

THE ITALIANS IN RHODE ISLAND

*The Age of Exploration to the Present,
1524-1989*

By

CARMELA E. SANTORO



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Rhode Island Ethnic Heritage Pamphlet Series

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Rhode Island Ethnic Heritage Pamphlet Series
Dr. Patrick T. Conley, *General Editor*

Cover: Statue of Columbus in Columbus Park, Providence.
Photo by Warren Jagger.

EDITOR'S FOREWORD

In 1975 and 1976, on the eve of the bicentennial observance, in my capacity as chairman of Rhode Island's celebration (ri76), I established eighteen ethnic heritage committees, consisting of recognized leaders of this state's major ethnocultural groups. One purpose of this move was to involve in bicentennial activities those ethnic communities whose contact with this country did not extend as far back as the Revolutionary era. I urged such groups to observe and commemorate the contributions they had made to the American and Rhode Island experience from the time of their arrival down to the bicentennial year. A much more important reason for establishing the ethnic heritage program, however, was to allow each group to present its unique contributions, customs, and folkways to its neighbors from other cultural backgrounds. Formulated under the premise that knowledge promotes understanding and understanding begets brotherhood, the program was designed to break down the ethnocentric barriers and antagonisms that hindered us from achieving that lofty motto and goal—*E pluribus unum*, one out of many.

The one task assigned to each group upon its formation was to write a brief interpretive account of its Rhode Island experience—its motives for migration, areas of settlement, cultural survivals, and economic, political, and social activities—together with an assessment of its contribution to the development of our state. Though some efforts are more sociological, subjective, anecdotal, or selective than the neat, precise historical narrative that I envisioned, each of these pamphlets in its own way makes a valuable statement to all Rhode Islanders and provides a useful self-evaluation for the group that is the subject of analysis.

After the bicentennial's expiration, the concept of an ethnic heritage pamphlet series was kept alive by the Rhode Island Heritage Commission and its tireless chairman, Robert J. McKenna. Albert T. Klyberg of the Rhode Island Historical Society, Dr. Hilliard Beller of the Rhode Island Publications Society, and, especially, the authors of the various essays have also labored to bring this project to fruition as their contribution to the 350th anniversary of the founding of the state. No historical enterprise could be more appropriate for this 1986 celebration than a recounting of the toil and the triumph of our diverse peoples: From American Indians to Southeast Asians, we are Rhode Islanders all!

Patrick T. Conley

PREFACE

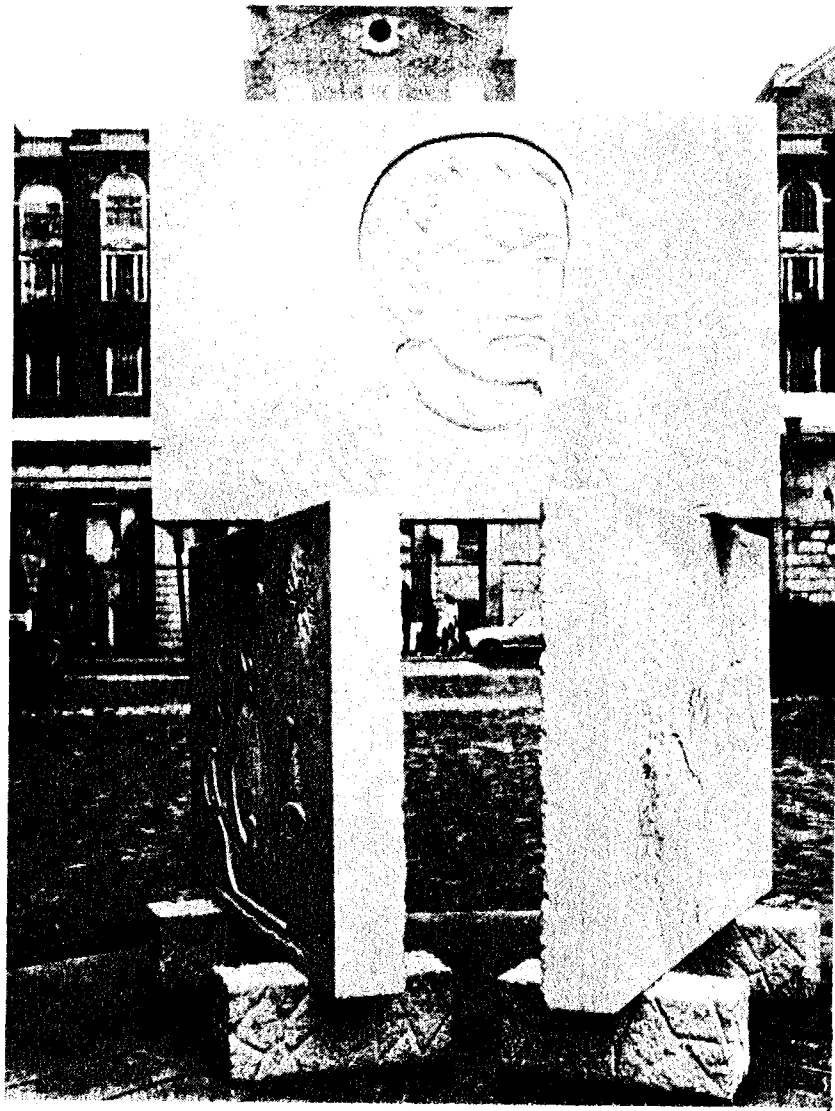
The story of the Italians in Rhode Island is essentially the story of the hopes and dreams, the aspirations and achievements, of Italian immigrants in the twentieth century. Although Italians have come to these shores since the Age of Exploration, it is only now, in the second half of the twentieth century, that their influence has become especially strong.

There is no way that their story can be told in a booklet of this size. The group is too large, too diverse, too individualistic. Many Italians have intermarried with children of other immigrants, and at times it is difficult to identify the major ethnic strain.

What I have attempted to do here is to write about the people as a whole, rather than about the rich and famous (although there are reputed to be more than one hundred Italian-American millionaires in Rhode Island at present). I have described some of the neighborhoods where they settled, some of the parishes that they established, and some of their traditions and values. I have used the past to explain the present. I have also indicated a few of the fields where they have excelled and certain of the areas where they have moved into the power structure of the state.

The major difficulty in writing about the Italians of Rhode Island is that there are so few published materials about this large ethnic group. I have therefore relied on unpublished student papers, newspaper articles, and articles from professional magazines.

I am indebted to many persons who have verified data and led me to different sources. In particular, I want to thank those of my students who have plowed through old documents, interviewed "pioneers," and dug out old clippings to help put this story together; I have drawn on the papers of Joanne Delmonico, Roseanne Squillacci, Ron Andreozzi, Jeanne DiPrete, Ann Coffey, Domenico Petrarca, Richard DelFino, Kevin Gatta, Joan O'Brien, Paul Spirito, and Paul Izzo, among others. I am also grateful to Sally Wilson, assistant librarian in Special Collections at Rhode Island College, for tracking down obscure sources; to Father Nicholas Iacovacci, Father Americo Lapati, the Reverend Paul Aquavella, the Reverend Judith Bucklin, and Elizabeth McDeed, archivist of the Diocese of Providence, for assistance on church data; to Dr. Henry Capasso for help in translations; to Michael J. Silvia, executive director of Federal Hill



Verrazzano monument, Verrazzano Park, Providence. Photo courtesy of The Echo.

Italian foreign-born living in the state. The dramatic change in these numbers occurred during the first decade of the twentieth century.

Few noticed the early Italian immigration, but during Providence's 1910 Columbus Day celebration the numerical strength of the Italians was much in evidence as Italian marchers filed past

the reviewing stand in seemingly endless procession. In *Rhode Island: Three Centuries of Democracy*, historian Charles Carroll recorded the event: "For hours," he wrote, "Italian divisions poured through the city streets in rapid succession at steady military pace, unceasingly and apparently inexhaustively. . . . Rhode Island had become conscious of its Italian population in a day."

The immigrants usually headed to where their relatives and friends had settled. Often those from the same village settled together in colonies throughout the state. Immigrants from Fornelli chose West Warwick's village of Natick; those from the mountain towns of Aliano, Raviscania, and Sant' Angelo D'Alife settled in West Barrington. From Calabria, Cocenza, and Acri the new arrivals went to Westerly; from Itri they made Cranston's village of Knightsville their new home.



Italian immigrants debarking from the Fabre Line's Venezia in Providence, 1913. Photo courtesy of the Providence College Archives.

By 1920 Italians recorded the largest number of foreign-born of any ethnic group in the state. As they poured into the port of Providence on the ships of the Fabre Line, they displaced the Irish on Federal Hill and spread to Eagle Park and Charles Street in the North End, and to Silver Lake. In 1920, 19 percent of Rhode Island's foreign-born residents were Italian.

The 1980 census shows just how "Italian" Rhode Island is. Eighty percent of those Americans claiming Italian ancestry reside in ten states; of these, Rhode Island's proportion of Italians—nearly 20 percent—is the largest. Of the twenty-three U.S. cities with the highest concentration of Italians, Cranston, where Italians number 38 percent of the population, leads all the rest.

