

The Italians in America

Between 1880 and 1920 more than 4 million Italians were counted entering the United States. No other immigrant group arrived in such numbers in so few years.

Italy, not united politically until 1870, was a land of high population density and very uneven economic development. Its southern provinces were desperately poor--what Italians call *la miseria*. Italy in this era was a classic country of emigration, much of it temporary emigration. One estimate has it that between 1871 and 1971, 26 million Italians emigrated and 13 million of them returned to their homeland. Unlike the other groups, the bulk of whose emigrants came to the United States, Italians also migrated heavily within Europe and to North Africa and South America.

Italian immigration to the United States was largely male, about 75 percent, and was marked by a high remigration rate, perhaps 45 percent. Relatively large numbers of Italians came more than once. One survey at Ellis Island showed that 10 percent of incoming Italians said they had been in the United States before. Of those who stayed in America, perhaps 70 percent settled in the cities of the Northeast, though there were sizable communities in California, mostly of northern Italians who had important roles in the development of the fishing industry as well as viticulture and other agricultural enterprises.

The majority of Italians in the eastern United States, like the Irish before them, did much of the pick-and-shovel work, creating new infrastructures, paving urban streets, building elevated lines and bridges, and digging tunnels for subways, trains, and automobile traffic.

Although married Italian-American women of the first and second generations rarely worked outside the home, their unmarried daughters did so to a very high degree.

Overwhelmingly Catholic, the Italians had a different relationship to the Roman Catholic church than did the Irish. The reasons for this lay partly in Italy, partly in America. Whereas in Ireland the church functioned as a protector of the people against British oppression, in much of pre-1870 Italy, the church was the state, and after 1870 the church tended to identify with landlords rather than with the peasantry from which most of the immigrants came. Thus Italians, particularly Italian men, developed an almost reflexive anticlericalism. In America, Italians found an Irish-dominated church which was usually indifferent and sometimes openly