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

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June 2025

Part 2 of 6: The Structure and Creation of Basilicata Emigrant American Enclaves 1850-1880

Introduction: Emigration By the Numbers

This article represents the second part of a six-part series focused on 19th century Basilicatan/Italian immigration to the U.S. For clarification, I break Italian emigration to the U.S. into five distinct “waves”. From my perspective the conditions that led to each emigration wave and the social/ regional composition of the emigres in each wave presents a unique profile reflecting the politics and conditions of the time.

The “First Wave,” occurred between 1790-1850. This wave consisted of about 10,000 individuals who were highly skilled and relatively affluent. They sought individual economic or professional opportunity, often at the request of America’s elite society. They came to America sourced primarily from northern and central Italy. At the time of the First Wave most southern Italians with similar skilled backgrounds sought professional opportunity mainly in Spanish controlled South America.

Political conditions in Europe led to a “Second Wave” of emigration to the U.S. This wave occurred between the years 1850-1880. It consisted of about 75,000, primarily middle-class individuals and families. A number of these individuals sought and were granted U.S. “political” refugee status. Many were fleeing the repercussions of failed involvement in either pro-constitutional local uprisings or Italian ‘unification” actions. The majority of this group consisted of about 80% northern and central Italians. The remainder of the refugees of the “second wave” came from southern Italy, with roughly half of those from the Italian State of Basilicata.

This was followed by a Third Wave” of emigration which began in 1880 and extended to 1907. This wave consisted of about 1.3 million mostly poor, undereducated, and under-skilled Italian emigres. This wave was post-Italian Unification. In Italy the third wave took place during a period of political consolidation of power, and a brutal economic/political suppression in the South. Much of the “third wave” was made up of “southern” Italians seeking relief from the disastrous economic and educational policies imposed by the newly “unified” Italian State. Those policies caused the collapse of the primary school educational system and most of the agricultural and industrial economy of southern Italy. These conditions accounted for the poverty and lack of education witnessed in the profile of Italian emigres of the time. (This is the wave in which we see the rise of Italian-American, “Little Italies,” communities.)

The “Fourth Wave” begins in 1908 and continues to World War II. The fourth wave consists of about 3.1 million people. This wave is by far the largest of the Italian emigration waves. It too was made up mostly of poor, undereducated and under-skilled individuals. They sought to escape what had become systemic southern Italian poverty. The profile of emigres of this wave was the result of continued poor national government management, exacerbated by the inadequate response to another horrific natural disaster. Like the third wave, this wave was made up primarily of “southern” Italians. Within that southern Italian majority was a surge in Sicilian emigres. The Sicilian surge was caused by the disastrous “Great Messina Earthquake”, which struck Sicily and Calabria in 1908. This event was one of the worst natural disasters to strike Europe in the last thousand years. The city of Messina was wiped out and over 100,000 southern Italians, mostly Sicilians, were killed in the earthquake and the tsunami that followed.

Lastly, there is the “Fifth Wave” which extends from the end of World War II to the present. I include this wave as a necessary acknowledgement that Italian emigration did not stop with World War II. Since the war, America has seen the arrival of about 800,000 individual emigres from Italy.

Basilicata Emigration During the Second Wave

This article’s primary focus is on the Basiicata emigres’ contribution to the “Second Wave”. Conservatively, Basilicata contributed between 10 to 15% of the 75,000 Italians making up the “Second Wave”. This translates to between 7,500 and 12,000 individuals and families. Basilicata emigration was marked by ascending numbers by decade throughout the second wave period. As part of the big picture, U.S. immigration data estimates that a total of about 250,000 Basilicatans emigrated to the U.S. between 1850 and 1930.

During that eighty-year emigration period, Basilicata registered the highest per capita emigration of any region of Italy. However, because of the State’s relatively small population, Basilicata’s percentage only represents 6% of the total 4.5 million Italian immigrants arriving in the U.S. between 1850 and 1930.

