



Exploring Diversity in Pennsylvania History

Rural Roads, City Streets: Italians in Pennsylvania

Student Reading

Rural Roads, City Streets: Italians in Pennsylvania

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Note: This reading is in part adapted from an article by Joan L. Saverino, “*Domani Ci Zappa`*”: Italian Immigration and Ethnicity in Pennsylvania” in *Pennsylvania Folklife*. 45 (Autumn 1995):2–22 and Joan L. Saverino, “Memories in Artifact and Stone: Italians Build a Neighborhood” in *Germantown Crier*. 53 (Fall 2003):48–64.

Craving a slice of pizza, some **wedding soup**, a hoagie, a cheese steak, or a water ice? Wherever you are in Pennsylvania—rural road or city street—you can probably fulfill your desire for these foods of Italian immigrant origin. See the churches, the houses, the gardens as you whiz by in your car? This is part of the built environment, the result of Italian workmanship and artistry that changed the Pennsylvania landscape wherever Italians settled. The availability of such foods in places as small as Pittston (near Scranton) and the material record carved into the landscape is a roadmap to the history of Italians who settled in communities spread throughout the state. It is a large and deep story of immigrants who arrived and adapted to homes in a strange land changing themselves and the culture they encountered in the decades that followed.

The Italian American ethnic tradition (part of that is **foodways**) that we have in Pennsylvania today grew primarily out of the culture of southern Italian immigrants. From what had been a trickle of skilled northern Italians immigrating to the United States until the 1870s, by the 1880s the overwhelming majority of Italians arriving were from the area south of Rome called the **Mezzogiorno**. Italians arriving in Pennsylvania were affected by what historians call the “push, pull” factors of **immigration/emigration**. A combination of worsening social, political, and economic factors in Italy were pushes that forced people to choose migration as a way to survive. These included poverty, overpopulation, and a scarcity of resources. The “pull” factors were the widespread use of the steamship, the stories of returning emigrants, advertising by transatlantic transportation companies in the villages, and the economic opportunities that the United States offered.

The typical emigrant was a young, unskilled man from a rural area who intended to earn enough money to return permanently to his home village and purchase land. Many who came were seasonal migrants (referred to as “**birds of passage**”) who returned to Italy several months out of the year. Many of those returning would marry women in the villages and bring their wives and children to the United States. Between 1880 and World War I more than four million Italians immigrated to the United States. Eighty percent of them were southern Italians. In 1921, the United States Congress passed the first quota bill directed against southern and eastern Europeans, restricting immigration from these regions for the first time.

When the immigrants first set foot in the United States, they thought of themselves as natives of the particular town or village from which they hailed, rather than Italians. Not yet thinking of themselves as Americans, Italian immigrants to Pennsylvania, coming from diverse regions and backgrounds, had no shared past. In a sense, they were a people without history, cut off from the villages they had left, speaking regional languages so different that a Calabrian could not understand a Sicilian, and living in a new place where they often felt out of place, facing an uncertain future. Nonetheless, the immigrants made homes in America and in the process they changed and America changed with them.

Pennsylvania was a key player in the transformation of America from an agricultural to an urban industrial economy in the late nineteenth century. Pennsylvania was a leading state in developing heavy industries such as coal, iron and steel, railroads, and cement and glass. These industries hired huge numbers of the new immigrants, especially Italians and Poles, who filled the need for large numbers of men who were eager to accept unskilled low paying jobs. Immigrants also composed a large percentage of the work force of other smaller industries in Pennsylvania. Italians dominated the road, public works, railroad construction, and certain food processing industries (canning fruits, truck farm vegetables and fish, and migrant fruit and vegetable harvesters). So many Italians headed to Pennsylvania that by 1890 their population was the second highest in the United States.

