19th Century Basilicata Emigration: A Fratellanza &Sorellanza Based Society

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Part 1 of 6

Introduction: It is my intention over the next six articles to focus on the establishment and structure of mid- 19th century Basilicata immigrant communities. Roughly 5.3 million Italians from all corners of Italy have emigrated to the United States since our country was founded in 1791. Frequently, in our Italian immigration narratives, this massive migration is described as a “20th century” event. Most of our published narratives have ignored that the migration was ever-present and has continued throughout the history of the U.S. I believe a better and more comprehensive approach is to view the migration as a continuous event which occurred in five distinct waves. Each of these waves connect to a specific block of time. The character and scope of each wave is a response to specific events occurring in Italy. Each wave of emigrants contributed to the complex perception that American society has of Italians emigrants, and Italian emigrants had of America. In the next six articles my primary focus will be Basilicata’s contribution to the overall Italian emigration story. Specifically, I will focus on the years 1791-1900, a time that includes waves 1-3. I will be exploring the “how” and “why” those Basilicata emigrants came and adjusted to life in their new homeland

The First Wave

The first of these waves encompasses the first sixty years of our Republic, 1791 thru 1850. During this period, immigration data suggests that about 10,000 Italians emigrated to the U.S. However, only about 5,000 Italians continued on to permanent resident status. Consistent with centuries of export of Italian intellectual property this small “first wave” of emigres came primarily to engage in professional commerce. For the most part these “first” Italian emigrants sought to promote and profit from their unique professional skills in art, business, science, education, and seamanship. America encouraged and welcomed the expertise that these individuals brought. Most of these “first wave” individuals came from northern and central Italy’s middle and upper-class. Their skills, training and education were well above that of the average American. Because of their skill level they were not regarded as competition by the American working class or the bulk of other immigrants. Even a cursory review of their contributions to American society demonstrates that their accomplishments far exceeded what their small numbers would suggest. They easily assimilated on an individual basis and settled into primarily, American upper-class society. Those that stayed did not seek to cluster as “Italians” or construct Italian cultural enclaves or communities. To the extent that they started families in America, it was often with local non-Italian spouses. Their children’s ethnic identity therefore became fully “American” usually, within a generation.

(Note: since the 15th century there was a close and direct familial relationship between the Monarchy of the Kingdom of Naples, southern Italy, and the Monarchy of Spain. As a result, most southern Italians, including from Basilicata, during the American colonial period emigrated to Iberian controlled “Spanish” America from the 1500’s thru 1850, not the U.S.).

The Second Wave

It is not until about 1850 that we see the “beginning” of what could be called “mass” Italian immigration to the U.S. The period of 1850 thru 1880 marks what I describe as the “second wave” of Italian emigration. During this thirty-year period according to U.S. immigration data approximately 75,000 Italians emigrated to the U.S. Analysis of the emigration data by decade records about 10,000 Italian emigrants arrived in the 1850’s, 22,000 arrived in the 1860’s, and 44,000 arrived in the 1870’s. In a real sense this “second wave” of emigration, although less than 2% of what would be the total, is the period of true introduction of Italians to America and America to Italians.

As the numbers demonstrate, this second wave of newly arriving Italians occurred slowly, at first. Most of the Italian emigres arriving between 1850 and 1880 were of lower social status than the first wave. Most had at least an Italian middle-class background. Like those who constituted the first wave, about 80% of the second wave of emigres arrived from northern and central Italy. As a group they too possessed higher skill levels and education than the average American. However, it is of note that the “second wave” Italian immigrant generally arrived in the U.S. with far less personal financial resources than first wave Italian emigres.

The principal reason for this is that following the Napoleonic Wars most of European middle-class society began to demand political reform and individual civil rights. This led to the formation of a number of popular, middle-class based political reform societies. These political organizations connected and were within an umbrella group known historically as the Carbonari Movement. Several European countries witnessed rising political pressure, and experienced revolts which reached an apex in 1848. These revolts were opposed by the European aristocracy which held traditional power and wealth. Most of these rebellions, including those within a divided Italian peninsula, initially failed. This created a large number of “political” refugees. Many of these “political” refugees sought asylum in the U.S. The U.S. was perceived by these political refugees as sympathetic to republican/civil rights causes. As a group these refugees, including the Italians among them, were referred to by U.S. immigration as 1848ers. The U.S. welcomed them and supported their political beliefs as well as, their continued struggle for equality.

