STEAMing Into The Future

Immigration to Providence Student Resources

Italian Immigration

New political realities came with the unification of Italy in 1860. Rather than liberate the poor from economic exploitation, the creation of modern Italy complicated their relationship to the land, its products, and the ability to feed themselves. The *macinato* (grist tax) was placed on every bag of grain brought to the mill. In Sicily and Naples, multiple peasant uprisings occurred to protest this. Taxes on draft animals like mules also made it harder for the poor to feed themselves. The rich often found ways to evade these taxes with political connections.

Leaving Italy for a better life, 1890s , Oil painting by R. Gambogi.

Poverty worsened with modernization and overpopulation. In the late 19th century, the unified nation coincided with a vast increase in population. Italy as a whole went from 26.8 million in 1871 to 28.46 million ten years later. In the two decades before statehood, Sicily's population had grown by 19% but in the next 40 years it would double. Between 1861 - 1901, the population of the Italian south as a whole doubled as well, even despite constant emigration.

A series of government surveys beginning in the 1870s through World War I estimated that the average poor family in Italy spent 75% to 85% of their income on food. Natural disasters--crop failures, droughts, storms--jeopardized food supply. A 1909 study based heavily on governmental reports noted “cases of death from starvation are very rare, but there is a terrible permanent lack of food.” The people mostly lived on the regional staples of rice, corn, or wheat and almost never ate meat. No matter how hungry they were, they always had to pay the landowners first.

Coming to Rhode Island

Crowded home - Italians RI: (For Child Welfare Exhibit 1912-13.) Crowded Italian home, 46 Crary St., Providence, R.I. Nov. 26, 1912. Property owned by a wealthy family. Location: Providence, Rhode Island. Library of Congress.

Immigration to Providence, Rhode Island prior to World War I consisted mainly of people of Italian or Portuguese descent, replacing the previous wave of immigrants that were largely from Ireland, France, Canada, and Switzerland. Many Italians left Europe due to poor economic conditions. Many were attracted to Rhode Island because of the need for inexpensive labor in

the textile mills. The Italians came to Rhode Island in search of a better life for themselves and their families. They settled in Federal Hill, Silver Lake, the North End, Johnston, North Providence, western Cranston and West Warwick. They worked in the mills or on small farms. The Portuguese mainly went to Fall River and New Bedford. Smaller communities settled on Cape Cod, the East Bay in Rhode Island and Fox Point in Providence.

After migration, food, particularly meat, that the rich once doled out on holidays, was now available to them everyday. Meat was consumed once or twice a week compared to back home when they ate it about three times a year. Immigrants from the scattered towns and villages of the Italian peninsula thus became Italian in America as food culture created an emergence of their new identity. “As sacred food was turned into everyday food, it became more sacred. Connected as it was to the essence of being Italian, this food culture emerged as a pillar of identity ...”

An Italian farm woman near Providence, Rhode Island preparing spaghetti. Photo by Jack Delano, courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Many Italian immigrants came to America ignorant of the cuisines beyond their region, but here in America, the Southern Italian learned about *osso buco* and veal *scaloppini* and his neighbor from the north experienced pizza and eggplant Parmesan. Spaghetti and meatballs was invented in America and became a staple in Italian homes.

Olive oil’s widespread use, despite its scarcity in early years of migration signified the immigrants desire for foods that were once only available to the rich. Despite poverty and criticisms by Americans for wasting money on such a luxury, Italians considered olive oil a staple. Big Sunday dinners always had meat. Pasta and olive oil, along with meat and cheese,

defined a good life, a life of choice that they didn't have in Italy. Local merchants made it possible for immigrants to eat well by extending them credit. Italians typically shopped at neighborhood stores owned by other Italians.

New foods and drink crept into their food culture. They drank beer and ate "Italian sausage." Sausage back home was not only a rare dish, usually reserved for some religious *feste*, it was specific to particular towns, primarily in the north. In Italy only the upper class used food for socializing. In America, the poor took up the practice of hospitality with food, behaving like the elites of their former towns.

In the early days of migration Italians worked in construction, the garment industry, as laborers, shoemakers, stone workers, even barbers and piano makers. These Italian workers often banded together to demand better wages and conditions. They would organize against Italian employers and target the *padrone* (labor boss), but generally they did not strike. Rarely did they organize when it came to making pasta, processing tomatoes, or manufacturing the foods so deeply entrenched in their cultural landscape.

A Port of Call in Providence

SS Providence *of the Fabre Line. From the Jess Welt Collection, SSHSA Archives.*

The demand for immigrant labor was so great that the Fabre Line selected Providence as its chief port in 1911. At the beginning of the 20th century, Providence began projects to improve the harbor at the head of Narragansett Bay to allow for increased shipping. Rail lines connected

it to the rest of the country. At the same time, the port of New York experienced increased congestion and Providence's maritime commerce continued to grow. In 1909, voters authorized $500,000 to be allocated to purchasing and improving shore property. Around 1910, preparations began in Providence Harbor for transatlantic shipping. By 1911, the Fabre Line had announced its intention to call at Providence.

