

The Montazzolesi first came to Scotch Plains in 1869 followed by a fairly large influx in 1892, according to Checchio, who is chairman of the Sister City project. Many settled just after World War II.

Checchio estimates that Italians account for as much as 25 percent of the 26,000 people living in Scotch Plains, and nearly all of them can trace their roots to Montazzoli. Some families have been in Scotch Plains for five generations.

“The Montazzolesi built most of Scotch Plains. They were the builders,” he said. “They came here with nothing and all they wanted was the opportunity of America. They lived essentially under a feudal system. Their prime ideal was to own a piece of land, build a house, and build a family. They were rich in work ethic.”

On Sundays, he said, all the Italian masons would gather at a site and lay the foundation of a house. The following Sunday, all the carpenters would gather and build the frame, and so on until the house was complete. None of the immigrants, said Checchio, ever had to worry about a mortgage.

The Italians all had neatly tended vegetable gardens in their backyards and many grew grapes to make their own wine. Checchio recalled that his father would produce four barrels of homemade wine each year.

The Montazzolesi were also well organized politically, counting among their rank numerous Scotch Plains mayors, including Checchio, and councilmen. Most of the Montazzoli descendants, like state Senator Donald DiFrancesco (New Jersey Acting Governor, 2001), are Republicans.