

Italian Immigrants

Life in Italy

Italian-Americans were among the most common groups to come to America during the wave of immigration at the turn of the century. Italy was supposed to be united, but the country was still experiencing many problems. There was violence, poverty and disease, and little joy for the working classes. Many people became ill, or were affected by natural disasters, and the government was unable to provide them with assistance. As **transatlantic** travel became more affordable, many Italians decided it was time to head to the new world of the United States. As the immigrants arrived, they were inspected for **frailty** and disease. In certain instances, immigrants were turned away and sent back to their land of origination. In the case of the Italians, this happened very rarely, with only about 2% of Italian immigrants being refused admittance to the new world.



The Country of Italy

Living in New York

Often, immigrants were assigned shorter, more Americanized names when they registered at Ellis Island. While most immigrants used New York as a bye-pass on their way to other parts of the country, Italians settled in areas of New York such as the Bronx, Brooklyn, and nearby neighborhoods in New Jersey. These Italian immigrants held fast to their old world traditions, creating small communities where everyone was familiar with the **customs**, cuisine and language. Today, you see areas of popular cities known as Little Italy as a result of this attitude and tradition of keeping their families and friends in the same neighborhood.

Italian immigrants, like most Europeans headed to the new world, experienced some disappointment when they realized that America lacked the "milk and honey" opportunities they had been anticipating. Many had to live in **tenement** housing, where twelve men and women might sleep in a room barely thirteen feet wide. Two or three would share one bed and the rest would sleep on the floor. Italians were used to tight quarters in their homeland, but they were also accustomed to spending a lot of their time outdoors, socializing and working. The tenements of the new world were without indoor plumbing, they were under-ventilated, and they were hotbeds for disease and vermin.

Many Italians that came to the new world during this time were unskilled farmers and were forced to work on **municipal** projects like digging ditches or laboring in **sweatshops** in order to make ends meet. A lot of these people sent a portion of their earnings home to their families that remained in Italy. There were some that fared better in jobs like masonry, bartending, and shoe-making. Many fruit-vendors in New York were of Italian descent.

Review Questions

1. List a few reasons why Italians immigrated to the United States.
2. What is a custom? Give an example of a custom that you follow
3. Tell what life was like for immigrants who had to live in tenements.
4. What were some of the jobs that Italian immigrants got when they came to the USA?