

Growing Italian Influences

The influence Italians had on America is often forgotten or unknown by many people today. However, within the Italian-American community the knowledge and pride in the historic accomplishments and current endeavors is a source of pride.

The John D. Calandra Italian American Institute project, “The Italian Diasporas: Data Snapshot” series shows a very telling story of accomplishment in recent decades based on educational achievement compared to the general population. However, compared to other immigrant groups the data suggests that education should continue to be a priority for Italian-Americans. (See the story on page 2).

We also learn joyous news about Don Luigi Portarulo, who comes from Bernalda, and is serving at Manhattan’s Our Lady of Pompeii Church. His new assignment brings him to the parish that includes the Shrine Church of the Most Precious Blood, with a historic connection to the Italian-American community in Little Italy. Among the many organizations and statuary there, Most Precious Blood serves as the home of the San Rocco Society of Potenza and The Craco Society. Both organizations have century old statues at the church and hold annual feast day celebrations there in August and October. We look forward to greeting Don Luigi in his new posting but in the meantime we wish him great success as he assumes his new ministry assignment. (See the story on page 2).

The little known contributions of Basilicata immigrants to the building of the Brooklyn Bridge and railroads in the Eastern United States is profiled by Tom Frascella in the second part of his series. His writing helps expand the knowledge of our

Immigrants from Basilicata contributed to building the Brooklyn Bridge and railroads in the US before the 20th century.

ancestors’ roles in changing the American culture well before the turn of the 20th Century. (See the story on page 3).

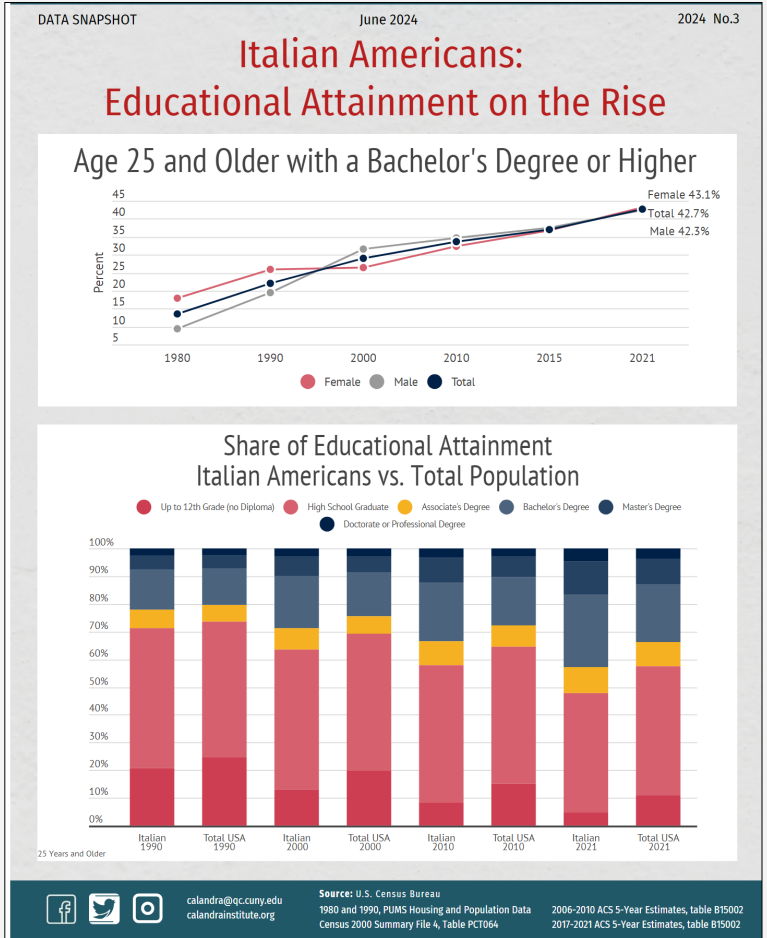
As we prepare for the BASILICATÈ Exhibition opening in New York on August 22nd, a great deal of planning is being done to support it with complementary activities. In addition to these plans being made by the Federazione Lucana d’America, the Italian Heritage Culture Committee -New York, Inc. (IHCC-NY), announced the theme for this October’s Italian Heritage Month. This marks the 48th year of this Celebration in New York and their choice of a theme goes back to 500 years ago when New York Harbor was discovered by Giovanni da Verrazzano, the renown Italian explorer. (See the story on page 6). ■