Italians have settled in every city and town in the state. The heaviest concentrations are in the Providence metropolitan area, Bristol County, and Westerly. According to the 1970 census, which counted foreign-born and foreign stock (i.e., the first two generations), Johnston ranked first in the state in the percentage of its Italian population (25 percent), North Providence second (21.5 percent), Westerly third (18.4 percent), Cranston fourth (16.01 percent), and Providence fifth (13.98 percent). These communities, of course, had many third- and fourth-generation Italian residents as well.

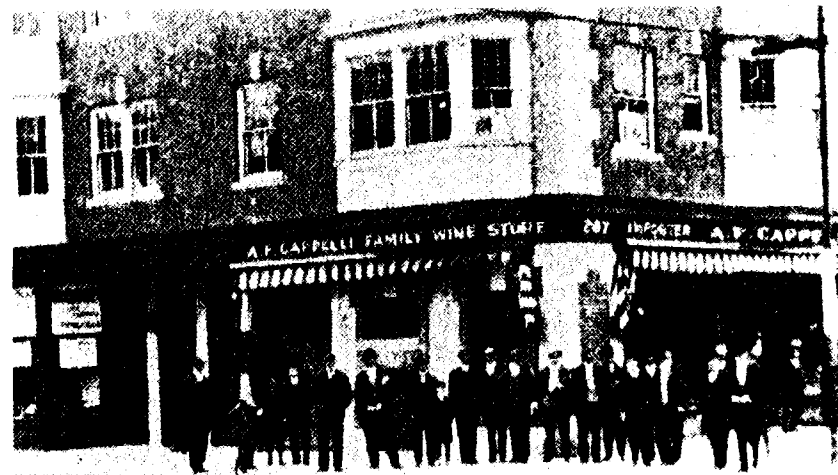
In the 1980 census, the first to pose the question of ancestry, 185,080 Rhode Islanders claimed Italian heritage, placing the Italian-Americans third in size (behind the Irish and the English) among Rhode Island's many ethnic groups.

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The pattern of Italian settlement in Rhode Island was much the same, whether the settlements were in Natick, on Charles Street, or in Bristol. The family was the central institution for the Italian immigrant. Basic values were taught primarily in the home rather than the school. The mother was (and still is) the centerpiece of the Italian family, its heart, its teacher. She handled the finances and had primary responsibility for the education of the children. The father was the provider and the titular head of the family. Male and female roles were clearly defined.

Those unfamiliar with the inner workings of an Italian family have a tendency to describe Italian women as traditionally subservient, as unable to think for themselves or make independent decisions. This impression is wrong. Italian immigrant women, for instance, had to be strong, because survival often depended upon a stable home.

Although most Italian immigrants were unskilled when they settled in Rhode Island, comparatively few worked in unskilled labor or construction by 1915. The larger numbers found employment in skilled or semiskilled jobs in foundries, textile plants, the building trades, and jewelry-manufacturing firms.

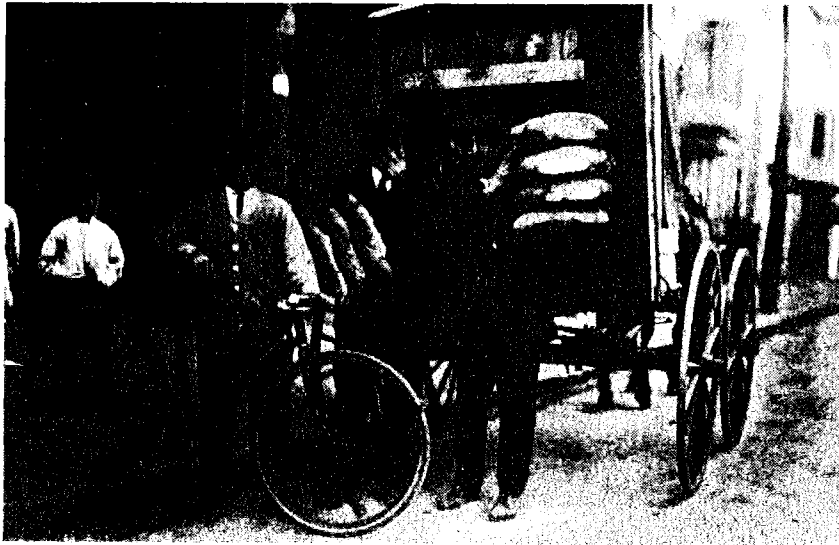


*Federal Hill's first business block, constructed by Italian immigrant Antonio Cappelli.
Photo courtesy of the Aurora Club.*

Notable was the rapid growth between 1900 and 1930 of Italian-operated businesses on Providence's Federal Hill and in the North End. Documenting this development, researcher John P. Colangelo notes that more than 35 percent of Italian shopkeepers during that time owned their own businesses—general stores, clothing stores, and bakeries—while others served the Italian community as independent craftsmen, such as barbers, tailors, cobblers, carpenters, and tinsmiths. These entrepreneurs gave the Italian-Americans of Rhode Island a relatively high rate of upward economic mobility.

Of all the Italian communities in Rhode Island, the most famous is Federal Hill, a neighborhood of approximately 350 acres just west of downtown Providence. In the early 1900s Italian immigrants replaced the Irish immigrants who had settled there during the latter part of the nineteenth century. The majority of Italians congregated in the Spruce Street and Atwells Avenue area, where tenement housing quickly became overcrowded.

Soon Federal Hill had become a Little Italy. Residents could shop for their daily needs at open-air markets or in neighborhood stores, and it was not unusual to see dead rabbits or lambs hanging from hooks in shop windows and buckets of codfish outside on the street. The sidewalks were always crowded with shoppers and children playing, and men of all ages gathered on street corners



Delivering bread on Spruce Street, Federal Hill, about 1915. Photo courtesy of The Echo.

to socialize. Religious events played an important role in the lives of these Italian immigrants, and on special holy days church attendance spilled over into the streets and religious processions stopped the traffic.

Federal Hill experienced its heyday just before the Second World War. Then, from 1950 to 1965, there was a general exodus from the neighborhood, with a loss of 46 percent of the population. Many factors account for this dramatic change. A major cause was the deterioration of housing conditions. The children of the immigrants had become educated, and their increased affluence enabled them to afford their own homes; in Mount Pleasant, North Providence, Cranston, and Warwick, they could enjoy homes with yards, garages, swimming pools, and play areas for their children. During the period from 1950 to 1970, Providence as a whole experienced a greater out-migration relative to its population than any other major city in the nation.

The late 1960s and 1970s were a period of revitalization for old neighborhoods everywhere. Those who remained on Federal Hill wanted to restore the ethnic flavor of the past. A report published in 1964 suggesting possible renovations for the Hill spearheaded the changes that took place a decade later. In August 1973 a fifteen-

member group, chaired by future councilman Anthony Pennine, was formed to prevent the demise of the Federal Hill community.

Two years later a beautiful new park, named for Giuseppe Garibaldi, graced the entrance to Federal Hill, replacing the public bathhouses that had been used by the neighborhood's older residents. Today the park is attractively landscaped with shrubs and flowers and decorated with flags, and a bust of Garibaldi, the Italian patriot who worked for the unification of his country, sits in the center.

Plaudits for the changes on Federal Hill go to the many dedicated persons who still believe in the neighborhood, but special mention should be made of the Federal Hill Revitalization Committee, the Providence Business Development Organization, and Vincent A. Cianci, Jr., Providence's first Italian-American mayor, who made the revitalization of the city's Italian neighborhoods the priority on his administrative agenda.

Today Federal Hill has become an important tourist attraction known for its many fine restaurants and Italian food stores; it is a place where a nostalgic flavor of Italy still lives. Such status has fostered considerable pride among the Hill's former and present residents.

Federal Hill has provided Rhode Island with most of its famous citizens of Italian heritage. Whether they were pushcart peddlers, tailors, shoemakers, butchers, bakers, musicians, mill workers, or bankers, Italian immigrants worked tirelessly to see to it that their children were educated. Medicine, law, and engineering were the favored professions for the boys; teaching and nursing, for the girls.

Dr. Anthony V. Migliaccio recorded what it was like to be a boy from Federal Hill going to an Ivy League school in the early 1920s. "During this period," recalls Migliaccio, "a fairly large number of Federal Hill boys attended Brown. We were 'carpet baggers'—that is, we lived at home and commuted to school. We were looked down upon because of this and because we were Italian. There was no social life for us, resulting in a closer cooperation and consolidation among us. While the student body was snobbish, the faculty was otherwise. The eager beavers were encouraged and prodded. A few of us were even appointed as laboratory instructors in our junior and senior years."

Dr. Migliaccio went on to Harvard Medical School, graduating in 1928. During the 1920s four other men from Federal Hill also graduated from that prestigious school of medicine: Dr. Ralph DiLeone, Dr. Angelo Valentino, Dr. Daniel V. Troppoli, and Dr. Angelo Scorpio.

