

# A Circle of Syracuse's

**V. Renzo Baldi arrived in Syracuse unexpectedly on Thursday, October 11, 1934. The renowned Italian sculptor travelled over 5,000 miles from his native Florence to attend the public dedication of his latest work, an enormous statue of his countryman, Christopher Columbus. Created in collaboration with Syracuse University graduate**

**and noted architect Dwight James Baum, who designed the pedestal, pool and fountain, Baldi's Columbus was the manifestation of a quarter century's worth of efforts by Syracuse's Italian community to demonstrate their ethnic and civic pride, during a period when they faced increasing prejudice.**

The story begins in 1910, when Syracuse University Professor Torquato DeFelice visited Florence. Prior to his trip, DeFelice and Dr. Serafino Chiarulli, both prominent members of the Italian community, discussed the possibility of raising a monument to the famous Italian mariner in Syracuse, which was home to approximately 7,000 Italians at the time. Upon his arrival in Florence, Professor DeFelice met with Signor Baldi and the two men discussed the project. Baldi even crafted a small model of the prospective statue that DeFelice brought back to Syracuse.

Upon his return to Syracuse, DeFelice and Chiarulli organized a meeting of delegates from the city's dozens of Italian social clubs. The first meeting of the United Italian Societies met on October 6, 1911. Among the topics discussed was the feasibility of a parade to celebrate Columbus Day (which was not yet a national holiday). The delegates also decided that the monies collected for the parades would be deposited in a bank, with any remainder being held in trust. These funds would ultimately pay for the erecting of a monument to Columbus. The United Italian



# *Controversy*

## Christopher Columbus Monument

By Robert Searing



John G. Ciciarelli was elected President of the Columbus Monument Association in 1928. He led the organization through the initial fund-raising campaign in May of 1929. He resigned in 1930 and moved to Providence, RI. Ciciarelli felt insulted by several public and private comments made during the turmoil in 1933 and 1934 and he did not attend the dedication ceremony, though he was invited.

Societies organized parades in 1912, 1913, and 1914, when the outbreak of the First World War ended the celebrations. As of July 1915, the Columbus Monument Fund had \$382.24 in its treasury. In 1916, as the United States was perched on the precipice of war, a group of men that included Police Capt. Pasquale Bennett, undertaker Joe Pirro, local citizen, John Vaccaro, and publisher James Lanzetta unofficially organized the Columbus Monument Association (C.M.A.) to act as a steward for the project. Yet, despite their passion for the project, the post-war years saw no major developments and no significant funds raised.

While Syracuse's Columbus Monument project lay dormant, the ensuing decade brought about a series of national developments that re-awakened the local Italian community's desire to honor their hero and their heritage. The

"Red Scare" of 1919, which stirred up anti-communist and nativist sentiments across the country, saw police raids against so-called "anti-American" groups, including labor unions like the International Workers of the World. In 1920, fears of anarchy and revolution were exacerbated by the terrorist bombing on Wall Street, which killed thirty eight people, and was allegedly carried out by Mario Buda, an Italian anarchist.

That same year, two other Italian immigrants, Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, were arrested for robbery and murder. The state of Massachusetts doctored evidence and changed testimony to convict the two men. Their appeal lasted seven years and became an international controversy. In Syracuse, the Sacco and Vanzetti saga was front page news in the *Herald*, *The Post Standard*, and the city's leading Italian language newspaper, *La Gazzeta Di Syracuse*. All of this turmoil led to the incredibly restrictive Immigration Acts of 1921 and 1924, which placed strict quotas on the number of immigrants from Asia, Eastern and Southern Europe (including Italy); people deemed threats to American values.

In July of 1927, as the fates of Sacco and Vanzetti barreled them toward the electric chair, the dormant Columbus Monument Association met at Joe Pirro's building at 529 North Salina Street to discuss reviving the long-delayed monument. Just a few weeks later, Sacco and Vanzetti were executed on August 23, 1927. The Syracuse Herald reported the execution as a "shock to civilization." This sentiment undoubtedly rang true to the thousands of Italians living in Syracuse, to whom Sacco and Vanzetti were martyrs sacrificed on the altar of American nativism,

after a decade of discriminations and recriminations.

