He never set foot here

History of Christopher Columbus: Why do we remember him?

Michael D. Hattem *Washington Post*

In recent days, statues of Christopher Columbus have been pulled down or defaced throughout the United States, including in Richmond, St. Paul and Boston.

New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo defended the monuments because they "in some way represent the Italian American legacy in this country."

But the history of how Christopher Columbus came to be a symbol in the memory of a nation whose territory he neither "discovered" nor set foot on is important at a time of national reckoning with the public commemoration of the past.

As debates on Confederate flags and monuments also continue to rage, the actual story of the myths and symbols of Columbus reveals how our collective memories of the past are constructed and change over time rather than being intrinsic expressions of the past.

The Columbus Monument in Columbus Circle in downtown Syracuse. *Post-Standard file photo*

COLONIST DIDN'T MAKE THE CONNECTION

Before the American Revolution, British colonists did not think of Christopher Columbus as having any direct historical relationship to the societies that had developed in North America. If you asked a British colonist who discovered America, they would likely answer John Cabot or Henry Hudson, in large part because they had sailed for England. During the 1690s, Samuel Sewall proved a rare exception when he insisted that the New World — and especially North America — be more correctly called "Columbina" after Columbus rather than "America" after Amerigo Vespucci, who had "discovered" Brazil after Columbus's initial voyages to the Caribbean.

The beginning of remembering Columbus in what would become the United States can be found in the first scattered uses of "Columbia" which emerged as a feminine personification of America in the 1760s. The enslaved African American poet Phillis Wheatley popularized the term, most notably in her 1775 poem "To His Excellency George Washington," which she sent to the general and to which he replied.

During the war and the years immediately following, the first generation of American poets widely adopted the use of this personification in so-called "prospect poems." In one example, "Ode on the Glory of Columbia," Timothy Dwight began: "COLUMBIA, Columbia, to glory arise / The queen of the world, and the child of the skies!" These poems analogized Americans after the Revolution, who were embarking into unknown territory, to Columbus, a move that sought to assure them of the future greatness of the new republic.

CREATING A NATIONAL IDENTITY

But by the 1790s the conversation changed and Columbus became the "discoverer" of America. Why? Because after the war, Americans were actively looking to create a new shared national identity that would distinguish them culturally from the former mother country. One historian has described this process as "unbecoming British" and the memory of Columbus played an important role.

Taking advantage of the 300th anniversary of his voyage in 1792, cultural nationalists intent on creating a distinctly American culture and national identity distinct from that of Britain organized public commemorations and festivities throughout the country. These events were designed to establish Columbus in the public's mind and memory as the discoverer of America and, by extension, the United States. The goal behind this commemorative campaign by nationalists such as Noah Webster, David Ramsay and Benjamin Rush was to create an origin story for the new nation that transcended the history of English and British colonialism and imperialism.

In the fall of 1792, large public festivities were held in Boston, New York and Baltimore among other places. In New York, the recently established Society of Tammany (also originally referred to as the Columbian Order) held a gathering and erected a 14-foot obelisk engraved with depictions of Columbus. In Baltimore, the Chevalier D'Anemours also erected an obelisk with "suitable inscriptions, on Metal Tables" that still stands today. In Boston, the new Massachusetts Historical Society marked the festivities with its first public lecture, "A Discourse intended to Commemorate the Discovery of America by Christopher Columbus." Delivered by its founder, Jeremy Belknap, the speech depicted Columbus's journey as the beginning of a world-historical process in which the seat of knowledge and science moved westward, from Europe to the New World.

The erection of the monuments was central to the goal of creating a new national origin story. Throughout the rest of the decade, Columbus became further incorporated into American public memory by the use of "Columbia" as a place name (most notably in the nation's capital) and in variations used in naming newspapers and voluntary societies. Depictions of Columbia were common in nationalist-themed paintings and engravings from this period.

Meanwhile, young Americans encountered the story of Columbus in their educational texts. The Little Reader's Assistant, a highly popular reader by Noah Webster, included "The Story of Columbus" and concluded with the exhortation: "Let every child in America learn to speak the praises of the great Columbus."

