



# VIVA ITALIA!

Say *grazie* to your Italian heritage—and satisfy that hankering for fettucini, frescoes and operatic tenors—with our guide to exploring your roots in the boot country.

**E**very ethnic group in the United States can recite ways its group has impacted American culture, but Italians have them all beat. After all, *we* dubbed the land *America*—a fine Italian name. And who doesn't like Italian food? Go to any US city and you'll find restaurants serving up pizza, lasagna and tiramisu. Italy's influence in America is everywhere you look, from expensive Armani suits to Roman art to Marlon Brando of *Godfather* fame. And descendants of *Italia*—among them baseball great Joe DiMaggio, Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia and blue-eyed crooner Frank Sinatra—represent one of the United States' largest heritage groups.

More than 5 million Italians have immigrated to the United States since 1820, with 80 percent of them arriving during the peak immigration years, 1880 to 1920. Nearly

16 million Americans claimed Italian ancestry in the 2000 US census. If that includes you, it's time to embark on the genealogical mystery tour to your roots. Let us guide you through the *magnifico* resources that await you.

### Flight patterns

First, you'll need a quick primer on Italian-American immigration history. Small numbers of Italians—mostly from northern Italy—came to America during the Colonial period. Italy still was a collection of independent states, so these early arrivals identified themselves by their hometown or region (Florence or Parma, for example) rather than Italy. Of course, to other Americans, they were all Italians, so that's how they're most likely listed in US records. When the Italian states unified as the Kingdom of Italy in 1861, some place names changed. You'll need to know the

By Sharon DeBartolo Carmack

## TIMELINE

- **1492** Genoese explorer Cristoforo Colombo sets foot in the New World
- **1787** Thomas Jefferson introduces the pasta machine to America
- **1806** Napoleon Bonaparte decrees that Italian births, marriages and deaths be registered
- **1861** Italy unifies
- **1884-1887** A cholera epidemic in Italy kills thousands and spurs emigration
- **1890** Italians establish the Dante Alighieri Society in Boston to promote their culture, language and literature
- **1891** A New Orleans mob lynches 11 Sicilians—nine acquitted of murder charges and two jailed for other crimes
- **1904** San Franciscan A.P. Giannini helps found the Bank of Italy (later renamed the Bank of America)
- **1905** Order Sons of Italy in America is established
- **1911** The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory, a New York City sweatshop, catches fire; nearly half those killed are young Italian women
- **1933** New Yorkers elect their first Italian-American mayor, Fiorello LaGuardia
- **1946** Italy becomes a republic

pre-unification name to find family in earlier records; see Lynn Nelson's *A Genealogist's Guide to Discovering Your Italian Ancestors* (Betterway Books, \$16.99) for a list.

Modern Italy's 103 *province* are grouped into 20 regions (*regioni*). If your ancestors immigrated after the Civil War, they likely came from the southern regions of Abruzzi, Molise, Apulia, Basilicata, Calabria, Campania, parts of Latium and the island of Sicily. More than 3 million made the journey between 1901 and 1920. About a quarter of Italians who immigrated to the United States in steerage left from Naples. Other ports of departure were Genoa in northern Italy and Palermo in Sicily.

Most Italian emigrants, whose roots had been planted in their homeland's soil for centuries, were what historians call "push migrants." They didn't want to leave Italy, but unfavorable circumstances—low wages, a failing agrarian economy, malnutrition, disease, industrial stagnation, the lingering

feudal system, a high cost of living and government corruption—forced them to. On top of that, in the early 1900s, southern Italy experienced drought, volcanic eruptions of mounts Vesuvius and Etna, and a 1908 earthquake that killed more than 100,000 people in the city of Messina alone.

Higher wages and the opportunity to own land enticed people to America. In what's called "chain migration," villagers who'd already moved encouraged others to join them by sending money and putting up newcomers. Some chains were so strong that entire villages relocated over a period of years. Roseto, Pa., was settled almost entirely by Italians from Roseto Valforte, Apulia.