Calandra's Italian Diasporas: June Snapshot

The John D. Calandra Italian American Institute project, "The Italian Diasporas: Data Snapshot" series issued another monthly snapshot of Italian American Demographic information. This release shows the Geographic Dispersion across the US and reported: *Educational attainment is simply the highest level of education completed. In assessing its achievement, the statistics include only those twenty-five years of age and older in order to eliminate current college students because it is unknown if these students will complete their degree. The rates of educational attainment have increased substantially in the United States since the 1960s, especially for the attainment of a high school diploma going from less than 8% in 1960 to more than 90% in 2022.*

There are many reasons given across the research literature indicating why the course of Italian American acculturation with respect to educational attainment has been slow incoming and, for many decades, difficult to achieve. The failure of Americans of Italian heritage in the first and second generations to move outside the boundaries of community and family has been well documented. Those who have educational attainment want the same for their children. The June Data Snapshot provides information about the educational attainment of Italian Americans as compared to the general populations in the United States. This tells only part of the story because economic achievement is linked to educational attainment. While it is evident that rates of educational attainment have increased compared to the general population, they are still not on par with the data for other immigrant groups with similar economic status. This is one reason why education must remain a priority for the Italian American community.



For more information visit the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute website:

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

Don Luigi Portarulo Joins Staff at Old St. Patrick's

Media reports provided announcements quoting the Lucanian priest, currently at Our Lady of Pompeii parish, Don Luigi Portarulo, "Beginning July 1, I was assigned to serve in the cathedral on Fifth Avenue and in the basilica of Old Saint Patrick Cathedral, between Mulberry Street and Mott Street, in the heart of SoHo."

He went on to say, "For me it is a joy and an honor that Italians will be able to have as a point of reference two churches that on a historical and symbolic level are very important for the Archdiocese of New York. In particular, at Old Saint Patrick, I will continue the ministry and pastoral care for Italians and Italian-Americans with Sunday Mass and many other beautiful initiatives."

Fr. Portarulo moved from Basilicata to Rome at age 12 to enter the Vatican in 2000, where at age 25 he was ordained a priest. He moved to New York in November 2022. ■



Don Luigi Portarulo at Old St. Patrick's

Basilicata Immigration: Contributions to the Building of the Brooklyn Bridge

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

Part II

First Phase Brooklyn Bridge Construction 1869-1878 Mid-19th Century Basilicata Laborers

Before starting to address Basilicata laborers' contribution to the building of the Brooklyn Bridge, I should take the time to examine the dynamics of the people who formed that labor pool. As I have written previously, the 1851-1863 period in Basilicata saw the region hit with a number of natural, social, and economic disruptions. They had two immense earthquakes, the outbreak of civil war within the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, and ultimately the joining in a war of unification of the north and south of Italy. These events affected Basilicata's society across class and educational boundaries. The resulting migratory impact of these disruptions also cut across social class, and so early Basilicata immigrants to the US included upper, middle and lower class Italians. However, starting shortly after the 1861 Unification a series of land distribution reforms coupled with agrarian tariff changes brought disastrous economic consequences to the region. For example, the removal of protective tariffs wiped out the economic security for olive oil and wheat production. Almost overnight these important agricultural mainstays and the industries they supported dried up. This coupled with corrupt policies for land redistribution forced many poor farmers into subsistence or below subsistence sharecropping arrangements.

(Writer's Note: There were several former American slaves who toured Europe in the late 1860's thru 1910 on anti-slavery, equality speaking tours, Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington among them. Many noted in their writings that the conditions and prospects of southern Italian sharecroppers were far worse than anything they had witnessed in the post American Civil War south. An example of this can be found in Booker T. Washington's book "The Man Farthest Down".)



Italian Sharecroppers

As a result, in the post mid-1860's many Lucanians immigrating to the U.S. came from the lower agrarian classes of Basilicata. As a result, more Basilicata immigrants engaged in US rail construction in the 1860's and 1870's as refugees from the Italian agrarian policies. These were hard working people familiar with long hours, low wages, and limited rations. This leads to some interesting stories concerning these early rail workers.

