

Robert Searing

Full Transcript

Interview Conducted October 22, 2020

Interviewer

We'd like to start by asking you for a brief bio. How would you want to be introduced to a broad audience of people on the street or people who might come to the downtown circle and interact with this project?

Robert Searing

I'm Robert Searing. I'm the curator of history at the Onondaga Historical Association. I'm also an American historian and teacher of American history.

Interviewer

Thank you. We'll start really open-ended. What are your thoughts about the Syracuse Columbus monument?

Robert Searing

Oh, they're myriad. I think that as somebody who works in downtown Syracuse, literally down the street from the monument, it's something that's been part of my consciousness for several years. Obviously, as an ordinary citizen, I always thought it was interesting that there was a statue of Christopher Columbus in Syracuse, not really knowing anything about the history of the statue. I was always taken with the beauty and aesthetic of it. It is a magnificent piece of public art. But I really became very interested in it when I became curator here back in 2017, and it was one of the first things

that I really researched into and sort of dug in, because I was just curious. I was curious as to why it was here, when it was put up, and the story behind it. And as I started to research it, I thought, you know, as research goes, you sort of get deeper and deeper into it. And I sort of lived with the monument for two years. So I see it from every angle, you know, in terms of all the stakeholders involved. I've talked and had many conversations with folks, both anti-Columbus statue and pro-Columbus statue. So I really feel, like I said, this has been a big part of my life for almost two years now. So this is a really great way to sort of capstone this, honestly, sitting in this chair right now.

Interviewer

Thank you. What histories does the monument site represent to you?

Robert Searing

Well, it represents many histories. I mean, first and foremost, I think it represents the history of the Italian American community in Syracuse, the struggles that they went through to be accepted as Americans, to be accepted as white people in the city. I think that really speaks to their pride and what they went through as a community to raise the funding.

You know, the monument lacks interpretation, which I think is just generally a problem with so many installations of public art, which this certainly is. It's just a statue with nothing around it and, you know, nothing where it came from. So when I found the histories and when I really researched the histories of the Italian community that came together and rubbed nickels together in many places to bring this thing together, it really put it into a new light. Now, as an American scholar, and somebody who's studied American history deeply, I'm fully aware of the history of Columbus as a man and the atrocities committed both under his direction and while on his watch, which makes it a very weird subject.

So, I mean, it's the histories of the people that built it. Then it's the histories of the Haudenosaunee as well. I mean, this is Onondaga land. This is a very interesting geographical position for a statue of Christopher Columbus considering what we know about his behavior in Hispaniola and the fallout from Columbus. I mean, it's a profound—it's near extermination across the continents. But here [internet connection lost briefly]...divest the two, at least I can't. So those are things you think about constantly. And then again, with the depictions of Native Americans within the statue itself, you know, bringing those histories a little more to the forefront, thinking about the ways in which Native Americans have been depicted in American popular culture for centuries now, so even then, the way that statue is such a frozen moment in time, that now stands to be interpreted by the masses, as all art is. And so, I've sort of enjoyed, from an analytical historical perspective, meeting various stakeholders in this discussion and hearing their thoughts, knowing what I know about the design, about the architect that built it, about the sculptor that made it, about their intentions, about the various representations of the Onondaga that were present at the celebration, at the dedication, about their feting of Renzo Baldi. It's an incredibly complex and fascinating tale, I think, for any sociologist, historian, archaeologist, anthropologist. It really is. There are so many things at that site, on that statue and the history behind it, that it's hard to extricate them from one another. It's all wrapped up in one 35 foot tall piece.

Interviewer

Absolutely, thank you. What do you think people should learn about the history of Columbus and the effects of his voyages?