By way of comparison of the second wave emigration numbers with U.S. population, American census data places the second wave of 75,000 Italian emigres within a U.S. population of about 50 million in 1880. For those statistically minded 75,000 people out of an 1880 population of 50 million represents less than .2% of the U.S. population. In terms of “all” Italian emigration to the U.S., 4.5 million between 1850 and 1930, the first 75,000 individuals made up only 1.7%. While small in number, this “second wave” is important to the Italian-American narrative in that it represents enough individuals and families to begin to observe the formation of early Italian emigrant clusters or enclaves.

The “migration” of individuals from Basilicata during the time of the “second wave” was initially “forced” by natural circumstances. In the 1850’s there were two incredibly powerful earthquakes, one in 1851 and a second in 1857 centered in the Potenza region of Basilicata. Combined the impacted Basilicata region suffered about 25,000 earthquake related fatalities. Literally, a decimation of a population of the affected area which held 250,000 people. The earthquakes’ devastation of infrastructure forced both short, and long-term population displacement and resettlement. This displacement initially was contained within local less damaged areas of Basilicata. Little by way of national or international relief reached or was offered to the Basilicata population during these successive tragedies. A small number of refugees from the earthquakes, those with transportable skills, were able to range further in search of economic self-support. This brought a small number of refugees to the Americas in the late 1850’s. Many of those initial refugees thought of this “survival” migration as temporary, that they would return to Italy to rebuild their lives. Subsequent civil unrest, political/military suppression of civil rights and economic depression in a very short time altered those expectations and encouraged ever increasing permanent emigration. It is about those initial Basilicatan refugees of the second wave that this article focuses.

It is important to differentiate the Basilicata émigré of the 1850’sand 1860’s from the more “political” Italian refugee of the period. While both groups of Italians were primarily middle-class, they were not arriving under the same conditions. Basilicata emigres did not arrive with reserve access to the same financial resources as the others. The Basilicatan refugee was arriving from a region of tremendous economic and structural devastation. As a result, they were more likely to seek out the poorest/ cheapest accommodations upon arrival, and to be willing to take on work, often seasonal, wherever they could find it.

According to our records many of these 1850’s and 1860’s refugees from Basilicata found low-cost housing in the “Five Points” district of Manhattan. This location was close to the Castle Garden center, which was an American customs point where most arrivals from Europe entered the United States between 1855 and 1892. The “Five Points” district of lower Manhattan was, by any social measure, the “worst” ghetto in the U.S. The district was served by a highly contaminated water source resulting in the highest mortality rate in the country. Its dense population consisted of the poorest of America’s urban poor. This included large numbers of poor immigrants, many of whom were displaced victims of the economics of the “Irish potato famine”. The Five Points district area was beset by gangs, violence, crime, and overseen by corrupt local government officials. The movie “Gangs of New York” gives a visual of conditions in the “Five Points” around the 1850-1860’s timeframe.

Under the circumstances, the Basilicatan émigré’s natural cultural tendency, a dependence on “fratellanza” based support, was to cluster in small groups centered on old world regional affiliations. At first, due to lack of resources, this meant residing in shared rooms, and as more arrived, they rented shared houses or tenements. In time, when their numbers grew, the houses and tenements became city blocks of housing, and Basilicatan enclaves formed. It was a process which offered mutual support, security and protection in an often hostile, local environment. Many of the young Basilicatan men who began emigrating especially after the implementation of Legge Pica in 1863 were veterans of both the southern unification war and the militant resistance to the political/military suppression imposed afterwards. They were not strangers to harsh unfair treatment or physical intimidation.

In the 1850’s, 1860’s and 1870’s the Five Points Basilicatan enclave’s residential structure was fluid due to seasonal work. Seasonal work often drew many of the resident Basilicatan men away for months. When they returned for the winter, they often shared rooms, sometimes ten or twelve to a room. They conserved whatever income they earned. Their modest earnings were preserved either to send back as support or as savings to eventually bring family over. The “Five Points” represented both a centered return point, and a transatlantic communication hub for Basilicatan families.

