

19th Century Basilicata Emigration: A Fratellanza & Sorellanza Based Society

Part 4 “B” of 6 Sections

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Introduction:

Section 4 “B” of the series is dedicated to discussing the formation of the Basilicata based immigrant community as it developed in Trenton N.J. between 1886 and 1900. Because of the amount of information associated with the topic, I intend to deliver the basics of community foundations in 3 sub-sections in Part 4. There will be a third sub-section 4 “C” covering 1900-1911 to follow in January.

As previously written, the origins of the Italian immigrant community of the late 19th and early 20th century in Trenton started with the arrival of three young men from the Basilicata region of Italy in 1862. The Italian community in Trenton remained largely regionally based from Basilicata thru about 1905. Between 1862 and 1880 Trenton’s Italian immigrant community numbered no more than about two dozen individuals. They were mostly men, who resided within a Trenton city landscape of about 30,000 people. The early Italian social dynamic was one of a “cluster” of individuals generally working independently as self-employed “street merchants”.

About twenty per cent of the city’s population was foreign born from the 1860’s thru 1890’s. Most foreign-born residents at that time were either of Irish or German ethnicity. Those immigrants and their families provided much of the factory and non-skilled labor for Trenton’s growing industrial base. They lived in the working-class commercial/industrial neighborhoods of south Trenton and the Borough of Chambersburg. The few Italian immigrants among them lived in south Trenton around First and Second Streets. The initial Italian cluster, because of its small size, was barely noticeable within the larger Trenton community. Official census records include them, not as a distinct group, but under the statistical “other” category.

When the Roebling Wire Rope Company began to offer and solicit employment to Italian immigrants in 1879, word was spread first to the larger Basilicata immigrant community in New York City. From N.Y.C. word of job opportunities eventually spread back to Basilicata. Emigration from Basilicata and resettlement to Trenton began in earnest from that 1879 point. Our historical local texts suggest that by the mid-1880’s Trenton’s Italian population had jumped to about three hundred and then to about nine hundred by 1890. However, this dramatic increase occurred within a city population which also had dramatically increased to about 57,000 by 1890.

At the close of the 19th century the city population grew to about 97,000. The foreign-born element of the population remained at about twenty percent. By 1900 Trenton’s Italian population increased to about 2,500- 3,000, still predominately from Basilicata. For historic

accuracy, the 1880's also began the period of the additional large influx of eastern and other southern Europeans to the city, creating a new and wider ethnic diversity than had previously existed.

For those interested in studying the process of the Italian immigrants' transition from a small cluster of individuals into a "community", the 1880's represent the origins and key. I hope that the following article, based on our community records and histories will shed some additional light on this subject.

Recruitment:

The initial growth of the Italian community in Trenton, post 1879, was somewhat unique as it was the specific result of interest in the recruitment of cheap unskilled Italian labor for factory work at the Roebling manufacturing plants. The emigrant flow was single sourced and specifically directed toward work in the Roebling factories. In 1879 John Roebling's sons had, after some political setbacks and maneuvers in New York City, resecured the design, production and development control to the final phase of the Brooklyn Bridge Project. The notoriety and prestige of that project would ensure the future growth of the Roebling company. The anticipated company growth had led management to select a large acre industrial site in what became known as the Chambersburg section of the city. This site would become the industrial production hub of the company thru 1904, and the company's corporate headquarters into the 1960's. When Roebling management in 1879 began to consider Italians as a source of future labor needs, the resident Italians in the city barely numbered a dozen. Those that resided there were mostly immigrants from Basilicata. So, it was to that resident cluster that assistance in recruitment in Italy was made. Initial contact by Roebling's management with the local Italian group was thru a local Franciscan priest Fr. Peter Jachetti, at Our Lady of Lourdes Parrish in Chambersburg. This parish, which he started in 1874, was composed largely an Irish/German working class immigrant Catholics. However, Fr. Jachetti's ethnic heritage afforded him an opportunity to maintain close ties to the small Trenton Italian population.

