

JAZZ LEWIS
Legislative District 24
Prince George's County

MAJORITY WHIP

Appropriations Committee



The Maryland House of Delegates
6 Bladen Street, Room 151
Annapolis, Maryland 21401
410-841-3691 · 301-858-3691
800-492-7122 Ext. 3691
Fax 410-841-3055 · 301-858-3055
Jazz.Lewis@house.state.md.us

THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

Testimony of Delegate Jazz Lewis– HB179– Indigenous Peoples' Day - Rule of Interpretation and Replacement of Columbus Day

Thank you, Chair Pena-Melnyk, Vice Chair Cullison, and members of the Health and Government Operations Committee.

I am here today to present my legislation, House Bill 179. For the record, I am Delegate Jazz Lewis. This bill replaces Columbus Day in Maryland statute with Indigenous Peoples' Day. Establishing Indigenous Peoples' Day provides a well-deserved recognition and celebration of Maryland's Native peoples, one that is long overdue. Christopher Columbus is not a man who should be revered and have an official day named celebrating him; it's those Indigenous People whose culture and lands we now occupy who should be remembered and honored.

While the focus of my bill is the importance of having an Indigenous People's Day, I think it is important for us to review Columbus Day and why replacing this specific day is key in establishing an Indigenous People's Day. An honest review of history would tell us that Columbus is not someone deserving of our celebration. Setting aside the fact that he did not set out to discover the Western Hemisphere and that he never set foot in mainland North America, let alone the state of Maryland, his regime over the lands he controlled was so brutal and despotic that any objective reader would be horrified by the atrocities he committed and were committed in his name.

A 2019 Washington Post article sheds light on the severity of Columbus's actions, detailing the systemic brutality and genocide committed under his command against Indigenous peoples in the Americas.¹ From enslavement to massacres, the atrocities Columbus and his men inflicted are well-documented, underscoring the profound inhumanity of their actions. These are not the deeds of a man who should be celebrated with a holiday; they are acts that should serve as sobering reminders of our history's darker chapters

For example, I want to reiterate verbiage from Christopher Columbus' own diary that he himself wrote on the day that he first met Indigenous Americans:

¹ Brockell, Gillian. "Indigenous Peoples Day: Christopher Columbus did not annihilate the Taíno." *The Washington Post*, 14 October 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/2019/10/14/here-are-indigenous-people-christopher-columbus-his-men-could-not-annihilate/>. Accessed 12 March 2024.

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“They should be good servants and intelligent, for I observed that they quickly took in what was said to them, and I believe that they would easily be made Christians, as it appeared to me that they had no religion. I, our Lord being pleased, will take hence, at the time of my departure, six natives for your Highnesses...”

This is someone who kidnapped natives from their homes as prizes to bring back to the monarchs of Spain as human gifts. His interactions with the Indigenous People of the Americas never improved. History even shows that his abuse during his despotic turn as Governor was so egregious that the monarchs appointed a judge to investigate the reports of violence against Columbus. This investigation ultimately led to Columbus and his brothers being arrested and transported back to Spain. His record is proof that he is not deserving of celebration; we can remember historical figures, but let's remember Columbus for his whole record as the person he was and for the abuses that Native Americans faced under his regime, rather than celebrating a mythic figure built into our collective imagination.

On that note, I want to put on the record that there are many noteworthy and patriotic Italian Americans who should be honored and who deserve recognition for their contribution to our country and to the world. Right here in Maryland, we have the D'Alesandro family filled with public servants from the City of Baltimore, including former Speaker of the House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi. There is a laundry list of better choices that we could celebrate.

Ultimately, we are here today to talk about Maryland and its proud and unique history. Maryland, our beloved state, is home to three tribes recognized by the state, including the Piscataway Indian Nation, the Piscataway Conoy Tribe, and the Accohannock Tribe. Other tribes served by the Maryland Commission on Indian Affairs include the Assateague Peoples Tribe, Nause-Waiwash Band of Indians, Piscataway Conoy Confederacy, Cedarville Band of Piscataway Indians, Piscataway Indian Nation, Pocomoke Indian Nation, Youghiogheny River Band of Shawnee Indian, whose presence in the region dates back over 10,000 years, predates recorded history.² These tribes, which reside across various counties, including Baltimore County, Anne Arundel County, Prince George's County, and on the Eastern Shore, have enriched Maryland's social and cultural tapestry for thousands of years.

² “Indigenous Peoples of Maryland - Indigenous Research - Research Guides at Towson University.” *Research Guides*, 19 November 2023, <https://towson.libguides.com/c.php?g=1294810&p=9531349>. Accessed 12 March 2024.

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This legislation, House Bill 179, proposes that we honor the resilience, culture, and history of Indigenous peoples from Maryland, instead of glorifying a figure whose legacy is marred by cruelty and oppression. Celebrating Indigenous Peoples' Day is an opportunity for Maryland to lead by example, showcasing our commitment to truth, reconciliation, and the honoring of those who have long been marginalized.

In light of the undeniable evidence of Columbus's brutal regime and in recognition of Maryland's vibrant Indigenous heritage, I urge you to give a favorable report on HB179. Let us embrace this opportunity to celebrate truth, healing, and the indomitable spirit of Indigenous peoples.

Thank you for your time, and I urge a favorable report on HB179.