Southern Italians had a high rate of return migration: 30 percent—called "birds of passage"—went back to Italy within five years of coming to the United States. Many men planned to earn enough money in America to buy land back home. Those who stayed here

generally sent for their families after three to five years, but some traveled back and forth several times before bringing kin. Once you identify an Italian man in passenger lists, check for other voyages. (See the August 2004 *Family Tree Magazine* for tips on researching passenger lists.) Since permanent US residence wasn't a goal of many Italians, they were slow to become naturalized citizens.

### Little Italys

Italian newcomers clustered in America with their *paesani* (fellow villagers). If you can't find the place in Italy where your ancestors originated, check out the neighbors. For example, immigrants from Lombardy and Sicily settled a part of St. Louis that become known as "Dago Hill." In New York City, Neapolitans occupied the Mulberry Bend neighborhood; Baxter Street near Five Points drew Genoese; Houston and Spring streets housed Sicilians; and East Harlem's 112th Street attracted villagers from Avigliano. Most residents of Pittsburgh's Panther Hollow district were from Abruzzi. Sicilians from four villages—Santo Stefano Quisquina, Alessandria della Rocca, Cianciana and Contessa Entellina—populated a community in Tampa, Fla.

Italians displaced 19th-century Irish immigrants in urban ghettos—the largest of which were in New York City, Boston, San Francisco and New Orleans. But like other ethnic groups, as Italians became financially able, they moved out of big cities. In fact, new immigrants' mobility may cause you problems locating them in census records—they often changed residences three or four times during their first few years in the United States.

Italian character also may explain an absence from censuses. Because of their emphasis on family loyalty, southern Italians tended to distrust outsiders, especially government representatives such as census takers. Since some Italian immigrants viewed education as a threat to family unity and economy, their children had high truancy and dropout rates, so school records may be helpful. Call school districts in your ancestors' area to ask where records are archived.

Family loyalty bore out in marriages, too: Divorce, separation and desertion rarely happened. Italians almost invariably married other Italians, even into the second generation. They generally sought mates from the same village first, then from the same province—except southern Italians. They'd



MARK STEIN STUDIOS

## — Patron Saints to the Rescue —

From innkeepers to people with in-law problems, everyone has a patron saint. Italian villages adopted them, too, and the locals traditionally celebrated their saint with an annual feast day. Once they came to America, Italian immigrants continued to observe their cherished patrons' designated days. Neapolitans honor St. Gennaro; Sicilians from Palermo laud St. Rossilia; and in Torino, John the Baptist rules.

If you don't know where in Italy your ancestors originated, pay attention to saints or feast days that pop up in your research. If you find a promising mention, visit <[www.catholic.org/saints/patron.php](http://www.catholic.org/saints/patron.php)> or <[www.catholicforum.com/saints/patronf.htm](http://www.catholicforum.com/saints/patronf.htm)>—both are compilations of patron saints listed alphabetically by the groups that adopted them. Search for the saint's name, and it may lead you to your ancestral village. Then look for genealogical evidence to back up your detective work.

typically marry into another ethnic group before taking a northern Italian spouse. Catholicism was the immigrants' predominant religion, although some Italians were Jews and a few were Protestants. If you're searching for American church records, look first to Italian parishes. Italians and Irish often didn't mix well, so your Catholic ancestors might not have attended an Irish parish.

### Civil behavior

Before plunging into records of the old country, you need as much information as possible about your immigrant ancestors in

America. Use home sources and census, vital and church records to find the immigrant's full name (his original Italian moniker, rather than a name he may have adopted in America), birth date (at least a year) and place, arrival date and family members' names. Learn women's maiden names, which Italian record-keepers used on civil records and other legal documents such as immigration passenger lists. (That means it won't be difficult to trace female ancestors or distinguish one Maria from another.) The more you know, the easier it'll be to make a positive ID in Italy.

Once you're ready to tackle Italian research, civil records (*stato civile*) of births, marriages and deaths are your best bet—they're the most readily available Italian record group on this side of the pond. And you may be able to reconstruct whole families in one fell swoop: One document often lists two or three generations. For example, birth records (*atto di nascita*) typically name the baby, father, mother and both grandfathers. Sometimes record-keepers added information in the margins about the child's marriage or death, including the date, volume and record number for the event.