Roebling management had an opportunity to observe and experience the value and proficiency of Italian immigrant labor on earlier rail/bridge projects and to a limited degree on the Brooklyn Bridge Project. However, the number of Italians within the American labor force was quite small in 1879. In fact, census data indicates that only 75,000 Italians emigrated to the U.S. between 1850 and 1880. Most of this group were middle-class, well educated "political" refugees. Few among them sought out "bottom-rung" labor employment. However, roughly 15-20 per cent of the Italian immigrants to America at that time were arriving from Basilicata. Existing conditions in Basilicata made them something of an exception to the Italian immigrant norm. Most were arriving with very limited resources.

By 1879 the Basilicata region had experienced three decades of hardship with no end in sight. First had come devastating earthquakes, followed by civil rebellion and regime change in the form of unification with northern Italy in 1861. This in turn lead to a difficult merger of politics

and economies, with local institutional collapses, disastrous agricultural reforms, economic depression, renewed civil unrest and brutal political suppression. Emigration for many in Basilicata became linked to basic survival. The Basilicata region saw a steady and increasing number of emigres to both south America and the United States from 1861 onward. The 1879 Roebling's "promise" of steady work and opportunity for a better life provided a powerful motivation for change, even with the risks and sacrifices that emigration entailed.

(Reference note: A number of people have over the years asked where I obtained some of the old materials I reference in my articles. One of the principal sources was Vito Frascella's oldest daughter, Angela, who was born in the 1860's in Basilicata and emigrated to America in the 1870's. It seems after she married in Trenton and started a family there, she began a family album. The album grew beyond pictures, to include personal papers, mementos, as well as newspaper articles relating to family and community. Generally, she retained materials she found interesting or considered worth saving. Her husband was a successful local businessman who unfortunately died relatively young. This occasioned her to take over his businesses, which produced additional records. Around the age of fifty she became involved in local politics as an organizer and political ward leader, this at a time before women had the right to vote. Local newspapers dubbed her, in her later years, as the "grandmother of the Republicans". A very organized woman, Angela kept documents related to politics as well. The extensive collection of her materials, some of which date back 150 years, was retained after her death, by one of her daughters and passed down in the family. Within our Trenton Basilicata society and my extended family, we refer to these materials as the "archives".)



Angela Frascella



Gaetano (Tom) Frascella

Word of the Roebling job opportunities in Trenton was first carried back to San Fele in Basilicata on a return visit by Gaetano (Tom) Frascella in 1880. Gaetano had returned to San Fele to marry. Gaetano's father Vito, (Pete), Trenton's first Basilicata born resident (1862), working in close association with Fr. Jachetti served as liaison between the newly arriving Basilicata emigrant workers and the Roebling factory management. In the first five years or so, Vito, Fr. Peter Jachetti and his assistant Fr. Domenic Marzetti worked closely to locate and provide housing, community acclimation, as well as spiritual support to the new arrivals. This greatly enhanced the original emigres rapid assimilation into the community.

Many of the newly arrived emigrants knew only the agrarian culture, contadini work, of their native Basilicata. Upon their arrival they experienced for the first time, an unfamiliar, multi-ethnic 19th century American urban industrial environment. Our local histories recite that in early 1880's to secure smooth transition the men met every Sunday at Vito Frascella's house. There they would collectively hold a conference on issues relating to working conditions, business opportunities, housing, transportation related to family re-unification, emigration and naturalization, and other issues. This collective mutual support was critical to the early community's success.

I should stress that initially in Trenton, most of the new Italian arrivals were not only from Basilicata, but more narrowly from the area of San Fele, in the County of Melfi. As such, most of those arriving had close personal associations with those already here. Many, in fact, represented extended family members. This created, from the outset, a community with strong, close familial inter-connections. Those close family ties were often not well understood, or decipherable, by those from outside the community. These emigrants had arrived from a centuries-old culture of clustered small towns and villages. Traditionally, in Italy and subsequently in America, they socially functioned more like a family clan or as they called it, a *fratellanza*. From our records it is evident that within the community, the close relationships uniquely guided both the early physical emigration process, and the Trenton Basilicata community's social/political structure. There was a more subtle "organization" structure in the emigration/assimilation process at work than what may have been observable from the outside.

