

## **Italians in Louisiana: A Selective Bibliography**

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### **Abstract**

A true melting pot, southeastern Louisiana has been influenced by several different ethnic groups. Many do not realize the impact that Italian immigrants have had on the area, specifically in terms of food and culture. This bibliography documents works on a variety of topics, but highlights newer and seminal sources on the study of Italians in southeastern Louisiana. While much of the literature focuses on New Orleans, the bibliography also includes works on rural areas of southeastern Louisiana where large pockets of Italian immigrants settled. Essential to the study of the Italian experience in Louisiana is the strife they endured because of prejudices of the “native” Louisianans, and works exploring this have been included. Whether as grocery store owners, restaurateurs, strawberry farmers, early Italian immigrant families had a significant impact on Louisiana, and these sources illuminate that influence. Librarians in all types of institutions should find these works not only interesting but valuable to their collections.

## **Italians in Louisiana: A Selective Bibliography**

### **Introduction**

Ask most Americans about the places they associate with Italian immigrants, and it would not be shocking to hear most reply New York, New Jersey, or even Chicago, but few would think of New Orleans and Louisiana in general when considering Italian-Americans. Although they may not be the first ethnic group to spring to mind, Italians have left an indelible mark on culture, food, and traditions since they first began arriving in Louisiana over 150 years ago. Anyone familiar with the great food institutions of New Orleans would not be surprised at the influence of Italians, especially Sicilians, on the city, but Italian immigrants have been a vital part of many communities throughout the state, not just in New Orleans.

According to the census of 1850, 658 people of Italian birth were living in the city of New Orleans. The only city who could claim more Italian residents was New York (702), whose population even then far out-numbered New Orleans.<sup>1</sup> By 1880, that number would more than triple, with nearly 2000 Italian-born residents in the city.<sup>2</sup> While the proportion of the population would never rival that of places with more substantial Italian communities, it is these early immigrants who founded the great culinary and cultural institutions that have become part of Louisiana life, such as Central Grocery (where the muffaletta was purportedly invented), Angelo Brocato's, annual St. Joseph's Day altars and gave even non-Italians a love of "red gravy". Although these are usually the things outsiders associate with Italians, their history in the region is certainly not all cannolis and sunshine. Like many other immigrant populations, Italians in Louisiana experienced strife and prejudice. The newcomers, especially those from agrarian societies, often worked as farm laborers or did other physically punishing work. In addition, the deep-seeded prejudice of "native" New Orleanians led to one of the most horrifying examples of

mob vengeance in American history: the lynching of eleven Italian-born men in the 1890s. This incident still reverberates in the psyche of the Italians of New Orleans but is largely unknown to those outside the culture. Although they endured much as new members of this region, it is still often said that there are two kinds of people: those who are Italian, and those who wish they were.

It is with a bit of a sentimental, and sometimes food-centric, view that we have compiled this selective bibliography. The resources listed are not necessarily those that are the most academic; all are non-fiction and most are book-length focusing on historical or cultural perspectives. We selected titles that provide a unique look into Italian culture, including some works that are primarily pictorial and newer sources that have not yet been included in other bibliographies. In our research, we consulted several other resource guides on the subject including John V. Baiamonte, Jr's guide from the 1994 *LLA Bulletin*<sup>3</sup> and the works included in Florence Jumonville's 2002 annotated bibliography of Louisiana history.<sup>4</sup> Although these are both excellent resources, we felt that there have been quite a few worthy publications since these compilations were written and several works that had been overlooked.

Our goal was not simply to provide a list for collection development purposes, although most of the works would make excellent additions to any academic library in Louisiana. We would also like the list to be used by those creating cultural displays and planning academic programming in their library, thus the inclusion of visual works as well as a well-known and easily accessible documentary. Because most of these works can be used for display purposes, the target audience is any member of a university community and not the history scholar. We wanted the works to be accessible to those without any prior knowledge of Italian-Louisianan culture.

### **Bibliography**

**Baiamonte, John V. 1972. Immigrants in rural America: a study of the Italians of Tangipahoa Parish, Louisiana. PhD diss., Mississippi State University.**

Baiamonte's PhD dissertation is one of the most cited works in Italian-Louisianan scholarship and seems an essential piece when studying Italians outside of New Orleans. It follows the immigrants as they travel from rural Sicily and end up in rural northern Tangipahoa parish, building their livelihood mostly as strawberry farmers. Certainly not for the researcher looking for a general overview of Italians in southeastern Louisiana, this dissertation would be an excellent source for anyone looking for a starting point to serious scholarly research.

