



Seeds of Italian Immigration

Italian influences in America began with Christopher Columbus, explorers such as Amerigo Vespucci, Giovanni Caboto (John Cabot), and Giovanni da Verrazzano; political thinkers like Filippo Mazzei; artisans like Constantino Brumidi. The names and contributions by Italians like Pietro Cesare Alberti (first Italian to settle in America), Francesco Vigo (Revolutionary War financier), are lost to most of us but the biggest impact by Italians was made by those nameless immigrants who arrived from 1880-1924. They and their descents changed American culture and society by their everyday toil and perseverance. Italian Americans now are 6% of the US population.

However, the seeds for the great wave of Italian immigration was sewn in their homeland centuries before. During the late 19th century when most of the immigrants who would come to America were born, Italy had only been unified since 1861 but it was in disarray. After centuries of fragmented states and rule by foreign powers a divide existed between northern Italians who were contemptuous of the backwards southern area. The south was resentful and paranoid about prospects of exploitation from the north.

Southern Italians were barely surviving in their hardscrabble agrarian economy. They were trapped in a feudal land system with no hope of progress as absentee northern landlords drained their earnings.

Added to that were negative effects of the Italian Revolution. In attempting to unify Italy, the new government eliminated the Roman Catholic Church from the nation's education system. In the North, where a public school system existed this wasn't a problem but in the South there was no educational system except for the Church. So large numbers of Southern Italian youth born in the 1880s, including the Crachesi, were raised "percho analfabeti" – without letters but skilled in the crafts and trades that allowed them to survive.

"Southern Italians were barely surviving in their hardscrabble agrarian economy."

Not only was the South separated from the rest of Italy by politics and economics but dialects, geography, and history combined to make it a world apart. To this day it is wilder, less developed, and rooted in traditions.

By the late 1800s conditions deteriorated as a series of events dramatically changed Italy's economic and social conditions. These included almost annual catastrophes that seemed to compound the distress of the population and included:

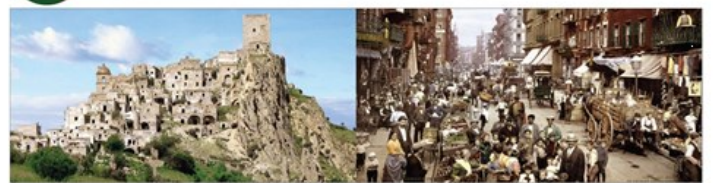
- 1884-1887 — cholera kills over 55,000 in the south
- 1887 — trade with France is severed
- 1888 — trade war with France
- 1888 — legislation recognizes the right to emigrate
- 1890 — plant disease destroys the grapevines in the south
- 1890 — drop in agricultural prices causes a trade war
- 1894 — land reforms proposed to quell Sicilian unrest
- 1894 — large earthquake
- 1898 — bread riots lead to suppression of civil rights

Meanwhile, in the New World, economic conditions had created a huge demand for labor and offered social structures that enabled individual accomplishment and rewarded hard work. This combination of events triggered an exodus. But America would prove to have its own challenges. ■



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Basilicata:

Potenza and The Vulture Melfese Area

The northern area of Basilicata that includes Potenza and the Vulture Melfese is marked by contrasts of pure springs, charming landscapes, mirrored lakes and dense forests. It has a rich heritage and culinary tradition. Linked to Monte Vulture the volcanic soil is extremely fertile creating thick woodlands, chestnut trees, vineyards and olive groves.

Key towns and areas are:

Venosa: Originally founded by [Samnites](#) as a city state, Venosa has a long and complicated history. After being taken over by the Romans it grew but entered a period of decline. In 1042 the [Normans](#) made it part of their defensive plans and [Frederick II](#) made it a crown property. Under the [Orsini](#), the town was part of a dowry to Pizzo del Balzo who built the Castle and Cathedral there. In the 16th century the [Gesualdo](#) princes turned the town into an intellectual and artistic center. Containing important Roman archeological sites, it was the birthplace of the classical poet Horace.

Palazzo San Gervasio near there was described by him in his works. Nearby is the unfinished Abby of the Trinity that is an intriguing tourist spot. Just outside the city walls is a castle dating back to the 1400s.

