



Wheeler Talk, Episode 2, Italian-American Heritage Month

Transcript:

00;00;10;25 - 00;01;23;10

Allison

[ALLISON] Welcome back to Wheeler Talk: the History of Ocean County. I'm your host, Allison. I'm the local history librarian, and I work out of the Hugh B. Wheeler Room, located on the second floor of the Ocean County Library's headquarters branch in Toms River. Wheeler is a treasure trove of genealogy and local history resources and home to many cherished one of a kind artifacts. Wheeler is a great place to sit and read or conduct research. To help with your research, Wheeler has rare books, historic pamphlets and magazines, old city directories and phonebooks, yearbooks from Ocean County schools, maps and atlases and much, much more. We have regular programming in Wheeler, such as our recurring class for genealogy enthusiasts called Getting Started with Ancestry. Are you a visual learner? Try Wheeler Movie Night. Wheeler Movie Night takes place on the third Thursday of every month, unless otherwise specified. Come and enjoy a rare film from one of our locked cases. Are you an auditory learner? Well, you're in the right place. Each episode of Wheeler Talk will focus on a historic event in Ocean County, as well as highlight some relevant artifacts in Wheeler's own collection.

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Allison

[ALLISON] Now onto today's episode in honor of Italian-American Heritage Month. First, for those who may be uncomfortable with such content, this episode contains stories with graphic imagery which may be upsetting to some. Italian-American Heritage Month is celebrated from October 1st through October 31st each year in recognition of the achievements and contributions of Italian immigrants. Italian-American Heritage Month was first recognized by Congress and President George H.W. Bush in 1989. The month of October was specifically chosen to coincide with Columbus Day. Now, many people know Columbus Day marks an important date for Italian Americans, but not many people know the reason why. The true history of Columbus Day isn't widely known to those who are not of Italian-American descent, or even to some who are Italian. And believe it or not, it has nothing to do with Christopher Columbus. To uncover this history, we have to go back over a century. When Italian immigrants began arriving in America, most settled in major industrial cities. This included New York, Connecticut and Louisiana. An event that occurred in Louisiana in 1891 is where we'll find the origin of Columbus Day. Italians began emigrating to Louisiana in the 1830s. By 1871, Louisiana was home to more Italian

Americans than any other place in the country. Most of these immigrants were from Sicily, which earned the French Quarter in New Orleans the nickname Little Palermo. The Italian-American population was rapidly increasing and with it anti-Italian sentiment. According to the Historic New Orleans Collection, this hatred was fueled by nativism and racism. The Historic New Orleans Collection writes, "Though Italians were European, most Americans did not see them as fully white." End quote. Their language and customs, paired with their darker skin tone, weren't looked upon favorably, and many, not just in Louisiana but throughout the country, saw them as a threat to the American way of life. According to the Library of Congress, the United States was in an economic decline in the late 1890s, and immigrants were blamed for taking American jobs. The newspapers took part in this anti-Italian sentiment printing theories which alleged that those of Mediterranean descent were inferior. These articles were often accompanied with cartoonish drawings depicting Italian Americans as criminal and subhuman. The Library of Congress describes one cartoon from 1891 that claimed, quote, "If immigration was properly restricted, we would never be troubled with anarchism, socialism, the mafia and such kindred evils." End quote. The Library of Congress goes on to explain that attacks on Italian-Americans were not limited to newspaper headlines and cartoons. Anti-immigrant societies formed all over the country, and the KKK saw a spike in membership. Catholic churches were burned or vandalized and Italian-Americans were attacked by mobs. In the 1890s alone, more than 20 Italian Americans were lynched. All of this came to a head in 1890 when Police Chief David Hennessy, who had made unpopular decisions regarding taxing brothels and gambling houses, was shot dead in the streets. Needless to say, he had many enemies. But when asked who committed the crime, he is said to have responded with the word "dagos." For those of you who may not know, "dagos" is a derogatory term against those of Spanish or Italian descent. Hennessy's death was the spark the city had been craving. According to 64parishes.org, a committee of 50 was assembled to address the growing crisis. The growing crisis being the growing Italian-American population. To call what the committee did an investigation would be a very large stretch. They rounded up hundreds of Italians based solely on their descent. Of these hundreds, 19 men were arrested, all of whom were Italian-American. One of whom was a 14 year old boy. The first nine men went to trial, but the trial was over before it even began because the city had its mind made up. Newspapers fueled the flames, declaring the men guilty and calling for justice. When the trials did take place, the threat of danger rose to an unimaginable height. Because you see, the trials resulted in six acquittals and three mistrials based on established alibis. And there was no containing the outrage of New Orleans at that point. These men were promptly thrown back into prison, which sent a strong message. New Orleans was going to make an example out of them, regardless of their innocence. The newspapers grew bolder. The Daily State's newspaper wrote "Rise people of New Orleans." They also wrote "Alien hands of oath-bound assassins have set the blot of a martyr's blood upon your vaunted civilization." The people of New Orleans heard the call. On March 14th, 1891, New Orleans citizens, including politicians, led the largest lynch mob ever to assemble on United States soil. Tens of thousands carried rifles and rope and surrounded the parish prison where these Italian immigrants were being detained. Passionate speakers incited an increasing level of rage from the mob, yelling about the threat of Italians and the need to run them out of the city. This mob stormed the prison, grabbing any guns they could find in the process. They then dragged the nine Italian Americans out of their cells, as well as two other Italian Americans who were being held for unrelated crimes. These innocent men were paraded in front of a mob, which cheered for their deaths. I can only imagine what they must've been thinking and how terrified they must have been. They came to America in search of a better life, and instead New Orleans celebrated as their bodies were riddled with bullets. The Smithsonian writes "Some corpses were hung. What