Because the Italian immigrant population of Federal Hill had grown so large by 1910, a settlement house was established on Atwells Avenue to serve the needs of this burgeoning group and to "enlighten them as to American ideas of domestic arts, broaden their minds, and make home surroundings more congenial."

This agency, Federal Hill House, began as the Mount Pleasant Working Girls' Club, organized in 1887 by Alida E. Sprague. During the first few years Miss Sprague concentrated on teaching cultural arts. As the activities of the girls became more community-oriented, they began to help the increasingly large number of Italian immigrants adjust to American life. In 1910 Miss Sprague secured the tenement at 417 Atwells Avenue to be closer to the immigrants, and in 1914 the name of the girls' club was changed to Federal Hill House Association.

By 1916 the Italian immigrant population had grown to 40,000, so Federal Hill House erected a new building at 400 Atwells Avenue to provide for its increased activities. The building contained a gymnasium, an assembly hall, industrial rooms, a milk station, a health clinic, a residence department, and a roof garden. Soon the facility was conducting programs in home management, social behavior, economics, citizenship, and English. Not until 1937, however, did the board of directors hire an Italian, Frank Traficante, as program director, and not until 1939 did Italians have a major voice on the board.

When a fire destroyed the building at 400 Atwells Avenue in 1972, some wondered whether Federal Hill House had outlived its usefulness. It was decided, however, that it had not; and through the efforts of the people of Federal Hill and the city of Providence, a new facility was built at 9 Courtland Street, behind Holy Ghost Church. Although its purpose has changed somewhat—it is now a multipurpose community center—Federal Hill House continues to provide services for the people of Federal Hill. Its clientele today is only 50 to 60 percent Italian, a change reflecting the changing face of the neighborhood; but for many Italian-Americans, Federal Hill House was an important step in the process of Americanization.

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It is impossible in such a brief account to tell the story of all the Italian communities in Rhode Island. A few additional examples, however, will show the flavor of these settlements, which in many instances remain vibrant communities where third- and even fourth-generation Italians enjoy the traditions of their forebears.

Often the immigrants attempted to transplant their Old World villages in a New World setting. The immigrants from Fornelli, a walled medieval town fifty miles north of Naples, came from a region known for its fruit trees, its vineyards, and its olive trees. Although the town was beautifully situated fifteen hundred feet above sea level, its rocky terrain made farming difficult, forcing the people of Fornelli to migrate. Many found their way to Natick, Rhode Island. The first immigrants, most of them men, came in the 1880s. Although they had been farmers in Italy, they were forced by circumstances to work in the textile mills of the Pawtuxet Valley. Some of these pioneers, while still working in the mills, started their own businesses; among these men were Tito Tedeschi, Nicola and Davide Senerchia, Domenico and Pasquale Petrarca, and Domenico and Michele Lombardi.

The Italians weathered the hostility, torments, and prejudices of those who had come to West Warwick before them. They organized their own community complete with churches, clubs, and associations for the promotion of various civic and social activities. One of their most active organizations is the East Natick Club, founded in 1949 by Fornellesi and their descendants as a place for men to gather, to play cards and boccia, and to hold other social events. Every year they conduct La Festa Fornellese, a festive reunion for the sons and daughters of Fornelli immigrants. Periodically the group organizes trips to Italy with a special stop at Fornelli, where the "Americani" are usually greeted with a fireworks display as they enter the town.

The Italians in the Johnston village of Thornton began to arrive in the 1880s and took jobs in nearby textile mills. By thrift and hard work they earned the money to buy their own homes. They cultivated their land and turned the area's rocky soil into a garden of fruit trees, vineyards, vegetables, and flowers.

As in other immigrant settlements, the men passed their time at traditional games such as boccia and soccer. Reputedly the men of Thornton were responsible for the first attempt to play organized boccia in this country. Also, according to Mario Votolato, a lifelong resident and businessman in Thornton, people came from all over Rhode Island to the local cricket field, where some of the first soccer games ever played in this country were contested.

During the 1930s and 1940s Thornton flourished. The village had its own Italian national parish, its own Italian doctors and teachers, Italian markets and stores, and Italian entertainments. During the summer months the residents celebrated the feast days

of many saints, capping their festivities in late August with a week-long celebration in honor of St. Rocco, their patron.

After a decline in the 1960s, Thornton has taken a turn for the better. Today it is a community of Italian-Americans who share a sense of trust and unity. The area is being revitalized, storefronts are being renovated, and the people of Thornton are helping to make the Feast of St. Rocco one of the largest in the country. The Sons of St. Rocco meet regularly and work to glorify their patron's name. At St. Rocco's Church a Mass in Italian is still said every Sunday at nine.

Westerly's Italians were originally attracted to jobs in the granite industry. When the quarries first opened, there was enough local



Richard Comolli, one of the few remaining granite sculptors of Westerly. Photo courtesy of *The Echo*.

labor to do the many tasks required. Soon, however, the demand for workers with special talents grew. Skilled craftsmen were recruited from other quarrying communities in the United States, then from Scotland and Ireland; but it was Italy that provided the talented carvers that could "chisel life into stone." In the 1870s and 1880s Italian stonemasons came from places like Carrara in northern Italy, a region known for quarrying and carving. As the men wrote back to their villages about the wonderful opportunities in Westerly, more Italians came.

Professor Stephen Macomber of the Rhode Island School of Design has observed of these Westerly craftsmen that "they bequeathed upon our town the best in Italian culture that stemmed from the Renaissance of centuries before, thus issuing a golden era in the granite arts that remains, perhaps, the chief glory of Westerly's past."

Although the granite industry declined in the early twentieth century, the Italians kept coming to Westerly. They came from Naples and the Abruzzi, followed by immigrants from Sicily and Calabria. Some of them were masons and craftsmen; many worked as unskilled laborers building roads and trolley lines. Some went to work in the textile mills, while others became merchants. Many went into farming, introducing new methods of cultivation as well as crops that they had grown in Italy.

Today the pride in their heritage is reflected in one of the most active Italian cultural societies of Westerly, the Società Dantesca di Westerly. In addition to sponsoring lectures, art exhibits, films, trips to Italy, and other cultural activities, the society publishes a monthly newsletter, *Una Chiacchierata* (A Chat), devoted to historical, literary, and artistic matters and such items as Italian recipes and news of coming events. The motto of the society comes from the twenty-sixth canto of Dante's *Inferno*: "*Considerate la Vostra semenza: Fate non foste a viver come bruti, Ma per seguir virtute e conoscenza*" ("Experience the world beyond: You are not born to live like brutes, but to press on toward manhood and recognition").

Each Italian colony was essentially self-contained. Having come from the same villages and towns, the immigrants in each neighborhood brought with them their own traditions and festivals, often vying with other Italian communities to stage the most extravagant celebrations to honor their patron saints. Central to each of these Italian settlements was the Catholic Church.

Italian Churches

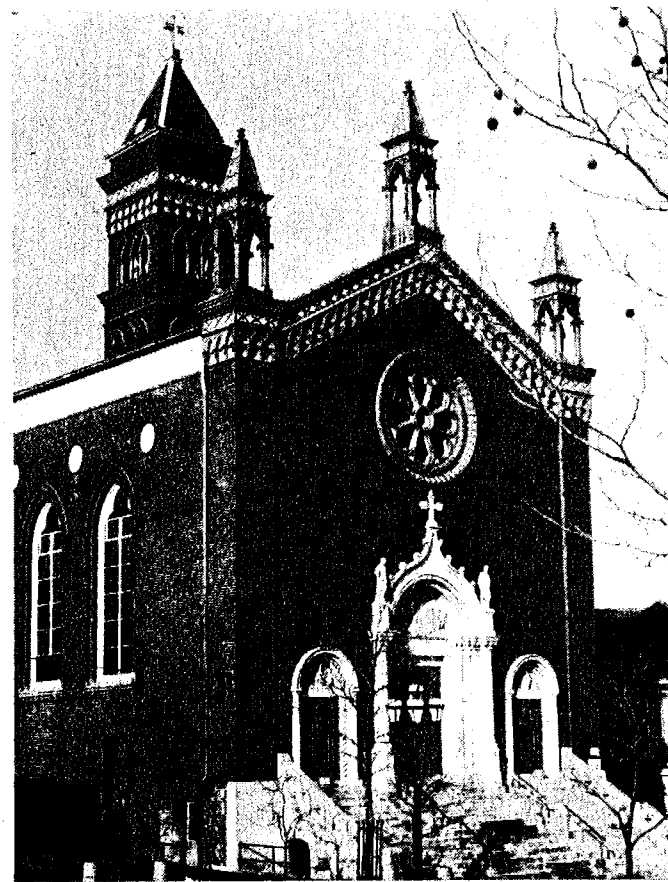
When Italian immigrants first arrived in Rhode Island, they found a Catholic Church controlled by Irish priests and bishops, hostile toward the brand of Catholicism the Italians practiced. To the Irish Catholics the religious practices of the Italian immigrants were more like those of a folk religion, with a mix of superstition and worship. The long street processions led by a marching band, with the faithful carrying statues of the Madonna and a whole array of saints laden with dollar bills, followed by praying, chanting parishioners holding candles and strewing flower petals along the way—these seemed more like pagan rituals than Catholic practices to the austere Irish Catholics. To the Italians, on the other hand, a religious holy day was an occasion of joy, a cause for dancing, singing, and celebration, as much as it was a day of prayer.