Marriage records (*atto di matrimonio*) give the couple's names, ages and occupations; their parents' names; and the dates the banns were posted. Death records (*atto di morto*) name the deceased plus his spouse, parents and, possibly, minor children. Unfortunately, the records generally don't give causes of death.

Through the wonders of microfilming, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints' Family History Library (FHL) <[www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org)> has made many Italian



Italy's villages enthusiastically celebrate their patron saints' feast days—a tradition carried on by Italian immigrants to America.

COURTESY OF THE ITALIAN GOVERNMENT TOURIST BOARD



COURTESY OF A.P.T. OF ROME

Typical family homes in Italy (above) were modest; as a result, celebrating and recreating usually occurred in piazzas and streets. Small towns such as Vernazza (right)—one of five Italian Riviera villages along a piece of Ligurian Sea coastline called the Cinque Terra—remain close-knit despite an influx of tourists.



COURTESY OF RICK STEVES' EUROPE

vital records available to genealogists. Typically, you'll find the civil vital records for Southern regions filmed for 1809 to 1910, and for Sicily from about 1820 on. Time periods vary for filmed records from northern and central Italy, so check the FHL catalog. Record-keeping there began between 1806 and 1815, but some areas of the north discontinued civil records after 1815 and didn't resume until 1870. Central Italy kept records beginning in 1808.

You'll need to know your ancestor's hometown—in Italy, civil records are held at the town level in *archivio comunale* (town archives), and that's also how the FHL organizes them. They're not online, but you can view the microfilm at your local FHL branch Family History Center (FHC). Go to the FHL's online catalog and do a place search for your ancestral village to see what records the church has filmed. (Be sure you have the spelling right—check an Italian road atlas or map.)

Civil records usually have one volume per year; most volumes have indexes. You also might find an index volume covering 10 years. Italian records are on 16 mm film—which is nearly impossible to read without high magnification, so you'll need to view them on a high-

CAP, go to <[www.comuni-italiani.it](http://www.comuni-italiani.it)> (the site's in Italian) and click on the province for a list of its towns. Click on the town and look under *Codici* for the CAP.

✉ Address your letter to:

*Ufficio di Stato Civile*

*Comune di* [name of town]

[postal code] [province] *Italia*

Microfilming is ongoing, so keep checking the FHL catalog for your ancestor's hometown. When I started my Italian research 10 years ago, only the 1809 to 1865 civil records had been filmed for one of my ancestral villages. A couple of years ago, the library added 1866 to 1910.

### A matter of interpretation

You may encounter obstacles in the records such as gaps, ink bleed-through, water damage and sporadic (or absent) indexes. The records for Terlizzi, my family's village, suffered a worm infestation—their little carcasses and nibbled page corners show up on the microfilm. Don't expect to find the index in the same place on every film: Sometimes it's at the beginning of the volume; other times, it's at the end. And when volumes were divided into two parts because of a large number of births (or whatever), it's in the middle. To add to the inconsistency, most indexes are arranged alphabetically by last name—but some are organized by first name. Here's where you really see how popular the names Francesco and Maria were. Another quirk: Some indexes ignore the prefix for names such as DeBartolo or DeFrancesco, so DeBartolo might be grouped with the Bs, and DeFrancesco under the Fs.

The index may record the date of the event, a page number or the record number. If it lists the date, you'll scroll the film to that date, which is written at the beginning of the record. When there's just a number, you'll have to figure out from looking at the records whether it's a page number or record number. If you don't find your ancestor in the index, search the records page by page. Usually, the name is easy to spot—often it will appear in the margin. If you don't read Italian, how can you decipher what the records say? Arm yourself with:

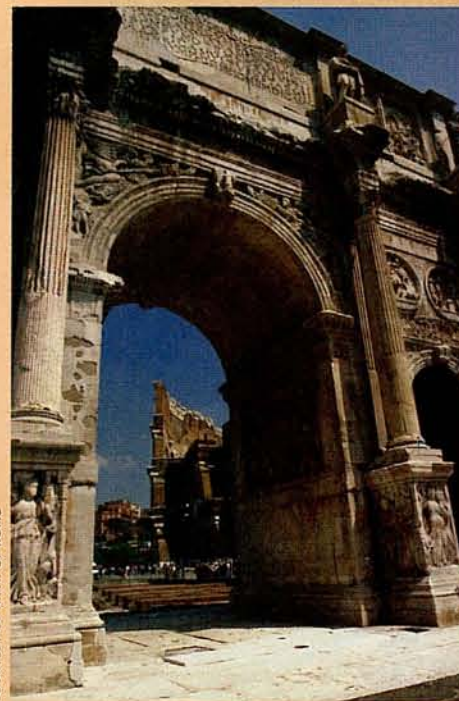
- an Italian-English translation dictionary
- *A Genealogist's Guide to Discovering Your Italian Ancestors*, which includes word lists, Italian record examples with English translations, and handwriting samples to help you decipher the documents you find

■ the FHL's Research Outline for Italy, available from its Web site (From the home page, click the Search tab, then Research Helps, followed by the letter *I*. Scroll down to Italy, and you'll see a series of helpful guides, including the Italy Research Outline, word lists and maps.)

You'll have an easier time interpreting if you memorize numbers (*uno, due, tre, quattro, cinque, sei, sette, otto, nove, dieci* and so on) and ordinals (such as *primo, secondo, terzo, quarto*), the names of the months (*gennaio, febbraio, marzo, aprile, maggio, giugno, luglio, agosto, settembre, ottobre, novembre, dicembre*—Italians don't capitalize them) and days of the week (*lunedì, martedì, mercoledì, giovedì, venerdì, sabato, domenica*).

Numbers are frequently spelled out—*milleottocentosessantotto* (1868)—and when numerals are used, 5, 7 and 9 often are difficult to distinguish from one another. Make a photocopy of the first nine records, even if they don't pertain to your family, so you can use those numbers for comparison with hard-to-read numbers in your records.

Italians abbreviated months, but you'll find September, October, November and December shortened as *7mber, 8mber, 9mber* and *Xmber*, respectively. (In the ancient calendar, September was the seventh month of



COURTESY OF A.P.T. OF ROME

Rome's Arch of Constantine, dedicated in 315, is part of your Italian ancestors' long history. It marks Constantine's victory over Maxentius, which brought peace to the Roman empire after years of civil war.

the year, October the eighth, and so on.) They wrote dates European style: 4/6/1887 is June 4, 1887. Even names might be abbreviated: *Ma* for Maria, *Anto* for Antonio, and *Franco* for Francesco.

Watch for a little word that means a lot. If you see *fu* preceding a name, it means the person is deceased. For example, *Vito DeBartolo figlio del fu Antonio e di Rosa Veneto* means Vito DeBartolo is the son of the late Antonio (DeBartolo) and Rosa Veneto (her maiden or family name). Another key word, found in some marriage records, is

*maggiora* or *maggiore*, meaning the eldest surviving son or daughter.

If you can't translate an Italian record yourself, you probably can get help fairly easily. Contact a local college's language department for a professor or student who's fluent in Italian. Many communities have Italian-American organizations (see the Toolkit, below, for a few)—a member in your local group may be willing to assist you. If all else fails and you find you have to hire someone, try the translators at [MyItalianFamily.com](http://MyItalianFamily.com) <[www.myitalianfamily.com](http://www.myitalianfamily.com)>.



## —TOOLKIT—

### WEB SITES

- **Cyndi's List—Italy**  
<[www.cyndislist.com/italy.htm](http://www.cyndislist.com/italy.htm)>
- **Italian-American History: A Timeline**  
<[pirate.shu.edu/~connelwi/itamtime.htm](http://pirate.shu.edu/~connelwi/itamtime.htm)>
- **Italian Genealogy**  
<[italiangenealogy.tardio.com](http://italiangenealogy.tardio.com)>
- **Italian Genealogy**  
<[www.virtualitalia.com/gene](http://www.virtualitalia.com/gene)>
- **The Italian Genealogy Home Page**  
<[www.daddezio.com/italgen.html](http://www.daddezio.com/italgen.html)>
- **Italian Genealogy Online**  
<[www.anzwers.org/free/italiangen](http://www.anzwers.org/free/italiangen)>
- **Italian Genealogy Web Club**  
<[www.initaly.com/gene](http://www.initaly.com/gene)>
- **My Italian Family**  
<[myitalianfamily.com](http://myitalianfamily.com)>
- **Pursing Our Italian Names Together**  
<[www.point-pointers.net](http://www.point-pointers.net)>
- **Writing to Italy**  
<[www.italianancestry.com/Section3.html](http://www.italianancestry.com/Section3.html)>