On October 11, 1927, the leaders of the Columbus Monument Association applied for incorporation. The group received

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*In an era when Italian Americans were to these men, all prominent members of*

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approval in February 1928 and immediately began formulating their battle plan.

The Christopher Columbus Monument Association began their charter with a preamble. Their statue would be a symbol of "achievement" that would "inculcate into the hearts of posterity, a desire to emulate the great. Thus, we would follow tradition and perpetuate the memory of a man who occupies a peculiar position in the history and tradition of the two great nations (Italy and the U.S.)." In an era when Italian Americans were regularly labelled as seditious, subversive, dangerous, and "un-American," it was important to these men, all prominent members of Syracuse's Italian community, to provide their community with a symbol of ethnic pride.

The main function of the Monument Association was to raise the requisite funds for the erection of the memorial. John Ciciarelli was elected President of the Association in the spring of 1928. From there, the organization operated like any other corporation, with a board of directors and several committees dedicated to finance, membership, and building/location. By February 1929, the Association was ready to begin planning the main thrust of its capital campaign. To do so, it organized itself along military lines. Fifteen Generals were responsible for raising \$1,000 each. To do so,

each General had ten Captains reporting directly to him; each one responsible for raising \$100 each, hence, a goal of \$15,000 for the entire project.

Adopting the motto,

there would be “Junior Captains” in classrooms all over the city. Moreover, letters of solicitation were sent to the Pastors at Our Lady of Pompeii, St. Peter’s, St. John the Baptist, and St. Cecilia’s

Barnell sent out a variety of letters to area business leaders, including F.R. Hazard, Burns Lyman Smith, and H.H. Franklin, as well as to companies like Dey Brothers, the Kinney Shoe Company, Burns

