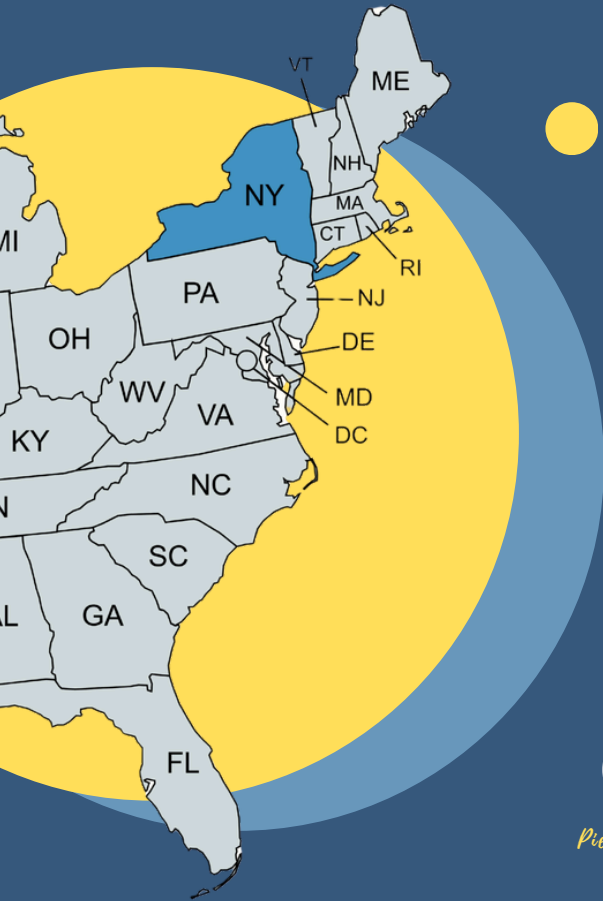


# HAPPY BIRTHDAY USA *from Italy*

● Italy's role  
in America's greatness



*Joe DiMaggio*



*Piccirilli Brothers*



*Gaetano Filangieri*

## ● Unsung Italian heroes (New England)



*Luigi Palma di Cesuola*



*Frank Serpico*



*Charles Paterno*



*Vito Marcantonio*



*Terro Mangione*



*Charles Gaetano*



*John Dabbene*



*Teressa Bellissimo*



*Geraldine Ferraro*



*Cosidio Perruzza*



*Francis Spinola*



*Carlo Barsotti*



*Pietro Ciulli*



*Dominic Altieri*



*Paul Vallone*

# HAPPY BIRTHDAY ITALY *from the US*



*Automotive*



*Economy and Finance*



*Innovation*



**TWO ANNIVERSARIES ONE HEART**

**APRIL 2026**

2026 is a very special year for the United States and for Italy. In both cases, an important milestone anniversary will be celebrated: 250 years since 1776, the birth of the United States; and 80 years since 1946, the birth of the Italian Republic.

At We the Italians, we want to celebrate both in our own way – by telling the beautiful stories in which Italy played a leading role throughout the 250 years of the United States, and likewise the beautiful stories in which the United States has played a leading role in Italy's 80 years.

Our project is called **Two Anniversaries, One Heart**, and as you may have guessed, it is divided into two parts.

## HAPPY BIRTHDAY USA

**Happy Birthday USA**, which includes stories about Italy's positive contribution to 250 years of the United States of America, is itself divided into two sub-projects.

The first is called **Italy's role in America's greatness**.

We have selected eighteen great Italians who played a fundamental role in the 250-year history of America. Eighteen prominent Italians of today will tell the stories of those eighteen very famous Italians of the past, also explaining the impact that these figures have had here in Italy within their respective fields of expertise.

The second is called **Unsung Italian Heroes**.

In addition to the eighteen most famous Italians, we want to tell the story of the impact that many other Italians have had in individual American states. These are more local Italian and Italian American heroes who are not as widely known. And who better than our Ambassadors to know at least one such story connected to their own area? They will tell us about the unsung hero who did something important in the place where they live and where they represent us.

At the end of February, we will share the stories of the Unsung Heroes of New England; at the end of April, those from the New York area; at the end of June, those from the East; at the end of August, those from the South; and at the end of December, those from the West.

## HAPPY BIRTHDAY ITALY

In this case, twelve stories written by prominent Italians of today will each be dedicated to America's positive contribution to Italy in a different thematic field.

We will tell twelve reasons why Italy has been, is, and will always be grateful to the United States – reasons that have generated positive effects in Italy and that have strengthened the solidity and the exceptional nature of the friendship and alliance between Italy and the United States.