### BOOKS

- *Finding Italian Roots*, 2nd edition, by John Philip Colletta (Genealogical Publishing Co., \$14.95)

- ✓ ■ *A Genealogist's Guide to Discovering Your Italian Ancestors* by Lynn Nelson (Betterway Books, \$16.99)
- ✓ ■ *Italian Genealogical Records* by Trafford Cole (Ancestry, \$34.95)
- ✓ ■ *Our Italian Surnames* by Joseph G. Fucilla (Genealogical Publishing Co., out of print)

### ORGANIZATIONS

- **Immigration History Research Center**  
University of Minnesota College of Liberal Arts, 311 Andersen Library, 222 21st Ave. S., Minneapolis, MN 55455, (612) 625-4800, <[www.ihrc.umn.edu/research/guide/italian.htm](http://www.ihrc.umn.edu/research/guide/italian.htm)>
- **Italian Genealogical Group**  
Box 626, Bethpage, NY 11714, <[www.italiangen.org](http://www.italiangen.org)>
- **Italian Genealogical Society of America**  
Box 3572, Peabody, MA 01961, <64.252.159.163/igsa>
- **Italian Historical Society of America**  
111 Columbia Heights, Brooklyn, NY 11201, (718) 852-2929, <[www.italianhistorical.org](http://www.italianhistorical.org)>
- **Order Sons of Italy in America**  
219 E St. NE, Washington, DC 20002, (202) 547-2900, <[www.osia.org](http://www.osia.org)>





## Pete and Re-Pete

If you know your Italian ancestors' traditional naming patterns, you can use the *bambini's* names to guess the parents' and grandparents' identities. The first son usually received the name of his father's father; the second son, his mother's father; and the third son, his father. The first daughter was named after the father's mother; the second daughter, after the mother's mother; and the third daughter, after the mother.

Italians also used necronyms—naming a baby after a deceased sibling—so if you see two or more Anna Francescas in the same family, don't assume it's a mistake. Because parents chose names to honor older generations, they would pass a moniker onto their next-born if the first child given that name died.



## Roots records

Other Italian records are harder to come by in the United States—you'll probably need to write to Italy (see page 56) or travel there to use them. If you do, you'll find that records access varies by town. For example, in Terlizzi (population 2,500), I got carte blanche to go through the civil records and indexes to my heart's content. Just 15 miles away in Potenza, a city of 100,000, the clerk wouldn't even let me breathe on the record books. In case you have a similar experience, be prepared with a list of names and dates of the people you're researching. Then the clerk easily can look up things for you if he's willing. Most clerks won't speak English, so know some phrases and questions in Italian.

Italy's state archives (*archivio di stato*) have copies of civil records (after 75 years), military-conscription and service records, censuses, tax assessments and notary records. You can research in these archives, or hire someone to do it for you, but the staff won't do research for you by mail or in person. The Italian Web site <[www.db.archivi.beniculturali.it/ucbaweb/indice.html](http://www.db.archivi.beniculturali.it/ucbaweb/indice.html)> lists

addresses for state archives; so does Nelson's guide. State archives usually are in each province's major city, though nine provinces established in 1994 don't have archives. If your ancestral town is in one of the new provinces, look in that locale's pre-1994 province. To learn more about researching in Italy, read John Philip Colletta's *Finding Italian Roots* (see previous page).

Here's a look at other Italian records that could hold clues to your family's past:

■ **Census:** Italian national censuses taken in 1861, 1871, 1881, 1891 and 1901 list heads of household and merely count up the other members. After 1911, census records (*censimenti*) list everyone in the household. These censuses, which are kept by the state archives, aren't microfilmed—nor are they open to the public. But you can write to your ancestor's town archives to request a census extract—if you can provide enough identifying information about your ancestor. Otherwise, your request will undoubtedly go unanswered. (Be forewarned: Your letter may go unanswered anyway.) Write to the vital-records office in your ancestor's town.



