

# **19<sup>th</sup> Century Basilicata Emigration: A Fratellanza & Sorellanza Based Society**

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## **Part 5B of 6: The Adaptation and Transport of Sorellanza Structure to America**

### **Introduction: Goal Driven Sorellanza Organizations**

In Part 5A, I traced some of the background conditions that helped create an unusual level of progressive social independence among Basilicata women in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. This independence, and necessary self-reliance was conditioned by, among other things, the long absences from the community of emigrating men. Severe government oppression forced conditions of social, political and economic isolation on the region. This in turn, forced unprecedented migration, initially of the men, in response. Among the women left behind a type of “practical feminism” developed to support community survival. The continuous emigration of large numbers of Basilicata’s overall population started in the 1850’s and accelerated, uninterrupted thru 1930. The level of social independence that the women of Basilicata achieved, because of the unique conditions in the region, were quite unusual in 19<sup>th</sup> century Italy. Once that social independence was firmly established, its’ spirit, naturally, was transported as women joined the emigration to foreign lands.

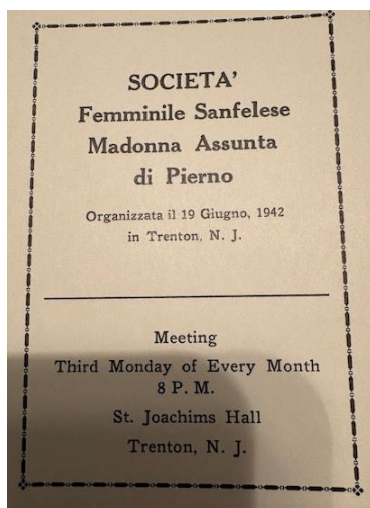
In the last article, I began to provide examples of how these women within the early Basilicata-American community began to create their own gender-based organizations. These organizations were formed to address what women determined were the special needs in the community. Collectively, once the women identified a need, they would develop individual or group action plans to resolve that need. Culturally, most Basilicata women are very private. In the early phases of Italian American community, they generally organized discreetly around singular tasks. Their sense of privacy often made it appear as if there was no umbrella organization or collective purpose directing the efforts. As a result, much of what the women’s organizations accomplished, as a group, has gone unreported. It is time, to bring some of their many contributions to light. My only regret is that it would take a much longer article to do justice to the many individual stories of lives that they touched by their efforts.

### **Basilicata Women and the Church**

The Catholic Church has always played an important role in the spiritual well-being of the Italian community. However, late 19<sup>th</sup> century Italian emigres often found that their regional Italian Catholic traditions and practices were considered foreign and unwelcome in America’s established Catholic parishes. This sense of not belonging gave rise to the term “basement” Catholics. This term expressed the experience of these emigrants, who were often directed to the basement of the church for services.

To address this alienation of newly arriving immigrant Catholics, Pope Leo XIII established the concept of “national” churches. Within this concept, the assigned Italian ethnic clergy were charged to provide centers where the traditions of faith and Italian culture could be celebrated, while the community transitioned into American culture.

Many of the community women’s groups representing old world regional religious customs and practices were invited to meet in those parish churches to pursue and preserve regional Italian traditions. These women’s groups were referred to as “altar” societies. This term arose as the regional groups would take on the responsibility of decorating Church side altars honoring patronal saints on that saint’s feast day. These church centered groups frequently provided valuable private “bonding” space for women where they could gather to share concerns or generate mutual support.



A membership card from St. Joachim’s Church in Trenton (left) of the Basilicata “Societa Femminile Sanfelese Madonna di Pierno”. This was a women’s group, one of the Italian regionally based groups in the community specifically formed during World War II as a sign of devotion and prayer to patronal saints for protection of the many family members in U.S. military service.

The “national” parishes also provided safe places where Italian clergy could provide resources, consultation, and guidance to community organizations and individuals. The clergy, male and female, in early Italian American communities provided spiritual counsel and just as important, societal counselling on how to work within American bureaucracy. The clergy often assumed important

roles for the emigrant community as liaison advocates, mediators, and activists to the greater American establishment.