IMMIGRATION TO RHODE ISLAND

DISTRIBUTION OF FOREIGN-BORN POPULATION
IN RHODE ISLAND IN 1910

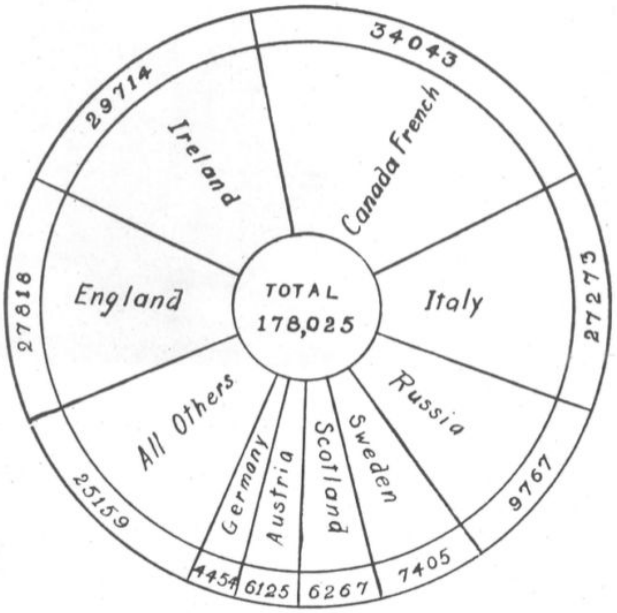

DIAGRAM BY JOHN J. SCOLNICK

Demographer John J. Scolnick prepared this pie chart of Rhode Island's foreign-born population based on the 1910 federal census. Notable are the number of Italian-born residents (27,273) and the fact that the Portuguese were not given the separate slice merited by their foreign-born tally of 6,068. A similar pie chart, based on the 1890 census, would list only 2,468 Italian-born residents, thus furnishing a graphic example of the most discriminatory feature of the 1924 quota law. In this chart, the segments allotted to Russia and Austria represent significant numbers of Polish Catholics and immigrants of the Jewish faith (Poland was then partitioned). Significant Irish immigration, which began in the 1820s, produced a large number of foreign-born residents from Ireland. Long overlooked but quite substantial in Rhode Island was the English migration to industrial America that occurred in the late nineteenth century. All English immigrants did not come on the *Mayflower*. *Conley Collection.*

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From Patrick T. Conley and William J. Jennings Jr.'s Aboard the Fabre Line: Immigration to Providence, Rhode Island.

It felt Providence was marketable to immigrants, especially to the Italians and Portuguese, because of the city's already established ethnic communities. The Fabre Line's *Madonna* would sail from Marseilles, France, on June 3, 1911, and visit Italy, call in the Azores and then continue on to Providence and New York. Between 1911 and 1914, the Fabre Line carried 30,000 passengers to Providence, most of them immigrants.

Steerage passengers on board the Kaiser Wilhem Der Grosse*, c. 1902. SSHSA Archives.*

The company began marketing to Europeans, stressing that cargo could be transported to America more cheaply through Providence rather than New York. However, with the onset of World War I (1914-1918), the numbers for passenger travel diminished, as did the hopes for the port of Providence and business. During the war, many of the Fabre steamships served as

hospitals and carried French colonial troops to the western front from North Africa at the request of the French government.

The federal Literacy Test Act of 1917 also limited immigration. It required immigrants over the age of 16 to be able to read “not less than 30 nor more than 80 words in ordinary use.” Laws and war deeply affected immigration, but so did the general American attitude after the war and the influenza pandemic of 1918-19. As immigration began to surge once again, this time with Slavs, Jews, Greeks, Arabs, Portuguese and Italians, some Americans viewed these new immigrants as threats to American values and culture. By the beginning of 1920, the Fabre line resumed business at pre-war levels, especially with its immigrant travel. At the same time, many local Portuguese returned to their native land to visit relatives they could not see during the war.

Fabre Line brochure from the SSHSA Archives.

The next decade brought additional difficulties for the Fabre Line in terms of its immigration traffic. The Emergency Quota Act became law on May 19, 1921, and took effect July 1. It added two new features to American immigration law: numerical limits on immigration and the use of a quota system for establishing those limits.

The second legislative act aimed at limiting immigration was more stringent. The National Origins Act of May 24, 1924, put a cap on immigrants coming from southern and eastern Europe after the war. At the time, Americans felt that these people with different linguistic,

cultural, religious, and ethnic backgrounds could not be assimilated. This attitude toward immigration continued through the Fabre Line's operation in Providence and lasted until 1965.

With these increased restrictions on immigration, the Fabre Line sought to diversify and include more eligible immigrants. In 1923, it began service eastward in the Mediterranean. The *Providence Journal* began reporting the nationality of these new immigrants. They included: persecuted Armenians from Turkey, Christian Syrian and Lebanese fleeing Muslim rule, Greeks, Jews from a number of countries, and Ukrainians and Romanians leaving the Black Sea area. Some immigrants from Portugal, Italy, Greece, and Armenian lands began using fraudulent return permits to enter the United States. The quotas for these countries were small and therefore filled up quickly. Inspectors began to tighten security at American ports.

Between the end of the 19th century and the 1920s, 4 million Italians came to America. During the 1920s, Providence was ranked third in immigrant-receiving ports along the Atlantic coast.

More immigrants aboard the Fabre Line disembarked in Providence compared to New York during the 23 years that Providence was a transatlantic port of call. Immigrants came to the United States for many reasons throughout the years: economic hardship, religious persecution, war, or famine. Whatever the reason, steamship companies like the Fabre Line reaped the benefits. Passenger travel, with immigrants making up the largest portion of passenger manifests, kept the Fabre Line afloat economically. Immigration began to slow down significantly and the economic downturn of the 1930s forced the Fabre Line to end its operations in Providence in the summer of 1934.

Questions for Further Thought

1. What were the push factors that led many Italians to flee their recently unified nation?
2. How did the American public view immigrants of certain nationalities during the Fabre Line years, and can we see any similarities or differences to how Americans view immigration today?
3. Have the reasons for immigration to the United States changed since the early 1900s? If so, how? Give examples.
4. What role has legislation played in increasing or decreasing immigration to the United States?