Initially, the bulk of the labor on these 1860s rail projects in the East were Irish and German immigrant labor. Many of them were veterans of the American Civil War. The US army would recruit Irish immigrants in particular, right at the immigration docks as they arrived. They were promised food, clothing, salaries and citizenship and in some cases bonuses for enlisting. These were enticing incentives. When the war was over many found themselves homeless and without jobs so the rail work was the better alternative. However, many of these immigrants were, because of their war experiences, suffering from what today we call Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). They demonstrated emotional and social stress in the work camps, often self-medicating with alcohol. As a result many were not reliable workers.

Rail camp life in the northeast rural and forested mountains was rough and the work hard. There were a number of examples of job actions by the workers often complaining about conditions and rations, especially being served shorted meat portions and hard, days-old loaves of bread. Some of the stories note that there was a rift between the Irish and Italian laborers in that the Italians would not join in the actions or complain about the stale bread. In fact, as odd as it seemed to the Irish, the Italians seemed perfectly content with being given the inedible stale bread. Of course, these were individuals who were used to limited rations back in Italy. They were used to making due and to not wasting food. Pane Cotto is not something they were unfamiliar with improvising meals by combining limited rations with the stale bread which was soaked in water and pan fried or boiled.

(Writers Note: Growing up occasionally my American born grandmother would make Pane Cotto based on her mother's 100 year old Lucanian recipe. I can attest that the original recipes, unlike today's online versions, were quite minimalist. I have no doubt that once you had the bread and water a number of the remaining ingredients would have either been readily available in the camps or easily forgeable in the rural northeast U.S. So these early immigrants would simply make a traditional peasant dish or meal from what others would consider inedible.)

These Italian immigrants were also adept, according to many stories, at setting traps for rabbits, fowl, and fish collecting the game when their shift was over. Another example, is that Italian immigrants did not regard dandelions, which grow wild, as a "lawn weed."

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It appears to this writer, the attitude of emerging industrialists in the US, based on stories like the above, was that Italian immigrant labor was hard working, uncomplaining, frugal, reliable, and cheap which helped open many employment opportunities for the immigrants moving forward.

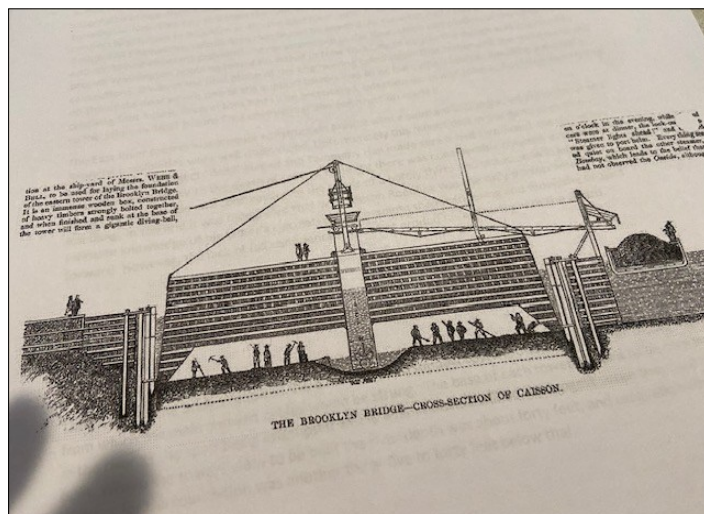
Construction of the Brooklyn Bridge

In Part I of this series of articles I left off with John A. Roebling leaving the almost complete Ohio River suspension bridge project under the supervision of his son Washington Roebling. In 1866 John A. Roebling travelled to New York City to bid for and obtain the contract to design and build a suspension bridge that would connect Manhattan to Brooklyn across the East River. John A. Roebling won that contract, in part because of his previous successes, and began the design and engineering calculations that would be needed. As stated in Part I, this project was innovative, and contained elements previously never attempted.

