

**SEMPRE AVANTI: March 2006 column**

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**WITH LIBERTY FOR ALL:  
ITALIAN AMERICANS & CIVIL RIGHTS**

Nearly 20 years ago, in August, 1989, the Italian American neighborhood of Bensonhurst in Brooklyn, New York made national headlines when Yusef Hawkins, a 16-year old African American, was attacked by an angry mob of neighborhood youths.

One of them shot and killed Hawkins, a tragedy that released a wave of racial tension that nearly culminated in a race riot when the Rev. Al Sharpton led a protest march through the neighborhood. The episode cemented in the nation's mind an image of Italian Americans as bigots and racists, despite the fact that Italian American leaders as well as the vast majority of Bensonhurst's residents condemned the crime and were glad to see its perpetrators receive lengthy prison sentences.

Since then, the stereotype of the Italian American-as-bigot has continued to thrive, thanks in large part to the U.S. entertainment industry, which routinely portrays its fictional Mafia characters as racists. Equally at fault are the films of the African American writer and director Spike Lee, who has produced *Do The Right Thing*, *Jungle Fever*, *Summer of Sam* and other films that feature working class Italian American characters as ignorant and narrow-minded bigots.

These racist stereotypes are all too familiar while largely unknown to most Americans is the very real, very long and very impressive record Italian Americans have achieved in the field of civil rights.

**COLUMBUS AND THE INDIANS**

The dearth of published research on Italian Americans and civil rights has led to many misconceptions and misinformation about the tolerance Italian Americans show to people of different ethnic, racial and religious backgrounds.

For example, contrary to popular myth, Christopher Columbus was not a racist or an African slave-trader. Not one African American is in the United States today because of Columbus nor was a single American Indian was ever harmed by him.

In fact, evidence indicates that Columbus admired the people he encountered in the Caribbean. In a letter to the Spanish monarchs in February 1493, he described them as “...*well-made with fine shapes and faces...their eyes were large and very beautiful...*” and found them “*trustworthy and very liberal with everything they have.*”

One of the Taino chieftains, **Guacanagari**, became a close friend of Columbus, called him “brother,” helped him build a fort and even fought alongside Columbus against other Taino tribes that wanted to kill him and his men.

## **THE AMERICAN INDIANS**

Here in the United States, men and women of Italian heritage have a long and significant record as champions of American Indians and their culture. In the years following Columbus’ historic voyages, Italian missionaries established schools for Indian children, taught the adults new farming methods and animal husbandry, educated them about ways to improve their health and fought to ensure their equal treatment under law.

The pioneers in Indian civil rights were the 17<sup>th</sup> century Italian missionaries, many of them Jesuits, who explored the American frontier where they learned the various

Indian languages and preserved them in bi-lingual dictionaries, vocabularies and grammar books.

One of the first was the 17<sup>th</sup> century priest, **Father Eusebio Chino**, who also gave the Indians of Mexico and the American West their first domestic animals and taught them how to cultivate wheat. After him came an estimated 350 Italian Jesuits, who ministered to American Indian tribes in the vast American Northwest. Beginning in 1840, they founded missions in what is today Idaho, Montana, Oregon and Washington State to help the Flatheads, Blackfeet, Nez Perce and other Indian nations.

Among them were priests like Fathers **Gregory Mengarini**, **Samuel Mazzuchelli**, **Joseph Giorda** and **Giuseppe Cataldo** who used their considerable linguistic skills to learn the native languages. Father Cataldo, for example, mastered fully 20 American Indian languages. The grammar books and dictionaries these priests painstakingly wrote have been preserved, making it possible for future generations of American Indians to learn the language of their ancestors.

After the Jesuits came other Italian Americans who were fascinated by the American Indians and their cultures. Significant among them is **Carlo Gentile**, a pioneering Neapolitan photographer, who devoted his career to capturing on film images of the American Indians of the Pacific Northwest.

During his travels, Gentile rescued a little Apache boy who had been kidnapped and enslaved by a band of Pima Indians. He adopted and raised the child, whom he named **Carlos Montezuma**, and sent him to study at the Chicago Medical College. Montezuma became the first American Indian physician and was also an advocate for Native American rights and education.