Many of these arrivals had hurriedly fled European governments that had issued arrest warrants and warrants of execution. This unique immigrant circumstance sets this group, including the Italians among them, on a somewhat different emigrant social trajectory. The Italian émigré of the second wave was not an emigre by choice. His refugee status had been “politically” forced upon him. In addition, this is the first time that we see many Italian emigrants arriving with families. They found themselves arriving in the U.S. with limited financial resources and dependents. This financial circumstance required their rapid economic adjustment and assimilation into the U.S. general economy. This placed them in direct competition with the American middle and working-class for jobs. Because they arrived in larger numbers and with families, they were able to construct relationships for mutual support and protection in ex-pat enclaves. These enclaves provided continued connection to their European cultures, and homeland political news. For Italian emigrants of the 1850’s and 1860’s most of these enclaves were established in cities, especially cities that were ports of entry such as Manhattan.

Basilicata’s Participation in Second Wave Emigration

At this point, I would like to focus on the narrative as it applies to Basilicata emigration. In addition to Italian emigres from northern and central Italy, emigres from the southern Italian State of Basilicata also began to arrive in the U.S. in the 1850’s. This represented a new addition to the Italian regional dynamics of emigration. This new addition represents an important shifting in the source of Italian emigration. It is estimated that 80% of all Italians that emigrated to the U.S. would eventually come from “southern” Italy. The Basilicata emigrants arriving in the U.S. in the 1850’s were among the first southern Italians to arrive in substantial numbers. The initial Basilicata emigrant contingent, because of their early entry, are often underrecognize in American immigration narratives. This may be due to several factors. First among these reasons was that 19th century America did not perceive Italy, regionally. As the initial Basilicata emigrant had similar language, social and professional skills as other Italian emigrants, they were simply “Italians”. However, there were important differences between the early Basilicata contingent of emigres and the others. The differences resided primarily in the reasons and conditions for their departure from Italy.

The U.S. Basilicata immigration narrative begins with the arrival in New York of a rather downtrodden group of mostly middle-class Basilicatans. These included highly skilled craftsmen, businessmen and artists, including classically trained musicians. They too were refugees however, in the 1850’s most of the Basilicata emigres were not fleeing “political” persecution. The first of these immigrants from Basilicata were seeking escape and refuge following two major earthquakes which struck the Basilicata area in the 1850’s. It is important to note that these earthquakes and the related devastation were confined to the Basilicata region of southern Italy. Therefore, the conditions that they were fleeing did not affect most of the rest of southern Italy’s population. It was essentially an isolated Basilicata event.

These initial Basilicata émigrés were survivors of two violent cataclysmic events. They were not barred from returning to Basilicata out of fear of political repercussions. Rather, their concern was escaping and recuperating from the devastation which existed in the Basilicata region. Economic assimilation for them meant first, survival, and then potentially developing the resources with which to help those left behind. The urgency for their success had immediate life and death consequences for themselves and for family back in Italy. That urgency pushed them to find any kind of supporting work. It also put them in more direct competition for the type of jobs relegated other newly arriving immigrants. They too settled in enclaves for mutual support and protection but often in the poorer immigrant neighborhoods such as Manhattan’s “Five Points”. They were arriving not just with less financial resources but literally just the shirts on their backs.

Understanding the Region and Basic Basilicata Culture

The Basilicata region’s geography and culture go hand and hand. By percentage Basilicata is the most mountainous, least densely populated State in Italy. Almost 80% of the surface area of the State is considered either mountain or hills with only about 20% tillable valley pasture. The region has only a very small coastline and that is without a natural harbor.

The region lies on a major continental fault line which results in earthquakes and tremors occurring frequently. Although, located at the southern arch of the Italian peninsula, its elevation, 1,500 to 2,500 feet, creates a true four-season climate. This allows a short growing season. The majority of the population is traditionally engaged in agriculture which in the mountainous environment is labor intensive.

Basilicata has a State-wide population which hovers historically around 500,000. The State population resides within its two provinces, Potenza and Matera. The State has only one small city the Capitol, Potenza, which in the 1850’s had a population of about 70,000. The rest of the State’s population is scattered among hundreds of small mountain-top towns and villages.

