Italy Emigration: The Who, Why, and Where

by Suzanne Russo Adams

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Italy has a long tradition of exploration and emigration, from Amerigo Vespucci to Christopher Columbus (Cristoforo Colombo) and John Cabot (Giovanni Caboto). For centuries, Italians have been explorers, inventors, and adventurers. Since the 1800s, Italians have immigrated to other countries for a variety of reasons, but most prominently for growth and employment opportunities. Millions of Italians immigrated to Brazil, Argentina, the United States, Canada, and other countries between 1880 and 1920. Nearly 80 million descendants of Italian immigrants live outside of Italy today, making tracing one’s Italian heritage a popular quest worldwide.

A Brief History—Who Were These Italian Immigrants and Why They Left

“Our people have to emigrate. It is a matter of too much boundless life and too much space.”
—Pascal D’Angelo, Son of Italy
Italy Emigration: The Who, Why, and Where (continued)

Italy was historically made up of city states that became unified (the Unification) between 1859 and 1871 to help them be more independent from foreign rule. The new government had new ideas and caused political and cultural changes. At various points, they emphasized Italian colonialism and propagating the Italian language and culture across the world. The Unification resulted in increased taxes and socioeconomic divisions between northern and southern Italy. Many citizens, predominantly poor southern Italians in rural areas, resolved to escape poverty and improve their status by seeking better employment and future growth opportunities in other countries. These Italian immigrants were mostly impoverished laborers and farmers, but included were some craftsmen, merchants, and artisans. They shared a strong work ethic.

Prior to the 1890s, a higher majority of Italian immigrants originally came from northern Italy. After 1890, a majority of the emigration was concentrated in the mezzogiorno area of Italy—Abruzzo, Molise, Campania, Puglia, Basilicata, Calabria, Sicily, and Sardinia. Between 30 and 50 percent of Italian emigrants returned to Italy within five years. Those who didn’t, replanted their deep love of their family and Italian heritage and culture in their new countries, and many sent much needed money to support family still in Italy.

Italian Immigrant Destinations
The major ports of embarkation from Italy were Genova, Naples, and Palermo. The top destination countries were Brazil, Argentina, the United States, Venezuela, and Canada—but other destination countries might surprise you (see the table below).

There were usually several ports of entry in each country. For example, when researching Italian immigration to America, you might start looking for immigration records from New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and New Orleans, as these were a few of the major ports. Make sure you don’t limit yourself to one port in your Italian ancestry research. My grandmother told me that my great-grandfather Bartolomeo Gambino entered the United States through New York. The reality is that he came through Boston. Also, do not be surprised if you find ancestors entering their new country multiple times. Some Italian immigrants did not intend to stay permanently, or once they did arrive, they decided to go back to Italy and retrieve family members or to visit Italy for a time. Because the peak Italian emigration periods were in late 1800 and early 1900, family members often have living memory of where and when their family may have immigrated and better records to identify places of origin.

Italian Immigration Records
You can consider many types of Italian immigration records when researching your Italian genealogy. The key record types differ by country. In Italy, the following records may exist.

- Passport Applications: When an Italian emigrant prepared to leave the native homeland, he or she would have completed a passport application. (Unfortunately, most of these applications were destroyed; however, some still exist locally.)
- Military Conscriptions (draft and service records): These records can be a great source for identifying an ancestor’s birth town.
- Church Records: These documents often include christenings, births, marriages, and deaths, often with information about multiple generations.
- Civil Registrations: Look in these civil registrations also for birth records, marriage records, and death records.

