

## Cabrini Influences in Our History

The recent movie about Francesca Saverio Cabrini, affectionately known as Mother Cabrini, has brought renewed interest in her. Though not shown in the film, she had a strong connection with the Crachese community in Manhattan's Little Italy at the turn of the 20th century. Besides the individuals she came into contact with at St. Joachim's Church on Roosevelt Street, she also had a close relationship with Dr. Donato Viggiano.

Dr. Viggiano (b. 1876, Craco) would become an administrator at New York's Columbus Hospital that was founded by Mother Cabrini. Dr. Viggiano has appeared in the

*"... she had a strong connection with the Crachese community ..."*

Newsletter many times (March 2012, July 2014, April 2020, March 2021) and the story of his connection to Mother Cabrini can be seen on page 2 of this edition.

Tom Frascella contributed an article about the "Cabrini" movie and elements in it that show what life was like for our immigrant ancestors in New York City's Five Points section of Little Italy. He explains the creation of two Italian national churches connecting them to the San Rocco Feast, celebrated for 134 years there and the Madonna di Pierno Feast celebrated in Trenton, New Jersey since 1902. (See story on page 3). ■



See the update about the Madonna della Stella Chapel in Craco on page 5.

# The Doctor and the Saint

With Italian immigrants streaming into New York City in the late 1880s there was tremendous need for support services of all types. One of the responses to this was made by the Catholic Church who sent Italian missionary groups to provide aid. Included in them was Francesca Saverio Cabrini, commonly known as Mother Cabrini, and would become the first citizen of the US to be canonized. When she arrived on the Lower East Side of New York in 1889 she allied her group of missionary nuns with St. Joachim's Church on Roosevelt Street. From then on Mother Cabrini was able to expand services for Italian immigrants.

She was faced with the same challenges others had in the new world: another culture, without contacts, and not knowing the language. In 1890 it became clear Italian immigrants needed hospitals to care for the sick. Mother Cabrini took on hospital work founding the Columbus Hospital in New York City before establishing other hospitals in Chicago and Seattle.

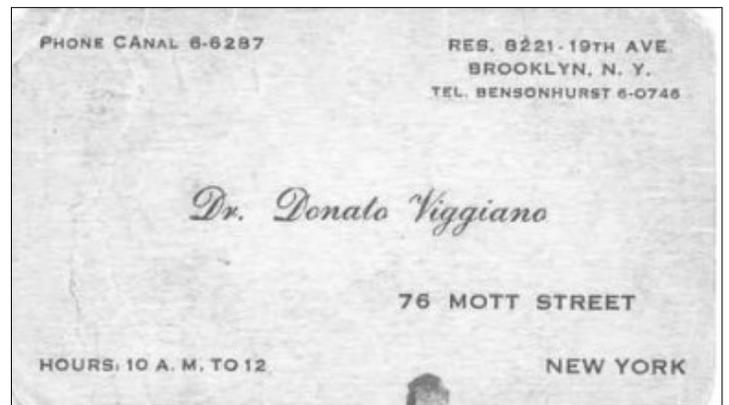
*“Dr. Viggiano arrived in New York from Craco and began helping the immigrant community on the Lower East Side.”*

Mother Cabrini worked extremely vigorously until 1917 when she died but not before establishing ministries of healing, teaching, caring, giving and reaching out, in cities of the United States, Italy, France, England, Spain, Brazil, Argentina, and Nicaragua. She was canonized in 1946.

Meanwhile, in 1903 a 27 year old doctor, Donato Viggiano arrived in New York from Craco and began helping the immigrant community on the Lower East Side. Obviously, coming from Craco and speaking the dialect, he was preferred by his “paesani” providing for them and other immigrants in the area from his office at 76 Mott Street.

In 1912 he married Elvira Manghise and they established their home in Brooklyn. Undoubtedly, Dr. Viggiano crossed paths with Mother Cabrini and supported her efforts by caring for the ill. This connection would become tangible through his affiliation with the Columbus Hospital that she founded. Dr. Viggiano, while continuing his work on the Lower East Side and attending to the community there, also worked with the Columbus Hospital ultimately taking on an administrative role there.

In the 1930s he and his wife were regularly listed in newspapers sponsoring and promoting fund raising events and activities aimed at supporting the hospital during the Depression. Dr. Viggiano continued practicing medicine into the 1950s and passed away in 1972 at the age of 95.



His impact on the Cracotan community in New York was significant. Families who had ancestors in Little Italy in his era tell stories about their interactions with him.

