



Basilicata: Influences on America

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 and Gaetano Filangieri; and artisans like Constantino Brumidi. The names and contributions of other Italians like Pietro Cesare Alberti (first Italian to settle in America), Francesco Vigo (Revolutionary War financier), are lost to most of us. The US founding fathers had contacts with Italian thinkers that helped shape their philosophy. [Benjamin Franklin](#) and [Thomas Jefferson](#) used Italian liberal ideals in creating the Declaration of Independence.

In 1773, Filippo Mazzei brought plants, seeds, silkworms, and farmers from [Lucca](#) to visit Jefferson at Monticello. The two became good friends maintained a correspondence for the rest of Mazzei's life. The doctrine, "All men are created equal" written into the US Declaration of Independence by Thomas Jefferson, was taken from writings by Mazzei. Benjamin Franklin, with the input of [Gaetano Filangieri](#), changed the words in the draft of the Declaration of Independence from, "right to property" to the "right of happiness."

The biggest impact by Italians was made by thousands of nameless immigrants who arrived from 1880-1924. They and their descents changed American culture and society by their everyday toil and perseverance. The 17 million Italian Americans descendants are now [7% of the US population](#).

However, the role of the people from the Basilicata region to the American experience has not been explored. Certainly, the bulk of Lucanians entering the US took place around the turn of the 20th century. During this year of the

"For Basilicata, the first immigrants arrived before the great Italian diaspora ..."

BASILICATÈ Exhibition, the immigrant experience that was a major factor in creating the culture and background we share in America is not being told as part of that project.

The Federazione Lucana d'America in conjunction with its member societies will fill that gap with information and programs. We start with the story of the first immigrants from Basilicata arriving before the great Italian diaspora of the 1880s-1920s. The story of San Fele immigrants fleeing political oppression is told by Thomas Frascella, Esq. His story connects them to the US Civil War in the 1860s, just when Italy was going through its struggles for Unification (the Risorgimento). See the story on page 3.

America's great draw and influence on Italy during that great immigration period from 1880-1924 led many men from Basilicata to engage in a practice described as the "birds of passage." They traveled back and forth to the US as migrant workers. Living apart from their families in Italy, they would send money home and after a long while, sometimes years return to Italy. The Italian poet, Rocco Scotellaro as a child, learned about America from his father who was one of those men. His stories and experiences instilled in his son deep themes of pain and separation that are reflected in his poetry. See the story on page 2. ■



See the story about the San Felesi Society on page 3

Scotellaro in America - Influencing the Poet

The BASILICATĒ Exhibition will feature the reading of Rocco Scotellaro's poem, "Serenata al Paese" (Serenade to the Town). Much of his work deals with the peasants in Basilicata but he was also influenced by the immigrant experience in America. Several of his relatives traveled back and forth between Tricarico and America as "birds of

passage." Their hardships and even deaths were certainly relayed to him. Chief among these was Scotellaro's father Rocco Vincenzo who spent six years in New Jersey on two occasions.

The influence can be found in two examples following. ■

America scordarola (America the forgetful)

For you who leave
without so much as a goodbye
where you weep at approaching death
(because you're tired of being cooped up in the wine-shop
here in the gray days of rain)
we'll see your little boy
play tip-cat around the tubs
that catch rain water.
But you won't stretch a hand to help him
with an envelope of pesos
if he gets nails stuck in his bare feet!

Come back fresh to us:
you'll wash your face in the morning.
You'll think yourself alive again, but you slowly
disappear in the shadow of the passerby
who turns at the cluster of houses.
There the buses are serious and deadly.
Come back; it's time for you to taste
flatbread crumbs
and how can we send you the ovens' smell.
Write to us: a cord vibrates
between us over the sea
and you, you want to snap it?
We still play on the swings.
Come back to your troubles here;
your boy is growing up,
his eyes search everywhere.
So many of us will welcome you,
you'll see yourself again in your grown son:
you need to calm his clumsy wings
so like those of a captive beetle
that flies tied to a string.
Already he hides his sulky head
in his cape.
What dark looks he sends your way
from the bridge over the river
in the delusion that he'll terrify you over there.

But the American papa has stopped writing.

C'era l'America (There was America)

The America of my twenty-year-old father
was beautiful far away.
It managed to break his heart.
America here, America there.
where is it now,
my father's America?

America will be my land
with its giant sun and moon,
soft air, blue sky,
a night of feasting
for workman and peasant.

This is the way they talk softly:
Steamer that says yes and no
on the wave that hold you in its hand,
I want to see what luck's in store for me.

The Serenade opened the doors,
and night and day I ploughed the sea
towards that country that wasn't listening.
My friend died shot down in that land;
they put wax on his face,
a wax face just like his.
They came back from so far away
with a house and a vineyard
for a bed of straw.

