



Historically Speaking

with *Eastchester Town Historian*
Richard Forlano

The saga of the Irish and the Italians in town

Over the last decade, in both private conversations and oral interviews with Irish and Italian Americans, stories abound of animosity between the Irish who arrived first and the Italian immigrants who started to come here in large mass over 100 hundred years ago.

Three important questions arise about the ethnic tension that evidently at one time existed between the Irish and Italian: Why was there so much friction between the two largest ethnic groups that settled this town? At the start of the 20th century, the working-class Village of Tuckahoe had the most people. The largest and most powerful ethnic group was the Irish-Americans. Ironically in Tuckahoe, the Italians, who by 1930 became the largest ethnic group, did not have difficulty getting along with other ethnic and racial groups. Why did the Irish have so much difficulty getting along with the newly arrived Italians? And last, why and when did the animosity between these two dominant groups that make up a majority of the people who live in this community only become a distant memory? Findings from historians and sociologists, and the observations of people whose grandparents and great grandparents settled in Tuckahoe will help answers these questions.

Irish immigrants fleeing the horrific potato famine of the 1840s arrived in town to work as unskilled quarrymen in Tuckahoe. Irish Catholics had suffered centuries of persecution at the hands of the British, but upon arrival in America, they had to endure xenophobic discrimination from the dominant Protestant majority. In Ireland, both laity and clergy had developed a special bond reinforced by centuries of persecution

by the British. The circumstances created by that special bond made the Irish identity and Catholicism inseparable. When the Irish arrived, both in the United States and also in Tuckahoe, they looked to the Catholic Church for advice, leadership and assistance in their new and sometimes hostile environment. In 1853, using every square penny, the Irish started the parish of the Immaculate Conception in Waverly Square.

Five decades later, Italians immigrants began to arrive in mass from southern Italy. Like the Irish before them, the Italians constituted the most backward peasantry in Europe. The Italian peasants, like the Irish before them, were fleeing from a country ravaged by famine, poverty, disease, and oppression. Both in America and Tuckahoe, the Roman Catholic Church helped the newly arrived Italians adapt to a strange and alien culture. But here, the similarities end.

Unlike the Italians, the Irish spoke English and were, along with the Germans, among the first large immigrant groups to arrive in America. Their early arrival and facility with the English language gave the Irish a distinct advantage over the immigrant groups that followed them. The Irish worked in construction jobs for which the Italian immigrants competed. In many communities like Tuckahoe, the Irish Americans had reached middle class status and saw no advantage of being identified with impoverished and illiterate Italians. Many of the Irish had internalized the same prejudices that their parents first experienced and projected those feeling onto the newly arrived Italians.

There was also a religious dimension to why the Irish and the Italians had difficulty getting along. The Irish had preceded the Italians to

America. The Irish dominated the Roman Catholic hierarchy and priesthood in the United States. It was very important to the Irish Catholic hierarchy that all Catholics could assimilate into the mainstream culture of America. The hierarchy of the church was concerned about what it termed the "Italian problem." What specifically was that problem?

The Italian immigrant who came here 100 years ago had a very different orientation to their Catholic faith than the Irish Catholics who preceded them. While a century ago, both the Irish and the Italians had a powerful religious orientation that included Roman Catholic dogma, there were significant differences among them. The Irish hierarchy and many priests found many of the religious practices of Italian immigrants unacceptable. These practices, *La Via Vecchia*, or "The Old Way," that were brought over from southern Italy included the presence of saints, the adoration of the Madonna, and the role of feasts, among other religious practices. Moreover, Italians were uncomfortable with sermons given in a language they did not understand and the mass became meaningless for those who did attend. There was also suspicion in a priest who did not understand the language and customs of the immigrant.

To deal with these problems accompanied by mass immigration, the most positive thing that leaders of the Catholic Church worked out was the creation of national parishes not only in Westchester and New York City, but also all across urban areas of America. The Assumption Church in Tuckahoe was a national church for Italians built the same year that Irish and German Catholics moved into the newly constructed Immaculate Conception Church on Winterhill Road. The ethnic orientation of these parishes sustained the immigrant by maintaining what was culturally important to them.

Italian-speaking priests like Father Vincent Lojacomio, who started the Assumption Church, were brought in to oversee the flock. These priests were familiar with the unique religiosity of the Italian laity and sanctioned the feast as a centerpiece of their religious participation. These national churches, along with the Italian family, helped the Italian immigrant adapt to a strange and alien culture. Ironically, these national churches served a similar function that the Catholic Church performed for the Irish a half century before.

For first-generation Italians, the national church kept in check assimilation, but help

Models and Images of Catholicism in Italian Americana: Academy and Society



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Important insights about the history of Tuckahoe can be learned not only from the academic field of history, but from the study of sociology. Salvatore Primeggia, a professor of sociology at Adelphi University, recently spoke at the Eastchester Public Library on Italian-American comedy. Contributed photo

to preserve and in many cases increase religious devotion. National churches helped future generations preserve their ethnic identity. Ironically, as time passed, the religious practices of second and third generation Italian and Irish Americans became similar. This is due to upward mobility, the shared experiences of attending the same schools, and the bonding experience of going off to fight in World War II.

This article could not have been written without a book partially written by and given to me by Salvatore Primeggia, a professor of sociology at Adelphi University and a member at the Center for Italian Studies at Stony Brook University. His book, "Models and Images of Catholicism in Italian Americana: Academy and Society" published by Forum Italicum Publishing in 2004, helped me to better understand why it was difficult for the Irish and the Italians to get along, long before I was born.

This is the ninth in a series of articles on Italians in the Tuckahoe community. "Historically Speaking" appears biweekly.