Companion Emigration:

From the emigration data of San Fele supplied in Prof. Stia's book, "La Grande Emigrazione" it appears that a significant feature of the Basilicata emigration was group, rather than individual, movement. Even in the 1850's where emigration appears to be more individual and composed of

young males, the emigres linked up with companions either at exit points or at their destinations. Many earlier ethnic immigrations to America appear to be more random and less organized, where emigres arrive in America and then spread out into the interior losing familial contacts. This does not appear to be a feature of early Basilicata emigration. Many of the annual emigration reports Prof. Stia supplied suggest that families, from the outset in the 1850's, either travelled together or reunited after arrival with surprising determination. This is remarkable given the travel limitations in the 19th century and the remoteness of the Basilicata mountains. There are a number of examples in our histories that demonstrate that even in the 19th century and with transatlantic distances they had remarkably close and dependable communication and could accurately track locations and movements of relatives throughout the U.S.

The fact that this "fratellanza" aspect of early Basilicata emigration was missed in most written local texts is not the fault of researchers, even researchers of Italian descent. The early Basilicata emigrants were very close, especially on what they regarded as personal information. Data which researchers reviewed as simply numbers or names of individuals, provide much more information to folks who understand the extended family structure at play. For those within the Basilicata community what appears to be individual names or arrival dates can be used to map the build-up of extended families. The arrivals can also be used to show that as the community grew, their needs grew with specific priorities and collective resolutions.

Collective Community Action

With any newly arriving immigrant group, especially when they have language, cultural or religious needs which are different than those of the majority existing resident population, there are substantial barriers to smooth acclimation. In the 1800's there were few governmental or charitable relief organizations set up to help in the emigration transition. Therefore, when "community" needs were identified a collective "self-help based" process was all that was often available. The structure of the process of needs resolution and its implementation by a fratellanza methodology is an interesting aspect of the community's history.

In the fratellanza based Trenton Basilicata community there were always leaders, males and females within the community. Often, these community leaders were considered such for their individual judgment, fairness and common sense. They were not of a type that was very outwardly visible, and they did not lead by directive. When a "community" need was recognized within the group, these individuals would serve more as "solution consensus builders", mediators, or resource organizers. In essence, they were "community" elders.

For example, as more and more families arrived and were reunited certain social needs arose in the community such as marriages, births, medical support, baptisms, sacraments, deaths, burials, etc. In this regard the Italian community in Trenton was fortunate throughout the 1880's in having Italian Franciscan priests at Our Lady of Lourdes Chapel providing assistance. Not very many early or developing Italian immigrant communities in America had the services of dedicated religious leaders available. In Trenton the emerging community had highly educated,

devoted and trusted priests/educators, Men who understood Italian cultural background, and who had access to resources to aid the poor, newly arrived, non-English speaking population. The priests and the Church became a resource on which the community's secular leaders could reliably turn and communicate. Our records indicate that thru 1886 Fr. Jachetti and Fr. Marzetti enthusiastically filled the role of supporting attendees, supporting the community and helping to overcome barriers which often were set up by anti-immigrant elements.

The issues of marriages, births, deaths and burials, leads to two topics related to early Italian community life in Trenton that I should mention.

First, while the Franciscan nuns in Trenton had started the city's first charitable hospital in 1874, the nuns as well as the doctors at that hospital were either English or German speaking. As a result, many of the non-English speaking early Italian immigrants had difficulty communicating for medical care or attention. This included receiving attention during childbirth. By custom, most of the Basilicata women were from a rural culture where births were handled by mid-wives. There were no Basilicata trained mid-wives or doctors in Trenton until about 1888. Therefore, births and medical advice regarding injury, illnesses or during pregnancy presented a problem in the early Community. What we see from community records is that in the early to mid-1880's a collective resolution was reached. New York's "Five Points" contained a far greater number of the Basilicata emigrants than Trenton. Within this larger Basilicata emigrant network there were mid-wives and a small number of trained Italian physicians. So when the need arose the Trenton community would fall back on the larger Basilicata community in N.Y.C. In the early 1880's for example, Trenton's Basilicata women who were with child would, prior to their due date, travel to the Five Points in N.Y.C. and stay with relatives while having their babies.