The Columbus Hospital, originally located on E. 20th St., moved to larger facilities in 1913 on E. 34th St. to be able to serve the expanding need. In 1973 the Columbus Hospital merged with the Italian Hospital and was renamed Cabrini Medical Center. It closed in 2008 due to financial difficulties and the buildings that were located then at 227 E. 19th St., Manhattan, NY were acquired by the Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center to operate an outpatient facility.

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# Basilicata Immigration: “Five Points” Depiction in the Cabrini Movie

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

Records both in the U.S. and in Italy indicate that substantial immigration to the U.S. from Basilicata began in the 1850s. In fact, the majority of immigration originating from the southern part of Italy from 1855-1885 may have been from the Basilicata region. This means Basilicata emigrants made up a substantial part of the first 3% of Italians to immigrate to the U.S. during the mass immigration of 4.5 million Italians that came to the U.S. before 1930.

Most of those poor rural early emigres arrived in the U.S. through the port of New York. They were refugees of several natural disasters and violent political unrest. Facing American religious, ethnic, social prejudices, and with limited skills, money, and language disadvantages, most were forced to seek out the cheapest living arrangements available to them. In New York City at that time these accommodations were in the section known as the “Five Points”.

Despite the early Basilicata presence most Italian American immigration literature does not acknowledge their arrival or their contributions to the establishment of the early “Little Italy” communities they established. The recently released “Cabrini” movie however, provides us both with an example of the failure to acknowledge, and an opportunity to discuss, the snapshot of what is depicted as the “Five Points” in 1889.

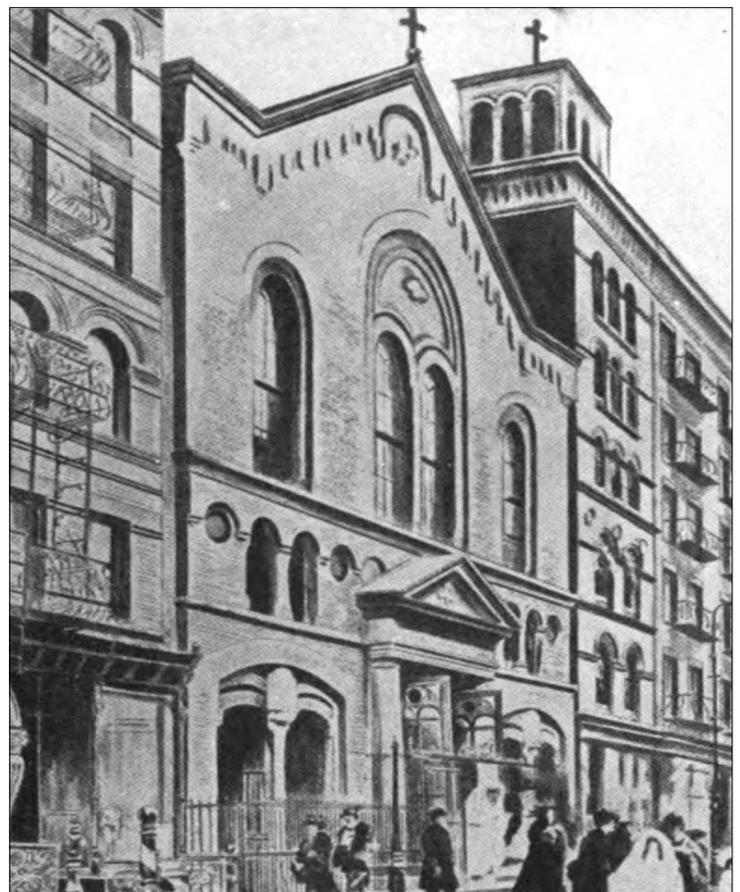
The area of Manhattan that would become known as the “Five Points” developed at the beginning of the 1800s as an industrial community associated with fabric dyeing and leather tanning. Runoff from these industrial activities polluted the local streams and ponds and permeated into the aquifer creating a toxic environment. As the population of Manhattan grew there was an attempt to build residential housing. It was soon discovered that the toxicity was causing health hazards and real estate values fell. About this time the U.S. began to experience its first waves of mass immigration coming from Ireland and Germany. Many of these immigrants wound up residing in the “Five Points” living in extreme poverty with health issues and social disorder. To get a sense of the pre-1865 area, the movie “the Gangs of New York” set in this time frame and location is an example. Into this environment the poor Italian immigrants eventually also settled, clustering for mutual aid and protection and exposed to the same poverty, crime and environmental toxicity that had existed for decades. The “Cabrini” film scenes depicting the conditions in 1889 show Italian immigrants entering the environment that was a revolving door of poor immigrants experiencing America for the first time and trying to survive.