I indicated in the last article, in 1889 with the founding of St. Joachim’s parish in N.Y.C. and in 1902 with the founding of St. Joachim’s parish in Trenton, there immediately followed formally incorporated Basilicata based fraternal societies. These societies functioned as focal points for physical/financial support of those religious institutions, and as support for the basic needs of the community. While those “societies” appear in formal documentation to be primarily “male” in fact, there were associated “female” organizations present and at work as well.

### **Religious Orders of Women and their Role within the Emigrant Community**

There is an interesting pattern in the way Italian clergy approached emigrant, “community building” in 19<sup>th</sup> century America. In that pattern the first to arrive are the priests who essentially are the C.E.O.’s of the newly forming parish corporations. Their initial task was literally to establish the bricks and mortar of the local parish Church, establish its financing by working with

the local community, and to provide sacramental access for the congregation. Their efforts were then quickly augmented by religious Orders of nuns.

In each early established emigrant parish, education, especially primary education for the young, became a high priority of the clergy. The clergy considered education one of the most important factors in achieving the successful transition of emigrants into American culture. Religious women's organizations were the key to the development of a robust American primary parochial school system. Both Franciscan Provincial leader, Fr. Pamphili in Upstate New York, and Bishop Neumann of Philadelphia established Franciscan based "mother" houses/convents, in the 1850's. This was done to greatly supplement and extend their religious and educational outreach.

In Trenton's case Franciscan priest Fr. Jachetti was originally installed by New Jersey's Bishop James Bayley as pastor in the predominantly ethnic German parish of St. Francis in 1869. German speaking Franciscan nuns from Philadelphia joined him at St. Francis within the year to take up teaching duties at St. Francis elementary school. That order of religious nuns had an established tradition of working with the poor and sick. In Philadelphia the Order, in addition to teaching duties, focused its energies on establishing hospitals starting in the 1850's. In Trenton while providing service as teachers they quickly organized, raised funds and directed the building of Trenton's first hospital St. Francis in 1874. Once the hospital was built, they provided medical services to the community as well as senior care thru the hospital's charter. The activism of the nuns, both as teachers and caregivers often put them in unique contact with the emigrant populations, taking them directly into family's lives and homes.

In New York's St. Joachim's Italian national parish, the Scalabrini priests' role was quickly augmented in 1889 by the arrival of Scalabrini Italian nuns led by Sr. Cabrini. Here too the nuns first established as a priority, a small elementary school, and then expanded their role in the community aiding the poor, orphans, etc. The extraordinary scope of the community activism accomplished in America by Mother Cabrini and her religious companions often eclipsed the activism of individual priests and bishops throughout her career.

However, the prioritization of providing primary educational opportunities in these early Italian emigrant communities remained a dedicated constant. That commitment is reflected in that the school buildings constructed were often larger and as expensive to build as the Churches. The expense of providing these educational spaces resulted in substantial additional debt burden for the start-up parishes. What was recognized by the clergy was that the American public school system was not prepared to handle large numbers of non-English speaking emigrant children. In addition, the established political structure of the poor urban communities was not focused on providing, as a priority, the resources needed. This concern is best illustrated in the reference summary to two letters, from the early 1900's, authored by Fr. Jannuzzi one of the early pastors of St. Joachim's Church N.Y.C. The summary reference is contained in the archives of the Church and in relevant part defends his position for the need to expand parochial school opportunity in the parish. The summary notes reflect what Fr. Jannuzzi stated in his letters,

“that children of Italian parentage could go only half the time to public schools, and that there were within the parish 6,000 Italian children who needed elementary school training.” The City of New York did not have a place for them and turned them away to wander in the streets. To remedy this sad situation, Fr. Jannuzzi, decided to build a new church of St. Joachim’s, with a school, capable of accommodating 1,600 children.