The mountains of the region have been formed by the action of hundreds of thousands of years of continental plate collision. The southern Apennine mountains have under enormous pressure been thrust upward haphazardly. This geographic condition makes path way connections between valleys indirect, and difficult. In the 19th century the region supported little national or international commercial trade. With little commerce the State was and is the poorest per capita region in all of Italy.

The geography contributed to what some sociologists refer to as, a “highland” culture. Before modern transportation most regions that contain small communities separated by difficult terrain, developed into small closely knit social clusters. Survival in these clusters of isolated villages depends on both individual self-reliance and in times of great stress, critical interdependence. In more familiar English terms “highland” cultures often produce what we call familial social “clans”. In Basilicata, clusters of ten to twenty villages create informal social cells of support. The people within these communities rely on each other as they are “within the sound of the bell”. This is a phrase that relates to the fact that in times of trouble you can depend for help from those within the sound of the warning of church or municipal bells. These village communities have a history of hundreds of years of close economic, cultural, religious and familial bonds.

When most historians examine Basilicata immigration or the post-unification events connected to the region, this specific aspect of the existence of a clan-based culture is largely overlooked. There is a tendency in American texts to consider this region’s social dynamic as the same as people from other Italian regions. The population along Italy’s southern coasts for example, whether urban, suburban or rural comes from a much more densely populated, more integrated and fluid society. Other Italian regions in the 19th century might have identified by region or by familial units but not in the sense of the closely dependent and extended familial bonds common to Basilicata communities.

As the term “clan” is generally not used in reference to Italian culture, I have chosen to replace it in favor of using a different Italian descriptive. The word that best captures the nature of social relationships at work in the Basilicata region is fratellanza, brotherhood. It is the word that in early Basilicata immigrant oral histories is most commonly used to express the association/union within their communities and their founding organizations. The actual corporate name of our Trenton Basilicata society, for example, is “Unione e Fratellanza San Felese”, union and brotherhood as both purpose and goal.

The Earthquakes and the Basilicata Community Response

I hope the following brief description of 1850’s conditions in Basilicata provides an understanding of the mindset and circumstances as they relate to the emigration experience. As mentioned, there were two earthquakes that struck the Potenza region in the 1850’s. The first a major earthquake struck in 1851 with an epicenter near Melfi, in Potenza Province. It was closely followed by the December “Great Neapolitan Earthquake” of 1857 with its epicenter near the Capitol city of Potenza. The impact of the two earthquakes was literally like dropping an atomic bomb on central western Basilicata. This region, with a population of 250,000, suffered a combined 30,000 fatalities in those two earthquakes. This fatality count demonstrates just how severe the area’s population was impacted. Death and serious injury knew no age, gender, social status or political boundary. The Capitol city of Potenza, the seat of State control, civil support and organization was left with 80% of its buildings rendered completely collapsed or uninhabitable. The “great” earthquake of 1857, struck in early winter when most of the region was cut off, snowed in, isolated for months.

The international press reports from the time of the earthquake confirmed that compounding the tragedy was that very little aid, either national or international, was provided or reached the region’s population during this crisis. Beyond the impacted area very little damage registered in the rest of southern Italy. Naples, for example, the kingdom’s capitol and ninety miles away, suffered no fatalities, no injuries and no structural damage to its buildings.

The lack of significant disaster aid left the population’s recovery to their own very limited resources and capabilities. During the two earthquakes entire villages were reduced to rubble and were forced to be abandoned. Some of these villages were never able to be reconstructed.

Given the “fratellanza” societal structure many survivors at first, sought refuge within neighboring extended family communities, if shelter, and support was available there. Many of the city of Potenza’s citizens spent the winter of 1857 in roofless unheated shells of structures. Most of the meager rescue/recovery efforts for victims trapped beneath the rubble was conducted by surviving neighbors working by hand. It was a brutal desperate survival experience.

The limited resources and dire conditions that were being experienced left the entire region and its people stressed to their maximum and beyond. The communal suffering was deeply personal and touched everyone in the region. The randomness of survival, in addition to destroying infrastructure and resources, resulted in a decimation of social and family units.

