BATTLE OF THE DAYS

Around the time of the centennial, a Roman Catholic organization called the Knights of Columbus and several Italian American groups began to lobby Congress to recognize Columbus Day. In 1907, the founder of Colorado’s first Italian newspaper helped establish the first official Columbus Day in his state, and within a few years, 15 states had adopted the holiday. By the time it became a federal holiday in 1971, most states already recognized Columbus Day.

Leif Erikson Day made its debut in the early 20th century too, but it never gained the same momentum. Though it’s been a national day of observance since 1954 (meaning the president issues a proclamation about it), many people don’t even know about Leif Erikson Day.

Columbus’s “victory” over Erikson is partly due to early lobbying by Italian Americans; but it’s also because, even if he wasn’t the first, Columbus arguably played a greater role in European migration to America.

“If you think about the subsequent history of the European conquest of America, that comes from Columbus; it doesn’t come from Leif Erikson,” Mancini says. “It’s interesting that the Vikings were able to cross the Atlantic, but … Columbus had more of an impact in the long run.”

Today, the clash between Columbus and Erikson has faded. And the question about Columbus Day is whether we should celebrate it at all. South Dakota celebrates Native American Day instead, and both Hawaii and Alaska do not celebrate Columbus Day.

In fact, Columbus Day’s current detractors might argue that the debate over whether Columbus or Erikson played a greater role in European migration to America is moot, since both of them “discovered” a place where they’d never been but where millions of people already lived.

HISTORY

In 1925, at the Norse-American Centennial, President Calvin Coolidge gave recognition to Leif Erikson as the discoverer of America due to research by Norwegian-American scholars such as Knut Geisert and Ludvig-Hektoen.

United States Representative John Blatnik from Duluth introduced a bill in 1963 to observe Leif Erikson Day nationwide. On September 2, 1964, the United States Congress passed Joint Resolution 88-566 authorizing the President to proclaim October 9 as Leif Erikson Day. President Lyndon B. Johnson and each President since have done so. In the proclamations, the Presidents have praised the contributions of Americans of Nordic descent generally and the spirit of discovery.

Some states officially commemorate Leif Erikson Day in addition to the federal observance, particularly in the Upper Midwest where there are large numbers of people from the Nordic countries settled.

On October 9, 1825, a sloop named, Restoration, with 52 Norwegian Quakers on board, landed in New York Harbor beginning what would become the first organized immigration from Norway to the United States. In commemoration of their journey and their exploring ancestor, Congress selected October 9 for National Leif Erickson Day.

SOME MINNESOTA ANCESTORS

Many Americans of northern European descent wanted to celebrate Erikson instead.

This was a time of fervent anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic sentiment in many parts of the U.S., and “the idea that there might be a story where the first Europeans to America are not southern Europeans” was appealing, says JoAnne Mancini, senior history lecturer at the National University of Ireland, Maynooth and author of “Discovering Viking America.”

Archaeologists have found evidence of Viking settlements in North America, and it’s expected more will be found in the coming century.

Erikson’s nationality wasn’t the only thing that made some people favor him over Columbus. Mancini says that in the 19th century, Americans “who were not Catholic were really paranoid about the Catholic Church.” Some Protestants went so far as to suggest that Columbus was part of a Roman Catholic conspiracy to suppress the recognition of earlier Norse explorers.

COLUMBUS VS. ERIKSON

In 1892, the U.S. celebrated a Columbian centennial: the 400th anniversary of Columbus’s journey to the Americas. At the time, the country’s recognition of him was a source of pride for many Italian Americans and Italian immigrants. But Scandinavian immigrants and Americans of northern European descent wanted to celebrate Erikson instead.

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It’s not clear whether many people bought into this conspiracy, but the rise of Columbus in the late 19th century did motivate anti-immigrant, anti-Catholic Americans to argue for the national recognition of Erikson over Columbus.