Upon completion of the Ohio River project, Washington Roebling joined his father in New York City to help in the design and engineering calculations. It was in the final phase of the engineering calculations that father and son were surveying on the docks near where one of the support towers was to be built. While there John A. Roebling suffered a crushing foot injury. Several toes had to be amputated, infection set in and John A. Roebling succumbed to the injury in 1869. His death occurred before final engineering was completed and construction started.

and control of the Board of Directors. With the death of John A. Roebling there was considerable concern about leaving the supervision and construction in the hands of a barely thirty and untested Washington Roebling. In the end it was recognized that Washington Roebling was the only person with enough intimate knowledge of his father's calculations to complete the engineering and move the project forward. However, the lack of full confidence and Washington Roebling's relative youth somewhat eroded his authority with the Board.

The design of the bridge required the building of two support towers, one on either side of the river from which the main support cables would be strung. The span would, when finished, be the longest suspension span ever attempted. Where the towers were to be built the river depth was about forty feet, and excavation down to bedrock for the foundation was another thirty-five to forty feet.



Men working in a Caisson

The technology for this kind of underwater construction, while primitive, did exist. Caissons, or enclosed metal chambers, would be submerged and then pressurized air would be pumped in to force and hold the water out to create space for the laborers to dig. Laborers working in the pressurized chambers were exposed to extreme heat and the ever present threat of internal chamber fires. In addition, they were exposed to a condition called caissons disease or more commonly known as the bends. Nose bleeds and breathing difficulty were frequently experienced on descent and workers would often complete their shifts while working thru these symptoms. Other symptoms such as cramps, lung collapse, paralysis and even death could be experienced on resurfacing. About half the recorded deaths on the Brooklyn Bridge project, around ten, are attributed to caissons disease.

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Washington Roebling

The East River project was a major construction undertaking with a substantial budget. Its importance and the financial possibilities it represented were well understood. Unfortunately, this also meant that in the early days of the financing of the project the corrupt "Boss" Tweed and Tammany Hall made sure they had significant involvement

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Caisson work on the Brooklyn Bridge project began in 1870 and continued below surface for several years thereafter. Shortly after work commenced a fire broke out in one of the caissons and Washington Roebling rushed in to supervise rescue and repair. In this incident and his haste in physically going down in the caisson he contracted a severe case of the bends. The injury left him for a time paralyzed and even after recovery he sustained permanent lung damage. He was so weakened by the injury that he was unable to leave his apartment overlooking the project. Again, there was consideration by the Board to remove him from the project because of his disability. Although, unable to actually visit the job site he convinced the board that he could supervise the project overlooking the construction site thru the use of surrogates on the site and so work continued. Once again, it was his unique knowledge of the calculations and engineering principles derived from his father that placed him in a unique position to continue even with his disability.

A Human Cost

Most of the actual digging in the caissons was done by immigrant labor, Irish, German and Italian immigrants some of whom were from Basilicata. These men formed the bulk of rotating digging crews. Much of the labor for this specific caisson task, because of the danger, fell on immigrants collected from the adjacent Five Points community. These men were among the poorest and most desperate men in the city.

Although ten workers “officially” died from the bends on this Project the actual total may have been much higher. Most men suffering severe effects were removed from the site, many taken to the ramshackle housing where they were staying in the Five Points. If these men died it went largely unreported. There were no hospitals available in the community and these immigrants had no money to pay for medical services or other assistance. They were on their own.

We also don’t know how many men were permanently disabled by their injury. These workers, in some cases, were permanently paralyzed or with breathing difficulties. Without resources or community support ultimately they died as well. Nevertheless, the project was able to continue to draw workers to go down in these caissons. These men were desperate knowingly risking their lives on the offer that they could earn three times the going rate for labor or about \$2.00 - \$2.50 a day.

As I stated, we will never know how many of these men simply died unreported deaths, only to be buried in New York pauper fields. On the other side of the ocean we also will not know how many families, mothers, wives children never heard the fate of loved ones. These women left behind waiting to hear from loved ones were to be greeted with a life of silent uncertainty as to their fate.

After the caisson work was completed the surface construction took on a more conventional turn. In New York City this meant contracts were awarded to favored contractors with kickbacks going to Tammany Hall. Tammany Hall’s corrupt practices made sure that materials were shorted and cost overruns were common.

