



## Exploring Diversity in Pennsylvania History

---

The Historical  
Society of  
Pennsylvania  
with THE BALCH  
INSTITUTE FOR  
ETHNIC STUDIES

Rural Roads, City Streets: Italians in Pennsylvania

Student Reading

### ITALIAN IMMIGRANT FAMILY PORTRAITS

Joan Saverino, Ph.D.

Historian's Note: These four portraits of Italian immigrants were composed from primary sources that are listed under each entry below. They represent the diversity of the places in Pennsylvania that Italians settled and thrived. While reading these portraits, think about how the place of settlement may have affected their opportunities and experience in Pennsylvania. Pittston is in the heart of the anthracite coal region in the north central area of the state. Reading is a mid-size town in the Pennsylvania German heartland that at the turn of the twentieth century was becoming a garment and textile manufacturing center. Germantown and Chestnut Hill are two of the many city neighborhoods in Philadelphia that drew Italians because of their industrial, manufacturing, and building opportunities.

#### **COLOGERO GIARRTANO AND CARMELLA MICCICHE`, PITTSTON, PA (PHOTO)**

From the age of eight, Cologero Giarrtano, worked in the sulphur mines in his home village of Serradifalco, in the province of Agrigento, in Sicily. Born in 1876, the eldest son of six children, Cologero's salary supported the family after his father died unexpectedly. Many people from Serradifalco were emigrating to the United States, and Cologero expressed a desire to follow them. His mother set aside money from his paychecks until she had the equivalent of fifty dollars, enough for the ship's fare. When Cologero arrived at Ellis Island, he was approached by a Bethlehem Steel agent who was recruiting men to work in the Dubois plant. He accepted a job cleaning rails, but was unhappy because there were so few Italians there. Seeking more Italians, Cologero was directed to board a train for West Virginia. When he mistakenly took one going east, he asked a passenger where he could find Italians and was told to get off at the next stop, Pittston township. As he walked the road into town from the train, a farmer offered him a job. After working on the farm for several months, he took a job in the coal mines in Pittston because he said that is the work he knew. Cologero was happy to discover that ten other families from Serradifalco had emigrated to Pittston.

Along with others from his hometown, Cologero founded the Serradifalco mutual aid society. He sent money back to his family every month and made three return trips to Italy, on the last of which he met his future wife, Carmella Micciche`. Carmella, accompanied by her father and a brother, arrived in January "on the bitterest winter day" in Pittston in 1908. Carmella and Cologero were married in April of that same year. By the 1920s, Cologero had improved the family situation considerably. He had purchased a house and about three acres in town on which he maintained a farm with animals, a small orchard, and grape arbors. He opened two grocery stores, managed by his wife and seven daughters (the couple also had three

sons), while he continued working in the mines. Cologero died in 1963 from black lung he contracted as a miner.

(Source: personal communication to Joan Saverino from Mary Giarrtano Mistretta, who was the daughter of Cologero Giarrtano, 27-28 June, 1995.)

### **SAVERIO SPADAFORA AND MARIA PULLANO, READING, PA (NO PHOTO)**

Saverio Spadafora emigrated from Sersale, a small village in the province of Catanzaro, in Calabria, where he had been a small businessman who tried to make a living by selling chestnuts. He could read and write Italian, but little else is known of his background. Spadafora came to Reading, PA, about 1895, working first as a laborer. Between 1895 and 1901 he did not appear in the city directory, perhaps returning to Italy in the interim. In 1901 he reappeared in the directory, listed as a laborer; by 1902 he had moved up to a foreman position. By 1903, Spadafora and his wife, Maria Pullano, lived with their children in a rented apartment in at the foot of Chestnut Street, in Reading, PA, in an area populated by newly arrived Italian immigrants. In that year he opened the first Italian bakery in the city. His son, Pasquale, age four, accompanied his father in a horse and wagon to make bread deliveries. The leftover bread dough was used to make macaroni for the family's meals. In 1912, Spadafora sold the bakery to his son-in-law. In that same year, he purchased a two-story house on the corner of Second and Franklin Streets (148 Franklin), in what was still primarily a Pennsylvania German neighborhood. Spadafora moved his family there, and opened a grocery in the front parlor. He kept the grocery for only a short time, however, subsequently renting it to a relative. Finding it difficult to make a living in his own business, Spadafora took a job at Reading Steel Casting and then Glen Gery Brickyard, which he kept until his death in November 1919, at the age of fifty-nine, leaving behind his wife and eight children.

