



Indigenous Peoples' Day arose as an alternative to Columbus Day, which Native Americans protested for honoring a man who had enabled their colonization and forced assimilation. One of the earliest celebrations of the holiday took place on October 10, 1992, in Berkeley, California. Photograph by Paul Sakuma, AP



Columbus Day or Indigenous Peoples' Day? How the holiday has been shaped by oppression

Columbus Day began as a celebration of Italian immigrants who faced persecution in the U.S. But for many it's now a symbol of the colonization and oppression of Indigenous people.

By Erin Blakemore

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Was Christopher Columbus a heroic explorer or a villainous murderer? It depends on who you ask. The tussle over how or whether the United States should commemorate the Italian navigator's 1492 landing in the Americas has fueled controversy for generations.

A federal holiday celebrated the second Monday of each October, Columbus Day arose out of a late 19th century movement to honor Italian American heritage at a time when Italian immigrants faced widespread persecution.

But the holiday has since come under fire as a celebration of a man whose arrival in the Americas heralded the oppression of another group of people: Native Americans. In recent decades, it has been replaced by Indigenous Peoples' Days in many states and cities. ([*Across the continent, North America's Native nations reassert their sovereignty.*](#))



Christopher Columbus famously set sail in 1492 with a fleet of three ships: the Niña, the Pinta, and the Santa Maria. Although he sought a western passage to India, Columbus instead made landfall in the Americas, kicking off an era of European exploration—and colonization.

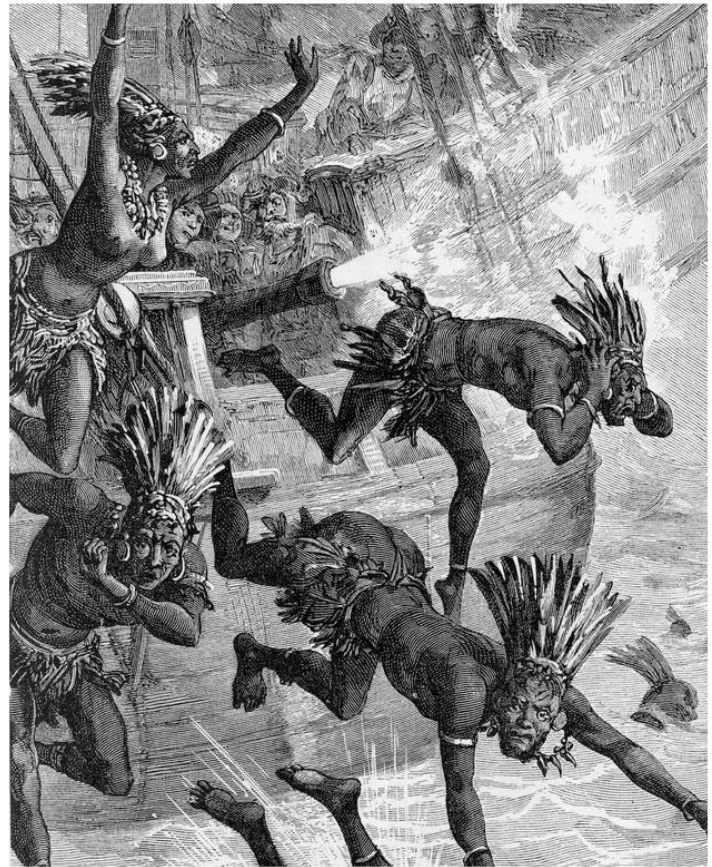
Color lithograph via Bridgeman Images

In 2021, the U.S. celebrated its first national Indigenous Peoples' Day in a commemoration President Joe Biden [proclaimed](#) as a day to honor “our diverse history and the Indigenous peoples who contribute to shaping this Nation.” Biden also issued [a Columbus Day proclamation](#) acknowledging the contributions of Italian Americans as well as “the painful history of wrongs and atrocities” that resulted from European exploration. Here’s how Columbus Day began, and how the movement to replace it has gained momentum. Americans as well as “the painful history of wrongs and atrocities” that resulted from European exploration. Here’s how Columbus Day began, and how the movement to replace it has gained momentum.