(Note: A principal example of the type of seasonal work available, in the 1850’s thru 1880’s was rail expansion related projects. Our records indicate that some Basilicatan emigres crossed the river to Newark and found work in the lumber yards cutting timber for railroad ties. Eventually, Basilicatans helped construct the Rahway to Bound Brook rail line extension in the 1870’s and 1880’s. This employment opened the door to setting up Basilicatan enclaves in both Newark’s 1st Ward, and Bound Brook. Many others Basilicatans would find work in the 1860’s and 1870’s extending rail lines northward to Buffalo where a Basilicatan enclave also began to flourish by the docks on Lake Erie. Some Basilicatans worked on rail bridge constructions which included the Brooklyn Bridge in the early 1870’s. This helped directly support the “Five Points” enclave as well as providing access to a new enclave location in Brooklyn in the 1880’s. The Brooklyn Bridge was a Roebling project and the Roebling iron works in Trenton began to hire Italian yard labor during the project in 1879. The Roebling factory work was the catalyst for the Basilicatan enclave that developed in south Trenton).

From the above short summary, we can to follow the American disbursement of the early Basilicatan emigres. We can also follow how that work opportunity led to small Basilicata enclaves developing in in the Northeast. What is less apparent, unless you study our histories, is that these early Basilicatan emigres of the second wave, even as they worked in remote areas or began to reside in disbursed small enclaves, remained in close contact thru a network that always centered on the “Five Points” or lower Manhattan. Thru this network, they could keep tabs on each other, while receiving and returning communications back to Basilicata. The Five Points remained the largest enclave and a link for all early Basilicata emigres in the 19th century. This central informal network was remarkedly efficient and critically important as an organizational support tool.

The Architects of the Early Italian-American Community

From the earliest years of Basilicatan emigration a collective effort was made to establish and maintain contact among the region’s village groups for mutual support. The Basilicata emigres remained a tight knit social collective. Those efforts are observable in the records maintained on both sides of the Atlantic. In mid- 19th century Italian records there is documentation that highlights émigré “groups” travelling together and gathering in specific Basilicatan villages, as part of the routing process before leaving for New York. In addition, there are stories that demonstrate Basilicatans could reliably find specific individuals in America quickly even when located in distant States. We also have records that indicate that they could transmit important information between enclaves and back to Italy efficiently. These records are the first indications that a purposeful effort at organization existed from the outset of Basilicatan emigration. My interpretation is that these records demonstrate that Basilicatan emigres of the second wave knew exactly where family and friends in America were, and intentionally made their way to those collective locations. In my opinion this is remarkable transatlantic coordination given the unfamiliar landscape and barriers to communications that existed in mid-19th century America.

After the passage of Legge Pica in 1863 our records and oral histories suggest that Basilicatan emigres transitioned, psychologically, from temporary refugees in America to immigrants seeking permanent resident status. The records further indicate, that early Basilicatan emigres, mostly educated Italian middle-class, sought out models of American benefit structures to aid them in their quest for assimilation. These men knew that the competition within the “ghetto” for beneficial resources was very difficult and that access to those resources was not equitably attainable, often due to bias, prejudice, and corruption. We have to acknowledge in our narratives that many early Italian emigres, intelligent, hard-working and determined were nevertheless crushed by the inequities of the time. But even though they were often knocked down, they got up, listened, watched, and learned the survival skills needed in America.

The Church and 19th Century Emigrants

In the early years of the American Republic, the Catholic Church was a small minority Christian religion within a multi-denominational largely Protestant society. Centuries old distrust, animosity and prejudices existed against Catholics. For example, following the ratification of the U.S. Constitution, every one of the original States had Constitutional provisions in their State Constitutions restricting Catholics from holding public elected office. New Jersey did not fully remove the prohibitions until the 1840’s.