Given that the "highest" infant mortality rates in the U.S. were registered in the Five Points ghetto during this time, it is difficult to conceive that this was considered the safer option for these women. However, in the Five Points these young mothers at least had Italian speaking mid-wives. Mid-wives who were available to assist the women giving birth by traditional methods. In addition, to assisting in the actual birthing process these mid-wives were available for the women's initial recovery and instruction on early childcare. This was critical help as in many cases these young women, first time mothers, did not have older more experienced women and mothers who had emigrated with them.

(Note: Once Basilicata midwives became available within the Trenton community, late 1880's, it is estimated that at least half of all Italian-American babies born in Trenton over the next forty years were delivered at home assisted by these women.)

A second and related issue of note, the community's need for burial plots in the early mid-1880's. As a result of high rates of infant mortality rather than adult deaths the need for burials arose quickly. This should not be surprising as many of the initial Italian immigrants were relatively young and healthy. However, high rates of infant and child mortality were common in that era. Our Lady of Lourdes cemetery was set up during the residency of Fr. Jachetti in the

1880's specifically for emerging Italian immigrant community. Fr. Jachetti was motivated to create the cemetery as Italians were often restricted in purchasing burial plots in other existing cemeteries based on anti-Italian or "racial" prejudices.

Independent Entrepreneurship and Emigration Sponsorship

Most Italians arriving between 1850 and 1880 had middle-class backgrounds and preferred, if they had the resources, to start businesses and be self-employed. This was also true in Trenton. Most of the initial Italians, 1860's-1870's, were engaged in various self-employed street vending occupations. Initial opportunities for self-employment were connected to the sale of merchandise, fish and vegetables which were delivered and unloaded at the river front docks and distributed daily in the community. The pro-active Roebling recruitment shifted that employment approach somewhat, by bringing in more Italians who started off as factory workers. However, private job creation continued to play an important part in the Italian community for several reasons.

Most importantly, it was expedient to set-up, private, community-oriented businesses, as a way that emigres could arrive in the U.S. with documents that indicated jobs waiting for them and sponsors certifying those jobs. A few examples of such jobs recorded in the community are, newspaper sales/delivery and barber shops. When reviewing emigration documents relating to the Trenton Basilicata group, I see an extraordinary number of people who listed "barber" as their occupation and very few who listed "farmworker". This is not what you would necessarily expect of a labor pool from an agricultural community. However, it was not uncommon to see barber shops with one or two barbers and six or eight chairs. I understand you could rent the chairs, establishing yourself as officially "employed" for immigration purposes and then seek actual employment at factories and elsewhere.



Trenton Barber Shop

Another business of critical importance to the early Italian community was real estate. As the Italian immigrant population grew the issue quickly arose that housing availability was limited. Often the limited housing inventory was a result of reluctance to rent to "foreigners". Italians

pulled their resources to purchase homes for the purpose of renting, thus assuring access to homes, especially in the vicinity of their workplaces. This resolution to the housing crisis eventually “created” the predominance of Italians in certain parts of south Trenton and Chambersburg.

1886 A Turning Point in the Trenton Emigration Story

When you consider that the first five years of the 1880’s saw the number of Italian immigrants to the U.S. equal to the total number that had come in the thirty years prior, it is not surprising that Italian immigration came under heightened and increasingly negative scrutiny from anti-immigrant factions. This negative shift began to be noticed around 1885 in Trenton as well.