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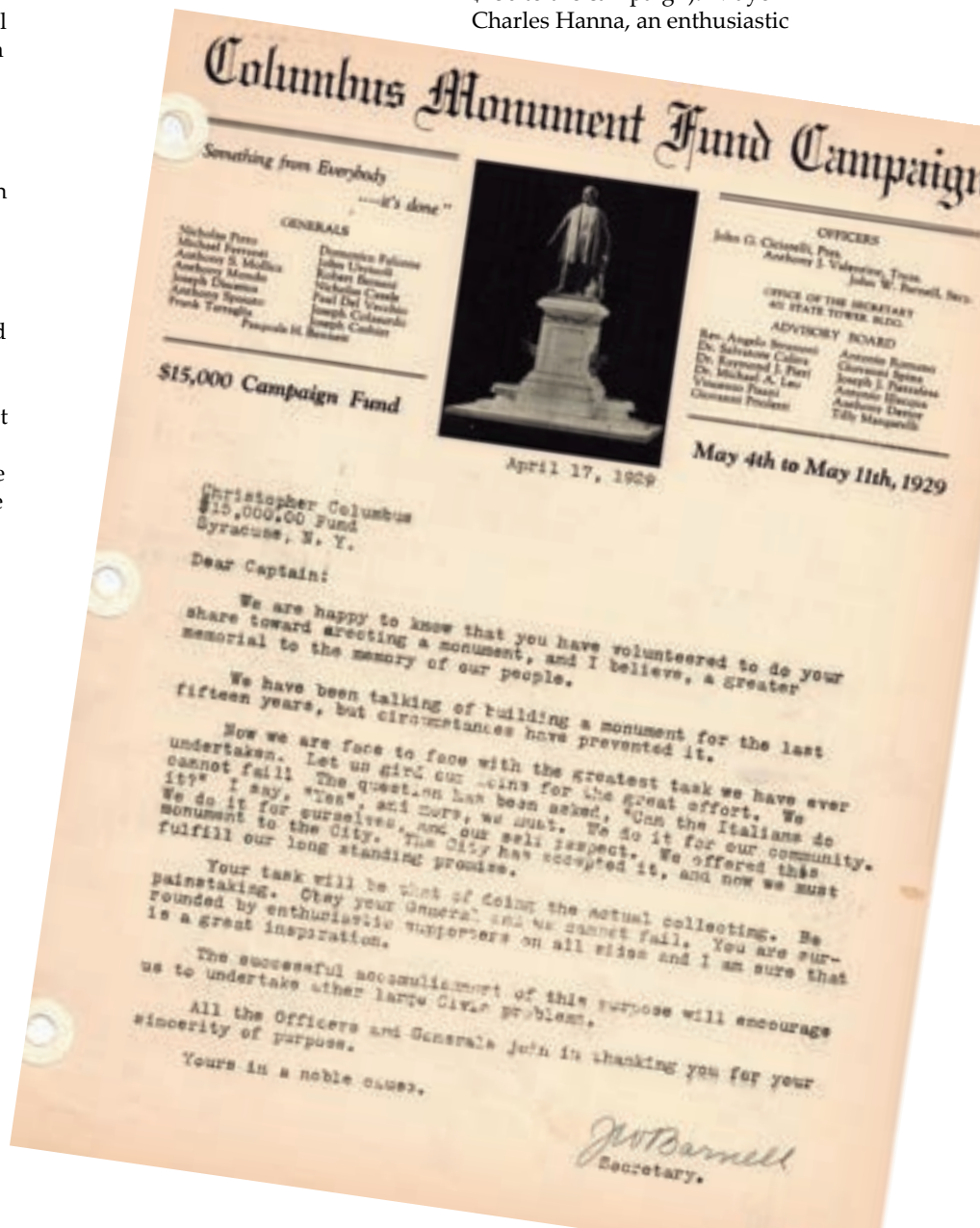
“Something from Everybody—it’s done,” the Columbus Monument Fund Campaign looked to raise the \$15,000 in only one week’s time, from May 4th to May 11th, 1929. Internal documents in the archives at the Onondaga Historical Association indicate just how much the Monument Association wanted this fundraiser to be “a distinctly Italian effort,” as Association Secretary John W. Barnell told the leaders of the city’s nearly 70 Italian Organizations in April of 1929. On May 3, 1929, the night before the drive was to begin, John Ciciarelli, Anthony Valentine, Zeff Pieri, Anthony Illacqua, John Barnell, and John Urciuoli sent a telegram to all “Generals, Captains, Lieutenants, Officers” inviting them to a banquet at the Roma Garden Restaurant at 163 East Onondaga, across from the Hotel Syracuse, that began with the phrase “TO ARMS! TO ARMS! TO ARMS” printed across the top in bold, red, capital letters.

To facilitate donations and further solidify the bonds of brotherhood and community, all while spurring a very American sense of competition, the Association contracted agreements with the city’s Italian language newspapers to publish the names and amounts donated. The Association also reached out to C. Carl Alverson, Superintendent of the Syracuse School District and the dozens of Catholic Schools in the area to inform them that

in Solvay, to ask that a special collection be taken up at Sunday Masses.

In addition to the Italian citizens of Syracuse, Ciciarelli and

Brothers, and Marsellus Casket Company to name just a few that employed many Italians in the city. (Hazard donated \$50, while Franklin donated an astounding \$250 to the campaign). Mayor Charles Hanna, an enthusiastic



Letter sent from the C.M.A. to the fifteen "Generals" that raised and collected the monies during the Fund Campaign in May of 1929.

*“Something from Everybody  
---it’s done.”*



*I Did My Share.*

supporter of the project, offered prizes to the top four crews as well.

As the drive progressed, local newspapers followed the rivalries as if it were a spectator sport. The Syracuse Herald printed daily updates, singling out the generals and captains by name as their respective crews topped their \$1,000 goals. The Herald even reported on the “last big individual match of the bowling season,” between Jack Byrne and John Martino, May 13 and 15th, with the winner pledging the \$200 purse to the Monument Association.

