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.

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

“He was an engineer, he was a scientist and he had that spirit to go out and explore the unknown,” Monte said. Last weekend, vandals painted the words “FAKE NEWS” on the base of the Norwalk statue in what appears to have been a 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 deacon reconning sailor that ever lived.”

From A9

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.