



Basilicata Comes to New York

August will see the opening of the BASILICATÈ Exhibition and a series of other events that highlight the Region.

After more than a year of planning and development by the Regione that started with filming of the San Rocco feast in New York in 2023 and in Montevideo and Buenos Aires, the Exhibition debuts on August 22nd. The Federazione Lucana d’America, working in conjunction with APT Basilicata and others, created several events that complement the Exhibition. Additionally, partner organizations are scheduling events that highlight Basilicata. These added events will run through the Fall.

BASILICATÈ Exhibition: this event will be hosted by the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute at 25 West 43rd Street, 17th floor, New York, New York, 10036. In addition to serving as the host for the exhibition, the Institute will also be presenting two activities as part of the Exhibit:

- Sept 9th: Three Lucane American writers - Penny Arcade (aka Susana Ventura), Joanna Claps Herman, and Helene Stapinski
- Sept 18th: Isabella Livorni’s lecture on Rocco Scotellaro

The Institute will also hold events in the Fall after the close of the Exhibition. Watch for the details about each of these events.

APT Basilicata and Eataly New York will be highlighting the cuisine, wines, and liquors of the Region during the Exhibition. Starting with the opening date of the Exhibition, the wines and liquors will be featured at the Eataly locations in New York, along with a wine tasting at their New York

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liquor store, Eataly Vino. There will also be a cooking class featuring recipes from the region.

Basilicata Roots: the Federazione Lucana d’America is developing several initiatives that will include:

- Basilicata immigration history panel discussion
- Emigration videos from the Lagopesole Museum
- Basilicata tourism information session
- Dual citizenship education session
- Purchasing property in Basilicata

The details for each of these events will be communicated as they approach so you can plan on attending. ■



Basilicata Immigration: Contributions to the Building of the Brooklyn Bridge

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

Part III

In this three part series of articles I am attempting to show the early presence, the “Castle Garden era 1855-1891” of Basilicata immigrants in the U.S. through the construction of the iconic Brooklyn Bridge. In Part II of this series I left off with the re-start of the Brooklyn Bridge project in 1879. Up to that point records from the construction show that Italian immigrant labor participated in construction especially in its most dangerous aspects.

As stated in the previous article, with the political corruption issues resolving, Washington Roebling continued on as chief engineer of the project. The John A. Roebling’s Sons Company was finally able to competitively bid on cable manufacturing contracts starting in 1878. Of course as previously explained, this contract bidding opportunity was conditioned on Washington Roebling divesting himself of his interest in the Roebling manufacturing company, as it was perceived a conflict of interest. This left control of the company in the hands of his two younger brothers Ferdinand and Charles Roebling. Both younger brothers were also brilliant and competent engineers. They divided their duties with Ferdinand handling the financial, contractual, and advertising with Charles handling the day to day production. The sudden immediate demand for increased production and growing demand for the Roebling product line created a need for additional labor at the Trenton plant. The Roebling wire and cable production line grew during this period to far more than various gauges of steel cable. Their product lines included communications wire and electrical wire as these technologies developed. For example, the electrical wire and strut cables used in the Charles Lindbergh’s airplane, “The Spirit of St. Louis” was Roebling wire. Also, when the Otis Elevator Company began to advertise their product it was important to them to stress safety. They advertised the lifting cable they used in their elevators was Roebling made. (Note: Ferdinand Roebling negotiated for a percentage of stock in the Otis Elevator Company to allow for the advertising).

Since the start of the company in the late 1830’s John A. Roebling had favored a company labor force comprised mostly of German speaking immigrants. Roebling himself a German immigrant supported his ethnic community. This preference continued when the company moved from Saxonburg Pennsylvania to Trenton N.J. in 1848. As a result Roebling’s factory employment and support, there was a large and prosperous German-American community in Trenton by the mid 1800’s.

However, it became obvious to Charles Roebling, now running production at the Trenton site, that the German speaking pool of immigrant workers available was going to be insufficient for the company’s present and future needs. So Charles decided to try supplementing the German speaking labor force with Italian immigrant labor. By 1879 Italian

immigrant labor had arrived in numbers sufficient enough to have successfully been employed in many US rail and transportation related projects.