When the dust settled on the morning of May 12, 1929, the campaign had raised nearly \$18,000 in total. By the end of the day on May 14, as John Ciciarelli sat down to compose a letter of thanks to the Knights of Columbus #191 on James Street--who had been instrumental in the “splendid movement” -- the total amount received was an astounding \$21,783.14! Records indicate that most of the donations were between \$1 and \$5 dollars on average, which speaks to the large number of Italians that donated. The entire Italian community had come together, even the youngest among them, the school

**Above:** Flyer sent to Generals and Captains in the C.M.A. These flyers were also displayed at many businesses on the North Side.

**Right:** St. Mary's Circle in the 1920s. As automobiles became more popular, this rotary became a heavily trafficked area. This was a major reason behind the initial opposition to the site on behalf of city planners.



children, donated \$41 of their hard-earned money to the undertaking. Association Secretary John Barnell sent letters to each of the city's major newspapers, both English and Italian, informing them of the "wonderful success" of the Monument Fund Drive.

Unfortunately, the resounding success of the fundraising drive and the spirit of brotherhood it portended did not last. A new set of controversies and challenges arose; some were internal, while others shed light on simmering prejudices that boiled over in discussions over the monument's design and prospective location.

The unexpected fundraising windfall allowed for the Columbus Monument Association to erect an even more impressive statue than they had planned, with the possible addition of a fountain. Immediately after the monies were collected, the Location Committee, chaired by local clothing magnate Joseph Pietrafesa, owner of Learbury Clothing Company, met to discuss possible locations that included St. Mary's Circle, Hanover Square, Onondaga Park, and Fayette Park.

On June 3, 1929 Joe Pietrafesa informed Association President John Ciciarelli of the Location Committee's final recommendations. Proposal #1 was to place a monument with a fountain near the Summit Street entrance to Onondaga Park. Proposal #2 was to place a monument without a fountain in St. Mary's Circle. Ultimately, the Association decided on St. Mary's Circle, according to internal documents.

Mayor Charles Hanna supported the St. Mary's location and had the City's Planning Commission and Parks Department meet with representatives from the Association. As these discussions

progressed through the fall and winter of 1929, City Planning Commissioner Clarence Howard pushed back on the St. Mary's site. In those days, St. Mary's Circle was a heavily trafficked rotary and Howard was concerned that this location would lead to major traffic delays and congestion. Yet



outside events once again brought the project's progress to a halt. The Stock Market crashed on Black Tuesday, October 24, 1929 and ushered in the Great Depression; and in November, Syracuse elected a new Mayor, Rolland B. Marvin. Both of these developments impacted the project, causing significant delays.

By April 1930, tensions were boiling over. Clarence Howard suggested to Mayor Marvin that the St. Mary's site was not feasible, from his perspective. His first



**Top:** Joseph Pietrafesa took out a full-page ad for his Learbury Clothing Company in Syracuse Journal's special Dedication issue.

**Left:** Joseph Pietrafesa owned Learbury Clothing and was an original member of the Monument Association and chairman of the Location Committee that selected St. Mary's Circle site in 1929. Pietrafesa was elected President of the C.M.A. in 1933. He led the final fund-raising drive in 1934 that secured the funds to finally erect the monument. The Pietrafesa Family still acts as stewards of the Columbus Monument.

choice was Columbus Park on East Genesee and Cherry Streets. Howard also suggested placing the monument in front of the planned New York Central Railroad Station to be built on Erie Boulevard, and even in Hanover Square on the site of the public toilet. Mr. Ciciarelli wasted no time declaring how "insulted" the Italian community was by this proposal.

Howard's most controversial suggestion was to remove the Hamilton White Monument and situate the Columbus Statue in Fayette Park. Adelaide White, Hamilton's widow, wrote to John Ciciarelli imploring him to choose another site. It seems that public perception was that the Italian community was looking

to displace a local hero with their memorial, even though the decision was ultimately made by the City Commission. Ciciarelli declared the Association's disapproval of the site and assured Mrs. White, in a private letter, that the C.M.A. had nothing to do with the suggestion. Ultimately, Mayor Marvin stepped in to quell the unrest. He decided that the monument would be erected outside the entrance to Onondaga Park, over the protests of Strathmore residents.