Probably the most impactful shift to Trenton’s Basilicata/Italian “early” immigrant community occurred in 1886. The Franciscan mission to the U.S. had come from the Order’s main Province in Italy in 1856. They were a “mission” group meant to start a “new” Province chapter and seminary in Buffalo N.Y. The missionary priest themselves remained affiliated with their original Italian Province. Essentially, in 1886 the Buffalo Province had grown, with “American” vocations of Irish/German ethnic seminarians and priests. The administration of the Buffalo Province had shifted in ideology to an “American” Catholic culture. A divide resulted which left the remaining original Italian Franciscans no longer dominant in administration or perceived in line with the “American” vision of the Buffalo Province. This occurred just as the Italian immigration was about to explode and before America perceived the enormous migration from Italy, southern Europe and eastern Europe that was about to occur. As the Vatican was closer to the European source of the migration it recognized that the spiritual/cultural needs of the increasing Italian emigrant Catholic population was not being adequately addressed by “American” English speaking Catholicism. In 1886 Pope Leo XIII authorized Cardinal Scalabrini to begin efforts to address the inadequacies of cultural religious support by sending more Italian clergy to America. Specifically, these priests and nuns were to help with the needs of this underserved Italian immigrant population which remained devoted to their “old world” customs, rituals and traditional forms of worship.

What occurred in Trenton was that the Italian Franciscan priests who had originally founded Our Lady of Lourdes Parish were removed, and that group detached from the Buffalo Province. This included first assistant, Fr. Domenic Marzetti. They were replaced by “American” non-Italian Franciscan priests from the Buffalo Province, who were mostly of Irish and German ethnicity. While this move reflected the then predominant Chambersburg parish population it did not prepare for the ethnic changes that were about to come. This ethnic and administrative transfer of clergy marked a change in Provincial politics that included the Chambersburg parish name changing from Our Lady of Lourdes to Immaculate Conception Parish. Of the original Italian priests only Fr. Jachetti remained for another six years in the Trenton parish. However, he no longer was the pastor. Instead, his duties were reduced to overseeing the construction of the physical Church being built on the Chestnut Ave site. Fr. Jachetti would successfully oversee the

construction of the Church from 1886 until its completion in 1892. At which time he was removed from the parish and reassigned as first assistant to Fr. Marzetti who had started, the predominately Italian (Genoese) parish of St. Francis in Hoboken N.J. in 1888.

As a result of the transfer of Fr. Jachetti in 1892, the small Trenton Italian community, at that time of about 1,200, no longer had access to religious services in their native language at Immaculate Conception Church. In fact, shortly after Fr. Jachetti's departure the Italian community's religious services became isolated from the main body of the congregation. Access to service at the Church for Italians was directed to the basement area. This was a pattern that early Italian Catholics experienced in a number of parishes, which gave rise to the term "basement Catholics". In response to this situation the Trenton Basilicata community began celebrating their patronal feast by travelling to St. Joachim's parish, a Scalabrini Italian national parish, in N.Y.C.

(Note: The incorporation of St. Francis parish in 1888, as an Italian national parish in Hoboken occurred in the same year as the incorporation of the parish of the Most Precious Blood in the Five Points section of N.Y.C. This was a year before the incorporation (1889) of St. Joachim's Italian-national parish also in the Five Points section of N.Y.C. The newly formed N.Y.C., St. Joachim's parish was the first parish that Mother Cabrini was assigned under the direction of Cardinal Scalabrini in 1889. Fr. Jachetti would remain at St. Francis parish as Fr. Marzetti's first assistant from 1892-1894 at which time he was recalled to Italy. There was a pattern in American Catholicism in the late 1800's where Italian priests who aggressively advocated for Italian immigrants were often sent back to Italy. This happened to Cabrini initially as well.

