Italian Immigrants


[Italian immigrant family at Ellis Island](http://loc.gov/pictures/item/97501656/)

It was an Italian who began the story of immigration to America.

When Christopher Columbus set foot on American soil in 1492, he launched a flood of migration that is still in motion, and that transformed the continent completely. Although Italy as a unified nation did not exist until 1861, the Italian peninsula has sent millions of its people to the shores of North America. These new arrivals thought of themselves as Neopolitans, Sicilians, Calabrians, or Syracuseans. They might not have understood each other’s dialects, but on arrival in the United States they became Italian Americans. By the turn of the 20th century, they would be ready to change the continent once more.

***Early Arrivals***




[Italian immigrant family at Ellis Island](http://loc.gov/pictures/item/97501656/)

[Amerigo Vespucci.](http://loc.gov/pictures/item/92520845/)

The Genoese navigator Cristoforo Colombo, known to us now as Columbus, was only the first of many Italian explorers who would come to shape the Western Hemisphere as we know it today. In 1497, the Venetian Giovanni Caboto, or John Cabot, sailed to Newfoundland and became the first European to see the shores of New England. By 1502, the Florentine explorer Amerigo Vespucci had deduced that these new discoveries were part of one great continent. Within a few years, that continent had been given his name--America.

Throughout the colonial and early national periods, immigrants from the Italian peninsula maintained a small but well-established presence in the North American population. Italian craftsmen were renowned the world over, and many traveled to the New World to help build its new institutions, working as sculptors, woodworkers, and glassblowers. Thomas Jefferson had a particular affinity for Italian culture; he recruited Italian stonemasons to work on his home at Monticello, and brought musicians from Italy to form the core of the Marine Band. In addition, he invented his own hand-operated pasta machine, the [designs for which](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mcc:@field(DOCID+@lit(mcc/027%3C/a%3E))) are still in the Library's collections.

Italian immigration continued at a trickle throughout the middle of the 19th century. Although travelers from the peninsula continued to roam the world, most chose to settle in Argentina and Brazil. Between 1820 and 1870, fewer than 25,000 Italian immigrants came to the U.S., mostly from northern Italy. These early arrivals settled in communities all across the country, from the farm towns of New Jersey and the vineyards of California to the ports of San Francisco and New Orleans.

The impact of their contributions can still be seen today. The poet Lorenzo da Ponte built the first opera house in the U.S., became a professor of Italian at Columbia University, and almost single-handedly established Italian opera in the United States. The abolition movement received key support from the prominent Philadelphia rabbi Sabato Morais, who brought a fierce commitment to freedom and human rights from his native Tuscany. Starting in the mid-1850s, painter Constantino Brumidi spent decades creating the paintings and frescoes that adorn the U.S. Capitol, including the spectacular images on the building’s great dome.

***The Great Arrival***


[Italian earthquake refugees
board ship for the U.S., 1909.](http://loc.gov/pictures/item/2002716084/)





Most of this generation of Italian immigrants took their first steps on U.S. soil in a place that has now become a legend—Ellis Island. In the 1880s, they numbered 300,000; in the 1890s, 600,000; in the decade after that, more than two million. By 1920, when immigration began to taper off, more than 4 million Italians had come to the United States, and represented more than 10 percent of the nation’s foreign-born population.

What brought about this dramatic surge in immigration? The causes are complex, and each hopeful individual or family no doubt had a unique story. By the late 19th century, the peninsula of Italy had finally been brought under one flag, but the land and the people were by no means unified. Decades of internal strife had left a legacy of violence, social chaos, and widespread poverty. The peasants in the primarily poor, mostly rural south of Italy and on the island of Sicily had little hope of improving their lot. Diseases and natural disasters swept through the new nation, but its fledgling government was in no condition to bring aid to the people. As transatlantic transportation became more affordable, and as word of American prosperity came via returning immigrants and U.S. recruiters, Italians found it increasingly difficult to resist the call of “L’America”.

This new generation of Italian immigrants was distinctly different in makeup from those that had come before. No longer did the immigrant population consist mostly of Northern Italian artisans and shopkeepers seeking a new market in which to ply their trades. Instead, the vast majority were farmers and laborers looking for a steady source of work—any work. There were a significant number of single men among these immigrants, and many came only to stay a short time. Within five years, between 30 and 50 percent of this generation of immigrants would return home to Italy, where they were known as *ritornati*.

