

A Brief History

of the

**ITALIAN
AMERICANS**

of

Worcester, Massachusetts

from

1860

to

1978

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When I was a young man, the Rev. Msgr. Gioacchino Maffei, the former pastor of Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church, asked me several times to translate a booklet he had written in Italian on the Italo-American population. For lack of time, I never yielded to his requests. I have felt guilty ever since. Now, in honor of him, and also because I would like to leave a brief historical sketch of the people with whom I grew up, and whom I love, I would like to attempt a brief history of the life of the Italo-Americans of this city of Worcester.

Let me tell you at the outset, it will not be an exhaustive history of the Italians of Worcester. I have neither the time nor the ability to do that. My duty is to foster the spiritual and moral life of the six thousand souls who belong to this parish of Mount Carmel, and that takes up most of my time. Yet, something in me spurs me to sit down and to start writing, confiding in the Lord. What comes, comes.

My life has been intertwined with the dear people of Italian origin of this city since the day I was born in 1911. I have loved, and love, these people; and wish to see them grow socially and politically, as well as morally and spiritually. That is the main reason why I am writing this brief history. I hope that others, after me, will be inspired to take up their pen, and write a complete history of these people.

As I grew up in this city, there were many Italian names that I would hear, and they always evoked a sense of admiration in me.

They were beautiful names, and I would always pray in my heart that their owners might rise to the moral and intellectual excellence of the really great Italians of Italy, like Michelangelo, Dante, Verdi, St. Catherine of, Siena and St. Francis of Assisi, Marconi, and many others. Some of them did in their modest way. A few left some scars, but nothing more prominent than in people of other groups.

My father, Salvatore Capuano, came here in 1907. He is now 94 years old, and is still alive and strong. One of his humorous sayings is: "I am no young buck, you know." This always brings a smile to those who hear it. He came here in 1907, from Caserta, near Naples in Italy. He met my mother, Paolina Mazzarella, and married her in Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church, where I was baptized.

Like all other poor Italians coming to this country for economic reasons, my father worked as a humble laborer at Nortons, and later at Graton and Knights. He worked hard and honestly. His income was modest. We six children grew up like so many, with only the basic things needed to live. But our home was filled with love and understanding. That was infinitely more precious than having wall-to-wall carpeting and two cars in the garage?

At the turn of the century, there were not too many Italians in this city. The first few began to arrive about 1860. Dr. Carlo Benaglia, still living, and in his eighties, was born here in Worcester of parents who came from Genova, Italy.

Another is Mrs. Mary Ricciardi, living at 85 Merrifield Street. Her father arrived in Worcester in 1875. She was born 87 years ago right here, and is the mother of many children, well known to us. Her maiden name was DeFalco. Her brother, Vincenzo, founded the cement business that still bears his name.

Perhaps it will help you to understand how the emigration of Italians from Italy grew by showing you the official count taken from the United States Emigration Office. This is the number who arrived at New York City:

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|--------------|--------|--------------|-----------|
| 1851 to 1860 | 9,231 | 1881 to 1890 | 307,309 |
| 1861 to 1870 | 11,728 | 1891 to 1900 | 651,890 |
| 1871 to 1880 | 55,759 | 1901 to 1908 | 1,647,102 |

Most of these made their homes with relatives and friends in New York itself, New Jersey, and other eastern cities, including Boston. From Boston some came to Worcester and established themselves along Shrewsbury Street.

Let me say a word about Shrewsbury Street. This was, and will forever be, the heart of the Italian community of Worcester. The very name is integral with the Italian Community. Anyone in Worcester who thinks of the Italians, instinctively thinks of Shrewsbury Street.

An effort was being made last year to change the name from Shrewsbury Street to Columbia Parkway, to honor the illustrious Discoverer of our Country, Christopher Columbus.

The effort was dropped, when it was realized that the name itself is the very heart of the Italian community, and that it would be very costly legally and socially to change the name. It is the main artery from the neighboring town of Shrewsbury, and leads into the heart of downtown Worcester.

If Shrewsbury Street is the heart, there are many other adjoining streets which have become enshrined in the Italian colony. They are Plum Street, Adams Street, Shamrock Street, Gage Street, Muskego Street, Suffolk Street, Plantation Street, only to mention a few. It was in homes on these and adjoining streets, that the first Italians lived and raised their families.

In those early days, that were often lonely, in order to encourage one another, the Italians formed various societies. The first was the Christopher Columbus Lodge, Number 168, Order Sons of Italy. Then came the Giuseppe Mazzini Society, which eventually merged with the Sons of Italy Lodge. Then the San Vitaliano Society, the Biscegliese Societies, one for men and another for women. Worthy of great respect was the Italian American Civic League, which encouraged the members to learn English, and to obtain their citizen's papers.

Those were the civic societies. There were two religious ones, both established about the same time as the parish of Our Lady of Mount Carmel was founded in 1906. The first was La Societa Maria Santissima del Carmine, affectionately known as LE MADRI CRISTIANE, for the women; and the CONGREpA DI MONTE CARMELO, for the men. These two societies were both dissolved in the last five years, for lack of new members.