Into this backdrop of Catholics being a very small minority religion, you have the sudden arrival of over a million poor Irish Catholics between 1830 and 1880. These were mostly refugees of the Irish Potato Famine. Added to this you have an additional several hundred thousand German speaking Catholics arriving at the same time. The Catholic Church in America was simply under resourced in terms of clerics and parishes to adequately meet either the spiritual or humanitarian needs of the emigrants arriving. As a result, the American Catholic Church focused a great deal of its energy in the 19th century on “growing” resources and expanding its footprint to reach these emigrants and their descendants. There are many notable American Catholic Church leaders from the period who devoted their lives to “catching up” to the demand and to improving the spiritual and economic wellbeing of the developing American Catholic community.

In my research into the interaction of the Catholic Church with 19th century Basilicatan emigres I have uncovered a number of Italian religious, “leaders”, who dedicated their lives to the Italian immigrant community. During the second wave an unrecognized but important key Italian figure was a humble Franciscan priest and theologian, Fr. Pamfilo da Magliano. Father Pamfilo and the Italian priests that would follow him to America has a story that is critical to understanding some of the spiritual and organizational actions taken to ensure emigrant success across multi-ethnic lines.

In historic Italian emigrant terms, Fr. Pamfilo and his group of “second wave” Franciscan priests with all of their successes and failures were the incubator for the later trials and successes of Pope Leo XIII, Cardinal Scalabrini, Mother Cabrini and others of the late 19th and early 20th century, in addressing the needs of the immigrants in Catholic Church in America.

Fr. Pamfilo was a brilliant scholar and at an early age earned a doctorate in theology and a professorship at the Irish Seminary College in Rome. In 1854 a number of American bishops had gathered in Rome for the announcement of the Papal bull of Pope Pius IX declaring the Church dogma of the Immaculate Conception. Among them, was Bishop Timon, the first appointed Bishop of the newly created Buffalo diocese. Bishop Timon’s diocese was experiencing rapid congregational growth in the mid-19th century due to the influx primarily of poor Irish Catholic emigrants. However, the diocese was also experiencing an influx of German speaking emigrants, many of whom were Catholic as well. The sudden influx of so many Catholic emigrants stressed the resources of what had been a small Catholic community, The stress was especially felt in the need for German speaking clerics. Bishop Timon while visiting the Irish Seminary College in Rome lamented on his failure to recruit German speaking parish priests from Europe to serve the small but growing German Catholic emigrant community in his New York diocese.

Fr. Pamfilo, an instructor at the College, hearing of the need for German speaking priests, suggested the novel idea of a joint arrangement between the Bishop and the Franciscan Order at Assisi. Many of the Franciscan priests of the Order were multi-lingual and the Order had long engaged in a global mission outreach. However, the Franciscan Order had no Provencial presence in the U.S. Father Pamfilo’s suggestion of a joint cooperative arrangement was novel in Church terms as the Franciscan Order operates independently of local Bishop control. Members of the Order are directed by their Order’s charter and answer only to their Order’s hierarchy. Nevertheless, an agreement was reached between Bishop Timons and the head Abbot at Assisi. A formal contract was drafted and was approved by Pope Pius IX. In this formal contract Bishop Timons agreed to supply funds, plus land, for the construction of a Franciscan Provincial headquarters in upstate New York. In exchange, the Franciscan Province at Assisi would provide several Franciscan priests to take on what was normally parish duties among German speaking emigres in the upstate diocese. Fr. Pamfilo was placed in charge of the first contingent of Franciscan priests which arrived in America in 1855. This was thirty-four years before Cabrini landed in America.

Fr. Pamfilo proved to be a brilliant leader and administrator. In the thirteen years that Fr. Pamfilo was in the U.S. not only did his Franciscans provide the pastoral responsibilities required, they created a number of new parishes within the diocese, raised funds, and constructed a number of Churches. As Custos of the new Franciscan Province, Fr. Pamfilo also authorized the founding of two Franciscan convents. The convents in turn provided teachers for numerous elementary schools. Lastly, he supervised the construction of an Abbey and seminary on the property delivered to the Order by Bishop Timon. Attached to the seminary he built and staffed with Franciscan priests a college named after a Franciscan saint, St. Bonaventure.