Those who stayed usually remained in close contact with their family in the old country, and worked hard in order to have money to send back home. In 1896, a government commission on Italian immigration estimated that Italian immigrants sent or took home between $4 million and $30 million each year, and that “the marked increase in the wealth of certain sections of Italy can be traced directly to the money earned in the United States.”

***L’Isola dell Lagrime***


[View from Ellis Island.](http://loc.gov/pictures/item/97502760/)







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Ellis Island was founded as a solution to a serious social crisis. New York’s previous immigrant processing station, a decaying fortress called Castle Garden, had become a pit of corruption and theft, where new immigrants had to run a gauntlet of swindlers, pickpockets, and armed robbers before escaping with their freedom and their paperwork. In order to ensure a safe, controlled, and regulated entry process, the federal government took over immigrant processing and erected a set of new, purpose-built facilities on an island in New York Harbor.

The immigration station at Ellis Island represented a new type of government institution and, since its closing in 1932, has become an enduring symbol of the immigrant experience in the United States. During the forty years it operated, Ellis Island saw more than 12 million immigrants pass through its gates, at a rate of up to 5,000 people a day. For many generations of Americans, and for almost all Italian Americans, Ellis Island is the first chapter of their family’s story in the United States.

When the first group of immigrants disembarked on Ellis Island in 1892, they found themselves in the grip of a bewildering, though still orderly, regime of bureaucratic procedures. Newcomers were numbered, sorted, and sent through a series of inspections, where they were checked for physical and mental fitness and for their ability to find work in the U.S. The consequences of failing an eye exam, or of seeming too frail for manual labor, could be devastating; one member of a family could be sent back to Italy, perhaps never to see his or her loved ones again, because of a hint of trachoma or a careless inspector. Although less than 2 percent of Italians were turned away, fear of such a separation led some immigrants to rename Ellis Island *L’Isola dell Lagrime*—the Island of Tears.

Even for those who made their way successfully through the battery of inspections, Ellis Island was generally not a pleasant experience. The regulations were confusing, the crowds disorienting, the officials rushed, and the hubbub of countless competing languages must have been jarring to the nerves. The moment of departure, when successful immigrants boarded ferries for New York City or destinations further west, came as a tremendous relief. As a final step, however, each new arrival had to be entered by name in the island’s official registry book. Because of the rush, the echoing noise of the vast Registry Hall, and many registrars’ unfamiliarity with European languages, some immigrants found themselves leaving with new, shorter, “American” versions of their names—a last, dubious gift from Ellis Island.

***A City of Villages***




[Mulberry Street ca. 1900.](http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/det/item/det1994000092/PP/)

Clam seller



The Italian immigrants who passed the test of Ellis Island went about transforming the city that they found before them. Many previous immigrant groups, such as those from Germany and Scandinavia, had passed through New York City in decades past, but most had regarded the city merely as a way station, and had continued on to settle elsewhere in the country. This generation of Italian immigrants, however, stopped and made their homes there; one third never got past New York City.

They scattered all over the New York region, settling in Brooklyn, the Bronx, and nearby towns in New Jersey. Perhaps the greatest concentration of all, though, was in Manhattan. The streets of Lower Manhattan, particularly parts of Mulberry Street, quickly became heavily Italian in character, with street vendors, store owners, residents and vagrants alike all speaking the same language--or at least a dialect of it.

In part because of the social and political divisions of the Italian peninsula, southern Italian villages tended to be isolated and insular, and new immigrants tended to preserve this isolation in their new country, clustering together in close enclaves. In some cases, the population of a single Italian village ended up living on the same block in New York, or even the same tenement building, and preserved many of the social institutions, habits of worship, grudges, and hierarchies from the old country. In Italy, this spirit of village cohesion was known as *campanilismo*—loyalty to those who live within the sound of the village church bells. In 1899, one visitor observed:

….in the numbered streets of Little Italy uptown, almost every block has its own village of mountain or lowland, and with the village its patron saint, in whose worship or celebration—call it what you will—the particular camp makes reply to the question, “Who is my neighbor?”

Many distinctive events and practices maintained the unity of the village: weddings, feasts, christenings, and funerals. One that often caught the attention of outsiders was the *festa*—a parade celebrating the feast day of a particular village’s patron saint. Hundreds or thousands of residents would follow the image of the saint in a procession through the streets of the neighborhood. The description of one such festa, which was witnessed by New York police commissioner Theodore Roosevelt, appeared in an [article](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/ncps:@field(DOCID+@lit(ABP2287-0058-117))) in *Century* magazine in 1899.