American Industries seeking Italian labor during this period generally recruited from the pool of workers in New York City. According to local histories Charles Roebling reached out to a local Italian immigrant Franciscan priest stationed in Trenton, Fr. Pietro Jachetti for help. The multi-lingual Fr. Jachetti had been recruited by the Bishop of New Jersey to minister to the German speaking immigrant community in New Jersey and had been appointed as pastor of St. Francis Church on Front St. in 1869. St. Francis was primarily a German speaking congregation incorporated in 1851 and many of the congregants were Roebling employees. Fr. Jachetti was positioned as a liaison between the Roebling administration and the Italian immigrant community which Roebling at the time was unable to reach directly.



Fr. Pietro Jachetti

The opportunity for Italians to be employed at the Trenton factory site occurred in 1879 and can be directly linked to the Brooklyn Bridge project needs. The problem with reaching the Italian immigrant community directly for Roebling was that according to our records the entire Italian immigrant population of Trenton at the beginning of 1879 amounted to 13 individuals. So, the resident Italian population was relatively invisible to most people in a town of 25,000.

Of those local Italian immigrants the majority were from Basilicata including the only family unit which consisted of Vito Frascella, his wife, son and two daughters. Vito had between 1862 and the late 1870’s returned to Italy twice for purposes of supporting and enlarging his family.

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Fr. Jachetti turned to Vito who had extensive contacts with the Basilicata community in New York City and northern New Jersey. Fr. Jachetti also reached out to his own native Italian community of Monteleone advising them of employment opportunities as well.

Vito recognizing the opportunity took up the challenge and was able to secure about ten young men, mostly immigrants from the village San Fele in Basilicata. I would note that these initial labor recruits had all already arrived in the US and were actively employed in seasonal labor. Vito gathered the men, brought them to Trenton and secured local housing in south Trenton. This doubled the number of Italian immigrants in the City. I believe this is the event that established Italian-American “community” in Trenton. Most Italians at that time were settling in south Trenton, in the area of Fair St. This had the advantage of being relatively close to Roebbling’s Delaware River factories. According to our records among those that initially came to work at Roebbling in 1879 were Antonio Russo, Vito and Giuseppe Massara, Michael Colucci, and Gerardo and Vito Radice, all formerly of San Fele.

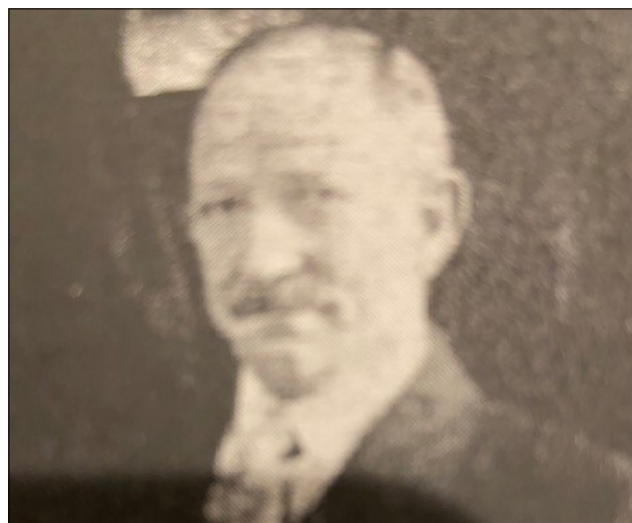
While a great deal has been written locally about Italian immigrant labor at Roebbling post 1900 the initial time frame in which employment began was obscured. I appreciate the opportunity to restate in this article what the actual historic origins of employment were.

Roebbling’s anticipated labor needs were far greater than what could be supplied from existing Italian immigrant populations in 1879. While some Italian immigrant labor continued to be recruited from New York City a larger and steadier flow of potential labor needed to be established to the Trenton factories.

What might surprise historians is the rapid communication and direct recruitment of labor to Trenton from so remote a location as Basilicata. Our histories trace the link to this larger pool of future workers to Vito (Pete) Frascella’s oldest son, Gaetano (Tommy) Frascella who was 19 years old in 1879. Gaetano’s link to this labor draft is an interesting story that is documented in local community’s histories.

Our story goes that Gaetano immigrated to the US when he was 12 years old in 1872. Either, as a result of availability, or custom, a suitable bride was not to be found in the US, so arrangements were made for Gaetano to marry a woman from his ancestral home in Basilicata, San Fele. In 1880 Gaetano returned to Basilicata to get married returning, with his wife to Trenton in 1882. (Of note, all of Vito’s other younger children married spouses from Basilicata but married in the US indicating Italian – American “communities” were developing).