The language barrier was another source of friction between the Irish Catholics and the Italian immigrants, another impetus for the newcomers to assert their identity as Italians. In 1889, then, a small group of Italian immigrants banded together to establish the first Italian-American parish in the Diocese of Providence.

Recognizing the need to preserve the Catholic faith among the immigrants, Irish-American Bishop Matthew Harkins invited the Reverend Luigi Paroli, a Scalabrinian priest from northern Italy, to come to Providence and minister to his countrymen. Paroli was a member of the Congregation of the Missionaries of St. Charles, an Italian missionary order founded in 1887 by Giovanni Battista Scalabrini, archbishop of Piacenza, to provide care for Italians who immigrated to foreign lands. At first Bishop Harkins allowed Father Paroli to use the cathedral for his services, but soon the desire of the immigrants for a church of their own became apparent.

The Italians formed a committee to raise funds for a little chapel

on Brayton Street, near the center of a small Italian colony, and they celebrated their first Mass on September 22, 1889. The following year land was purchased at the corner of Knight Street and Atwells Avenue for a larger building to serve the rapidly growing Italian community. On August 17, 1890, this structure was solemnly dedicated to the Holy Ghost. As the stream of Italian immigrants to Federal Hill surged in the 1890s, a third church (the present structure) became necessary. Its cornerstone was laid on Atwells Avenue in 1901, with Bishop Scalabrini himself joining Bishop Harkins for the memorable ceremony. Because of its size and splendor, the new Church of the Holy Ghost was not completed and blessed until February 1910.



Holy Ghost Church, Atwells Avenue, Providence. Photo courtesy of The Echo.

The golden age of the Holy Ghost parish began with the coming of Father Flaminio Parenti in February 1922. For forty-two years he served as its pastor. His accomplishments are legion; but perhaps his greatest achievement was the establishment in 1922 of a parochial school.



Celebrating the Feast of St. Joseph on Atwells Avenue. Photo courtesy of The Echo.

Holy Ghost Church, still staffed by the Scalabrinian Fathers, continues to serve as a centerpiece for Italians of Federal Hill despite the decline of that neighborhood's Italian population. In 1986 the parish school had an enrollment of 240 pupils in grades K-8, while the church had a membership of approximately 1,200 families, or 3,000 persons. One Mass is still said in Italian. All parades and processions on Federal Hill—whether they are in honor of Christopher Columbus, St. Joseph, or another patron saint—end at Holy Ghost Church.

* * * * *

During the 1890s many of the faithful from Bristol and Barrington went by train to Providence on Sundays to attend Mass at Holy Ghost Church. They also held parish membership and were

baptized there. And since the Italians in Barrington and Bristol were often related to those in Providence, Sunday was also a day for visiting and socializing.

The journey to Providence was a long and costly one, so a number of Barrington Italians began to attend the French church of St. Jean Baptiste in Warren. Since they made the trip on foot, a walk of about five miles, they soon decided to build their own house of worship.

Fund-raising for the new church was begun in 1903 by Michele Cicerchia and Placido Mancini, two leaders of the West Barrington Italian community, who chose the Feast of the Assumption, celebrated on August 15, to launch their drive. Cicerchia and Mancini had purchased a life-size statue of the Blessed Mother, which they kept in the Warren church. On August 15, 1903, they carried the statue to Barrington and set it on a platform for all to see. Many pinned money on a ribbon placed around the body of the statue, and thus the drive to finance the new church got under way.

The celebration of the Feast of the Assumption in Barrington grew, attracting Italians from nearby Massachusetts and elsewhere in Rhode Island. The pattern of festivities resembled that in other Italian communities. The band played and the procession followed; there were sporting events, good food, song and dance, and a grand display of fireworks to top the daylong celebration. On December 17, 1913, with the help of the money raised at these annual events, the Church of the Holy Angels was finally incorporated. Michele Cicerchia and Placido Mancini were its first lay members.

On September 9, 1962, ground was broken for a new and larger church. Today Holy Angels contains 850 families and a total parish membership of approximately 2,320 people, many of them the descendants of the 50 families who started the first church in 1903. The parishioners still observe their traditional celebration on the Feast of the Assumption, and because no Masses are now said in Italian at Holy Angels, they import a priest to say Mass in the language of their original homeland. In 1949 Warren's Italians established their own national parish (St. Alexander's), and Bristol's large and vibrant Italian community did likewise (Our Lady of Mount Carmel).

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The story of St. Ann's Church in Providence's North End reveals not only the process of parish formation but also the difficulties

and conflicts such an effort generated for the Italian Catholic community—conflicts between Italian priests and Irish priests; competition among the various Italian churches; tensions between Italian priests who came from northern Italy and their parishioners who were largely from the south; and disputes between American nuns and Italian nuns. Such turmoil encouraged attempts by Protestant churches to convert Italian Catholics, and this missionary effort, in turn, brought a response from the American Catholic hierarchy.

Around 1890 the first Italian Catholics came to the sparsely settled part of Providence known as the North End, an area whose barren, rocky soil was soon dotted with vineyards and gardens, sheep and goats. Soon this undeveloped area became one of the largest Italian colonies in the state.

North End immigrants felt removed from Holy Ghost Church, the only Italian Catholic parish in Providence. By 1895 the number of Italians in the North End had increased enough to warrant the establishment of the Mission of St. Ann near Charles Street. The first baptism there was administered to Giovanni Ferri on July 26, 1896, the day of the Feast of St. Ann; the first marriage, between Antonio Mangiarelli and Maria Paolilli, took place on September 13, 1896.

Two years later the diocese purchased from the city of Providence an old vacant building that had once served as the North Providence town hall and jail in the years before the North End was annexed by Providence. That structure became the mission church of these new immigrants. Father Antonio Bove, a Scalabrinian, was placed in charge of St. Ann's in 1901, and almost immediately conflicts erupted between him and the immigrants. Father Bove wanted "discipline" among his parishioners. He opposed the extravagant religious festivals, which for the immigrants were an important link to their native Old World villages. This dynamic priest could think of other uses for the large sums of money that were spent on these festivities.

During the thirty years of his pastorate, St. Ann's grew from a mission to a thriving parish. In 1910 Bove and Bishop Harkins laid the cornerstone for a beautiful Italian Romanesque church on Hawkins Street facing Hopkins Park in the North End. The contractor for the church—a modified copy of the world-famous Venetian Shrine of Sts. Peter and Paul—was Rocco M. Famiglietti, who later became one of the trustees of the corporation and a major Rhode Island builder.



St. Ann's Church, opposite Hopkins Park, Hawkins Street, Providence. Photo courtesy of The Echo.

Having provided a beautiful place of worship for his people, Father Bove established a parochial school (the first in any Italian national parish) and opened a nursery for the children of working mothers. He placed the Sisters of Mercy, an American order composed primarily of Irish-American nuns, in charge of the school, a fully equipped ten-room building with accommodations for 700. It opened on January 28, 1917, and graduated its first class in June 1921.

Father Bove also brought the Maestre Pie Venerini sisters from Rome to teach Italian and to run the nursery, and he began evening Americanization classes to promote citizenship for his immigrant flock. Today, in addition to its lovely renovated church on Hawkins Street, St. Ann's parish has a new twenty-room school with an enrollment of over 300 in grades K-8, an auditorium on Branch Avenue, a new rectory on Russo Street, and a parish center on Greeley Street, which hosts such functions as religious education classes, Catholic Youth Organizations meetings, and a privately run day-care center. There are presently 2,000 families and about 5,300 individual members in the parish, down considerably from the 10,000

members who were enrolled twenty years ago. For a decade and a half no Masses have been said in Italian on a regular basis, but on special occasions an Italian priest is brought in to celebrate Mass in the Italian tongue.

Father Bove's tenure was notable not only for his administrative skills but also for his conflict with the Sons of Italy, whom he accused of being an enemy of the Catholic Church. He likened this fraternal group to the Freemasons, although the Sons of Italy saw themselves as similar in function to the Knights of Columbus, a decidedly Catholic organization.

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St. Ann's parish became the center of controversy between Catholics and Protestants when the American Baptist Church attempted to convert the Italian immigrants. In January 1897, two years after the establishment of St. Ann's Mission, the American Baptist Church rented a storefront at the corner of Charles and Ledge streets, a few blocks from St. Ann's, and began Rhode Island's first Italian Baptist church, with services held in both English and Italian. Conversions soon took place: during 1897 and 1898 about a dozen Italians of the Charles Street area were baptized as members of the new church.