Around the corner came a band of musicians with green cock-feathers in hats set rakishly over fierce, sunburnt faces. A raft of boys walked in front, abreast of two bored policemen, stepping in time to the music. Four men carried a silk-fringed banner with evident pride. Behind them a strange procession toiled along: women with babies at the breast and dragging little children; fat and prosperous padrones carrying their canes like staves of office and authority; young men out for a holiday; old men with lives of hardship and toil written in their halting gait and worn and crooked frames….

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| ***Tenements and Toil***Urban life was often filled with hazards for the new immigrant, and housing could be one of the greatest dangers. At the turn of the century more than half the population of New York City, and most immigrants, lived in tenement houses, narrow, low-rise apartment buildings that were usually grossly overcrowded by their landlords. Cramped, poorly lit, under ventilated, and usually without indoor plumbing, the tenements were hotbeds of vermin and disease, and were frequently swept by cholera, typhus, and tuberculosis. The investigative journalist Jacob Riis, himself a Danish immigrant, launched a public campaign to expose and eradicate the exploitative housing new immigrants were forced to endure.Tenement house, ca. 1890.[Tenement house, ca. 1890.](http://loc.gov/pictures/item/2002710259/)New York City subway, 1905.Italian immigrants doing piecework in their home. New York City, 1912.In a room not thirteen feet either way slept twelve men and women, two or three in bunks set in a sort of alcove, the rest on the floor. A kerosene lamp burned dimly in the fearful atmosphere, probably to guide other and later arrivals to their beds, for it was only just past midnight. A baby’s fretful wail came from an adjoining hall-room, where, in the semi-darkness, three recumbent figures could be made out. The apartment was one of three in two adjoining buildings we had found, within half an hour, similarly crowded. Most of the men were lodgers, who slept there for five cents a spot. --Riis, [How the Other Half Lives, 1889.](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/ncpsbib:@field(DOCID+@lit(AFR7379-0006-71_bib)))For Italians, this way of living came as an enormous shock. In Italy, many rural families had slept in small, cramped houses; however, they spent most of their waking hours out of the house, working, socializing, and taking their meals in the outdoors. In New York, they found themselves confined to a claustrophobic indoor existence, using the same small room for eating, sleeping, and even working. A substantial percentage of immigrant families worked at home performing *piecework*—that is, doing work that paid them by the piece, such as stitching together garments or hand-assembling machinery. In a situation like this, an immigrant woman or child might go days without seeing sunlight.Immigrants’ work places could be as unhealthy as their homes. A substantial number of southern Italian immigrants had only worked as farmers, and were thus qualified only for unskilled, and more dangerous, urban labor. Many Italians went to work on the growing city’s municipal works projects, digging canals, laying paving and gas lines, building bridges, and tunneling out the New York subway system. In 1890, nearly 90 percent of the laborers in New York’s Department of Public Works were Italian immigrants. By no means was all Italian immigrants’ work grim and hazardous. Italians found work throughout the city, in many of the improvised trades that have long been a haven for immigrants, such as shoemaking, masonry, bartending, and barbering. For a time, some observers felt that Italians operated every fruit-vendor’s cart in the city. For many immigrants, though, and especially women and children, work could only be found in sweatshops, the dark, unsafe factories that sprang up around New York. When a fire broke out at the Triangle Shirtwaist factory in 1911, killing 146 workers, nearly half of the victims were young Italian women. |

***Working Across the Country***


[Italian family picking
berries in Delaware, 1910.](http://loc.gov/pictures/item/ncl2004002318/PP/)

Italian Newsboys



Italian Banker

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As the great surge of immigration continued into the 20th century, Italian communities bloomed across the country. As they did so, the Italian immigrants put their hands to a wide variety of work. In San Francisco, home of a longstanding Italian enclave, the new arrivals found their way to the docks for work as fishermen and stevedores. In Appalachia and the mountain West, they went into the pits and mines, digging for coal and ore. Stonemasons who had learned their trade on the rocks and crags of southern Italy worked in the quarries of New England and Indiana. Meanwhile, Italians labored on farms and ranches in every corner of the country, from the cranberry bogs of the northeast to the strawberry beds of Louisiana to the bean fields of California.