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Monticchio: Two lakes known as the *Laghi di Monticchio* are set in the extinct crater of Mt. Vulture providing beautiful scenery and historic sites. Overlooking the lakes is the former [Abby of San Michele](#) founded in the 10th century and used by Benedictine and Capuchin monks.

Melfi: A medieval history influences the look of this town with a castle and town walls but it dates back to pre-Roman times. It became the capital of the Dukedom of Puglia and hosted papal councils including the Holy league which ordered the first Crusade from there in 1089. In 1231 Frederick II issued from here [new laws](#) that reformed feudal codes and gave women new rights. The Melfi Castle houses an archeological museum.

Potenza: The city serves both as the Basilicata Regional capital and the provincial capital. It is the highest regional



capital in Italy with the old town situated at the top of a hill and the newer neighborhoods spread out below it. Dating back to Roman times it was invaded by [Goths](#), [Saracens](#), Normans, and [Swabians](#) and [Angevins](#). Always an active political area, it was the first in Southern Italy to rebel against the [Bourbons](#) and declare its annexation to the [Kingdom of Italy](#). With an increasing economic role it hosts the regional university, skyscrapers, futuristic architectural designs, and many cultural institutions.

The Potenza and Vulture Melfese area of the region is blessed with local foods such as olives (from the towns of [Rapone](#), [Ripacandida](#), [Rionero](#), Venosa, and [Barile](#)), a unique pasta, [manate](#) (from the town of [Vaglio](#)), cheeses (from the Vitalaba Valley including [caciocavallo](#), [ciocallvalo](#), [tomini](#), [scamorzette](#)), wines in the Vulture area (from [Maschito](#), [Forenza](#), [Genzano](#), [Rionero](#), Barile, Ripacandida, [Rapolla](#), Melfi, and [Ginestra](#)), including the unique [Aglianico del Vulture](#) and hams (from [Vietri](#), [Picerno](#)).

More information about the area can be found at the [APT Basilicata](#) website brochure archives.



Focus: The First Immigrants From Craco

From 1880 - 1924 over 1,600 Crachesi left to settle in North America primarily in New York City and New Jersey.

Prof. Dino D'Angella in his history of the town of Craco identified Antonio Viggiano as the first immigrant from Craco to go to America. Antonio Viggiano had been a member of the town council since 1867 but was unable to find a secure job so he became an expatriate in 1880.

D'Angella added, "Craco was one of the villages of the Materano that had the highest number of emigrations. The Crachese population in 1881 numbered 2,015 inhabitants, the population present in 1901 was 1,696 persons, and by 1911 Craco counted 1,359 inhabitants. Entire family units abandoned their native land, their customs and their culture to begin a new life..."

Considering the difficulties to get to America, the conditions and despair must have been extreme. Those seeking to emigrate needed to have considerable money, documents, travel to Naples, and obtain ship's passage before they began an arduous and life threatening voyage. D'Angella

commented that, "This was a hard and dangerous trip due to what were described as "gypsies" and brigands. Many people would have written a will before embarking on the trip."

From 1880—1890, the first decade of mass immigration from Italy to America, US records show 40 people from Craco arriving at New York's Castle Garden Immigration Station. (The more commonly known Ellis Island Immigration Station would not be opened until 1892.) Probably, twice that many actually arrived from Craco but manifests in the earlier part of the period did require immigrants to provide their town of origin.

The following is the list of names transcribed from manifests by CastleGarden.org that provides online access to records. The names below contain obvious errors but are provided as extracted from the Castle Garden online database so those seeking to find the record can use them.

continued on page 4

Cracotan Traditions

As we continue the Society's mission of preserving and documenting Cracotan traditions we turn to the work of Dino D'Angella the author of Note Storiche sul Comune di Craco, the history of the town to tell us about folk traditions. Many of these traditions were common to the Basilicata Region as so they are important to all Lucani.

D'Angella includes in his chapter on folk traditions the following comments:

"Even in Craco, the sense of religion has dominated the fundamental stages of the cycle of life, tempered with prejudice, fear, and magic; in other words irrationality. The farmers, and all who dealt with the land and with nature, feared the elements and at the same time used them to fight evil. Many times a religious element such as a saint is present. In Craco, as in Pisticci and Bernalda, there have been stories of San Vincenzo or the Madonna della Stella who were transformed into healers or have brought rain, or in the case of San Rocco, removed the plague."