Where is our America now?
Grandmother believed it was another world.
We children read
our fathers' wax faces.
For us there is no America.
The wind came,
the merry-go-round collapsed,
our next-door neighbor,
who had been in that country, died.

America here, America there,
where is it now,
my father's America?

Join the BASILICATĒ Project

We are looking for readers of a Scotellaro poem. If you are interested, please contact us by email at: memberservices@thecracosociety.org or by phone: 774-269-6611

Basilicata: Emigration to the U.S. 1851-1863

By: Hon. Thomas P. Frascella, M.ed, J.D.

I am writing on behalf of the [San Felese Society of New Jersey](#). As one of the oldest Basilicata American heritage groups in the United States we take seriously our responsibility to preserve and promote our Italian cultural history and American immigration narrative.

Most published southern Italian emigration narratives tend to start in the mid-1880's, at the earliest. However, our ancestral research, family oral histories, and community documents, both here and in Italy, all confirm that "substantial" migration and emigration initially commenced from [Basilicata in the early 1850's](#).

Although, we have been consistent in our efforts in affirming the earlier commencement date we may have inadvertently

failed to draw proper attention to the correct dates by publishing our immigration narratives as a San Fele, rather than from Basilicata immigration perspective. San Fele is a small town within Basilicata and the events and conditions that were attendant there, apply to the whole region. Our ancestor's emigration was just a part of the larger Basilicata regional emigration.

Therefore, we would like to express our gratitude to the Craco Society for extending this opportunity in your newsletter to correct any perception that our emigration narrative is a limited regional view. We further look forward to sharing our Basilicata ancestors' "early" emigration story with the community of fellow Lucanians. We hope that the story that follows will expand our common knowledge and respect for the sacrifices and trials that our Basilicata ancestors made, whenever undertaken, in their journey to the Americas.

Part I: Emigration 1851-1858

To begin our story we acknowledge that some "politically" based emigration to the Americas resulted from the failed [Carbonari](#) insurrections that swept across Europe and Italy in 1848. However, we do not view this as a significant cause of Basilicata emigration in the 1850's. Instead, we attribute the trigger of our initial "substantial" migration to a single unique event. That event occurred on the evening of August 14, 1851 and is known as the Melfi earthquake of 1851.

This event is classified on the earthquake scale as a "Major" earthquake. Meaning extensive physical destruction encompassing hundreds of square miles and resulting in the death and serious injury to thousands of people. Essentially, the entire Melfi region in Basilicata, which at the time held about 50,000 souls and dozens of towns, villages and hamlets, suffered substantial physical destruction. Since the event occurred at night when most people were home asleep thousands of people were trapped or entombed in their collapsed homes. The government of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, did little to aid in the rescue or recovery. In fact, English tourists who passed through Melfi a week after the earthquake went so far as to say the government provided little physical support and appeared to intentionally "officially" understate the destructive consequences to the region. Unofficial reports, which appear more accurate, placed the dead at between 3,000 and 3,500 and those that received serious crush injuries at around 2,000. A true decimation of the region's population. In addition, destruction was greatest at the earthquake center which was in the region of the towns of Melfi, Venosa, and Repolla. This happened to be where the region's concentration of population is and is also the region's civic/administrative center. Melfi specifically is the regional governmental seat. In Melfi, as an example of the destruction, the town suffered the loss of the cathedral, college, and police station all collapsing along with an estimated 75% of the town's housing. The

college suffered between 65 and 70 students killed alone. The town of San Fele was a smaller community within the local region of Melfi and even so this substantial natural disaster is very much a part of our collective ancestral memory as well as that of all of the small towns and villages in the affected area.

[Writer's Note I: This earthquake was reported internationally in 1851 and if interested online you can find the eyewitness accounts in English in newspapers printed in New York, Boston, and Sydney. You can also find photographs and etchings of the destruction.]

All natural disasters of this magnitude are "migratory" events. Meaning that disaster events which destroy families, property, livelihoods, basic shelter, and food force people to seek safety and security elsewhere. This migration of substantial numbers of people can be short term, prolonged, or permanent. Also, depending on opportunities and availability the migration from devastated areas can be to local shelters or more distant shelters including international relocation. In other words such an event causes population displacement and creates natural disaster "refugees". So following this earthquake we see migration outward from the Melfi area including emigration to the Americas. Thousands of desperate people from that specific disaster zone seeking safety and survivor where they can.

While we view this event as our initial emigration trigger, Basilicata and indeed Melfi, had witnessed earthquake events many times in their past. People of Basilicata are historically resilient and, although reconstruction can take decades, they have rebuilt many times. Undoubtedly, they began to rebuild after this event. However, for the first time, that I am aware of, this terrible singular natural disaster was closely followed, five and half years later, by a second immensely worse natural disaster. This disaster affected a much larger part of Basilicata but also again struck the Melfi region.