remained of others were torn apart and plundered for souvenirs.” End quote. Some members of the mob actually took body parts home. These men whose bodies were mutilated and scavenged as trophies were grandfathers, fathers, husbands, friends. Not only did these men lose their lives in such a tragic and senseless way, but some of the most prominent newspapers of the time, including The New York Times, praised the lynchings. Newspapers told tales of the Mafia, as well as stories of any Italian American who had ever committed a crime as justification for what had happened. Those who held anti-Italian sentiments were convinced they were in the right. Even Teddy Roosevelt in a letter he sent home to a family member about the murders, wrote, “Personally, I think it rather a good thing.” Italian Americans across the country were outraged, and so were leaders in Italy. So much so that Italy broke off diplomatic relations with the United States. There was even talk of war between the two countries and this is where Columbus Day makes its first appearance. To ease tensions, President Harrison instituted Columbus Day as a means of drawing a connection between Italian Americans and an Italian who discovered America. The hope was that it would be an olive branch to not only bring the country together, but to ease tensions between the United States and Italy. But what Columbus Day really was, was a means of placating the harrowing experience of Italian-American immigrants. All these decades later, many Italian Americans hold on to Columbus Day not as a means of celebrating an explorer who happened to be Italian, but as a way of honoring ancestors who came before, those who read the newspaper headlines, those who experienced the hatred, and those who lost loved ones because of it. Unfortunately, what happened to Italian Americans who first emigrated to this country wasn't unique. America is often referred to as the melting pot because our country is made up of generations of immigrants from all over the world. In many ways, what happened to Italian Americans is part of the American experience. It's important to remember the past because the only way to do better is to remember what we did wrong so that we don't make the same mistakes with current or future generations of immigrants. If you want to learn more about what happened on March 14th, 1891, the Ocean County Library has a few books you can check out. One is called Rope and Soap: Lynchings of Italians in the United States. Another is called La Storia: Five Centuries of the Italian American Experience. According to the National Italian American Foundation, there are an estimated 26 million Italian Americans in this country, making Italians the fifth largest ethnic group in America. Each year, Italian Americans around the country use the month of October not only to celebrate, but to acknowledge the tribulations of our ancestors. As an Italian American myself, I can tell you that pride in our heritage goes a lot deeper than a favorite family dish or holiday tradition.

