

## Italian America: The Role of Place in the Italian Diaspora

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John Cabot University

Department of Modern Languages and Literature

Bachelor of Arts in Italian Studies

**Italian America:**  
***The Role of Place in the Italian Diaspora.***

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## Abstract

Il termine “Little Italy” è stato coniato negli ultimi decenni del XIX secolo, durante le prime fasi dell'immigrazione e dell'insediamento degli italiani nelle città del Nord America. Da allora, la nascita di quartieri italiani ha suscitato l'interesse pubblico per oltre un secolo e mezzo. Alla luce di ciò, questa tesi esamina l'importanza del luogo nel contesto della diaspora italiana, combinando il significato storico e attuale della “Little Italy” di Providence, Rhode Island, per capire come esso agisca nella conservazione del patrimonio culturale e nell'integrazione sociale all'interno della comunità. Le metodologie impiegate in questa tesi si basano su un'ampia quantità di materiale d'archivio e ricerche storiche in combinazione con interviste a immigrati italiani e figure locali dei quartieri italiani di Providence: Federal Hill, North End e Silver Lake. Il risultato di questo studio dimostra che, dopo oltre un secolo dall'arrivo dei primi gruppi di italiani nelle Americhe, la “Little Italy” riveste ancora oggi un ruolo importante all'interno della comunità. Anche se la definizione di questi luoghi può non essere la stessa di decenni fa, la loro importanza come mezzo di conservazione del patrimonio culturale è rimasta. Infatti, mentre molti quartieri etnici stanno scomparendo, la “Little Italy” in una forma o nell'altra rimane, grazie a coloro che ogni giorno continuano a dare significato a questi luoghi.

## **Dedication**

To my grandparents, who, without their love, guidance, and inspiration, I would be nothing.

Thank you for always being by my side and watching over me.

To my parents and sister, whose support and love sustained me through the most difficult times.

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## **1. Introduction:**

As of 2023, the Italian diaspora in the United States had an estimated population of sixteen million individuals (U.S. Census, 2023), a massive expansion from the twenty-five thousand Italian immigrants living in America in 1870 prior to the dawn of the great migration. By the 1920s, when immigration quotas marked the tapering off of mass immigration, more than four million Italians had come to the United States (U.S. Library of Congress). A considerable amount of literature documents the Italian American experience. However, most of the work was conducted decades ago, leaving gaps in the modern study of this diaspora. Since the arrival of the Italians, journalists, authors, and scholars have been fascinated with their stories. It is arguably one of the most famed stories of any immigrant group, giving birth to its own subculture. The neighborhoods they established, the “Little Italies,” have been the source of both fact and fiction (Marazzi, 2001). The term “Little Italy” emerged in the last decades of the nineteenth century during the first stages of Italian immigration and settlement in North American cities. Since then, the emergence of Italian neighborhoods has sparked the interest of many for over a century. Described as either squalid, packed neighborhoods with an over-abundant odor of garlic or a picturesque quarter, where daily life is played out in the streets and gardens abundant with fruits and flowers, the “Little Italy” has served as a colorful backdrop to the story of the Italian American experience (Marazzi, 2001). The volume of literature covering the diaspora is also limited to particular areas, primarily New York and Boston, although a large part of the diaspora settled and planted roots elsewhere. In contrast, other cities like Newark, Philadelphia, and Providence, which have historic, strong, large populations of Italian Americans, have not been

studied in depth or to the extent of their counterparts (Federici, 2018). Based on the lack of research regarding the modern study of the diaspora in conjunction with the lack of geographic diversity, this study will chronicle the history and evolution of three Italian neighborhoods in Providence, Rhode Island, from the 1830s to the present. In examining these areas, the research question is: how does place act as a means of cultural preservation within the Italian diaspora?

There is very little scholarly writing on the Italians of Rhode Island; as stated previously, the literature tends to be hyper-focused on specific areas. It should not be concluded, however, these areas do not house significant populations of Italian Americans. In the case of Rhode Island's Italian neighborhoods, there has been little research on the various settlements that sprang up around the turn of the twentieth century (Muratore, 1982). Many of these neighborhoods still have a heavy Italian influence today. Rhode Island ranks second in the nation for the number of individuals identifying as Italian Americans<sup>1</sup> per state population, only 0.67 percentage points below Connecticut (World et al., 2024). Nearly 15 percent of Rhode Islanders are of Italian descent. In 2000, the state boasted the highest percentage of Italian Americans than any other state, according to the National Italian American Federation and the United States Census: 19 percent of the state's population identified as having Italian origins<sup>2</sup> (The Sons of Italy, 2003). Additionally, it is worth noting that Rhode Island is the smallest state in the union: 3,144 square kilometers, from end to end, and is quite densely populated. Over half of the state's entire population resides in the capital city of Providence (World et al., 2024). For many individuals of Italian descent in Rhode Island, Federal Hill is considered the motherland. Throughout the late

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<sup>1</sup> The study defined Italian Americans as individuals either born on Italian soil, to an Italian-born parent, or with Italian or dual citizenship.

<sup>2</sup> In the 2010 the United States Federal Government excluded the ethnic option of "Italian American" from the U.S. Census. Consequently, individuals personally indicated their Italian American heritage in the available "open space". 17,253,941 individuals identified themselves as Italian Americans by writing in "Italian." However, experts estimate that the actual size of the community might be larger, approximately 26 million.



nineteenth and twentieth centuries, most of the state's Italian immigrants settled and established themselves within the confines of this neighborhood (Federici, 2018). It was where generations of their descendants continued to live or return to. However, Federal Hill is just one of the many Italian enclaves scattered throughout the state. Providence's Federal Hill neighborhood is not only one of Rhode Island's most storied neighborhoods. Today, Italian American culture has woven itself into the fabric of the state; in almost every city and town, there are traces of Italian American identity.

During the early period of Italian immigration in Rhode Island, there were three bustling Italian settlements within Providence: the first in the Federal Hill section, the second in the North End or Charles area, and lastly, the third in the Silver Lake district (Pesaturo, 1940). Each neighborhood was adorned with an array of Italian ethnic parishes, religious and civic organizations, and various specialty shops, eateries, and social clubs. What remains of the Italian American identity in these former enclaves acts as a form of "ruins" for a once vibrant community (Garroni, 2018). Today, these neighborhoods serve as a remembrance for generations of the Italian American community who once called these places home. The Federal Hill neighborhood still has a thriving Italian American commercial and culinary district; upscale restaurants and specialty markets line the principal avenue, which is the heart of the neighborhood.<sup>3</sup> In the other areas, a memorial square or street name serves as a reminder of the past inhabitants. In each area, the Italian National Catholic Parishes remain, only one offering a Mass in Italian on Sundays. For the most part, these churches have been taken over by droves of Spanish speakers or have seen a significant decline in weekly mass attendance or parishioner

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<sup>3</sup> Much of the success of Federal Hill's ability to remain a vital "little Italy" district compared to its counterparts is the benefits it reaped during urban revitalization from the mid-1970s to the early 2000s, as well as its proximity to the highway and Providence's downtown city center, primary during the administration of Providence's first Italian American Mayor Vincent "Buddy" Cianci.

enrollment, and others closed. As the following chapters will display, this study will detail the history and evolution of Providence's "Little Italies" and their importance today to those who live there and frequent them.

## **i. Literature Review**

In recent years, transnational cultural studies has offered a new approach to the declining focus on Eurocentric cultures. It is to be expected that in an ever mobilizing and globalized world, these disciplines, which follow the historical, geographic, and linguistic confines of nationalistic logic, have lost touch with a new generation of learners. In order to keep these studies alive, they, like the cultures they study, must evolve, and modernize (Baldoli et al., 2020). The study of transnational culture follows a populace outside the confines of any political or geographic border (Burdett & Polezzi, 2020). As cultures become more transnational, this discipline can help revisit and revive an older field or topic. In the case of my research topic, the study of the Italian diaspora has experienced a decline in recent decades. The application of the study of transnational Italy and examining the patterns in which individuals migrated and settled and how they brought their culture and adapted it to a new environment broaden the way one can approach this topic from an alternative perspective (Chianese, 2022).

In transnational culture, a place acts as a bridge between two distinct and diverse geographical points to form a place of reference (Burns, 2020). In certain places, one can express one's culture, not only individually or within one's family but within a greater community, inhabiting domestic, communal, and public spheres. The idea of transnationalism revolves primarily and profoundly around the individual, the spaces where they live, and the relationships they establish. The emphasis is on the "transnational dimension" of their culture in daily life; how and what one does in the space one inhabits. Expressing oneself in a foreign space sheds

light on the extent of the transmission of transnational culture and questions the importance of geographical boundaries that define a nation (Grechi, 2019). This does not suggest that the importance of a nation should be diminished, but “the open” should be acknowledged: the idea of the existence of a people and their culture can be mobilized and thrive outside the confines of a particular geographical space, one’s place of origin. This is not a new phenomenon; since 1861, twenty-seven million Italians have left Italy. Since that time, they greatly impacted the spaces they inhabited, spreading their culture and identity with them and proving that Italian culture is not static (Grechi, 2019).

In *Transcultural Italies: Mobility, Memory, and Translation*, Italy is defined as the representation of a “highly concentrated space of intercultural contact.” (Burdett & Polezzi, p. 15, 2019). Due to the peninsula’s proximity to Africa and the Middle East, its central location in the Mediterranean, and its geographical connection to the European continent, Italy deserves to be studied as an object of great social and cultural significance. Additionally, Burdett and Polezzi (2019) write that Italian mobility is another area of great importance, this idea of an Italy that exists outside the nation’s borders. Thus, leading one to the study of the diaspora. Donna Gabaccia, the author of *Italy’s Many Diasporas* (2002), adds that Italians have historically made one of the most significant impacts globally through the exportation of their culture through the various waves of emigration throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Italian communities have planted roots throughout the northern and southern hemispheres. The idea is to examine the overlap between national and transnational culture, to what extent these two interact, and precisely the idea of a familiar place and shared ties to a homeland.

Place and identity are key themes in this study. For individuals living outside the confines of the Italian peninsula, there is an idea of a shared sense of pride in the two, a negotiation of

these two identities linked to place. A pride in the home they left behind and in the one they have established abroad. This is a crucial element in identifying the “home” space, the idea of re-creating an Italy abroad, attempting to transport some familiarity based on one’s origins. One’s ability to build a sense of belonging to a particular space is linked to identity and how one can construct or re-create elements of one’s former home in the new one. Jennifer Burns (2020) considers the ways in which one identifies a particular space as a “home.” Individuals and communities form settlements in geographical locations to create a point of reference or common place where they may express the national, cultural, social, and linguistic qualities that link them. She notes that these attributes initially form a sense of belonging and give birth to a settlement, neighborhood, or enclave. It is critical to analyze the objects and practices these Italian immigrants possess within their new spaces to determine whether or not they have established a ‘home’ space.

In a separate article, Jennifer Burns (2020) emphasizes the practices of immigrants in their new ‘home,’ which mainly details the practice of “homing,” which ties into the prior notions of identity and belonging but, in this case, to the new space. She identifies the homing process as a “process of building relations” between individuals of shared culture based on one’s place of origin or, more precisely, specific regions or villages. In this “homing” process, she states that the individual has to go through a “de-naturalization” stage, straying away from the homeland. The re-creation one constructs in the new ‘home space’ is, in a way, fictional; it has attributes of cultural familiarity, but it is not the same. There is this unsettledness within the immigrant, the knowledge that life will not be the same, both positively and negatively, and a longing for the idealized nostalgia that exists for one’s prior home, which is left behind. She contradicts her peers, questioning if one can consider this new ‘home’ space a re-creation of the

previous one. She underlines that not all immigrants long for a “home,” an old or new one, so it is not to conclude that establishing one is intrinsic. Burns focuses on how immigrants connect or distance themselves from their homeland or tradition. She believes that there is a balance, “a negotiation.” In further analyzing this, she points to various examples in film and literature that depict the Italian American home in order to examine this hybrid of the two cultures in the construction of a ‘home,’ primarily in the domestic sphere.

Contrary to the above perspective, Maria Susanna Garroni (2018) writes that Italian settlements were created out of a nostalgia for a homeland, a need to feel a “sense of unity” and that even decades and generations later, these spaces serve as a meeting point or a ‘home’ for Italian Americans, including for those who have never set foot in Italy but for whom it offers the closest notion of Italy. For the purposes of this thesis, it is important to like these two disciplines of space and identity and how they intersect. The article by Garroni (2018) details the historical and cultural significance of “Little Italy.” For this study, it is a testament to the practices and importance of a ‘home’ space in terms of a public sphere. The critical factor that her research gathers is that throughout the history of Italian immigration, Italians have sought out and inhabited a common geographical space. The communal sphere proved to be of great importance in terms of the formation of a “home.” Through the church, religious, and civic organizations, Italians met and continued linguistic and cultural practices, specifically the celebration of religious feasts and neighborhood festivals. Garroni’s work is a testament to the history of the Italian settlements in the United States. She explains the importance of the home through a study of Italian neighborhoods. This approach involves also examining Italy from an external viewpoint while also being mindful of the country's internal dynamics. In recent years, we have witnessed a shift away from studying Italy solely within its geographical boundaries, with new

voices and viewpoints emerging that explore Italian migration and the experiences of immigrants.

## 2. Methodology

The Italian American experience has been heavily researched in past decades (Garroni, 2018). Much scholarly literature was written and published, particularly in the mid-to-late twentieth century. However, much less material exists on the most recent history and present state of the Italian diaspora in the United States. Additionally, for the purposes of my research, little has been investigated on the role of place in the diaspora. The little that has been written is mainly about the cities of New York and Toronto and some surrounding areas (Chiaricati, 2022). For the purposes of my study, I selected an area I was very familiar with, but which also had the highest numbers of Italians per capita than any other state in the country. Narrowing in on Rhode Island, I decided I wanted to chronicle the origin and evolution of the Italians in the state while also reconstructing the fabric of the “little Italies” that they established and inhabited. I would like to underline this approach as it has not yet been done, and the data, I believe, is important to a nuanced history of Italian culture and society. Overall, I believe this process is essential in chronicling the history of the Italian American community in the United States through public and communal spaces.

My main focus is the importance of place within the Italian diaspora: what types of spaces they created, their roles, and their significance to those who inhabited or frequented them. In my research, I employ two distinct methodologies. The first involves tracing the lineage of the Italians in Rhode Island. To do this, I adopted the method of historical research, through an extensive process of searching first through the recently digitalized archive of Rhode Island’s most significant newspaper publication, *The Providence Journal*, which dates back to 1829. I estimate that I have searched through roughly six hundred newspaper articles from the 1870s to the present day, utilizing a variety of keywords, primarily names of the three Italian

neighborhoods I was interested in, the Italian churches, terms such as Italians, Italo Americans, Italian Americans, the Italian colony, or the Italian community, for example. In the end, I read through 196 articles, of which 39 were cited in this thesis. In addition to this digital archive, Rhode Island College offers an online archive on the Italians of Rhode Island. The majority of the material they offer is comprised of the writings of local historian Commendatore Joseph R. Muratore. Muratore's contributions were to a project conducted by the college in the 1980s concerning the ethnic communities of Rhode Island; his writings were primarily on the Italians of Providence from the early 1900s to the 1980s, as well as the history of the Federal Hill neighborhood from the 1700s to the 1980s. These two sources were critical in my reconstruction of the history and fabric of the community in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries.

In addition to my digital archival research, I carried out two field visits to Providence, the first in December 2023, where I extensively searched the archives of Holy Ghost and Saint Ann Churches. From these churches, I gained information on the histories of each and the richness of the communities once there. Parishioner registration numbers and sacramental records aided me in understanding the size and demographics of Providence's Italian colonies. Both also had an extensive archive of photographs that shed light on the former esthetic of the Federal Hill and North End neighborhoods before the decline of the Italians in the area and urban revitalization. In addition to mapping the physical changes in the neighborhood through historic photographs, the Rhode Island Historical Society provided me with over a century of maps and city directories. While the atlases provided insights into the construction and infrastructural changes from the 1870s to the 1980s, the city directories, broken down by street names, allowed me to trace demographic changes regarding surnames and the types of establishments within the neighborhoods of my research. The Providence Public Library's collection of historic



publications regarding the Italians of Rhode Island, printed in the 1930s and 1940s, were also essential to my research, as well as recent publications in the 1970s and 1980s held there. These fonts provided a plethora of information regarding the rich history of the diaspora in the state. I found this to be a critical aspect of my research, piecing together an array of fragments to create an in-depth image of Providence's "Little Italies."