If you are unsure where your Italian ancestor was born, a good rule of thumb is to begin exploring the records created in the country they immigrated to. You might have inherited documents from family members, such as alien registrations or green cards; passports; birth, marriage and death certificates; obituaries or funeral cards; letters and other correspondence; naturalization papers; and so on.
In destination countries, you can also consider the following records created by government and church officials or local organizations:

- Federal and State Censuses
- Birth, Marriage, and Death Records
- Church Records
- Passenger Lists
- Naturalization and Alien Registration
- Military Records
- City Directories, Newspapers, Societies, and Associations

Other Italian Genealogy Research Tips

The way an Italian immigrant ancestor’s name was spelled on a passenger list is most likely the way the name would have been spelled on records in Italy. The lists were often filled out at the port of embarkation before the ship left Italy. Contrary to popular belief in the United States, names were not changed at the port of entry, but rather as Italian ancestors assimilated into their new neighborhoods. For example, my great-grandfather’s name was Matteo Russo. I have found him on a variety of documents in the United States as Mike, Matt, and Martin.

Keep in mind that Italian women typically use their maiden names on official documents in Italy, which means that on passenger lists, you will often find a woman travelling under her maiden name with minor children travelling under the father’s surname.

Passenger lists and other useful records to locate your Italian family can be found on FamilySearch, Ancestry, and MyHeritage. In addition, FamilySearch is publishing nearly the complete civil registration of Italy online. For more information and clues about how to find your place of origin, consider these sources:

- Italy Gathering Information to Locate Place of Origin
- A Family Tree Italian Genealogy Guide
- Finding Your Italian Ancestors: A Beginner’s Guide

In many instances, Italians didn’t travel alone. If you can’t find a place of origin on the records of your direct ancestor, branch out to siblings, neighbors, and associates. After all, it’s a family thing.
Additional Historical Sources on Italian Immigration

- Pascal D’Angelo, Son of Italy (Toronto: Guernica Editions, 2003).
- “Italy Emigration and Immigration,” FamilySearch wiki, last modified 28 April, 2018.


Footnotes


Article by Suzanne Russo Adams, MA, AG®. Suzanne works in content strategy for FamilySearch and was previously employed by Ancestry.com. She is a graduate of Brigham Young University, with a B.S. in sociology, a B.A. in family history and genealogy, and a master’s degree in European history. She has served on the boards of the Association of Professional Genealogists (APG), Utah Genealogical Association (UGA), and ICAPGen. She is the author of Finding Your Italian Ancestors: A Beginner’s Guide and was a lead researcher for season 1 of NBC’s hit series Who Do You Think You Are.
In 2017 the Arkansas Legislature passed Act 519. It provides individuals who were adopted and are 21 years of age or older, the ability to request their adoption file from the Arkansas Department of Health (ADH). These files usually include an original birth certificate and adoption decree, but they can vary depending on the adoption. Act 519, allows birth parents to redact their names from an adoption file and update family medical history. They can also request to be contacted by the adopted child directly, through a third party or not at all. Birth parents, when submitting a request, must show proof of their identity, submit a notarized form and update their genetic or social history. For more information or copies of the forms go to: https://www.healthy.arkansas.gov/programs-services/topics/adoption-file-requests
The board of the Arkansas Genealogical Society met on Saturday August 11, 2018 at the Lonoke County Museum in Lonoke, Arkansas. First Vice-President Linda Fischer reviewed details of the upcoming Fall seminar and board members were assigned to various tasks necessary to make seminar a success. Rita Benafied Henard reported on vendors for the seminar and President George Mitchell stated that quite a few donations have been received for door prizes. Board member Chris Stewart reported that applications have been received for six Civil War and two Antebellum Ancestry certificates. All certificates awarded this year will be recognized at the annual Fall seminar in October. President George Mitchell informed the board that the National Society of the Daughter of the War of 1812 have offered to donate $4,000 to the State of Arkansas to update the War of 1812 Memorial Fountain which stands on the State Capitol grounds. The Arkansas Arts and Grounds Commission has approved this for public comment which will take place on October 11. The update will add over 600 names to the memorial. Board member Jeanne Rollberg reported on efforts to partner with the Department of Parks and Tourism and the Department of Arkansas Heritage to produce a travel brochure to promote genealogically based tourism. This will be an ongoing project.

Submitted by Secretary Ginney Pumphrey

The Arkansas State Archives is interested in you!

