

As previously noted the people of San Fele have, as many southern Italians have, great devotion to Mary. Mary, the mother of Christ, is the patroness of the town of San Fele which celebrates her feast day in mid August every year. The celebration of a feast day is a common feature in the traditions of many of the small towns and villages especially in this general region. An interesting aspect of regional devotion to Mary is that many of the towns trace their celebrations back to the discoveries of statues and icons of Mary miraculously found or restored to the towns and villages after decades or even centuries of being lost or hidden. The reuniting of the local people with the devotional symbols of their regions' past has inspired within the communities not only a renewed religious fervor, but has reinforced a sense of cultural perseverance and survival. The people of the region are keenly aware that the restoration of these icons in times of safety is the result of the successful rescue of these symbols by their ancestors in times of threat of foreign invasion or theological assault. The history of the region reveals many examples through the centuries where a towns' treasured possessions or devotional preferences were threatened by looting, destruction or religious persecution. In many circumstances resistance to these threats was militant and aggressive but often it could also be passive and subtle. History books originating among those who conquered the region are full of examples where the populations' "defiance" to adoption of external cultural or religious orthodoxy has been highlighted and their attitudes disparaged. However, defiance in this context is an expression used by those who have an outsiders' agenda. Regionally the people proudly held on to their ancestral traditions and religious expression as a declaration of cultural assertiveness.

Understanding the above it is interesting but not surprising that the Italian American tradition of the "Festa" officially traces back to 1888 to the first San Rocco Procession held in New York City in what was still known as the five points section of the city. I say officially, since the small but growing populations of southern Italians of the area had been placing small temporary devotional shrines on streets and back alleys to commemorate the feast days of their regional religious patrons since they had started arriving in the city. The practice of creating these 'personal' shrines as well as any suggestion of a larger type of "festa" along the lines practiced in their native Italian homeland was actively discouraged by the American Catholic Church and ultimately banned by the bishop of the Diocese of New York. The first true "festa" was orchestrated during the ban by an umbrella group, the Potenza society, made up of the many small communal groups from the region of the Province of Potenza in Basilicata then residing in the five points. At the time this region of Italy had provided the majority of Italian immigrants then residing in the five points area. It should be noted that at the time the "Festa" was organized the Bishop was quite disturbed when he learned from newspaper accounts that the Procession was held. Newspaper accounts depicted the San Rocco statue elevated and adorned carried through the streets joined by representatives of the other patronal icons of the villages of the region, including San Fele as thousands marched in a show of devotion and solidarity. Apparently, the Bishop was adamant afterwards that the conducting of the Procession was in his view an open act of defiance of his authority. However his position did not prevail and to fast forward on August 22, 2010 the Potenza society will conduct the 122nd San Rocco Procession in the five points Little Italy section of New York City.

To help understand the Italian presence in the five points in 1888 it is useful to understand the overall historic Italian immigration pattern to the United States. Those who have studied the pattern of immigration usually divide the historic timelines into three (3) waves. The first wave extended from 1492-1790 with a transitional period of 1790-1810. The second wave extended from 1810-1870 with a transitional period 1870-1890. The third wave extended from 1890-1925. During this immigration period approximately 4.5 million Italians immigrated to territories that would ultimately become what we know as the United States. Each of these waves are very distinct and deserve some exploration.

The first wave, 1492-1790, was the longest by duration and smallest by number of Italian immigrants arriving on North American shores. It covers the period when much of the future U.S. territory was unexplored, underdeveloped and parcelled among various colonial powers. It is estimated that about 10,000 Italians immigrated during these approximately three hundred years. About eighty percent

of those who immigrated during this period originated from Italian provinces north of Rome, most were highly skilled professionals, explorers, merchants or missionaries. They came individually or in small groups and integrated into the colonial cultures where they landed without creating communities that could be identified as distinctly Italian or Italian American.

The first transitional period, 1790-1810, encompasses the early formation of the U.S. as a nation and a growing republican/anti-colonial awakening on the Italian peninsula. Italy had long been a colonial holding controlled by foreign European powers usually Austria, France and/or Spain. With the examples of independence of the U.S. and the effects of the French Revolution Italians began to dream of independent nationhood after centuries of foreign rule. Many Italians began to actively pursue independence which in turn brought them in conflict with colonial authority. Many under threat of execution or confiscation of property were forced into exile. Some chose to flee or immigrate to the U.S. during this period. In the majority of those coming to the U.S. in the early 1800's the U.S. government recognized a kindred republican spirit and between 1800-1880 the U.S. Government regarded Italian immigrants as political refugees. However, this second wave of Italian immigrants was very different than the first wave, both in profile and in numbers and tended to track and be influenced by the changing political conditions in Italy.

