

**Richard N. Juliani.** *Building Little Italy: Philadelphia's Italians before Mass Migration.* University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998. xxiii + 398 \$50.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-271-01731-0.



**Reviewed by** Roger D. Simon

**Published on** H-Urban (September, 1998)

In *Building Little Italy* Richard Juliani argues that previous studies of Italian American immigration have slighted the early, pre-1880 phase of settlement. This is a bit of an unfair straw person since Juliani, a sociologist at Villanova, who has written on Italian immigration, has previously given consideration to that period.[1] This volume, however, does deal entirely with the pioneers who staked out the terrain, established the first communal institutions, carved occupational niches, founded businesses that provided financial resources, and developed the earliest community leaders. The book's strength and principal contribution lies in its very detailed examination of the formative decades, notably between 1840-1870, showing how the handful of early immigrants came together geographically and founded the earliest institutions. The research is extraordinarily meticulous and truly painstaking as he traced individuals through various records despite misspellings and Americanization of names.

Italians trickled into Philadelphia from the mid-eighteenth century on, but the numbers re-

mained very small until the 1850s. Most of those whose origins can be identified came from the Ligurian coast, in and around Genoa. The small port town of Chiavari supplied a few emigrants who laid the basis for a subsequent chain migration. In most cases, these immigrants arrived in the United States from intermediate ports outside Italy. This intriguing bit of information comes from the petitions for naturalization and suggests a cosmopolitan population with prior exposure to urban life and to trade.

By examining church records, marriage and baptism certificates, and naturalization records, Juliani is able to piece together that most of the small number of Philadelphia Italians knew one another; they served as witnesses and sponsors for each other at important life events, although whether or not these relationships pre-dated migration cannot be sorted out. Limited evidence suggests that in the 1840s there were boarding houses of Italian men in the Moyamensing district, and by 1850 there was the beginning of a distinct clustering in that district. These early settlers clustered in a few fields, and thereby laid the

basis for important occupational niches later on: street musicians and organ grinders, confectioners (they introduced ice cream to the city), sculptors and painters, particularly on construction projects.

Until mid-century the community was too small to support any formal institutions, but the population grew steadily, from no more than 200 in 1850 to about 760 in 1870, including the American-born children. During those two decades immigrants from the Italian states coalesced, clustered more in one part of the city, and founded the first communal institutions. A small number of successful businessmen provided the resources and the leadership necessary for communal organization. By the 1870s Philadelphia's Italians were ready to take their place on the public stage with other immigrant groups.

The social and demographic characteristics changed little during the middle decades. Juliani examined in detail the census manuscripts for 1850, 1860, and 1870 and provides an excellent demographic profile. The population continued to draw from the Ligurian coastal area and nearby northern provinces. Of 237 people with a listed occupation in 1870, the vast majority were either artisans or worked in sales and commerce at some level. There were now some clear niches, particularly as food handlers and dealers and in construction trades. Only a small number were identified as street musicians or organists, but their visibility and accusations of child-slavery tarnished the Italians' image in the community. Other migrants pursued a variety of crafts, while a few secured positions as clerks, agents, brokers, and teachers. What stands out most in examining the occupational structure is that the Italian immigrants eschewed the rapidly expanding industrial sector. In 1870 virtually no one worked in textiles, Philadelphia's leading industry, and only a few could be identified with the metal trades. Not more than 8 percent of the 1870 group were listed simply as laborers, but thirty-six men, or 10

percent, reported some real estate or personal wealth. While this community was not affluent, it was not impoverished either.

By the 1850s the community was firmly centered in Moyamensing around the intersection of Eighth and Christian streets. It was a low prestige district, rapidly filling with cheap row homes and Irish immigrants, but it was still within walking distance of the downtown district. Juliani does not speculate at length as to why that area emerged as the Italian cluster, but given the occupation niches the immigrants were developing, it made sense.

Despite the extremely small population, in 1853 the Roman Catholic bishop granted the community an Italian national parish, the first in the country. Located near the corner of Eighth and Christian streets, St. Mary Magdalen de Pazzi Church provided the anchor and the magnet for the community and reinforced the district as the locus for Philadelphia Italians. Fifteen years later a group of the community's successful businessmen founded the *Societa di Unione e Fratellanza Italiana*, the first Italian beneficial society in the city and only the third in the nation. The Society provided an opportunity for its members to demonstrate both their loyalty to Italy and to America and to aid one another and their fellow countrymen. The founders purchased an old fire house near Eighth and Christian streets and renovated it as Columbus Hall. The Hall further anchored the immigrant community to the South Philadelphia neighborhood.

Juliani essentially cuts off his narrative story in the mid- 1870s, which is just a little too soon. The community was still very much in its formative stage; the 1880 census reported 1,656 Italian born residents in the city, double the 1870 population, but still a very small community. We learn in a footnote of the establishment of a second parish only a few blocks from St. Mary Magdalen, but we do not know in what year or the precise location. There is one comment to suggest tension between the more established pioneers and newcomers

from southern Italy and Sicily, but no explicit treatment of the issue is offered. We also learn of the proliferation of beneficial societies (eventually there were 435 of them). Juliani concludes the study with biographical sketches of the major business figures of the last quarter of the century. Those men, most of whom settled in the city in the mid-century decades, did provide leadership to the growing community in a variety of ways, but Juliani does not specifically link the pioneers with the mass migration after 1880 in a narrative story. It is always unfair to criticize an author for the book he did not write, or one the reviewer wanted, so I tread cautiously here, but since the author argues that the initial stage had a powerful impact on the migration that followed and specifically indicates the 1880s as the beginning of the mass migration (p. xviii and p. 297) he might have linked the two more directly.

Rarely have historians of a major immigrant group invested as much effort in tracing the early pioneers as has Juliani in this work. Juliani has sympathetically reconstructed the initial stages of immigrant community formation and imaginatively drawn from a wide range of sources. He provides new insight into the process of how a discrete group of individuals formed social networks and worked to create the base for Philadelphia's large Italian American community.

[1]. Richard N. Juliani, "The Origin and Development of the Italian Community in Philadelphia," in John E. Bodnar, ed., *The Ethnic Experience in Pennsylvania*. Lewisburg, Penn., Bucknell University Press, 1973.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-urban>

**Citation:** Roger D. Simon. Review of Juliani, Richard N. *Building Little Italy: Philadelphia's Italians before Mass Migration*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. September, 1998.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2371>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.