00;11;12;28 - 00;17;13;06

Allison

[ALLISON] For many of us, recognizing the strength of our ancestors by remembering their stories and their hardships is how we respect our heritage. At this time, I'd like to highlight some stories of Italian Americans in Ocean County. This is my family's story. I'm just over 80% Italian from both my mom's and my dad's sides. My dad, a large, burly Italian man, is my hero. The typical strong, silent type. You always knew where you stood with him, and you always wanted to impress him. He was and still is, so loved that when he passed, a line extended out of the funeral home doors to the point where the funeral home opened a second room for my family. I wish I could tell you more about my dad's Italian ancestry, but I missed the opportunity to ask him when he was alive, and the pieces have been hard to put together. So today, I'm going to tell you about my mom's side of the family. My great grandparents on my mother's side, Innocente and Domenica Melchiori emigrated to America from a small village in

northern Italy called Piacenza at the turn of the century. They settled in a small one bedroom apartment on the famous Baxter Street in New York's Little Italy with their eight children, Joseph, Ralph, Peter, Julia, John, Michael, my grandfather Louis, and Florence. In total, though, they had ten children. An infant daughter passed back in Italy before they left for America. My great grandma carried her picture with her always as that was all she had to remember her by. Another daughter sadly passed when she went to turn on the light bulb in that same apartment in Little Italy, which exploded and set her on fire. My great grandparents persevered not only through these losses, but also through cramped living conditions, low wages and anti-Italian sentiment. My mother always tells me stories about how they never wasted any scrap of food and how my great grandma would sew the holes in her children's socks until she couldn't anymore. At which point she would turn the socks into blankets for her family. As time went on, my great grandparents lost three more children, two boys and my grandfather, Louis Melchiori, who passed from stomach cancer after his appendix ruptured. And the doctor at the time missed some pieces of the organ which stayed behind to rot and turn cancerous. He was only 37. My grandfather left behind a wife, my grandma, Angelina Casali Melchiori, and three children. They all lived in a house in Staten Island, the house where I lived for the first seven years of my life, the house which my grandfather built from the ground up. After he passed the house wasn't finished, and so my grandmother, the strongest woman I know, not only worked three jobs and raised three children on her own, but she also figured out how to finish building that house. My grandma Angelina was an absolute beauty. Whenever I see pictures of her, it's hard to believe she wasn't a movie star. She was so beautiful that men lined up to ask her out after my grandfather passed, but she turned them all down. For the rest of her life, she never dated, never remarried. All she wanted was my grandfather. For them, it was true love. And that love never died. They met when they both lived in Little Italy, not two blocks from each other. My grandfather played baseball at the local baseball field on a team called the Park Arrows. My grandma played softball on the same field. She was outgoing. He was shy. But she had her sights set on him. And she made the first move. With her beauty and charm, he didn't stand a chance. Their life together didn't last long, but their love story has been passed down along with a valuable lesson. Find the one you love. Love them and only them forever. It gives me peace knowing they are together again. Last year, I had the great opportunity of visiting the apartment on Baxter Street, where my grandfather lived with my great grandparents and his siblings. Little Italy has changed over the years and not much remains, but my family's building still stands tall. As luck would have it, the interior hasn't been renovated since my family lived there. So the stairs we walked up, the mailboxes we saw, even the floors all remain the same. We weren't able to step inside their apartment as it's currently occupied, but the realtor for the building was kind enough to let us tour the apartment across the hall, which has the very same layout. To say the apartment was small is putting it mildly. It was hot, cramped and I truly don't understand how ten people lived there at once. All I can say is they must have really loved each other. Growing up Italian was an experience I wouldn't trade for anything. Sunday dinners, old family recipes, cold pasta for breakfast, a house filled with loud voices and passionate love. A mentality that pushes you to endure no matter what comes your way, and an unwavering belief that you're being watched over by your ancestors, who you want to make proud. It was always instilled in me to respect and remember my ancestors. They were kept alive through stories and photos, and it always felt like they were in the room with me, like they were there for holidays and family gatherings. Truly, I feel as though I've met them all. I am who I am, and I am where I am in my life because of them and their sacrifices. Not a day goes by when I don't acknowledge and appreciate that. To honor them, I tell their

stories. I display their photos, I celebrate their birthdays, and I even buy small gifts for them around the holidays. It's the least I can do for all they've done for me. Now let's hear Colleen's story.