For my second methodological approach, I conducted semi-structured interviews with Italian-born individuals living in Rhode Island who had some connection to the neighborhoods covered in my study. In selecting my interviewees, I decided to begin with individuals active in the Italian community on Federal Hill. It is important to note that the names of the individuals interviewed have been modified to conceal their identity; businesses have also been given fictitious names to protect the privacy of the business owners interviewed. The first three interviews were conducted remotely in February 2024; they were, for the most part, limited to technological issues. These individuals were reinterviewed when I returned to Providence in March 2024. During the trip, I visited all three neighborhoods, Federal Hill, The North End, and Silver Lake, to better understand each area's spatial, residential, and commercial layout in the present. In the North End and Silver Lake, I visited the only places I presumed there might be Italians congregating: the churches of Saint Bartholomew and Saint Ann, neither of which have Mass in Italian. Still, some members of the Italian community who attend Mass in English might be left. After speaking with both Pastors of each parish, I was told that there was not much of an Italian community left: Saint Ann had a majority of Hispanic parishioners, with a handful of elderly Americans of Italian descent and the occasional Italian who comes back for specific celebrations. For Saint Bartholomew, I talked with three Italian immigrants who arrived in Providence in the 1960s but wanted to refrain from participating in my research. Besides the

Italian parishes, a sole religious social club remained in each neighborhood in the North End: The Saint Anthony Club and in Silver Lake: La Madonna del Rosario Society. Both clubs were closed when I attempted to visit them on two separate occasions. Both areas lacked the presence of an Italian shop, market, or restaurant, so my field research became limited to the area of Federal Hill, where I knew I could find some Italians.

My first two interviewees were: Assunta Broccolo and Concetta Colangelo. The two are very close friends; Assunta married Concetta's brother-in-law in 1960 and have known one another since the late fifties. Assunta, born in Sant'Ambrogio, Frosinone, in 1933, came to Federal Hill in 1952. Concetta is a few years younger, born in Sulmona, Abruzzo; she came to America in 1955 to meet her husband, who lived in Federal Hill then. Both come back to the neighborhood every day for church, their volunteer work, and to do their shopping at the Italian markets on Atwells Avenue. Next, I interviewed Giulio Micco, owner of a local café and deli. He immigrated from Caserta in the 1960s, first settling in Canada. He came to Providence in the late seventies, and with his wife, they opened shop in 1982 on Atwells Avenue. He was open to being interviewed, but with Sisto, my questions differed from those I had outlined for the prior interviews; I was more interested in his insights on changes in the neighborhood and how "Italian" he considered it to be. I decided to interview other Italian-born business owners in the neighborhood, the only being the proprietors of another deli and marketplace across the street from Giulio's business, Domenico's Italian Market. However, he and his wife declined, as did the last of the neighborhood's Italian-born business owners; like the others, he was of the same generation but operated a small café off the main avenue. In the end, the only other business owner who accepted my request was the owner of Rhode Island's largest Italian market, Tom Catanzaro, age 79. Unlike the majority of my interviewees, Tom was born and raised in Federal

Hill, the son of Italian Immigrants. He has operated his businesses for nearly fifty-five years. My questions to Tom were the same as those to Giulio; they are the following:

1. In your opinion, how Italian is Federal Hill today compared to when you first opened your business?
2. What are some major changes or challenges your business has experienced or faced?
3. Why did you choose or continue to have your business here?
4. What does the neighborhood mean to you?

The following questions were presented to the remainder of my interviewees, except for the Pastor of the Holy Ghost Church, where we engaged in more of a structured conversation regarding the state of the parish and its communities today. The questions for the Italian-born interviewees are as follows:

1. What were the circumstances leading you to immigrate to America? How did you end up in Rhode Island?
2. How important are Providence's Italian neighborhoods to you, both in the past and present?
3. In which places do you feel most connected to your identity and/or community?
4. Have you experienced any noticeable changes in the places discussed, the neighborhoods or churches? How do these changes make you feel about the state of the Italian culture and community in Rhode Island?

The fifteen individuals who were asked these questions were quite responsive, and common themes were expressed among particular generations, as noted in chapter seven, which covers the findings of these interviews. Among those who immigrated in the 1960s and 1970s, the Holy Ghost Church played an important role, along with the Circolo Giovanni XXIII, which aided in

forming a community for the masses arriving in these decades. The individuals who immigrated at this time were brothers Giovanni Di Muccio, 74, and Donato Di Muccio, 68. The two gave insights into the neighborhood and the church at the time of their arrival and the transition made throughout the decades. They perform in an Italian music group they started in 1975; they claim to have played at almost every wedding of Italians in Rhode Island and nearly every Italian Feast in Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Rhode Island. They have an extensive network of friends and connected me with additional interviewees.

The remainder of the individuals who immigrated in the sixties and seventies were Italo Zarillo, Immacolata Minutillo, and Pia Carnevale. At age 83, Italo Zarillo is the proprietor of a sausage company in the North End; our interview was conducted in his upstairs apartment, where he's lived since 1974. Italo immigrated in 1968 from the province of Caserta; he offered insights into the decline of his neighborhood; he had many memories of Federal Hill and the Circolo. Immacolata Minutillo, President of the Circolo Giovanni II, was the next interviewee; we met where the Circolo has met for decades, in the basement of the Holy Ghost Church every Friday evening. Immacolata settled in Silver Lake, immigrating from Fornelli, Molise, in 1968; she now lives outside the city in Cranston. She was also instrumental in helping me find more recent Italian immigrants to interview for my research. Pia Carnevale, age 68, is one of the last Italian families left in Federal Hill; with her son, she ran an Italian bakery off Atwells Avenue for many years. In 1969, with her parents and siblings, she settled in Federal Hill and has remained there ever since. While others moved away, her family stayed in her home, where three generations lived together. She offered an interesting perspective as she has been in the neighborhood for nearly sixty years.

The next set of interviewees immigrated from 1982 to 2022, ranging in age from 71 to 22 years old. Their responses provided various opinions regarding the importance of place within the diaspora, as seen in chapter seven. In 1982, Giuseppe Lombardi immigrated to the North End with his wife and son from Roccamonfina, Caserta. He came to meet his uncle and work as a stone cutter for his company. He is a more recent addition to the Italian community of Federal Hill, as he only recently began to frequent the area. Also, from the province of Caserta, Mario Antonelli and his wife Stefania Zeppetella immigrated to Johnston, Rhode Island, in the 1990s. The couple expressed mixed perspectives on the Italian community, focusing more on themselves and their families than on connecting to a larger community. The more recent wave of immigration tends to be young professionals, highly educated from northern provinces. Mattia Rossi, 41, arrived in 2007 in Providence, Rhode Island, to study at Brown University from Asolo, Treviso, Italy. He settled in Providence's East Side, where he currently lives and works. Also heralding from the north, Analisa Bertelloni, 39, arrived in 2018 to teach at the University of Rhode Island from Carrara, Massa Carrara, Italy. These immigrants were put in touch with me by Immacolata. From Analisa, I met and interviewed Fabiana Sartor, 36, who arrived in 2022 alone to work for Johnson and Wales University; she lived in Rome, Italy, before being transferred to the U.S. She is from Pescia, Pistoia, Italy. She settled in East Greenwich, Rhode Island.

Of the youngest generation, I found them hanging out at Tutto Italiano's espresso bar on a rainy afternoon. It was more of a conversation than an interview. Still, they provided surprising opinions about the state of the Italian community and culture in Rhode Island, as well as the importance of the Federal Hill neighborhood to them. The final four were Francesco Cardi, 30, who arrived in 2015 from Itri, Latina, Italy, to meet his uncle. He lives in Cranston and works for

his uncle's construction company. Luigi Bisceglia, 27, arrived in 2012 from Castel Volturno, Caserta, to meet his sister and brother-in-law who live in Rhode Island. Matteo Di Giulio, 22, arrived in 2016 for high school from Teano, Caserta. He lives with his grandparents in Johnston and works as a barber. Valerio Trabucco, 22, arrived in 2020 for university from Ostia, Roma, Italy. He lives on Federal Hill in student apartments, where over one hundred years ago, immigrants like him lived.

In conclusion, the mix of these different methodologies should paint an ample picture of the Italian American experience in Rhode Island. The historical background should not be disregarded as it is essential to understand the deep history and influence of the Italian diaspora in the area. While this process was quite tedious, it was quite satisfying to reconstruct the "Little Italies" of Providence. The following chapters will detail the foundation and evolution of these neighborhoods, spanning across nearly two centuries. The interviews give a more recent and personal view into the meaning that these places have for generations of the Italian diaspora and allow one to understand, to a greater extent, these neighborhoods, primarily Federal Hill, serve in cultural preservation and social interaction within the community.

### 3. Making Italy in America:

Critical to the study of any ethnic enclave is examining its establishment and evolution over time. This chapter offers an extensive view of how the Italian American community was formed in Providence, Rhode Island. It details the social, cultural, and economic conditions, as well as the types of places and practices that were transported from Italy to America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As stated in the introductory chapter, Rhode Island houses one of the oldest and largest communities of Italian Americans in the United States. Federal Hill, one of the nation's most famous Little Italies, was the earliest settlement for the masses of southern Italian immigrants arriving in Providence. Due to the lack of scholarly research surrounding the history of Rhode Island's Italian American community, the majority of research presented in these next four chapters was conducted by scanning through hundreds of newspaper articles and historical archives from the city, state, churches, and preservation societies. The information obtained through these fonts illustrates in great detail the foundation of Rhode Island's first colony of Italians.

Rhode Island's first recorded Italian immigrant, Giuseppe Parini, settled in Providence in 1832, nearly sixty years before the mass migration of primarily southern Italian immigrants to the United States. The city's newspaper, *The Providence Journal*, noted in its earliest article on the "Italian Colony of Providence" in 1887 that the process of the establishment of an Italian settlement in Providence, after the arrival of Parini, the "founder" of the "Italian colony," was quite gradual and lengthy. In 1848, four Italians, like Parini, migrated from the Tuscan region. By 1868, the Italian community in Providence had risen to approximately 175 members. Ten years later, in 1878, about 800 Italian immigrants established their first settlement in the southern corner of the Federal Hill section of Providence, primarily along Cedar and Spruce Street (From

Sunny Lands, 1887). At that time, the neighborhood was mainly a blue-collar Irish American enclave with a bustling commercial center. Set upon one of the city's highest peaks, Federal Hill had first been developed from a mere pasture to a city neighborhood in the 1780s, around the time of the publication of the Federalist Papers, from where the area's name derives. The area's commercial success can also be traced back to this period. Amos Atwell, leader of a syndicate of local businessmen, began to parcel up the land in this area for retail and agricultural purposes. By the close of the Eighteenth Century, there was no more farmland on Federal Hill. In its place were a plethora of Federal Style cottages and craftsman shops. The neighborhood's valley would develop industrially from the 1830s onward. A major foundry, coal yard, several machine, textile, and jewelry factories were set up in the shadow of Federal Hill. Additionally, a major railway connecting Providence to Boston, Hartford, and New York was completed in this period. These industries provided residents with new employment opportunities. However, there was a large surplus of jobs compared to the number of workers. The need for manpower was a major pull factor for Irish immigrants fleeing the "Great Famine," which ravished the country from the 1840s to the 1850s. These immigrants made their home in the Federal Hill section of Providence around this time, significantly affecting the fabric of the city. Although they were similar to native-born citizens, they came from a similar ethnic background and spoke the same language as their Anglo-Saxon counterparts. While Irish immigrants did not face the same extent of hurdles Italian immigrants would confront decades later, they still were the victims of significant discrimination. This anti-Irish sentiment was due to the open expression of their Catholic faith in the heavily Protestant city of Providence. In 1860, Irish immigrants comprised nearly twenty percent of the city's population, the most significant minority in Providence (Muratore, 1978).



At the time of the 1887 publication of the “Italian Colony of Providence,” the city’s Italian settlements housed roughly 3,500 members, the majority residing in Federal Hill. A year later, *The Providence Journal* released another article regarding the Italian “colony” of Providence, their occupations, customs, and general mode of living. At this point, the Italian immigrant population in Providence had already expanded to 500 persons, and each week, there were reports of additions to the community immigrating from southern Italy, specifically the “Neapolitan provinces” (The Italians, 1888). Besides the statistical information regarding the population of Italian immigrants in Providence, these articles shed light on the activities and developments in the early years of establishing the “Italian colony.” Italian American societies were established, the first being the Italian Benevolent Society, which provided funds for burials for the poor as well as financial support for orphaned children of the community. The second organization, La Fratellanza Italiana, offered educational services on American civics and the English language and assisted in the naturalization process. The last of these three societies, La Società Roma, founded by and comprised solely of Neapolitan immigrants, the society organized events on Italian nationalism, specifically feasts celebrating the liberation of Rome and unification of the Kingdom of Italy (From Sunny Lands, 1887). The combination of these first three societies, none of which exist to this day, offers an insight into the process of Italian American immigrants not only beginning to construct their community in Providence but also their process of integration. These societies organized Italian patriotic celebrations, such as the birthdate of the “Natale di Roma” or the “Aniversario dell’Unità d’Italia,” but, at the same time, they provided services such as courses in language and US citizenship, forming this blended Italian American identity.

A critical factor in the process of constructing the “Italian colony” of Federal Hill, both employment and commerce, are heavily covered in this article. A great deal is written about the types of occupations had by the Italian immigrants, whether it be factory work, construction, farming, stone cutting, or tailoring. Aside from these occupations, this piece mentions how commerce in the “Italian colony” had boomed, aside from working as “organ grinders, chestnut roasters, and peanut peddlers.” Italians had been able to elevate themselves in terms of self-employment quite early following their arrival in Providence. The article alludes to a shift in the demographics of the Federal Hill neighborhood from Irish to Italian immigrants. Italian immigrants had set up six “Italian shops,” a bakery, ice creameries, and Italian imports of “olive oil, macaroni, wines, canned and preserved goods, and vegetables.” Cited in the piece is the establishment of the first men’s boarding house for Italian immigrants in the former “McNally Block,” referencing the turnover from the Irish to the Italians. The transition between these two ethnic groups was not always amicable. Until the 1920s, the Irish continued to inhabit homes in the dense Italian streets of the enclave. Even after the majority of Irish Americans left the neighborhood, they relocated to the surrounding districts, and exchanges between the two groups were quite violent at times (Raben, 2016). Before 1871, there were no Italian immigrant women in the “Italian colony”; it was only post-1871 that wives began to meet their husbands and establish their new homes in America. These immigrant women later brought their single sisters, and quickly, these women began marrying the Italian immigrant men already settled in Federal Hill. In addition to these additions to the Italian colony, women, aside from working in the home, began working in the surrounding industries, primarily the textile mills or within the specialty shops, from their husbands’ sides. The presence of Italian immigrant women in the “colony” affected the growth of families, the overall demographic shift and population boom in the area,

and the physical appearance of Federal Hill's Italian section. The homes, yards, and gardens significantly improved thanks to the presence of the women in the "Italian colony," the article notes (From Sunny Lands, 1887).

