



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

The purpose of this paper is to present information which may be used by the Little Italy Neighborhood Association and others, in a 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 a major portion of Italian settlement and migration over the past 150 years.

The initial, amendable, and expandable boundaries of the proposed Little Italy Historic District, located in the City of Rochester, NY, are detailed below, and are also shown on a separate map, *(the “street view” version, which is available on our website)*, and they include the following:

The corner intersection of the State Street and Lyell Avenue area, acting as the East entrance and border line (running up and down State Street, North to Lorimer Street and South to Jay Street); the Broad Street, Lyell Avenue and Dewey Avenue intersection area acting as the West entrance and border line (running North to Lorimer Street and South to Jay Street); the Jay Street area acting as the South entrance and border line (running East to State Street and West to Broad Street), and Lorimer Street acting as the North entrance and border line (running East to State Street and West to Dewey Avenue.)

Historic Overview

The major transportation/commercial artery through the proposed “Little Italy Historic District” is Lyell Avenue, which was established in the early 19th century as part of the east-west State Road (Route 31) that extends from Central New York, westward, to Niagara Falls. In 1815, Lyell Avenue was named after Phillip Lyell, a Town of Gates Commissioner at the time, known for his service to the community. This was an era when central and western New York witnessed major development, with the establishment of new roads and the Erie Canal. In 1817, the fledgling frontier settlement on the Genesee River received its official state charter and became the incorporated, “Village of Rochesterville.” By 1834, Rochesterville had experienced a dramatic increase in population and the rise of new industries, due to the completion of the Erie Canal. The much-enlarged municipality acquired both a new State charter and a new name, “City of Rochester.”

Rochester’s population continued to expand throughout the mid and late 19th century, with immigrants arriving from Western Europe, beginning in the 1840s, then southern and central Europe, beginning in the 1860s and ‘70s.

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 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 ugly racial slur “Daygo,” a term 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 on the east side of the Genesee River, north of Andrews Street and between St. Paul Street and the river, (an area now known as “Old Rochesterville”).

In 1868, two other Italians, Isaac and John Verspelle, also resided on the west side of the Genesee River, just north of the train tracks near what is now the Inner Loop highway. This area, near Front and Mill Streets, is just south of the intersection of Lyell and Lake Avenues (the eastern gateway to the “Little Italy Historic District”).

In 1878, an Italian settlement existed known as “Poison Row,” existed on the east side of the Genesee River, in an area near North Street and St Paul Street. 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 in the area of North Water Street, Platt Street and across the river, near State Street, not far from Lyell Avenue corridor. In 1889, an “Italian Mission” was set up by several prominent Rochester matrons on State Street, near Lake Avenue. Headed by Miss C.R. Cutler, who had studied in Italy, 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 Street, Mill Street, 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. 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 Catholic parish in the city. Known as St. Anthony of Padua Church, the congregation initially met for several years in Our Lady’s Chapel at St. Patrick’s Cathedral, located on North Plymouth Avenue and Platt Street. In 1906, the congregation rehabilitated former School No. 6 as its first house of worship. The new church, located in a transformed 19th- century school building, was originally located on the northeast corner of Lyell Avenue and Plymouth Avenue, near the historic DiPaolo Bakery, which still operates there to this day. By the 1950s, St. Anthony of Padua Church moved to a new campus on Lorimer Street, several blocks north of Lyell Avenue and across the street from Jones Square Park. (*Note: In the early 1800’s, the park was used as marching grounds for Civil War soldiers and was one of Rochester's earliest baseball fields. In the 1890’s, the park was eventually redesigned by famed landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted.*)

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

Italian families continued to reside on the east side of the river, in neighborhoods now known as Marketview Heights and C.O.N.E.A. In 1901, the Baden Street Settlement was started in that area, 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 it was led by Michael Cariola in 1909.