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Fr. Marzetti would remain the first pastor of St. Francis parish from 1888 thru to Fr. Marzetti's death at age 60 in 1902. In a touch of irony, Fr. Marzetti was buried from St. Francis Church in Hoboken but was the only member of the original founding Italian Franciscan priests of Our Lady of Lourdes parish to be buried in Our Lady of Lourdes cemetery in Hamilton Twp N.J. Fr. Marzetti's passing and burial in 1902 occurred in the same year as Trenton's first Italian-national parish, St. Jochim's, was established in the Chambersburg section of the city. The name selected was not a coincidence. This Italian national church was built only three blocks from Immaculate Conception Church which the Italian Franciscans had built. The selection of the name of the first Italian national Church in Trenton as St. Joachim was demanded by the Trenton Basilicata community. The nature of how all of this came about will be discussed in Part 4 "C". As an additional comment, no monument or dedication plaque acknowledging the efforts of the early Italian Franciscans to the construction of Immaculate Conception Church was erected until 2005. That acknowledgement of Fr. Jachetti efforts was finally installed by Fr. Jeffrey Lee upon his appointment as first pastor of the newly consolidated parishes of St. Joachim's and Immaculate Conception. The consolidated parishes are now known as Our Lady of the Angels parish).

Formal Italian Organizations and Businesses in Late 19 Century Trenton

Italians, from the outset showed a strong interest in private entrepreneurship. They sought out ways to open doors which were often closed to them. They worked diligently to network in the larger citywide community. Around 1886 they formed a business chapter within the Oddfellows Lodge system which they named the Garibaldi Chapter. The San Felese Society of N.J considers this founding as our original attempt at formal organizational recognition. Our society retains the original voting box from the organization complete with the white and black balls used for casting ballots.

According to the research done by Erasmo Ciccolella, in 1885 the Trenton business directory was already listing several businesses owned and operated by Italians in the city. Among the first businesses were barber shops, shoe repair, and masonry contractors. By 1890 the directory was showing multiple businesses of the type above and, in addition, there were bakers, confectionery shops, and a music teacher listed. The music teacher, Vito DeLorenzo formed Trenton's first Italian orchestra around this time. (This band was the featured group that played at the first Trenton Columbus' day celebration in October 1892. This first Columbus Day celebration was declared a "national" holiday by the President of the United States and marked the 400th anniversary of Columbus' voyage. The local Trenton celebration was organized in part under the direction of Fr. Jachetti as one of the last acts of his time in Trenton. This first ever National celebration was instituted to reduce political tensions between the U.S. and Italy caused by the vigilante lynching of eleven innocent Italian immigrants in New Orleans earlier that year. That event both shocked and angered the Italian Republic and the Italian-American immigrant community. The lynching was an act of pure prejudice against the resident Italian minority. It constituted an unprecedented vile act and the largest vigilante lynching in U.S. history.)

By 1895 the Trenton business directory continued to show multiples of the type of Italian owned and operated businesses mentioned above with more continuing to sprout up. In addition, there were newly added butchers, cigar sellers, cigar makers, fruit dealers, grocers, saloons, ice cream parlors, junk dealers, and newsstands. Thanks to earlier researchers, the names of the owners and addresses of the businesses reported in the directories are readily available.

To these businesses the records also indicate the arrival of Italian trained doctors and midwives to service the community, meaning local inhabitants no longer had to travel to find Italian speaking medical care.

However, the late 1880's and 1890's continued to demonstrate challenges to the community stemming from prejudices based on race, ethnicity, religion, economic, social and educational class perceptions against the Italian community. For example, politically the community was shut out of participation in major party organizations. Since most of the early Italian immigrants favored the Republican party as the more "progressive" of the major parties, it is to that party that the community turned its attention. Initially unable to be accepted as active members in the local Republican party organization, they simply formed the Italian Republican Club in 1893. A key member of the club was Vito Dileo who had emigrated from Basilicata in the early 1880's

and had been made a foreman at the Roebling Company in Trenton in 1892. Through his efforts and those of other members of the club the community began organizing “block” voting. As their voting numbers grew, they started getting political, business, and religious organizational attention. As their numbers kept increasing, they began to affect election outcomes, and later began to place successful candidates. Eventually, there was no choice but to welcome the community into the mainstream of the political parties. The local Italian Democratic Party was organized in Trenton in 1899.

Part 4C will continue the early development of the community picking up in 1900 thru 1911.



Photograph of the grave marker of Fr. Domenic Marzetti in the old section of Our Lady of Lourdes Cemetery.