In 1905, the number of Italian-born residents in the Federal Hill section had risen to nearly 20,000 individuals. Federal Hill was the prominent enclave of Italian Americans in Rhode Island: "There are several settlements of Italians in this city, streets where men of one province gather, but there is one 'Little Italy' – the quarter where all classes from Garibaldi's country unite. This is Federal Hill." (Federal Hill Now the Abiding Place of Nearly 20,000 Italians, 1905). According to the Rhode Island State census in 1905, between 17,000 and 19,000 Italians were living in the confines of the neighborhood. This article draws attention to the fact that 25 years ago, Italians had been restricted to living on the neighborhood's outskirts, far from the main street of Atwells Avenue, and in shanty towns built between the streets bordering the railway lines. Italians who wandered towards Atwells Avenue were "...stoned by the young men of the neighborhood." (Federal Hill Now the Abiding Place of Nearly 20,000 Italians, 1905). A major shift is noted in this period, not solely in the neighborhood's demographic but in its architecture and how it influenced the way of living. When Federal Hill was inhabited by Irish immigrants, homes along the avenue and side streets were primarily one-family Federal-style cottages, except for the occasional multifamily tenement house. "The first thing Italians did was to change the character of the locality..." (Federal Hill Now the Abiding Place of Nearly 20,000 Italians, 1905). Italian immigrants began to purchase the old cottages, demolish them, and construct substantial tenement homes, housing between three to eight families in their place and Italianate-style buildings, many built of wood but later brick and stone. Homes were built on every square inch to maximize the space and shape a type of "borgo" within Federal Hill. In the backyards of

many of these major tenements, smaller one- or two-family homes were built, and there was an element of communal living similar to that of the “old country.” By this time, the Italians of Providence had established a booming commercial row, their own newspaper, “L’Eco del Rhode Island,” a multitude of clubs and organizations, most noteworthy, the first Italian fraternal organization in the United States, The Italo-American Club of Rhode Island. In addition to the civic, social, and religious organizations, two churches were established in the neighborhood, one Baptist and one Roman Catholic, Holy Ghost, the oldest Italian national parish in New England (Zizzamia, 1989). “... They (the Italians) have created a quarter worth seeing, especially on a Sunday afternoon in the summer, when almost the entire population lives in the street.” (Federal Hill Now the Abiding Place of Nearly 20,000 Italians, 1905).

A central element in the construction of “Little Italy” is the religious aspect of the neighborhood. In 1889, La Congregazione dei Missionari di San Carlo founded the Holy Ghost Church from Piacenza, Italy. In 1887, the order was just being established by then Bishop Giovanni Battista Scalabrini, and in the following years, Providence’s Bishop, Rev. Matthew Harkins, would request the presence of Scalabrinian Priests in his Diocese to serve the needs of the Italian community. The records of the Holy Ghost Church offer a history of the religious practices before the parish’s formation. In 1871, the Roman Catholic Church of Saint John was built in the center of the Federal Hill neighborhood for Irish immigrants. Italian immigrants arrived only a few years later, and the difference in religious expressions between the two groups had Italians banned from attending Mass there. Instead, the early community practiced their faith in the basement church of Providence’s old Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul, outside the limits of Federal Hill (Holy Ghost Church, 1989). The foundation of the first Italian national parish in Rhode Island would usher a quite profound period in the expansion of the Diocese of Providence

and for the Scalabrini missionaries within the diocese. The study of the formation of Italian national parishes in Rhode Island aids in understanding how Italian settlements formed and evolved, precisely where and when; depending on the size of the parish as well as the vibrancy, one gains insight on whether the area was a booming “Little Italy” and for how long. Following the establishment of the Holy Ghost Church on November 4, 1889, several chapels were formed, not only in Providence but throughout Rhode Island. These chapels later evolved into churches and parishes in their own right, with booming communities of Italian Americans, many of which housed spiritual societies, festivals, and established parochial schools. In Providence’s North End or Charles neighborhood, the Church of Saint Anne was established in 1895, 1903 Saint Rocco Church nearby in the town of Johnston, next was Saint Bartholomew Church in Providence’s Silver Lake in 1909, then in 1913 Our Lady of Grace in Johnston, the list continues with Our Lady of Loreto in East Providence, Holy Cross on Hartford Avenue in Providence, Saint Anthony in Woonsocket, Sacred Heart in West Warwick and lastly, Our Lady of Mount Carmel on Federal Hill in Providence (Polo, 2014).<sup>4</sup> The timeline and location of the establishment of each parish is an essential factor in mapping how Italian Americans dispersed throughout the past century. Apart from Federal Hill, which gained another Italian national parish in 1925 to house a congregation of nearly 18,000 Italian Americans, the formation of urban parishes in Italian “colonies” was limited to the period of the late 1800s and early 1900s (Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church, 2019). Rural pockets of the state, including communities such as Johnston, East Providence, Woonsocket, and West Warwick, established their Italian National

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<sup>4</sup> Aside from the Italian national parishes founded by the Scalabrini Missionaries, additional parishes would form to serve the Italian American community of Rhode Island, Saint Mary in Cranston, Saint Maria Goretti in Pawtucket, Saint Anthony in North Providence, Our Lady of Mount Carmel in Bristol, a number of non-Italian national parishes have since become a house of worship for those of Italian decent, perhaps none more prolific than that of Our Lady of Mount Carmel in Westerly which appears to be the most vibrant of Italian American communities today.

Parishes later in the 1910s and 1920s. Initially, they were quite small, founded as “mission churches,” but in the mid-twentieth century, they would grow into large parishes in their own right. Simultaneously, the urban Italian National Parishes would begin to experience decline, tracing the different patterns in Italian American settlements and documenting the mass exodus from the city to the suburbs, shedding light on how Italian Americans moved in this period.

In conclusion, the early years of the formation of Italian American neighborhoods in Providence, Rhode Island, were vibrant. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, employment, commerce, and religious practices were central elements in establishing the Federal Hill community. Demographic changes within Federal Hill, from the initial settlement of Irish immigrants to the substantial influx of Italian immigrants, led to the transformation of the physical landscape of the city. The establishment of Italian National Parishes, religious and civic organizations, commercial districts, and specialty shops provides an understanding of the community's development. The church played a vital role in shaping the Italian American identity, fostering community bonds, and serving as a spiritual center. As this study progresses, these foundational insights will provide a solid framework for further exploration and analysis of the role of place for the Italian diaspora in Rhode Island.

## **4. Preservation and Adaptation:**

The landscape of Providence, Rhode Island, in the early twentieth century, was marked by the rapid expansion of the city's Italian ethnic neighborhoods. The previous chapter centered on the foundation of the Italian settlements, primarily the first of Rhode Island's "Little Italies," Federal Hill. As the 1800s concluded, additional Italian neighborhoods began to form along the city's outskirts. The North End and Silver Lake would both take shape and flourish as the twentieth century progressed. The golden age of Providence's "Little Italies" occurred in the early part of the century, primarily from the late 1910s to the early 1940s. This chapter will chronicle the evolution of Rhode Island's Italian American community and neighborhoods in Providence. The growth and evolution of the Italian colonies were not solely characterized by physical expansion. Institutions like churches and social clubs were vital centers for community interaction, religious observance, and cultural celebration. Religious festivals and patriotic feasts spilled into the streets as well, turning these spaces into integral settings for social life and a representation of the growing social integration among Italian immigrants. These events celebrated Italian heritage and served as markers of the community's progress and integration into American society. Despite these achievements, Italian American communities continued to face many challenges, including discrimination, economic hardships, and external pressures such as the rise of Fascism in Italy and World War II (Tintori, 2013). However, through resilience and perseverance, Italian Americans continued to contribute to the economic, social, and cultural fabric of Providence and beyond. The chapter will delve deeper into the growth and evolution of Italian colonies in Providence, exploring the rich tapestry of experiences and challenges that shaped the Italian American community in Rhode Island as they navigated the preservation of their culture while adapting to the American way.

In 1905, Federal Hill's population of Italian immigrants totaled approximately twenty thousand (Federal Hill Now the Abiding Place of Nearly 20,000 Italians, 1905). *The Providence Journal* declared Federal Hill as the one and only "Little Italy" in the city, the center for the life of Rhode Island's Italian American population. This, however, should not disregard the importance of the additional Italian settlements within the city and state. While the Italian immigrant population was steadily rising in the area, there was not enough space within the existing "Italian colonies." Federal Hill's Italian immigrants spilled into the neighboring valley, known as Eagle Square, expanding the colony's borders. The North End Italian immigrants also began outgrowing the confines of their neighborhood. They developed much of the land bordering the city, which was primarily rocky and infertile wasteland. It was developed with multifamily housing, and the North End colony grew into the town of North Providence and the nearby Providence neighborhood of Eagle Park (Savidge Sterne, 2004). In this period, *The Providence Journal* published an article that chronicled the growth of another of the city's Italian colonies, Silver Lake. The piece entitled "Federal Hill's Growing Rival, Silver Lake" comes about following a major celebration on Federal Hill, where non-Italian observers questioned how the masses piled in the streets, hanging out of the tenement windows and on fire escapes could all fit in the confines of the area. A member of the Italian American community replied that the majority lived on Federal Hill, some in the North End. However, many on that day were from the Silver Lake settlement (Federal Hill's Growing Rival, Silver Lake, 1909).

Silver Lake, like the North End, is located along the outskirts of Providence's city center. At the same time, the North End, bordering the town of North Providence, was urban and densely populated, while Silver Lake was quite the opposite. Far removed from the early center of Providence and bordering the small city of Cranston, which was quite rural at the time of this



article's publication, Silver Lake was a bridge between the urban and rural landscape. The Silver Lake settlement is quite interesting for this study's purposes and specifically for this chapter's argument because it marks a shift in the process by which Italians immigrated and settled not only in this area but in America at the dawn of the twentieth century. The earlier settlements of Federal Hill and the North End were developed in areas already inhabited by other immigrant groups. Silver Lake, in contrast, was set up primarily by Italian immigrants. *The Providence Journal* writes, "Unlike other communities in which the Italians have settled, where they have crowded out other nationalities and taken possession of property which may have depreciated in value, the settlers in Silver Lake have transformed what was practically useless territory into a residential section that shows promise of becoming the fashionable quarter of Italian race in the city" (Federal Hill's Growing Rival, Silver Lake, 1909). Silver Lake was the first Italian colony of its kind in Rhode Island. Before the arrival of the Italian immigrants, the area was primarily occupied by a body of water called Silver Lake and basin, from where the neighborhood's name derives. In the mid-1800s, the area was relatively undeveloped, primarily serving as a source of recreation for the surrounding rural communities. Silver Lake was significantly altered in the late nineteenth century when the extension of Providence's trolley lines created a more significant network, connecting the city's rural pockets to its center (Olneyville pressure, streetcars pushed Silver Lake growth, 1987). In 1892, the first Italians arrived in the area, settling along the banks of the Silver Lake Basin. At that time, the lake had been greatly polluted due to the effects of Providence's industrialization, and the area was undesirable. Property values were some of the lowest in the city, drastically less than Federal Hill and North End, with parcels of land sold for thirty-five dollars each. Within five years, Antonio Lafazio, the founder of Silver Lake's "Italian colony," and a handful of Italian immigrants began developing the area. By the early twentieth

century, the body of water was drained and filled in as demand for land in the Silver Lake area rose. Property values began to rise quickly as more Italian immigrants constructed their homes there. Only twelve years after the arrival of the first Italian immigrant settlers, parcels of land were selling for nearly one thousand dollars each. In 1909, the Italian immigrant population of Silver Lake was made up of approximately four thousand individuals. Within six months of that same year, the Italian settlers had constructed nearly fifty buildings, marking a significant shift in how these immigrants established themselves in America (Federal Hill's Growing Rival, Silver Lake, 1909).

During the first great wave of Italian immigration, a significant number of Italians returned to the land of their birth after a short period. "In the eyes of American society, the Italian represented 'birds of passage' who remained only for a brief period, temporarily profiting from a place's resources only to pass on afterward to more favorable shores... Roughly forty-six Italians out of a hundred returned to their country between 1899 and 1925" (Garroni, p.166). The establishment of the Silver Lake enclave sheds light on the change in the way Italian immigrants began to make a home in the United States. The idea of home was not always temporary; for many, their objective was to immigrate to America for a short period, make their fortunes, and then return "home" to Italy. Nevertheless, for those who, either through their work, families, or community, began to imagine their future in this new land and feel rooted in America, the notion of establishing their permanent "home" became a critical factor. The Silver Lake study showcases the evolution of Little Italies. These neighborhoods were not solely densely populated, inner-city settlements where foreign-born residents were detached from American customs and society. In Silver Lake, the residential district was created with a mix of single-family cottages, duplex homes, or multifamily tenements, constructed differently from

their counterparts. Homes were spaced out, allowing land to be cultivated into flower and vegetable gardens. Greenspaces and yards were abundant, attracting many immigrants from rural Italy.

The land was partitioned for several parks, aspects that needed to be added in Federal Hill or the North End. Following the area's residential development, the commercial district came about. Pocasset and Union Avenue were lined with dry goods stores and specialty shops; Italian immigrants owned all but four businesses that occupied these streets. These stores were “old world,” similar to the “mercantile” of the mid-nineteenth century, noted *The Providence Journal* (Federal Hill’s Growing Rival, Silver Lake, 1909). Aside from the investment of the Italian Americans in the area, the city also funded much of the improvement of Silver Lake following the area’s development. *The Providence Journal* writes, “In no section of the city inhabited by Italians is there displayed a greater desire to adopt American methods” (Federal Hill’s Growing Rival, Silver Lake, 1909). Silver Lake embodied Italian and American ways of living more profoundly than the city’s other “Italian colonies.” The Italian immigrants of Silver Lake established their own post office and expressed the desire for a public school, paved roads, and a playground for the children; these immigrants desired to adapt to the “American method,” while Federal Hill and the North End remained very much detached from American society.

Providence’s Italian neighborhoods remained relatively isolated from the rest of the city for various reasons, primarily racial<sup>5</sup>, ethnic, and linguistic differences, which characterized them as

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<sup>5</sup> Italians of southern descent, much like other southern, eastern Europeans, were considered racially inferior to their northern and western counterparts, Anglo-Saxons, Celts, and Nordics, throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. While today the definition of “race” has evolved, in the past, particular ethnicities, such as Mediterraneans, Hebrews, and Slavs, were categorized as an in-between sub-sector of the white race. Italian immigrants were racially divided into two categories, “northern” and “southern”. Southerners were noted as a “long-headed, dark, ‘Mediterranean’ race of short stature.” (Vellon, p. 214, 2029). The “racial” differences of these Italians posed concerns to Americans who feared the mass migration of a people viewed as ethnically and racially diverse from the “white” masses.

“more foreign than Europe” by *The Providence Journal* (Little Italy, 1896). Additionally, inhabitants of the Federal Hill neighborhood were often noted for their defiance in conforming to American society, thus further alienating them from the rest of society. While for some, the way of life and traditions of these immigrants was considered charming or colorful, the perception was quite different for many. Italians were viewed as “alien” inhabitants of squalid pockets of the city who practiced strange traditions, mixing the sacred and profane. *The Providence Journal* writes, “...the odor of garlic, the smell of smoke, pervades... There are no means of ventilation, and the air is always foul...” (Savidge Sterne, 2004). The view of the Italian immigrant as the “other” fueled an anti-Italian sentiment within the city, specifically in the first three decades of the 1900s when Providence’s Italian immigrant population drastically increased. The displacement of residents within other neighborhoods, primarily the Irish inhabitants of the North End, Federal Hill, and Eagle Park neighborhoods. The cultural and linguistic barriers Italian immigrants faced in Providence led them to rarely venture outside their neighborhoods, consequently confining them to go about their daily lives within the borders of their “Little Italies.” Federal Hill was the central meeting point for the masses of Italian immigrants within Rhode Island. Apart from the bustling commercial district, occupied by a plethora of Italian specialty shops and restaurants, the neighborhood’s church was the center of both spiritual and social life.

The Holy Ghost Church acted as a source of refuge for the immigrants in this period. Other Italian communities in American cities like New York and Boston established churches honoring a particular patron saint from a specific city or town, for example, the churches of the Madonna di Pompeii for Neapolitan immigrants or Santa Rosalia for Sicilian immigrants, La Parocchia Italiana dello Spirito Santo, or Holy Ghost Parish, was given this name in order to

serve as a house of worship for all Italian immigrants, not just those of a particular city or town with a devotion to a specific saint. The church's congregation was the largest of the Italian national parishes in Rhode Island, drawing from various towns, cities, and neighborhoods; throughout the 1890s, many journeyed hours to attend Sunday mass or to take part in religious processions and festivities (Santoro, 1990). By 1901, the Holy Ghost Church had outgrown two prior houses of worship, a small wooden chapel and a modest brick church, both located within the side streets of Federal Hill. In February of that same year, the cornerstone of a new church was laid on the neighborhood's main street, Atwells Avenue, marking the presence and permanence of the Italian community in Providence. The red brick and limestone Italian gothic structure, modeled after the Basilica of San Marco in Venice, was finally completed in February 1910. The parish continued to flourish from the new structure and began to establish mission churches throughout the state. Aside from the spiritual aspect, the church was the primary hub of social life in this period; nearly every weekend, religious processions and festivals honoring a patron saint from a particular city or town were celebrated. These festivities then grew into major celebrations, serving not only a spiritual purpose but a social one. These events drew together immigrants from the same areas; for example, the Società di San Bernardo di Carinola, Società di San Paride e San Antonio di Teano, or the Società della Madonna dei Latani di Roccamonfina were founded in order to celebrate not only the saint but a particular town. The early religious societies began to take shape outside of the church, establishing social clubs under the name of a specific village. Many societies took the name of the hometown or 'paese' from which several immigrants came. In contrast, others retained the names of the particular patron saint of their village, for example, the Società di Mutuo Soccorso San Biagio or the Società di Mutuo Soccorso Sant'Eraclio. These societies assisted their fellow villagers, shifting away from solely

the spiritual aspect. They began to offer aid to those in need, primarily new immigrants, the sick, and the elderly. Eventually, small headquarters were established along Atwells Avenue and side streets, such as the Pietravairano Club, Frosolonese Club, and Isernia Social Club. These clubs and organizations acted as additional places for “paesani,” fellow immigrants of the same area, to meet and socialize outside a religious setting (DeSimone, 2014). Members would meet and help one another find employment or get established in the new area. However, they served a great social service in a period without telephones, radio, or television; these clubs were places for men or women to meet, converse, organize events and festivals, or play cards. By 1919, an estimated one hundred societies, lodges, and clubs were located in Providence and an additional fifty elsewhere in Rhode Island (Active Fraternal Life of “Little Italy, 1919). Later, these establishments sprang up all over Providence in the Italian colonies.

