



Historically Speaking

With Town Historian
Richard Forliano

Italian contractors, builders, masons, and workers

The story of Luigi DiRenzo and Carmela Fiore DiRenzo

Note: This article is co-written by Al DiPippo

Even before the turn of the 19th century, the newly-formed nation of Italy was beset by a soaring birthrate, a series of natural disasters, and an inefficient and corrupt government. During this time, millions of young Italian men in their teens and 20s came to America to work, save money, and either return to Italy or send for the rest of their families to join them. Of the 2.3 million Italians who immigrated to the United States between 1899 and 1910, almost 2 million were from the South.

This migration to New York City was made up mainly of peasants and landless laborers, craftsmen, and building trade workers, with a smaller number of professional people. These immigrants were responsible for the construction of many iconic facets of American infrastructure, buildings, and monuments. These accomplishments include the pavement of thousands of miles of streets and highways, the expansion of railroads, and the construction of buildings, including factories, skyscrapers, and the sculpting of many statues, and monuments throughout the area.

A great number of young male Italian workers came to southern Westchester to work on these important construction projects. A large number settled in Tuckahoe while some settled in neighborhoods in Eastchester, Mount Vernon, New Rochelle and Yonkers. In the first three decades of the 20th century, the number of Italians and Italian Americans in Westchester dramatically increased.

The small, working class suburban village

of Tuckahoe, located on the east bank of the Bronx River, was a magnet for Italian immigrants. On the west side of the village, a long, irregular ridge housed one of the larger sources of marble in the United States. New research shows that the Tuckahoe marble quarries were still active and that Italians were very active in the industry. Not only would Tuckahoe marble be used for the construction of the Immaculate Conception (1911) and Assumption Churches (1912), but also for village hall in both Bronxville (1906) and Tuckahoe (1912), along with many local homes. In addition, the Benedict Stone Company whose headquarters were located in Crestwood, provided marble for the New York Public Library (1911), the Rutherford, N.J. World War I monument (1919), and Soldier's Field in Chicago (1924), and numerous other projects of both marble and granite in New York City, Westchester County, and throughout the Northeast and Canada.

New homes and apartments had to be built in the town of Eastchester, whose population had in the span of 30 years had increased seven fold from 300 people in 1900 to over 20,000 in 1930. These families headed by Angelo Capparella, Luigi DiRenzo, Alfonso DiPippo, and Antonio Consolazio built homes and apartments not only in Tuckahoe, but throughout the area. (My apologies go out to the families of other contractors who, at this time, I have not yet discovered.)

Work was not easy for Italian men who often came over from Italy, sometimes leaving their wives and children behind until they had enough money either to send for them or return back to Italy. Luigi DiRenzo was a



Italian immigrants who settled in town and in other parts of Westchester worked on the Kensico Dam between 1906 and 1915.

master mason who worked with his brother Gennaro and many other Italian workers on the rebuilding of the Kensico Dam before 1911. Wages were shockingly low for Italian workers. A report of the U.S. Immigration Commission in 1910 showed that the average Italian American-born male earned \$396 annually. The national average was \$666 and African Americans earned \$445.

Luigi was injured on the job and had a permanent steel plate inserted in his head. His brother Gennaro returned to Italy and was not allowed to return because of stricter immigration laws in the 1920s restricting Italian immigration. But Luigi DiRenzo continued to persevere. In 1911, he married Carmela Fiore, whose came from a family of masons that worked in a quarry in upstate New York as far back as 1896. Carmela's mother, Filomenia, was a midwife who delivered, in the words of the DiRienzo family, "half the people in Tuckahoe, both black and white."

In 1911, Luigi and Carmella were married in the basement of the Immaculate Conception Church. At that time, Italians were not allowed to get married in the regular church. A year later, Luigi, with other Italian contractors, masons, and laborers would help erect the Assumption Church a few blocks away where Italian language and customs were respected. Luigi and Carmela went on to have 11 children, eight boys and three girls. All the boys became masons and contractors who worked in the quarries.

When World War II broke out, every male member of the DiRenzo family served their country.

The DiRenzo story is one of success but the outcome for others was not always as fruitful. In 1890, a New York City official commented about the Italian work force. "We can't get along without Italians," he said. "We want someone to do the dirty work." In order to survive all members of the Italian family were often forced to work. Children sold newspapers and shined shoes. Men accepted any type of labor they could find. Women went to work in clothing factories, sometimes bringing such as home piece work. Other industrious Italians owned their own businesses such as grocery stores, bakeries, fish markets, and restaurants.

Work is what brought Italians to America and work is why so many stayed. It would not always be easy but as time went on, more and more opportunities opened up. Carmine DiRienzo, a granddaughter of Luigi, put it beautifully when asked why her family was so patriotic. "They believed in the American dream," she said. "Even though Italians faced some discrimination, they found more opportunity than they left behind. Their dreams were bigger than the land they left behind."

As a people of Italian descent, Carmine's words make us very proud of our heritage.

This is the third of a series of articles on the Italians in our community.