



HISTORICAL NARRATIVE
ITALIAN SETTLEMENT AND MIGRATION
CITY OF ROCHESTER, NY – LYELL AVENUE CORRIDOR

The purpose of this narrative is to present information to be used by the Landmark Society of Western NY and the Little Italy Association, in their collaborative effort to seek and obtain an official “Little Italy Historic District” designation, for a specific area located along the Lyell Avenue corridor, in the City of Rochester, NY, which saw the bulk of Italian settlement and migration over the past 150 years.

In 1815, Lyell Avenue was named after Phillip Lyell, a Gates Commissioner at the time, known for his service to the community. The City of Rochester was later founded in 1817. The initial boundaries for the proposed Little Italy Historic District would be from the corner of State Street and Lyell Avenue (East entrance) to the corner of Broad Street, Dewey Avenue and Lyell Avenue (West entrance), and initially, for development purposes, only one building or property deep, to the North and South of that proposed area. *(Note: The proposed historic district, however, spans North to Lorimer Street and South to Jay Street. See map of the proposed district at the bottom or the LittleItalyROC.com website, in the download section.)*

One of the principal causes of Italian immigration to the United States was the “Risorgimento” (Unification of Italy), during the period of 1860 to 1870, and the subsequent two World Wars. The unification (and wars) caused many economic difficulties for the people of Italy, especially Southern Italy.

The first Italian immigrant arrived to Rochester, NY, in 1860, but his name is unknown and not recorded. Many Italian immigrants initially came to Rochester and the Upstate NY area for very short periods, during the 1800’s, to work on the railroads, or to help dig the enlargement of the Erie Canal (the Barge Canal), and they lived and worked under extremely harsh conditions, often times discriminated against and treated poorly, as simple uneducated “Day-laborers” *(a term for Italians who didn’t understand English, and who came to the U.S. as laborers earning a meager daily wage, and which later morphed into the racial slur “Daygo” – an ugly term which is still used, unfortunately, even to this day).*

The first Italian immigrant to be listed in the City of Rochester's directories was Domenico Sturla (1868), an organ grinder, who resided in Carthage Alley, an area known as "Sleepy Hollow", located north of Andrews Street and between St Paul Street and the Genesee River, now known as "Old Rochesterville".

In 1868, two other Italians, Isaac and John Verspelle, also resided just north of the train tracks near what is now the Inner Loop area, and near the area of Front and Mill Street, at the mouth of the Lyell Avenue corridor. In 1878, an Italian settlement existed in an area near North Street and St Paul St., called "Poison Row". Eventually, the Poison Row settlement was demolished in 1887, by Board of Health order, for its squalor, and its residents moved to another crowded tenement on North Water Street, Platt Street and near State Street, again near the mouth of the Lyell Avenue corridor, where in 1889, an "Italian Mission" was set up by several prominent matrons, near the area of Lake Avenue and State Street, headed by C.R. Cutler and her associates. The Italian Mission served to educate Italian immigrants who were turned away from night school, due to their inability to understand English at that time. In 1896, the Italian colony's first non-political men's club was formed, called "La Societa Italiana", made up of primarily west-siders from Front St., Mill St, Lyell Avenue and the Jay Street area neighborhoods. Also in 1896, the "West End Italian Political Club" was formed by west-side homeowners, who hailed primarily from the Jay Street and the Lyell Avenue corridor area. In 1896, Bishop McQuaid (*Rochester's first Bishop, who strongly believed in integrating Italian and Irish immigrants into the local Catholic Church and Diocese*), helped establish "Holy Apostles Church" on the corner of Lyell Avenue and Austin St, as a Parish to welcome the Italians and all new immigrants who populated the area.

In 1898, the Italians further confirmed the initial organization of their little "colony" on the Lyell Avenue corridor (*"colony" was the term used by City of Rochester Historian Blake McKelvey in his historical recount listed below in the bibliography*), establishing the first Italian-built Catholic Church in the City of Rochester, known as St. Anthony of Padua Church, which was originally located close to Lyell and Lake Avenue, on the corner of Jay Street and State Street, near the historic DiPaolo Bakery, which still operates there to this day. Later, St. Anthony's Church was moved north along the Lyell Avenue corridor, a few blocks away, to the area now known as Jones Square Park, on Lorimer Street.