In the North End, the cornerstone for the Church of Saint Ann was being laid; from a mission church, it had flourished into a parish in its own right thanks to the efforts of Rev. Antonio Bove, who served as pastor for nearly thirty years. The red-brick, Romanesque-style church was completed in 1910, providing a beautiful place of worship for the Italians of the North End. Under Rev. Bove’s leadership, the local community was shaped and vastly improved. In 1916, Saint Ann's School was the first school of any Italian national parish. Religious Sisters were brought in from Rome to teach the Italian language and staff the school’s nursery. At the same time, instructors provided children with a curriculum equivalent to that of the American public school system, and enrollment by 1920 grew to approximately three hundred students. Additionally, Rev. Bove established an “Americanization” class in the evenings, offering English language lessons and citizenship classes, the first incorporated by a religious institution in the Italian colonies (Santoro, 1990). For his efforts, the pastor was recognized by the Italian

government and the Catholic Church, receiving honorary titles from both entities (St. Anne Church, 1970). Prior to his death in 1931, Fr. Bove was a fervent ally of Mussolini's government, using the pulpit as a means to spread the Fascist and Catholic ideology.

By 1920, Italian-born residents were the largest foreign-born population in Rhode Island, making up nineteen percent of the state's foreign-born population (Santoro, 1990). At the same time, living conditions within Providence's Italian neighborhoods began to improve, and Italians slowly began to notice a change in their quality of life. However, in 1921, a report by the Rhode Island Commissioner of Labor found that Italian immigrants were the lowest paid of the state's ethnic groups. This did not hinder the Italian immigrant's opportunities to make advances not only economically but socially. In 1925, *The Providence Journal* declared Federal Hill as the city's fastest-growing section, not only in population but also in building and property values (Federal Hill Marks Record Breaking Growth, 1925). At this time, approximately thirty-five thousand Italian-born individuals called Federal Hill home. Historians have also noted this period as a time of rapid growth in the neighborhood; nearly thirty-five percent of Italian businesses were self-owned. For those who did not have the luxury of a storefront, they took to the streets. These vendors, often referred to as peddlers, each day set up shop on sidewalks and street corners, creating an open-air market. "... residents could shop for their daily needs... it was not unusual to see dead rabbits or lambs hanging from hooks... buckets of codfish outside on the street. The sidewalks were always crowded with shoppers and children playing and men of all ages gathered on the street corners to socialize." (Santoro, 1990). The majority of social interactions occurred in the streets, a ritual that these immigrants had taken with them from the "old world." The street life that developed in this era as the quality of life improved allowed these individuals to spend more time enjoying one another's company. Religious festivals and

patriotic feasts spilled into the streets as well, and this space served as an integral setting, not only in terms of social life but also as a representation of the growth of Italian immigrants during this period socially. No longer were they confined to the periphery of Federal Hill, hidden on the side streets; now, they had taken over the neighborhood and openly went about their activities on the main streets, front and center.

The credit for social and economic development can be given to first-generation Italian Americans who immigrated from the peninsula in the early 1900s and second-generation immigrants born on American soil. From the first generation, who primarily worked as day laborers, the next generation followed their work ethic and applied it to create a more sustainable way of living, primarily in entrepreneurship, drastically changing the commercial and residential aspects of the neighborhood (Federal Hill Marks Record Breaking Growth, 1925). The first great wave of Italian immigration would conclude in these years, specifically in 1924, with the enactment of the Johnson-Reed Act (Parker, 1924). The legislation drastically reduced the number of immigrants allowed to enter the United States, only six thousand Italians annually; this significantly affected the Italian diaspora in Rhode Island and the rest of the country (Crudale, 2021). The further development of Italian neighborhoods would be fueled by the efforts of the first and second-generation Italian Americans, who began to invest more and more in these communities, rooting themselves there. However, with the lack of a continued great flow of Italian immigrants, the effects of Americanization would be strongly felt within the Italian colonies.

Whether the Italian immigrants realized it or not, their ordinary, everyday actions were critical in preserving the culture of their homeland. They transported their cuisine, language, song, and religious and social practices from their village or province in Italy to their new homes



in America and passed them on to their children. In the isolation of the Italian neighborhood, the children of these immigrants born in America remained very much rooted in the culture and tradition of the generation before them. As outlined previously, the church and the social clubs or organizations offered a more formal means of culture preservation. The advent of Fascism in the mid-1920s and early 1930s greatly influenced the cultural identity and heritage of Italian Americans at this time. The Italian American press, such as *The Italian Echo* and *Il Progresso*, looked quite favorably upon Mussolini at this time, and he was a symbol for Italian Americans to venerate and unify around, specifically for a generation who began to feel the effects of Americanization and adaptation to this new culture. The messages of the Fascist regime were strong uniting factors for the fragmented Italian identity rooted in “campanilismo.”<sup>6</sup> Mussolini launched a campaign strategically aimed toward Italians in America through unsuccessful Fascist Party Chapters in “Little Italies” to an alliance with the Catholic Church, religious schools, cultural societies, and associations, the regime attempted to use language and culture as means to link together Italian Americans from across the peninsula and heighten Italian imperialism and nationalism (Pretelli, 2006). The Italian newspapers would continue to print their publications in Italian even though the number of English-speaking readers increased within the community. The preservation and instruction of “proper Italian” was rhetoric often printed in these newspapers, on Italian American radio programming, the cinema, and the church, which acted as a strong advocate for cultural preservation and mouthpiece for the regime (Federici, 2018). At this same time, exterior influences were striving to assist Italian Americans in assimilating to American society and culture; in this period, children had more opportunities to attend school,

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<sup>6</sup> *Campanilismo* comes from the Italian word for bell tower, the focal point or meeting place for a group of people in a town or village. The sociological term describes a deep sense of belonging or great pride in one’s place of origin, usually stronger than one’s connection to national identity. This was considered problematic in terms of Italian Unification.

the Boy Scouts were established in all three neighborhoods and in Federal Hill, the Sprague Home for Girls, was reformed into the Federal Hill House, which offered a variety of services for women and children: social, medical, educational, and vocational assistance. The “Italian” population was the third largest ethnic population in Rhode Island at the time of the 1930 United States Census.

While 32,498 Rhode Islanders declared Italian birth, they were significantly outnumbered by the population claiming Italian parents and Italian descent, identified as “Italian-stock” or “Italian Americans.” 92,036 individuals declared Italian descent and over half of that population lived in Providence. However great the numbers, these individuals were still, for the most part, marginalized and “...underrepresented in clerical, professional, and managerial occupations.” (Federici, 2018). The economic crisis of 1929 was an additional factor that hindered the professional growth of the community; however, Italian American businesspeople, doctors, architects, lawyers, and politicians began to make strides in this decade (Pesaturo, 1940). For the most part, however, due to economic constraints, the majority of Italian Americans were left with meager opportunities and remained in the confines of their neighborhoods, which offered them security in the sense of community and terms of employment; the initial factors that drew their parents and grandparents to the colonies. The lack of economic growth forced families to stay close in relationships and space. Newlywed couples often could not afford to rent an apartment of their own and would more often move in with either the bride's or groom's parents. Domestic spaces were the center for generations of families; in many cases, even if married children did not live in the same apartment as their parents, daughters often remained near their mothers, either in the same tenement, next door, or on the same street, keeping the family unit intact. The proximity of the family was an integral factor in cultural preservation, as language,

tradition, and cuisine were passed on from generation to generation. As the 1930s progressed into the next decade, tensions between the United States and Italy heightened during the dawn of the Second World War. When Americans eventually went to war, the loyalty of the Italian American community was questioned; approximately fifteen million soldiers of Italian descent went off to war to serve the United States (Candeloro, 2018). Nevertheless, those back home were still vilified; in 1940, Italians were listed as enemies of the State, and more than half a million of the foreign-born population in America was not naturalized. Carnevale, 2018). Mussolini Square in the North End and Italo Balbo Avenue in Federal Hill were renamed to try to calm the tensions between the Italians and their fellow American citizens. The Italian language was no longer spoken publicly, and within the parishes and communities, there was a push to help in the war effort. The Italian “enemy” status<sup>7</sup> had resurged significantly, perhaps more profound than in the early days of the mass immigration of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Carnevale, 2018). Italian Americans could no longer negotiate between the duality of their identity, and in this period, the push toward Americanization intensified.

Concluding this chapter, it is crucial to recognize the expansion and growth of additional Italian colonies within the city, notably Silver Lake, the North End, and Federal Hill. While distinct in their characteristics and demographics, these neighborhoods contributed to the rich fabric of the Italian American community in Rhode Island. The emergence of Silver Lake as a residential and commercial district marked a shift in the settlement patterns of Italian immigrants. Unlike earlier colonies, Silver Lake was primarily developed by Italian immigrants themselves, transforming previously uninhabitable territory into a thriving community. This

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<sup>7</sup> Italians who were not naturalized were registered as enemies of the United States from 1941-1942, hundreds of Italians were placed in internment camps or relocated and sanctioned. The U.S. government issued various campaigns satirizing the Axis leaders and combating the use of the Italian language and customs. Signs printed and posted in Italian American communities read: “Don’t speak Italian” and “Don’t ACT Italian.” (Candelone, 2018).

exemplifies the adaptability of Italian immigrants in creating new homes and opportunities in America. Additionally, these Italian neighborhoods' social and cultural life played a pivotal role in preserving Italian heritage while adapting to American society. Institutions like churches and social clubs served as hubs for community interaction, religious observance, and cultural celebration. These spaces facilitated the transmission of language, traditions, and values across generations, fostering a strong sense of identity and belonging among Italian Americans.

The Italian immigrant experience was not without challenges. Discrimination, economic hardships, and external pressures, such as the rise of Fascism in Italy and World War II, tested the resilience of Italian American communities. Despite these adversities, Italian Americans persevered, contributing to the economic, social, and cultural fabric of Providence and beyond.

## **5. Urban Decay and Cultural Decline:**

While the Second World War proved to be a trying time for Italian Americans throughout the United States, by the end of the war, they emerged resilient and were celebrated for their loyalty to the American cause (LaGumina, 2002). The Italian Americans were considered American, after having adapted to the American way of life. While the duality of the identity of these individuals remained, the differences between them and their non-Italian American counterparts were eroding. The once strong, tight-knit Italian American enclaves began to decline as the exodus from the city to the suburbs occurred in the post-war period.<sup>8</sup> Many rural Italian American settlements outside Providence transformed into suburban neighborhoods from the late 1940s to the mid-1960s. Cities and towns such as Johnston, Cranston, and North Providence experienced significant expansion and population booms during this period, and a substantial number of Italian Americans made their new homes here. As for the old neighborhoods, Federal Hill and the North End experienced some early effects of depopulation by the early 1960s. In contrast, the existing suburban landscape of the Silver Lake neighborhood was not significantly affected at this time. For Federal Hill, the construction of the Interstate 95 highway between 1957 and 1965 marked a period of immense decline for the neighborhood. Providence's central neighborhoods, primarily ethnic enclaves of Irish, Italian, and African Americans, were overtaken by the highway construction, displacing thousands. The city's population decreased by twenty-eight percent between 1950 and 1970 (Drum, 2017).

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<sup>8</sup> Following the Second World War, the Servicemen's Readjustment Act, also known as the G.I. Bill, was signed into law by President Roosevelt. The legislation provided financial support to WWII veterans, allowing them to obtain higher education, unemployment insurance, and housing. Many made their homes in the new suburban neighborhoods outside the city, kickstarting the inner-city exodus.

In 1960, *The Providence Journal* ran a five-part series of articles entitled “The Flight from Federal Hill.” The articles explored the problems facing the neighborhood at the time, primarily depopulation and overall decay. The once bustling “Little Italy,” Rhode Island’s most famed neighborhood, had declined so significantly by 1960 that neighborhood leaders were quoted as describing Federal Hill as “dead.” Those who called the neighborhood home believed it to be at or beyond “the gravest crisis it has ever faced.” (Howard, 1960). The cause of this crisis was the volume and speed at which individuals left the neighborhood. *The Journal* chronicled, “Church membership is being whittled down at an alarming rate. Schools are disappearing and enrollments shrinking. Houses are being boarded up or torn down. Empty tenements blanket the area. Business, in some cases, is worse than it was during the Great Depression. The number of vacant stores is multiplying rapidly.” (Howard, 1960). In addition, the mass exodus and the advent of big box stores and supermarkets had detrimental effects on the small family-run operations along Atwells Avenue, DePasquale Avenue, and Spruce Street. One businessman remarked that what was once a bustling shopping center “will be nothing but a ghost town in a few years.” (Howard, 1960). Another businessman added, “There isn’t a man on Atwells Avenue whose business isn’t for sale... This place is done.” Frank Moia, President of the Federal Hill Businessmen’s Association, remarked that the situation would only worsen without any intervention. (Howard, 1960). The “old-timers” who had moved away still came up to Federal Hill to shop, either to congregate with friends or find products they could not locate elsewhere. However, the lack of parking deterred many from taking their business up to Federal Hill. Once the highest population density in the city, the neighborhood had decreased by over one thousand residents each year for seven years.

In detail, the article interviews a variety of individuals. Rev. Flaminio Parenti, Pastor of the Holy Ghost Church, offered much insight into the shifts in the neighborhood at this time. The multifamily homes and tenements surrounding the church were almost all abandoned, with nearly ten to fifteen families gone, only on one street. The parish statistics also reflect this migration from the neighborhood; in 1950, there were seventeen thousand registered parishioners, and in 1960, the number had decreased by nearly seven thousand individuals. At the nearby Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church, membership had dropped from seven to four thousand parishioners in the same timeframe. As for the three neighborhood schools, enrollment had dropped by fifty percent in fifteen years. (Howard, 1960). The housing issues in the Federal Hill neighborhood were primary push factors for families who once inhabited the neighborhood. The multifamily tenement houses built at the turn of the century had fallen into a state of disrepair or decay. Of the nearly sixty-five hundred dwellings within the Federal Hill area, almost half were designated as “sub-standard” by the U.S. government housing regulations. In the heart of the neighborhood, 62.5 percent of housing was described as “substandard.” These statistics were the worst in the city’s history. Forty-six dwellings were leveled in less than ten years, and not a single new home had been built in the neighborhood. The old tenements were great homes in a different era and generation. For these reasons, the allure of suburban life grew all the more, the dream of living in a single-family home with a yard and space for their children, away from the chaos of the city. An added factor that pushed out many residents was the rent increases at the beginning of the crisis. Many landlords who lost tenants and could not find new ones were forced to raise the rents of remaining families and individuals, pushing them away from the neighborhood. (Howard, 1960).