Although he was ultimately unsuccessful in escaping the life of a paid laborer, before his death Saverio Spadafora had achieved certain southern Italian ideals that would have been nearly impossible had he remained in Italy. He became an independent businessman for a short time and relatively quickly became a property owner of a middle-class house by Calabrian standards. He was well-known in the Italian community because of his position as a part-time agent (also known as importer or banker) for the White Star Line shipping line. Usually such agents arranged trans-atlantic voyages and transportation from the port of entry, and often had jobs waiting for new arrivals, charging a fee for such services. When immigrants arrived at the rail station in Reading, they would be told to "go down to Sammy's."

Spadafora achieved a respected social status in the community through his organizational efforts and his reputation for helping others. He was a founding member of the Victor Emmanuel II Society and possibly of the Spartaco Society, two mutual aid societies in Reading that were founded by immigrant Italians. He was also one of a committee of men who pushed for the establishment of an Italian Catholic parish that resulted in the church of Our Lady of the Holy Rosary.

After Spadafora's death, his wife, who had never worked outside the home, depended on the older children to support her and the youngest children. All the children except the youngest left school before graduating from high school to begin working. Daughter Maria worked at a garment factory near their home. Son Pasquale quit school at age fourteen to begin working at the Berkshire Knitting Mills where his job was to push stockings through a ring and turn them right side out.

(Sources: Letter to Joan Saverino, 29 February 1992. Pasquale Spadafora, son of Saverio Spadafora, in telephone interview by Joan Saverino, 8, 9 July, 1993.)

## **FRANCESCO IANNUZZI AND ANNA MARIA BIANCAMANO, GERMANTOWN NEIGHBORHOOD OF PHILADELPHIA, PA (PHOTO)**

Historian's note: Pasqualina (Bessie) Iannuzzi Scarpello, daughter of Francesco Iannuzzi and Anna Maria Biancamano, wrote this reminiscence sometime in the 1970s. The exact date is unknown. Francesco and Anna Maria married in their hometown of Altomonte in the province of Cosenza in Calabria, Italy, on May 2, 1878. From the entry below, you will see that they settled in Germantown, a neighborhood in the northwest corner of the city of Philadelphia. This reminiscence is transcribed exactly as it was written in long hand. Minor changes to enhance readability were made and are indicated by words inserted in brackets.

My father had come to America in 1893. Seven years later in 1900 he was unexpectedly joined [by] my older brother Vincenzo.

Shortly after he arrived he constantly kept writing Mom letters to sell everything and come to America where we could all be together.

Mom hesitated to leave our lovely comfortable house where for years she had operated a weaving loom and made a good living. But letters continued to come from my brother urging Mom to come soon as we could because they needed her so much.

Finally she gave in and did as she was told.

Our passports were soon issued. So Mom, my sister and I joined my father and brother in America in 1901. My younger brother who was also supposed to leave with us was suddenly called for [the] army draft registration so we had to leave him in Italy to wait for draft results. But he was later rejected for duty and joined us in 1902.

We lived in a four room frame house at 523 E. Rittenhouse which my father and brother with the help of their "landlady" had the whole house nicely set up for our arrival.

When we got settled we all felt happy that after years of separation our little family was together again.

My father and brother Vincenzo were master stone mason[s] and they worked together with a building contractor. My father later had to retire because he had asthma and couldn't work anymore.

My brother Gennarino was a pottery maker by trade. But since pottery jobs were not available at that time, through my brother Vincenzo, Gennarino was hired by the same contractor as a stone mason apprentice. He soon learned the trade and they both worked steady together.

And to help out with expenses we also took in two boarders, Pasquale Altomare and his uncle, Zio [translates as uncle] Totonno Amoroso, who both later moved out. Mom took over all responsibilities with the allowance my brothers gave her every week plus the boarders' small monthly rent she took care of all expenses and also managed to save a few dollars for a rainy day.

But in 1904 my brother Vincenzo who was the bread winner got married. They lived with us for a short time, then moved out and went to live with his wife[']s] brother. A year later my sister got married and they went to live with their in-laws also.

After my brother Vincenzo got married we were left with no income. Besides it was winter time and we couldn't depend on my younger brother because he only worked a few days a week and what he earned was used up for his own pleasures and we even had to feed him.

Luckily, during the good years my mother had managed to save \$500.00. We soon got the idea to invest it in a small home, and [we thought that] probably in time we could open a little business and earn our living.

So in 1907 we bought our first little home from [Gennaro] LaGreca at 530 E. Rittenhouse Street.

(Source: Reminiscence collected by Joan Saverino for the Germantown Historical Society's Italian American Communities in Northwest Philadelphia Project.)

