

O Mio Padrone: Occupations of Italian Immigrants 1870–1920

Pamela Vittorio

FindingTheirRoutes@gmail.com



Figure 1 From the Frescos at Pompeii:
The Italian Sparrow

Birds of Passage: ritornati. Came here, earned money and returned to Italy

Padrone: commissaire, “boss” or agent who recruited laborers and earned a fee.

Summary:

Push-Pull: Economic factors, the Industrial revolution, safety, health.

Social Context & Resources: Finding records on employees is rare – but there are some records among the archives of various railroad companies, factories, and the public works like NYS canals that point to what conditions were like. Putting our ancestors’ lives into a social context by looking at photographs and other types of records can give us important information on their livelihoods. From these types of records we can reconstruct what their lives were like. The NYS Barge Canal is a good example of how the padrone system both helped and harmed—it opened the gate for immigrants to enter the U.S. At the same time, our immigrant ancestors were often exploited and struggled to acquire their daily needs: everything came at a cost.

Brief Timeline:

1820s	Northern Italians begin to arrive in U.S. in search of work in wineries in California
1834	Cholera Epidemic in S. Italy/Sicily; Railroad construction begins in eastern U.S.
1837	Revolt against the Bourbons in Sicily
1860s	Unskilled Italian workers begin to arrive in the U.S.
1862	Transcontinental RR construction begins
1870	Padrone system begins in Europe and spreads to the U.S.
1878	New Public Works Departments
1890	Waves of Italian Immigration (S. Italy & Sicily)
1903–1917	Construction of the Barge Canal (now New York State Canal System), Highways

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Italian Occupations and English Equivalents (for reverse search of occupations)

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Using Occupation to Help Identify an Ancestor's Origin.

- After looking at the death or immigration record, if you do not know your ancestor's place of origin, profession can help.
- As we typically should do, start at the death date if you know it, and refer back to the latest census where you find your ancestor and work back in time.
- Look in local directories, and histories regarding projects that were going on during your ancestors lifetime.
- Check maps for locations to transportation, bridges, or construction projects in the city where your ancestor may have lived and worked as a "laborer."

Ask yourself the following questions about your ancestor.

Did he or she:

- Arrive before 1860?
- Work as a grocer/merchant? shoemaker? → more likely to be from N. Italian state
- Arrive after 1860? Unskilled labor → more likely to be from S. Italy/Sicily

Male:

- labor force on bridges, canals, highways;
- workforce in mines, quarries, steel/iron factories (piece work);

Female or Male:

- Unskilled: Factories—candy, feathers, glass, pasta, textiles, wool
- Skilled: tailors, seamstresses, milliners, weavers

1. Profession or Trade:

- 1840 Federal census. If your ancestor was engaged in mining, navigation or learned professions and arrived between 1820 and 1840, look on page 2 of the census.
- 1850 to 1880 Federal census.
- 1900 to 1940 industry/Business

2. Alien Birth or Parents foreign-born:

- 1870 Federal census. The first time we find that parents were foreign born;
- 1900 to 1930—
 - Year of immigration
 - Speaks English
- 1910 – 1930
 - Speaks a foreign language
- 1940 to 1950--
 - Year of immigration/ naturalization/
 - 1940 and (forthcoming) 1950 citizenship (AL, NA)

3. Living conditions/Work conditions:

- **Census:** Owning a home or renting/boarding. Again, look at maps of the era to see how close in proximity your ancestor was to a railroad, mine/quarry, highway, or canal and who owned the home. Was your ancestor a boarder?
- Look at the entire neighborhood on the census, not just your ancestor. Who are your ancestor's neighbors? Where did they come from? In which occupations/professions do the neighbors engage?
- **Immigration & Naturalization status:** If your ancestor was an alien immigrant, it is possible he or she was a bird of passage; double check the manifests to see if your ancestor had multiple entry dates. Though it might be a confusing "same name" situation, you can rule out by looking at destination and whom your ancestor has listed as a contact.
- **Newspapers:** Use location plus key words like "mining", "canal," "highway" with "laborers" and/or "Italian." Filter the dates of your ancestor's employment (estimated).
- **Directories** – confirm address and again, refer to a map.