The lack of recreational spaces for children and families was a significant factor in deterring families from remaining in the neighborhood. The playground on Garibaldi Field was the largest open space for children to play, surrounded by abandoned factories and dilapidated buildings. The city closed the hazardous property, and a wasteland formed; for nearly seven years, residents awaited the renovation of the park, but it was never begun and later would be absorbed by the construction of the highway. Of Providence's fifty-nine playgrounds, only two were located on Federal Hill. There had been no newly developed recreational space in the neighborhood in over a decade, since then, the city's Parks Department added eighteen recreational facilities and play spaces, none of which in Federal Hill (Howard, 1960). In interviews with me, several individuals who once resided in the area credited this as one of the primary reasons, they decided to take their families to live outside the neighborhood. Many, sickened by the deterioration of their old homes, blame the city's leadership and elected officials for Federal Hill's problems at that time. "If the Redevelopment Agency and the mayor would take an interest in the Hill and not pass the buck, the area might get somewhere," added a former resident. Perspectives from the neighborhood councilmen Luongo and DiLorenzo offered grim views on the future of the neighborhood. Without proper insight and action, Federal Hill would only continue to decline. On the state level, Rhode Island's Governor, Christopher Del Sesto, the state's second Italian American governor and himself the son of Italian immigrants, pledged his support in aiding the revitalization of Federal Hill but added that real change would have to come from within the neighborhood. He argued that the neighborhood's professionals, the architects, engineers, and attorneys needed to spearhead a coalition to provide a non-profit study of what would be needed to bring back Federal Hill (Howard, 1960).



By the mid-1960s, Providence was further spiraling into economic decline and urban decay. Many significant industries had left the city and moved to suburban neighborhoods, Providence's great textile industry had dissolved entirely, and the only primary manufacturing sector that remained was jewelry making, which kept many residents employed. Providence's North End and Federal Hill neighborhoods continued to suffer, and there was a great need for government-assisted revitalization to bring some life back to these once-colorful "Little Italies." The Italian American community was at a crossroads, having to decide between preserving their culture and assimilating completely to the American fabric. In 1967, a special publication entitled "The Italian Heritage in Rhode Island" was printed by *The Providence Journal*. The piece covered the issues facing people whose culture had diminished with the passage of time. Author George Popkin declared that no other state had been more influenced by Italians than Rhode Island. From the arrival of Italy's first representative, Giovanni Verrazzano, on the shores of Providence in 1515 to the mass immigration of Italians in the early nineteenth century, these individuals and their children had significantly enriched the State of Rhode Island. But as for the third generation, he wrote, "A younger generation of Italian Americans, raised on soft drinks and hamburgers, completely Americanized – has come into being. Its integration into our society raises questions: Are they aware of their Italian Heritage? Are they concerned about it? Or will the future feature only chicken cacciatore as a remnant of the original legacy?" (Popkin, 1967). Popkin raised actual concerns regarding the decline of Italian ethnic diversity and cultural vibrancy in Rhode Island. This decline happened simultaneously with the deterioration of their neighborhoods too. Popkin added, "With each movement away from the Federal Hills of Rhode Island into the suburbs, with each passing year, with every loss of memory of the old Neapolitan

songs and legends, the chain will weaken.” However direly the situation was presented, ties between the Italian peninsula and the state of Rhode Island remained strong. (Popkin, 1967). As Italian Americans’ social and economic conditions improved significantly,<sup>9</sup> an appreciation for the Italian language, literature, history, and arts increased. There was a shift from an emphasis on the provincial folk culture to what was considered Italian high culture. Economic and social differences within the Italian American community created a divide in opinions concerning the significance of Italian culture and how it should be maintained and preserved. Affectionally known as the “Shepard of Federal Hill,” Rev. Flaminio Parenti, pastor of the Holy Ghost Church, spent nearly fifty years serving the spiritual needs of Rhode Island’s Italian American Catholic population. At age eighty-one, he was once again interviewed for this publication. He had witnessed immense changes in Federal Hill and the Italian American community since arriving in Providence in 1922. Rev. Parenti is quoted as saying, “I would say that interest in Italy and Italian language and art is decreasing with the passing years.” He added, “...our church is losing membership, for example. People move out to Cranston and Warwick and other places. And what happens? They lose touch with their past. It’s understandable. Here, the children still learn Italian, all of them, in our school. When they go away, it’s a different story.” (Popkin, 1967). However, the church was not the only institution that lost momentum in this period; the religious, social clubs and fraternal organizations had seen a decline in memberships as the greater community began to navigate outside the confines of the ethnic neighborhoods and the focus shifted inward, around the nuclear family and a smaller network of family and friends. Luigi Scala, grand venerable of the Sons of Italy in Rhode Island, suggested

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<sup>9</sup> In the post-war period, Rhode Island’s Italian American population experienced a significant increase in professional employment, such as doctors, lawyers, and politicians. This was not the case for the entire populous, therefore creating not only a social, and economic divide but also a cultural one.

that Italian Americans had become “too individualistic... Each one wants to go in his own way. They should have established a relationship and worked together. The Italian fault is personal vanity.” (Popkin, 1967). The overall consensus, he added, was that the younger generations had lost interest in maintaining the traditions of their predecessors. However, as the population of native-born Italians in Rhode Island aged and their decedents completely Americanized, the Italian American community and its neighborhoods would undergo a renaissance in the years to follow thanks to the efforts of its community members and the foresight of local government and politicians.

While the Italian American culture in Rhode Island seemed to diminish in the mid-twentieth century, an influx of new Italian immigrants was soon to arrive. Like many states in the northeast, Rhode Island experienced a new wave of Italian immigration following the Second World War. Although the numbers paled compared to those of the turn of the century, from 1946 to 1970, about 426,448 Italians immigrated to the United States (Tintori, 2013). As resources documenting this second wave of Italian immigration to Rhode Island are few, there is some evidence that contributes to this development. For instance, the renewed popularity of Providence’s Italian radio programming in the mid-1950s and 1960s was attributed to a surge in its audience, a new generation of native speakers who made their homes in Rhode Island. Antonio Pace, the forefather of Italian American radio programming in Rhode Island, experienced great success with the daily broadcasting of the *Italo-American Radio Review* throughout the early twentieth century. In the 1950s, due to the resurgence in his audience, Pace returned to cities and towns in Italy where Rhode Island’s foreign-born population heralded from to record the sounds of the piazza, the church bells, and the voices of family and paesani, transmitting what he recorded over the airways. “...Pace, through the simple act of recording

these relatives' voices, would reunite the distant family members and bring great joy and comfort to the entire Italian diaspora of Rhode Island..." (Crudale, 2021). Additionally, in 1954, a new Italian radio program was broadcast, Claudio Campellone's *La Festa Italiana*, primarily dedicated to transmitting both traditional and popular music from Italy. A year later, Rolland Petrella launched his program, *Piccolo Mondo*, which broadcasted new hit music from Italy. Both Campellone and Petrella were recent immigrants to Providence, making homes there in the post-war period; their shows would expand and evolve in the decades to follow (Crudale, 2021). In 1972, *The Providence Journal* published an article covering the recent increase in immigration in Rhode Island. "The third largest group of immigrants are the Italians... They are settling in the traditionally Italian areas of Federal Hill (and) Silver Lake... but they seem to spread out more than other groups." The article also points out an interesting factor regarding these new Italian immigrants, which scholars call chain migration<sup>10</sup>, "...Italian immigrants are the brothers, cousins, or nephews of immigrants who came to this country early in this century. The ties of the extended family are strong... and these relatives born here have not been forgotten" (Thousands Settle in Rhode Island, 1972).

The late 1960s and early 1970s marked a difficult period in the history of Providence, not solely in its Italian neighborhoods. Federal Hill experienced detrimental losses; while many left the neighborhood of their own volition, many of the neighborhood's residents were displaced due to the construction of the I-95 and Route 10 highways. (Holy Ghost Church, 1989). Parts of Silver Lake and the North End were lost to the highway construction but nowhere near the extent

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<sup>10</sup> Chain migration, also known as family reunification, refers to the process by which immigrants to a country sponsor the migration of family members or relatives to join them. Individuals who have already immigrated to a particular country can sponsor their family members, such as spouses, children, parents, and siblings, to immigrate and join them in the new country.

of Federal Hill. Two sections of Federal Hill were destroyed entirely, blocks of tenement houses, businesses, and neighborhood landmarks were demolished, and the area's churches were greatly affected. Holy Ghost Church's parish hall, school, land, and rental properties were all to be demolished. The church was constructed in a densely populated area of Federal Hill surrounded by tenement homes; after the completion of the highway in 1967, Holy Ghost was surrounded by the highway. As the number of residents dwindled and parish membership declined, permission to reconstruct the Holy Ghost School was declined, as the Diocese viewed the parish as having no future. The same year, just a few blocks away, Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church faced similar difficulties, much more drastic than those of the Holy Ghost. (Holy Ghost Church, 1989). Nearly half of the parish's congregation had left. In 1960, the church was put under the direction of Monsignor Galliano Cavallaro, a son of Italian immigrant parents born in Federal Hill and raised in Our Lady of Mount Carmel. The Diocese believed the Monsignor could bring back the landmark parish. By 1964, a significant modernization program was presented by Msgr. Cavallaro. Although this renovation laid quite a heavy financial burden on the parish, by 1968, it was completed. The new interior, modern by design, marked a new period for Our Lady of Mount Carmel. This focus shifted toward youth involvement, religious education, sports leagues, and recreation for the neighborhood children. (Our Lady of Mt. Carmel, 1973). While the parish had experienced a slight increase in popularity and patronage, it would continue to suffer throughout the decades. The Renovation of the Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church is one of the first signs of revitalization of the neighborhood. The beautification of the parish facilities included an extensive children's library, a modernized hall for events, and a recreational space for the neighborhood children, as well as a parking area for parishioners traveling from outside the area.

If Our Lady of Mount Carmel was rejuvenated to serve a modern, new generation, the Holy Ghost was considered old and traditional. Under the watch of Rev. Parenti, the parish had risen to great heights, but due to ailing health, he was forced to step down from his duties as pastor, a role he had held for nearly fifty years. (Holy Ghost Church, 1989). A change of the guard began a new chapter in the story of the Holy Ghost Church. Although many difficulties were faced during this period, the church evolved and thrived through the foresight and perseverance of the Scalabrini Fathers. Under the direction of the new pastor, Rev. Joseph Internizzi, a new school building and daycare facility was constructed in 1970, along with a basketball court and swimming pool. A year prior, in 1969, one of the state's most significant Italian organizations of the late twentieth century was founded by Rev. Decimo Crevani, associate pastor of the Holy Ghost Church. The Circolo Giovanni XXIII was initially formed by the priest and a small group of Providence's new Italian immigrants to bring together these new arrivals and form a community. (Holy Ghost Church, 1989). The Circolo was organized to preserve the "Italian culture, music, religion, festivities, and all the folklore and customs that go with the Italian identity." (Statuto del Circolo Giovanni XXIII, 1983). Hundreds of Italians would meet "sotto la chiesa" every Friday night to converse, dance, and socialize. The resurgence of Italian immigration to Rhode Island brought new life to old-world traditions. The churches of the Holy Ghost, Saint Ann, and Saint Bartholomew remained strongholds for the Italian American community. While generations of Italian Americans left the old neighborhoods of Federal Hill, the North End, and Silver Lake, their interest in them remained. On Sundays, many would make a pilgrimage back to their churches. A people once linked had been dispersed, and for them, the church was a lasting point of reference, a place to congregate not only in faith and heritage but also integral to preserving a community. They were symbols of

nostalgia and familiarity in an ever-changing society and way of life. For the new Italian immigrants, who began to settle not only in the old Italian neighborhoods but dispersed throughout the city and state, the Italian national parishes were points of refuge. The religious festivals continued to be expressions of faith, tradition, and culture. The feast of Saint Bartholomew continued to be a large-scale celebration that drew individuals from cities and towns from all over the state back to the neighborhood's streets and parish where the statue of the patron saint brought from Italy at the turn of the century was paraded and venerated by the masses of young and old. The number of religious festivities paled in comparison to those of the past. While previously processions and festivals were almost a weekly occurrence, each parish focused its efforts around organizing three or four festivities a year as the decline in many of the old religious societies placed the burden of organization on the church. In 1969, the Church of Saint Bartholomew built a new, modern church atop one of Silver Lake's highest points, on Laurel Hill Avenue, moving the parish from the center of the densely populated neighborhood to a primarily residential section of the neighborhood. The new church was nearly double the size of its previous structure. Its architectural style was modeled after the midcentury modern, a popular style at the time, drastically different from the former spiritual home of the neighborhood where generations had worshiped for over sixty years.

The effects of urban decline took a heavy toll on Providence's ethnic enclaves, particularly Federal Hill. By the mid-sixties, the population had significantly dropped as more and more individuals and families made their homes in the suburbs. The decay of the urban landscape was matched by the erosion of the once-vibrant culture. Reacting to these two factors, the parishes began their efforts to revitalize the neighborhoods, heritage, and tradition. The next chapter will further study the multifaceted "Renaissance" of the Italian culture in Rhode Island,

through the revitalization of Federal Hill. The collective efforts of Priests, politicians, businesspersons, and residents saved one of America's most famous "Little Italies" from fading away, preserving the cultural integrity, and rejuvenating the district. Throughout all the difficulties brought on by cultural assimilation and urban decline, the community continued on and became stronger, further shaping the Italian American experience and leaving their mark on the cultural landscape of Rhode Island.



## 6. Revitalization and Evolution:

The previous chapters followed Providence's Italian neighborhoods' foundation, development, and eventual decline. Thus far, this study has covered nearly one hundred and thirty years of the Italians in Providence, from the arrival of the first Italian immigrant in 1832 to the departure of Italian Americans from the city in the 1960s. The early story of Rhode Island's Italian community, like that of other ethnic groups throughout the United States, was plagued by various obstacles. In the early decades of the twentieth century, Italian immigrants began to make economic and social strides. While the Great Depression and the Second World War would hinder these efforts, these Italians and their descendants would prevail, proving their loyalty to their nation and further assimilating into the fabric of America. By the 1960s, the Italian community and their neighborhoods faced significant changes and challenges, as assimilation proved to diminish the virality of their culture. The physical demise of their once vibrant neighborhoods was an additional reminder of a decline in their heritage and tradition. In 1974, *The Providence Journal* writes, "Years ago, Federal Hill bulged at the seams with people, motion, and excitement. For seven decades, it turned out some of Rhode Island's leading citizens. Today, it is a place where many ghosts walk and where dim voices carry on the wind that blows over the hilltop. Gone are the pushcarts and street sounds. Gone are small boys playing catch, feast days, processions, and big funerals. Gone, too, are the fireworks and band music and large weddings. Today, few old men play casino in rear rooms of dark, dank, unheated stores, their twists of Di Nobili cigars giving off smoke signals. Yet *Il Colletto* (The Small Hill) is not dead. It refuses to be erased. It has an obdurate character and much more than a trace of

vitality. In fact, Federal Hill is now in the early stages of a renaissance, though it is an area still inhabited by a die-hard and strong-minded people who cling to a lusty past..." (Hackett, 1974). At this juncture, the improvements spearheaded by residents, businesspeople, and politicians marked the rebirth of a neighborhood, a people, and a culture. This chapter will follow the developments made to the Federal Hill, North End, and Silver Lake neighborhoods in the late twentieth century by the combined efforts of many to enhance them as ethnic enclaves, vessels of preservation of the Italian culture in America. The revitalization of these neighborhoods redefined the meaning of the "Little Italy," a place where Italians no longer live but where they and generations of their descendants return.

By the mid-1970s, there was still no solution regarding the state of Providence's neighborhoods, which were heavily affected by the construction of the highways over a decade prior. In Federal Hill, a plan was presented by the Providence Redevelopment Agency in 1972 to demolish a large part of the neighborhood housing. Nearly one hundred old homes would be torn down, approximately eight blocks of tenement houses destroyed, and in their place, single-family homes spread out with yards (Bailey, 1972). Backed by many, the supporters of the plan believed this change in the urban landscape of Federal Hill would draw families back to the neighborhood. The plan, however, 1975 was discarded under the Cianci Administration, only to be later reconceived in a different section of the neighborhood and on a small scale in 1993. "In the 1970s, as ethnicity came into vogue and the Federal Government began financially supporting the recycling of old buildings, Atwells more and more looked like a possibility for real estate investment." (Hopkins, 1979). The first action taken by Mayor Vincent A. Cianci<sup>11</sup> to

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<sup>11</sup> Providence's first Italian American and longest-serving Mayor held office for twenty-one years. Cianci, more often referred to as "Buddy," is credited with the city's great boom in the 1990s. During his time as Mayor, he was elected for six terms, which were divided into two periods. The first was from 1975-1984 (in 1980, he ran an unsuccessful Gubernatorial campaign), ending with his resignation after threatening and assaulting a man he claimed

revitalize the Federal Hill neighborhood was in 1975, with the demolition of the Franklin Park Bathhouse. The land dedicated to the city by Amos Atwells for the enjoyment of the people of Federal Hill in the early nineteenth century was named Franklin Park (Muratore, 1982). Over a century and a half later, the long-abandoned, dilapidated bathhouse was viewed as a neighborhood eyesore and a physical reminder of the city's lack of effort in revitalizing the neighborhood. The forces behind its demolition were two neighborhood mothers, Catherine Antonetti and Helen Natale; tired of the lack of effort by the city to improve the neighborhood, the two stormed onto the property with sledgehammers, threatening to destroy the building themselves and making a park in the name of Mayor Cianci. The city intervened, demolishing the former bathhouse and, in its place, a park for the people of Federal Hill, constructed and named after Italian general and patriot Giuseppe Garibaldi<sup>12</sup> (Jones, 1975). The inauguration of Garibaldi Park marked the beginning of the Renaissance of the Federal Hill neighborhood and later that of Providence's other Italian enclaves.