With the location established (or so they thought) the Association's Building Commission worked with Harold Butler, Dean

of Arts and Sciences at Syracuse University to select a group of eight Syracusans to select a final design for the monument. The group included Dr. Irene Sargent, a world-renowned authority on fine art and the force behind Gustav Stickley's *The Craftsman* magazine. On Columbus Day 1930, the committee selected Joseph Pollia's design from fourteen submitted. The statute, atop a thirty-five-foot pillar, would be unveiled on October 12, 1931. The corner stone was to be laid, not coincidentally, on July 4th.

Then the wheels came off. The simmering tensions between factions within the Monument

Association increased during the debacle over the location. In the meantime, Ciccarelli's job relocated to Providence, R.I. On November 30th, in Ciccarelli's absence, the Association rejected Pollia's design and called for a new one. On December 6, 1930, John Ciccarelli resigned, having stewarded the project from nothing to the brink of fruition, raising nearly \$22,000. In January 1931, Anthony Valentine assumed the presidency, filling the void left by Ciccarelli's resignation. Ultimately, Pollia

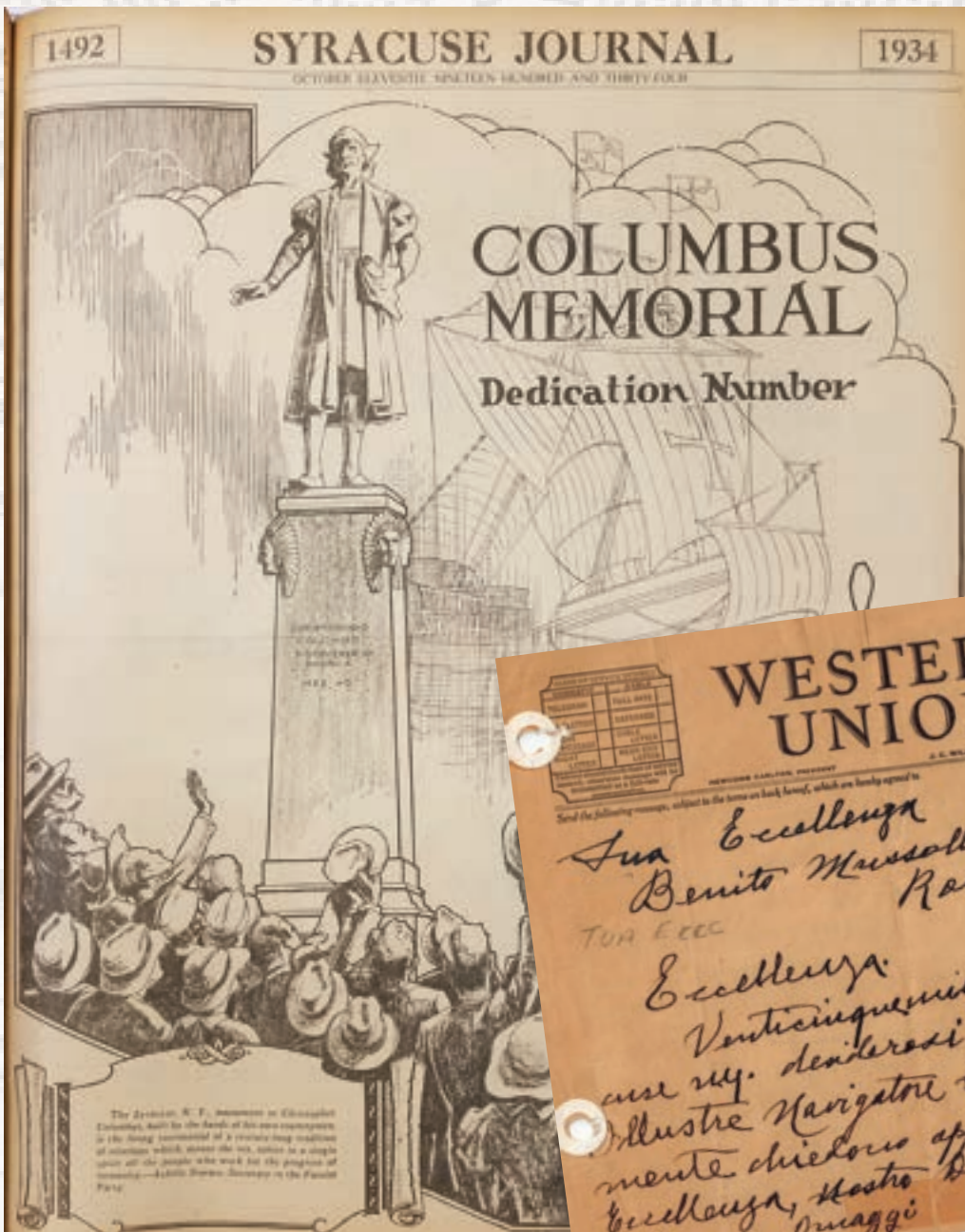
sued the Association, though his case was dismissed.