Upon arriving in the Bahamas, Columbus believed he had successfully reached India and dubbed the Indigenous people he found "Indians." This map created in 1507 by Martin Waldseemüller was the first to depict the land as a new continent named America after another Italian navigator, Amerigo Vespucci.

Lithograph by Martin Waldseemüller via Bridgeman Images



Left: In 1500, Spain's King Ferdinand had Columbus imprisoned and stripped of his governorship of Hispaniola—now the Dominican Republic and Haiti—for his brutal mistreatment of Indigenous people and colonists.

Engraving via Bridgeman Images

Right: This illustration depicts Indigenous people jumping into the water out of fear after hearing a cannon shot fired by Europeans. Indigenous people faced the threat of being kidnapped, enslaved, and raped at hands of the colonizers.

Lithograph via Bridgeman Images

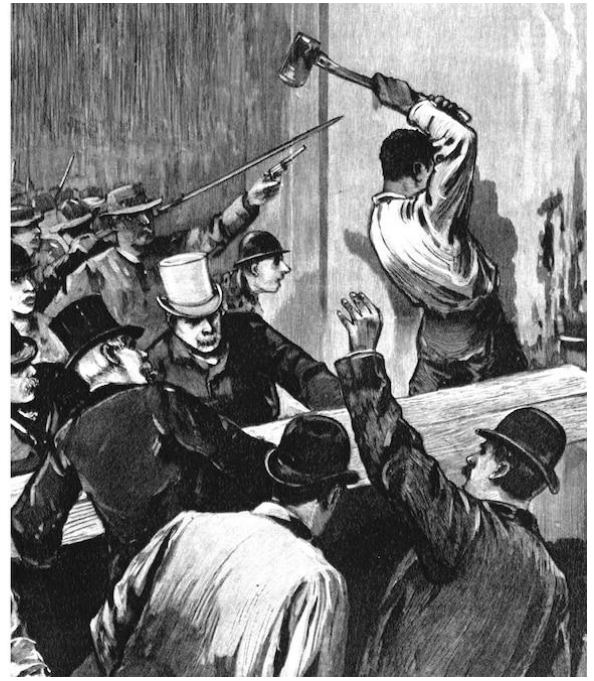
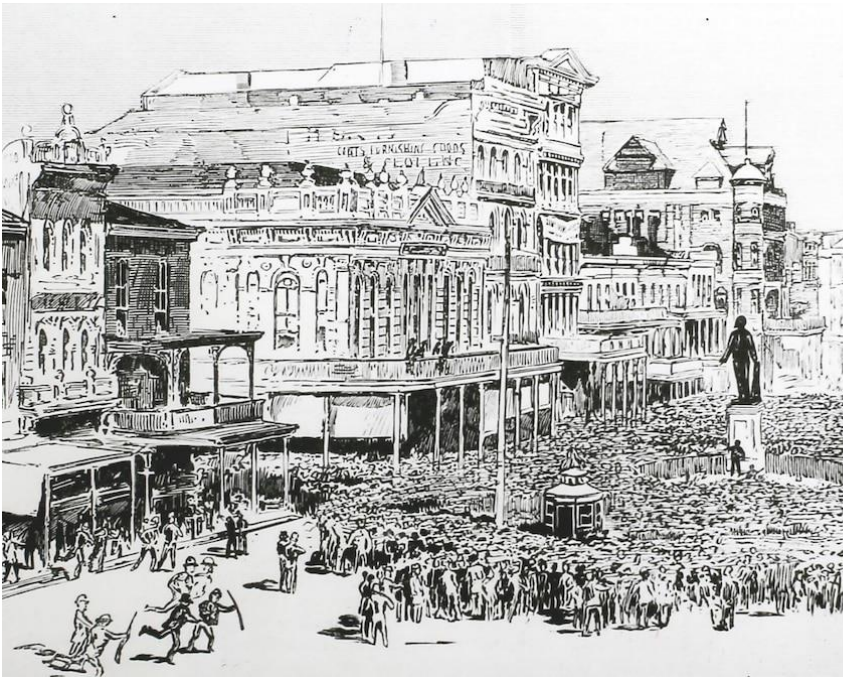
Early Columbus Day celebrations