In addition to the use of Columbia in prospect poems, Columbus himself served as a major character in the first American epic poem of note, "The Vision of Columbus" by Joel Barlow (which he later rewrote in the early 19th century as "The Columbiad"). The famous poem began with Columbus sitting dejected in a Spanish prison until an angel revealed to him a vision of the future of the land he "discovered." This vision included the American Revolution, which would allow knowledge, science and the arts to develop further than they had in Europe. In these ways, the memory of Columbus became a nationalist tool for those who believed that establishing cultural independence from Britain was key to maintaining tenuous political independence.

Over the next two centuries, writers, politicians and ordinary citizens all continued to reshape Columbus's legacy and memory like they did at the beginning of the nation's history. It became justification for the nation's westward expansion, and helped to promote assimilation among white immigrants. In 1828, Washington Irving's semi-fictional "History of the Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus" created and popularized many of the most common myths about Columbus including the false assertion that his voyages proved to European scholars that the earth was round rather than flat.

SYSTEMATIC DISPLACEMENT AND GENOCIDE OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

Memory of Columbus, however, also had more destructive consequences. In the mid 19th century, Columbia and the Columbian legacy depicted by Belknap was used to justify the idea of "Manifest Destiny" by making him the patron saint of the westward expansion of the new nation across the continent. In a speech justifying the Mexican American War in 1846, Sen. Thomas Hart Benton reminded his colleagues of "the grand idea of Columbus," who by "going west" had "provided America with her true course of empire." In other words, just as he had done so in life, Columbus's memory was used to justify the systematic displacement and genocide of Indigenous Peoples.

By the end of the 19th century, Columbus became a useful symbol to urban political machines seeking to consolidate the support of the growing Italian-American immigrant community, especially in New York where the monument at Columbus Circle was erected. "Under the inspiration of Him whose name we bear," wrote Thomas Cummings to the newly established Knights of Columbus, "we have the broadest kind of basis for patriotism and true love of country." As Gov. Cuomo's comments remind us, these efforts were effective in promoting the acculturation of those immigrants into the national polity as well by offering them a direct opportunity to express patriotism for their new country.

Reckoning with the constructed and constantly changing nature of the memory of Columbus in our national history reminds us that monuments, like our collective memories, are constantly being reimagined and remade. Certain figures and events have been lionized greatly at certain times in American history only to disappear from the collective consciousness when their memories no longer serve their original purpose and cannot be adapted to suit a new purpose or when the public perception of those figures has changed. Most significantly, this reminds us that we are not beholden to our origin stories, and in fact, we have a civic responsibility to define them — whether through creating or rejecting them — as part of the process of defining ourselves. That is an American tradition.

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YOUR LETTERS

Columbus enslaved Native people, doesn't deserve support

To the Editor:

Our Native people have marched with millions of others to protest the killing by police of African Americans. The tragic fact is that of all ethnic groups, this country's indigenous people have the highest rate of death by cop.

We endure, despite the small pockets of casino wealth, critically high rates of poverty, violence and discrimination. We are dehumanized by American sports team mascots, trivialized in the media and burdened by the vicious myths in school textbooks. It is small wonder that the local, state and federal law enforcement agents see us as little more than savages and respond accordingly.

We are pleased that some black athletes have come to understand they can make a difference by insisting on the removal of Native stereotypes as mascots, while other citizens are supporting the taking down of statues marking those military commanders who violated their oaths, took up arms against the United States and thereby sought to preserve slavery. We ask that the original European enslaver of human beings in this hemisphere also be removed from whatever pedestal he stands upon. That man was Cristobal Colon, later anglicized as Christopher Columbus.

Despite what Gov. Andrew Cuomo may believe, Colon was not Italian, as that country did not exist prior to 1861. He was of controversial heritage but he cited Barcelona in Catalonia as his home. He thought, wrote and spoke Catalonian and not the Genovesian dialect of Italian. He was an inept administrator, a mediocre navigator and a bad geographer.

He began the trans-Atlantic slave trade by capturing, imprisoning and transporting Native people to Spain. He was notorious in his cruelty toward Natives in the Caribbean, compelling them to mine for gold under the harshest conditions, and is directly responsible for creating a bondage system which led to the death by disease, starvation and murder of millions.

He does not merit a statue and his image should join those of Nathan Bedford Forrest, Robert E. Lee, Braxton Bragg and Jefferson Davis as representing the most terrible instances of American history.

Cuomo's support of Colon is wrong and perpetuates myths that have harmed Native and African peoples, the lies of which are a symbolic knee upon our necks.

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