The abandonment of the Pollia design necessitated a new location as well. Mayor Marvin ultimately promised the C.M.A. the St. Mary's location, originally advocated for by Joseph Pietrafesa and the Location Committee in 1929. As part of this agreement, Mayor Marvin requested that he have a say in the final design. Thus, the C.M.A. reconnected with Renzo Baldi, who created that first model for Professor DeFelice some nineteen years earlier. The Monument Association contracted with Baldi to cast his eleven-foot bronze Columbus, in Italy, where the buying power of the dollar was incredibly strong. This allowed for a much larger and more impressive statue than could be cast in the United States. It was also a point of pride for the Italians that the piece came from their homeland. In collaboration with Mayor Marvin's office, Dwight James Baum was brought on board to design the pedestal and fountain (Baum designed Hendricks Chapel at Syracuse University with the legendary John Russell Pope in 1928).

On October 12, 1932, an enormous parade led by Col. Guido Verbeck, the Head-Master of The Manlius Military Academy, marched from North Salina Street to St. Mary's Circle, for the site's dedication. The Mayor and the C.M.A. declared that the monument to the "Discoverer of America" would be unveiled one year later, on October 12, 1933. However, over the next year the project was beset with another series of controversies and misfortune. Allegations of mishandling of funds and a general unhappiness with the leadership of Valentine appeared in John Lanzetta's *La Gazzetta di Syracuse*, leading to more turnover in

