

# Columbus Hijacks New York Statue Commission Debate

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ARCHITECT OF THE CAPITOL

American painter John Vanderlyn was commissioned by Congress in 1836 to paint the *Landing of Columbus* for the Capitol Building. The scene, and the image of Columbus, are both imagined

After neo-Nazi and alt-right celebrations of Confederate Civil War monuments in Charlottesville, Virginia in August, and other cities began to remove statues commemorating segregationists and racists, New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio established a special commission to recommend guidelines for what the city should do about statues and other monuments that are effectively “symbols of hate.”

What started out as an examination of the city's ties to slavery, which are deep, has been hijacked by a debate over Christopher Columbus and the future of Columbus Circle at 59th Street and Broadway. City Council Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito began the shift in focus when she called for the removal of the Columbus Circle statue because his voyages to the Western Hemisphere had genocidal consequences for Native Americans. Italian-American groups responded that Columbus should be celebrated as a symbol of Italian-American achievements in the United States. At a series of public hearings across the city, and in news coverage, the Columbus debate is overshadowing any real discussion of the heritage of slavery and racism in the United States and New York.

Statues honoring James Marion Sims and Samuel Morse in Central Park and Samuel Cox in Tompkins Square Park are going largely ignored. Sims performed experimental gynecological operations on enslaved African women in the American South including over 34 operations on a single woman without the benefit of anesthesia or any type of antiseptic. Many of the women he experimented on died from infection. Morse was an advocate for slavery and an opponent of emancipation. In his diaries he wrote: "Slavery . . . is not sin. It is a social condition ordained from the beginning of the world for the wisest purposes, benevolent and disciplinary, by Divine Wisdom." Cox was one of 56 Congressional representatives who voted against the 13th amendment to end slavery.



REUTERS  
Rossanna Mercedes of Black Youth Project 100: "Memorializing of imperialist slaveholders, murderers and torturers like J. Marion Sims is white supremacy."

While people are debating Columbus, they ignore streets in the city named after Andrew Jackson, who was a slaveholder and who committed genocide against native people in the Southeastern United States both before and during his presidency. There are also streets on a military base in Brooklyn named after “Stonewall” Jackson and Robert E. Lee, who fought for the South during the Civil War in defense of slavery.

One of the more offensive place names is John Mullaly Park in the Bronx. Mullaly’s call for armed resistance to the military draft led to his arrest following the July 1863 New York City Draft riots. Over one hundred people died and at least nineteen Black men were beaten to death or lynched by rioters in the worst urban unrest in the United States during the 19th century.

Even the name New York commemorates a slave trader. James, the Duke of York, was the brother of British King Charles II, and later became King James II. In 1664, his brother granted him control over British North American colonies between the Delaware and Connecticut Rivers and the province and the city of New Amsterdam were renamed after him. James also headed the Royal African Company, which held a royal monopoly over British trade with West Africa, including the slave trade. In the 1680s the Royal African Company forcibly transported about 5,000 enslaved Africans a year to the Americas. Many were branded on their chests with either the letters DY for Duke of York or for the Royal African Company. The British deposed James as King in 1688, but New York province and city kept his name.

There is historic precedent in New York City for removing statues of people considered oppressors. During the American Revolution New Yorkers tore down a lead statue of King George III on Bowling Green and melted it to make musket balls.



NEW YORK REVIEW OF BOOKS  
New Yorkers tearing down a lead statue of  
King George III on Bowling Green.  
It was melted to make musket balls.

I have mixed feelings about Columbus and the Columbus statue. Columbus certainly was not the first old world mariner to reach the western hemisphere. We know that about 1000 AD Norsemen or Vikings from pre-Christian Scandinavia established settlements in the North Atlantic, including one for a brief time in what is now Newfoundland, Canada. Plausible claims have been made based on ocean currents, botanical evidence, and cryptic textual references for other trans-oceanic voyagers, including Andalusian Arabs from Spain, West Africans, and Polynesians. Legends from a variety of cultures have been used to make the case for trans-oceanic travelers to the New World from China, India, Japan, and an Irish monk known as Saint Brendan who supposedly crossed the Atlantic in the sixth century.

I especially like the possibility that West African fishermen, blown out to sea by a storm, could have been caught in South Atlantic currents that carried them to South America. A similar thing happened to a fleet of thirteen Portuguese ships under the command of Pedro Cabral in 1500.

We also have no idea what Christopher Columbus looked like. No images survive from his lifetime. Columbus died in 1506. Sebastiano del Piombo of Venice painted the earliest portrait believed to represent Columbus in 1519.

But the biggest issue is that Columbus and his team committed horrendous acts against native people he encountered in the Caribbean. Natives were enslaved and tortured to force them to hand over non-existing gold. Treatment of the native population of the Americas was documented by Dominican friar Bartolomé de las Casas, one of the early European settlers in the Western Hemisphere, in his book "A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies." De las Casas managed an estate in the Spanish colonies from 1502 to 1507 before entering the priesthood.

On the other hand, the Columbian voyages, lead to a series of exchanges between the Eastern and Western hemispheres that transformed the world. These included foods, cultures, diseases, technologies, and massive amounts of transplanted people. They mark the shift from regional to global history. In Teaching Global History, I identify the Columbian Exchange including the European colonization of the Americas as the first wave of global integration. That exchange merits recognition, and Christopher Columbus is the symbol of the exchange, whether we like him as an individual or not.

At the Manhattan monument committee hearing I ended my testimony as my alter ego, the urban rapper Reeces Pieces.

***Robert E. Lee, His Confederacy, Defended slavery, In U.S. history. Stonewall Jack, Led the attack, That drove, The Union army back. Old Hickory, Slaughtered Cherokee, Committed Genocide, Not a mystery. Doc Marion Sims, Pursued medical whims, Experiments Butchered, Enslaved Black women. They were villains, not heroes, No place in our town, Time to correct history, Tear those statues down. Washington, Columbus, TR\* too, I'd let them stay, But it's up to you.***

\* TR is Teddy Roosevelt. There is a statue of Teddy Roosevelt leading Native Americans and Africans to civilization" on the front steps of the American Museum of Natural History.

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Dr. Alan Singer with his honored guest!