

# **COLUMBUS: FACT vs. FICTION**

**Prepared by**

## **THE ORDER SONS OF ITALY IN AMERICA**



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# Introduction

**T**his study on Christopher Columbus was undertaken by the Order Sons of Italy in America (OSIA) in response to growing concerns about the celebration of Columbus Day in America. It was first released in 2002 and was updated in 2003.

For much of its history, the United States considered Columbus a man worthy of admiration. Columbus Day is one of America's oldest patriotic holidays, first celebrated in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. America has more monuments to Columbus than any other nation in the world. Generations of American school children studied his life and accomplishments. Teachers held him up as an example of a person of character, who overcame strong opposition and great disappointment but never gave up trying to prove what he believed to be true.

Since 1992, however, the reputation of Columbus has suffered at the hands of special interest groups who have used this Renaissance navigator of the 15<sup>th</sup> century to further their 21<sup>st</sup> century political and social agendas.

As a result, today Columbus is often depicted as a slave trader, racist, and even “the Hitler of the 15<sup>th</sup> century.” A small but vocal number of historians, journalists, text-book writers and teachers have helped spread these charges despite their questionable foundations in historical fact.

They have done so principally by assigning to, evaluating, and judging a quintessentially Renaissance man and his actions by contemporary values and measurements. It bears noting that England, birthplace of the Magna Carta, did not outlaw slavery in its colonies until 1833. The United States did not outlaw slavery until 1862 and Brazil, the late 1880s. In this context, Columbus was an enlightened and humane man.

Italian Americans continue to hold Columbus in high regard, however, not only for his historic achievements but also because Columbus Day is the only day our nation recognizes the heritage of an estimated 26 million Americans of Italian descent.

Increasingly, Italian American communities are finding their Columbus Day celebrations marred by demonstrations by special interest groups who sometimes turn violent, as happened in Denver during OSIA's Columbus Day parade in 2000.

OSIA presents this study on Columbus in an attempt to bring more balance to the examination of this first important Renaissance explorer, his life, character and explorations.

We thank Columbus scholars Robert Royal, Ph.D., president of the Faith and Reason Institute and David Curfman, M.D., president of the National Columbus Celebration Association in Washington, D.C., for sharing their impressive knowledge of Columbus with us.

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# Columbus: Fact vs. Fiction

**FICTION: COLUMBUS DID NOT DISCOVER THE AMERICAS. THE VIKINGS DID.**

**FACT:** In 1950, a map surfaced in Europe that shows the “Island of Vinland” in the northwest Atlantic Ocean. The map’s text in Medieval Latin explains that Leif Erickson and his Vikings found Vinland in the year 1000 A.D.

The Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., dates the map’s parchment to around 1434 A.D. – nearly 60 years before Columbus’s first voyage. But when researchers at London’s University College used a laser technique to test the map’s ink, they found it contained a chemical substance called *anatase*, which was not synthesized until 1923, proving that the map is a forgery.

Did Columbus “discover” America? In every significant way, he did. Even if others visited the continent sporadically before he did, their voyages had no historical significance. Columbus's voyages, however, marked the end of thousands of years of isolation between the Western Hemisphere and the rest of the world. The recorded history of the Americas and the Caribbean starts with Columbus.

Columbus’s voyages contributed to the emergence of the modern world, in making it possible for the first time in history for all people to be in contact with one another.

**FICTION: COLUMBUS FOUND SOPHISTICATED NATIVE CIVILIZATIONS.**

**FACT:** Most of the native tribes Columbus found were hunter-gatherers who engaged in bloody tribal wars and, in the case of the Arawaks, Caribs and Canibs, slavery, torture and cannibalism.

To survive, the native populations depended on “slash-and-burn” cultivation of the land along with hunting, fishing and collecting edible wild plants, seeds and shellfish. They had no written language, history or literature. In their struggle for survival, these peoples were not the environmental exemplars they are mistakenly portrayed today as having been.

**FICTION: COLUMBUS WAS IN THE SLAVE TRADE.**

**FACT:** Columbus never owned any slaves or brought any to the Western Hemisphere from Africa. Following his second voyage in 1493, however, Columbus and his men won a battle with some of the native tribes on the island of Hispaniola (now Haiti and the Dominican Republic). Columbus took 300 natives prisoners and sent them to Spain to be held for ransom, as was the custom in the 15<sup>th</sup> century with prisoners of war. The Spanish monarchs sent the natives back since there was no chance they could ever be ransomed. Columbus never again sent prisoners of war to Spain.