Fr. Jannuzzi’s resolve to expand the commitment to educational outreach in such a poor, start-up parish to so large a group, shows remarkable clerical resolve.

Italian nuns initially arriving in America to assume teaching duties often were not English speaking. Anxious to get started, they initially relied on women within the Italian community who were bilingual for help. This was certainly true in the Basilicata-based parishes where emigration had begun as early as the 1850’s. By the time the Italian national parishes began to be formed there existed several Italian women emigrants who had lived within the community for decades. This group of bilingual emigrant women, young American-born women, and girls provided an informal female support group to aid the nuns in their work. The willingness of the women of the community to organize and “volunteer” this type of support was critical. Young women and girls would stand in as volunteer teachers’ aides for translation of school lessons. This was important as many of the young children of emigrants spoke either only rural dialects or had been discouraged from speaking Italian at home. English became their only language. Many of these young women became remarkable teachers in their own right due to the training and association with the religious teachers. Bilingual women and girls would also accompany the nuns out in the community when they did home visits. The young women and girls knew the specific circumstances of the community’s residents and could provide insight as to family or individual needs. The mixed ethnic neighborhoods in which they travelled also had many non-Italian residents and the nuns relied on the local women to help them navigate that community as well. In Trenton, as an example, the nuns would make spiritual support visits to various public social service facilities such as the “home for unwed mothers”. For those visits, I was told, they would be accompanied by bilingual girls from the community in order to facilitate communication between the nuns, the non- Italian speaking program administrators and the personnel at the facility. The community network of young bilingual women was an important element of community success. One outgrowth of the association between these young bilingual women and the nuns was that the women became literate in “proper” Italian. This provided them with the skill to serve a largely illiterate adult emigrant population. I can remember some of these women being approached by emigres who needed to communicate with officials in Italy requesting documents or reading documents, etc. They regularly volunteered those correspondence skills.

### **The Trenton Italian National Parish**

In Trenton this same Italian national parish developmental pattern repeated, except at a slightly slower and later pace. Trenton’s St. Joachim’s parish began to be proposed around 1899 when the



Fr. Aloysius Pozzi

then bishop of the Diocese recognized the growing need for the resources associated with an Italian national parish. In 1901 Fr. Pozzi, was appointed by the bishop as first pastor of the proposed Italian national parish. Fr. Pozzi was himself a recent 1897 emigrant to America from Italy.

(Note: In terms of the regional make-up of the Italian community in Trenton, Basilicata emigres made up almost all of the community between 1862 and 1885. After 1885 the community became more regionally diverse, but majority Basilicata, until about 1900. After 1900, the Basilicata element became a minority as a result of the massive emigration which flowed from other regions of Italy.

However, the Basilicata element was the most “Americanized” as it was already several generations in residence in the city by 1900. Therefore, Basilicata residents

filled many of the bilingual needs of the community in those early years).

Initially, religious Services for the new Italian national parish were conducted at Centennial Hall at the corner of Hudson and Genesee Streets. Fr. Pozzi determined to build a new Church within two years. His determination to do so was resisted by the non-Italian majority of residents in Chambersburg. Many of these residents did not want to encourage either additional Italian migration to the city, or the addition of another Catholic church. Nevertheless, Fr. Pozzi was able to raise the funds and secure a site central to the greatest concentration of Italian emigrants in the city. The cornerstone of the church was laid on Butler Street on August 15, 1903, the feast of the Assumption. Construction of the Church was completed in 1904. The total cost of the Church was \$27,000 with an additional cost of \$1,800 for the rectory. There was a major dedication ceremony, and a parade of several thousand residents which marched from the Cathedral in the city center to the Chambersburg building site when the Church was completed. Most of the Italian organizations of the community participated in the parade and Gaetano Frascella was selected Grand Marshall.