In the late 1880's, as the number of Italian families and newcomers in Rochester overflowed the original tenements located in the St. Paul Street and North Street area, the Italian "colony" began its more dense migration to the area near the mouth of the Lyell Avenue corridor, (*near Front and Mill Streets, as depicted by the yellow stars in the map below*), headed West towards Broad Street and Sherman Street.

In 1901, the Baden Street Settlement was started, first to help Jewish immigrants, and later the Italian immigrants. The first “Italian Democratic Committee” was established in the 5th ward, near the Jewish community, and near what is now the Town of Brighton, and it was led by Michael Cariola. In 1906, there was a location actually referred to as *“Little Italy”* in Rochester, *(as mentioned by City of Rochester Historian Blake McKelvey in his historical recount listed below in the bibliography section)*, indicating that the Italian colony had better-organized itself at that time, and that it extended from the mouth of the Lyell corridor, near Front Street and Mill Street, into the area of Lake Avenue, Lyell Avenue, Lorimer Street and Jay Street, where the Italians had primarily settled and built their church, and where they set up many shops, businesses, saloons, bakeries and other commercial activities. *(See map below for business names.)*

The flourishing Italian community, however, quickly out-grew their St. Anthony of Padua Parish, which numbered around 14,000 people in 1907. Bishop McQuaid entrusted Father Gefell to organize and build “Our Lady of Mount Carmel”, which opened in 1909, located at 53 Ontario Street, *(near the areas of Central Park, North Street, Scio Street, Avenue D and the North Clinton Avenue area, which was known as another Italian neighborhood called “Mount Allegro”, as described in Jerre Mangione’s famous book, entitled, “Mount Allegro”. Our Lady of Mount Carmel was in close proximity to the Rochester Public Market area, East of the Genesee River and High Falls, where many Italians had also settled in the early 1900’s. Many Italians immigrated to Rochester as tailors, and wanted to be closer to Rochester’s budding clothing industry and factories, near Clinton Avenue, such as Hickey Freeman, Bonds and Timely Clothes.)*

In 1910, the “DiPaolo Baking Co.” was established, originally located on Ontario Street. *(Note: In 1920, DiPaolo purchased an old church at 598 N. Plymouth Ave, previously called Frank St., near Lyell Ave, to expand operations. At that time, there were 10 Italian bakeries in the Lyell Ave neighborhood alone.)* The “Gioia Pasta Company”, also founded in 1910, operated a pasta and packaging plant on the corner of Cameron Street and Parkway, less than one block north of Lyell Avenue and near Dewey Avenue.

While most Italian immigrants and their families were Catholics, it is important to note that a few were Protestants, *(actually known as “Waldensians” at the time, hailing from a congregation founded in the Middle Ages)*. These immigrants settled near the Broad, Lyell, Jay and Smith Street areas *(near the area that is currently known as the Josanna neighborhood area)*, and their church was built at 766 Broad Street, off of Lyell Avenue, and it opened in 1915. It was called the “Italian Presbyterian Church” and its parishioners were often pelted with stones by those who opposed the Italians and their protestant faith.

The “More Candy Company” was started in 1916 by an Italian father and son, David and Ray Cassaretti, at 31 Mill Street, near the Lyell corridor, where it had made its home for over 50 years. *(Note: In 1966, More Candy moved to 54 Brown Street, and in 1970, Douglas Lee Rook Sr. bought the company. In 1983, the land and building were sold back to Eastman Kodak. In 1993, the company dissolved.)*

The Charles Settlement House was founded in 1917 at 445 Jay Street, by Miss Harriet Barry and a group of Catholic lay women as an affiliate of the Catholic Charities. These women assisted Italian, and later German, immigrants to settle in the community. *(Note: Later in the 1990’s a Community Center was also established by the United Neighborhood Centers of Greater Rochester Foundation, which the Charles Settlement House is part of, to provide more coordinated, comprehensive services to neighborhood residents right in the Lyell Avenue neighborhood area. Many sites were examined as possible locations for the Community Center. Finally a property was acquired in 1995, north of Lyell Avenue, on Parkway Avenue, [originally the Gioia Macaroni plant mentioned above] and the Community Center was opened in 1997.)*