All of this content will be distributed in several ways.

The articles will be published – all in Italian and English – on our website and across our social media channels.

The English versions will also be included in special bimonthly inserts of our magazine, to be released at the end of February, April, June, August, October, and December 2026.

At the end of the year, we will publish a book collecting all the content.

**Happy Birthday USA** and **Happy Birthday Italy** will also become two audio and video podcasts, likewise released every two months.

Finally, our Gala – which this year will take place on June 4 – will include a segment in which we will briefly present this project, along with a surprise that we are not yet ready to reveal.

**Two Flags, One Heart** – and this year as well,  
**Two Anniversaries, One Heart.**



**HAPPY BIRTHDAY**  
**ITALY** *from the US*



**HAPPY BIRTHDAY**  
**ITALY** *from the US*



*Automotive*



Paola Allegra Baistrocchi

## Two shores, one road. The dialogue between Italy and the United States in the automotive sector

Over the eighty years of the Italian Republic, few sectors illustrate the depth of the relationship between Italy and the United States as clearly as automotive. This is not just about industry, but about material culture, technological vision, and the ability to imagine the future of mobility.

Looking at the history of the automobile in the twentieth century, the United States represented an essential reference point for Italy. The Fordist production model, developed by Henry Ford, redefined the very concept of industrial manufacturing by introducing scale, standardization, and efficiency. This paradigm also influenced Italy, helping shape the country's industrial growth in the postwar period. At the same time, Italy did not simply adopt this model – it reinterpreted it. Italian industry transformed mass production into something more refined, more human-centered, and closely tied to quality and design. Companies such as FIAT stood at the heart of this transformation, driving mass motorization across the country, while brands like Ferrari and Alfa Romeo built a global image where performance, aesthetics, and identity converge. The dialogue between Italy and the United States thus developed as a dynamic balance between scale and detail, between production and design, between industry and culture. This relationship found one of its most visible expressions in the city of Detroit, the historic capital of the automotive world. During my time serving as Consul of Italy in Detroit, I had the opportunity to observe firsthand how this dialogue remains alive and continuously evolving.

Detroit is a city that has experienced both industrial greatness and deep crisis, yet today it is reinventing itself as a hub of innovation. In this context, the Italian presence is far from marginal – it is an integral part of the ecosystem.

Major industrial groups, research centers, startups, and highly specialized suppliers form a widespread and deeply rooted Italian network in the United States. Companies like Stellantis – born from the integration of Fiat Chrysler Automobiles and the PSA Group – embody this transatlantic dimension, where expertise, markets, and visions intersect.

The American contribution to the evolution of the Italian automotive sector goes beyond industry alone. In recent years, the United States has played a crucial role in shaping new technological trajectories, from electric mobility to autonomous driving, and the integration of automotive and software. These are areas where Italy already excels, and through collaboration among universities, research centers, and businesses, it has further strengthened its ability to compete at the highest levels.

In this sense, the relationship between Italy and the United States can be seen as one of mutual learning. If Italy has found in the United States a model of scale and competitiveness, the United States has often looked to Italy as a laboratory of excellence in design, prototyping, and the ability to combine technology with beauty. I have seen how this complementarity can translate into concrete opportunities. Initiatives focused on innovation, startup exchange programs, academic collaborations, and business networking events have helped create fertile ground for new projects. During my consular mandate, I supported numerous Italian SMEs in components and engineering in accessing American counterparts within the Midwest automotive supply chain, fostering direct relationships with OEMs and Tier 1 suppliers.



# HAPPY BIRTHDAY ITALY *from the US*



*Automotive*



One of the most striking aspects of this ecosystem is the growing centrality of the human dimension in mobility. The automobile is no longer just an industrial product, but part of a broader system that includes sustainability, quality of life, and urban transformation. Here too, the dialogue between Italy and the United States continues to be particularly productive. The American approach – oriented toward experimentation and speed of implementation – meets the Italian tradition of design that is attentive to context, people, and aesthetics.

What emerges is a vision of mobility that is not only technologically advanced, but also culturally meaningful.

If I had to summarize the greatest American contribution to Italy's growth, I would say it lies in fostering a constant drive toward improvement. The United States has been both a mirror and a challenge for Italy – a model to engage with, and a partner with whom to build something new.

Today, in the face of major ongoing transitions – energy, digital, and industrial – this relationship appears more relevant than ever. Automotive is once again at the center of a profound transformation, and once again Italy and the United States are engaging, collaborating, and influencing each other.