What is clear is that Fr. Pamfilo had a vision for the “German” Catholic emigrant community which was more than simply providing parish support. His vision equated success and assimilation with service and education. It was a vision organized to be self-perpetuating by advancing and developing from within the talent emigrant community.

Fr. Pamfilo’s initial mission was in service to the U.S. immigrant German speaking community in upstate New York. As a result of his successes in Buffalo three other American Bishops asked him to provide German speaking clerics for their dioceses. Fr. Pamfilo negotiated with those Bishops, and drafted new contracts similar to the one entered into in Buffalo.

The U.S. Italian emigrant population in the 1850’s was growing, as the statistics demonstrate, but still very small. U.S. immigration data suggests 10,000 Italian emigres arrived in the decade of the 1850’s and 22,000 in the decade of the 1860’s. It appears, however, that the Italian emigrant population in New York City did reach sufficient size that Archbishop John Hughes recognized the need for an Italian speaking priest to handle parish duties in the City. Archbishop Hughes recruited, from Italy, a parish priest in 1859 and established, St. Anthony of Padua Parish, in Tribeca, an area to the west of the Five Points in lower Manhattan. This was the first Catholic parish in the U.S. specifically organized to serve the needs of an Italian immigrant community. Unfortunately, after a year the Italian priest who was appointed didn’t wish to remain and returned to Italy. This left the Church without a pastor. In 1866 Archbishop McCloskey who succeeded Archbishop Hughes asked Fr. Pamfilo and the Franciscans to take over pastoral duties at the Church. This permitted the parish to be re-established in 1866. The assignment brought the Italian Franciscan priests of St. Bonaventure College into direct contact with the small enclaves of second wave Italian emigrants, including Basilicatans residing in lower Manhattan. I should point out that this is twenty-three years before Mother Cabrini landed in lower Manhattan.

In 1868 Fr. Pamfilo began negotiations with Bishop Bayley of New Jersey to send “German” speaking Franciscan priests from St. Bonaventure to minister to the growing German speaking population in that State. However, Fr. Pamfilo was unable to conclude those negotiations. It appears that he was in a sense a victim of his own success. At the time of Fr. Pamfilo’s American ministry, the American Catholic Church was struggling under the resource burden of providing for the spiritual and physical care of over a million impoverished and newly arrived Irish immigrants. Many local parish priests looked at Pamfilo’s expanding successes in German speaking communities as drawing resources away from a larger more critical immediate parish needs of poor Irish immigrant Catholics. The complaints and unfounded allegations against the focus of his efforts resulted in Fr. Pamfilo’s recall to Rome in 1868.

However, the New Jersey contract with Bishop Bayley was entered into by Fr. Pamfilo’s Buffalo N.Y. Franciscan subordinates. Several of Fr. Pamfilo’s proteges were sent to the German immigrant parish of St. Francis in Trenton. That delegation was headed by Fr. Peter Jachetti and his first assistant Fr. Domenic Marzetti. They arrived at St. Francis Church in Trenton in 1869 and began their pastoral ministry to New Jersey’s, German speaking Catholics.

(Note: By 1869 the Franciscan priests who came to America to minister to “German” speaking Catholics had established pastorships in three separate locations which would continue to grow as Basilicatan enclaves during the second wave, Lower Manhattan (Five Points), Buffalo and Trenton. This contact and support between Italian priests and the early Basilicatan emigres is important to later Basilicatan community development.)

St. Francis parish had a substantial and prosperous German speaking congregation. This was due in part to the Roebling factory wire works. Roebling, himself a German emigrant was one of the wealthiest industrialists in the city. Roebling had a policy of hiring only German factory workers. Our Basilicata records indicate that at the time that Fr. Jachetti arrived, 1869, there were only about a dozen Italian emigrants living in Trenton, all males and mostly from Basilicata. They resided in south Trenton, near the original first Roebling factory building. Contact resulted in deep friendships and support between the Italian Franciscan priests and the small cluster of Italian immigrants in Trenton.

