

CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS

Vandalized statue has storied past

Has drawn attention, pride since dedication in 1940

By Robert Koch

NORWALK — Seventy-seven years ago this month, members of Norwalk’s sizable Italian-American community gathered proudly in front of Columbus Elementary School on Concord Street and dedicated a monument honoring the school’s namesake.

“It’s next to Jesus Christ.”

Louis Imperator Jr., financial secretary of the Knights of Columbus Msgr. Thomas J. Finn Council 46 of Norwalk

The Columbus Memorial Scholarship Fund donated \$2,800 for the statue, which was built by a sculptor from Fairfield and dedicated on Oct. 12, 1940, to the school upon its opening.

The statue, although moved to Heritage Wall in Thomas C. O’Connor Park

in 1983, still draws attention and respect of the local Italian-American community on Columbus Day.

“It’s next to Jesus Christ,” said Louis Imperator Jr., financial secretary of the Knights of Columbus Msgr. Thomas J. Finn Council 46 of Norwalk. “When we started 129 years ago the disparaging comments about Columbus were not out there. He was an explorer.”

Columbus, an Italian explorer and navigator in service of the Spanish crown, was long credited as being the first European to

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discover America after he crossed the Atlantic Ocean with three ships and made landfall in what are now the Bahamas in October 1492.

The monument along the Heritage Wall carries a statue of Columbus atop a base containing images of the vessels and the words, “Erected by Italian-American People of Norwalk — Sponsored by The Columbus Memorial Fund Inc., October 12, 1940 A.D.”

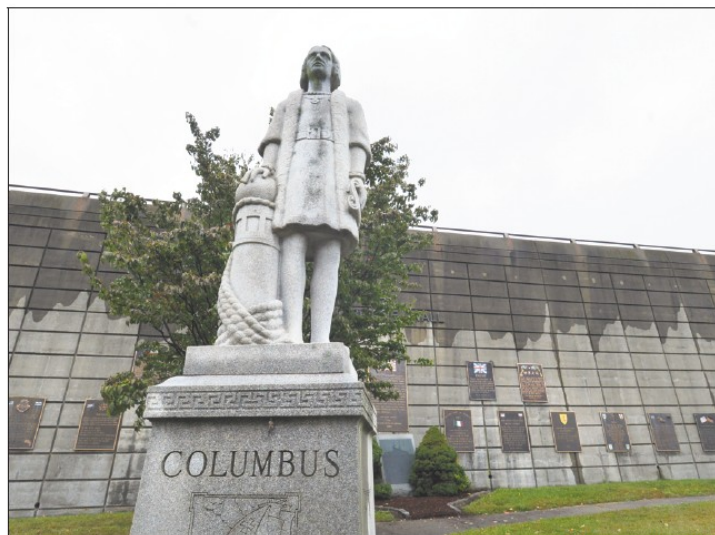
Ralph Bloom, Norwalk historian and volunteer in the History Room at the Main Library on Belden Avenue, remembers walking past the statue outside Columbus School when he attended nearby Lincoln Elementary School, which has since been demolished. Bloom is of Italian heritage on his mother’s side of the family.

“It’s a case of the Italians putting themselves forward,” Bloom said of the statue and school, which is

now known as Columbus Magnet School. “In Connecticut — Norwalk especially — we have a large Italian-American community. It was a way of the Italian-American community expressing itself in town.”

The Norwalk statue depicts a “youthful Columbus in Renaissance tunic and leggings stands on a two-stepped inscribed and decorated base. His right hand rests on a globe. He holds an unrolled sheet in his left hand at his side. Wind-blown Spanish sailing ships are incised on three sides of the plinth, with incised inscription on the front,” reads a description posted at vanderkrogt.net, a website that documents monuments related to Christopher Columbus’ voyages.

Ralph Monte, a member of the Norwalk Sons of Italy, isn’t a fan of the design — “it looks like he’s got his hands on an ox cart.” He prefers the Columbus statue in his hometown of New Haven, which shows the Italian explorer holding the world in his hands. But as a re-



Alex von Kleydorff / Hearst Connecticut Media

The statue of Christopher Columbus in Thomas C. O’Connor Park that includes The Heritage Wall on West Ave. was found to have the slogan Fake News stenciled on its base on Sunday.

tired engineer, Monte can find no better example of an explorer than Columbus.

“He was an engineer, he

was a scientist and he that spirit to go out and explore the unknown,” Monte said.

Last weekend, vandals

painted the words “FAKE NEWS” at the base of the Norwalk statue in what appears to have been broad-

er backlash over Columbus Day. Statues of Columbus were vandalized in Norwalk, Bridgeport, Middletown and New Haven in what police say may have been an action coordinated by an anarchist group.

The defacement came amid ongoing debate about the treatment of indigenous peoples by European colonists whose arrival in the Americas was ushered by Columbus’ crossing of the Atlantic. Disease, slavery and displacement followed in both North and South America.

Neither Imperator nor Monte ignore that broader, modern assessment of Columbus’ role in history. But neither do they find the darker elements grounds for not remembering him.

“He was not involved in colonization, but what he was involved was his cut of the wealth that was coming out of the New World — that was his downside,” Monte said. “His upside was that he was the best ever dead-reckoning sailor that ever lived.”