Robert Searing

I think they should learn more than they do. I think that they should try when possible to go back to the source materials, what we have, as biased as they are, whether it's his son's biography of Columbus, whether it's his own writings, which we know were sort of ad hoc, after the fact, so obviously to be taken with a grain of salt. As a historian and a history professor, it's always back to the source materials

for me, but one of the things that I often talk about with the Italian community, particularly the older Italian community, that still has some connection to whether their grandmother, their aunt, or their fathers, donated money, is that they often would try to tell me, “Bob, it’s not about Columbus,” to which I would often have to say, “Well, it’s hard to make that argument because it’s a giant statue of Columbus. So it’s definitely about Columbus.” So, you know, what I think is important—and this is where education comes into play, particularly in 2020—is that that monument is, in many respects, a monument to ignorance as well. To my mind, it stands out apart from the lost cause monuments that are being taken down in the American South, where the intent was clear. Those statues were built for a very specific reason. Knowing what I know, from researching and talking to people that were involved in the monument’s construction, the Italians in Syracuse were not raising a monument to genocide or the extermination of Native American peoples. It was not meant as a signpost of white supremacy. Whereas now, it’s been interpreted as such because we, as a society, have evolved in our education. I think that’s significant. I mean, you know, as somebody who’s on the frontlines of education trying to bring people—Those folks block-learned a sanitized, you know, mythological history: Columbus sailed the ocean blue, the American Revolution, the Constitution, the Civil War, yay America. There we are. And that’s obviously incredibly problematic. I think that that is unfortunate.

Murder, rape, pillaging, these are human characteristics that go back as long as there’s been people. And even by the [standards of] his own Conquistadores that would come after him, Cortes and Pizarro in particular make Columbus look like a, I don’t know, a Junior Varsity murderer. So relativism is something that I think has to be dealt with. And there is still some scholastic debate about what Columbus was doing here, and whether it’s his motivations—Personally, I don’t really care what his motivations were, I think it’s something to be talked about, but I mean, as we’re trying to come up with an interpretive system, what will hopefully be some sort of museum, to this structure that’s going to come down, you know, we have to figure out how to deal with Columbus without trying to make too many normative statements about what he did. It’s mostly trying to get back to the sources so that whether you are an activist who wanted to see Columbus come down, or you are an 85 year old Italian

man from North Salina Street, when you come to see the interpretation, you have to confront the facts on the ground, whether it's his letters, or whether it's his competitors who wrote back to the monarchs in Spain saying, "This guy is too nice to the Indians," which I always sort of laugh at, because I can't imagine how they thought that, but it just goes to show just exactly what they were willing to do to take over the land. So I think these are all incredibly important things. And I think, unfortunately, there are large swathes of the population that are simply ignorant even still in 2020, or choose to be ignorant, I think there's a certain willful ignorance on the part of a lot of people in the public that are out there campaigning to save statues of Christopher Columbus, which I think is, again, problematic. I think it behooves us all to try to see the other perspectives on this issue. I think, particularly in a community like Syracuse, considering the ancestral lands that we are all living on, it makes it more acute, you know, the pain and the histories that are so raw for these folks that are descendants of, particularly First Peoples, I think, is significant. It makes me sad sometimes to see, like, an oppression competition about this, which I've seen in my private dealings with people.

So, as far as Columbus goes, I think one of the things that will come out of this discussion, and I think this project is a great part of that solution, is to face people, to have to confront harsh truths and harsh realities on both sides of that argument. As I say to students, history is complex, and these issues are very complex. The source materials we have are problematic and biased. So we have to put all of those things on the table. And as a historian, we're really trying to just educate people, so that out of this, what is seen by supporters of the Columbus monument as this tragic turn of events where it's coming down, or for people on the other side is this great movement for progress, what we can do is show both positions. So for me personally, it's been—with my Italian friends and colleagues it's to tell them the history that they may not want to hear or listen to about conquest and colonization, what that meant for the peoples of what we call the Americas. And then conversely, a lot of my friends—I mean, I myself am a very progressive left winger—So you know, I have lots of friends who are in Black Lives Matter, and marched in these protests, and to tell them the story of the statue, and why it was built, and the history of that, which, which, you know, doesn't often lead them to change their mind about

leaving statue up, but I have seen in dozens of interactions, where it at least gets them to think about what other marginalized peoples went through. And so I often try to get them to think about—there is a bridge there, even though it's hard for us in 2020 to imagine white people being oppressed or marginalized, but they [Italian Americans] were marginalized for decades. So there's a common ground there, which, again, generally is not thought about or known. So all those things are tied together.

