



# Historically Speaking

With Town Historian  
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## Exodus of the Italians, 1890-1929



Contributed photo

Italians waiting to leave Naples in 1910. Many of the Italians who came here left from Naples.

Why did so many Italians come to live in America and especially in Tuckahoe and Eastchester? Both the Irish, who left during the potato famine, and the peasants of southern Italy, who departed decades later, immigrated because their homeland could not support them. Both the Irish and the Italians were mistreated and taken advantage of by the people who ruled over them.

Neither country could support their native population of uneducated and unskilled peasants. In the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a rapid increase in the population of Italy strained the ability of the newly-formed nation to provide enough jobs and food for

their people. In the 1890s, a series of natural disasters, droughts, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and plant parasites doomed the population of southern Italy to endless poverty. Diseases such as malaria and cholera ravaged the land.

The peasants of southern Italy and Sicily resented the newly formed Italian government. The vast holdings of the Catholic Church had been sold off, but the peasants could only afford plots that were too small to be profitable. Within two decades, most of the land was in the hands of the wealthy. The peasants working for the new landowners were no better off than they had been in

feudal times. Worse, the new government sent corrupt officials to govern, levied high taxes, and drafted young men in the villages into the army.

Initially, the Italian government urged its native population not to leave the nation. A group of Italian peasants issued this reply to an official in the Italian government, "We plant and we reap wheat but never do we eat white bread. We cultivate the grape but we do not drink wine. We raise animals but we eat no meat. We are clothed in rags." Another Italian immigrant painfully recalled life back in Italy:

"It was unbearable. My brother Luigi and I were seven. Every morning we would get up before sunrise and start walking about four or five mile on the farm of the *patroni* (bosses). Many times we went without breakfast. For lunch we ate a piece of bread and plenty of water...We worked in the hot sun until the late afternoon, then we had to drag ourselves home...so tired we could barely eat and fell asleep with all our clothes on...and life went on this way day in day out."

The Italian peasant, like the Irish 50 years before, had a choice: 'Leave the homeland in a boat, or stay and leave in a coffin.'

The Italian poet, Pascal D'Angelo who came to New York City at age 16 with his father, described the dire economic conditions that compelled him to reluctantly emigrate here.

"Everyone works *in Italy*. There is poverty. Often, there is not enough to eat...Our people have to emigrate. It is a matter of too much boundless life and too little space. Every bit of cultivable soil is owned by those fortunate few who lord over us."

Millions of Italians left their homeland looking for a better way to provide for their family. Mario Cuomo, the father of New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo, described why his parents left Italy. "The young couple left the land, the family, and their friends they knew, arriving in Lady Liberty's shadow with no money, unable to speak English and without education. They were filled with both hope and apprehension." Many left their homeland, carrying with them the dream of returning someday to Italy and a culture deeply rooted in a few but proven values, work and family.

Within a span of almost 50 years, over 4.5 million Italian immigrants arrived in the United States. The total population of

Italy came to 14 million. Historians estimate that between 20 to 30 percent of Italian immigrants returned permanently. During the depression of 1908, 160,000 sailed back to Italy, half the number that came. One of those who went back responded 50 years later about what America meant to him, "America meant bread. There was always bread in America."

But the overwhelming majority of Italian immigrants were here to stay. One immigrant living in America put it best when he said that Italians who had lived in America had "more life and spirit, and he would not as a rule be willing to put his neck under the yoke again and be content with his former life." Fortunately, many did not want to give up ties to the country that could no longer support them. But more and more people of Italian descent began to think of America as a new and permanent home.

And Italians began to live here in Tuckahoe and Eastchester. The Census of 1900 shows that 200 Italians lived in the Town of Eastchester, less than 8 percent of the total population of the town. The census taker probably missed many of the Italians who lived in boarding houses, inns, and inexpensive hotels that were scattered throughout the town.

Almost all of them were laborers looking for work wherever they could find it. Over the next 30 years, the number of Italians living in Tuckahoe and the town outside of Eastchester would increase astronomically. A very conservative estimate is that there were at least 3,000 Italians and their children living in this town. Accounts in newspapers and other documents state that the number of Italians was much greater than that. A recent study of the census finds those estimates have no substance in fact.

The Italians who arrived at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had to overcome many obstacles. Language was the first obstacle, but discrimination in employment, social acceptance, religion, and education made the plight of the Italian immigrant very difficult. Life was not easy, but the opportunities that America offered would slowly outweigh the many barriers that Italian Americans had to overcome.

*In the next article, the heroic story of one of the early Italian families who came to Tuckahoe and Eastchester will be told.*