Columbus found that slavery was practiced in the Caribbean by the native tribes. The Caribs and Canibs made slaves of the tribes they conquered and also ate their victims. (Hence the word “cannibal”).

Later European explorers in Mexico and Central America found that even the more advanced civilizations of the Aztecs, Incas and Mayans kept slaves. They also practiced torture, ritual murder and the human sacrifice of their own women and children as well as of prisoners of war. These practices horrified the Spanish and caused them to look down on native cultures. In fact, the Spanish arrival in the New World was the decisive factor that eventually ended the practices of human sacrifice and cannibalism.

**FICTION: COLUMBUS WAS A RACIST.**

**FACT:** No evidence indicates that Columbus thought the islanders he met were racially inferior in any way. In fact, in the journal of his first voyage, Columbus describes the Tainos and other tribes as “*well-made with fine shapes and faces...their eyes were large and very beautiful...straight-limbed without exception and handsomely shaped....*” He praises their generosity, innocence and intelligence, saying they could “*readily become Christians as they have a good understanding.*”

Initially, Columbus had friendly relations with the people he found in the West Indies. These relations soured after his second voyage when he found the colony of men he had left behind had been slaughtered and possibly eaten by the Caribs.

**FICTION: COLUMBUS COMMITTED GENOCIDE.**

**FACT:** The destruction of the native populations of the Western Hemisphere over the centuries is a complex historical tragedy. No one knows exactly how many people were here when the Europeans arrived. The numbers vary from 8 million to 145 million. Many researchers believe the number to be around 40 million.

Columbus made four voyages to the Caribbean in a ten-year period (1492-1502), spending only a few months each time (except for the year he was shipwrecked on his fourth voyage.) It is inconceivable that he could have killed millions of people in so short a time. In fact, other than a few armed skirmishes neither Columbus nor his men had any violent episodes at all.

Responsibility for the deaths of many thousands of natives can justly be attributed to the Spanish conquistadors and other Europeans who followed Columbus here. But even in this, since there were more natives than Europeans, the loss of millions of lives could not have been caused by the Spaniards' warfare and forced labor alone.

In fact, most of the native populations perished because they lacked immunity to such diseases as small pox, typhoid and diphtheria as well as the non-fatal childhood diseases of measles and mumps that they caught from the Spanish explorers. These diseases were not transmitted deliberately and cannot be considered a tool of genocide. Scholars estimate that 80% of those who died were infected without ever seeing a white man.

Tragic as this epidemic was, it also bears remembering that prior to the Europeans' arrival the Western Hemisphere was no Garden of Eden. The native populations gave the early explorers syphilis, which they brought back to Europe. New medical research on pre-Colombian mummies in Peru, Chile and remote areas far from the early European colonies reveals that

tuberculosis, long thought European in origin, was rampant among the Indian tribes before the arrival of Columbus.

Arthritis, periodontal disease and significant bone erosion also afflicted the native populations well before the voyages of Columbus and other Europeans. Most adults, only in their 20s and 30s, had terrible teeth or none at all. Very few lived past age 40.

Clearly, blaming Columbus for the extermination of the native populations is as fair as blaming the native populations for killing people who die from using tobacco and cocaine, which the natives introduced to the Europeans.

**FICTION: COLUMBUS DESTROYED THE BALANCE BETWEEN MAN & NATURE.**

**FACT:** Columbus and the other Europeans brought with them Old World agricultural techniques, including crop rotation and animal breeding. They also introduced new tools (including the wheel) as well as new plants and domesticated animals, including the horse.

These imports led to improved farming methods, a greater diversity of crops and a more dependable food supply that benefited the native populations. Perfected over the centuries, they have helped make the nations in the Western Hemisphere a significant source of food for the rest of the world.

**FICTION: COLUMBUS AND OTHER EUROPEANS STOLE THE NATIVES LAND.**

**FACT:** A sad fact of human civilization is that powerful nations usurp the land of the vanquished. The Spanish conquistadors who followed Columbus in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries were establishing an empire through military conquest. They did what Egypt, Persia, Rome and China did before them in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. They also did what the Aztecs, Mayans, and Incas did in the Americas. “The Iroquois Federation in North America subjugated so many Indians,” writes Richard Gambino, “that historian Francis Parkman calls them ‘the Romans of the New World’.” But Columbus himself had no part in this.

It is worth pointing out that the Europeans brought some benefits to Latin America. Their arrival gave the entire continent a common language, while in North America, land taken

from the Iroquois and other tribes eventually became the United States, a haven for the poor and oppressed from all over the world, who find opportunities and freedoms here that their own countries deny them.