By 1858 we begin to see a desperate few who had transportable skills emigrate to other regions, including internationally. This initial group of refugees was made up of young males who had the health and vigor, not only to survive but to prosper in the transport of their skills. Their success and the fact that they maintained close contact with those left behind would provide the roadmap, as we shall see, for others to follow.

Beyond the Earthquake Event

In 1858 circumstances in the region were exacerbated when the Bourbon federal authorities in Naples chose to prioritize guarding absentee landlords’ crop reserves, and other valuable resources over helping the people. This left a largely homeless population to starve while local food supplies were being removed under military guard and sold for profit elsewhere. What can only be described as inevitable food riots and protests began to occur in 1858. The military, many of whom were foreign mercenaries, suppressed the riots violently.

Not surprisingly, the local victims of the earthquake rebelled in communal/fratellanza based outrage. I have written previously that some military analysts trace the origins of modern guerrilla warfare tactics to the resistance these people organized in response to government sponsored suppression. Small unit, close knit local ‘communal” resistance began to form. Initially, this occurred in response to individual acts of military suppression and assaults in specific localities. When you examine historic records regarding the local militant response you find that it composed of members closely related to each other and specific village clusters. Often as the government sent in reinforcements the local resistance would flee into the mountains. The authorities labelled the rebels as “outlaws” or in Italian, “Briganti”. This was done to justify continued even harsher military intervention. More accurately, the Briganti were a popular front of resistance. They were of the people, and supported by the people. The Briganti unit organization and tactics were a natural outgrowth of the fratellanza culture and Basilicata geography.

An additional point about the Briganti which should not be left out is that when the community rebellion against the tactics of the government began, women as well as men protested and were assaulted by the military. Militant resistance actively arose not only from “male” Briganti but also among female fighters who were called Brigantessa.

As Basilicata’s resistance expanded, village to village, the resistance tactics became increasingly coordinated. This ultimately resulted in the successful expulsion of the Bourbon regime’s military from Basilicata’s territory by early 1860. After working together to drive the federal forces out of their State, Basilicata further organized and declared an independent provisional republican government. This provisional body was not elected but rather chosen thru fraternal hierarchy. In 1860 the provisional government of Basilicata voted to petition the Piedmont Government for membership with the Italian States of the northern regime. (Note: this was before Garibaldi had completed his campaign in Sicily).

Upon Garibaldi’s landing in 1860, on the southern Italian mainland, Basilicata was prepared and provided the safety of a centrally located territory. A territory from which Garibaldi launched his successful campaign against the rest of the Bourbon controlled Kingdom of Naples. Garibald’s forces were aided in that campaign by 30,000-40,000 young Basilicata volunteers. These men had first fought under their own leadership for Basilicata’s independence. They then volunteered to fight, as their provisional government had petitioned, for unification under the military leadership of Garibaldi.

As history records Garibaldi and his forces successfully went on to substantially defeat the forces of the Kingdom of Naples also known as the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies on the southern mainland. It was not until the Bourbon King and the remnants of his army were greatly reduced and cornered that the Piedmont forces under King Victor Emmanuel II “officially” arrived.

Unfortunately, the subsequent successful push in Basilicata and southern Italy did not result in the civil benefits that should have inured to their efforts. As the newly unified Italian government consolidated power it began to suppress civil rights and loot the southern treasury and economy. Concerned about southern Italian resistance, the Piedmont dominated government issued demand for arrest of many of the independence fighters in the southern part of the country. Many surrendered to prison but many refused. When these southern Italians objected to the warrants of imprisonment the Piedmont regime imposed martial law in 1863. This started a renewed communal rebellion, fratellanza based objection, in the Basilicata region. Again, severe government military action was directed at the population in response. The participants in this renewed rebellion were once again labelled as “outlaws”, or Briganti, this time by the new “unified” government.

Organized resistance and militant retaliatory acts against Government suppression continued over the next twenty years in Basilicata. Ten of thousands, including men, women, and children lost their lives at the hands of the Piedmont military. Unspeakable atrocities were inflicted upon the civilian population by acts that today would be considered genocidal.

Throughout this entire twenty-year sequence of events, there is a remarkable consistency of internal cooperative fraternal resistance action by the people of Basilicata. However, as the situation in the region deteriorated and suppressive government acts intensified, many in Basilicata were forced to look to emigration as the best avenue for survival. Data reflects that Basilicata’s coordinated emigration steadily grew, in the 1860’s. The Italian immigration departure data clearly indicates that widespread emigration from Basilicata was substantial enough to have constituted close to 20% of the second wave Italian emigration.