In addition to the plan for construction of a modest church, Fr. Pozzi’s ambition was to build a large elementary school to support the education of the growing number of emigrant and native-born American children of the parish. Fr. Pozzi was given permission by the Diocese to build the school in 1908. The school construction was completed in 1909 at a cost of \$31,000. Again, the emphasis on the priority of education is reflected in that the cost of building the school was greater than the expense of building the modest Church. Fr. Pozzi, like those priests who came before him, recognized the Italian emigrant youth were not getting adequate educational access in the public schools. In 1910 Fr. Pozzi personally went to Rome seeking help in finding religious teachers willing to emigrate. This appeal would eventually be filled with a Papal

Blessing and the 1910 arrival of five sisters of the Order of religious Teachers Filippini, an Italian Teaching Order originally founded as such by St. Lucia Filippini in 1692.



Photo of original interior of St. Joachim's Church Trenton, N.J.

## Education and its Importance in the Italian Emigrant Community

Many narratives on Italian immigration note that most early 20<sup>th</sup> century Italian emigrants, especially from southern Italy who made up 80% after 1890, were essentially illiterate at the time of arrival. Some imply from this fact that southern Italians by culture or history were always this way. This is not the case. The late 19<sup>th</sup> century literacy affliction of southern Italians was largely the result of a post-unification, 1861 systematic dismantling of southern Italy's long-standing parochial based primary educational system. The dismantling of the parochial system was followed by the failure of the unified government to adequately fund and staff a replacement secular system. In just two late 19<sup>th</sup> century generations, southern Italy went from having the highest literacy rate in Italy to a condition of systemic general illiteracy.



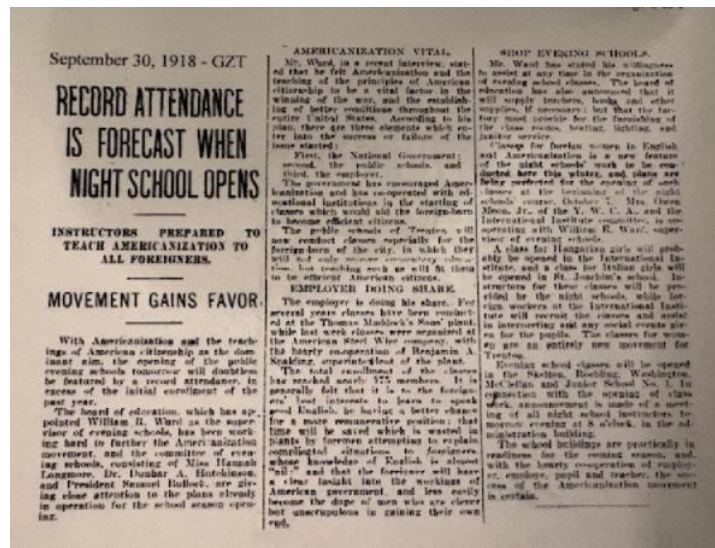
Original Five Emigrant Nuns of the Filippini Order, and Mother General of the Order Rosa Leone

It needs to be emphasized that southern Italians have always valued education, including a tradition of higher education. Salerno for example, was the site of Pythagoras' school of mathematics in the era of Greater Greece. From 100 B.C until 500 A.D Salerno was the "Mayo" clinic/ medical training center of the Western Roman world. The first university established in western Europe at the end of the "dark ages" was the University of Salerno. The structure of the University of Salerno became the model for all of the early

universities of Europe. As late as the time of unification, the University of Naples was one of the finest and most progressive universities in all of Italy. Southern Italy has a multi-millennia deep history of educational achievement and excellence.

So, when Italians began to emigrate in mass, a desire to renew that educational achievement and provide access for their children was very much on their minds. Education was something that they were willing to sacrifice to attain. However, their poverty, large numbers, and lack of language skills made access and success in the American public educational system difficult. The American educational system was ill-prepared and slow to adjust to the demands. In the public sector you do not see significant public sector investment in the education of either emigrant children or adults until around 1916 -1918. About this time there suddenly appear many newspaper articles announcing new and “innovative” public programs/resources emphasizing teaching English to both children and adult emigrants in the community. In Trenton for example, night school class resources at the city’s high school, Y.M.C.A. and women’s classes all began around the same time. The sudden opening of the opportunity received very wide support within the Italian community.