It is precisely in this ability to evolve together, while preserving their distinct identities, that the most enduring contribution of the United States to the eighty years of the Italian Republic in the automotive sector can be found.

***Paola Allegra Baistrocchi*** is an Italian diplomat who served as Consul of Italy in Detroit, where she promoted economic and cultural relations between Italy and the United States, and she is currently serving at the Directorate General for Growth and Export Promotion at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.



**HAPPY BIRTHDAY**  
**ITALY** *from the US*



*Economy and Finance*



Simone Crolla

## United States and Italy 80 years of shared economic growth across regions, businesses, and innovation

As Italy celebrates the 80th anniversary of the Italian Republic this year, its economic relationship with the United States stands out as one of the strongest and most enduring pillars of national growth. This is not just a trade relationship, but a true strategic partnership that has accompanied – and often anticipated – the transformation of Italy’s economic system. From postwar reconstruction to the challenges of globalization and the digital transition, the United States has been a key reference point for Italy – a partner capable of investing, innovating, and strengthening the competitiveness of the country’s productive system.

American contributions had a decisive impact from the very beginning of the Republic. Economic and financial support in the post-World War II years went beyond rebuilding infrastructure – it introduced industrial and organizational models that helped shape Italy’s manufacturing base. A clear example is the Falck Group, which, supported by the Marshall Plan, launched a new phase of growth and eventually became Italy’s largest private steel producer.

In the decades that followed, this relationship evolved into a continuous flow of investments, expertise, and exchange. U.S. companies found in Italy a fertile environment for developing high-value activities, contributing to job creation, the spread of new technologies, and the strengthening of industrial supply chains. Today, the United States is among the leading foreign investors in Italy and represents the top non-EU export destination for Italian goods. Trade between the two countries exceeded \$114 billion in 2025, with a strong presence of American multinationals across key sectors of the Italian economy.

One of the most interesting developments in recent years has been the growing role of local territories. Regions such as Veneto, Emilia-Romagna, and Campania have emerged as true hubs of transatlantic dialogue, supported by dynamic business ecosystems, strong export orientation, and the ability to attract international investment.

Direct engagement among businesses, institutions, and local stakeholders has shown that the relationship between Italy and the United States is no longer limited to government-level interaction. It has become a widespread ecosystem, made up of industrial districts, small and medium-sized enterprises, and large corporations working together across global value chains. In this context, initiatives promoted by organizations such as AmCham play a key role in connecting experience, expertise, and opportunities.

Italy’s most export-driven regions are also those most integrated into trade flows and investment relationships with the United States, confirming a bond that is increasingly rooted at the local level.

In recent years, the international environment has introduced new challenges – trade tensions, supply chain reconfiguration, tariff policies, and geopolitical instability. Yet the economic relationship between Italy and the United States has demonstrated remarkable resilience.

Even with the introduction of new tariffs, Italian exports to the United States continued to grow, recording a 7.2% increase last year, according to official data. This reflects not only strong American demand for Made in Italy products,



# HAPPY BIRTHDAY ITALY *from the US*



## *Economy and Finance*



but also the ability of Italian companies to adapt quickly to complex conditions. At the same time, American companies continue to invest in Italy, strengthening their presence in strategic sectors and contributing to the modernization of the economy. This is a two-way relationship, where both sides benefit from a continuous exchange of value.

Today, the transatlantic partnership is increasingly shaped by issues such as innovation, sustainability, and supply chain security. Italian and American companies are working together to make supply chains more resilient, investing in advanced technologies, digitalization, and energy transition. This cooperation is especially important in a global context where competition is closely tied to economic security and access to strategic resources. As a result, the dialogue between Italy and the United States is expanding into new areas, from advanced manufacturing to critical technologies, further reinforcing the strategic nature of the relationship.

Working daily to strengthen economic ties between Italy and the United States has provided a close view of how this relationship continues to evolve. What stands out is that it is not just about numbers - important as they are - but about a partnership built on trust, complementarity, and a shared vision. Italian companies see the United States not just as a market, but as a partner for growth. At the same time, American companies view Italy as a strategic platform in Europe, combining industrial excellence, creativity, and manufacturing expertise. This combination is what makes the relationship between the two countries unique - a balance between tradition and innovation, local roots and global reach. Looking ahead, the challenges we face - from digital transformation to sustainability, from economic security to global competition - require strong and forward-looking alliances. In this context, the relationship between Italy and

manufacturing expertise. This combination is what makes the relationship between the two countries unique - a balance between tradition and innovation, local roots and global reach.