**Baiamonte, John V. 1986. *Spirit of vengeance*. Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State UP.**

An excellent companion book to Smith's *Crescent City Lynchings*, Baiamonte's nonfiction work seems to have been dreamed up in a Hollywood studio. Following a botched bank robbery, a man from Independence, LA is shot and killed and six Italian men are arrested for the murder. This book focuses on Tangipahoa Parish in the 1920s but echoes the lynchings of thirty years prior. Thus the books work well in tandem with one another. It offers an excellent account of prejudice and justice as it pertained to Italians in Louisiana but outside of New Orleans.

**Boulard, Garry. 1989. *Just a gigolo: the life and times of Louis Prima*. Lafayette, LA: Center for Louisiana Studies.**

While not a book strictly about Italian culture in Louisiana, *Just a Gigolo* is certainly an excellent chronicle of probably the most famous Italian-New Orleanian: musical legend Louis Prima. Boulard's biography examines Prima's roots in jazz and consequent move through the ages to swing and big band music. This book was reprinted as simply *Louis Prima* in 2002 by University of Illinois Press and is the only book-length biography of the musician in print. Because of Prima's boisterous personality and lively lifestyle, the book is an extremely entertaining and yet still faithful portrait of the musician. [For those seeking more in-depth discussion of how Italian-Americans were involved in the early development of jazz in New Orleans, see Bruce Raeburn's excellent article published in

2009. Raeburn, Bruce Boyd. "Stars of David and Sons of Sicily: constellations beyond the canon in early New Orleans Jazz." *Jazz Perspectives* 3, no. 2 (2009): p123-152.]

**Campanella, Richard. 2006. "Little Palermo and the Sicilian Italians of New Orleans." In *Geographies of New Orleans: urban fabrics before the storm*. Lafayette, LA: Center for Louisiana Studies.**

This relatively new publication is a particularly interesting addition to this bibliography as Campanella brings the perspective of historical and cultural geography to the development of New Orleans. In his chapter on Italian immigration into New Orleans, the author looks at where Italians lived after they arrived, how they made their living, and what influenced those patterns. Using understandable analysis maps, he charts where Italians initially resided in New Orleans (i.e. Little Palermo), and then later how they began to expand into different areas of the city. He effectively combines historical and contemporary photographs which keep this book visually appealing. Campanella's book is a valuable resource for any library in south Louisiana.

**Landry, Terry. *Italian New Orleans*. DVD. New Orleans, LA: WYES-TV. 2001.**

This one hour documentary produced by and often shown on New Orleans's PBS affiliate examines the history of Italians in New Orleans and interviews key figures in current Italian-New Orleanian circles. This work is a must for collections considering that it is truly unique, the only documentary of its kind. It examines the historical roots of Italians in New Orleans, but also looks at how traditional cultural values have survived into modern times.

**Magnaghi, Russell M. 1986. Louisiana's Italian immigrants prior to 1870. *Louisiana History* 27, no.1 (1986): 43-68.**

Beginning with the earliest of Italian immigrants, those accompanying Hernando de Soto

on his expedition of the region in the 1540s, Magnaghi writes of Italians who arrived earlier than most scholarship examines. The article is primarily a chronological look at individual immigrants living in the cultural context of the entire colony. It is a fairly brief work that would be of substantial use to anyone looking for an overview of the Italian population in Louisiana before the larger numbers of immigrants arrived later in the nineteenth century.

**Macaluso, Joseph N. 2004. *Italian immigrant families: grocers, proprietors, and entrepreneurs, the story of the Italian/Sicilian corner grocers and markets of Algiers, LA. Pittsburgh, PA: RoseDog Books.***

Macaluso's work tends to veer towards genealogy and oral history rather than more serious historical scholasticism. However, he posits that Italian immigrants were able to move to the middle class with relative ease when compared to other immigrant populations because they became entrepreneurs, owning their own small businesses within years of coming to the country. By looking at the microcosm of Algiers, a community on the west bank of the Mississippi River in New Orleans, Macaluso's work may not represent a large sect of Italian immigrants but nevertheless tells a story of how many Italian immigrants achieved prosperity and success.