On October 12, 1492, after a voyage of 10 weeks, Christopher Columbus' crew spotted the New World. The Italian navigator's three ships, sailing at the behest of the Spanish crown, would soon land, likely on an [island](#) known to its Lucayan residents as Guanahani. Columbus christened it San Salvador.

It was the beginning of a new era in the history of the Western Hemisphere—an event commemorated in the U.S. since the nation was founded in 1776. But before the late 19th century, the celebrations were mainly [limited](#) to Catholic and Italian American enclaves on the East Coast, where many embraced Columbus as an intrepid explorer who embodied progress and bravery. For these people, Columbus represented their indelible contribution to a society that viewed both Catholics and Italian Americans with suspicion.

Celebrations of Columbus gained momentum as Italian immigration grew from a trickle to a flood. Beginning in the 1880s, Italian immigrants began [pouring](#) into the U.S. in search of opportunity and a better life. But the new arrivals were not welcomed by all. [Maligned](#) as sinister and criminal, Italian immigrants were the focus of increasing bigotry.

In 1890 anti-Italian sentiment boiled over in New Orleans after police chief David Hennessy, reputed for his arrests of Italian Americans, was murdered. In the aftermath, more than a hundred Sicilian Americans were arrested. When nine were tried and acquitted in March 1891, a furious mob [rioted](#) and broke into the city prison, where they beat, shot, and hanged at least 11 Italian American prisoners. None of the rioters who lynched the Italian Americans were prosecuted. It remains one of the largest mass lynchings in the nation's history.



In 1890, a mob gathered at the statue of Henry Clay on Canal Street in New Orleans, where they decided to avenge police chief David Hennessy's murder with a mass lynching of Italian American prisoners. The killings forced a reckoning with the country's persecution of Italian immigrants—and paved the way for a holiday celebrating the Italian navigator, Columbus. Lithographs via Hulton Archive / Getty Images (left); Universal Images Group / Getty Images (right)

Columbus Day becomes a nationwide holiday

The brutal killings created tit-for-tat tensions between the U.S. and Italy, which called for reparations for the murders. At first, the U.S. [refused](#), prompting Italy to recall its ambassador and cut off diplomatic relations. The U.S. reciprocated.

But eventually, in an attempt to appease Italy and acknowledge the contributions of Italian Americans on the 400th anniversary of Columbus' arrival, President Benjamin Harrison in 1892 [proclaimed](#) a nationwide celebration of "Discovery Day," recognizing Columbus as "the pioneer of progress and enlightenment." Eventually, the nations mended their relationship and the U.S. paid \$25,000 in reparations.

In the decades after the mass lynching, Italian American advocates pushed for a nationwide holiday, and states slowly began to adopt it. In 1934, President Franklin D. Roosevelt [designated](#) it a national holiday, and in 1971 Congress [changed the date](#) from October 12 to the second Monday of October. The holiday, [writes](#) historian Bénédicte Deschamps, "allowed Italian-Americans to celebrate at the same time their Italian identity, their Italian-American group specificity, and their allegiance to America."

The push for Indigenous Peoples' Day

Columbus Day celebrated Italians. But for many with Indigenous ancestry, it was a slap in the face—a celebration of invasion, theft, brutality, and colonization. Columbus and his crew [enabled](#) and perpetrated the kidnapping, enslavement, forced [assimilation](#), rape and sexual [abuse](#) of Native people, including children; the Native American population [shrank](#) by about half after European contact. For Indigenous Americans, the landing celebrated by some as a day of triumphant discovery was the beginning of an incursion onto land that had long been their home. ([The history of the Red Power movement's fight for Native sovereignty](#).)