Looking ahead, the challenges we face - from digital transformation to sustainability, from economic security to global competition - require strong and forward-looking alliances. In this context, the relationship between Italy and the United States will continue to be a key strategic asset. If the past 80 years of the Italian Republic tell a story of growth and transformation, it is only right to recognize that a significant part of that journey has been shared with the United States - a collaboration that has evolved over time, adapted to change, and generated lasting value for both economies, and continues to do so today.

**Simone Crolla** is Managing Director of the American Chamber of Commerce in Italy (AmCham) since 2009. He is Chairman of Haizum and an independent board member of Tesmec S.p.A. A former member of Parliament and senior government official, he teaches Corporate Public Affairs at IULM University and is active in cultural and philanthropic initiatives.



**HAPPY BIRTHDAY**  
**ITALY** *from the US*



Fabrizio Capobianco

## The American dream that is changing Italy. Innovation, risk, and the courage to fail

In the late 1990s, I left Valtellina for Silicon Valley because I had decided to compete in the Champions League. For someone in technology like me, Silicon Valley had always been the ultimate destination. I lived there for 23 years, became an American citizen, and over time developed a clear sense of what makes Silicon Valley unique. I also came to understand that it is primarily a state of mind – something that can be replicated anywhere. Even in Italy, even in Valtellina.

### The Culture of Risk

The first contribution the United States has made to Italy in the field of innovation is not technological. It is cultural. It is the culture of risk.

In Italy, for decades, failure was synonymous with shame. An entrepreneur who shut down a company was considered finished – socially and often legally. In the United States, and especially in Silicon Valley, failure is part of your résumé. It is experience. It is proof that you tried to do something difficult. An American venture capitalist is often more willing to invest in someone who has failed twice than in someone who has never tried – provided you can clearly explain what went wrong and what you learned.

This American mindset is beginning to influence Italy, slowly but irreversibly. Today there are Italian founders who have closed one startup and launched another. There are Italian investors who fund ideas without demanding hard collateral. It is not yet enough, but it represents a historic shift from the Italy in which I grew up.

### The Startup Model

The second contribution is the operating model of the technology startup. Before Silicon Valley exported this model around the world, the Italian

way of doing business was largely artisanal or manufacturing-based: small and medium-sized enterprises, often family-run, deeply rooted in their territory, outstanding in quality but rarely scalable beyond national borders.

The American startup introduced a completely different paradigm: build something scalable, raise capital from investors willing to take risks, grow quickly, and target the global market from day one. This model opened up a world that previously did not exist for Italians.

In Silicon Valley, I founded Funambol, a startup focused on mobile phone data synchronization, and raised tens of millions of dollars from American venture capitalists. But I did it with Italian engineers, because they are among the best in the world. Without the American model, that story would never have happened.

Today hundreds of Italian startups operate according to this same framework. Many fail, of course. But some become global companies, and all of them contribute to building an ecosystem that simply did not exist in Italy before.

### Venture Capital

The third contribution, closely tied to the second, is venture capital. For decades, the only way to finance an idea in Italy was to go to a bank, present a cautious business plan, and offer tangible guarantees. American-style risk capital – which accepts losing everything on nine investments in order to find the tenth that changes the world – was foreign to Italy's financial culture.

The United States showed the world that this model works. Not only does it work – it is the only model capable of producing radical innovation. No bank would have financed Google in 1998,



# HAPPY BIRTHDAY ITALY *from the US*



Apple in 1976, or Amazon in 1994. Investors willing to bet on the bold ideas of ambitious young founders made those companies possible. This model has also begun to take root in Italy, albeit later. Today there are Italian venture capital funds. There are Italian angel investors willing to put their own money behind an idea and a person without requiring guarantees. It is still small compared to the American ecosystem, but it is infinitely more than what existed thirty years ago.

## **A Bridge Between Two Worlds**

I have spent much of my professional life building bridges between Italy and the United States. First with Funambol, then with TOK.tv, and later with The Liquid Factory, the startup factory I founded in Valtellina that selects entrepreneurs from around the world to build startups based in Italy with global ambitions.

What I have learned over the years is that America's contribution to Italy is not about replacing the Italian model with the American one. It is about cross-pollinating, hybridizing, and making it more ambitious. Italy has something Silicon Valley will never have: a unique ability to create beauty, to embed aesthetics and quality into everything – from fashion to food to industrial design. When that Italian sensibility meets American global ambition and a culture of risk, extraordinary things happen.