The American Catholic Church experienced tremendous growing pains due to the influx of millions of immigrants from Ireland and Germany in the first three quarters of the 19th century. As it struggled to service and accommodate these new arrivals and their communities it oriented to the traditions, culture, and practices associated with Ireland and

Germany. As the early Italian immigrants arrived the Church was not prepared to adjust to these new arrivals’ traditions, language, customs, and practices. This often resulted in prejudices which discouraged the Italian immigrant from attendance and participation in local Catholic parishes. While the Pope tried to encourage the American bishops toward more inclusiveness, his efforts largely failed to effect the American Catholic Church.

The Pope, recognizing that the needs of thousands of Italian Catholic immigrant religious needs were not being met, placed Cardinal Scalabrini in charge of addressing the issues. Among the solutions employed was to dispatch Italian priests and nuns to set up Italian “national” parishes where immigrants could practice in their traditional ways and where social services could be obtained. Two Italian national” parishes were established in New York’s “Five Points” in 1888, The Church of the Most Precious Blood (by Franciscans) and the Church of St. Joachim (by Scalabrini Brothers). Although the movie does not indicate it, when Mother Cabrini arrived in 1889 she took up residence in St. Joachim’s parish. The scenes where she takes in orphans from the neighborhood and starts a school and orphanage are in St. Joachim’s parish.

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*St. Joachim's Church, Roosevelt St., New York c. 1914*

# Basilicata Immigration: “Five Points” Depiction in the Cabrini Movie

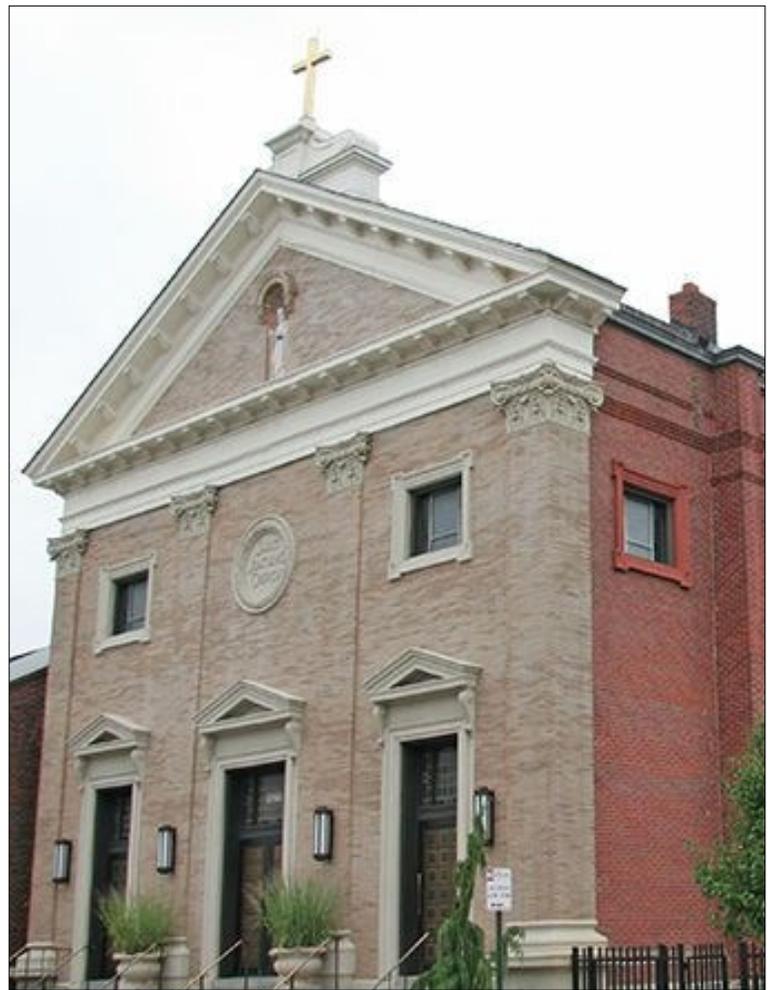
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With the forming of St. Joachim’s parish the local Italian community was able to organize as well. It is well known that immigrants often cluster regionally. In 1889 the Italian community at St. Joachim’s incorporated a regional society which was called the “Potenza Society.” The parish population and scenes in the “Cabrini” movie are depicting the immigrant community from Basilicata. One of the first things the Potenza Society did was raise funds from that impoverished community for the purchase of a statue of St. Rocco. From that year forward the community celebrated the feast day of St. Rocco, with the cooperation of the local Italian priests and nuns even though the bishop of New York officially banned the activity. The feast of St. Rocco is still celebrated in New York City, although St. Joachim’s Church was demolished in 1967. The San Rocco Society of Potenza still owns the St. Rocco statue, a saint associated with healing. *(Note) for those curious the statue shown in the Godfather movie is the original St. Rocco statue from 1889. Also of note, the better known San Gennaro feast started in the parish of the Most Precious Blood but did not start until 1926.*

It may be surprising how fast after her arrival Mother Cabrini dug in by establishing an orphanage and hospital. The scenes in the movie show unattended children many of whom had parents who had died. Because of the toxicity of the environment, adult and infant mortality were at the highest in the U.S. in the “Five Points.” One of the scenes not depicted was that “abandoned children or “street orphans” were often gathered up by the authorities, and ended up on “orphan” trains that would ship them out west. This was part of the urgency for Mother Cabrini to establish Catholic orphanages and hospitals.

