

Columbus Circle Action Committee Addendum to Final Report

Mayor Walsh,

Respectfully, it is our opinion that the Committee Report sent to you by Interfaith does not accurately represent the conclusions of the Committee as a whole. We also believe that it leaves out certain important learnings from our eight weeks together. So we would like to offer these additional thoughts.

We understand that selection of Committee members was not random. Likely on purpose, you selected people in our community who have a passion for or a background in education/healing around oppression, racism, history, government, or the monument specifically.

So it is not surprising that even after extended deliberations, the Committee could not reach unanimity around one, specific verdict. Unlike any consensus suggested in the body of the report, we believe our group would be better defined as “hung jury”. Folks who came into the meeting believing the statue should come down still believe it should come down; folks originally advocating for it to remain still believe it should remain. However, all members would likely agree that they concluded the process with a greater understanding of one another’s history and human conditions.

In some ways. Interfaith was handed an impossible task. Too large of a problem to solve, too little time to solve it in, and with too divided a committee.

Similarly, we believe that those who make Columbus the symbol of all oppression, racism, social injustice, and atrocities committed by the British and French over the course of a 500 year history are heaping too much blame onto one man who captained a ship. The Church was the promoter and sponsor of the Doctrine of Discovery – Columbus, the scientist and explorer, was merely one of its instruments to execute that doctrine. Erasing Columbus doesn’t solve any fundamental issues.



As you know, the Columbus Monument and annual celebration remains important to thousands of people in Syracuse. It is not like other statues throughout the city that are ignored. This one stands as a living symbol of Italian pride, and Italian history in Central New York. And it has been celebrated as such each and every year for ninety years.

Those advocating removal of the statue offer that their intent is not to cause pain to the Italian community. However, we were very clear that regardless of the intent, *it would indeed cause pain*. We asked, how does consciously causing pain to one group of people just to satisfy another lead to healing or civic unity? Removal would simply lead to a greater divide in our community.

We believe that removal of the Columbus statue is a step too far. Regardless of the good intentions professed by those advocating removal, we are emphatic that removal of the statue would indeed be considered a direct affront to Italians and their heritage, and would cause great pain. It is important to note that in finding a route to the New World that would be repeated, Columbus didn't intend to cause pain either – he was merely the soldier in the Doctrine of Discovery campaign.

Also, we believe that the other side of the Doctrine of Discovery is already on display for public consumption at the Ska Nonh Center . This is a fantastic and unique facility, beautifully curated by the OHA and the Nation, to explain the negative impacts of colonization. It needs to be better utilized.

Instead of tearing things down, we believe that recognition of and education about other oppressed groups will cause healing, just as it did for the Italians in 1934, and for the Nation at the Ska Nonh Center.

In an attempt to address your objectives of including educational components, recognition of unrecognized minorities, physical changes, and promoting civic unity, we worked hard with the Columbus Monument Association to devise a proposal that could be immediately executed at little to no cost to the City of Syracuse. We don't believe that our proposal was properly outlined in the Report, so we have included it here.

By pairing the existing Columbus Monument with an ongoing series of conflicting artworks dealing with the themes of oppression and exclusion, Syracuse would be confronting history rather than erasing history. The community would be educating rather than destroying. Done properly, this initiative in Syracuse could become an example for communities all over the country who are struggling with the same conundrum. Syracuse could model how to preserve history while at the same time addressing modern realities.

Finally, as we learned in one of our sessions, any effort to alter, move or demolish the Columbus monument would involve a process. The Syracuse Public Arts Commission generally discourages relocation or deaccession of permanent artwork, and would need to review and approve any change per the adopted Public Art Plan. A Certificate of Appropriateness would be required from the Syracuse Landmark Preservation Board. There may be additional contractual requirements and conditions relating to a New York State Environmental Quality Bond Act Grant used for the monument restoration in 1992. And research needs to be completed into the original designation of Columbus Circle by then Mayor Marvin, the deed for Columbus Circle, and the original gift of the statute from the CMA to the City to determine if either carries any restrictions and/or covenants regarding preservation.

We believe that our proposal – consistent with but going beyond the approach taken in New York City - is innovative, inclusive, and executable almost immediately.

PROPOSAL

9/21/2020

1. Project Background and Description

i This committee was assembled to recommend an action plan for making Columbus Circle a “heritage site”, drawing on the suggestions outlined by the 2019 Dialogue Groups.