The Liquid Factory was born from this vision. We build startups in Valtellina with Italian and international talent, then guide founders into the world's top accelerators and support them in raising capital in Silicon Valley. We are not bringing America to Italy to replace what exists. We are doing it to multiply the best of what we are capable of creating.

## **A Personal Reflection**

As I look at the eighty years of the Italian Republic and reflect on America's contribution to innovation, I see one thing above all: liberation from the idea that things must remain as they are.

At its best, America is the country that believes the future can be different from the present. That a young person born anywhere can change the world with an idea. That failure is not the end of a story, but the beginning of a better one.

That idea crossed the Atlantic and changed Italy. Not enough yet. But the process is underway, and it is irreversible.

I am one of many Italians who has experienced that cross-pollination firsthand. I brought to California what I had learned in Pavia, and I brought back to Valtellina what I had learned in Palo Alto. It is not a journey that ends. It is an ongoing conversation between two cultures that, when they truly listen to each other, create something better than either could produce alone.

Happy birthday, Italy. And thank you, America.

***Fabrizio Capobianco**, a serial entrepreneur and PhD in Computer Science from the University of Pavia, founded Funambol and TOK.tv between Italy and Silicon Valley. He is a partner at The Liquid Factory, Chief Innovation Officer at Minerva Networks, and a Knight of the Italian Republic.*



**HAPPY BIRTHDAY**  
**USA** *from Italy*

**Italy's role in America's greatness**

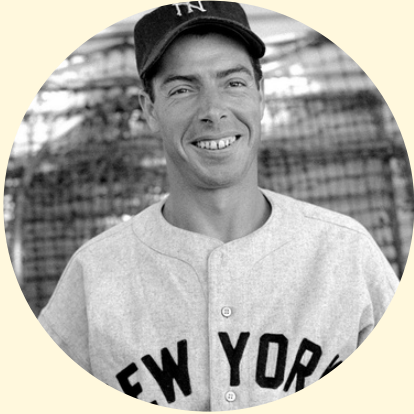
**Unsung Italian heroes**



# HAPPY BIRTHDAY USA *from Italy*



## Italy's role in America's greatness



### *Joe DiMaggio,* **Italian roots and a sporting legacy that changed America**

Joe DiMaggio was far more than a baseball legend – he was a cultural icon who helped reshape the United States and redefine how Italian Americans were perceived in the twentieth century. His life story, rooted in discipline, excellence, and quiet dignity, stands as a powerful example of the positive impact Italians have had on American society.

Born in 1914 in Martinez, California, to Sicilian immigrants from Isola delle Femmine, DiMaggio grew up in a working-class family that valued hard work and perseverance. Like many children of Italian immigrants, he lived between two worlds – the traditions of his family and the opportunities of America. This dual identity shaped his character and fueled his determination to succeed, not just for himself, but for the community he represented.

DiMaggio rose to prominence with the New York Yankees, one of the most storied franchises in Major League Baseball. His career achievements are remarkable: nine World Series titles, three Most Valuable Player awards, and 13 All-Star appearances. Yet his most legendary accomplishment remains the 56-game hitting streak in 1941, a record that still stands today as one of the most extraordinary feats in sports history.

However, DiMaggio's influence extended far beyond statistics. At a time when Italian Americans often faced discrimination and harmful stereotypes, he became a symbol of integrity, elegance, and professionalism. He was reserved, composed, and consistently excellent – qualities that challenged prevailing prejudices and offered a new image of Italian Americans to the broader public. His graceful style of play and understated confidence made him admired not only as an athlete but as a person.

During World War II, DiMaggio left baseball to serve in the United States military, further strengthening his reputation as a dedicated and patriotic citizen. Although he spent much of his service playing baseball for troops and boosting morale, his willingness to step away from his career at its peak reflected a deep sense of responsibility and loyalty to his country.

DiMaggio's fame grew beyond the baseball field, turning him into a national icon. His marriage to Marilyn Monroe brought him into the world of Hollywood and popular culture, but it was his personal conduct – disciplined, respectful, and private – that earned him lasting admiration. He represented a model of success that combined talent with humility, showing that greatness did not require arrogance or excess.

Importantly, DiMaggio never lost touch with his Italian roots. He remained deeply connected to his family and heritage, embodying values such as loyalty, hard work, and respect. In doing so, he became a source of pride for Italian Americans across the country. His success helped shift public perception, demonstrating that Italian immigrants and their descendants were not only capable of success, but could excel at the highest levels of American life.