A Lesson in Structure Learned from the 1870’s U.S. Anti-Immigrant, Anti-Catholic Riots

The early 1870’s saw the U.S. enter into its worst financial depression to that date. The already present anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic sentiment, which was directed primarily at Irish and German immigrants, combined with the financial downturn to spur violent riots in several U.S. cities, including Philadelphia. In Philadelphia two of the oldest Catholic Churches were burned down in the riots. The two parishes sued the City of Philadelphia for failing to protect the structures. The suit was initially dismissed on the legal argument that the Roman Catholic Church was a foreign State/entity and did not have standing to sue. The dismissal was overturned when it was determined that the parishes were not the property of the Vatican. The parishes had both been incorporated individually under Pennsylvania law, therefore, they were a U.S. domestic “person” under the law. As such, the parishes had all of the civil rights attached to their legal “American” corporate status and could bring suit.

I mention this episode because we will note many instances in the record of early Italian-American incorporated organizations. This was derived from the lesson in assimilation of enforcing civil legal rights learned from the riots. Italian emigres in the 19th century would find that when it was convenient, their “foreign national” status would often bar them from certain expected civil rights, including enforcement, or access to legal contracts. The legal rights that incorporation provided was used as an opportunity to overcome discrimination, prejudice and racial bias, a sort of proto or pseudo-Civil Rights Act.

Fr. Jachetti was a true protégé of Fr. Pamfilo as can be seen from the resume of his accomplishments. Upon taking over the role of pastor of St. Francis Church in Trenton he immediately invited ethnic German nuns from the Franciscan convent in Philadelphia to locate a convent in Trenton. These nuns initially engaged in teaching duties at St. Francis elementary school. This freed up his three Priests and one brother to engage in a ministry that included regular visits to German speaking Catholic enclaves around the State. Fr. Jachetti would ultimately create several new parishes throughout New Jersey.

By contract with Bishop Bayley, Fr. Jachetti was to be allowed to set up a State headquarters for the Franciscan ministry in New Jersey. He began this task in 1870 with the purchase of land and onsite building of a rectory, chapel, a seminary for first year seminarians, a convent and elementary school in the Borough of Chambersburg, at the time a suburb of Trenton. He named this new parish Our Lady of Lourdes Parish. This location was chosen by Fr, Jachetti as it was near where Roebling Company was planning to build a major expansion of its iron works, with attendant major expansion of factory workers and housing.

The second phase of Fr. Jachetti’s plan for the new parish site was to raise funds to build a full seminary facility with dormitory, a church, which would have been Trenton’s largest at the time, and a four-year College. As you can see, Jachetti was following the St. Bonaventure plan of Fr, Pamfilo. In addition, the Franciscan nuns requested permission from Fr, Jachetti to raise funds for the purpose of purchasing land for building and staffing what was intended to be Trenton’s first hospital. Fr. Jachetti endorsed the hospital plan in 1874 and immediately was immersed in conflict and competition for charitable contributions and resources with other local diocesan parish priests. This was the same resource conflicts that had resulted in Fr, Pamfilo’s recall to Rome and sadly would end the same way for Fr. Jachetti. (Note: this initially happened to Cabrini as well, fifteen years later).

As the Roebling factory complex expansion and the company’s production lines increased labor demands exceeded available supply. The Roebling administration spotted, in the increasing Italian immigrant flow, a potential for new low-cost labor. They reached out to Fr. Jachetti for help in accessing that pool of workers in 1879. In turn Fr. Jachetti reached out to the small, about eighteen individuals, Basilicata enclave in Trenton for assistance in recruiting Italian workers. What follows allows us to examine 19th century Basilicatan networking in some detail.