COURTESY OF A.P.T. OF ROME

Legend has it you'll return to Rome if you toss a coin into the famous Trevi Fountain. Whatever it takes for another research trip!

part of unified Italy). After 75 years, the military turns these records over to state archives, where they're available for research. The FHL has begun filming military records, so check its catalog periodically by doing place searches of the provinces and towns where the state archives are located.

■ **Military:** One of unified Italy's first laws mandated military conscription beginning in 1865. At age 18, all men had to report to the draft board and undergo a physical exam. Conscription records (*registro di leva*) include every man born in Italy from about 1855 (this varies depending on when each area became

■ **Church:** The FHL has a few microfilmed church records—if your ancestor's in them, consider yourself lucky. These documents can take you back generations: For example, some filmed church records for the town of Marco (in Trento) cover 1666 to 1923; Marzano's (in Parma) span 1575 to 1950. If your ancestor

isn't there, write to his or her parish and hope the priest is in a generous mood that day.

✉ Address your letter to:  
Parrocchia di [name of church]  
[postal code] [province] Italia

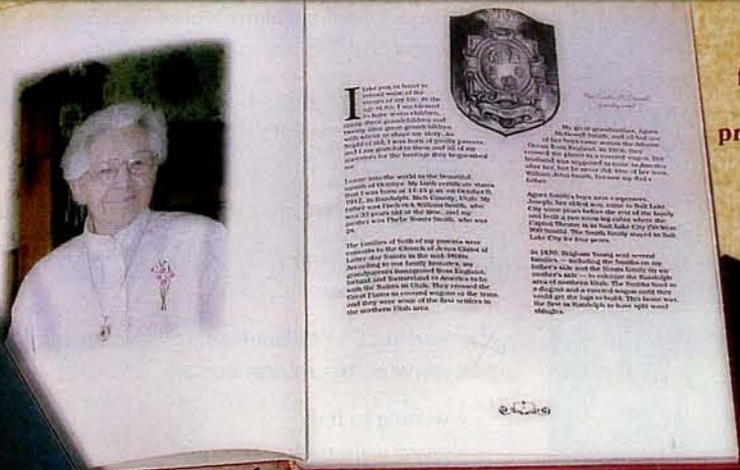
The priest keeps his church's baptism, marriage and burial records, as well as parish censuses. Even a small town can have several parishes, so look in civil records for clues to which parish your ancestors attended. Always include a donation to the church, even if you visit in person—the more charitable you are, the more likely you'll get a response. And remember that Catholic Church records will be written in Latin as well as Italian.

Whether you tour your Italian roots from afar or on the boot itself, don't let the language barrier scare you. Hundreds of people—most of whom don't speak or read any Italian—trace their ancestors in Italian records every day. If they can do it, so can you. *Buona fortuna!* ☘

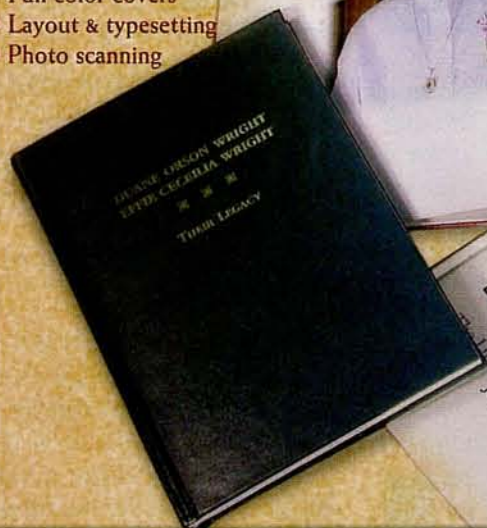
SHARON DEBARTOLO CARMACK is a contributing editor of *Family Tree Magazine* and the author of several genealogy guides, including *You Can Write Your Family History* (Betterway Books, \$19.99).

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