I believe that the best way to examine the second wave is to divide it into three subparts. The first subpart occurred between 1800 and 1850 when approximately 10,000 Italians, eighty percent from north of Rome immigrated to the U.S. Rather than the elite of Italian society, the Italian immigrant of that first part of the second wave tended to be grounded in the middle class of their society and highly focused on political action. Their communal associations in the U.S. revolved around political attachments and activities taking place back in Italy. By the 1850's however the immigration pattern again changed as a result of increased rebellious activity throughout Italy and disastrous earthquakes which struck in the Basilicata region. What resulted was a dramatic increase in immigration with approximately 9,000 Italians entering the U.S. between 1850 and 1860. Who these Italians were also changed as fifty percent were suddenly arriving from the battlegrounds and earthquake ravaged southern Italy. Of those from southern Italy many, possibly the majority, were from Basilicata. Those who arrived from the south were generally poorer. As new arrivals with little or nothing in the way of financial support, the five points area, considered the worst living conditions in the U.S. became the only home the majority of southern Italians could afford. Immigration numbers from Italy continued to swell in the subsequent decade as well and between 1860 and 1870 with war raging in the U.S. and civil unrest heightened in Italy some 13,000 Italians arrived in this country with profiles similar to the preceding decade, fifty percent of southern Italian origin. Then after decades of struggle the Italians experienced success, unification and nationhood. However, for the average southern Italian unification brought even more suppression, now at the hands of their own countrymen as things went from bad to worse. Between 1870 and 1880 the immigration surged to 60,000 Italians, eighty percent of whom were from southern Italy. Conditions had for the average southern Italian so deteriorated and prospects of improvement so unlikely that immigrations to the U.S. in the 1870's became generally recognized as the best viable option. This despite the fact that the U.S. was experiencing its worst economic depression in its short history and outright hostility against immigrants as competitors for jobs was becoming rampant.

The Italy they left and the America that our San Felese ancestors and other southern Italians encountered in the 1850's in New York, 1860's in New Jersey and Buffalo in the 1870's was a landscape that presented formidable challenges which they were willing to take on despite the fact that they were few in number and had few resources. Even by 1880 the total Italian immigration to what comprises today the U.S. from 1492 to 1880 was only 100,000 and yet our ancestors persevered and made it work, survived and flourished. The experiences of those 80,000 Italians who between 1850 and 1880 laid down the foundation for 4.4 million Italians that followed is really the immigration story that our community today needs to preserve as an important part of our heritage.

The first 80,000 Italians who immigrated between 1850 and 1880 set the stage and prepared the ground work for those who followed. In the next decade between 1880 and 1890, 310,000 Italians arrived most from the south. The five points became "Little Italy" a community capable of expressing

its own culture and political will. The "Festa" is very much a part of that story and expression. By 1888 if you look closely at the documentation that survives in New York, Trenton and Buffalo, the Italian immigrants, many from Basilicata were not just clustering in regional or village enclaves but were forming political, social and economic organizations. They were forming cultural groups like the Garibaldi Society, Benefit Societies for mutual aide and medical support, and lahor organizations. Their neighborhoods were becoming home to a first generation of American born children of Italian descent.

Since we started our website in 2007 the world of the internet has opened the door to many new opportunities to explore our communities' heritage. It has provided a communications link between our organization and people who share our heritage scattered about the globe. It has also put us in touch with other Italian American organizations that are actively working to preserve and maintain our common heritage. Two years ago we were happy to receive an invitation from Mr. Steven La Rocco, Esq. Who is president of the Potenza Society in New York and has been working tirelessly to maintain the tradition, to attend the 120th San Rocco Mass and procession in New York City.

The invitation was for us a unique opportunity to reconnect with an American tradition that our San Felese ancestors participated in and helped start with other immigrant groups from Basilicata. As Frank Bruno and I drove to New York we wondered if St. Joseph's Church, the recipient of the art work which originally was housed in St. Joachim's Church, might include a copy of the Madonna Di Pierno. When we arrived and observed the preparations for the procession we were reminded of our own celebrations, which began in the year 1139 in Pierno Italy.



**Picture of statue as displayed within the Church in Pierno built by returning Crusaders from San Fele in 1189.**

The San Fele story of the procession with their Patroness begins almost 900 years ago. Every year since 1139 the people of the region hold a religious festival in mid August in which the ancient statue of the Madonna is carried in procession through the streets of the small hamlet of Pierno. It is in Pierno that knights of San Fele, returning from the 3rd Crusade, built a church to house the statue in the year 1189.

Below are photographs taken from an article in Italian by Marcella Viggiano describing the procession and feast as conducted in Pierno.