The Arkansas State Archives and Friends of the Arkansas State Archives are looking for eager individuals to help indexing county and state records. Work is done sitting down, along side staff members, with gloves and masks provided. It takes place on Tuesday mornings from 9:00 to noon in a conference room at the Collections Management Facility on North Street in Little Rock where parking is more easily available than at the Archives. Come and join the fun.
Arkansas Genealogical Society
2018 Fall Seminar

Featuring CeCe Moore
& Jeanne Rollberg
October 19-20, 2018

Program: Friday, October 19, 2018
Both Presentations by Jeanne Rollberg, AGS Board Member

5:00PM Registration (Vendors Open 5:00PM - 9:00PM)
6:00PM Social Media Enhance Family History: Mining the Fields - Traditional genealogy research may be combined with proper uses of Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Pinterest, and blogs to enrich the family tree and enliven connections in the family history experience. Evaluate and use social media with expertise.
7:00PM Break
7:30PM The Ancestor Pester/ Excelling in Genealogy Travel/Reunions & Research Together - Nearly % of Americans - and especially Baby Boomers - visit family and broader heritage sites yearly, often combining reunions/other travel with family history study. Learn to systematically maximize research while getting the most from travel.

Saturday, October 20, 2018
All Presentations by CeCe Moore

8:00AM Registration (Vendors Open 8:00AM - 3:00PM)
9:00AM The Power of DNA: Genetic Genealogy Basics - Understanding the basics of the four types of DNA and three types of genetic genealogy tests is essential to successfully applying genetic genealogy to furthering your research. This presentation helps to lay the foundation for genealogists interested in adding genetic genealogy to their skill set.
10:00AM Break
10:30AM Who Am I: Exploring Ethnicity Estimates - Addressing the question of “Who am I?” through DNA testing that provides ethnicity percentages is becoming a popular research tool. Attendees will learn how to better interpret and analyze these results and what they can and cannot tell you about your family tree.
11:30AM Lunch
1:00PM AGS Annual Meeting
1:30PM Applying Autosomal DNA to Your Genealogical Research - The introduction of autosomal DNA into the genealogical scene empowered our use of DNA to learn more about our ancestors in a way never before possible. This presentation will cover FAQs regarding best practices and the most efficient methodologies in the application of autosomal DNA to our research.
2:30PM Break
3:00PM Genetic Genealogy Case Studies - Step-by-step case studies demonstrate the use of all four types of DNA in conjunction with traditional research to solve genealogical mysteries and showcase the exciting possibilities this work offers.
Arkansas Genealogical Society
2018 Fall Seminar Registration Form

October 19-20, 2018
Benton Event Center
17322 I-30 North Benton, AR

Name: ________________________________________________

Address: _____________________________________________________________________

City: ___________________ State: ______ Zip: ____________________

email: ____________________________________________________

Registration Fee

A syllabus is guaranteed for those registered by September 24

____ $20 Friday Night Only
____ $40 Saturday Only (includes a box lunch)
____ $55 Friday & Saturday (includes Saturday’s box lunch)
____ $25 (AGS Membership - New and Renewing)
________ Total Enclosed

Make Check Payable to AGS and mail to:

AGS Fall Conference Registration
P O Box 26374
Little Rock AR 72221-6374

Hotel Reservations can be made at:

Fairfield Inn & Suites
17320 Interstate 30 North
Benton, AR, 72019
(501) 722-6330
National Archives Virtual Genealogy Fair 2018
October 24, 2018 - sixth annual virtual Genealogy Fair

Every year, the National Archives hosts a virtual Genealogy Fair via live webcast on YouTube. The sessions offer family history research tools on Federal records for all skill levels. Thousands of family historians participate in the live event.

As a virtual attendee, you can:

- Watch the entire day on YouTube.
- Join us – from wherever and whenever.
- Participate with the presenters and other family historians during the live event.
- Watch individual sessions and download the materials at your convenience -- live or after the event.
- Attend free of charge and registration!

Administrative Stuff

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