Work brought Italians to Pennsylvania. Which places they found most attractive and what jobs they filled involves **demographic**, economic, and cultural factors such as the hopes and expectations of the workers themselves. Ninety percent of Italians settled in American cities. In Pennsylvania, though, most (71%) Italians who came moved to the mid-size and smaller industrial towns scattered throughout the state, rather than to the two largest cities, Pittsburgh and Philadelphia. Italians settled in the soft coal fields of southwestern Pennsylvania, in towns with names like Cokeburg, as well as in the eastern anthracite towns of Pittston, Shamokin, and Nanticoke, to name only a few. They settled in the industrial towns of Erie, Reading, Scranton, and Allentown. Most immigrants entered through New York's Ellis Island and traveled to Pennsylvania destinations by rail.

Although the situation differed somewhat from city to city, in general, the **padrone** system, local political bosses, chain migration and kin systems, pre-migration skills, and personal preferences, influenced where Italians moved and worked. Newly arrived immigrants were forced to work in what they considered undesirable paid labor jobs such as those found on the railroad, in construction, or in the iron foundries. Immigrants hoped that after a short time they could enter occupations such as baker, plasterer, barber, tailor or merchant/businessman which they felt had more status. The road to achieving a more independent occupation was long and not always successful. Italians often moved to several different locations within Pennsylvania or to other states and back again in search of work. For instance, two brothers, Charles and Gus Lorenzon, first came to Philadelphia in 1896 from the small town of Poffabro in the northern Italian region of Friuli. Unable to find employment, they traveled west to Silverado, Colorado, to work in the silver mines. By 1902, they settled permanently in the neighborhood of Chestnut Hill in northwest Philadelphia. In 1904, their brother Victor, joined them and in 1906, their mother, an uncle, and two other brothers arrived. By 1914, three of the brothers started a building company that became very successful and still exists today.

Immigrants formed support networks among kin and neighbors to help alleviate difficulties of adjustment (such as language barriers, illiteracy, unfamiliarity with American customs, and discrimination). Family and ethnic ties were connected to the workplace, since new arrivals often secured their first jobs through these internal networks. Life for immigrants in the small towns and rural areas of Pennsylvania was often significantly different from the "**little Italies**" in large cities. In the crowded tenements of cities like Philadelphia, Italian communities were self-sufficient with their own family-owned businesses, fraternal organizations, and ethnic parishes, each with its annual religious festival. Immigrants were drawn together through chain migration, a system in which new immigrants depended on previously settled kin and **paesani** to help them find jobs and housing, and to provide an instantaneous social network.

With few exceptions, Italians who moved to rural areas were not choosing between city life and a farming life. They were moving to what were "**company towns**" – that is, towns dominated by a particular industry. Italians in these places lived in the "**company houses**" alongside newly arrived immigrants from other countries who were employed in the same industries. These smaller communities, perhaps consisting of only one or two streets, were scattered over the landscape in isolated areas. For example, Italians settled in Birdsboro and Temple, near Reading, because the iron foundries were looking for cheap labor.

In these small towns and rural places, Italians seemed even more different, an awareness that was acutely felt by both the Italians and the rest of the population. Depending on the size and density of the Italian population in non-urban areas, it was difficult to establish **fraternal**

associations or Italian Catholic parishes, organizations to which new immigrants could look for help. Wherever Italians settled, it was the complex interplay of the traditional values, beliefs, and practices the immigrants brought with them and the realities of the places themselves that resulted in distinct immigrant communities in the United States.

By the turn of the twentieth century, the expanding Italian populations had developed new economic, social, and religious requirements. The Catholic Church was the most powerful and crucial institution with which the immigrant came into contact in their everyday lives. In part so that new immigrants coming from eastern and southern Europe could have priests who spoke their own language, the American Catholic Church instituted **nationality parishes**. St. Mary Magdalene de Pazzi, in South Philadelphia, was the first Italian national parish in the United States, established in 1853 by Bishop John Neumann.