Workers at Rochester’s “Bond Bakery”, which was part of the “General Baking Co.”, helped found “Petrillo’s Bakery”, which was established in 1920 on Lyell Avenue, where it still operates today. *(It is important to note here that during the period of the 1920’s to the 1940’s, Italian immigrants were banned from entry to the United States, and were considered “enemy aliens”, during World War II, along with the Japanese and Germans. Yet during that time, the Italians that had made it to Rochester, were very resourceful, and began to form many businesses, all along the Lyell and Jay corridor.)* In the early 1920’s, the City of Rochester established a Police Station, with a mini-jailhouse behind it, on the north side of Lyell Avenue, between Myrtle Street and Cameron Street. It is now an historic apartment building.

In 1929, the “Congrega dei Santi Martiri di Celano” *(a Catholic Women’s Society formed by Italian immigrants from the City of Celano, L’Aquila, in the Abruzzi region of Italy)* formed at Saint Anthony of Padua Church, where it regularly held its meetings, and planned annual dinners and exciting cultural festivities, to celebrate St. Anthony of Padua and the three Martyred Saints of Celano *(the S.S. Santi Martiri di Celano)*, also holding lavish Grand Processions around the surrounding area of Jones Square Park.

At approximately the same time (late 1920’s), Italian immigrants of primarily Neapolitan (Pignataro) and Sicilian origins, held their annual celebration of St. Giorgio (St. George), in the area of Smith Street and Lyell Avenue, utilizing the old St. Patrick’s Church (later becoming St. Patrick’s Cathedral). *(Note: St. Patrick’s was Rochester’s first Catholic Church, founded more than a decade before the City of Rochester. St. Patrick’s was also the area’s first Cathedral, and it served that role for decades before*

Eastman Kodak Co. bought it and then demolished the property in 1937, to expand its growing industrial empire. As the center of what later became the Catholic Diocese of Rochester, four bishops were consecrated at St. Patrick's, highlighting the strong faith and presence of Italian and Irish immigrants on the west-side, near the Lyell corridor, and more specifically, near Platt St. and North Plymouth Avenue.)

When the Bausch Street Bridge was built in 1931, it facilitated easier access to the “Little Italy” that had formed on the west side, along the Lyell Avenue and Jay Street corridor, and many east side Italian residents moved across the river to the more bustling Lyell Avenue and Jay Street areas.

By that time, the population of Italian immigrants increased twenty-fold in Rochester, primarily in the Lyell Avenue area, where skilled laborers were employed as masons, carpenters and in other trades, or later as assembly line workers in the Lyell Avenue area’s many industrial factories. In 1932, John Veltre opened the “Veltre’s Bakery” on Parkway Street, just off of Lyell Avenue, and right next door to Roncone’s Restaurant, the Rochester area’s oldest Italian restaurant, which was established in 1937. John Veltre also bought “Zazzara Bakery”, on the opposite corner from Roncone’s, and later on Otis St. A year before that, in 1936, “Al’s Stand”, a Rochester institution, opened its doors for business at 249 Saratoga Street.

In 1949, the Mastrella family opened the famous “Rocky’s Restaurant” on Jay Street. In the early 1950’s, the Italian-owned and former “Marianetti Funeral Home” was established on Plymouth Avenue, near Jones Square Park, and near the St. Anthony of Padua Church. At approximately the same time, Dr. Scinta, MD, who spoke fluent Italian, opened his practice at the corner of Plymouth Avenue and Lyell Avenue, to primarily serve the area’s many Italian residents at that time. The early 1950’s also saw the establishment of noteworthy Italian businesses, such as “Shortino’s Meat Market” on Jay Street, the well-frequented “Pop’s Pub” on Lyell Avenue near Saratoga Street (where many Italian men went to play cards and have a few drinks with their friends), and “Celentano’s Market” on Lyell Ave, north of Whitney Street, where the Italians went to purchase their imported Italian music records and housewares. In 1953, the “Italian American Sports Club” was established near the corner of Sherman Street and Lexington Avenue. In 1959, “Martusciello’s Bakery” opened at 229 Saratoga Street, and now operates on Lyell Ave in Gates. In 1966, the historic “Nacca’s Bakery” was established at 463 Jay Street, where it still operates today.