Roebling, whose Trenton “wire rope” factory had expected to get the steel cable contract was blocked from the contract by the Board. The argument they made was awarding the contract to Roebling would be a conflict of interest for him and the company. The denial of the contract for the steel cable was made despite Roebling being recognized as manufacturing the finest steel cable and offering the lowest bid of any of the bidders on this project. Instead, the cable contract was awarded to a higher bidder who had no experience in wire rope manufacture and who proceeded to produce inferior cable at below design parameters.

The work proceeded but few Italian immigrants were employed by the favored politically connected contractors. That is until 1878 when all of the corruption came to a head. The project exceeded its budget, the inferior main support cable snapped, killing several workers including a Roebling project supervisor, Boss Tweed was indicted and new financing had to be arranged. The construction of the bridge was halted for about six months in 1878 while things got straightened out.

The Roebling wire works in Trenton was allowed to bid on the remaining cable needs for the project. However, on the condition Washington Roebling divested himself of his interest in the factory. This placed the control of manufacturing in the hands of Charles Roebling, Washington Roebling’s younger brother who, like his older brother and father, was also a trained engineer.

In Part III, I will pick up the story in 1879, and explain how it relates to the hiring of Basilicata laborers in the John A. Roebling and Sons, factory in Trenton. ■



How to contact us - Come contattarci

The Craco Society
14 Earl Road
East Sandwich, MA 02537 USA

EMAIL: memberservices@thecracosociety.org



VISIT: www.thecracosociety.org



48th Annual Italian Heritage and Culture Month



The Board of Directors of the Italian Heritage Culture Committee - New York, Inc. (IHCC-NY), announced that for the October 2024 celebration the theme will be GIOVANNI DA VERRAZZANO 1524-2024 | 500 YEARS.

In 1524, Giovanni Verrazzano was the first European to sail into New York Harbor and the coast of North America. The IHCC-NY press release about the month long celebration included the accomplishments of Verrazzano as follows:

Giovanni da Verrazzano, the renown Italian explorer and Renaissance Humanist, (1485-1528), was born into a noble family in Val di Greve, Tuscany. Under the patronage of King Francis I of France, Verrazzano made three exploratory voyages west, hoping to find a passage to the Far East. In 1524, after first landing off the coast of North Carolina and exploring southward, he sailed up the coast on his flagship, *La Dauphine*, and on April 17, 1524, he was the first European to enter the body of water, which is present day New York Harbor. Also, he was the first European to explore the entire East Coast of America. This was 500 years ago, and eighty-five years before Henry Hudson entered the New York Bay in 1609!

Verrazzano continued to sail up to the area now known as New England, discovering Block Island and Narragansett Bay, and as far north as Newfoundland before returning to France. During this voyage, he kept an amazingly detailed journal of the flora, fauna, geography, climate, and description of the Native Americans, including their appearance, customs, and society. This was a profound contribution to the knowledge of this unknown land and its inhabitants. A second voyage in 1527 followed the coast of Brazil. During his third voyage in 1528, exploring the Florida coast, the Bahamas and lower Antilles, among the Caribbean Islands, he encountered hostile Carib Indians, which ultimately led to his capture and death. Of great significance is that Verrazzano added much geographic knowledge for the mapmakers of his time, which guided subsequent explorers. His Cèllere Codex, a letter written to King Francis I, describing America's eastern coastline with descriptions of its geography and inhabitants led to a definitive world map. A rare manuscript copy is in the collection of the Morgan Library & Museum in New York City, along with one of the earliest world globes, depicting the world according to Verrazzano's explorations.

Homages to Verrazzano can be found in his statue displayed in Battery Park, facing the NY Harbor. Other statues can be found at John J. Carty Park in Fort Hamilton, Brooklyn; Rehoboth Beach, Delaware; Newport, Rhode Island; and Greve, Italy. Three bridges, the famous Verrazzano Narrows over New York Harbor, and two other bridges, in



Narragansett Bay and in Maryland, bear the name Verrazzano, as well as a commemorative plaque in Staten Island. Events dedicated to the IHCC-NY theme will be held throughout October's Italian Culture Month, including the IHCC-NY da Vinci Award, proclamations at all government levels, symposiums, lectures, receptions, a viewing of the Cèllere Codex, and a special Postmaster General's commemorative Verrazzano cancellation stamp, along with Verrazzano posters and educational bookmarks. ■