**Statue being removed from the ancient Church in Pierno**



**Two pictures of the Procession as it takes place in San Fele first as they carried the statue and then second note the carrying of oak and olive branches.**



**Photo showing procession as it was conducted in the early 20th century**

So great was the religious and cultural devotion to the Madonna that as San Fele began to experience locals leaving to seek employment and a better life it was natural that they brought their religious customs with them. As San Felese immigrants fanned out from New York City and helped found other Catholic parishes, each enclave made sure that the Madonna Di Pierno was represented in their communities. Unfortunately many of these original copies have been lost over time, only a few having been preserved.

## **St. Joachim's Church, New York City**

If a "first" copy existed it would most likely have been in St. Joachim's Church in New York City. The original St. Joachim's Church sadly was torn down in the mid 1960's as part of an urban renewal project. There appears to be no written record of whether the Church contained a copy of the Madonna Di Pierno statue. It is our understanding that most of the Italian religious materials and art was transferred to St. Joseph's Church, a Scalabrinian parish also located in the Little Italy section of New York. We have inquired of the pastor of St. Joseph's but he has no record of receiving a statue identified as the Madonna Di Pierno. While attending the San Rocco feast in 2008 at St. Joseph's Church, Frank Bruno and I did notice that the Church contained a Statue which clearly if not the Madonna Di Pierno was artistically influenced by that ancient statue. According to the plaque the Statue is a copy of the Madonna Della Stella, the original of which resides in Craco Italy which is in Basilicata Matera Province. Since many statues are influenced by but not identical to the ancient originals it is impossible to determine for certain what the statue at St. Joseph's is a copy of. By color, staging and crown it is closer to the Madonna Di Pierno than to the Madonna Della Stella but stylistically it is different than both. I have included photographs of both below.



MADONNA DELLA STELLA

Photograph of the Madonna Della Stella - Craco Italy



Photograph of the Madonna Della Stella as it appears in St. Joseph's Church, NYC



Photographs of the Madonna Della Stella as it appears in St. Joseph's Church, NYC

## St. Anthony of Padua Church, Buffalo NY

St. Anthony of Padua Church was established as an Italian-American parish in the 1890's. Italian immigrants, mostly from Basilicata started arriving in Buffalo in the early 1870's. At the time of the parish founding the majority of the parish congregation had San Felese roots. To this day the feast of the Madonna Di Pierno is celebrated at St. Anthony's. Below is a photograph of the Statue of the Madonna Di Pierno which resides in the Church.



Photographs of the Statue of Madonna Di Pierno located at St. Anthony of Padua Church, Buffalo NY



## St. Lucy's Church, Newark NJ

St. Lucy's was established as an Italian-American parish in Newark, NJ in the early 1890's. Many of the original parish congregation were from Basilicata. Of those from Basilicata a significant number were from the town of San Fele. St. Lucy's Church has on display a Madonna Statue which it does identify as the Madonna Di Pierno.



Photos of Statue of the Madonna Di Pierno on permanent display at St Lucy's Church, Newark, NJ

## St. Joachim's Church, Trenton NJ

Originally the Italian-American community of the Chambersburg section of Trenton was part of the multi-ethnic parish of the Immaculate Conception Church. However in the late 1890's the Italian-American community, which had been developing since the 1860's, petitioned to form an Italian oriented parish. As a result St. Joachim's was established in the early 1900's. At the time of the parish founding the majority of parishioners were San Felese. Celebration of the feast of the Madonna Di Pierno continues to the present. Declining parish enrollment however forced a merging of St. Joachim's parish and Immaculate Conception parish a few years ago. The new parish is known as Our Lady of the Angels parish.



Photos of the Madonna Di Pierno St. Joachim's Church, Trenton NJ

At the present time the copy of the Madonna Di Pierno Statue at Our Lady of the Angels Parish at St. Joachim's Church is used in alternating years in the Procession marking the Assumption.



Photo from the Trenton Times, August 16, 2008 of the Madonna Di Pierno Statue being prepared for procession



Photo of board from Pierno Italy's Church of Our Lady showing the procession as it is carried out in Sydney Australia

## St. Joseph's Church, New York City

2008 we witnessed an interesting event. One of the other Italian Heritage groups, the Craco Society, who were also present, were approached by Camille and Vincent Niceforo, residents of the City, and presented with a gift. It turns out that Camille's family had retained a small statue of St. Vincenzo the patron of Craco which was a copy of the statue that the group used to carry in New York.



Photo of Camille & Vincent with the statue

The following year the Craco Society requested that they celebrate their feast day at St. Joseph's. They were gracious enough to invite me. The photographs below show the small statue decorated on the side altar in St. Joseph's along side of the altar's permanent statue of a reclining St. Vincenzo.



Photos of the St. Vincenzo's statue