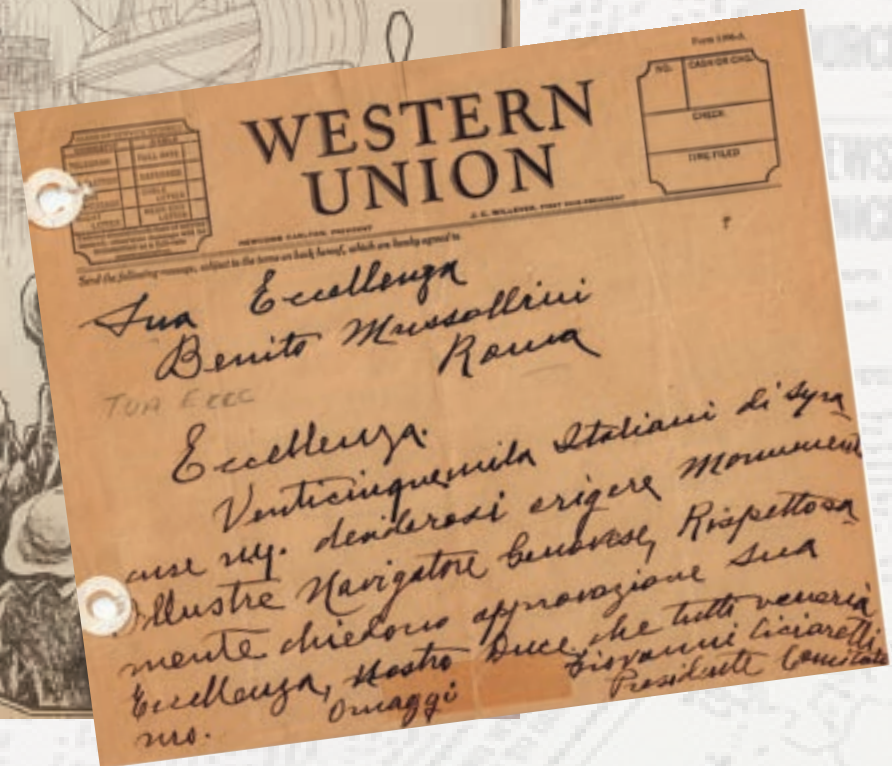


Joseph Pollia with his proposed model of the Christopher Columbus statue



**Left:** Cover from the *Syracuse Journal's*, October 11, 1934 edition featuring a quote from Achille Starace, Secretary to the Fascist Party.

**Bottom:** A undated telegram drafted by John Ciciarelli to Italy's Fascist Leader Benito Mussolini informing "his Excellency" of the desire of 25,000 Italians in Syracuse to erect a monument to Columbus and respectfully asking for his approval. There is no record at OHA of a response.



leadership, as Valentine was ousted. Barnell took to the press to defend his handling and accounting of the Association's monies, pleading with his Italian compatriots to rally and complete "the beautiful gesture of civic pride."

This internal strife within the Italian community was dwarfed in comparison to the financial blow that came in April 1933, when newly elected President Franklin Roosevelt abandoned the gold standard. This severely

de-valued the dollar in the short term and, as a result, the exchange rates that were once so favorable, suddenly plummeted. This left the Association lacking the requisite funds to pay Baldi and the Italian stone masons. In January of 1934, with the fate of the project hanging in the balance, Finance Committee chairman Joseph Pietrafesa, stepped into the fold and successfully stewarded the organization through a second fundraising drive. Accordingly, Pietrafesa was elected

President of the C.M.A.

On October 11, 1934 the *Syracuse Herald* ran a special "Dedication Number" that featured a line drawing of the monument, featuring dozens of congratulatory advertisements by many of the city's most popular and prominent businesses addressed directly to Syracuse's Italian community. In addition to the drawing, the front page featured a quote from Achille Starace, Secretary of Italy's Fascist Party, Benito Mussolini's second



# COLORFUL SCENES ENACTED IN ST. MARY'S CIRCLE



in command. Starace praised the "Syracuse, N.Y. monument to Christopher Columbus, built by the hands of his own countrymen, as the living testimonial...to the spirit [of] all the people who work for the progress of humanity." In fact, the leaders of the C.M.A. had been in communication with members of Italy's Fascist government for years. At one point in 1929, the Italian nationalist poet and Fascist, Gabrielle D'Annunzioto, was approached to write an inscription

for the monument's base, though this never materialized. There were also inquiries into having the Italian government help defray costs of shipping the materials from Italy (some authors have claimed Mussolini himself authorized payments, though no corroborative evidence of this exists in OHA's archives). At the end of his statement, Starace linked the memorial and what it represented with the aims of Fascist Italy and the partnership between the Italian

people and "mighty America." In fact, the C.M.A. had invited the Italian Ambassador to attend the celebration, but he declined. The lone Italian to make the 5,000-mile journey to attend the celebration was Renzo Baldi, who surprised the Committee with his attendance.

Finally, on October 12, after nearly a quarter century, a World War and a Great Depression, nearly 20,000 Syracusans lined the parade route (Verbeck reprised his role as Grand Marshall) and filled St.



**Above:** Photo from the *Syracuse Journal* of the monument dedication on October 12, 1934. The crowd, including the parade, was estimated at 20,000.  
**Right:** From the October 17, 1934 edition of the *Syracuse Journal*.