With the help and encouragement of the Rhode Island Baptist State Convention and the assistance of the American Baptist Home Missionary Society, land was purchased on Marietta Street in 1901, and the First Italian Baptist Church was built there the following year. Within the next twenty years membership in this congregation grew to 125. The cornerstone of a second church—the congregation's present home—was laid on Charles Street in October 1924. A generation later the name was changed to Emmanuel Baptist Church to attract other neighborhood residents by making the church seem less ethnic in identity. Emmanuel's present membership of 152 is still predominantly Italian-American (about 90 percent).

Protestants also made efforts to convert Italian immigrants elsewhere in Providence. In 1902 the Methodist Church established an Italian mission on Federal Hill, and another Italian Baptist church opened there in 1904. By the 1960s membership in those two churches had fallen so low that they merged with other congregations: the Broadway Methodist Church, with its twenty-five members, joined the Mathewson Street United Methodist Church in 1964, and the

Federal Hill Baptist Church, with thirty-seven members, merged with the Church of the Master in 1965.

Early in the century Father Bove emerged as the major opponent of these Protestant missionary efforts among local Italian immigrants. He contended that those who converted did so not because they had lost faith but because they desired social advancement. Others felt the conversions occurred because the Protestant churches offered the Italian immigrants economic assistance in time of need. Father Bove moved quickly to reconvert these immigrants. He also spoke out vigorously to challenge the doctrines of socialism, which had acquired some local adherents.

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By the end of the nineteenth century about three hundred Italians had settled in Silver Lake, an area between Laurel Hill and Neutakonkanut Hill in Providence. They too wanted their own church in their own neighborhood, and in 1902 they sought permission from Bishop Harkins to build one. It took these immigrants nearly three years to raise enough money to achieve their goal. Finally, on September 22, 1907, St. Bartholomew's, named for the patron saint of the Vairanesi (who were the most numerous in the Silver Lake colony), was dedicated by Bishop Harkins and placed under the care of the Scalabrinian missionary priests.

In a few short years the people of St. Bartholomew's built a rectory (1912), a day nursery (1914), and a parish hall (1915). During the twenty-seven years (1922-1949) when Father Peter Gorret was pastor, the church was enlarged, a beautiful belfry containing "La Campana di Silver Lake" was added, and a lower church was built. One of Father Gorret's most important contributions was the publication of a parish monthly; started in 1923, it now serves as a historical sourcebook for this Italian-American community.

The Italian parish in Silver Lake continued to grow and prosper. In 1953 a parish school was dedicated, and in 1966 a campaign was inaugurated to build a new church. In little more than a year and a half, the people of St. Bartholomew's had a new house of worship and a new rectory, which were dedicated on April 13, 1969. The tower of the old "St. Bart's" still stands, however, as the centerpiece of a city-owned plaza dedicated to the memory of John Baptist Scalabrini, founder of the famed band of Italian missionary priests who still minister to the spiritual needs of the parish.



The bell tower of St. Bartholomew's Church, Silver Lake, Providence. Photo courtesy of The Echo.

Although the neighborhood is beginning to change as the younger generation of Italian-Americans moves away, the parish still counts about 4,500 souls today (1989), down from its 7,400 parishioners in 1980. The Italians of Silver Lake, and especially the people of St. Bartholomew's, are proud of the church's accomplishments.

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In the early 1900s the Cranston village of Knightsville was inundated with Italian immigrants from Itri, a small town in Italy between Rome and Naples. Although life in their new surroundings was hard and their reception less than cordial, these hardworking farmers, masons, bricklayers, and entrepreneurs began to build Knightsville into a thriving, industrious community. Some tended their own land, while others worked on large farms nearby. Still others ventured into business for themselves, setting up small stores and shops.

Living in a strange new land and exposed to a different lifestyle, these Italian people needed something of the old way to hold on to. Their faith was part of them, and their patron saint, Maria Della Civita, was a part of Italy that they had brought with them to America. They missed having a church of their own where they could worship in their native tongue.

In 1921, when the Italian population in Knightsville had surpassed 3,500, residents of the village formed a group called the Italian Committee of Cranston. In a letter to Bishop William A. Hickey, committee spokesman Luigi Vallone indicated that "the Italian people are ready to make any sacrifice, provided they are delivered from their present slavery and continuous persecutions of the American priest against all Italians." In 1925 their dream became a reality when Bishop Hickey created St. Mary's Parish.

The church was built with the nickels and dimes of its parishioners and is the centerpiece of the Italian community of Knightsville to this day. Among the customs and traditions that the people of Itri brought with them is the Festa Della Madonna Della Civita on July 21. This is a grand occasion, accompanied by singing and dancing, during which the parishioners open up their homes and provide lavish spreads of good food and wine.

On the feast day the church is filled with people who come from near and far to pay homage to the Madonna in remembrance of the vision of Mary upon Civita Mountain in Itri. The statue of



At the Feast of Santa Maria della Civita in Knightsville, Cranston. Photo courtesy of The Echo.

the Madonna is carried in glory through the streets of the neighborhood by men who bid for the honor, while the faithful follow in procession carrying candles and chanting prayers. Along the route tables are set up where the Madonna can rest, and flower petals are strewn at her feet. Some worshipers pin dollar bills on the robes of the Madonna out of respect and gratitude. The day ends in a carnival spirit with music and fireworks.

Over the years second- and third-generation Italians have continued the St. Mary's Day tradition with little variation. In fact, a group of Cranstonians goes regularly to old Itri to celebrate the Feast of the Madonna firsthand. The strong ties between Cranstonians and Itrani prompted Rhode Island filmmaker Salvatore Mancini to make a film called *The Americanization of Itri*.

The Cardis, the DiPretes, the Saccoccias, the Vallones, the Maggiacomos, the Sepes, and the Spiritos, to name but a few, replaced the English and the Irish who had lived in Knightsville. Their children and the children of other Italian immigrants are the doctors, lawyers, teachers, businessmen, and politicians of the city today. Cranston is the most Italian of all American cities, with 38 percent of its population claiming to be of Italian heritage, and St. Mary's parish, with a membership of 14,000 (3,500 families), is the largest Italian parish in the Diocese of Providence.

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The story of Italian parishes in Rhode Island may vary in some details, but even where there are fewer processions and where Masses are no longer said in Italian, the customs and religious celebrations continue. Each parish still commemorates the feast of its patron saint in a special way as the descendants of the early Italian immigrants remember the past.

Italian Organizations

As immigrants experienced life in the New World, they came to realize that they would have to help themselves to adjust and to survive. Among the earliest organizations formed by Italian immigrants were mutual-assistance societies. The first such local organization was the Unione e Benevolenza Society of Providence, founded in 1882 to dispense emergency aid and to provide sickness and death benefits for its members. Six years later the Roma Society was established, followed by the Società Fratellanza Militare Italiana Bersagliere in 1890.

As each Italian community developed, another mutual-aid society was created to serve the needs of those immigrants. These societies provided benefits for the sick and paid all or some of the costs for burial, and sometimes they furnished weekly or monthly payments to the unemployed as well. The wealthier societies also contributed money for the celebration of patronal feasts and for band concerts, parades, and fireworks.

Restrictive immigration laws passed in 1921 and 1924, plus the new needs and interests of second-generation Italians, contributed to the loss of interest in these organizations, which had so ably met the concerns of the first immigrants. Although the social legislation of the New Deal period also diminished the importance of self-help associations, there were still 120 Italian mutual-benefit societies in 1936.

Other kinds of organizations also emerged among the Italians. One of the most important groups founded by Italian immigrants, and one that still plays a significant role in Italian-American life, is the Order of the Sons of Italy. The first chapter in Rhode Island, the Providence Grand Lodge, was formed in 1915. Within five years its membership had passed the 5,000 mark. Although the Sons of



The Aurora Club's first officers and board of directors (1932): seated (left to right), Theodore V. Galassi, Edmund M. Mauro, Prof. Alfonso DeSalvio, Judge Antonio Capotosto, Vincent Sorrentino, and John DiStefano; standing, Ralph Vicario, Felix Mirando, Giuseppe Mercurio, Louis Jackvony, and Ralph Tortolani. Photo courtesy of the Aurora Club.

Italy did not see itself as a mutual-aid society in the strictest sense of the term, it did offer many of the benefits that the mutual-aid societies provided. Its major goal, however, was to bring together the better elements of both American and Italian culture for the advancement of Italian-Americans.

The first social organization for Italian men was the Young Italian Imperial Club. Dating from August 24, 1902, it still functions at 459 Broadway in Providence. The first Italian businessmen's club, the Italo-American Club, chartered in 1896, is also still active; located nearby at 256 Broadway, it presently has a membership of approximately 160. Not far off, at 289 Broadway, is the Aurora Civic Association. Founded in 1932 by a handful of prominent Italian-American professionals led by Judge Antonio Capotosto, it has included some of the wealthiest men in the state. Once a haven for Italian-Americans, it is now open to men of all ethnic groups and takes pride in its cosmopolitan flavor. In 1982 a history of this prestigious club was written by Paul R. Campbell and Dr. Patrick T. Conley (whose mother was a DeStasio) to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of its founding.