The "Celanese Sports Club" was formed in the early 1970's, in a building the Celanese men purchased on Lyell Avenue, near Murray Street, close to Holy Apostle’s Church. It was a well-frequented club for many years, by Italians from every region of Italy. The Celanese also held a yearly "Celanese Picnic" at Seneca Park, which was well-frequented by Italians and non-Italians alike, from across the city.

“Little Italy” on the Lyell Avenue and Jay Street corridor strengthened in numbers, and continued to expand westward, down Lyell Avenue in the late 1970’s and early 1980’s, into the Town of Gates, which to this day, still features a very prosperous Italian culture and family presence, primarily on Lyell Avenue and Spencerport Road, where many Italian businesses still exist, such as bakeries, restaurants, shops, dentists, insurance agencies, travel agencies and other noteworthy commercial activities. In the mid-1990’s the Italian American Community Center board met at a location on Lyell Avenue owned by C&C Imports, directly across from Wegman’s on Lyell Ave, and later built a building in the Town of Gates.

In 2016, the Little Italy Neighborhood Association, Inc., (“LINA”) formed in Rochester, NY, as a 501(c)(3) non-profit corporation and public charity, seeking the formal commemoration of the over 150 year history of the Italian culture’s settlement and migration along the famous Lyell Avenue corridor, with the hope of attaining “Little Italy Historic District” status for an initial, small, and well-defined area on Lyell Avenue, where Rochester, NY’s “Little Italy” began, and later expanded, in its historic heyday.

LINA’s mission is to commemorate the area’s splendid 150 year history, and it is intent on attracting new retail, housing and business investment to the Lyell corridor. LINA is determined turn the area around, into a safe, prosperous and vibrant *destination place*, which may also become a new *Community Benefit District* and job-creating “economic driver” for the greater Rochester area and the upstate region. LINA is also intent on creating a new *Little Italy Welcome Center*, which would welcome new arrivals to the area, and help them acclimate, integrate and settle in Rochester. The new center would provide access to information and services for immigrants, and new arrivals, as they seek the American Dream – just as Italian immigrants have done for over 150 years – and still do, to this day. The Lyell area has always been known as an immigrant’s corridor, and as a first stop for new arrivals to our city, including the Italians, Hispanics, Irish and Germans, and has always welcomed all cultures. (*Note: An area of the current Josanna Neighborhood, near the proposed Little Italy Historic District, was also known as “Dutch Town” at one time.*) LINA’s goal is to initiate a rebirth of the Lyell area, and to revitalize this truly magical and primary NW Gateway to our city, so as to continue to convey the warmth, friendship and inclusiveness that the Italian-American community has always been known for -- in an area which the entire community could celebrate and enjoy together, as a true historical treasure of the City of Rochester.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- *The Italians of Rochester an Historical Review* (1960) by Blake McKelvey, City of Rochester Historian
- *Italians in Rochester, NY* (1900-1940) by Frank A. Salamone
- *What Ever Happened to St. Patrick’s Church* by Alan Morelle (2015), Democrat & Chronicle Newspaper
- *Mount Allegro* by Jerre Mangione (1943)

PROPOSED "LITTLE ITALY HISTORIC DISTRICT" MAP



The red and green areas combined indicate the proposed Little Italy Historic District area along the Lyell Avenue corridor. Red area alone indicates the area targeted for the first phase of potential development.

Some businesses (shown in blue) are no longer there but many still remain along the Lyell Avenue corridor.

The yellow stars indicate the areas where the first few Italian families settled in the late 1860's, later migrating towards the mouth of the Lyell corridor, and then to the Lyell Avenue and Jay Street area, which subsequently developed as Rochester, New York's original Little Italy.



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