In the 1960s and 1970s, the Pan-Indian and [Red Power](#) movements brought together Native Americans who began to draw attention to the hero's sordid history. In 1970, for example, anonymous protesters scrawled Red Power slogans on the statue of the navigator in the middle of New York's Columbus Circle ahead of Columbus Day celebrations. *The New Yorker* [reported](#) on the incident, calling it "a topic to joke about safely" among white

politicians on the viewing stand for that day's festivities—an indication of just how far the movement would have to go to change the nation's view of Columbus.

In the 1980s and 1990s, protests against the holiday grew. In 1990, ahead of the 100th anniversary of the Wounded Knee Massacre, in which U.S. soldiers killed some 300 Lakota people, Native American publisher Tim Giago urged South Dakota's governor to declare it a year of reconciliation and change Columbus Day to a holiday called Native American Day. The governor, George S. Mickelson, [agreed](#), and the holiday has replaced Columbus Day in the state ever since. ([Here's what really happened at Wounded Knee, the site of a historic massacre.](#))



In Costa Rica Columbus Day is celebrated as the Encounter of Cultures Day. In this image from October 12, 2006, elementary school children in Alajuela, Costa Rica, dress as Native Americans to celebrate Columbus' arrival in the Americas. Photograph by Cristobal Herrera, AP

Two years later, ahead of the 500th anniversary of Columbus' landing, Indigenous groups [lobbied](#) the United Nations and local governments not to participate in international celebrations. A group called Resistance 500 [formed](#) in the Bay Area in response to the plans—such as an event in which replicas of Columbus' ships sailed into San Francisco Harbor. Berkeley's city council recognized the group as a task force and unanimously adopted its suggestion of replacing Columbus Day with a holiday called the Day of Solidarity with Indigenous People. The Indigenous activists won another victory when the ships' journey was called off in the face of growing pressure.

How the holidays are recognized today

Though Italian American groups protested the move, it fueled ongoing activism among Indigenous people. In the 2010s, Indigenous Peoples' Day—known by some as Native American Day—gained steam as it was adopted by scores of cities and states around the nation. Some states honor both Columbus Day and Indigenous Peoples' Day on the paid holiday, while others have renamed it entirely



Left: On October 12, 1998, Andrian Esquino Lisco, a Cacique Indian, burns incense during a ceremony in San Salvador to honor the thousands of Indigenous people who died as a result of Columbus' arrival in the Americas.

Photograph by Luis Romero, AP

Right: For many people, Thanksgiving Day is another holiday that attempts to whitewash the country's colonial history. Every year, a crowd of people gather instead at Alcatraz Island for the Indigenous People's Sunrise Ceremony—or Un-Thanksgiving Day.

Photograph by Liu Guanguan, China News Service/VCG via Getty Images

In addition, multiple states have stopped celebrating the date altogether. [According to](#) Pew Research, in 2021 only 21 states offered their government workers paid holidays on the second Monday in October.

Even Columbus, Ohio, the largest city named after the Italian navigator, has changed its tune: In 2018, it stopped celebrating Columbus Day, and in 2020 it declared October 12 Indigenous Peoples' Day. "It's impossible to think about a more just future without recognizing these original sins of our past," Columbus City Council president Shannon Hardin [reportedly said](#) at the meeting.

In a similar spirit of reckoning, in April 2019 New Orleans Mayor LaToya Cantrell apologized for the 1891 lynchings of Italian Americans, more than a century after the incident. "Some people didn't want me to make this apology today," Cantrell [said at the time](#). "But...I have a responsibility to deal with what's in front of me, and to speak honestly about the challenges we face, those that shape our history and, more importantly, our future."



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