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Italian Immigration

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Italian explorers were among the first to arrive in the Americas, beginning with Christopher Columbus, John Cabot (Caboto), Giovanni da Verrazano, and Amerigo Vespucci, after whom the continent is named. As the new republic of the United States gained its independence, a relatively small number of Italian immigrants, mostly from northern Italy, arrived. These were skilled artisans and artists, as well as shopkeepers, seeking to make their fortune in the economic and cultural growth of the nascent societies in the new American republics. Italians have been deeply influential in the United States since its beginning as a new republic. Examples abound of Italian architecture having been adapted to the architecture of the early republic, such as the University of Virginia. The Italian William Paca of Maryland was one of the signatories of the Declaration of Independence, and Italian musicians formed the first marine band in Washington, D.C. More than half a million Italian Americans joined the U.S. military to fight in World War II. In time, millions of Italians migrated to the Americas, bringing with them their culture, customs, and traditions, which have been passed down through the generations and extended to all arenas of American culture. In the late 1880s and early 1900s, a large wave of Italian immigration to the Americas became known as the Italian diaspora. Composed mostly of immigrants from southern Italy, it took place for complex reasons, including poverty, lack of opportunities, insufficient land, an economic downturn, political oppression after the unification of Italy, and the rise of Italian fascism in the 1920s.

Background

Italians have been immigrating to the United States since the late 18th century. Beginning in the 1890s, however, they arrived in vast numbers. This great migration was the largest wave of European immigrants into North America and consisted mainly of eastern Europeans, Jews, and Italians. This wave was known as the “new immigration,” to distinguish it from the previous large immigration, which had consisted mostly of British, Germans, Irish, and Scandinavians earlier in the 19th century.

Italian immigrants were mostly from rural areas of southern Italy, such as Sicily and Campania. Although most were agricultural workers, there were also skilled tradesmen, such as barbers, carpenters, and masons. More than 75 percent of Italian immigrants to the United States arrived from southern Italy. There were also some Italians who arrived from northern Italy, such as the regions of Piedmont and Tuscany, who were more skilled in industrial work. Society in southern Italy was mostly composed of *contadini*, or “sharecroppers,” as well as farm laborers and artisans or tradesmen. The region was poor, and the society was semifeudal and rigidly stratified. Italian unification politically and economically favored northern Italy, establishing policies that provided subsidies and incentives for industrial development. Immigrants from northern Italy, then, were better trained in industrial skills than were immigrants from the more neglected regions of southern Italy.

Approximately 5 million Italians arrived in the United States from 1876 to 1930, the majority of them arriving between 1900 and 1915. Although many believe that most of the Italians remained in the country, about 50 percent of Italian immigrants who arrived in the first two decades of the 20th century repatriated, or returned to their native country. Usually, new arrivals depended on a *padrone*, or “middle man,” to find work and living quarters. A *padrone* was an Italian immigrant who had become established in the United States and helped immigrants find work and lodging, and navigate the system. Overall, a large number of these immigrants from 1900 to 1920 returned to Italy after having earned and saved enough money. Others remained in their ports of entry, mostly in northeastern United States. While other immigrants, such as Germans and Slavs, moved from their ports of entry to the rest of the

nation, Italian immigrants tended to remain in the urban hub. Therefore, the city of New York, through which a majority came into the country, became a large urban hub for Italian immigrants.

The principal reason for these Italians to migrate in search of work was poverty, hardship, and lack of opportunities. The majority depended on agriculture in their native Italy and desired to buy land or extend their holdings. The conditions in rural Italy were often harsh, and people lacked access to roads, plumbing, modern agricultural equipment, and steady work opportunities. They were often illiterate or semiliterate. In the 19th century, political turmoil, and the falling prices of agricultural products such as grain, and the arrival of crop-destroying diseases further eroded the economy. Primitive agricultural systems rendered them unable to compete in the rising industrialized agricultural global market.

The United States represented the opportunity for abundant work and better wages. It also represented freedom from political instability for some Italians because following the Risorgimento movement and the unification of Italy in 1870, the Italian government engaged in repressive measures in southern Italy. Some civil liberties were taken away, and individuals considered by the Italian authorities as threatening to the establishment were incarcerated or exiled. Mostly, Italians immigrated to the United States and other American nations because they wanted to acquire land back home.

Most immigrants were young men whose aim was to return to the old country. About half of them remained in the new country, however, learned English, and acquired citizenship. By the 1910s, women and families also began to migrate, making permanent settling in the urban areas more common. Like many large migrant groups to this day, Italian immigrants brought with them a strong sense of identification from their original villages or regions, a feeling known as *campanilismo*. In time, this ethnic identification gave way to a larger national identity in their new country. Localism remained present, however, in feasts to particular patron saints and similar celebrations in Italian American communities. They also brought and maintained through generations a strong sense of family typical of peasant and clan-based cultures.