One stoneworker in Barre, Vermont, told his [story](http://www.loc.gov/item/wpalh002712) to a WPA oral historian in 1940.

Viuggi, Italy, in the Como district, is where I am born. A good granite center, Viuggi. I am raise' to feel granite, to smell an' know it. My father an' his brother, they work' the stone, too….Funny, here in Barre we got 'bout couple dozen people from my town of Viuggi.

Some Italians seized upon entrepreneurial opportunities in their new home. Italian immigrants in upstate New York formed the Contadina food company in 1918, and Andrea Sbarbaro of Genoa helped establish the California wine industry. In turn-of-the-century San Francisco, a Neapolitan American named A.P. Giannini began offering small loans to his fellow Italians, going door to door to collect interest. Eventually, Giannini’s operation grew until he was forced to rent an office in the North Beach neighborhood, then to buy a building. Today, Giannini’s Banca D’Italia has become one of the world’s largest financial institutions, the Bank of America.

Many Italian immigrants, however, found themselves toiling for low pay in unhealthy working conditions. At the turn of the 20th century, southern Italian immigrants were among the lowest-paid workers in the United States. Child labor was common, and even small children often went to work in factories, mines, and farms, or sold newspapers on city streets.

Many thousands of Italian immigrants found themselves prisoners of the *padrone*, or patron, system of labor. The *padroni* were labor brokers, sometimes immigrants themselves, who recruited Italian immigrants for large employers and then acted as overseers on the work site. In practice, many padroni acted more like slave holders than managers. A padrone often controlled the wages, contracts, and food supply of the immigrants under his authority, and could keep workers on the job for weeks or months beyond their contracts. Some padroni built vast labor empires, keeping thousands of workers confined in locked camps, behind barbed wire fences patrolled by armed guards. The padrone system, despite its many injustices, was not eradicated until the middle of the 20th century.

***Organizing***

Italian immigrants fought against unscrupulous management and unsafe conditions by taking organized action. Because several of the major U.S. unions barred foreign workers from membership for many years, many immigrants formed their own unions, such as the Italian Workers union in Houston, or joined the radical International Workers of the World. Italian union organizers fanned out across the nation, often risking arrest or death for their efforts. Italian workers were active in most of the great labor struggles of the 20th century’s early decades, leading strikes in the Tampa cigar factories, the granite quarries of Vermont, and the textile mills of New England. In 1912, during a bitter textile strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts, the Italian IWW organizers Arturo Giovannitti and Joseph Ettor, along with striker Joseph Caruso, were imprisoned for nearly a year on false murder charges. In the [Ludlow Massacre](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/hawp:@field(NUMBER+@band(codhawp+10060443))) of 1914, when Colorado National Guardsmen attempted to break a miners’ strike by burning down the strikers’ tent village, the two women and eleven children who died in the fire were all Italian immigrants.

***Under Attack***


[“Where the Blame Lies.”](http://loc.gov/pictures/item/97515495/)

Italian Neighborhood



Labor struggles were not the only conflicts Italian immigrants faced. During the years of the great Italian immigration, they also had to confront a wave of virulent prejudice and nativist hostility.

As immigration from Europe and Asia neared its crest in the late 19th century, anti-immigrant sentiment soared along with it. The U.S. was in the grips of an economic depression, and immigrants were blamed for taking American jobs. At the same time, racialist theories circulated in the press, advancing pseudo scientific theories that alleged that “Mediterranean” types were inherently inferior to people of northern European heritage. Drawings and songs caricaturing the new immigrants as childlike, criminal, or subhuman became sadly commonplace. One 1891 cartoon claimed that “If immigration was properly restricted, you would never be troubled with anarchism, socialism, the Mafia and such kindred evils!”

Attacks on Italians were not limited to the printed page, however. From the late 1880s, anti-immigrant societies sprang up around the country, and the Ku Klux Klan saw a spike in membership. Catholic churches and charities were vandalized and burned, and Italians attacked by mobs. In the 1890s alone, more than 20 Italians were lynched.

One of the bloodiest episodes took place in New Orleans in 1891. When the chief of police was found shot to death on the street one night, the mayor blamed “Sicilian gangsters” and rounded up more than 100 Sicilian Americans. Eventually, 19 were put on trial and, as the nation’s Italian Americans watched nervously, were found not guilty for lack of evidence. Before they could be freed, however, a mob of 10,000 people, including many of New Orleans’ most prominent citizens, broke into the jail. They dragged 11 Sicilians from their cells and lynched them, including two men jailed on other offenses. Italians worldwide were outraged, but the U.S. press generally approved of the action. It was the largest single mass lynching in U.S. history.

