

Why Do We Celebrate Columbus Day and Not Leif Erikson Day?



A statue of Leif Erikson, the Viking thought to have sailed to the Americas 500 years before Columbus, guards the Hallgrímskirkja Church in Reykjavík, Iceland.

Some consider Erikson to be the first European to reach America—and over a century ago, there was a push to recognize him over Columbus.

BY BECKY LITTLE – NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC, OCTOBER 11, 2015

What's Spongebob Squarepants's favorite holiday, besides April Fools' Day? Unless you're really into Vikings, you probably missed it. October 9 is Leif Erikson Day, a United States holiday that honors the Icelandic explorer who some believe was the first European to reach North America.

Leif Erikson Day doesn't get as much recognition because it's overshadowed by Monday's Columbus Day—which, unlike Erikson's day, is a federal holiday, meaning government employees get off work, as do many students and private-sector workers.

Christopher Columbus and his holiday are controversial today largely because of the way he and subsequent European explorers and settlers treated Native Americans. For years, there have been campaigns to celebrate an indigenous people's day. But in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, many people had a different problem with Columbus: They argued that the real credit for discovering North America should go to Erikson, who they believed arrived 500 years before Columbus. Plus, they favored Erikson because, unlike Columbus, he wasn't Italian or Catholic.

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.

This was a time of fervent anti-immigrant and anti-Italian 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.

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.

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.”



A painting depicts Christopher Columbus and his crew landing in the Americas. Columbus made trips to the Western Hemisphere in 1492, 1493, 1498, and 1502.

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.

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