He goes on to say: "In all centers of the

Materano region (but also in other communities of the Italian Peninsula), people would avoid crossing paths with a black cat. The use of "abitini" is still widespread in Craco today. "Abitini" [a tiny cloth sac filled with small icons of saints, pieces of stole, amulets, etc. that was pinned to one's chest] were used to ward off evil and the evil eye. Today, small gold or silver charms with images of Jesus, the Virgin Mary, or other saints, are blessed and placed in the tiny sac.

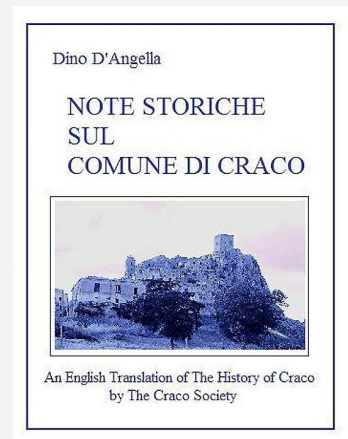
Belief in superstitions, more so the need to protect oneself from evil or evil spells was also evident in the placement of gargoyle masks at the entrance to homes of noble people (also found in the courtyard of the former convent).

Superstitions are founded on the absence of explanations for certain phenomena and the lack of faith in medical science. Superstitions tend to wane in the presence of greater social security, a less precarious way of life, the diffusion of literacy, science, and medical practice.

There was also a strong belief in evil

spells and the evil eye. For severe cases, people would go to Valsinni or Albano. In past years there were a few healers in Craco who were able to adjust a sprained foot or hand, or some old woman capable of casting away spells.

Will this recourse to irrationality disappear altogether? Probably not, because man will continue to look to magic when science cannot fulfill his needs; despite the great technological advances and the always diminishing precariousness of his existence."



The First Immigrants from Craco

continued from page 3

1. MARIA ARANZO
2. PIETRO BALDO
3. ANTONIO BARBETTA
4. FILOMENA BARBETTA
5. ANGELO BATTISTO
6. VINCENZO BRANDA
7. DOMENICO BRUNETTI
8. F. CANTAROCO
9. SALVATORE CITARELLO
10. ROSA DADDURNO
11. FRANCESCO ELIA
12. GIUSEPPE ELIA
13. MARIA EPISCOPIA
14. GIOVANNA EPISCOPIA
15. ANGELA EPISCOPIA
16. GIUSEPPE FERRANTE
17. VINCENZO FORGIONE
18. ANDREA LABASCO
19. A.M. LABASCO
20. GIUSEPPE LAMBERLURO
21. ELEONORA LAPENTA
22. ROCCO LIBERTINI
23. DONATO LOMBARDI
24. BENEDETTO MANFREDI
25. GIUSEPPE MARRESE
26. PASQUALE MARRESE
27. LEONARDO MORANDA
28. ELEONORA MORANDA
29. ANGELA MORANDA
30. GAETANO MORMA-
31. NICOLA MORMANDO

32. PASQUALE PARISI
33. GIOVANNI RINALDI
34. ANGELO SACCAFINO
35. VINCENZO SACCAFINO
36. ANTONIO SCIANNAP
37. ANDREA SCIOSCIA
38. GIUSEPPE SIMONETTI
39. VINCENZO TERRA
40. NICOLA VITARELLI

These first arrivals and their descendants served as the foundation for the Crachese presence in America. It was their communications back home about the opportunities and the ability to sponsor others that allowed more to follow and settle in the New World. ■



The left photo shows a typical southern Italian girl, wearing traditional clothing of the period, arriving in America among the immigrants. Note the similarity to the Cracotan dress, shown right.

New Look For Our Newsletter

Since 2007 the Society has published a monthly newsletter that keeps us in touch. The content aims to help educate readers about our common interest in preserving the history, culture, and traditions of Craco in North America. Although the content has been consistent our format has changed a few times in the past 15 years.

The newsletter's new look this year was inspired by a request from our president Joe Rinaldi and, with the professional help of our Board member Rita Lavery, the design emerged.



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The intent is to make the document more consistent and readable. We hope you'll find it so.

Reminder:

You should have received your 2023 membership dues notice.
Please submit your payment, the Society relies on you for support.



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