Gaetano while in Basilicata obviously talked up the availability of jobs at Roebbling. As a result we begin to see in



Gaetano Frascella in later years

our local records from 1880 a direct flow of immigration from San Fele and other parts of central Basilicata.

Our documents indicate this labor recruitment was very organized and tracked in Italy. Those arriving in Trenton went directly to the Roebbling works for employment. Although immigration out of Basilicata had been happening since the 1850’s, the land journey through the mountains of Basilicata to the port of Naples was not easy nor was the ocean voyage safe. Vito Frascella who had already completed the chain migration of his immediate family in the 1870’s is held up in our local histories, as an example of the degree of difficulty experienced. In the process of bringing his young family to the US in the 1870s. In a process that took 37 days, Vito’s family suffered, like many early Italian immigrants, the loss of a young infant child during the ocean transit.

However, immigration post 1880 onward from central Basilicata was helped by improvements to transportation. Ocean vessels began the transition to steam power resulting in faster trans-Atlantic crossing times. Also in terms of overland transport from central Basilicata to the port of Naples, that too seems to improve. At some point in the 1870’s the Italian government began constructing a rail line going from the port of Naples on the west coast of Italy to the port of Bari on the east coast. This line cut across central Basilicata. A rail station opened in Muro Bella in 1877 a town which is relatively close to San Fele. A second station further east, in the Capitol of Basilicata, Potenza was opened in 1880. The availability of these rail resources may have helped account for the local Trenton immigrant population being heavily weighted from central Basilicata during this period. The convenience of this rail access not only made those seeking U.S. employment easier but provided for easier transit for young family members to follow.

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As an indicator of immigrant volume, Trenton's Italian population went from 13 in early 1879 to about 1,500 by 1889. Of those settling in Trenton the majority were from Basilicata with a second large group being from Monteleone. Almost all of the newly arriving Italian immigrants lived in south Trenton. These Basilicata immigrants played an important role in providing labor for the completion of the Brooklyn Bridge project between 1879 and 1883 and an important role in the future success of the Roebling Company moving forward.

The Roebling Company became Trenton's single largest employer as the city grew to about 130,000 in the first half of the 20th century. Among those who immigrated early for employment at Roebling, was Vito Dileo. Vito was born in San Fele in 1867. He was a young teenager when Gaetano Frascella returned to Basilicata with news of employment opportunities in 1880. Vito Dileo was one of those influenced by Gaetano to come to Trenton. Vito immigrated to the U.S. in 1883 at the age of 16. Once in Trenton he immediately went to work at the Roebling factory. In addition to being a major asset to the developing the early Italian-American community in Trenton he also was promoted to "yard foreman" at the Roebling factory in 1892. This gave him a direct say in hiring new employees. He was the first Italian-American to reach supervisor status within the Roebling factory hierarchy and was at the start of a seventy year chain of Italian immigrants filling the position of yard foreman at the factory until its sale in the early 1960s.



Vito Dileo

One of my objectives in writing these articles is to highlight the arrival and successes of these early "Castle Garden" era Italian immigrants who have been overlooked in the Italian immigrant narrative. As a result of their earlier than usually reported arrival, Basilicata immigrants rack up a number of "firsts" among Italian-Americans. They accomplished this in the face of profound prejudices and often without any recognition as being from Basilicata. One example that

might be recognized is the Panaro family of Trenton. Both husband and wife immigrated as a couple to the US around 1900 from the town of Bella in Basilicata. They had two

children born into Trenton's already established Basilicata community between 1903-1905. By then children of Basilicata heritage had been growing up in Trenton for twenty to thirty years. There were many examples of Italian and American born Basilicata entering into a host of professional occupations. The Panaro son would become a lawyer and in the 1950s the mayor of Ewing Township, NJ. But he wasn't the first of Basilicata ancestry to become a lawyer or elected office holder, that distinction goes to Daniel "Spair" Sperduto twenty to thirty years earlier.

The Panaro daughter, Katherina became a public school teacher in Trenton. She is probably better known by her married name, Katherina Scalia whose Trenton born son, Antonin, followed and exceeded his uncle's legal footsteps and established a "first" of his own as the first Italian - American Supreme Court Justice.



Antonin Scalia, 2013

The children of these "Castle Garden" Italian immigrants very quickly entered into many American professions that would have been unattainable in their ancestral homeland. Their successes were due to their individual initiative and a supportive community. These early successes opened the door for later Italian immigrant's children to do the same and more. ■



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