The arrival of Columbus in the Western Hemisphere more than 500 years ago enriched Western civilization in ways that are still measurable.

*[For sources, see page 11.]*



# What Columbus Accomplished

## *HISTORICAL:*

- Columbus proved that it was possible to cross the Atlantic Ocean and back.
- Columbus founded the first permanent European settlement in the Western Hemisphere, Hispaniola (now Haiti and the Dominican Republic).
- Columbus was the first to open relations between Europe and the Western Hemisphere. His voyages mark the beginning of more than 500 years of cultural, economic and political relations between Europe and the Americas.
- The recorded history of the Western Hemisphere begins with Columbus. There was no written history about these vast continents before his arrival in 1492.

## *NAVIGATIONAL:*

- Columbus was the first European to realize the full importance of the Atlantic wind pattern called the prevailing Westerlies, which blew steadily west to east. This convinced him it was possible to sail west with the Trade Winds to the New World and return to Europe with the Westerlies.
- During his four transatlantic voyages, Columbus chartered the route for what today are the islands of Cuba, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Jamaica, the Lesser Antilles and the coasts of Panama, Honduras and Venezuela.
- Columbus's trans-Atlantic route lay the foundation for future navigation in the region. His maps were used by Amerigo Vespucci (after whom the American continent takes its name), whose maps were used by later explorers of South America. Columbus's maps also helped Magellan follow the coasts of South America during his voyage around the world.
- The route across the Atlantic Ocean that Columbus charted in the 15<sup>th</sup> century is still used by sailors today.
- Columbus introduced the principle of compass variation (the variation at any point on the Earth's surface between the direction to magnetic and geographic north) and observed the rotation of the Pole star.

# Why We Should Celebrate Columbus Day

- Columbus Day recognizes the achievements of a great Renaissance explorer who founded the first permanent European settlement in the New World. The arrival of Columbus in 1492 marks the beginning of recorded history in America and opened relations between the Americas and the rest of the world.
- Columbus Day celebrates the beginning of cultural exchange between America and Europe. After Columbus, millions of European immigrants brought their art, music, science, medicine, philosophy and religious principles to America. These contributions have helped shape the United States and include Greek democracy, Roman law, Judeo-Christian ethics and the belief that all men are created equal.
- Columbus Day is one of America's oldest holidays. The tradition of observing Columbus Day dates back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It was first celebrated on October 12, 1792, when the New York Society of Tammany honored Columbus on the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his first voyage.
- Columbus Day is a patriotic holiday. In fact, the Pledge of Allegiance was written in 1892 in honor of the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his first voyage. That year, President Benjamin Harrison declared Columbus Day a legal holiday.
- The United States has long admired Columbus. America has more monuments to Columbus than any nation in the world, according to the Christopher Columbus Encyclopedia. These include a Columbus statue in Providence, R.I., cast by Frederic Auguste Bertholdi, who created the Statue of Liberty, and one in New York City, created by one of the six Italian American brothers who carved the Lincoln Memorial.
- The United States has a significant collection of Columbus memorabilia, including his desk, papers, and the cross he used to claim the New World for Spain. These are in the Columbus Chapel in Boalsburg, Pennsylvania.
- In 1971, Columbus Day became a federal holiday in all 50 states after Congress passed a law declaring the second Monday in October Columbus Day.
- Columbus Day also commemorates the arrival on these shores of more than 5 million Italians a century ago. Today, their children and grandchildren constitute the nation's fifth largest ethnic group, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.
- Columbus Day is the only day on which the nation recognizes the heritage of an estimated 26 million Italian Americans.

# Christopher Columbus: Biography

- 1451** Christopher Columbus (Cristoforo Colombo) is born in Genoa to Domenico Colombo and his wife, Susanna Fontanarossa. They were weavers who lived above their small shop. At that time, Genoa was a naval power and independent republic that rivaled Venice and traded with the Orient. In 1453, two years after Columbus's birth, Constantinople fell to the Moslems, cutting off Europe's eastward trade routes to the Orient and making the finding of a westward route imperative.
- 1465** Columbus takes his first sea voyage at age 14. Later he studies navigation in Greece and mapmaking in Portugal, where he lives for nine years in a colony of Genoese businessmen and shippers. He also travels to Africa, Ireland, England and Iceland.
- 1479** Columbus marries Felipa Perestrello y Moniz (1479), has a son, Diego, and is widowed (1480). [Later, he has another son, Fernando, with Beatrice de Harana, whom he never marries.]
- 1481** Columbus presents his plan to reach the Orient by sailing west across the Atlantic to the kings of Portugal, England, France and Spain. Only Spain's King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella accept his offer, but it takes Columbus six years (1486-1492) to convince them to underwrite his explorations.
- 1492** On August 3, Columbus sails from Palos, Spain. On October 12 at two o'clock in the morning, land is sighted. It was an island which he names San Salvador (Holy Savior). Deeply religious, Columbus believes one of his missions is to bring Christianity to the New World.
- 1502** Columbus makes his last voyage across the ocean. He crossed the Atlantic four times in 10 years: 1492, 1493, 1498 and 1502.