Among the more notable Italian American women is **Sister Blandina Segale**, a lifelong champion of the rights of American Indians, who also fought for laws to end child labor. Tiny (5'3") but strong-willed and resourceful, Sister Blandina taught Hispanic children, took care of the sick and worked among the Indians in Colorado, California and New Mexico, where she also founded the state's first public school. Her book, *At the End of the Santa Fe Trail* documents her work with American Indians.

### **THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT**

In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, as the American civil rights movement gained momentum, a number of Italian American law-makers championed the cause. One of them was the first Italian American to serve in the U.S. Senate, **John Pastore** of Rhode Island. Elected in 1950, Pastore helped pass some of the most controversial parts of the *1964 Civil Rights Act* including outlawing segregation in public places and requiring companies that wanted federal contracts to have a pro-civil rights charter.

While history will remember him for chairing the House Judiciary Committee during the Nixon impeachment hearings in 1974, **Peter Rodino**, a U.S. Congressman from New Jersey, also deserves recognition for his early advocacy of civil rights legislation, especially open housing and voting rights.

Rodino strongly supported the historic *Civil Rights Acts of 1957, 1964 and 1968*, helping to pass the 1964 bill that outlawed unequal application of voter registration requirements, discrimination in places of public accommodation (hotels, motels, theatres, and restaurants), segregation in public schools, and discrimination in employment.

In the 1980s, Rodino fought successfully against congressional factions attempting to limit civil rights laws. He also authored the legislation that helped make Martin Luther King's birthday a national holiday.

**Anthony Celebrezze**, the first Italian American to serve in a presidential Cabinet, used his position as John F. Kennedy's secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, to support the *1964 Civil Rights Act*, urging Congress and the White House to take immediate action to desegregate all public institutions, especially hospitals and healthcare institutions.

Even the popular entertainer **Frank Sinatra** became a champion for civil rights. During World War II, his performance of the song, *The House I Live In*, was featured in a short film about intolerance shown around the country as part of the war effort. During his long career, he supported African American performers both financially and artistically and refused to stay or sing at hotels that discriminated against his friend, the multi-talented African American entertainer, Sammy Davis, Jr.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, another Catholic priest of Italian ancestry, **Father Geno Baroni**, distinguished himself in the civil rights arena. One of the leaders of the social revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, Father Baroni helped coordinate Martin Luther King's 1963 March on Washington and marched himself in the civil rights demonstrations of Selma, Montgomery and other southern cities.

In 1971, he founded the National Center for Urban Ethnic Affairs through which he helped rebuild inner city neighborhoods and improve relations between blacks and whites living together. He also campaigned against unfair federal welfare regulations and for legislation to help the urban poor. President Jimmy Carter asked him to serve as

assistant secretary of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (1977-1981), the only Catholic priest to hold this position. There he championed programs to preserve and improve inner city neighborhoods.

And finally, no discussion of Italian Americans and civil rights could end without mentioning **Vito Marcantonio**, a U.S. Congressman from the Bronx in the 1930s and 1940s. A man ahead of his time, little of his legislation was ever passed during his term, but Marcantonio's proposals forced Congress to confront race issues, helping to jump-start the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. After his death in 1954 at age 52, many of the proposals rejected during his lifetime were eventually passed, including anti-segregation laws and laws guaranteeing the right of workers to organize and fair employment practices.

But this is just the tip of the iceberg. From the earliest forays of Europeans in the New World, that began with Christopher Columbus, Giovanni Caboto (John Cabot) and Giovanni da Verrazzano, men and woman of Italian heritage have championed the civil rights of American Indians, African Americans, immigrants, workers, women, the disabled and the poor.

Their contributions have been collected in a report to be released this month by the Sons of Italy Commission for Social Justice: *With Liberty for All: Italian Americans and Civil Rights*, believed to be the first study that examines Italian American efforts in this area. Hopefully, it will inspire other researchers to explore in greater depth this long-neglected subject.

For a free copy of the report, send a large (9 x 12) self addressed envelope to:  
CSJ Civil Rights Report, 219 E Street NE, Washington, DC 20002 or download a copy at  
[www.osia.org](http://www.osia.org) at Studies in Culture, “Research and Reports.”

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