Joe DiMaggio's impact on the United States was profound and enduring. He was not just a sports hero – he was a bridge between cultures, a symbol of successful integration, and a



# HAPPY BIRTHDAY USA *from Italy*



## Italy's role in America's greatness

testament to the contributions of Italian Americans. His legacy helped open doors and change attitudes, paving the way for future generations to be judged by their achievements rather than their origins.

Today, his name remains synonymous with excellence, discipline, and quiet strength. Joe DiMaggio stands as one of the great Italians who left a lasting, positive mark on the United States – a true embodiment of the American dream, shaped by Italian heritage and realized through extraordinary talent and character.

Joe DiMaggio was never just a baseball player to me – he was a symbol. A symbol of excellence, discipline, and identity. Growing up in Italy, far from the stadiums where he made history, I discovered his story through articles, books, and every piece of writing I could find about him. I didn't just read about a great athlete, I felt connected to a legacy that extended beyond the field.

Joe DiMaggio represented something unique: greatness with elegance, success with humility, and a deep pride in his Italian roots. For many Italian and Italian American families, he was more than a sports icon – he was proof that our culture, our values, and our work ethic could leave a lasting mark on the world.

As a young player, those stories stayed with me. They shaped the way I saw the game, but also the way I approached competition and responsibility. That is why, throughout my entire career, first as a player, and later as a coach, I chose to wear the number 5. It was never a casual decision. It was a tribute. A way to carry a piece of that inspiration with me every time I stepped onto the field.

Wearing that number meant holding myself to a higher standard. It was a quiet reminder of what baseball can represent at its best: respect for the game, consistency, and the pursuit of excellence day after day.

Even today, Joe DiMaggio's legacy continues to resonate. Not only in the history books, but in the values, he embodied – values that still inspire new generations of players, in Italy and beyond. His story reminds us that baseball is more than a sport. It is a bridge between cultures, a shared language, and, sometimes, a source of identity.

Watching Italy compete so strongly in the most recent World Baseball Classic, I couldn't help but think of him. I truly believe he would have been proud – proud to see a team representing both Italy and the Italian American community playing with passion, discipline, and a clear sense of identity. In many ways, that spirit reflects exactly what he stood for.

For me, that connection has always been personal. And every time I wore number 5, it was my way of saying thank you to a legend who helped shape not only my love for baseball, but also my journey within it.



**Marco Mazzeri** is a former Italian baseball player and coach who played for five years on the Italian national team, which he later managed for ten years. Today he serves as President of the Federazione Italiana Baseball e Softball.



# HAPPY BIRTHDAY USA *from Italy*



## Italy's role in America's greatness



### *The Piccirilli Brothers,* **memory carved between Italy and the United States**

There is a story that crosses the ocean, shaped by marble dust, molten bronze, and tireless hands. It is the story of the Piccirilli Brothers, sons of Giuseppe Piccirilli – born in Rome and later settled in Massa, Tuscany, where he raised his family – who brought the ancient knowledge of Italian workshops to the United States at the end of the 19th century, transforming it into one of the most remarkable artistic experiences of modern America.

They established their studio in the Bronx at a time when New York was expanding rapidly and searching for a monumental language to define itself. Their workshop quickly became a key reference point – not merely craftsmen, but refined interpreters of the visions of major artists and architects. Within those walls, works were created that would permanently shape the visual identity of the United States.

Among their most famous achievements is the massive seated figure of Abraham Lincoln at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, a sculpture admired by millions every year, often without knowing it was carved by Italian hands. Yet this masterpiece also reflects one of the most painful injustices they faced: the Piccirilli name was never inscribed on it. They were Italians, immigrants, artisans – and at that time, that was enough to keep them in the shadows.

Their output was extraordinary – marble and bronze sculptures, public monuments, architectural decorations spread across the country. Their Bronx studio, active from the late 1800s into the early decades of the 20th century, was a place of excellence where discipline, talent, and a deeply Italian work ethic came together. It was a living, almost familial environment where art and daily life were inseparable.

It is said, with a timeless smile, that Attilio, the leading figure among the brothers, would cook pasta for the workers during lunch breaks. A simple, domestic gesture that reveals the humanity of that artistic workshop. There are also stories that New York's Italian American mayor, Fiorello La Guardia, a close friend of the Piccirilli brothers, would join them at the table. Whether embellished or not, the story reflects a deeper truth – a community bound together by work and shared rituals.

Then, as often happens, memory faded. In 1970, a year filled with symbolic weight, the Piccirilli studio was demolished. A place that had helped define a nation's visual identity disappeared quietly, without full recognition of its value. The works remained, but the story – and the name – began to vanish.

