

# Italian American Alliance

Massachusetts



June 15, 2021

Town of Holyoke  
City Councilors  
Holyoke, Massachusetts

Dear Holyoke City Councilors,

We are writing to you as representatives of the Italian-American Alliance, of Massachusetts. The Italian-American Alliance is the largest Italian-American cultural organization in New England with over 7,000 members.

Recently, your community has been debating changing Columbus Day in favor of Indigenous People's Day. This contentious issue has increased divisions among all of our communities.

Christopher Columbus is the penultimate symbol of the Italian-American and immigrant communities. The origins of Columbus Day in the United States are founded in the very principles of equality and justice. The view of Columbus in Italy, carried forward by many Italian-Americans, is that Christopher Columbus is an inspiration, an example of perseverance for taking an action which changed the world.

Italian-Americans were one of the most oppressed and discriminated ethnic groups in America. In fact, in Massachusetts in 1921 a jury convicted and sentenced to death Sacco and Vanzetti based on anti-Italianism and anti-immigration sentiment.

**Only in 2019 did the city of New Orleans apologize for the largest mass lynching to have ever occurred on American of 11 Italian immigrants living in New Orleans in 1891.** After being acquitted of the crime of murdering a popular police officer, an unruly and violent Jim Crow mob lynched them. In a showing of remorse with the sincerest apologies, President Benjamin Harrison proclaimed Columbus Day of 1892 a national holiday. Ten years later President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Congress established October 12, 1937, as the Columbus Day national holiday. In so doing forever intertwined the history of Columbus with the forming of America as the cultural and ethnic symbolism to not only the Italian-American community, but also the American public. This was a step in bringing about credibility and acceptance of Italian immigrants.

The alleged misdeeds of Christopher Columbus are derived from one historian, Howard Zinn; who has been routinely and roundly discredited by modern researchers and scholars like Dr. Mary Grabar in her book *Debunking Howard Zinn* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BtNfqJx4OIM>). Moreover, Georgetown University professor and Zinn contemporary Michael Kazin proclaimed Zinn's publication as "polemic

disguised as history. Modern scholars have made clear that genocide is the deliberate action of a government to eliminate an entire group of people. Genocide is NOT the accidental clash of microbes.

On the charge of slavery, historians note that native indigenous people had been enslaving each other for many hundreds of years before Columbus ever left Spain. Additionally, Ryan P. Smith, writing for the *Smithsonian Magazine* reminded us that Indigenous tribes, most notably the “Five Civilized Tribes” of the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek and Seminole, openly practiced chattel slavery and held African slaves. Choctaw Chief Greenwood LeFlore owned over 15,000 acres of land in Mississippi and held over 400 African slaves. Cherokee Chief John Ross was not only a slave owner, but after the events of the Trail-of-Tears, he and many other tribal chiefs joined the Confederate States of America and fought with the South to preserve slavery.

In contrast, according to Stanford Professor Carol L. Delaney’s book *Columbus and the Quest for Jerusalem*, Columbus not only never owned a slave, he also never participated in the institution of chattel slavery. Columbus has been miscredited with beginning the transatlantic slave trade when after retaliating against the local and cannibalistic Carib Tribe, he captured approximately 40 prisoners of war, presented them to the Spanish Crown, who subsequently released those captured; as was customary across the globe. Further, it is well documented that Christopher Columbus supported the indigenous peoples he met and advocated on their behalf to the King and Queen of Spain and the Pope. Christopher Columbus support of the indigenous tribes was so sincere, particularly toward the Taino peoples, he adopted a Taino boy as his own son.

In closing, Columbus Day symbolizes unity, a fight against racism and discrimination against all immigrants and minorities living in the United States. *To not protect Columbus is to discriminate against Italian Americans and their national origin.* (please see *Courage and Conviction: The True History of Christopher Columbus* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NJliggj1k0s>.) We urge you to preserve October 12th as Columbus Day, and join us in the fight for social justice by recognizing the last Friday of November as Indigenous Peoples Day to coincide with Native American Heritage Day; a holiday established by Federal law in 2008 and subsequently recognized by 184 indigenous tribes and the National Indian Gaming Association.

Very truly yours,

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