

# Understanding what we don't understand

By Ed Breen

Certainly you've been down to Anderson at some time and toured Mounds State Park, or you've been to the mounds sites in southeastern Ohio, or maybe Cahokia, a veritable city built a thousand years ago to house 10,000 or 20,000 people along the banks of the Mississippi River near today's St. Louis.

Or Arizona, north of Phoenix just off of I-17, a place called Montezuma Castle National Monument. Or Mesa Verde, the even more spectacular Anasazi ruins near the Four Corners, where Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado and Utah meet. If you are agile enough you can be in all four states at the same time right there. In the distance is the elegantly sophisticated Mesa Verde ruin, which was once the largest apartment building in North America.

We could go on, but you get the idea: A lot of years ago there were a lot of people living, loving, working, playing across this vast landscape of North America and, specifically, the United States,

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right here where we are today and as close as those mounds down along Ind. 9 near Anderson, except Ind. 9 was a thousand years in the future back then.

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people, eager to show him around.

Bottom line is this: Christopher Columbus "discovered" nothing. Men, women and children of the indigenous people, the sophisticated cultures that built Cahokia and Mesa Verde had been here for thousands of years and it is only we pale skinned softies from western Europe – English, Irish, Spanish, Portuguese, Swedes, Danes – who think that Columbus and Desoto and Henry Hudson and all the others were a big deal.

They were not, even though we were taught from first grade on about how "in 1492 Columbus sailed the ocean blue." Taught in a European language by blue-eyed blond teachers what swell folks had come before us and made the world safe for democracy by killing most of the people who were already here. Manifest Destiny and all that.

So, it is for this reason that I have absolutely no problem with the people over in Columbus, Ohio, taking down the statue of Mr. Columbus last week. He was, simply put, a freelance gun-for-hire – he was Italian and the Spanish paid the bill – in search of a cheap road to China, where there was money to be made.

I did not know until the other day that in the foolishness of self-promotion back in the '70s or '80s the Ohio folks had built a life-size replica of Columbus's flagship, the Santa Maria – you remember the Nina, the Pinta and the Santa Maria? – and moored it right there in downtown Columbus on the Scioto River.

Columbus, apparently, is

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littered with statues of the man, but the one that seems most offensive and is being removed this week stood in front of the City Hall: 22-foot tall, cast bronze, three tons, given by the old country folks from Genoa back in 1955. There have been failed attempts through the years to get rid of it, just as there were attempts to dispose of the silly ship on the Scioto, located within site of an historic native village where, in 1774, an army of Virginians opened fire only because they could and

killed 96 men, women and children. Manifest Destiny and all that.

As with so many things American, what we have now is not what was intended. I have a little sign once posted in Boston which reads, "Help Wanted. No Irish Need Apply." So, too, with the Italians. Columbus Day in October and most things Columbus started as a way to empower immigrants and celebrate American diversity.

A New York newspaper editorialist once saw Italians as – his words – "pests without mitigation."

A Columbus commentator last week put all this in perspective: "We are at the doorstep of an era in which the once impossible is becoming newly possible."

We are, indeed, seemingly beginning to understand much: That Robert E. Lee was treasonous, that Christopher Columbus was an opportunist, that gender is not a defining barrier to life or love, that racism is as much systemic as it is individual.

The challenge is to know what we do not know, to understand what we do not understand.



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