The mid-1930s saw the founding of both the Clavis Club and the Colita Club (the latter's name an acronym of *Coltura Italiana Americana*). The primary purpose of these two organizations, begun by second-generation Italian-American college graduates, was to promote an understanding and knowledge of Italian culture. The

clubs were short-lived, because World War II called their members to the service of the country, but their emergence heralded the arrival of a new and educated generation of Italian-Americans into the mainstream of Rhode Island life.

Also in the 1930s a group of Italian-American women, many of them immigrants with considerable formal education, formed the Convivio, an eclectic organization devoted to speaking and preserving the language of Dante. They held regular meetings, usually at the homes of the members, to converse in Italian, to read poetry and other literature, and to share their common heritage. The group promoted a knowledge of Italian culture through public lectures and by awards to promising artists, musicians, and scholars. The Convivio continued as an integral part of the community until 1978, when its members disbanded because their numbers had declined significantly, and because the younger Italian-American women in the organization had become immersed in their jobs and careers. Nevertheless, Italian-American women continue to be active in such cultural organizations as the Rhode Island Council of Italian Women, the Women's Youth League, and the Mnemosyne Society of Fine Arts.

On April 1, 1962, the Alpine Country Club opened on Pippin Orchard Road in Cranston. It grew out of the old Italian Social Club on Oaklawn Avenue, which had been an organization for Italian men. Unlike its predecessor, however, the Alpine was a place where the entire family could enjoy the setting and activities of a country club. The Alpine has grown and prospered, and it now includes approximately 400 families of second-, third-, and fourth-generation Italian-Americans. Because it cannot accommodate all who would like to become members, its waiting list is long. Today the Alpine Country Club is no longer restricted to Italian-Americans, though they remain its predominant group.

In more recent years the younger generation of Italian-Americans has become interested in preserving the Italian heritage for future generations. The Verrazzano Day Observance Committee, Inc., was established in 1962 to commemorate the achievements of Giovanni da Verrazzano and to foster public recognition of Italian-American Rhode Islanders who have achieved distinction in some field of endeavor. To promote the study of Italian in institutions of higher learning, the Verrazzano Committee provides a scholarship each year to the outstanding local college student in the field of Italian culture. In addition, the committee presents an equal sum

to the college that the student attends, the money to be used for the purchase of materials for this area of study. These awards are rotated among the colleges and universities of the state.

In 1975 the Italian-American Heritage Subcommittee of the Rhode Island Bicentennial Commission (ri76) was organized.



The March 1975 organizational meeting of the Rhode Island Bicentennial Commission's Italian-American Heritage Subcommittee, a group appointed and assembled by Dr. Patrick T. Conley (center, head of table) and chaired by Providence businessman Lum Gasbarro. Photo by Barbara McDowell.

Originally chaired by Lombard "Lum" Gasbarro, a prominent Providence businessman, this group staged numerous cultural events during the bicentennial year and then continued in operation as a component of the Rhode Island Heritage Commission. This booklet is one of its many worthwhile projects.

In 1978 Unitam (United Italian Americans, Inc.) was formed to preserve the Italian-American heritage of Rhode Island, to promote ethnocultural pride among Italians by highlighting the many contributions of the state's Italian-Americans, and to lobby against any form of discrimination against Italian ethnicity. Unitam works with another group, Teachers of Italian, to promote the study of the Italian language in the schools of the state, and it also honors younger Italian-Americans with its annual awards. In 1986 (as the first draft of this pamphlet went to press) Unitam honored four outstanding men: Dr. John O. Pastore, the son of Rhode Island's

illustrious United States senator, a teaching cardiologist and corecipient of the 1985 Nobel Peace Prize; Louis A. Lamoriello, Providence College's athletic director and former hockey coach, who had earlier been inducted into the Providence College Athletic Hall of Fame; Joseph R. Muratore, a successful businessman and community leader, who has won recognition both in this country and in Italy; and Louis F. DiMaio, the director of Special Programs for Talent Development at the University of Rhode Island, who has spent seventeen years in recruiting, counseling, and guiding minority and disadvantaged students. These four men represent the broad range of contributions made by Italian-Americans to present-day Rhode Island.

The Rhode Island Italian American Historical Society, also begun in 1978, was founded to allow all people sharing Italian cultural interests to work together for their dissemination and to create a permanent cultural center. This group is raising funds to purchase a building that will serve as a library and repository of historical materials relating to Rhode Island's Italian-Americans.

In 1979 the state government established the American and Italian Cultural Exchange Commission, consisting of nine members, "all of whom shall be American citizens descended from Italian ancestry and residents of the state." The commission's task is to establish, maintain, and develop cultural ties between Italians and Italian-Americans; to foster a special interest in the historical and cultural background of both groups; and to help establish and promote Italian-language programs in the schools of the state.

The Italian-American voice in Rhode Island is heard through *The Echo*, a biweekly newspaper that traces its beginnings *L'Aurora*, the first paper to serve the needs of the Italian community. Published during the winter of 1895-96 by Michael Pesaturo, *L'Aurora* was short-lived. The following year Federico Curzio began publication of *L'Eco del Rhode Island*, whose positions were stated in English in its first issue (October 1897): "It will never touch subjects relating to religion. Politically, it will stand on the side of the party that made the United States a great nation, and which is even now striving to make the star spangled banner respected and revered the whole world over (i.e., the Republicans). It will combat all the perverse sectarianism with incessant energy. . . . It will be the organ of the colony, its columns will be open to everyone, but will . . . be closed for personal correspondence or . . . sentiment."

Through the years there have been several different owners



Beneficiaries of the Echo's summer camp fund. Photo courtesy of *The Echo*.

and publishers. During the 1930s, under the editorship of Antonio Pace, an Italian-language pioneer on local radio, the paper grew in size, scope, and coverage. For many years the *Echo* was written in both English and Italian. Now under the editorship of Doreen Dimitri, the second Italian woman to serve in this post (the first was Jean Rossi), the paper is written entirely in English, its scope is cosmopolitan, and its circulation has reached 28,000. The *Echo's* present publisher is Richard Baccari, the president of the Downing Corporation and one of many major Rhode Island real estate developers of Italian heritage.

state representatives, but no senators. By 1940 three of forty-four state senators and nine of one hundred representatives were Italian-Americans. The number of Italian-Americans in the General Assembly increased marginally during the next thirty years, but the big change did not come until the decade of the 1970s. In the 1986 session of the legislature, approximately one-fourth of the members in each house were Italian-Americans.

The first Italian-American governor of Rhode Island was John O. Pastore, who was elected lieutenant governor in 1944 and assumed the office of governor on October 6, 1945, when Governor J. Howard McGrath was appointed solicitor general by President Harry S. Truman. Since then Rhode Islanders have elected four more Italian-American governors: Christopher DelSesto, 1959-1961; John Notte, 1961-1963; Philip Noel, 1973-1977 (of Italian ancestry on his maternal side); and Edward D. DiPrete, 1985-.

There were no Italian-American mayors of Rhode Island cities in 1950. Cranston got its first in 1963 with the election of James DiPrete; Providence elected its first Italian-American chief executive,



Mayor Vincent A. Cianci, Jr. (right) with Gerald Ford on the former president's visit to Rhode Island in 1980. Photo courtesy of Vincent A. Cianci, Jr.

Vincent A. Cianci, Jr., in 1975. In 1989 five communities in the state had Italian-American mayors: Cranston, Providence, Johnston, North Providence, and Woonsocket.

The Italian-American impact on the state's judiciary has been equally dramatic. In 1922 Antonio Capotosto was named associate justice of the state Superior Court. He was born in Naples, Italy, in 1879, graduated from Harvard in 1904, and served as a Republican-appointed assistant attorney general from 1912 to 1922. On January 1, 1935, in the aftermath of the so-called Bloodless Revolution, he was chosen associate justice of the state Supreme Court. Also in 1935 Governor Green appointed Luigi DePasquale, a former Democratic state chairman, as associate justice of the Sixth District Court. Nine years later former secretary of state (1933-1939) and lieutenant governor (1941-1944) Louis W. Cappelli, the first Italian to hold general office in Rhode Island, was appointed associate justice of the Superior Court. After fifteen years' service on this tribunal, he became its presiding justice.

By 1950 there was an Italian-American on the state Supreme Court, Capotosto; one in the Superior Court, Cappelli; one in the District Court, DePasquale; one in probate court, Fred Brosco of Johnston; and one in police court, Harold Arcaro of Providence.

During the past twenty-five years Italian-Americans have made significant gains in the state court system. As of January 1986, the chief justice of the Supreme Court (Joseph A. Bevilacqua), the presiding justice (Anthony A. Giannini) and five associate justices of the Superior Court, one family court judge, and six members of the district courts were Italian-Americans.

On the national level, Rhode Island elected John Pastore the first Italian-American United States senator in 1950. Pastore became one of the Senate's most powerful, influential, and respected members before retiring from office in 1976.