The Organization of Emigration from Basilicata

I have been fortunate in my research to have access to preserved San Fele municipal records detailing who were departing from the town of San Fele during the 1860-1930 timeframe. These records offer an opportunity to study how the emigration was organized and progressed over seven decades. Most of Trenton’s Basilicata community has its roots in Potenza Province, specifically the counties of Melfi and Muro Lucano. A large number of those who took up residence in Trenton came from the immediate vicinity of the town of San Fele. Therefore, the San Fele records have special relevance to the Trenton based Basilicata community.

I have to point out that the details collected within the town’s data have given a number of researchers, not just me, the opportunity to study many aspects beyond the organization of emigration. I first became aware of this fifty years ago. I came across an article referencing Italian immigration to the U.S. and indirectly emigration from this area of Basilicata. The article mentioned that throughout the course of mass emigration, 1850’s thru 1930, San Fele was distinct in keeping extensive municipal records regarding departures.

The article went on to report that the data had also provided Italian sociologists in the 1920’s, an ability to study the impacts of that emigration over multiple generations. The details allowed the sociologists to opine on issues including the impact on the function of traditional Italian culture. Their findings noted among other things that the steady removal or prolonged absence of an extraordinary number of young men from the community over a seventy-year period had created a chronic regional labor crisis. This was an obvious and expected conclusion. However, as labor was crucial to the survival and productivity of an agricultural community, it was the community response to solving the labor crisis that got the sociologists attention. The only source of labor available, in so isolated an area, were young women.

I mention this because the fundamental and organizational role of women in the Basilicata emigration story is underappreciated. Women stepping into non-traditional roles in times of crisis or emergencies is not unusual. What drew these sociologists’ attention was the cultural transformation that resulted when these prolonged absences of men repeated over several generations. The article noted that the sociologists expressed concerns that the traditional patriarchal Italian dynamic appeared to have been altered. Women had become accustomed, and the community accepted, women in roles as head of households and even municipal administration in the region.

The second time I came across the specifics of San Fele record keeping on emigration was about ten years ago. I was visiting San Fele and was introduced to professor Pietro Stia who had just published a small book, in 2011, titled “San Fele Seconda meta dell Ottocento La Grande Emigrazione” or San Fele the second half of the 19th century, the Great Emigration. Like the article I read fifty years ago this more recent book spoke to the massive emigration of residents and the devasting impact on the community. It also provides additional commentary on the gender role adaptations.

My take away point is that a number of independent sources noted that the severe and unique conditions impacting Basilicata in the mid-19th century onward had transformed local traditional Italian culture. Traditional dominant patriarchy had evolved into a more accepted cooperative balance in gender roles. In fact, there was actually a subtle, little acknowledged and interesting structural social adjustment that took place. An adjustment which was uniquely Basilicata. It was an adjustment that was transported to become an important part of the organization of early Basilicata immigrant communities.

Traditionally Basilicata operated within what I called a “fratellanza” societal framework. They transported this way of organizing and adapted it to American society and conditions when they emigrated. The women who were left behind had to fill traditional male work roles but in so doing created a female parallel organizational framework. Within the community, men and women could work together seamlessly on associated beneficial tasks, but women beyond filling authoritative and labor roles, could also exercise independent decision making and action. They could utilize female collective actions on tasks which they deemed necessary through a hierarchy of their own choosing. I have suggested that the male cultural organization of the region is a fratellanza, the female organizational equivalent is a sorellanza, a sisterhood.

By example of this duality, well over a century ago the Trenton Basilicata community incorporated an organization dedicated to promote the welfare of the community known as Unione e Fratelanza San Felese. The community also established the Unione e Sorellanza San Felese. The organizations were independent and separate, until about fifteen years ago, but worked cooperatively and in parallel for the community’s welfare. They each had their own rules, officers, dues, projects and meetings.

As I go forward in these articles to discuss how the early Basilicata immigrant community came into being, were structured, and organized it is important to recognize this dual organizational social arraignment, which is unique in Italian culture for the period.

The next article in this series will discuss the early Basilicata emigrant enclaves.

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