



Historically Speaking

With Town Historian
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So many miles before we rest

Barriers of language, poverty, and housing in the Italian community

It must have been very difficult for an Italian male to leave his family, his village, and native land and make the voyage to America. For many Italian immigrants, life became harder after their arrival. Poor and adrift in an alien and often hostile culture, they struggled to overcome overwhelming barriers.

The first barrier was language. For the un-schooled Italian immigrant, learning English was no easy task. The Irish who came a half-century before spoke English. Scandinavians and Germans spoke Germanic languages of which the English language is a derivative. For them, learning English was not as troublesome. Linguists affirm that it was more difficult for Italians to learn English. And there was a secondary problem.

In most cases, the first language of the Italian was not Italian. Their first language was a regional dialect; of those from Lombardy or Piedmont, or Sicily the languages were unique and separate from one other. In cases such as those from Abruzzi or the peninsula south of Naples, the language had a style, a vocabulary, and pronunciation virtually impenetrable to other Italians.

Not only could Italians not communicate with Americans, but with each other. In many cases, Italians were forced not only to live in neighborhoods where Italian was spoken, but on certain streets or sections where they could communicate with people who spoke the same dialect.

The situation in Tuckahoe might not have been as isolating. It is presently being researched that many of the Italians who came to live here came from the same section of southern Italy where people spoke one dialect. Also, because of the spatial layout of the community Italians, Irish, Germans, African Americans, Jews, and other groups lived relatively side-by-side, not in isolated neighborhoods.

The Village of Tuckahoe is unique in that it is a self-contained area on the east side of the

Bronx River amidst a vast stretch of one of the richest sources of marble on the west side. Since the turn of the 20th century, Tuckahoe was one of the few places in America that was a true melting pot. Italians, African Americans, Irish, Germans, and other ethnic and religious groups lived side-by-side, not in separate neighborhoods.

Still, many Italians in America and also in this community never learned English. Instead, in the large cites of the Northeast, they remained isolated in self-contained neighborhoods with their own newspapers, clubs, churches, and stores. It is important to remember that the overwhelming majority of Italian immigrants were poor, landless, and uneducated working people who left Italy because the homeland could not support them. They came for work and most Italians worked low paying jobs as unskilled laborers. Poverty and housing were huge barriers that would make life in America very difficult.

The unskilled Italian laborer - once he found work - was not paid the same as other workers from the country's subgroups. White men were paid \$1.50 a day, African Americans \$1.25, and Italians \$1.15. Italians were the last hired and the first fired. Betty Boyd Caroli, an Italian American historian wrote, "In large eastern cities where nearly half of all the Italian immigrants lived by 1910, the emptiness of their dream became apparent." The stereotype emerged that because Italian Americans were unskilled workers that they could do no other work.

In Tuckahoe, Eastchester, and lower Westchester, Italian male workers were very important in the building of the railroads - they rebuilt Kensico Dam, and other major construction projects.

The major employer in Tuckahoe was the Hodgman Rubber Company that employed during World War I over 1,700 people. But the Italians who came into this community were not simply unskilled laborers. Italian contrac-



This drawing of the village, on display at Village Hall, shows that in 1923 Tuckahoe was an attractive working class community in which most of the homes and apartment buildings had been built by Italian contractors. (Contributed photo)

tors built many of the homes throughout the country, steel workers provided the frames, masons provided the necessary stonework, and stonecutters dug out and finished the marble and the granite that went into the building of many of the fine homes and buildings not only in the county, but across the entire northeast region.

In New York City and other major metropolitan areas throughout the northeast, Italians were crowded into tenements in grimy, unhealthy pockets of poverty. Conditions for these newly-arrived immigrants were very challenging.

At worst, 12 adults slept in one room. In the five and six-story tenements, there was little air and light and interior rooms received no ventilation. In many cases, there would be only one toilet for an entire floor. It was cold in winter and coal ovens would be used for heat. The heat was unbearable in the summer, with people sleeping on fire escapes.

Conditions in Tuckahoe and Eastchester were much better than in nearby metropolitan areas. Many of the first arrivals lived in hotels, inns, and boarding houses. Italian contractors like the DiRienzos, Capparellas, and DiPippos built apartment houses in Tuckahoe Village, and houses throughout Tuckahoe and Eastchester.

By the 1920s, more and more people had moved to Tuckahoe and Eastchester. In an advertisement to attract more people to the growing Tuckahoe community by Hughes

and Baily, the village was described as:

"A live, progressive fast growing village, four miles north of New York City line. Thirty minutes to Grand Central Terminal...35 trains daily. Good roads and trolley lines in all directions. Beautifully situated along the Bronx River and Bronx parkway and the picturesque hills of Westchester County and near its highest elevations, population 3,700 enterprising and prosperous citizens...Many miles of well-paved and shaded streets and unusually fine and up to date residences."

While life was much better in Tuckahoe and nearby Eastchester for the Italian immigrants and their families, there were still serious obstacles to overcome. There was work, but it often times required heavy labor, and if you were injured on the job, there was not medical help, unemployment insurance, or barely any help except for a pittance from a public or private charity. Italians were often the last hired and the first fired.

But the most insidious and longest lasting obstacles were those of prejudice and discrimination.

An excellent exhibit on is on display at the Generoso Pope Foundation on "Italian Builders Artisans, and Trades" now through Nov. 23, put together by the Westchester Italian Cultural Center. Call (914) 771 8700 for more information.

This is the fourth in a series of articles on the Italians in the community. "Historically Speaking" runs bi-weekly.