1975 proved to be an important year for Federal Hill's redevelopment. That same year, the neighborhood was earmarked by a pilot project by the federal government, and it became one

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was having an affair with his estranged wife. He was astonishingly reelected in 1991, marking his "Renaissance phase" when Providence gained national attention for great theater, art, and culinary districts; hotels, a mall, a skating rink, and a waterfront district were all constructed, and Providence was listed as one of the best places to live by *Money Magazine* and designated a "Renaissance City" by *USA Today* under Cianci's time as Mayor from 1991-2001. Cianci was forced to resign after being indicted on criminal charges of racketeering, extortion, witness tampering, and mail fraud. In 2007, Cianci was released from prison and found success on the local radio waves as a political commentator, his popularity gained him to have both his own radio and television shows locally. In 2014, he ran for the seventh time as Mayor of Providence but was defeated. He died two years later of cancer, at 74 years old.

<sup>12</sup> The Garibaldi bust predates the park by almost thirty years. In 1932, Rhode Island's Italian Americans gifted the bronze bust by Italian sculptor Filippo Sgarlata (1901-1979) to the city. Initially, the state declined to accept it, and the bust was placed on the former campus of Rhode Island College in Downtown Providence. Upon constructing the college's new campus, the bust was displaced and, after a few years, found its home on Federal Hill. Its inscription follows: "'Nino, domani a Palermo.' Giuseppe Garibaldi. Soldier of humanity. Dedicated to his memory on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death. 1882-1932.' In 1975, the following inscription was added: "Donated to the state of Rhode Island by its Italo American citizens as a token of goodwill. This memorial was relocated to the new Garibaldi Park. Designed by the Hon. Vincent A. Cianci, Jr., Mayor of Providence October 13<sup>th</sup>, 1975."

of four neighborhoods in the country to become a “laboratory for economic development.” The project grew from a study on U.S. Housing and Urban Development, which studied neighborhoods in twenty cities and finally settled on just four. A committee of twenty-four individuals—businessmen, clergy, and residents—The Neighborhood Economic Commission of Federal Hill was given control over the of the neighborhood's economic and urban revitalization, with the Federal Government's oversight (Hopkins, 1979). In 1977, the committee employed Albert Verdi, a prominent local architect and son of the neighborhood, and a group of students at the Rhode Island School of Design. It embarked on the first wave of improvements to the Federal Hill neighborhood to enhance it as a commercial district. A 3.6-million-dollar investment by the city of Providence ensured the completion of these improvements. The committee had the narrow concrete sidewalks torn up, widened for strolling visitors and residents, and laid with cobblestone in patterns reminiscent of European streets and squares. The industrial aluminum overhead street lighting was replaced with ostentatious rough iron “Italian Renaissance-style” streetlamps. These initial improvements sparked further architectural enhancements, and by 1979, significant public spaces were constructed by the city under the direction of the Mayor and the redevelopment committee. Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church gained a considerable amount of property, and a large park was constructed in front of the church. The neighborhood gained another green space for children to play, walkways were constructed for passers-by, and benches for older people to converse before and after Masses were scattered in the shade of cherry blossom trees. Adjacent to the church at the corner of Dean Street and Atwells Avenue, a granite bust of the Pastor, Monsignor Galliano Cavallaro, was placed, and a plaza was named in his honor; an excerpt of the inscription reads “...He pioneered the renaissance of the Federal Hill area, at a time when few persons expressed faith in the redevelopment effort” (Muratore, 1982).

An additional plaza constructed in cobblestone was named in honor and erected in front of the Holy Ghost Church, lined with park benches, an abundance of ornate streetlamps, and a small fountain (Muratore, 1982). The church used the space for festivals, concerts, and outdoor liturgical celebrations through the eighties and nineties; it is where families gather to converse after church, where countless wedding photos have been taken, and for residents, it offers a place of refuge in a heavily trafficked area of the neighborhood. Due to the protest of the Church of Saint John, the only non-Italian national parish on the avenue, there were no plans to improve the surrounding area of the church; a small marker was placed at the steps of the church's entrance, marking it "Saint John's Plaza," but besides the granite marker set in the sidewalk, nothing was added. Creating these public spaces was critical for both the neighborhood's residents and those who lived outside of it but returned for holidays, feasts, or Sunday Mass. These spaces served as a meeting point, a place to catch up or reminisce among neighbors and friends. The Holy Ghost Plaza has served its purpose very well; while the Cavallaro Plaza was never considerably frequented, it served as a stopping point for tourists or passers-by admire the Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church from afar. However, not far from the plaza, the Spruce Street Bocce courts, constructed at the same time on land left vacant by the highway construction, served as a popular spot for summer nights on Federal Hill for old and young to meet under the maple trees and enjoy live music and play bocce. Today, bocce leagues still meet weekly at the courts to compete on summer evenings.

Two of the most significant architectural developments were completed during Federal Hill's early renaissance: DePasquale Plaza in 1979 and the Atwells Avenue welcome arch and "La Pigna" at the avenue's entrance from Providence's city center in 1980. A block of DePasquale Avenue was closed, constricting DePasquale Plaza from Atwells Avenue to Spruce

Street, the geographical central point of Atwells Avenue. Cobblestones were laid in a pattern of overlapping arches, typical of the Roman piazza, park benches, granite urns filled with flowers, and Italian-style streetlamps were all set in place around an elaborate four-tier quatrefoil Romanesque fountain of dark gray granite, designed and constructed by the Italian Americans of Rhode Island. The space was created by the combined efforts of Mayor Vincent A. Cianci's Office, The Providence Development Agency, and The Neighborhood Economic Commission of Federal Hill. The plaza's initial purpose was to create a space for residents to enjoy, for festivals and outdoor concerts, and for shoppers and tourists to flock to. In the following decades, the space would continue to boom and shift as a significant draw for both locals and tourists, not only in terms of its architectural beauty and resemblance to that of the Italian piazza but also for the array of nightly concerts and outdoor dining that would spring up around the plaza. Atop the DePasquale Fountain, a bronze pinecone was placed for its significance in Italian culture, specifically during the Ancient Roman Empire, as a symbol of immortality and rebirth (Boorsch, 1982). The pinecone was incorporated as the symbol of Federal Hill and has become synonymous with the neighborhood; not only is it incorporated into almost every logo and marketing material for the area, but its physical presence as one enters the neighborhood is quite significant. In 1978, construction began on a towering archway at the most trafficked entrance to the neighborhood, the intersection of Atwells Avenue and Bradford Street, where many enter if coming from the highway or Providence's Downtown district. The archway was designed for many purposes: to welcome visitors, to serve as a tourist spot, and to symbolize the contributions Italians made to the state of Rhode Island through the great symbols of "Italian" but more so Roman engineering. The arch, perhaps the most significant architectural and innovative piece of infrastructure, was selected. Four Corinthian columns constructed in bronze and concrete support

the base of the structure. At the arch's center, four concrete beams meet, forming a point from which a massive bronze sculpture of "La Pigna" fashioned after that of the Vatican Museums and made in Italy hangs. It is an imposing and often noted overdone fixture on the avenue, but it serves its purpose in letting all who visit know that Federal Hill is an Italian neighborhood. The inauguration of the arch and plaza marked the conclusion of nearly four years of infrastructural improvements and innovations to the neighborhood in hopes of sparking some revitalization.

The Mayor's Office remained heavily involved in Federal Hill, working with the local parishes, primarily Holy Ghost, to orchestrate large-scale festivals to draw visitors to the area. In 1975, the first large-scale feast in years was celebrated in the neighborhood. Together, the city and the church organized an elaborate three-day celebration of Saint Joseph, "La Festa di San Giuseppe. After the neighborhood improvements in 1977 and 1979, the festival was one of the largest in the state. "This is a great neighborhood...It has a great historical significance; many Italians born on Federal Hill have moved away, but their hearts are still here," stated the mayor in an address during the feast of Saint Joseph in 1977 (Collins, 1977). At the time, the avenue was adorned with Italian and American flags and imported festival lighting from Italy, and the traffic lines down the center of the avenue were painted green, white, and red instead of the traditional yellow paint. All along Atwells, from Knight Street to Dean Street, the avenue was closed and lined with stand after stand, with vendors selling Italian sausage sandwiches, fried calamari, and dough. Loudspeakers played music from Italian American crooners like Lou Monte, Dean Martin, and Jerry Vale to Italia singers of the day like Mina, Celentano, and Morandi. The atmosphere was once again lively (Collins, 1979). In 1979, the feast was moved to May for better weather conditions and extended to become a week-long festival. Thousands flocked back to the neighborhood, Holy Ghost Church bursting at the seams for the Mass in

honor of the patron saint. In the evening, many returned to participate in the candlelight procession following the statue of Saint Joseph the Worker on the feast of Italian Labor Day. The shop owners' stores on the avenue were decorated with images of the saint, mixed with flags and banners of the Italian "tre colori," offering free wine, pasta, bread, and cheese to passersby in the tradition in many southern Italian towns who open their homes to pilgrims and visitors on a feast day. In the streets, the masses gathered around street vendors or one of the many musicians playing their guitars, accordions, and mandolins, singing Italian songs, stopping to observe the procession accompanied by the marching band and the faithful (Collins, 1979). The revitalized avenue became the main stretch of open expression of tradition. A local business owner noted, "We're all happy... the older Italians who moved away are meeting friends they haven't seen for years." Another adds, "We got a lot of people who aren't Italian, come from Newport, some places like that, and they buy things like souvenirs like they never saw Italian things." Aside from the festivals of Saint Joseph, La Madonna del Colletto, Our Lady of Mount Carmel, and Columbus Day, the neighborhood returned as a tourist destination and capital of Italian cuisine on the East Coast. Businesses began renovating the historic buildings around the avenue and side streets, improving the overall aesthetic of the neighborhood and the clientele who frequented the restaurants, cafes, and specialty shops (Hopkins, 1979).

By the 1980s, Federal Hill was well into its renaissance; not only was the neighborhood's physical presence revitalized, but its spirit was too. A once run-down and abandoned area was bustling with new life thanks to a boom in commerce and tourism. Neighborhoods like the North End and Silver Lake were still strongholds for Italian Americans. While the North End had never been an affluent district with a bustling commerce scene, it, too, needed some redevelopment. By late 1979, surveys were distributed among residents and business owners for ideas regarding



neighborhood assistance. In 1978, the Cianci administration secured 170,000 to redevelop Hopkins Park, at the center of the neighborhood, in front of the Saint Ann Church. A year later, one million dollars was allotted to the pavement of sidewalks, providing the area with more street lighting, and demolishing nearly a dozen condemned buildings. The projects presented were to meet the day-to-day needs of the residents. “It’s alive but not flamboyant,” says a local, John DeLuca. The improvements would aid the 17,500 residents who call the area home, the largest of the populations of the three neighborhoods at the time (Mulligan, 1979). The neighborhood’s demographic highly influenced the results yielded in the surveys conducted. The majority of the population, either elderly or lower-income families, did not desire neighborhood redevelopment in terms of neighborhood beautification. Instead, a request for added stores and markets, as well as infrastructural improvements, was made. The director of the North End’s revitalization efforts expressed the needs of the residents as more significant than the 1.2 million allotted by the city, “we aren’t doing this so a few businessmen can make some money. We are doing it because there’s a real problem. There’s a lack of stores, a lack of mobility for older people,” stated Mark Lomazzo (Mulligan, 1979). The plan was not to turn the North End into another Federal Hill; he added, “We aren’t in competition with Atwells Avenue by any stretch of the imagination... we aren’t looking for tourists. We are just trying to make it a viable market area,” (Mulligan, 1979). The improvements pushed the neighborhood forward in the following decades until a later beautification project was undertaken in the nineties.

For Silver Lake, the neighborhood was still quite lively. The neighborhood’s demographic remained primarily Italian American. The Saint Bartholomew Feast in August was a significant draw of Rhode Islanders of Italian origin to the neighborhood. However, those living there also primarily frequented the neighborhood's commercial center. No urban

revitalization efforts were undertaken in the neighborhood as it inhabited both characteristics of the suburbs and city; it remained, for many a comfortable and safe place to live. Mayor Cianci was born and raised in the neighborhood and created a public park during his tenure in 1980 with the redevelopment of the old Saint Bartholomew Church building (Hopkins, 1980). In 1978, the parish gave what it thought would be its final goodbye to its former church, a small redbrick Romanesque structure where generations had worshiped for seventy years. It had been abandoned for approximately ten years and defaced by vandals, but the church held a special place in the hearts of those from the neighborhood (Wyss, 1978). Later that year, the city purchased the church with Federal funding to redevelop the space for the community to enjoy. Before the church's demolition, a group of parishioners spent weeks repairing the former church to bid it a final farewell. It was repainted, the statues were returned, the boarded windows were removed, and sunlight shone back into the church for the first time in a decade. On a Sunday in September, over three thousand individuals filled the church, spilling into the street for the last mass at the old Saint Bartholomew's. A special ceremony was conducted following the mass where the parish priest spoke, thanking the city for the purchase of the property, rather than having a warehouse built in its place. Mayor Cianci had the cross of the church bell tower and the statue of the patron saint of the façade removed and gifted to the parish; he added that the project, at its completion, would continue to provide an important service to the people of Silver Lake (Wyss, 1978). For the former Saint Bartholomew Church, the city allotted nearly two hundred thousand Federal dollars to construct a new park at the heart of Silver Lake. In 1979, the project was completed, and the new Scalabrini Piazza was dedicated in honor of the founder of the order of Priests that served Rhode Island's Italian immigrant community in nearly every pocket of the state for nearly one hundred years. The old church bell tower was incorporated into

the park's design, and a row of arches that mimicked the pattern of the church's windows acted as walkways for passersby (Hopkins, 1980). The park provided a grassy space for the children to enjoy, bocce courts for an older generation, and a paved section finished in cobblestones and cement for community events such as outdoor concerts and festivals. Following the construction of the piazza, Saint Bartholomew's church used the space for outdoor Masses around Easter and the feast of Saint Bartholomew. However, the land was never really utilized to the extent of DePasquale Plaza; its purpose was more of a reminder of the past; the belltower acting as a ruin of what was, and the bronze bust of Saint Scalabrini adjacent to it a reminder of the immigrant community he served (Hopkins, 1980).

Throughout the eighties, the commercial success of Federal Hill attracted hundreds of thousands of visitors annually. In a 1982 article regarding the Festa di San Giuseppe, one visitor says, "I come up here because it's sociable and because I don't want to forget the Italian language my mother taught me." Another says, "It's a beautiful reunion for everybody, for seeing people you haven't seen, and remembering what the neighborhood is" (Peri, 1982). Federal Hill served not only as a district for shopping and dining but also as a meeting place for friends and families whose roots were planted in the neighborhood but no longer lived in the three and four-story tenements nestled in the neighborhood side streets. Throughout the decade, newspaper articles and local media praised the revitalization of Federal Hill, and fine dining restaurants began to infiltrate the neighborhood, pushing out the mom-and-pop stores that operated along the avenue for decades. Italian culture and cuisine had been elevated in this period. Antonio DiCicco, owner of a local gourmet deli and marketplace, said at the time, "We've gradually dropped all of our American groceries. We cater more to the new generation, the young people who are looking for the extra virgin olive oil and aged balsamic vinegar..."