The spirituality of the Italian immigrants was a belief system that fused official Catholic doctrine with other supernatural beliefs and magical ritual. The immigrants' spiritual practices provided a method for negotiating life crises and gave meaning to an unpredictable world. The immigrants' devotion was firmly rooted in their villages and region of origin, in the saints and holy places connected to these sites. The immigrants continued their devotion to the same village saints in the United States by recreating the religious **feste** of their villages. In Italian parishes throughout the United States, including Pennsylvania, the annual *fiesta* became the force that drew people and linked them emotionally with their parish. A traditional *fiesta* tradition was more likely to be transferred from Italy if large numbers of people from the same village emigrated to the same town in Pennsylvania. For instance, the small town of Roseto, in Northampton County, was founded by villagers from Roseto Valfortore, in Apulia. They still celebrate the Feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, in honor of their patron saint in Italy, although older residents complain that the celebration is not the communal one it once was.

Although Italian Protestant congregations existed in both Italy and the United States, Protestant missionary work was relatively unsuccessful in converting large numbers of Italians. Their relationship to folk religion and their distrust of the institutional church in Italy explains why more Italians were not attracted to Protestantism. Even so, Italian Protestant congregations existed and smaller Italian settlements such as those in Reading and in the neighborhood of Germantown in Philadelphia had one Italian Protestant church.

In addition to religious institutions, secular institutions also took a keen interest in the immigrants' welfare. Beginning around the turn of the twentieth century, and rising to a crescendo in the post-World War I period, private and public agencies proliferated to aid and **Americanize** new immigrants. In general, Italians avoided programs that promised handouts. They were unfamiliar with and distrustful of institutionalized help since it had been uncommon in Italy. The immediate family, relatives, and the mutual aid societies were expected to help the needy.

Similar to the pattern of Italian communities in other sections of the country, **mutual aid** and **fraternal societies** were the first and most well-organized Italian institutions in Pennsylvania. Mutual aid societies, founded on the concept of communal assistance, were of paramount importance in ethnic communities during an era when neither unions nor employers offered any safety net of benefits. Perhaps even more important than providing economic assistance, the societies helped new immigrants adjust to America and also served as centers of social life.

The first years of Italian settlement in Pennsylvania were formative ones. That was a time when the immigrants arrived unsure of their place in American society, slowly putting down roots as individuals, families, and **paesani**. They created larger social and economic networks, started businesses, formed local organizations, engaged in civic activities, and reached out to the larger society, hesitantly at first but with more assurance as they developed a sense of their place in American society.

The large numbers of Italians in the United States, the development of national Italian organizational networks, and the use of mass media helped to transform Pennsylvania Italians' self-identity as immigrants from individual villages to a national identity as Italian Americans. In fact, from the first days of immigration, leaders in Italian American communities fostered the development of an ethnic identity distinct from mainstream American culture.

One way to do this was to stage public events incorporating symbolic imagery around which the diverse Italian population could identify and rally together as a unified group. Christopher Columbus, accepted as a hero by Americans since the late eighteenth century, is probably the best example of an image that was seized on by Italian immigrants and soon became adopted as a national Italian American ethnic **symbol**. Such symbols were spread through efforts of the ethnic press and national Italian American organizations like the Sons of Italy in an effort to counteract the negative stereotypes of Italians so prevalent during the immigration period. In the late nineteenth century, Italian leaders in New York and Philadelphia began promoting Columbus as the perfect symbol to represent Italians in the United States. As early as 1882, Italian American organizations invited to march in the parade to celebrate William Penn's arrival in Philadelphia carried a float with a representation of Columbus. Columbus Day Parades soon became public rituals (meaning that they were repeated year after year) for Italian Americans in communities across the United States.

The social climate in the Italian communities in the decades between World War I and World War II was a key element in the emergence and development of an Italian American ethnic identity. After World War I, Italians in the United States expanded their concept of community and their ethnic identity from a local to a national and even international focus. This reorientation was due to a several reasons including the pervasiveness of post-World War I anti-immigrant sentiment in the general population. Other factors that contributed to the reorientation was the economic depression, involvement in labor organization, New Deal politics, the conflict between Fascist and anti-Fascist factions, and finally World War II.