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Emigration to the U.S. 1851-1863 continued from page 3

On the evening of December 16, 1857 a “Great” earthquake struck Basilicata. Known as the “[Great Neapolitan Earthquake](#)”, an earthquake classified as “Great” carries a destructive impact that is many times that of a “Major” earthquake. The destructive force, range of destruction and casualties resulting from the Great Neapolitan Earthquake is said to have been, in fact, ten times that of the Melfi earthquake. The center of this earthquake was Basilicata’s capitol city Potenza.

The destructive range encompassed about half of the region including parts of both Potenza and Matera Provinces. About one-half of Basilicata’s population resided within the ring of destruction. Unofficial reports put the number of dead between 25,000 and 35,000 people with about 15,000 sustaining serious crush injuries. Like the Melfi earthquake this earthquake struck at night, but it also struck at the beginning of the winter season in the Apennine Mountains. Little aid was available following this horrific event and what was sent couldn’t make it through the snowbound mountain passes. What followed was a long and dreadful winter with little food and makeshift shelters. Eighty percent of the houses of the City of Potenza were uninhabitable and aftershocks continued into April 1858. No relief could be anticipated by the people of Basilicata until the spring thaws. One report confirms there were still four feet of snow in the mountain passes in March of 1858. The only help was self-help.

[Writer’s Note II: This was the first “Great Earthquake” scientifically studied. The earthquake wave movements, and destruction were surveyed and measured by British scientist Robert Mallet and organized in several volumes published by the Royal Society of London. Mallet spent six weeks in Basilicata starting in mid-February 1858. There are many comments in the margins of his report that highlight just how bad conditions were for the survivors.]

By the time spring came, conditions were so desperate in central Basilicata that widespread looting occurred, especially for food. These conditions, as should be expected caused an even greater humanitarian migratory rush in search of basic survival needs throughout 1858. The government of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies instead of sending aid, sent troops to stop the looting. Food riots broke out and were put down violently by the army. The results were that the riots became larger and more violent until by the end of 1858 large scale insurrection had spread through the whole of Basilicata. Interestingly, the intensifying violence between Basilicata earthquake survivors and the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies troops made fleeing the area an increasingly more difficult and dangerous endeavor. By 1859 with Basilicata in full scale revolt, migration and emigration ground to a forced halt and

temporary suspension. The rebellion in Basilicata as history confirms, then folded into the larger rebellion of southern Italy against the regime following Garibaldi’s landing in Sicily in 1860. Basilicata was an integral part of the southern campaign from 1859 thru the collapse of the Regime at the end of 1860. Then the region voted overwhelmingly in the Plebiscite for Unification with the North which occurred in March 1861.

Historically the “Unification” draws all of the attention however, the two years of hostilities and the declaring of Unification did nothing to relieve the desperate conditions caused by the earthquakes. In fact, they probably made things worse. Our records indicate that migration including emigration to the Americas, which had been suspended during the hostilities, started up again as soon as the Sicilian and Neapolitan ports were open in 1861. For the record from this point on, our records indicate emigration from Basilicata was continuous and unbroken until the Italian Government stopped emigration in 1930. Census data reflects that Basilicata had greatest per capita total emigration, more than any other State or region in Italy. None of this should come as a surprise given the horrific conditions and events of the 1850’s and what was to follow.

[Writer’s Note III: The southern Italian Immigrant is often considered an “economic” refugee. Early Basilicata emigrants were actually refugees from either the natural disasters or the northern military intervention and excesses against the civilian population that followed the politics of unification.]

[Writer’s Note IV: I have over the years encountered many who, while doing ancestry research, find someone in their family tree that “dead ends” meaning not located with family and no history of parents. They often assume this means that ancestor was illegitimate. Many orphans and fractured families were created by the events and conditions above. In the 19th century it was common to place orphaned children in the households of unrelated people who could support them in exchange for domestic services. Their actual family histories could wind up totally lost. This type of placement of unsupported children happened in the United States to orphaned immigrant children as well, see “[orphan trains](#)”.]
[Writer’s Note V: My estimate is between 15,000 and 20,000 young fit Basilicata men comprised the core of the volunteer irregular force that Garibaldi led in his southern mainland campaign against The Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. Their courageous service and loyalty to the cause of civil liberty, unification and Carbonari principles has not only been largely overlooked but intentionally maligned in Italian history.]

We will pick up the rest of the San Fele emigration narrative in part II of this essay next month. ■



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Craco Vecchio in Media

Craco Vecchio continues its history of being a beacon for visual media. With a history of being the site for 10 films and three television shows, a new project was filmed in the old town in December.

Originally started in 2008 as an animated television show in Italy, it gained worldwide popularity. Since then, toys, computer games, and other television series were produced.

"I Gormiti" is a fifth series Italian television production, that will be a live-action show, coming out in 2024.

Filming crews and actors were visible in the town taking advantage of the unique settings Craco Vecchio offers. ■



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Please submit your payment, the Society relies on you for support.