(Lee, 1988). DiCicco's store opened in 1969, only a few years after he and his wife immigrated from Italy. In 1983, Roma Gourmet, another specialty deli and market, opened its doors, also owned, and operated by Italian immigrant Sisto Grillo. The restaurants that added to the avenue's culinary scene at the time were sophisticated; the Grotto Azzurro and Casa Christine gained national recognition, elevating the status of the neighborhood's long-established restaurants like Camille's Roman Garden and The Old Canteen. While these restaurants and gourmet shops added to the quality of the neighborhood's culinary and commercial scene, they began to influence the quality of life of the community of people who still lived in the neighborhood. Their prices are much higher than the neighborhood demographic would spend on a pack of pasta or a jar of tomato passata.

Even before the significant effects of revitalization were brought about, concerns were already voiced regarding these efforts and their consequences. Resident Tom DiPippio stated he believed the neighborhood was broken up under the former Mayor of Providence, Joseph A. Doorley, Jr., to weaken the community and erase the political strength of the neighborhood. Another resident, Cesina Pinocci, is quoted as saying, "When they tore down those old buildings and some of the old people had to move away, they were so sad away from their people. Some didn't speak any English. This was home. Those people didn't live much longer" (Federal Hill, 1980). *The Providence Journal* 1988 printed an in-depth article about the neighborhood entitled "The Hill: An ethnic district changes." It is the first article post the Federal Hill "Renaissance" that addresses at length the issues surrounding the community of Federal Hill. The image of Federal Hill on Atwells Avenue was drastically different from that within its side streets. The first concerns were addressed by lifelong resident and City Councilman of the Federal Hill District, John J. Lombardi, who notes that a "different community is developing:

‘Crime is on the increase. You don’t know your next-door neighbor anymore. They change constantly, every two or three months.’ Lombardi said. People who purchased homes decades ago for \$10,000 have sold them for \$150,000. ‘That’s probably more money they’ve ever seen. You can’t blame them.’ Lombardi said he worries that the departure of many Federal Hill perennials – the steady families that nurtured their homes and shopped regularly in area markets – will cause ‘a deterioration of the moral fiber of the neighborhood.’” (Karp, 1988). Holy Ghost Church’s Pastor, Rev. Pietro P. Polo, echoed similar sentiments: “People used to keep their doors unlocked and trusted each other. They felt a real community and a sense of mutual knowledge. In addition to knowing one another, they sort of looked out for each other. There must have been something to it because whenever people from the Hill come together, they seem to speak in these terms.” (Karp, 1989). Neighborhood business owners expressed little concern; they retained that “crime, drugs, and property standards are not a problem in the neighborhood,” (Karp, 1989). However, the Providence Police Special Investigations Bureau reported that the neighborhood has more problems than it did twenty years prior. Lt. Richard S. Tamburini of the Providence Police added, “If you compare Federal Hill with the way it once was, there is a serious problem. There are no landlords living there. It’s all absentee landlords. The property in the neighborhood is not being kept the way it once was.” He added that a change in an ethnic demographic is also to blame, “It was the Italian gangsters or so-called Mafia people that were intimidating their own kind. The people that populate Federal Hill now will not be intimidated by the Italian gangsters, as once was the situation” (Karp, 1989). Cambodian, Colombian, and Dominican immigrants were the first non-Italians to infiltrate the neighborhood. However, young professionals and artisans also began to make their homes in the neighborhood; one new resident said, “I like the energy here, and I feel pretty safe.”

Walking through the neighborhood, one could still see clotheslines hanging from house to house, with laundry displayed, cultivated gardens, and statues of “la Madonna” marking the homes of the faithful. Federal Hill, the North End, and Silver Lake, like all “Little Italies” or other ethnic neighborhoods, were never meant to be permanent. They were places of transition. The idea of what they should be is credited to the memory associated with the particular places that make up the neighborhood: the church, the plaza, the café, the grocery, or the deli. These places are used as vessels that retain a memory, people, and tradition. The revitalization of Federal Hill successfully created a space that drew together those of the same lineage or appreciation of a culture. However, the neighborhoods throughout the end of the twentieth century continued to undergo significant changes, culturally and demographically. It is worth noting that revitalization has since led to the gentrification of the neighborhood, primarily through the types of businesses opened on Atwells Avenue. These establishments were out of the price range of those who inhabited the area. The rise in rent was also a factor that led to the pushing out the former residents, furthering the process of gentrification. Despite these challenges, the spirit of community and traditions endure, serving as a reminder of the legacy of Providence's Italian neighborhoods and the ongoing efforts to preserve their cultural heritage for future generations.

## **7. The Voice of Rhode Island's Italian Diaspora**

While the previous chapters were based on archival materials and desk research to reconstruct the experience of Italians in Providence, Rhode Island, from the early nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth, this chapter will utilize the personal accounts of more recent Italian immigrants to develop an image of the Italian community and their neighborhoods in the modern era, from the 1950s to today. This analysis is based on the responses of twenty individuals, of which eighteen were born on Italian soil; the remainder of these interviews were conducted with individuals who were born to Italian parents in Rhode Island and who hold important roles in the community of Federal Hill today. Together, they share their experiences and opinions of the “Little Italy,” its purpose in the past, and what role it will play in the future. This chapter is mostly organized in chronological order based on when certain individuals arrived in the United States. The subjects of these interviews were asked four questions regarding the circumstances of their arrival to Providence, Rhode Island, where they settled, what places they frequented and for what reasons, and what importance these public or communal spaces hold for these individuals today and what will become of them in future generations. In prefacing the following section, these individuals have been given pseudonyms to protect their identities.

One of the community's oldest and most active members is Assunta Broccolo, a native of Sant' Ambrogio, Frosinone. At 91 years of age, she still drives from her home in the Elmhurst section of Providence to Federal Hill each day for morning mass at Holy Ghost Church, where she also volunteers in the parish's financial office, delivers communion to the homebound, and sings in the Italian choir each Sunday. For Assunta, her memories of Italy are ravaged by war

and poverty; therefore, coming to America was critical in moving forward. “I arrived in 1952 with my mother after the war. She was born in Providence and left at just two years old with my grandparents. It was hard for them to adjust, you know, they didn’t like it here, so they went back. My grandfather was the first president of the Mutuo Soccorso di San Biagio in Providence.” Assunta stated proudly. “But they never talked much about America, and I didn’t ask too much. They lived a modest but comfortable life before the war. In the Second World War, my father was listed missing in action, we think he froze to death somewhere at the Russian front, and my sister was killed in a bombing in our town not long before liberation. She was just six years old. So, for me and my mother it was bad, and we decided to go to America as soon as we had the money saved. We were lucky because my mother was American, so for us, it was easy to come here.”

Like many of the immigrants at this time, the memories of their lives in Italy were plagued with dire poverty and the destruction of war, but the simplicity of their lives, their villages, and families, prevails; there is a sense of pride that they made it out. Concetta Colangelo, born in Sulmona, Abruzzo, is 88 years old, she immigrated a few years after Assunta in 1955; the two are good friends and had similar experiences in Italy and the United States. “I came here to Providence because my husband had a brother who was here. He got married and was a citizen, so then he could call for my husband first and then me. At the time in my town, it was not too good. We really had nothing. So, I married my husband maybe three weeks before he left for Providence. It was really my only way out. I didn’t want to leave at all, even though we were suffering. But I married my Gaetano, my husband, because I thought maybe he’ll come back with some monies (laughs) and, ah, I can help my mother and my aunt, but ah he didn’t come back, and I left seven months later to meet him. But I worked here in the jewelry factories,



we all did, ah us, Italians in those days, it was a nice work, so, I made some monies, and I sent to my mother and my aunt to help them, and I brought them here, you know, (pauses) that I'm very proud of."

When asked about their early experiences in Providence, they both had fond recollections, although both admitted that leaving behind their families and homes wasn't easy. Assunta says, "To leave my grandmother was the hardest thing; it broke my heart in pieces, and even to leave my town, even if it was destroyed, and we had nothing, it was all I knew." She continued, "when we moved to Providence, I was shocked because it was so much more than what we had in Italy, I mean, we lived in houses with no heat or hot water, and you know how cold it gets here, but we were better here, now I think back and I laugh at how we lived, but we didn't know better, I mean in Italy we had no water in the house so already here we were better off." The houses, both attested, were always neat, the exteriors well kept, and the gardens meticulously landscaped. "At that time in the fifties, it was still a nice place. I loved it. We were surrounded by Italian families. I didn't need to learn English. In our house on the Hill, lived me, my husband and brother-in-law on the first floor, my other brother-in-law and sister-in-law on the second, and on the third was a nice old lady, she was from our town, but she came a long time before us in like 1910, but she owned the house, she was old and we help her a lot, she was like our zia, so we call her that, Zi Carmella, she was very nice." said Concetta. As for Assunta, she and her mother lived in a house with other immigrants from their town in Italy. "In those days, people looked out for one another. When they knew we were coming, they met us at the train station and brought us to their home where they had an apartment ready and set for me and my mother. They even had the picture of San Biagio, our patron saint on the wall, and we thought how nice San Biagio welcomed us. Then me and my mother did the same for the other

Italians once we had the means.” There was a strong bond amongst fellow “paesani” in those days, even if other immigrants had settled nearly forty to fifty years prior, they helped one another. Nevertheless, there was a something of a divide between the second and third generations. Concetta stated, “We felt safe in our community, you know, you knew who lived around you, and if you needed something, someone would give it to you.” The church also maintained a special place for spiritual and social life in those days; in Federal Hill, the Holy Ghost parish grew due to the efforts of the Italian missionary priests who once again catered to the Italian immigrants, sending for additional priests from Italy to serve as spiritual guides to this new wave of immigrants. Assunta adds, “I met all my friends at the church. In those days, there was maybe a few bars, but, you know, a woman didn’t go there alone, so we made friends at church and at the different functions.” Concetta says, “It was really a special place, Holy Ghost. I still go every Sunday to the Italian Mass, my kids no go, but they all baptized here, and married here, my grandkids too.”

From the late fifties to the early sixties, Providence’s Italian immigrant community slowly expanded. “Many people went to Federal Hill, especially if they had family members already there or like someone from their town,” according to Concetta. In 1966, brothers Giovanni Di Muccio, 74, and Donato Di Muccio, 68, immigrated from Sant’Ambrogio to Providence, settling outside Providence’s designated “Little Italies.” Donato says, “When we came, the rents were too expensive in Federal Hill and Silver Lake. There were six of us, so my father and mother were on a budget (laughs), so we found an apartment off Manton Street. And you know there weren’t a lot of Italians, but when we moved in, we found my paesano, Melina Cardillo, from my town, living upstairs (laughs). It was nice. We felt like, ah, it was a good sign.” His brother added, “It was that same day we moved in that, ‘Padre Decimo’ he came to

meet us.” Giovanni continued, “he would get a list from the consulate of Italians who came to Providence, and he would go and greet them, and that’s how we got into the chiesa there, the Holy Ghost.” When asked about Rev. Decimo Crevani, affectionately known as “Padre Decimo,” almost every interviewee of that generation has fond memories of the priest. In the 1960s and 1970s, he was instrumental in unifying the Italian immigrants settling in Rhode Island. Assunta says, “Holy Ghost was so full of life in the early seventies. We didn’t have the money to go out every week, so that we would go down the church. And every Friday the “Circolo” would meet. In 1969, the Circolo Giovanni XXIII was founded by Rev. Decimo Crevani and a handful of Italian immigrants, including the father of Giovanni and Donato. “Well, (pause) you see, in those days, there wasn’t much for us, on Federal Hill or Silver Lake, there wasn’t one real Italian bar, you know, for espresso, we had maybe a movie theater with the Italian communist movies and ah, that was it,” said Donato. The Circolo was formed to create a space for Italians to meet, listen to music, dance, converse, organize events, play sports, and celebrate religious festivities. “We had large processions for the major feast days, like Corpus Christi and Palm Sunday; you couldn’t get into the church; it was so full, people would be outside on the street. We would recreate the traditions like in Italy, and nobody else in Rhode Island did that, so the Italians wanted to come up here to Holy Ghost, we even had a soccer team.” said Giovanni. If the earlier generations had more specific devotion to the individual patron saints, the younger generations became more secularized, as the church proved to be a point of cultural preservation. “Saint Joseph Day became big because of Father’s Day, and here it’s not a holiday. Father’s Day is in June, but San Giuseppe blew up because we wanted to make it a holiday in March, I am mean so people wanted to make the money, but we wanted a feast of our own, so we organized a

procession, concert, and festival, and it became a big day on Federal Hill; we ended up celebrating San Giuseppe seven days, not just one.” Donato added.

Aside from Giovanni and Donato’s statements, various interviewees referred to the Holy Ghost Church and Federal Hill as a meeting point for Rhode Island’s Italian community in those years. The current president of the Circolo Giovanni XXIII, Immacolata Minutillo, 71, arrived in Providence in 1968 from Fornelli, Molise, with her parents and two siblings. Like the two brothers, they did not settle in Providence’s Federal Hill neighborhood, but that did not mean it was not a critical place for herself, her family, and her culture. “The Hill, (pauses) for as long as I remember has been, really, an important place for the community, and that in the beginning was because of the church. Then, in, like, ah, the eighties, there was nice restaurants, some markets, and stuff, and that’s what got us coming up here more. Not just on Friday nights and Sunday mornings. My husband, Luigi, he’s up here every day for his caffè and to talk to the guys; you know, it’s like a ritual for him,” she adds. “For me, it’s still mostly the church, as well as to do some shopping,” she laughs. Like many of the Holy Ghost parishioners and Circolo members, Immacolata did not live on Federal Hill because of the high prices and poor living conditions when she immigrated to Providence. “You see, before Cianci, (Providence’s former Mayor) Federal Hill was kind of abandoned, ah, you didn’t have anything really, a few shops and a lot of rundown homes, that was in the seventies and eighties, you know, then it got real nice. We lived near Saint Bartolomeo, in Silver Lake, the old church though, and because of Father Decimo, we ended up coming here to Holy Ghost,” Immacolata says. In agreement is a longtime resident of the North End neighborhood, Italo Zarrillo, who immigrated in 1968 from Marzano Appio, Caserta. “I only go to mass in Italy,” he says with laughter, “no, for me, I’m very faithful, but I don’t go to Mass often. I come to Holy Ghost when I have to; it’s where I will get buried

from, even if I can see the steeples of three churches from my apartment,” he adds. The same is true for Immacolata. She says she passes nearly eleven churches as she drives to Holy Ghost, although she frequents the church every Sunday. She says with a grin, “Yeah, I count them as I go by on Sunday. For me Holy Ghost is my home. Federal Hill is home. It’s where we come back to, it holds a lot of memories, it’s not like it was but it feels familiar, I still know a lot of faces.” Many of these interviewees chose to return to the neighborhood and the church as a ritual, even if they never lived there; Federal Hill is where they assembled throughout the decades, built relationships, and continue to congregate today.

“The eighties and nineties were great up here on the Hill,” says Italo. “The mayor Cianci, he was the best, the best!” The Cianci years were the most prosperous in Providence’s recent history, and, as outlined in the previous chapter, he - with the efforts of many - transformed Federal Hill from a slum to a chic district of national recognition. “He did a lot for our city,” added Concetta. “Before, people were leaving Providence, but ah, he made me want to stay, you know.” “He added the bocce courts on Spruce Street, that’s when I started to come up here more to play in the league. Then one store opened and another, we could go for the espresso, have a nice sandwich or dinner, it got nice up here and it’s because of the mayor,” expressed Italo. “It’s sad to see how things changed,” added Immacolata. “In his time as mayor, we were great. You know he built the piazza? The one up here, DePasquale, and then he did one for each of the churches.” In those years Federal Hill became the center for fine dining, gourmet shopping, and elaborate festivals. “Well, there was Columbus, San Giuseppe, le feste delle Madonne, and maybe one other I can’t remember, but they went up the entire street. The streets were closed for days, and many people came,” added Assunta.” As time passed, fewer Italians wanted to live in the neighborhood, and it became more of a destination for us. Like those before, you know.

Providence's inner-city Italian communities began to migrate to more suburban areas of the city or other cities and towns in Rhode Island. Still, Federal Hill remained a point of reference for a large number of Italians until the early 2000s, when things slowly began to change. "In the nineties, we lost Saint John Church, but the neighborhood was booming with shoppers and tourists. But that was really the beginning of the changes up here; then came the Latinos," stated Italo.