Our Basilicata community in Trenton, New Jersey also suffered the same sort of denied access to religious participation. From 1889 to 1900, immigrants would take the train to New York City to participate in the mid-August St. Rocco celebration. In 1902 the Italian population in Trenton, mostly from Basilicata, was deemed large enough to warrant and support its own Italian “national” church. The church was built by the community with the construction materials donated by the Roebling Wire Rope Company, the company that built the Brooklyn Bridge. Immigrants from Basilicata made up the majority of the factory’s labor at that time. The Church and parish was named St. Joachim.

The precondition of support for the Church was that our Basilicata regional feast day honoring Mary, the “Ma Donna Di Pierno,” would be held every year. The San Felese Society was incorporated the same year and raised funds for the statue of Mary which most Catholics would recognize as a depiction of Our Lady of Perpetual Care, who like St. Rocco, has a healing connotation and is celebrated on the same date each year. ■



*St. Joachim’s Church, Trenton, New Jersey*



*Madonna di Pierno,  
St. Joachim’s Church,  
Trenton, New Jersey*

# Saving The Madonna della Stella Chapel

*“...the restoration ended with the arrangement of the interior;  
the installation of the new altar ... and a hint on the outside  
which stopped due to lack of funds ...”*

Arch. Nicola Camporeale, who is overseeing the restoration of the Madonna della Stella Chapel in Craco, sent an update on the progress of the works for the church of the Madonna della Stella, which is so dear to us.

He says, “As already mentioned in the past, the restoration ended with the arrangement of the interior, the installation of the new altar for liturgical adaptation and a hint on the outside of how the works which stopped due to lack of funds should continue.”

To disseminate the work of the Diocese we thought we could draw up a series of publications on all the interventions carried out in the various churches to maintain a historical trace of the work and at the same time be able to raise public awareness. It seems from the Soprintendenza Beni Culturali that financial funding will be allocated to also fix the external façade and the roof tiles, but to date we have not received any news.”



*The restored doors to the Madonna della Stella chapel.*

*Left: interior doors.  
Right: exterior doors.*



**Cracotan Physician** - Dr. Donato Viggiano (shown above in a 1924 passport photograph) was a fixture in Little Italy and preferred by his Cracotan paesani because of his ability to speak the dialect. He ultimately became an administrator of Columbus Hospital in Manhattan that was founded by Mother Cabrini. Also pictured is his eleven year old daughter Rosina and wife Elvira who traveled with him that summer to France and Italy. They left New York on July 10th aboard the SS Albania and returned October 11th from Naples aboard the steamship Conte Rosso. Dr. Viggiano and his wife made trips back to Italy in the ensuing years with visits in 1948 and 1956. ■

JOHN D. CALANDRA ITALIAN AMERICAN INSTITUTE

## Calandra's "Italian Diasporas: Data Snapshot"

The John D. Calandra Italian American Institute announced a new project, "The Italian Diasporas: Data

Snapshot" series that will provide information about characteristics related to the Italian diaspora.

Future summaries and reports will answer questions such as:

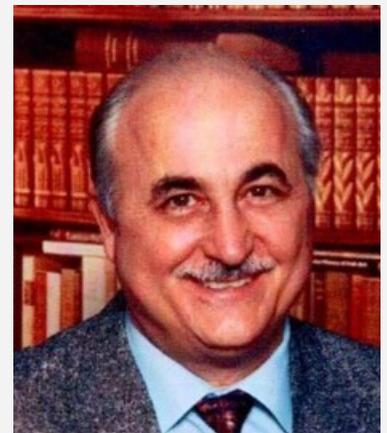
- What sets the Italian diaspora apart from those of other ethnic groups?
- What distinguishes the Italian diaspora across the countries of immigration?
- Are there significant differences in patterns of assimilation and acculturation for the Italian diaspora?

You can learn more about the project at:

[Italian Diasporas: Data Snapshot – Calandra Italian American Institute \(calandrainstitute.org\)](https://calandrainstitute.org) ■

### In Memoriam

† *With Our Ancestors*



**Prospero Rivielli**

Nov. 3, 2023



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