Anti-immigrant sentiment continued until the 1920s, when severe restrictions on immigration were put into place by the U.S. Congress. When this legislation passed, the great era of Italian immigration came to an end.

***A Century in the Spotlight***


[Italian-American children,
New York City.](http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/owi2001017896/PP/)



[“Rosie”, by
Norman Rockwell.](http://loc.gov/pictures/item/96506211/)

Union Card



As the 20th century moved forward, Italian immigrants moved steadily into the main currents of U.S. society. By the 1920s and 30s, the immigrant generation had begun to see their children grow up as Americans—a process that many immigrants viewed with some ambivalence. The U.S. public school system provided immigrant children with a new language, a new set of patriotic symbols, a school yard immersion in U.S. popular culture, and sometimes even a new Anglicized name. At the same time, though, this process often created a cultural gap between the second, Americanized, generation and their parents, who would always belong, at least in part, to the old country.

Over time, Italian Americans achieved advances in the U.S. workforce. The major labor unions soon opened their doors to immigrant workers, and Italians were able to continue their activism on a much larger scale. As they gained more experience, Italian Americans were able to move into a wider range of careers, and became business owners and managers in greater numbers. Works by Italian-American authors began appearing in bookstores, and the Neapolitan tenor [Enrico Caruso](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/cdn:@field(NUMBER+@band(ichicdn+n072477))) became a best-selling artist among Italians and non-Italians alike. With prosperity came greater political clout, and candidates began currying favor with [Italian-American associations](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/coolbib:@field(NUMBER+@band(cph+3c11741))) as elections drew near.

The coming of World War II saw Italian Americans step permanently into the center of U.S. cultural life. Nearly one million Italian Americans served in the armed forces, about 5 percent of the Italian-American population, and millions more worked in war industries. As with many other immigrant groups, national service brought Italian Americans even greater social mobility, more access to education, and a higher profile in the nation’s popular imagination. According to one account, an Italian-American aircraft worker, Rose Bonavita, became the inspiration for a 20th-century icon, Rosie the Riveter.


[Italian American police officer
in Italian American grocery
store, New York, 1943.](http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/owi2001015627/PP/)

[Enrico Fermi, 1947.](http://loc.gov/pictures/item/98518701/)



From the 1940s on, the children of Italian immigrants could be found in all regions of the U.S., in almost every career and nearly every walk of life. This was especially true in New York City, where Italian American culture soon became a major component of the city’s personality. For many Americans, the city’s longtime mayor, [Fiorello LaGuardia](http://loc.gov/pictures/item/2003652898/), served as an energetic and erudite ambassador both for his city and for his national heritage. For a comprehensive collection of photographs of Italian Americans in the war years, and particularly in New York City, visit the collection [Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Black-and-White Negatives](http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/fsa/) and search for “Italian American.”

With the explosion of mass media after the war, Italian Americans became ubiquitous. Every aspect of show business, politics, science, and art seemed to have a prominent Italian American in its vanguard. [Marlon Brando](http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2004662618/) became the face of a new school of naturalistic acting. [Rocky Marciano](http://loc.gov/pictures/item/92513427/) revolutionized the sport of boxing. Diane Di Prima pioneered the rough poetry and prose of the Beat movement. Enrico Fermi continued his Nobel Prize-winning work on the mysteries of the atom, becoming arguably the greatest physicist alive.


[Frank Sinatra.](http://www.loc.gov/item/gottlieb.07791)



[Joe DiMaggio](http://loc.gov/pictures/item/95522441/), the son of a San Francisco fisherman, led the New York Yankees to nine World Series championships. The crooners [Perry Como](http://www.loc.gov/item/gottlieb.10651) and Dean Martin ruled the airwaves, and Hoboken, New Jersey’s Frank Sinatra was, for a time, the most popular entertainer in the United States.

Today, Italian Americans are represented throughout U.S. society, from the Supreme Court to the National Academy of Sciences to the National Basketball Association. More than one hundred years after the great era of Italian immigration began, the children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren of the original immigrants continue to celebrate the heritage that their forebears brought to their new home.