### **EMILIO LORENZON AND MARIA BRUN, CHESTNUT HILL NEIGHBORHOOD OF PHILADELPHIA, PA (PHOTO)**

The Lorenzon family was a well-respected land-owning family in the small village of Poffabro, in the province of Udine in the northern region of Friuli, and the only Protestant one. According to an oral interview with Herbert Lorenzon, his grandfather, Vincenzo, converted to Protestantism when he encountered missionaries who came through the town. During the economic crisis in Italy at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, even better-off families like the Lorenzons, were forced to choose migration as a survival strategy. This was the case for the Lorenzon brothers who had learned stone cutting and building techniques from their father. The Lorenzon brothers were skilled stone masons and builders who had learned the trade in Italy. By 1898, working alongside their father, Vincenzo, they had built the family home in Poffabro, a five-story stone house, still used by the Lorenzon family. They quarried the stone, cut the trees that they used for the wood trim on the house, and even made the tools that they used in the construction. Vincenzo's brother was a cabinetmaker who designed and built furniture for the house.

Since they could not find construction work in Italy, the two elder brothers, Charles and Gus (Agostino) first came to Philadelphia in 1896 in search of work. They were unable to find any employment and so they traveled west to Silverado, Colorado, to find work in the silver mines. "Birds of passage" is a phrase often used to refer to single males who made frequent, even seasonal, trips back and forth to Italy. This phrase is an apt description of the Lorenzon brothers' early travel pattern. Before choosing the United States as a destination, one brother had traveled to Egypt to find work building roads. He returned to Poffabro and then left for the United States. Between 1896 and 1902, Charles and Gus returned at least once to Poffabro and then in 1902 settled permanently in Chestnut Hill. Another brother, Vittorio, traveled to Philadelphia alone in 1904 at age eighteen. A letter to Vittorio dated March 26, 1904, from another brother Emil (Emilio) who was then a soldier in the Italian army and stationed in Padua, illustrates both the pull of immigration and the stress that separation put on a family.

Dear Brother,

I was so pleased to receive your letter and hear that you are well. I am sorry, however, to learn that you are leaving too to join our brothers. Unfortunately, I cannot come, but God willing soon I'll be able to be free and follow you.

You ask me to come and spend a few days with the family before you leave. It's my strong desire to do so, but I am not the one to decide. I'll ask to get leave next week. If our wish to get together is not realized, I hope I'll get permission to come and see you at the station when you pass through here.

How sad are our parents now that they are old, [at the time the

mother Maria Roman was fifty-five, the father Vincenzo, sixty-four] at seeing us leave one by one! But we have to accept our fate. We were not given the privilege of staying together. I hope some day we'll be all together again. I hope Alberto and Marina [siblings, ages sixteen and eleven respectively] will help and obey them in everything, they are the only ones left and could make our absence less painful.

I do hope to see you before you leave. Sending many sincere wishes and kisses. From your loving brother, Emilio Lorenzon.

Only five months after the letter was written, Vincenzo died of appendicitis. Charles returned to Poffabro to settle the family estate and remained in Italy until 1909. In 1906, Emilio, Alberto, a sister Marina, mother Maria, and an uncle, Valentino, emigrated and joined the rest of the family in Chestnut Hill. Like many other single immigrant men, Emilio returned to his hometown to find a suitable wife. In 1913, he returned to Chestnut Hill with his new bride, Maria Brun.

In 1908, the brothers, Charles, Agostino, and Emilio, began using their extensive building skills in their newly adopted country. They built a three-story twin structure at the corner of Benezet and Ardleigh Streets. In 1914, they incorporated as Lorenzon Brothers Company. Primarily, they took on stone masonry jobs that were sub-contracted by larger firms in the area. Over time, they built a very successful company that still exists in Chestnut Hill. By 1926, Emilio was successful enough to build a substantial two and one-half story middle-class home in Chestnut Hill that reflected his new found status. Although its design, a classic center hall colonial, is in keeping with contemporary American tastes of the period, if it is closely examined, certain features indicate values of Italian craftsmanship and taste. For instance, the tile roof is common to a period when various kinds of classical architectural styles had been popularly revived, but the roof is also typical of the landscape of the immigrant's folk past. The fine stone work, the gargoyle on the front portico, the arches on the sun porch, are all elements that reflect Italian aesthetic ideals.

The Lorenzon family became active members in the Venetian Social Club which was a social organization founded by immigrants, most of whom came from the Friuli region of Italy.

## References

Saverino, Joan Lynn. *Private Lives, Public Identities: The Italians of Reading and Berks County, PA, 1890-1940*. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1996.

Saverino, Joan L. "The Italians of Northwest Philadelphia." *Germantown Crier*. 60 (Fall 2000):44-70.

Saverino, Joan L. "Memories in Artifact and Stone: Italians Build a Neighborhood." *Germantown Crier*. 53 (Fall 2003):48-64.