That same year, I was born in Rome. A coincidence that now feels like a subtle thread, almost an invisible passing of the torch.

My name is Dante Mortet. My family's roots go back to Florence, where our craft began shortly after 1800. Today, our workshop is in Rome, at 18 Via dei Portoghesi, inside the historic Palazzo della Scimmia, where it has been for 100 years. In a different but parallel universe to the Piccirilli, we too are artisans – metal engravers for five generations, working not in marble but in bronze, silver, and gold, preserving a craft that demands time, precision, and total dedication.



# HAPPY BIRTHDAY USA *from Italy*



## Italy's role in America's greatness

Over the past 20 years, I have often traveled to the United States for work, and I cannot help but think of the Piccirilli. I walk among their creations – sometimes anonymous to most – and recognize something deeply familiar: the same pursuit of perfection, the same respect for materials, the same quiet pride.

Their story inspires me not only for the scale of their achievements, but for what it represents – the ability of Italian craftsmanship to cross time and space, to adapt without losing identity, to create beauty far from home. I imagine the smell of pitch and melted wax, the rhythm of chisels – a kind of music played with the same tools we still use, on the other side of the ocean. In this, I feel a direct connection to my work and my family. The tools are the same, the gestures are passed down, the challenges are familiar. Contexts change, but the essence remains. It is a continuous line – built on sacrifice, knowledge, and achievement – linking past and future.

Today, that line continues through my son, who is taking his first steps in sculpture and painting with a prestigious assignment in New York – portraying the faces of past players of the Cosmos in a new chapter for the historic team. In his passion and energy, I see the same spark that once animated Italian workshops. It is another form of memory, another way of giving shape to history.

From these reflections comes a project of my own: "We come from there." A bronze sculpture – a hand – to be placed in the port of New York, pointing toward the horizon, toward the endless sea from which millions of Italians arrived. Not a random gesture, but a precise symbol. The hand has always been the true emblem of Italians. It is the hand that creates, that works, that transforms. It is the hand that allowed generations of migrants to reclaim their identity and build new lives – to become a "precious seed in a generous land" like the Americas – without ever forgetting their roots. It is the same hand as the Piccirilli's, the same skilled hands of our ancestors.

An identical sculpture will stand in the port of Genoa – alongside historic departure ports like Naples and Palermo – created with the support of the Italian Emigration Museum, pointing toward the same infinite sea. In these two twin sculptures, I see an ideal bridge connecting migrants, Italian workshops, and the Americas. A sign that does not belong only to the past, but continues to live in the present.

Because true art knows no boundaries or time. It is born in places that are often small and hidden, like our workshops, yet it has the power to speak to the entire world.

The Piccirilli Brothers left us this lesson – that beauty is built with patience, skill, and love. And that even when the name fades, the work endures. It is up to us today to carry that legacy forward and continue shaping that line.



**Dante Mortet** is a renowned Roman sculptor, heir to a family dynasty of artisans active since 1890. He is best known for the project "Mano Artigiana" – a series of bronze sculptures portraying the hands of prominent figures from culture, sports, and film, conceived as a symbol of craftsmanship and mastery.



# HAPPY BIRTHDAY USA *from Italy*



## Italy's role in America's greatness



### *Gaetano Filangieri,* “public happiness” as the “supreme law” between Naples and Philadelphia

In 1781, the first two volumes of a work destined to leave a profound mark on the history of Western legal thought came into the hands of Benjamin Franklin, then the diplomatic representative of the United States in Paris. It was *The Science of Legislation* by Gaetano Filangieri, a Neapolitan jurist in his late twenties, convinced that ‘the reform of legislation’ was ‘the only hand that remains to be put forth in order to complete the work of the happiness of humankind’. Franklin, who was then seventy-five years old, let it be known that he had found Filangieri’s ideas set forth with ‘great clarity and precision’, which prompted the young Neapolitan philosopher to write to him, thus beginning a correspondence that would intertwine the fortunes of the Italian Enlightenment with the birth of the American republic.

Filangieri was born on 22 August 1753 in San Sebastiano, near Naples, into one of the most ancient families of the Neapolitan nobility. Destined for a military career, he abandoned it in order to devote himself to legal studies. At only nineteen years of age, he published *On the Morality of Legislators* (1772), in which he identified as the end of governmental action ‘the preservation’ and ‘the tranquility of the peoples’.