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The state of Rhode Island, particularly Providence, has long been known as a jewelry-manufacturing center. Italian-Americans have been an important part of this development. Among the best-known jewelry firms is the Uncas Manufacturing Company, one of the largest ring factories in the world, founded by Vincent Sorrentino. Others prominent in the jewelry industry—to name just a few—are Sammartino Brothers Company; Imperial Pearl Company; Gustavo Trifari Jewelry Company (first established in New York



Senator John O. Pastore delivering the keynote address at the 1964 Democratic National Convention. Photo courtesy of the Providence College Archives.

City in 1908); Gennaro Morvillo and Sons; Evandro and Michael Radoccia; Cloisonne Enamel and Plating Company (founded by Michael Conca and Adolph Lobello); Ralph Tortolani; Tasca Jewelry; Crafts, Inc. (directed by Joseph Ricci); Cianfarani Brothers; Angelo DelSesto; and J. Edward Mariano. To list all the local Italian-Americans who are connected with the jewelry industry as founders, as designers, and as craftsmen would require a small volume. Italians are the backbone of the industry for which Rhode Island—"the Jewelry Capital of the World"—is most renowned.

In the manufacture of knives, there are many well-known Rhode Island firms founded by Italian-Americans. Among these are the Imperial Knife Company, founded in 1917 by Michael Mirando, Felix Mirando, and Domenic A. Fazzano; the Colonial Knife Company, founded by Fortunato, Domenico, and Antonio Paolantonio; the Providence Cutlery Company; and the Ideal Knife Company.

Other businesses in which Italian-Americans have excelled include construction (the Cardis, Campanellas, Dimeos, Capaldis, and Gamminos), macaroni production, stonecutting, and banking. Some of Rhode Island's largest machine shops and findings companies

were established by second-generation Italian-Americans. Italian-Americans have also flourished as real estate developers (e.g., Nazarene Meloccaro, the builder of Garden City; Romeo Picerne of Picerne Properties; Richard Baccari, president of the Downing Corporation; Joseph Cerelli, president of Providence Land Company; Joseph R. Paolino, Sr.; Alfred Carpiolato; and Ronald Marsella, the driving force behind the Capital Center Project in Providence. Nortek, a nationally known conglomerate, was founded by the resourceful



Ralph Papitto, founder and chief executive officer of Nortek. Photo courtesy of Roger Williams College.

Silver Lake native Ralph Papitto in 1967. By late 1986, operating from a suite of offices on the top floors of the new Fleet Center in Kennedy Plaza (a building which it helped to develop), and still led by Papitto, Nortek had earned a steadily rising place on the prestigious Fortune 500 listing of America's largest companies (number 416 in 1986).

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Italian-Americans have also made their mark in organized labor, where they have assumed leadership roles for the last sixty-five years. Until the early 1920s Italian-American workers were among the lowest paid and were unlikely to seek remedies for economic injustice through formal political mechanisms. Many of them were unskilled and illiterate, and few voted. Despite these limitations they were not usually drawn to radical movements, although a few embraced socialist views. One leader of a small radical movement was Luigi Nimini, an intellectual from Verona, who came to Providence at the turn of the century and published his own monthly socialist paper, *Ragione Nuova* (New Reason). Nimini did not attract many Italian immigrants to his cause, but he did lay the groundwork for economic action by those Italian-Americans who resented discrimination toward them in the workplace and sought better working conditions and higher wages by means other than ideological engineering.

Another early Italian radical was Luigi Nardella, who came from Italy in 1913 and joined the barber's union while in his mid-teens. In 1918 he and his brothers started a local of the Amalgamated Textile Workers Union in Natick, West Warwick. Nardella played a leading role in the great textile strike of 1922, one of the most significant episodes of class conflict in the modern history of the state.

Italians employed by the Royal Mills in Natick took the lead in that strike because they suffered discrimination. Although they constituted 50 percent of Royal's work force, the company, which owned the mill housing in Natick, would not allow Italians into its tenements on Main Street, even if those structures were empty. Italians were called "Dagoes" and were pelted with eggs, rocks, and tomatoes. They had to organize to defend themselves.

With such discrimination and harassment common in the workplace, a rising self-consciousness among Italian-Americans led many of them to embrace unionization, especially in the late 1920s. They protested ethnic slurs and began to demand fair treatment for Italian workers from their employers.

One of the unions in which Italian-American leadership has been most visible is the Laborers' International Union of North America (LIUNA). Founded in April 1903 in Washington, D.C., as the International Hod Carriers' and Building Laborers' Union of America, the union adopted its present name in 1965 and now encompasses over 870 locals throughout the United States and

Canada. From its inception this union attracted several ethnic groups. Its first president was Herman Lilien, a Belgian from Chicago, Illinois; but since 1907 the national presidents of LIUNA have been Italian-Americans. Domenico D'Alessandro, an immigrant from Italy and a Rhode Islander, served as general president for twenty years (1907-1926).

Arthur E. Coia is another Rhode Islander who has achieved prominence in LIUNA. Born in Providence in 1913, where his father, an Italian immigrant, had recently settled, Arthur came to the labor movement naturally. The senior Coia, a leader of Local 271 (chartered January 22, 1912), fervently preached the importance of trade



Arthur E. Coia, general secretary-treasurer emeritus of the Laborers' International Union of North America. Photo courtesy of Dr. Vito Russo.

unionism. Arthur joined that local in 1933. Working at all kinds of jobs, he became familiar with the intricacies of the construction business, and in 1936 he won election to his first union office. Elected general secretary-treasurer of LIUNA in 1979, Arthur Coia was a major force in the international labor movement and a person active in civic and humanitarian endeavors. In 1985 he was named "Man of the Year" by Boys Town of Italy, and in 1988 he and his son, attorney Arthur A. Coia, were honored by the National Italian-American Foundation of Washington, D.C. (former senator John O. Pastore and his son had been honored the year before; these are the only father-son accolades that organization has ever bestowed). Arthur A. Coia was elected to succeed his father as LIUNA's general secretary-treasurer in 1989.

Another union in which Italian-Americans have played a leadership role is the American Federation of Musicians. They have been dominant on the board of directors of Rhode Island Local 198 only in the last fifteen years, but they have held the presidency of that local (a group whose charter dates from May 24, 1902) since the 1920s. Vincent Castronovo served as president of Local 198 from the early 1920s to 1949, when Francis Capalli succeeded him. Capalli, in turn, was followed in 1979 by Joseph Conte, who has been president since then.

Organizing musicians in Rhode Island was not an easy task. Meeting secretly for nearly three years, local musicians feared the threats of Colonel Felix Wendelschaefer, manager of the Providence Opera House, and other theater owners and hotelkeepers in the state. By 1925 enrollment in Local 198 had grown to 400. Currently it stands at 750, down from a high of nearly 1,000 a few years ago. Membership in the Providence local is predominantly Italian-American, an indication of the importance of music in Italian culture.

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A number of Italian-Americans have distinguished themselves in the arts, though only a few can be mentioned in this brief account. One notable figure, as an artist and an educator, was Antonio Cirino. Born in Serino, Italy, on March 23, 1888, Cirino came to Rhode Island in 1891. He attended the Rhode Island School of Design (1904-1908) and graduated from Columbia University in 1912 with a degree in education. He then returned to RISD as a faculty member and became head of the department of teacher training there. A writer as well as a painter, Cirino contributed numerous articles

to magazines and newspapers and wrote two books, *Jewelry Making and Design* and *The Arnold Silver and American Illustrators (1885-1912)*.

Aristide Cianfarani (born 1895), an accomplished sculptor, was educated at the School of Design in Caserta, Italy. He came to Rhode Island in 1913. Three years later he was employed by Gorham Manufacturing Company as a model maker and designer of silverware and bronze statuary. Among his important works is a bust of Edgar Allan Poe, created for the John Hay Library of Brown University.

One of the most highly regarded Italian-American artists is Gino Conti. Much has been written about Conti and his works. Born in Barga, Italy, on July 18, 1900, he graduated from the Rhode Island School of Design in 1923 and went to Paris to study. There he graduated from the Fontainebleau Ecole des Beaux Arts in 1925. Conti spent many years traveling and working in Europe and exhibited his paintings in Europe and America. During the Depression he undertook numerous WPA art projects, including a series of murals for Edwards Hall at the University of Rhode Island and two murals for Samuel Slater Junior High School in Pawtucket. Conti dedicated his life to making art that expressed his own spirituality and—because he believed that "the eyes of invisible fires are those of the child"—to teaching children how to create beauty and truth.

Two of the earliest teachers of music in the local Italian-American community were Oscar Lozzi and Danilo Sciotti. The former, a piano teacher, started the Lozzi Band, gave numerous concerts, and enlivened many colorful parades with his music. Sciotti, born in Providence in 1900, received his music education at the Gioacchino Rossini Conservatory of Music in Pesaro, Italy, graduating in 1925 with the title of Maestro. Returning to Providence in 1926, he founded and directed the New England Grand Opera Company. Sciotti was responsible for staging many full-length operas and bringing several world-famous opera stars to Rhode Island.