2. Project Scope

i The Committee’s deliberations – and comments by the Mayor - suggest that any solution needs to include **physical changes**, as well as **educational components**.

3. Proposal and Rationale

i Respecting our Covenant of Engagement, and in consideration of the many sides to this issue, this Proposal attempts to further the desired Scope, while at the same time sustaining an important commemorative event and landscape in our City. This Proposal is designed to work in conjunction with the Onondaga Historical Association’s digital project at the monument, the Skänoñh Center, and other ongoing interventions to contextualize issues about Columbus, but also to preserve an important and cherished dedication, a significant piece of public art, and a 90 year tradition in our City. Finally, any action around the Columbus Monument will involve cost. This Proposal addresses specific sources and uses around a proposed action.

- Each year The Columbus Monument Association (“CMA”) honors someone of Italian descent. In addition to that honoree, we propose that this honor be opened up to honorees of all nationalities, celebrating immigrants from any country, who have made an impact on our community and/or society as a whole. *This provides an established forum of over 50 years to annually celebrate underrecognized races and nationalities in our community.*
- Each year that there is a Columbus Day celebration, the CMA each year makes a donation of \$1000 to a charity in the name of each honoree. We propose that the \$1000 be gifted each year to the Onondaga County Historical Association (“OHA”), to be used to support public school field trips to Skänoñh Center, so that new generations learn how colonization impacted indigenous people. *This promotes perpetual education of issues not included in textbooks.*
- In recognition that the Indian head tributes on the monument are historically inaccurate and offensive to indigenous people, we propose that those be removed from the monument and entered into the collection of the OHA for preservation. *This is a significant and noticeable physical alternation to the monument.*
- In recognition that two of the bronze reliefs are offensive to some in our community, we propose that these be replaced with plaques containing text only, recognizing Columbus as a scientist and an

explorer, not as a “discoverer”. The original relief should be entered into the collection of the OHA for preservation. *This is a second significant and noticeable physical alternation to the monument.*

- We propose that a new work of art, equally imposing and significant as the Columbus monument, be commissioned for the neighboring Powelson Park. That piece should somehow tell a story of all people that have been left out, displaced, or erased from public histories and public spaces in our community - African Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanic Americans, and any other significant population. The CMA will commit to raising \$25,000 for that new public art. *This engages Syracuse’s entire Italian American community in the solution of building civic unity.*

Or a better alternative for the nearby park, ...

- Raising money for a significant piece of public art in the Powelson Park could be a very time consuming effort, and could take years. Also, defining that one piece of conflicting art could be difficult given the plethora of important messages that we have suggested need to be addressed - racism, social justice, slavery, colonization, etc.

As an alternative - one that could be executed almost immediately - we could propose that the \$25,000 raised by the Columbus Monument Association (and any additional support raised locally) be used to beautify the park, and bring utilities to the site (proper lighting, electricity, and water). The Syracuse Public Art commission could then be tasked with inviting artists from our community and from around the globe to use this spot to display art dealing with these important issues.

By pairing the existing Columbus Monument with an ongoing series of artworks dealing with the themes above, we would be confronting history rather than erasing history. We would be educating rather than destroying. We would be initiating a perpetual, evolving dialogue rather than setting into motion a series of bitter, costly legal disputes.

Done properly, this initiative in Syracuse could become an example for communities all over the country who are struggling with the same conundrum. We could model how to preserve history while at the same time addressing modern realities.

Commenting on monuments in France, President Macron said recently:

“The Republic will erase no trace of names of its history, it will forget none of its works, it will tear down none of its statues. We must instead lucidly look together at our history” with a goal of “truth” instead of “denying who we are.”

As intelligent people who live in a complex world, we should all be capable of holding two thoughts simultaneously, and reconciling those thoughts. I can feel remorse for the effects of colonization, and still feel pride for an Italian explorer and scientist. I can feel shame for the way our government has violated treaties and still remain a proud American citizen. I can remain a practicing, spiritual Catholic and still forgive the Church for its heinous behavior.

Removing the symbols doesn’t erase the history. Leaving them reminds us to confront history, and to learn from it. A dynamic, ever-changing display of conflicting art in Powelson Park opposite Columbus Circle would allow the space to tell multiple stories; it would afford artists from around the country - interested in this dialogue - a prominent spot to display their outdoor and/or oversized works; and it would continue to educate Syracuse youth for generations to come.

And it could begin immediately.

This engages the Syracuse Public Art Commission and artists/advocates from throughout the USA in our dynamic, creative solution.