**Margavio, Anthony V., and Jerome J. Salomone. 2002. *Bread and respect: the Italians of Louisiana. Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing Co.***

Margavio and Salomone successfully combine many methods to tell the story of the Italians who immigrated and created new communities in Louisiana. They provide a good bit of historical background to explain that which preceded, and stimulated, the Italian immigration to Louisiana. And they summarize the many historical events of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century which heavily impacted these communities. Additionally, they use sociological approaches to identify and explain the strong cultural values Italians brought with them to this New World. Throughout their narrative they intersperse biographical sketches of individuals and fictionalized "vignettes"

which illustrate the academic content. In doing so they keep the reader connected to the very human emotions, ties, and motivations that were at stake for those within this group of American newcomers. They bring to life the transitions Italians underwent as they adapted to living in Louisiana and illustrate the valuable contributions they made to the culture of Louisiana. In doing so they create an important resource that will be compelling to a wide variety of library users.

**Maselli, Joseph, and Dominic Candeloro. 2004. *Italians in New Orleans*. Charleston, SC: Arcadia.**

A small pictorial book which illustrates the people, places, and customs of the Italian-Americans in New Orleans. A helpful book for any library, it offers brief summaries on the history of the early Italian immigrants in New Orleans, and highlights the important cultural traditions that remain strong in the community today. Features an interesting array of photographs which range from the early 1900's to the present day.

**McCaffety, Kerri. 2003. *Saint Joseph altars*. Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing Co.**

A small press book of primarily photographs, McCaffety's work is nevertheless a great look at a tradition often unknown to those outside of the culture of Sicily. Sicilians and their descendants create altars to St. Joseph every March 19<sup>th</sup>. The altars are a culinary and visual homage to St. Joseph, thus descriptions of them in print are not nearly as valuable as pictures of actual altars. McCaffety's book does contain some traditional recipes and brief descriptions of items found on the altars, so anyone who is unfamiliar with the custom will have a good idea of the make-up and look of the altars upon examining this book.

**Scarpaci, Jean A. 1972. *Italian immigrants in Louisiana's sugar parishes: recruitment, labor conditions, and community relations, 1880-1910*. PhD diss., Rutgers University.**

Although this work may be the hardest on the list to purchase due to its rarity, Scarpaci's

dissertation is valuable in that it explores a topic that other works shy away from: the new Italian immigrants' relationship with former slaves in agrarian communities. It also examines the harvest migration common at the time in which Italians from other American cities and even Sicily would work the harvest in Louisiana and then return to their homes.

**Smith, Tom. 2007. *The Crescent City lynchings: the murder of chief Hennessy, the New Orleans "Mafia" trials, and the Parish Prison mob*. Guilford, CT: Lyons Press.**

Although many historical articles and chapters have been written on the mob murders of eleven Sicilian men in New Orleans in the 1890s, this is one of the few book-length studies of the travesty. Written for a general audience, this nonfiction study is researched with a depth that an historian would admire. The mob lynching chronicled here is important not only to New Orleans history but to American immigration history in general, both because of its breadth of violence and massacre and because of the time at which it occurred, relatively early in the great wave of Italian immigration into the United States.

**Wilson, Nancy Tregre. 2005. *Louisiana's Italians, food, recipes, and folkways*. Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing Co.**

Nearly three-quarters of this slim volume is dedicated to traditional recipes of Italian-Americans from the region. However, that does not negate its value as a source of unique information about a vastly important part of Italian heritage: the preparation of food. One of the most unique aspects of the book is that it goes into detail about how to build and operate a Sicilian mud oven. It also gives information about the Feast of St. Lucy, which is often overshadowed in the literature by St. Joseph's Day.



<sup>1</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. "1850 Census." <http://www2.census.gov/prod2/decennial/documents/1850c-11.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. "1880 Census." [http://www2.census.gov/prod2/decennial/documents/1880a\\_v1-01.pdf](http://www2.census.gov/prod2/decennial/documents/1880a_v1-01.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Baiamonte, John V. 1994. Italians in Louisiana. *LLA Bulletin* 57, no.1: 21-30.

<sup>4</sup> Jumonville, Florence M. 2002. *Louisiana history: an annotated bibliography*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press.