I would note that within the community the primary motivation for attendance was the understanding that learning English would aid them in advancement in work situations. The motivation for society’s investment, on the other hand, appears to be to promote “Americanization”. Critically, I must mention that these programs were hastily assembled and seem to have attained some urgency as World War I approached. As America drew closer to entering the conflict Americanization of these large emigrant communities took on increased value to society. There is an oft-cited statistic that of the 12-14 million U.S service personnel in World War II, one in ten were either Italian-born or first-generation Italian American. An incredibly remarkable statistic considering Italians represented only about 5% of the U.S. population. The military service of Italian Americans was a significant contribution toward American victory in the war. What is overlooked is that of the roughly 4.8 million Americans that served in World War I over 6% were also either Italian-born or first-generation Italian Americans. This at a time when only about 3% of the U.S. population was of Italian descent. So, it was apparent as early as World War I that newly arriving emigrants were needed



Copy of newspaper article from September 1918 regarding educational programs being newly offered with attendance doubling from 1917 numbers

not only as cheap labor, but to fill a significant portion of our military reserve. With that realization came the acknowledged need for Americanization and English proficiency. (Note: From family stories told by my American born World War I veteran grandfather, bilingual services were heavily called upon for instruction especially in basic training as many Italian emigrant recruits couldn't read or speak English).

Once the public sector recognized the need for "Americanization," an important component that allowed the system to develop was again the availability of bilingual teachers, primarily women trained to teach in the elementary grades. In Trenton many came out of the Basilicata element of the Italian American community. In the publication "History of Italians in Trenton" published in 1929 there was a list of some of those earliest Italian women who taught in the public schools. The list of recorded names is as follows;

"Florence Camera, Lena Rimo, Helen D'Aquilli, Louise D'Aquilli, Jennie Lanza, Mary Moretti, Angelina Terito, Lucia Aquaviva, Teresa Ronca, Catherina Dileo, Philomina Graziano, Elvira Vittoritto, Phillie Gilbert, Lucy Dileo, Eleanor Cicatelli, Mary De Angelo, Katherina Panero Scalia, Ezia Parnazza, and Mary Arzenti. Many of these women represent a first generation of American born Basilicata descent. That list includes Katherina Panero Scalia the American born, Basilicata mother of the late Supreme Court Justice Anton Scalia"

Basilicata women, following in a long tradition of independent action and service to the community, were quick to acquire training and become employed in additional fields including medicine, art, government and business. One Basilicata women who I would hold out as an example, is Carmella Santamano Radice Frascella who I introduced in Part 5 A. She was Trenton's principal midwife in the Italian community from 1890-1930. In addition, to assisting in delivering over 3,000 babies and providing, at cost, supplemental fresh farm produce to nursing mothers, Carmella found time to manage several residential rental properties. She also negotiated and held substantial garbage collection contracts with the City of Trenton for several decades up until her death in the 1930's. Those contracts required her to maintain and manage teams of wagons, horses and drivers. It also required that she compete and stand on equal footing in a male dominated industry. Apparently, this five-foot Basilicata woman was more than up to the challenge.

### **Preservers of the Culture**

It is well known that mother and grandmother figures play an important role in traditional Italian families. Often that role is expressed in the limited context of the extended family and home setting. I want to convey in these articles that the women of the Basilicata community, as I knew them, were much more dynamic and expansive in their community roles. They had direct influence and impact far beyond the kitchen table. They were more than capable of rolling up their sleeves and doing the necessary as the times demanded. I would also say that if you got in their way, that was going to be your problem.