Italians, feeling isolated and discriminated against in the United States, turned their sights outward to their Italian homeland and the new Fascist Italy. Mussolini's propaganda campaign capitalized on this vulnerability, promoting the idea of an international colony of united Italians who could all take pride in and work for a new Italy. From 1922 to 1945, social and political conditions in the United States did not allow Italian Americans to ignore the issue of their Italian origins. Italian American organizations used newspapers as well as new and expanding media such as radio, photographs, and film to sell the concept of a local, national, and international Italian ethnic identity.

During these years, the maturing second generation, who had grown up in the United States, was caught between two cultural identities--their Italian ethnicity and their emergent sense of being an American. Whatever their generation, however, Italians could not escape being influenced by the contemporary rhetoric--that of a unified Italian ethnic pride.

From the 1920s, until the United States entered World War II, **Mussolini** was a popular figure among Italians in Pennsylvania and throughout the United States. Italians throughout the United States believed Mussolini was transforming Italy into a great nation. **Fascism** painted a picture of a vital, strong Italian "nation," not the factionalized Italy the immigrants had left behind. Mussolini's March on Rome in 1922 was convenient timing, allowing Fascism to latch onto the surge in nationalistic sentiment that Italian Americans felt during World War I. For Italian Americans, who often felt discriminated against and displaced in the United States, embracing this imagined Italian homeland was appealing.

Whether individuals truly adopted the Fascist ideology or merely sympathized with its goals, Fascist propaganda became the instrument that united the Italian **diaspora** in spirit and at times in action with the Italian homeland. Fascism brought Italian Americans together under a banner of pan-Italian ethnic unity. If Italian Americans were vocal in their support for Mussolini, they were only in step with American public and United States' governmental sentiments.

Before the **Axis** attack on France in June 1940, many Italian Americans felt that Mussolini was a good leader who would make Italy a stronger and better nation. After 1940 on and culminating with the U. S. declaration of war in December 1941, Italian Americans, spearheaded by their ethnic leaders and the press, rejected Mussolini and declared loyalty to the United States and democracy. Once it was clear that the United States would enter the war, Italians never wavered in uniting with other Americans in the war effort. Perhaps because of their virtual immediate rejection of Mussolini at the crucial moment, suspicion of Italian Americans was not widespread among the general populace.

Nonetheless, the United States government itself regarded Italians with suspicion and acted against them. After the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, 600,000 Italian immigrants in the United States who were not citizens were labeled "**enemy aliens.**" What practical meaning did this designation have? It meant that these individuals had their freedom and that of their families restricted. It meant they were required to carry identification cards, their personal property was seized, and travel restrictions were placed on them. It meant that thousands were arrested and hundreds were interned in military camps. During the war, United States government policy kept this information from the public and even today many documents are still classified and so forbidden from public view. At the time, Italians were the largest foreign-born population in the United States (15 million) and hundreds of thousands were serving and dying for America in World War II. The war time experience was devastating to Italian American communities and the negative effects are still felt.

[For the full text of the bills that were introduced in the U.S. Senate to detail the injustices suffered by Italian Americans during World War II, go to <http://bss.sfsu.edu/internment/italians.html>.]

After World War II, the beginnings of a scaling down of heavy industry, the trend of an exodus from city and town to suburb, the desire of adult second generation children to blend with mainstream America, and the aging of the immigrant generation, contributed to a general decline of old ethnic neighborhoods. These factors did not signal an end to ethnic identity. As the second generation aged they often became nostalgic for the sense of belonging - however stifling it felt when they were young - that they once had in Italian family systems and close-knit neighborhoods. In part in an effort to recreate what they had lost, they became interested in their own ethnic heritage. They were also buoyed by their third generation children who embraced the label of Italian American, never having felt the need to rebel against it.

Italians continued to settle in the United States and Pennsylvania after World War II, although few in number when compared with the figures in the early part of the century. Nonetheless, these immigrants contributed to keeping old Italian neighborhoods like South Philadelphia alive with language and artistic traditions that might have been forgotten otherwise. The metamorphosis from immigrant to ethnic American happened over time and is continually reinvented. The expressions of Italian ethnicity, as they exist today, began with the immigrants' roots in Italy and the communities they created after their arrival in the United States.