00;17;14;15 - 00;22;32;06

Colleen

[COLLEEN] Hello. My name is Colleen, and I'm going to share a little background about the Italian side of my family. With the help of a fellow genealogy researcher, I can trace my maternal family's history back to the mid 1730s. My ancestors lived in the small village of Fraine in the province of Chieti, in the region of Abruzzo, which is east of Rome. The hilly village of Fraine is very small, just 6.2 square miles with a current population of approximately 500 residents. Its economy is mainly based on agriculture and the production of extra virgin olive oil. At one point, the village had nearly 2,000 residents. However, the population started to dwindle as people emigrated to America. Like many others in the village, my ancestors left Italy for the United States searching for better opportunities. One such relative, my great grand uncle Carlo, left Italy, but unfortunately did not reach his destination. On March 17, 1891, he died on the steamship Utopia when it accidentally collided with a moored battleship in the Bay of Gibraltar. The Utopia sank within 20 minutes, 562 passengers, crew, and would-be rescuers were lost. My great grand uncle Carlo was 22 years old and he left behind a wife and young son. My great grandfather and grandfather did reach their destination and they settled in New Jersey. Here they found a community of immigrants from Fraine who eventually formed the Societa' Frainese di Mutuo Soccorso, a civic organization that banded together to help one another settle in their new home and maintain their cultural identity. When my grandfather returned to Italy to visit his mother, he was drafted into the Italian army during World War One. He was shot during a battle and became a prisoner of war. After the war when he returned to the United States, this time with his wife, he became a tailor. My grandmother did not have any relatives in the U.S. or so we thought. In 2010, my family took a trip of a lifetime to Italy. We stayed in a town near Fraine called Carunchio and combined a cooking and cultural tour with a bit of genealogy research. We made pasta from scratch, visited an artisanal cheese business, an olive farm, a bell foundry, a trabucco, and much more. We were in Chieti during two festivals, the Feast of Santa Maria Mater Domini in Fraine and the Infiorata del Corpus Domini in Carunchio. The Feast of Santa Maria, Mater Domini and the procession to the Sanctuary commemorates a miracle that took place around the year 1000 A.D.. The miracle occurred when a young shepherdess born without the ability to speak or hear saw a flash near an oak tree and witnessed the Virgin Mary with a child in her arms. The shepherdess yelled for her parents to come, but they did not recognize her voice. When they eventually returned with her to the oak tree, the Madonna instructed them to go to the parish priest and tell him to build a chapel in that place where devotees could pray. The parents, once they reached the parish priest of Fraine fulfilled his request, and a church stands in that spot today. The Infiorata originated in medieval times, and the tradition has evolved into a cherished cultural event involving thousands of flowers. It is held annually on the occasion of Corpus Christi, showcasing an extraordinary display of floral artistry. The cobblestone streets of Carunchio are adorned in a carpet of flower displays depicting religious and folk-themed scenes. As I mentioned earlier, we also planned to do some genealogical research on our trip. One day we visited the Fraine town clerk and he was extremely welcoming and helpful with our research. He opened up the ledgers, letting us take photos of birth, marriage and death records. We walked around the town afterwards and saw a strong connection to New Jersey. One of the roads was named Via Paterson in recognition of the many residents who migrated to that city. As we were walking down the street to see my grandmother's old home, we ran

into a cousin on my grandmother's side that we did not even know that we had. It was a heartwarming experience and many tears of joy were shed. Our cousin thought she did not have any living relatives on her dad's side of the family. When we asked her where she lived, she said, Saddle Brook, New Jersey. Imagine our surprise and good fortune in finding our cousin halfway around the world. Since then, we have kept in touch with and visited our found cousins on many family occasions and celebrations. We also see them when we attend the Feast of Santa Maria Mater Domini, which is celebrated each year in Clifton, New Jersey. I heartily encourage anyone with an interest in family history to talk to their family members, glean what information they can, gather photos, mementos, and use online resources available to research further. The library subscribes to Ancestry Library Edition, a valuable database accessible from inside any library location. Thank you for listening to my family's story.