Mary’s Circle for the unveiling of the Columbus Monument. Speeches were made by Mayor Marvin, Baum, and Joseph Pietrafesa who recounted the statue’s saga, going all the way back to Professor de Felice. The final product was a magnificent and stirring work of art. At the base, a pool 96 feet in diameter, paved in the ancient Roman manner with colored pebbles. A thirty-foot pillar of pink granite, imported from Italy, rose from the four-pointed compass in

the reflecting pool, while grotesque faces spewed water from their mouths. Atop the pillar, stood “Cristoforo Colombo Discoverer of America,” twelve feet high and cast in bronze, triumphantly facing the west. Intricate bronze castings of four Native American heads adorned each corner of the pillar, which Baum said represented the “new America discovered by Columbus.”

After nearly a week of celebrations, dinners, and

festivities, there was a dinner held to honor Renzo Baldi, at Pirro Hall, before his return to Florence. In a scene made even more surreal by the political and educational developments of the past eighty-years, Baldi, the portly, bald Italian sculptor, was presented with a headdress by Onondaga Jesse Lyons, who bestowed Baldi with a new name in a Native dialect, Gah-Wah-Ya-Tah, which, according to the report in the *Syracuse Herald*, meant “New Man.”

## CHANGING ATTITUDES towards the COLUMBUS STATUE

Over the ensuing decades, the Columbus Monument became a revered part of the Downtown landscape. Citizens began referring to the area in front of St. Mary's as Columbus Circle almost immediately in 1934. In 1936, the U.S. Government made Columbus Day a national holiday. In Syracuse, each year on Columbus Day, representatives of the Columbus Monument Association laid a wreath at the base; this practice continues to this day.

Yet, the tumult of the 1960s and the push for civil rights and equality brought about a sea change in the way history was analyzed and presented. The triumphant and sterilized narrative of Columbus's voyages presented to generations of American children was challenged

as activists and reformers called for a more realistic accounting of the conquest of the Americas.

As the 500th Anniversary of Columbus's voyage approached in 1992, protests occurred all over the United States, including here in Syracuse. Many activists took umbrage with the concept of Columbus and discovery, citing the fact that millions of Indigenous peoples were living on this land in 1492. In October 1991, a group of protestors led by American Indian Movement Founder Dennis Banks, burned Columbus in effigy at the base of the monument as one of them splashed the bronze plaques with red paint to symbolize the blood of the millions of Native Peoples killed during the conquest of the Western Hemisphere. The

Onondaga, who were part of the Monument's unveiling, disavowed the protests and Banks's tactics. The city of Syracuse paid nearly \$450,000 to have the statue cleaned and restored to its original appearance for the festivities in 1992. Protests of Columbus Day continue up to this day, as do calls for the statue's removal and the replacement of Columbus Day with Indigenous People's Day.

The Columbus monument erected in St. Mary's Circle has stirred debate since its inception. Thus, it is not surprising that eighty-five years later, Baldi's Columbus continues to be at the center of a circle of controversy, as the American public, and the people of Syracuse, grapple with the complex realities and interpretations of their shared past; a past that begins, for good or ill, with Christopher Columbus and the undeniable and world altering effects of contact, conquest, and what historians and anthropologists call the Columbian Exchange.

The statue in St. Mary's Circle (now, Columbus Circle), much like the man it memorializes, embodies the conflicts at the core of the American experiment. For some, like the thousands of Italian Americans that built it, and their descendants, it is a symbol of ethnic and civic pride. For others, like the descendants of those indigenous peoples whose world was torn asunder by Columbus's "discovery" of a world unknown to Europeans, it is a symbol of oppression and genocide. The story of this particular monument provides a fascinating insight into this important conversation. Even more fascinating, perhaps, is how a seemingly innocuous monument in downtown Syracuse could be so connected to something so profound. Take a moment to think on that; after all, the monument's designers did include a reflecting pool.

Columbus statue in 1980.

Note the missing bronze Indian heads. They were removed in the 1940s and "lost." In 1989, the FBI seized them in Orlando, FL after receiving a tip. They were returned to Syracuse and placed back on the monument in time for the 500th Anniversary Celebration in 1992.