Pia Carnevale came to Providence in the early eighties after living in New Haven, Connecticut. She is 68 and from the town of Pico, Frosinone. She is an active member of the community, with her son she ran an Italian bakery off Atwells Avenue, and she is the president of the Società Sant'Antonino di Pico. With her husband, son, daughter-in-law, and granddaughter, still lives in the neighborhood occupying a three-family tenement; she says, "You know something, I'm one of the last Italian families up here, I came because my aunt lived here, she died and left me the house, so we moved here. I like the neighborhood, 'il Colletto.' I can tell you there is my family, the Milano's; there's maybe a dozen single ladies like Dora Petrella and Annita Carnevale or Giovanna Pelino that still live up here. It's sad. I liked the Spanish people here. They were good families; they didn't keep up the houses, but they were nice people, you know. Not a lot of people liked them, but we lost them too. The rents are too high now." The demographic is changing in the neighborhood for the third time in thirty years; as the Italians moved out, the Latino American immigrants moved in, and now there seems to be an influx of students and young professionals, as well as a considerable number of African Americans moving into the neighborhood. Construction of small-scale apartment buildings has been on the rise since the pandemic. The closure of Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church in 2015 forced the diocese to assume the parish's debt and sell the property. The Omni Corporation obtained the

property and developed it into condos. They also constructed two large three-story buildings in the large park that faced the church. In addition, a private firm has been slowly buying up property throughout the Federal Hill and West End; they have constructed approximately five large-scale apartment buildings in the neighborhoods.

Change is inevitable, while the number of Italians living in the neighborhood has diminished, and a generation of Italian immigrants is aging and dying. The businesses along Atwells Avenue are, for the most part, no longer Italian; many staples have closed their doors as hookah bars and Latin and Middle Eastern restaurants take their place. People and culture are slowly fading away. Today, on a Sunday at 10:30 a.m., more Italians are at the various espresso bars on the avenue than within the walls of the Holy Ghost Church during the Italian Mass. The men of another generation congregate, watch a soccer game, sip an espresso or amaro, reminisce about Italy and the neighborhood, and talk about their families, boasting about their grandchildren, complaining how watery the espresso is or how the prices are always going up. In each of these bars, different groups of different ages and areas in Italy meet, and they've formed their own subcommunities throughout the decades. The numbers are smaller than the generations that preceded them, primarily those who immigrated from the eighties to the present day. Italy's economic boom from the 1980s to the early 2000s caused fewer individuals to venture outside the peninsula to the United States. For Mario Antonelli, 54, who immigrated at age 25 to the town of Johnston outside of Providence, Federal Hill is not as important. "I work," he says laughing, "I don't have the time to come up here all the time for a coffee, but when I can, it makes me happy. It takes me back for a bit. These guys live life as if they were still in Italy, and it's funny; they've never really adjusted, I think." Mario adds with a grin, "Something about living outside Italy makes you more Italian. I think you have like this constant struggle, (pauses),

you think you're losing who you are, because maybe you forget a word in your language, or you want to have an iced coffee." His wife Stefania, 55, is from the same town of Pietramelara, Caserta. She immigrated shortly after they were married in 1997. Of Federal Hill she says, "I never go up there, for me, personally, I don't like. My family is my focus. I have a few friends Italian, and many friends no Italian. For me, personally, it doesn't matter. I can find the stuff to cook Italian at the supermarket; I don't have to go up there." she adds. Mario says, "my wife isn't social," to which she rebuts "Stai zitto! I'm a social person, Mario why you say that? It's just me and my friends we prefer not to go there that's it. It's not like it was back then." For a generation of "younger" Italians, Federal Hill, and Providence's other Italian neighborhoods, there is very little binding them to these places. A few factors cause this. First, the neighborhood and community in the past two decades have started to decline. Without a constant influx of Italians, the neighborhoods and culture will inevitably diminish. Secondly, younger generations seem to focus more on the nuclear family and secular life or assimilating to a more "American" way of living. Italian American organizations have little to no participation from young Italian immigrants; they do not participate in the festivals, and very few attend Mass in Italian or frequent Federal Hill; they seem to have a desire to experience a culture other than their own. Additionally, because the Italy of their generation was drastically different from that of their predecessors.

A small portion of young Italian immigrants long to connect with a greater community or preserve a past they never experienced but have heard stories about from the generations before them. This set of eight individuals who immigrated from 2007 to 2022 were interviewed about their experiences and impressions of the Italian community of Providence today. Mattia Rossi, 41, originally from Asolo, Treviso, came to Providence as a graduate student at Brown



University and decided to make Providence his home after completing his studies; he works for the university and lives in the city, outside any Italian neighborhood in Providence. “For me, I come to Federal Hill if I need some type of Italian product I can’t find anywhere, like if I’m too lazy to make the bechamel. I remember I didn’t even know of this neighborhood until I lived here after two or three years, so I thought, ah, not so Italian because Providence is a small, quite small city, so it was strange.” For many newer immigrants without a network, it is common to feel that the community is small or non-existent. “But then, I came to the feast of Colombo, and I see the Italian street food, restaurants, and I hear this Italian band, playing: I Pooh, and eh, Gianni Morandi, and like even like Nek and Jovanotti and I think, like, ok, wow, finalmente, I found the Italians,” he says with laughter. “And from there, I stated to come to Federal Hill a bit, maybe once a week on the Saturday afternoon. I admit though most of my friends are Americans, because the italiani here my age are like not many. But I think it’s important to maintain the culture, so I come up here, and feel Italian.”

Analisa Bertelloni, 39, and Fabiana Sartor, 36, like Mattia, are both from northern Italy and came to America for higher education. Analisa, originally from Massa Carrara, teaches at the University of Rhode Island. Fabiana is from Pescia, Pistoia, and works for Johnson and Wales University. They met via Reddit, an online platform. Fabiana had posted hoping to find other young Italians in the Rhode Island area; she found Analisa, now living in Rhode Island, not far from Fabiana. The two met and became fast friends. “We were both homesick, not only for our families but for Italy,” said Fabiana. “I think like we were missing something, for example, we had no one to talk the language to, my boyfriend is American. Where I live, there is like no one Italian. So, me and Analisa we became friends fast.” Analisa added, “We found the Holy Ghost Church, they have Italian Mass, and we started to go a few times because we were waiting to

meet more Italians. I remember we go into this huge church, and there is like nobody, maybe twenty people in a church built for like a thousand. Then the choir sings, and we look up, and there's like another twenty," she laughs, "After the Mass, we go and talk to them, and we made friends, and now sing in the choir." The two both note that it is sad to see the church almost empty at times, showing the demise of a community and its traditions. Giuseppe Lombardi is a recent addition to the Italian community at Holy Ghost. He is 71 years old, originally from Roccamonfina, Caserta, he lives in Johnston, Rhode Island, and spent most of his life in the North End of Providence. "Before, there was many Italian people in the North End, but now really nobody is Italian. We moved out in the nineties, like a lot of people." He now finds himself coming weekly to Holy Ghost in search of a sense of community. "You know we all getting older and there seems to be only few of us left. I spent my whole life in America going to Saint Ann's Church, it was sad to see it change. I come to Holy Ghost now because there's the Mass in Italian, they do some parties and it's where my friends are." He adds, "I hope more people come back to the church and the neighborhood, we can't lose it."

For a younger group of Italians, the church is no longer so important. A group spanning from 22 to 30 years of age, Francesco Cardi, Alfredo Trabucco, Luigi Bisceglia, and Matteo Di Giulio meet daily at one of Atwells Avenue's Italian cafés. They play together in a soccer league twice a week with many senior Italian immigrants. They do their best to recreate some lifestyle they were accustomed to in Italy. Valerio says, "For me, its personal, I want to not lose the things I love about my country, Italy. There's a lot of things that are problematic which brought me here, but I like to retain the things that are beautiful." Alfredo, 22, is a student at Providence College, originally from Ostia; his mother a native of Providence, met his father while studying abroad in Rome. "I am lucky that I can come here because I'm Italian American. My friends

back home don't have this chance and they are stuck in my town." Francesco, 30, from the region of Itri, Latina stated, "We came when I was 11, the situation for my family economically wasn't good. My nonno had family still in Rhode Island, a brother in Johnston, so we came here. Initially to make some money and go back, but we stayed." He adds, "I miss Italy every day." Luigi and Matteo expressed similar sentiments towards their home country. Both come from towns outside Napoli, both had connections to Federal Hill via their grandparents. Luigi, 27 born in Napoli says, "My grandparents came to Federal Hill, my grandfather he had a barber shop, here on this street, he cut the hairs of mob guys, priests and politicians, this street it's corrupt like Italy," he laughs, "but no, seriously, it's a nice place. It's an important place for us. My grandparents came here, made their money, settled here and I plan to do the same thing." Matteo, 22 of Teano, Caserta, also believes that the neighborhood is important. He says, "I see this place, through the eyes of my grandparents, they still live in Rhode Island, in Johnston now, but they came here first, too. They talk about the old days and how now we're losing the neighborhood, I think we have to hold on, because its important. I still go to the church because like for my nonni. It's important, our heritage." Many of these individuals who partake in this sort of chain migration, tend to have a high return rate. They spend a few months making money, then return to their home towns in Italy for a period and continue this process.

The older generation feels the same way; Immacolata shares the feelings of many when she notes, "I'm sad when I see my old house in Silver Lake today, it's abandoned and falling apart. It was full of life, but that whole neighborhood is, it makes me want to cry sometimes. I'm afraid one day it will happen here in Federal Hill too." The lack of involvement of younger generations, combined with the small number of Italians immigrating to Rhode Island, has created a significant decline within the Federal Hill neighborhood. "There's maybe ten or twelve

Italian families living on Federal Hill today; the vast majority are all gone to the suburbs,” says the pastor of the Holy Ghost Church, Rev. Francesco Francese. Son of Calabrese immigrants, Rev. Francese, is the first American pastor of Italian origin in the parish’s history; prior to the departure of the Scalabrinian Missionaries in 2012, the church was only staffed by Italian-born priests. Since the Providence Diocese took over the parish, a variety of priests of English and Irish descent had served the Federal Hill Parish. “In the recent history of the church, I am the longest pastor; I’ve been here for nearly seven years now. The Italian community has had its ups and downs; unfortunately, after COVID-19, mass attendance is down through the three sectors of the congregation.” The parish offers Masses in English, Italian, and Spanish. Local shop owner and Italian immigrant from Caserta, Italy, Sisto Micco, age 82, added that COVID really took its toll on the neighborhood. “Many of the old customers died. People moved out of the city too. We got hit hard. There’s a lot of new non-Italian costumers. I’ve been here forty-two years, and it was the biggest change I’ve seen in my life here.” The drastic decline in the neighborhood following COVID can be paralleled with the post-WWII period, perhaps. “More people used to come around and meet, more of the old people. Now, it’s not the same; a lot dying off, the pandemic scared a lot of people too, and it took its toll, let me tell you,” said Tom Catanzaro of Providence, 79, owner and operator of a specialty store and coffee bar. However, many noted in their interviews that there is a great change in the neighborhood. Donato stated, “You know, these neighborhoods were never supposed to be permanent. The Italians who came here in the 1900s, like us, wanted to come make money and then go home, but we got stuck. We had our families and set up a life here, and then, (pauses) we got stuck here, our kids wouldn’t go back to my town, come on, there’s nothing. But these neighborhoods have been constantly changing.” Assunta adds, “The Italians aren’t there anymore; we all moved far, away, but we come back, we

come back, and we complain that things aren't the same, but you know, it's our fault. We left the neighborhood. We wanted something better. But I think it's important to come back."

In conclusion, the voices of these generations of Rhode Island's Italian community echo similar sentiments of those from a century ago. Like their predecessors, they faced difficulties but were raised to great heights. Place remains an important factor; primarily, the church and the neighborhood act as a means for social interaction and the preservation of culture and identity. These interviews expressed the experiences, memories, and reflections of these individuals. Although many years have gone by, Federal Hill, like the other neighborhoods, has gone through a major change, yet there is still a point of reference for generations to meet, and from young to old, there is still a sense of belonging and purpose that makes the neighborhood still viable, and still quite significant to the Italian diaspora of Rhode Island.

## 8. Conclusions:

“Little Italies exist no more.’ So say some people. But others say they never really existed to begin with. And others, instead, claim that that they still exist; that they have reemerged with more life than ever, although in a different form. Some say that Italian Americans used to be embarrassed by Little Italies. Yet it is also probably true that the continuing existence of Little Italies was reassuring, not only for the Italian immigrants of the first generation who lived there but also for the successive generations that abandoned them for more comfortable surroundings. Indeed, there are people today who are proud to promote their survival.” (Garroni, p. 163, 2017) Perhaps Garroni is right in her assessment of the modern-day conception of the Italian neighborhood; for many, the idea of a “Little Italy” is quite subjective. One must consider this lineage of a neighborhood or ethnic enclave and how it got its name or received its reputation. A “Little Italy” is defined as an area, quarter, or section of a city that is inhabited primarily and overwhelmingly by Italian immigrants or those of Italian ancestry. This definition, based on that of the Webster’s dictionary, was written in 1885. As seen in this work, “Little Italies” have evolved much since 1885. Therefore, it is implied that the definition of a “Little Italy” is no longer the same. Jewish, Irish, or Polish neighborhoods, for example, have faded away as those immigrants and their descendants settled outside the confines of the “neighborhood.” Italian neighborhoods have remained to a certain extent, although the people who once inhabited them, the Italian diaspora has for the most part left. The difference in the case of the “Little Italy” is that the Italians or Italian Americans, and the generations after return. The sense of place proves even today to be critical to the diaspora and to those of Italian

heritage. It is true that “Little Italies” no longer exist if one abides by the traditional definition; these neighborhoods have changed drastically, no longer do Italians make their homes there, but those who return give them meaning, fostering this eternal vitality.

This trend is found throughout this literature; Federal Hill still serves as a point of reference to a community of people, whether they be Italian immigrants, first-generation Italian Americans, or their grandsons and granddaughters. The neighborhood has been revitalized; what was once a slum, where those who lived there searched for an escape, has been transformed into a destination, a bustling culinary district with fountains, cafes, open spaces, and restaurants. But as colorful and picturesque as this all may seem, it is a fabrication, some may say like a “Disneyland” but to an extent, it has served its purpose in attracting not only those who once lived in the neighborhood but also members of other Italian communities, Italian Americans, shoppers, and tourists, keeping alive some form of Italian culture in Federal Hill. In the cases of the North End and Silver Lake, all that remains are the ruins of the former “Italian colonies.” The churches dedicated to Italian patron saints, the statues, faded flags of green, white, and red, the long-closed social club, or a memorial square or street named in honor of an Italian village or figure of importance are all that is left to indicate a significant population of the diaspora lived there. These elements, combined with the testimonies of those who lived in these communities, offer a remembrance, and give meaning to places that seem to be otherwise forgotten.

This research was important in documenting the Italian diaspora in Rhode Island through the Italian neighborhoods of its capital city, Providence. As stated previously, Rhode Island ranks second in the nation for the number of individuals identifying as Italian Americans per state population (World Population Review, 2024). Therefore, it deserves to be studied. There are however some limitations in the research and findings of this study. The endeavor of

documenting the Italian community of Rhode Island since the 1830s was a massive undertaking and, with hindsight, it would have been better to home in on a small period of time. Additionally, I would have liked to have analyzed the different types of space in more detail, not solely communal and public ones, but also domestic spaces. Initially, I would have liked to utilize the Italian newspaper publication in Rhode Island, *L'Echo*, but there was no index, and it is not digitalized. It would have been interesting to compare the accounts of the “Italian colony” from the standpoint of Italians versus that of the American writers of *The Providence Journal*. Additionally, I would go back and do further interviews with individuals of Italian descent to compare them with the responses of the Italian immigrant interviewees.

In conclusion, this study has examined how the places where Italian immigrants settled in the United States influenced the formation of Italian American identity and community, both past and present. The focus of this work answered the question of what role place plays in shaping cultural preservation and social integration within the Italian diaspora. Through the detailed history of these neighborhoods and the interviews conducted with individuals chronicled in these chapters, the connection between place and culture preservation and social integration has proven to be quite apparent. There is great pride among the majority of those who lived in the Federal Hill, North End, or Silver Lake areas because these places still hold such important meanings in shaping one's identity.



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