In the field of popular music and entertainment, Rhode Island produced Frankie Carle, born in Providence's Eagle Park as Francesco Carlone in 1903. A noted pianist, Carle led his own orchestra during the Big Band Era of the 1940s and wrote such hit songs as "Sunrise Serenade" and "Falling Leaves." Other Italian-American entertainers who have gained national attention are singer Denise Mainelli, a native of Federal Hill, and Ruth Buzzi of Westerly, an actress-comedienne who has already earned admission to the Rhode Island



Frankie Carle, with Governor John O. Pastore among his appreciative listeners, in 1947. Photo courtesy of The Providence Journal.

Heritage Hall of Fame. Locally, Frank J. Russo has emerged as Rhode Island's premier promoter of popular music concerts and entertainment events.

Italians in Sports

No litany of local Italian-American achievers would be complete without reference to athletic competition. To list those who have earned distinction in schoolboy, sandlot, collegiate, and even professional sports would fill a volume. Some Italian-American athletes, however, stand out above the rest.

Vincent "Poosha" Maddona was the first local Italian sports hero. He engaged in an unlikely field of athletic endeavor—cycling. Crowds flocked to the old Providence Cycledrome during the 1920s to cheer this record-setting performer as he rose to national prominence as a bike racer. Another Italian-American with a penchant for speed was Carl Lisa. Now a successful Providence attorney, Lisa earned All-Yankee Conference honors in 1960 as a sprinter. His most memorable achievement that year was a 9.5 clocking in the 100-yard dash, a time that remains the fastest ever run by a Rhode Islander.

Boxing is another sport in which local Italo-Americans have excelled. Romeo "Johnny" Curcio had an undefeated reign as New England welterweight and middleweight champion between 1934 and 1937. Less than a decade later, the tough and popular Ralph Zannelli of Federal Hill won his New England middleweight title while compiling a pugilistic record that recently earned him election to the Rhode Island Heritage Hall of Fame. During his long career Zannelli fought nine world champions while winning 185 of his 200 professional bouts. Currently the local boxing hero is Vinny Pazienza, a flashy, glib, and skillful fighter who briefly held the world International Boxing Federation lightweight title in 1986.

Rocky Marciano, the greatest Italian-American fighter of all time, had strong local connections. Although he was a native and resident of nearby Brockton, Massachusetts, Rocky also belonged

to Providence. He fought in that city twenty-eight times from 1948 to 1952 en route to compiling a career record of forty-nine wins and no defeats, before retiring undefeated as the undisputed heavyweight champion of the world.

In football, Rhode Island's premier Italian-American performer has been Pasquale Abbruzzi, the present coach at Warren High School. An all-Yankee Conference fullback at URI, Pat is one of the all-time greats of the Canadian Football League, where he starred during the 1950s. Canada's Player of the Year in 1955 as a member of the Montreal Alouettes, Abbruzzi was a first-team all-pro during the four years he played in the CFL, and he was named to the all-CFL silver anniversary team as well. Don Panciera of Westerly was another notable gridiron star. After quarterbacking the famed 1945 LaSalle Academy team—a team that played to a tie in the Sugar Bowl for the mythical national high school championship—Panciera starred at Boston College and the University of San Francisco and then played with several teams in the National Football League. He is now a Wakefield businessman.

In basketball, Ernie DiGregorio of North Providence was preeminent. After winning all-state honors at North Providence High, "Ernie D" became an all-American guard for Providence College and led the Friars to the final four of the 1973 NCAA championship tournament. Following his brilliant career at PC, DiGregorio turned professional and promptly became the National Basketball Association's Rookie of the Year. A phenomenal passer and playmaker, Ernie D is regarded by most fans as Rhode Island's premier basketball player of all time.

In ice hockey, Chris Terreri of Warwick was another Providence College standout. An all-stater at Pilgrim High and twice a first-team all-American at PC, in 1985 he led the Friars to the finals of the NCAA hockey championships. Terreri subsequently played for the U.S. Olympic and national teams and in 1989 began a professional career as goaltender for the New Jersey Devils of the National Hockey League. Cranston's Capuano brothers, Jack and Dave, both former all-state performers, earned all-American hockey honors at the University of Maine, and both have recently launched professional careers in the National Hockey League. Yet another local hockey luminary is Clark Donatelli of North Providence. Donatelli went from Moses Brown to Boston University, where he was an all-American wingman; then, after a stint on the 1988 U.S. national and Olympic teams, in 1989 he joined the Minnesota North Stars of the NHL.



Providence College's Ernie DiGregorio, squaring off against UCLA's Bill Walton at Madison Square Garden in 1973. Photo courtesy of the Providence College Archives.

To this day Rhode Island's brightest rink star has been Zellio "Topper" Toppazzini, Rhode Island Reds standout in the 1950s. His pro career, which began in 1947, also included stints with Boston, New York, and Chicago of the National Hockey League and Hershey and Cincinnati of the American Hockey League. Although Topper is a native of Ontario, Canada, he settled in Rhode Island when his career with the Reds ended and later became the PC hockey coach (1964-1968).

Not to be forgotten in the local sports arena are the numerous promoters, owners, and coaches of Italian extraction. Among the most prominent and successful of these figures have been Peter A. Laudati, owner of the old Cycledrome on North Main Street and sponsor and secretary of the Providence Steam Roller football team, NFL champions in 1928; Louis A. R. Pieri, owner of the Rhode Island Reds of the American Hockey League from 1938 to 1967; Robert Amato, a former PC track star, who developed a series of nationally ranked Providence College cross-country teams in the 1970s and early 1980s, including two second-place finishers in the

NCAA tournament, by recruiting runners from Ireland; John Toppa, for more than three decades the highly successful coach of the perennially powerful Rogers High School football team; and Lou Lamoriello, a Providence College hockey standout, the Friars' winningest hockey coach, the school's athletic director, and, since 1987, the general manager of the New Jersey Devils of the National Hockey League.

In addition to these native Italian-Americans and those who settled in Rhode Island, there have also been notable birds of passage. Famed football coach Joe Paterno played at Brown University and coached there briefly before beginning his illustrious career at Penn State University, and Rick Pitino was basketball mentor at Providence College just long enough to guide the Friars to their second final-four appearance in the 1987 NCAA tourney before accepting successive coaching positions with the New York Knicks of the NBA and the University of Kentucky.

The triumphs of these superstars and the achievements of many lesser but very talented Italian-American athletes have been chronicled or recalled by Bill Parrillo, chief sports writer for the *Providence Journal*; and for many years local athletes of all backgrounds were repaired and refitted for competition by the late Dr. Americo A. Savastano, a nationally renowned orthopedic surgeon and authority on sports medicine. Clearly, in every phase of sport, Rhode Island's Italian-Americans have gained their full measure of distinction.

The Italian Heritage

There is a new awakening among Italian-Americans in Rhode Island. The grandchildren and great-grandchildren of the immigrants are becoming interested in learning more about who they are and where their grandparents came from. The study of Italian is gaining new popularity. A recent survey by the American Association of Teachers of Italian indicates that more students are studying Italian nationwide than in the past, and that Rhode Island has the fourth highest enrollment of high school students who are studying Italian.

The study of Italian is increasing also at the University of Rhode Island. Every semester Italian courses are elected there by over 300 students, 32 percent of whom are third-generation Italian-Americans interested in the study of the language not to fulfill requirements but to enhance their links with the culture of their ancestors. As the educational level of Italian-Americans increases, so does their interest in their heritage.

Many of the more affluent Italian-Americans have left the old neighborhoods and moved to the East Side of Providence; or to Garden City, Garden Hills, Stoney Acres, Woodridge, or Dean Estates in Cranston; or to Scituate, East Greenwich, or the finer sections of Warwick, Johnston, and Barrington. But many, especially the elderly, have remained in the old neighborhoods.

Speaking at the University of Rhode Island in February 1979, the poet-playwright-novelist Joseph Pintauro said he was not sure why he had kept his Italian-American background out of his writings for so long. "I was defensive about it, I guess," he said. "But now that I am older, I've realized how much of who I am and what I do is based on it. We Italian-Americans have such a rich tradition, such a marvelous heritage in art, music, and writing. That's what we should be conscious of when we're growing up."

This awakened interest inspired Rhode Island College's Department of History to establish a special fund in the Rhode Island College Foundation for acquiring materials for the study of the state's Italian-American community. As we approach the year 1992, the quincentenary of Christopher Columbus's voyage to America, we can expect Italian-Americans to show an even greater enthusiasm about their diverse heritage and an even greater interest in the countless contributions of Italian-Americans to Rhode Island and the nation.

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For the serious researcher, the most valuable source on the local Italian-American community is *The Echo* (formerly *The Italian Echo*), which has been published almost continuously since 1897. In addition to news items, the *Echo* has printed numerous historical pieces. Especially valuable in this respect are the recent writings of Joseph R. Muratore, perhaps the foremost student of the Italians in Rhode Island.