Only God knows the immense good these civic and religious societies did for those early Italians. There were some modest financial advantages; but the greatest advantage of all was that the members could meet together, talk in their native tongue, and assist one another in their various problems.

Within the pages of this booklet, you will find some pictures. They will help you to obtain a vivid image of the life of those times, how the people looked and dressed. In 1907, Monsignor Maffei wrote a booklet in Italian for the dedication of the renovated Mount Carmel Church, at the corner of Mulberry Street and Eastern Avenue. It had been purchased in 1906 from the Swedish Baptist Community, and in it Mass was celebrated, and the children were taught in the ways of the Lord. Here are the names exactly as they were printed in that booklet. I am publishing them all, so that you might see who some of the Italians of Worcester were in 1907. They helped to found the parish of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, and we owe them a debt of gratitude.

Our fathers and mothers and grandparents came here. They did not know the language. They did not have a lot of world's goods. Unfortunately, their priests did not accompany them from Italy as they arrived. Often, they were met with hostility and misunderstanding. Unfortunately still, a few of them rebelled, and did things which inflicted a scar into the community they were founding. However, little by little, with hard work and patience, and the understanding of some of the other groups, especially the Irish, they prevailed.

Italians are intelligent people. They are not afraid of hard work. They have innate tenacity like the Romans from who they spring. And they are a practical people. The first thing they like to do is, to take care of their family, and to establish a home. As time went on, they began to buy land, and to build modest homes. This, coupled with their honesty and dedicated work in the shops, gave them stability and stature in the entire community.

And this brings me to a point which I wish to emphasize in these pages: the presence of Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church, from which Our Lady of Loreto sprung as a mission in 1956, then final-as a parish in its own right in 1965. If it had not been for the Mount Carmel Parish, things would have been much harder for the early Italians in Worcester.

It will forever be to the honor and the glory of God, Who inspired and permitted the first pastor, the Rev. Msgr. Gioacchino Maffei, to come here, and to rally the Italians around the altar of the Lord - "PRO ARA ET FOCIS," as he used to like to say. He succeeded admirably. First by purchasing the modest church at the corner of Mulberry Street and Eastern Avenue, in 1906, from the Baptist Congregation, and renovating it to say Mass, and to instruct the people until 1928; and then by inspiring the Italians to join together and to donate for the new church building, erected in 1928, at the cost of \$232,000, which was paid in cash. To me, it will always remain a wonder how he, and the dear people who preceded us here in this city, were able, in 1928, to raise that amount of money to erect our magnificent romanesque church, still majestic with its matchless architecture. All I can say is "GOD BLESS THEM." May we, who follow them, appreciate, and do the same.

In 1946, Msgr. Maffei who had served the people for forty years, died. He was succeeded by Monsignor Angelo Carpinella, who remained as pastor until his death in 1957. He came here from St. Anthony Parish in Fitchburg, Mass., when he was 68 years of age. He lived eleven more years, and what he did during those

eleven years was phenomenal. He built the Mount Carmel Educational Center. He built Our Lady of Loreto Church. He was instrumental in founding St. Christopher Church in Greendale, and he gave immense stature to the Italian Community. He died in 1957, and was succeeded by a priest whom he esteemed: by Fr. Erminio Mastroianni, who remained as pastor until 1969. He had the difficult job of paying off some of the big parish debt. During his tenure Bishop Flanagan turned over the former St. Ann Parish to him. At one time, this priest was pastor of three churches--Mount Carmel, Our Lady of Loreto, and St. Ann's--two rectories, and seven priests. His patience and confidence in God were amazing. He was succeeded by the writer of this booklet, who was transferred on July 4, 1969.

In 1916, Msgr. Maffei wrote a booklet on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the founding of Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church. Someone, whose name I do not know, translated it for him, and it was published on November 5, 1916.

Here are the first three paragraphs of that booklet. You will enjoy reading them: **TO THE ITALIAN PEOPLE OF WORCESTER, MASS.**

"My Dear Brethren:

Ten years ago, on this very day and at this same hour, the majority of our people assembled in this church for the first time. A fervid hymn of thanksgiving was then sung to God our Lord. On that day we felt more intensely the throbs of our heart's overflowing with sincere emotion, because our ardent desire was an accomplished fact. We, too, Italians and Catholics, had our church. So that Sunday, November 4, 1906, in which the Church of 'Our Lady of Mt. Carmel' was opened, makes in the history of the Italian colony of Worcester, Mass., a glorious page, unforgettable for you, true sons of your fathers, who always fought 'Pro ara et focus.'

It was a happy day for us. 'In a mist of tears' we received in our church the blessing of our beloved Bishop, Thomas D. Beaven, D.D., who with solemn rite, blessed the new house of God. Going home that day we felt stronger and happier, ready and better to fight the battle of life in a strange land.