On his **first voyage** he lands on Haiti and the Dominican Republic, which he calls "Hispaniola," where he founds the first permanent European settlement in the Western Hemisphere. On his **third voyage**, his political enemies bring him back to Spain in chains, but the Queen absolves him of any blame. On his **fourth voyage**, he was shipwrecked for nearly a year on what is today Jamaica.

- 1506** Columbus dies in Valladolid, Spain, on May 20 at age 54. He insists on being buried with the chains he wore when he was brought back to Spain, following his third voyage. No one is sure where he is buried. Some scholars believe his remains are in the Cathedral of Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic while others believe they are in Spain in the Cathedral of Seville.

# Little-Known Facts From Italian American History\*

*For more information about Italian American issues, history, and culture,  
Visit the Sons of Italy web site at [www.osia.org](http://www.osia.org)*

- **John Cabot** [1450 c. - 1498], born Giovanni Caboto, discovered North America in 1497. Cabot sailed for the British. His voyage led to the English colonization of America. His son, Sebastian **Cabot** [1482-1557] explored South America for Spain.
- Two signers of the Declaration of Independence were of Italian descent: Maryland's **William Paca** and Delaware's **Caesar Rodney**.
- Five to ten thousand Italians fought in the Civil War for both the Union and the Confederacy. Three were Union generals. One Union officer, **Col. Luigi Palma di Cesnola** received one of the first Medals of Honor. He later became the first director of New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art.
- Italian immigrant **Attilio Piccirilli** and his five brothers carved the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. They also carved the lions on the steps of the New York Public Library and the facade of the Brooklyn Museum among many other works.
- In 1978, at age 38, **A. Bartlett Giamatti** (1940-1989) became the youngest president of Yale University in 200 years and the first president not of Anglo Saxon heritage. He served until 1986, leaving to become president and later commissioner of major league baseball's National League.
- **Ed McBain** (b. 1926), inventor of the police novel, has written 94 novels with 100 million copies in many languages. He was born **Salvatore Albert Lombino** but an editor told him his Italian name might hurt sales.
- The only enlisted Marine in World War II who earned the nation's two highest military honors, the Navy Cross and the Medal of Honor, was **John Basilone**, a U.S. Marine sergeant, who died at the Battle of Iwo Jima in World War II. He received the U.S. Medal of Honor in 1942 and was posthumously awarded the Navy Cross for heroism at Iwo Jima during February 1945.
- **Robert Gallo, M.D.**, a research scientist and virologist, co-discovered the AIDS virus in 1984 and developed a blood test to screen for the disease. In 1978, he discovered and isolated the virus that is linked to leukemia.
- The suburban shopping mall was developed by **William Cafaro** and **Edward J. DeBartolo**. Cafaro pioneered the enclosed shopping mall with his American Mall in Lima, Ohio, in 1965. DeBartolo built the first American shopping plaza in the 1940s.
- **Susan Sarandon, Bruce Springsteen** and **Georgia O'Keeffe** are of Italian descent.

\* *Source: The National Italian American Foundation*

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- The **Order Sons of Italy in America (OSIA)** is the largest and oldest national organization in the United States for Italian American men and women.
- Founded in 1905 in New York City's Little Italy, OSIA has grown to 600,000 members in all 50 states and two U.S. territories. It includes a network of more than 700 chapters in 35 states and the District of Columbia.
- Its mission includes encouraging the study of Italian language and culture in American schools and universities; preserving Italian American traditions, culture, history and heritage; and promoting closer cultural relations between the United States and Italy.
- **The Sons of Italy Foundation (SIF)** is a private, grant-making philanthropic institution established by OSIA in 1959. To date, the **SIF has given more than \$83 million** to scholarships, medical research, cultural preservation, disaster relief and other projects.
- **The Commission for Social Justice (CSJ)** is the anti-defamation arm of OSIA. The CSJ is committed to fighting racism, prejudice, and the stereotyping of all races, religions and cultures.

# Columbus: Fact vs. Fiction

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