Interviewer

Thank you. Picking up on some of these last things you were saying, is there more you'd like to say about what other histories and stories, beyond Columbus, you would want people who come to the site to learn about?

Robert Searing

Yeah, our plan is really to talk about pre-contact, certainly talk about the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, the Great Law of Peace, which had profound impacts on the Confederation here and American democracy and women's suffrage. Like Matilda Joslyn Gage, who drew on the matrilineal society and culture of the Haudenosaunee to push for greater rights for white European women here. And, you know, I think this is hugely significant. I think, again, we have a duty, those of us that are going to be involved in that project, considering where we are at the center of this amazing Confederacy, which still survives to this day, whereas so many other Native Peoples were simply destroyed; their cultures were just absolutely—they're gone. I mean, talk about the Arawaks in Hispaniola, and they're just—they're not there. So I think that's significant. I think—again, one of the other things I want to highlight, whatever we've come up with, is the history of nativism. I mean, every immigrant group that's come to the United States has faced marginalization, has faced oppression in one way or another, whether it's—The Irish Catholics came in the 1790s, right up through – the Asian Americans were excluded in the 1880s. And the Italians and the immigration acts of the 20s. I mean, these are all significant histories that speak to the larger things that the Black Lives Matter protests are getting at, about white supremacy and its foundation in the United States and other places. So those are histories of various

immigrant communities, those are all significant histories that I would like to use, because the context of the construction of this Columbus monument, the context of Columbus Day, is an outgrowth of the murder of, the lynching of, Italian Americans in the American South. So these are issues that faced all of these groups in America, it's this process of becoming an American or becoming white. Having to become white to be accepted into the power structure. It's something that we still talk about and deal with today. And so Syracuse as a—not only, generationally, for millennia, as the center of the Confederacy—but Syracuse continues, right up to this day, to be a very strong center for immigrants and a major refugee center. We have growing Sudanese and Somali, Laotian, Vietnamese populations on the north side of the city, which were once inhabited by the very Italian people whose families built the Columbus monument. So I think all of those histories are significant. All of those histories should be told, and we certainly plan on telling those stories in whatever interpretive manner we're able to do.

Interviewer

Thank you. Are there ways that your personal history or family history shape your feelings about the site and its meanings?

Robert Searing

Maybe, you know, sort of subconsciously. My family came to the United States, on both sides, in the 1880s, and they were Irish and German. So, you know, by that point, the Irish and the Germans had been assimilated. They were running cities. I mean, my family landed in Scranton. The Irish people were running the town. So, you know, it was what it was. They struggled, they worked in coal mines, and they worked on the railroad. So I mean, obviously, I understand that. And Syracuse, as a city, is very much like the city I grew up in. And again, coming from a working class background, I certainly identify with some of the folks I've talked to in the Italian community who sort of still see that monument as harking back to that. But I think, other than the sort of inherent things that you subconsciously think about, I think I'd sort of been schooled out of or been thinking about these issues so critically that I don't think it's necessarily affected the way I look at it. But again, who's to say,

honestly, what inherent or subconscious things are bubbling up. I certainly try to be as analytical and detached as possible in my dealings or in my writings, my research or presentations about these things, always trying to see, empathize whenever possible. But again, I—it's difficult for me to identify, obviously, with people of color—I have no experience with their treatment or their history. So you know, I can't—But I devoted my life to education and the study of history and culture. So I try to sympathize if I cannot empathize. That's about as good of an answer as I could give on that question.

Interviewer

This has kind of been a through-line of everything that you've been talking about, but how do you think we should think about the site and the history behind it in ways that can decrease polarization and acknowledge its complexities?