Italian Americans also settled in other countries of the Americas, such as Brazil, Canada, Peru, Uruguay, and, most especially, Argentina, where they traveled, responding to the demand for labor, from the mid-1870s to the mid-1920s. Argentina, to date, has the largest population descended from Italian origins. More than 24 million Argentine citizens have Italian roots—close to 60 percent of the nation's population. The current head of the Roman Catholic Church, Pope Francis, was formerly Jorge Mario Bergoglio, the archbishop of Buenos Aires. He is a second-generation Italian Argentine.

As in the United States, labor demands and economic opportunities in Latin America were attractive to Italians. Argentina's president Domingo Sarmiento particularly encouraged European immigration in the late 1880s. The labor needs in Latin America, however, were agricultural, while the United States needed inexpensive labor for manufacturing and industry. South America, then, provided more opportunities for Italians to rise rapidly into the rural and urban middle classes and professional fields than did the United States. A rise in U.S. nativist sentiment and anti-immigration legislation in the early 1900s also tipped the balance toward more Italians immigrating to South America.

Italian Americans in Modern America

Italian immigrants arrived and settled among family and village connections; these also

helped them find work and become settled. They formed largely urban clusters in the northeast and midwest regions of the United States, as well as in some areas farther south or west, such as Louisiana and California. They developed a particularly salient community in the city of New Orleans. More than 90 percent during the years of mass immigration, however, became mostly established in the urban regions of only 11 states. Some of these communities became known as Little Italy. Today, New York City's Little Italy is a very popular historic and cultural tourist attraction.

At first, Italian Americans were subjected to much discrimination and even violence. Considered smaller and weaker than other immigrants, such as Poles and Slavs, they were often rejected by employers at jobs requiring raw physical strength, such as in dockyards. In general, Italian Americans relied on unskilled and semiskilled manual labor to make a living. Some worked as carpenters, shoemakers, and makers of other old-world crafts, or opened family-operated shops and restaurants. In time, manufacturing provided a living wage for many immigrant communities, including Italian Americans. They also suffered the consequences of stereotyping associated with poverty and immigration; they were believed to be highly illiterate, with a tendency to criminality and prone to disease. This coincided with a rise in nativist sentiment and the popularity of eugenics tenets in the United States, adding to the unjust discriminatory views of recent southern Italian immigrants as a lower race and, in general, the unfavorable views of immigrants.

The years of Prohibition (1920–33), the constitutional legislation that prohibited the manufacture, transportation, and sale of alcoholic beverages, gave way to many unexpected social problems. During this period, a large number of law-abiding Americans broke the law to purchase, consume, and sell alcoholic beverages. This opened the door to the formation of strong networks of organized crime that engaged in gangster activity, such as illegal production and contraband of liquor, opening speakeasies or illegal bars, and related activities. These dynamics became so enmeshed in the culture that they inspired a new genre of film: gangster movies. Some Italian immigrants became involved in these lucrative endeavors, and the production of popular film and literature exacerbated the image of Italian Americans as gangsters, a stereotype that has survived to date. Italian Americans, however, developed a vital cultural life. Not only was Italian opera a staple in the United States, but Italians also developed Italian theater, music halls, and music bands based on cultural traditions from their original regions.

Integration

The first wave of immigrants was a generation that remained attached to its original culture, centered on traditional norms of the family. As with most immigrant communities, however, the second generation grew up between two worlds: (1) the traditional culture maintained at home and (2) modern American culture, which is more individualistic and less tradition oriented. Italian American theaters and music halls disappeared because younger Italian Americans preferred popular American films, music, and radio programs. The post–World War II years stressed the melting pot ideology for immigrants, the idea that conformism, patriotism, and consumerism were the paths to true Americanization. Although the original peasant cultures did not value higher education because they needed children to contribute to the family economy as soon as possible, in the 1950s, taking advantage of the benefits of their war service, Italian Americans pursued higher education in numbers greater than ever before. After World War II, more than half a million Italians immigrated to the United States, especially after the mid-1960s. These numbers trickled down as the economic situation in Italy improved.

Today, Italian American neighborhoods and communities remain largely rooted in urban centers and have experienced an incipient cultural revival and interest in their ethnic roots. They tend to be Roman Catholic and are solidly represented in the professional and executive fields. They have reached the higher echelons of cultural production and political participation in the nation. Southern Italian cuisine has become a staple in the United States, although increasingly in Americanized versions. The presence of Italian Americans in the cultural industries is widespread, including film directors such as Frank Capra, Francis Ford Coppola, Sophia Coppola, and Martin Scorsese; actors such as Don Ameche, Liza Minnelli, and Al Pacino; and singers such as Perry Como, Dean Martin, Frank Sinatra, and Frank Zappa. Italian Americans are also amply represented in politics, sports, literature, academia, and many arts and other fields.

See also [Cultural Industries](#); [Ethnic Identity](#); [Immigration Networks](#); [Little Italy](#); [Transnational Families](#)

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