00;22;33;19 - 00;22;36;19

Allison

[ALLISON] Last but not least, here's Diane story.

00;22;37;24 - 00;27;07;14

Diane

[DIANE] Hello, this is Diane. I'm a librarian here in Toms River, and I want to tell you a little about my family. My family is of Italian descent. I am a second generation American on one side of the family and a third generation on the other side. I am 100% Italian-American. And when I was growing up, that's what I knew. I was an Italian American. I, of course, know I'm American, but my identity is with Italian Americans and that's my heritage. And it's very important to me. My grandfather on my father's side was born in 1908. He immigrated in 1921, so he was 13 years old, which is amazing to me to think that he came across the Atlantic on a boat, which he would refer to me as a banana boat. I remember when I was young doing a little interview with him and he said, "Oh, it's a banana boat." And I can remember the way he spoke and he had this really hard Italian accent. He worked all of his life and he was a walker. He always was walking around and a classic Italian guy, a long coat and a hat. He came from Bari, Italy, which is near the heel, and he became a citizen in 1927. So even though he was 19 years old when he became a citizen, came in through Ellis Island, his name is on the wall and I can really vividly remember how he spoke and how he looked and that he was an iconic Italian. My grandmother on that same side, she's also Italian. And as I said, we were always 100% Italian. But it was weird to me because she was born in Canada and I would be like, "Well, doesn't that make us part Canadian?" And my family would be like, "No, no, we're Italian." It was always very humorous to me. And now as I get older, I do a little more research. So what it was, was her mother was pregnant as they, when they came over, they couldn't come through Ellis Island. They went by way of Canada. I don't know the reasoning. Maybe that was always their plan. Or maybe it was because my great grandmother was pregnant. So my grandmother was born in Canada and on Ancestry interestingly I was able to find her baptismal certificate because at that time you were baptized right away. It's in French, so I haven't been able to translate it yet. I'm working on it. So she was born in Quebec, and when she was six months old, she came via Canada into Rouses Point, New York. That's when she came to America. So both of my grandparents on my dad's side came in. Again, she was only six months old, was my grandfather was 13. That grandmother became a naturalized citizen in 1968. So that was interesting to me. So just interesting things you find when you do a little bit of research. My heritage, though, comes from more, I think, my mom's side. Of course, both sides are Italian-American, but all of my traditions come from my

mom's side. I think that's because you take your mother's traditions. So anything we do for holidays, it's more my mom's like struffoli for Christmas and we have a cookie we call Aunt Jenette's, that was an Italian Christmas cookie, and then we made our bread to Easter. Everything in my family does revolve around the foods and the feast and enjoying a good meal with our family. It's not the same as it was years ago. Again, my family grew up and they were in the city, so the Bronx. And everyone was in the same apartment. Everyone was so close that my mom was able to go up to her grandmother's apartment and her aunt lived in the same building and her uncle was down the block. But we still try to keep our Italian traditions as much as we can. We all know that St Joseph's Day in March is the most important date. I don't care what anybody else tries to say. St Joseph's Day is more important. It's got a better dessert, it's a better meal. So name days are very important. And yeah, so that's a little bit about my family. So thank you.

00;27;09;02 - 00;28;04;12

Allison

[ALLISON] If you're interested in exploring your own Italian-American ancestry, Wheeler is a great place to start. One of Wheeler's most popular collections is our Italians to America series, which lists Italian passengers who arrived at American ports. Wheeler also has a helpful book titled Italian-American Family History: A Guide to Researching and Writing About Your Heritage. And, of course, Ancestry Library Edition is an excellent resource for unlocking the clues to your past. The past, at the end of the day, is really just an idea, isn't it? A myth. Because each of us are living, breathing examples of how the past never really dies. Thanks for listening to Wheeler Talk: The History of Ocean County. See you next time for another blast from the past.