Robert Searing

I think it's important for people to be able to see, to be able to access, to be able to witness these stories, these histories, on every side. I think that's one of the biggest problems with the site. Period. I mean, this is not a new issue, right? I mean, they've been protesting the statue for 20 years now, you know. This should have been done earlier. There should have been some attempt at remedy, or some attempt at education. So I feel like people have dropped the ball for a long time. Because again, like I said earlier, me telling a Black Lives Matter protester or me telling an Onondaga that the Italian community felt oppressed and marginalized and how they might have felt doesn't change the fact that they look at the statue and see what they see. It's not going to change their interpretation. It's not going to probably change their desire to see the statue taken down, and that's completely fine. I completely understand their position. And that same goes vice versa, right? I mean, I've been yelled at by many Italians who sort of see me as some sort of turncoat or something, which is unfortunate. They had me as their guest speaker last year at what will be the last Columbus gala, where I told the story of the monument, which a lot of them did not know. So I think it's incumbent upon those of us who are in these positions, and you guys doing this project, which I certainly hope will be incorporated in one way or

another—because for me, it’s just about awareness. And so many people are in their silos, so many people are in their camp, they’re intractable, everybody wants to be right. And if 20 years as a historian has taught me anything it’s that there is no “right” sometimes, there’s a whole lot of gray. And so I think that the best that we can do as educators is to give people access to the information, to make as well an informed decision and opinion as is possible. And one of the things that just makes me sad across the board, not just in this debate, this discussion, but just writ large, is people making decisions and holding opinions that are just reflexive, based in nothing other than a feeling. That’s human nature, I get that, but I loathe it. So I think that’s one of the things, like I said, having tried and pushing behind the scenes as part of these dialogues, you know, for two years, it’s about awareness on every side. It’s not going to maybe change your opinion, but at least you’ll be more educated on the subject, and you’ll have an awareness of a position that you did not have. And, you know, it’s impossible to sympathize with somebody if you can’t see their point of view. And if you’ve never been exposed to their point of view, then you couldn’t possibly make those decisions. And one of the problems with the discourse now, especially around these heated issues, is that people just talk past one another, the rhetoric is heated, the language is heated, anger boils up. And one of the nice things perhaps about a passive delivery method is that it allows for those interactions to take place without that sort of adversarial underpinning.

Interviewer

This is building off some of the things you were saying about the future of the statue, or the future of the site, I should say. What do you think would be ideal next steps for the site once the statue is removed, that are inclusive of all the communities involved?

Robert Searing

I mean, if I had my druthers, I know the Mellon Foundation is giving away like \$250 million for these site renovations. So we are, I think, gonna really push the mayor, certainly, to get our hands on—What I would love to see in a perfect world is two more statues erected. Honestly, I would love to see a statue

of Hiawatha Peacemaker in a canoe to speak to the history—or whatever the Onondaga would want to put up. I mean, it's their position. But I think that would be great because it ties in the Confederacy. I think it's really significant. Onondaga Lake is a sacred Lake, and it's right there. And I would love to see a statue of Jermain Loguen. He should have a statue. He's part of the Jerry rescue statue, which is great, all well and dandy, but the man deserves his own statue. And I think it speaks to the African American experience in so many ways. He's just a giant figure who should be more well known and, unfortunately, is not. So I would love to see those statues go up. And then again, I would push, and we have been pushing, for a series of—I often talk about a seven or eight subject interpretive panel that may include interactive things like you guys are working on, that speak to issues of pre-contact, speak to issues of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, that speak to issues of contact, of conquest, of colonization, of nativism, the history of nativism and xenophobia in the United States. A History of that site as it developed, St. Mary's circle, the cathedral, the courthouse, the statue itself as another one, and then the history of the movement and the social justice protests that ultimately led to the statue's removal. I would love to see all of that, so that people that come through—that is a heavily trafficked area, both pedestrian and other—so I think to not have those sorts of things there would be foolish and a wasted opportunity.

Interviewer

Absolutely. Thank you. That's pretty much the end of my formal questions. Thank you very much for taking the time to do this, and for everything you've shared, which is extremely helpful.

Robert Searing

It's been my pleasure.

Biography

I'm Robert Searing. I'm the curator of history at the Onondaga Historical Association. I'm also a historian of Antebellum America with two Masters degrees from Syracuse University. In addition, I am an adjunct instructor in the History Department at SUNY-Cortland and Tompkins-Cortland CC.