In 1906, there was a location on the west side of the river 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 east end of the Lyell corridor, near Front Street and Mill Street, north, along 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 district map with business names.*)

The flourishing Italian community, however, quickly out-grew their St. Anthony of Padua Parish, which numbered around 14,000 people in 1907 and was located on the west side of the river, in the Lyell/Lake Avenue neighborhood. On the east side of the river, Bishop McQuaid entrusted Father Gefell to organize and build "Our Lady of Mount Carmel Catholic Church", which opened in 1909 at 53 Ontario Street. This new parish served the Italian residents who lived near the area of Central Park, North Street, Scio Street, Avenue D and the North Clinton Avenue. This area was another Italian neighborhood that became known as "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.

Italian residents established a number of businesses in these neighborhoods during this era. In 1910, the "DiPaolo Baking Co." was established on Ontario Street, near the Public Market.

By 1920, however, the DiPaolo Bakery moved to the west side of the river, when they purchased an old church at 598 N. Plymouth Avenue, near Lyell Avenue, to expand operations. At that time, there were 10 Italian bakeries in the Lyell Avenue 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 West Broad St.- Lyell Ave.- Jay St.-and Smith Street area (near the area that is currently known as the Josana and Dutchtown neighborhoods). Their church was built at 766 West Broad Street, south of Lyell Avenue, and it opened in 1915. A distinctive example of Arts-and-Crafts style architecture, the church was designed by Claude Bragdon, Rochester’s most innovative, early 20th-century architect and is an officially designated City of Rochester landmark. 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 need for social services in the Lyell Avenue-West Broad-Jay Street area resulted in the founding of the Charles Settlement House 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, [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. This was one of three identical police precinct stations designed by noted Rochester architect, Claude Bragdon. Only two of the former police station buildings survive: this one on Lyell Ave and another on University Ave – now the headquarters of the "Writers and Books" organization. The former Police Station on Lyell Ave has been converted into apartments.

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 across the Genesee River 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 North, opposite 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 North 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 Avenue in the town of Gates, a suburb immediately west of the city. In 1966, the historic "Nacca's Bakery" was established at 463 Jay Street, where it still operates today.

During this same period between the late 1950s-mid 1970s, the construction of the Interstate-490 highway, from downtown, west, towards the town of Gates, had an enormous impact on the Dutchtown neighborhood, south of Lyell Avenue, where many Italian residents had settled. The demolition of dozens of houses along that highway corridor, eliminated entire sections of Dutchtown. Many of those residents whose homes were demolished, moved west, into the town of Gates, which today, still has a large Italian community.

The 1950s-'70s also witnessed extensive demolition of many buildings – particularly houses - in the Brown's Square neighborhood, immediately south of Lyell Avenue. Between the 1890s-1930s, Brown's Square had become a mostly Italian neighborhood, characterized by the modest houses, small businesses, and Brown's Square Park, that was originally laid out in the early 1800s. The demolition of properties in Brown's Square was part of the large Federal Urban Renewal program that targeted distressed neighborhoods in the city, many of which were immediately adjacent to the central business district (i.e. the Third Ward, Brown's Square, St. Paul/Joseph/Hudson Avenue area). With the widespread demolition of buildings in Brown's Square, many residents of that area relocated to other neighborhoods or the suburbs adjacent to Rochester.

Development in the "Little Italy" neighborhood continued in the late 20th century. 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 continued to strengthen in numbers, and it continued to expand westward, along 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 along Lyell Avenue and in the Spencerport Road area, 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 an initial "Italian-American Community Center" planning board met at a location on Lyell Avenue owned by C&C Imports, directly across from Wegman's on Lyell Avenue, and later erected a building in a large empty lot area, for their activities 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 years of Italian-American history, 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 along Lyell Avenue, where Rochester's "Little Italy" began to form, 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, and job-creating "economic driver" for the greater Rochester area and the Upstate NY 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, Germans and many other cultures. *(Note: South of Lyell Avenue is a large neighborhood area that was originally known as “Dutchtown” for the many German-speaking or “Deutsch” immigrants who first settled there in the early 1800’s. The same area later also hosted many Italian immigrants, and has welcomed all cultures ever since.)*

LINA’s goal is to initiate a rebirth of the historic Lyell area, and to revitalize a truly magical place in our city, which would continue to convey the warmth, friendship and inclusiveness that the Italian-American community has always been known for. It is a splendid area and Rochester’s hidden gem, which the entire community could enjoy together, as a true historical treasure of the City of Rochester.

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