Ten years have passed since then, Sunday, November 5th, 1916. Now, as on that day, we are united in this same church to tender our devotion to the Lord, who during those ten years had never ceased to be. Then Msgr. Maffei goes into a description of the cultural background of the first Italians, which does not concern us here. However, the last few paragraphs are of keen interest to us, even today and here they are:

"I invite you all to look at our Italian Colony of Worcester, so you may see what the religion of Jesus Christ has done for us. Ten years ago, when the Italian parish was organized, there were in this City about five thousand Italians, and not more than twenty families were attending one or other of the many Catholic Churches...Today it is different. There are thousands of good Catholics. There are three Masses celebrated in our church every Sunday, and each one is crowded with the faithful. Over five hundred children attend Sunday School every Sunday. The men are united in the sodality of the 'Confraternity of Our Lady of Mount Carmel;' the women under the name of 'Christian Mothers;' the youths in 'Sacred Heart of Jesus,' Holy Infant Jesus;' while the girls gather as the 'Children of Mary.'

During this period many things have been accomplished for the moral and civic welfare of our people, so that the standing of the Italians today is very different from what it was before. They have a fair showing in all the walks of life, and are beginning to be looked upon in their true light. It is consoling to know that in ten years, six hundred and thirteen marriages were contracted, and three thousand one hundred and ninety-five children were baptized. Over a thousand have made their first communion and a good many have received their confirmation. There were many marriages rehabilitated and blessed in this church of God, and many grown children baptized, who might not have been if the Italian church had not been established."

And with that quotation, I bring this modest historical sketch to a close. I hope--and pray--that others after me will rise and list the history of these people more adequately. It is both necessary and good.

I thank God for the privilege of having been born in this city and for having been educated in its schools. I shall be forever grateful to people of other ethnic origins of this city, who were kind to me, to my family, to the Italians in general.

Of the Italians themselves who went before us here in the last one hundred years, I have nothing but admiration. They physically helped to build our streets and ditches. Silently, they worked in the shops, and helped to make our city progressive. They built their homes and paid their taxes. Thousands of their sons fought in the various wars to make our nation safe for democracy, dozens of them paying the supreme sacrifice. Above all, they loved their families, and left a sound example of Christian and moral living to us.

**And today--in 1978--many of their sons and daughters are rising in the cultural, social, political and religious life of the city, on a par with other ethnic groups, for this, may God be praised! And may the children of these sturdy Italians ever realize the heritage that is theirs, be proud of it, and carry on for the moral and spiritual splendor of our beloved Worcester, Massachusetts.
Rev. John J. Capuano**

**This booklet is given to you
as a compliment of the Author.
May God love you always.**

Addenda:

Italians who helped found the parish of Our Lady of Mount Carmel:

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|----------------------|-----------------------|
| Andreuccetti, Maria | Laraia, Gennaro |
| Angurio, Angelo | Lucente, E. Marco |
| Asselta, Giuseppe | Luvisi, Everardo |
| Baiocchi, Maria | Luvisi, Settimo |
| Barone, Carlo | Malva, Rocco |
| Bellomo, Giovannina | Manzi, Luciano |
| Benagha, Pietro | Marione, Giuseppe |
| Bianchi, Angelo | Martocci, Giuseppe |
| Bilangi, Giovanni | Massei, Pilade |
| Booardi, Pietro | Menghini, Elisa |
| Borelli, Enrico | Meringolo, Antonio |
| Bovenzi, Raffaele | Migliore, Vincenzo |
| Buccio, Giuseppe | Monteforte, Salvatore |
| Capuvro, Lorenzo | Nardi, Tommaso |
| Carabio, Giuseppe | Oriani, Ugo |
| Casale, Nicola | Oriente, Amilcare |
| Cherubini, Angelo | Pactula, Margherita |
| Ciaramella, Giovanni | Pagano, Giuseppe |
| Constanzo, Pietro | Peluso, Antonio |
| Cravech, Severino | Pietraraia, Giuseppe |
| Cupolo, Antonio | Polacchi, Carlo |
| Dainiano, Vito | Possidente, Michele |
| Damian, Rocco | Regaglia, Vincenzo |
| D'Anzilio, Antonio | Risso, Lorenzo |
| DeFalco, Giuseppe | Romano, Giuseppe |
| DeFina, Nicola | Rossi, Biagio |
| DeGirolamo, Giuseppe | Salotti, Paolo |
| DeMarco, Giuseppe | Samele, Domenico |
| Favulli, Ernesto | Sargentelli, Alberto |
| Ferrazzano, Giuseppe | Scalzo, Giuseppe |
| Frigoglietti, Donato | Schiavone, Domenico |
| Gambosi, Pacifico | Sighiglia, Teresa |
| Gardena, Francesco | Simonetti, Amos |
| Gerardi, Giuseppe | Tosi, Lamar |
| Gigliotti, Paolo | Trogo, Francesco |
| Giusti, Egisto | Zamarro |
| Gregorio, Giuseppe | |
| Griego, James | |
| Groccia, Gennaro | |
| Jacouzzi, Tommaso | |



OUR LADY OF MOUNT CARMEL PARISH. Taken August 1975!