Regarding the preservation of our cultural heritage, I have to acknowledge that more than half of the oral histories that I have been privy to hearing or recording have come from Basilicata women. In addition, I frequently refer to gathered original source materials in my articles that were provided to me and preserved primarily by women. I credit the women of the community with carrying the torch of Basilicata's culture. Further, it was largely thru the community of women that the culture was passed along in educating our children and grandchildren.

One example of how the women of the community passed the heritage messaging along was a picture they would show. The picture showed a group of young Basilicata women who at the turn of the century produced skits and performed costumed plays in the community. The skit depicted in the photo was designed for the retelling of the story of the ancestral groups' troubled 19<sup>th</sup> century Italian past and early emigration experience. I was shown the photo by many of the women, who are in the photo. They would then use the photo to retell the heritage story behind the skit. While these women were always proud to be Americans they believed that remembering their roots and history helped determine the character of who they were.



Trenton community Basilicata women's history play performed around 1916. All of the women in this photograph were American born between 1880 and 1902.

Basilicata women did range in their support beyond their regional ethnicity. This is especially true as the community became more regionally diverse. They supported many Italian community general causes, as well as, causes and organizations that supported what they determined beneficial activities. Below is a photo of a group of Trenton Italian-American women identified

in a local newspaper clipping as members of a local chapter of a “National” Italian American group.



Gathering of Trenton’s chapter of the national Italian organization “Ordine Figli D’Italia” in 1923.

I recognize some of the women in the photograph, some of the older women in the front row were born in Basilicata in the 1850’s and 1860’s. They were part of the Trenton Italian community at its earliest beginnings when the total community numbered only a few dozen. There was a lot of history in that front row.

### **Leadership, Respect and Dignity within the Sorellanza: The Essence of Who they Were**

As I discussed above, women of the Basilicata community had a tradition of feminine collective association and support. That implies they also had a tradition of internal leadership. Leadership took many forms, formal and informal, depending on the circumstances. From what I observed it

often was fluid and was guided by the ability to successfully act not from social status or titles. At least not titles that you would easily recognize.

Italian culture seems to have a propensity for using certain common words or phrases in a context that conveys a vastly more significant/different meaning than the literal meaning you might expect. Listening closely to some of the conversations of Basilicata women, my grandmother's generation, I picked up on the fact that they would use one such phrase in a very specific context. First, I only heard the phrase when they attached it to a young woman, a woman just on the verge of adulthood. Second, it was used sparingly and was said about only a few young women. From what I came to understand the phrase was meant to convey qualities of a women specifically leadership, respect and dignity that they admired.

The older generation of women, of course, had a close and lifetime involvement in upbringing and the education of their daughters and granddaughters. I think they accepted that the later generations were different, influenced by different times and by American culture and experiences. However, in private conversations the older women nevertheless assessed the quality of the younger women of the community, especially as they approached young adulthood, using this one traditional metric. Those women they assessed as having the potential to be the bedrock of the next generation. The first time I heard the phrase applied, I had no idea what was meant because I did not understand the historic context, of what they were saying. I was thinking in the present, and the phrase had no relevance to immediate circumstances.

The phrase that the older women when they were extremely impressed by the character of a young woman was; "SHE WILL SAVE THE FAMILY". Of course, in using this phrase they didn't mean to imply that a particular young woman's family was in danger or would ever be in danger. Instead, they were expressing that, if put to the extreme tests that life sometimes presents, this young woman had the internal fortitude, intelligence, perseverance, commitment to step-up and to succeed in saving her family, community, etc. They were saying this was a woman, resourceful enough to lead, someone to be respected and on whom you could depend. I think, given the regional history of 19<sup>th</sup> century Basilicata women, you can readily understand how they came up with that phrase. I also think it neatly sums up 19<sup>th</sup> century Basilicata feminism.

In Part 6 of this series, I intend to go a little off track and for fun write about how three 19<sup>th</sup> century young men named, Paulo, Donato and Vito, of Basilicata heritage, by working together contributed to changing American professional boxing in the late 19<sup>th</sup>, early 20<sup>th</sup> century.