Two years later, he published *Political Reflections on the Sovereign’s Latest Law Concerning the Reform of the Administration of Justice* (1774), in which he praised a law requiring judges to give reasons for and publish their decisions as a safeguard against the arbitrariness of judicial power. In that work, Filangieri made explicit the spirit that would characterize his entire scholarly production: the philosopher’s task is ‘to write a lesson most useful for States, and for all Humanity’.

He subsequently undertook the writing of *The Science of Legislation*, an ambitious project for the reform of laws in the light of the experience of ‘all countries and all ages’. The work, published in Naples beginning in 1780 and translated into French, German, Spanish, English, Polish, and Russian, earned its author the appellation ‘the Montesquieu of Italy’. Filangieri sent several copies to Franklin, who in exchange sent the Neapolitan philosopher, in 1783, a collection of the constitutions of the United States of America and, in 1787, a copy of the U.S. Federal Constitution, as a token of appreciation for Filangieri’s ‘invaluable work on legislation’. That latter gift, however, reached Filangieri at the Castle of Vico Equense only the following year, when he was gravely ill. He would die a few days later, on 21 July 1788, not yet thirty-five years old.

In *The Science of Legislation*, the term ‘*felicità*’ (happiness) appears more than one hundred and sixty times, in its dual public and private connotation. The work opens with a firm condemnation of the ‘military mania’ of the sovereigns of the age, whose calculations were directed towards the resolution of a single problem: ‘to find the means of killing the greatest number of men in the shortest time possible’. Convinced that peace was ‘the first law of nations’, Filangieri urged governments to renounce their spirit of ‘rivalry and jealousy’, to combine their own interests with those of other nations, and to abhor the ‘absurd distinctions of nation against nation, baneful remnants of the



# HAPPY BIRTHDAY USA *from Italy*



## Italy's role in America's greatness

ancient prejudices of barbarism, always destructive, but today dishonoring to an age which thinks itself enlightened, and which indeed ought to be so'.

Filangieri's work proceeds from the natural-law assumption that there exist 'inviolable rights of humanity and of reason', which cannot be sacrificed to the contingencies of political power. In order to guarantee them, Filangieri proposed the adoption of a 'small separate code of the true fundamental laws, which should determine the true nature of the constitution, the rights and the limits of authority': a rigid constitution, which ordinary legislation 'must neither destroy nor can destroy', since no power could assert a right 'contrary to the liberty of the people, to the security of the citizen, to the interest of the nation, the happiness whereof must always be the supreme law'.

While the U.S. Declaration of Independence had enshrined the "pursuit of Happiness" as an inalienable right of every individual, Filangieri elevated 'public happiness' into the guiding principle for the reform of positive law. In order to give concrete form to that vision, Filangieri proposed instruments of striking modernity: a 'Censor of the laws', charged with verifying the continuing conformity of legislation with the changing needs of society, and a magistracy inspired by the Spartan Ephors, entrusted with preserving the balance among the powers of the State. These intuitions underlay the Constitution of the Neapolitan Republic of 1799, which introduced the first model of constitutional review of legislation in Europe, although it remained unimplemented due to the downfall of the Republic and the Bourbon restoration.

Moreover, Filangieri laid down a detailed plan for the reform of education, in order to render it public and more attentive to the study of foreign languages; of criminal law and procedure, in order to overcome the inquisitorial model and ensure that punishments were more proportionate to crimes; of taxation, in order to distribute wealth more equitably and achieve the equality of happiness in all classes'; as well

as of the laws on the press, in order to make it free and place it at the service of the 'tribunal of public opinion'.

Filangieri devoted his life to the happiness of humankind, but what would, in turn, have made him happy? To discover that, one must read his second letter to Franklin, dated 2 December 1782: 'From my infancy Philadelphia has attracted my gaze. I have become so accustomed to regard it as the only country wherein I may be happy, that my imagination can no longer divest itself of this idea [...] Might not my work on legislation perhaps induce you to invite me to contribute to the great Code that is being drafted in the United Provinces of America, the laws whereof are to determine not only their fate, but also the fate of all this new hemisphere?'

Franklin's answer was negative, and Filangieri therefore never set sail for Philadelphia. Yet his ideas nevertheless reached the United States, thanks in part to the many copies of *The Science of Legislation* that Franklin requested so that he might share them with other American intellectuals. Filangieri himself was aware of the universal scope of the reforming message of the Enlightenment philosopher, whom he described in these terms: 'Citizen of all places, contemporary of all ages, the universe is his country, the earth his school, his contemporaries and his posterity are his disciples'.



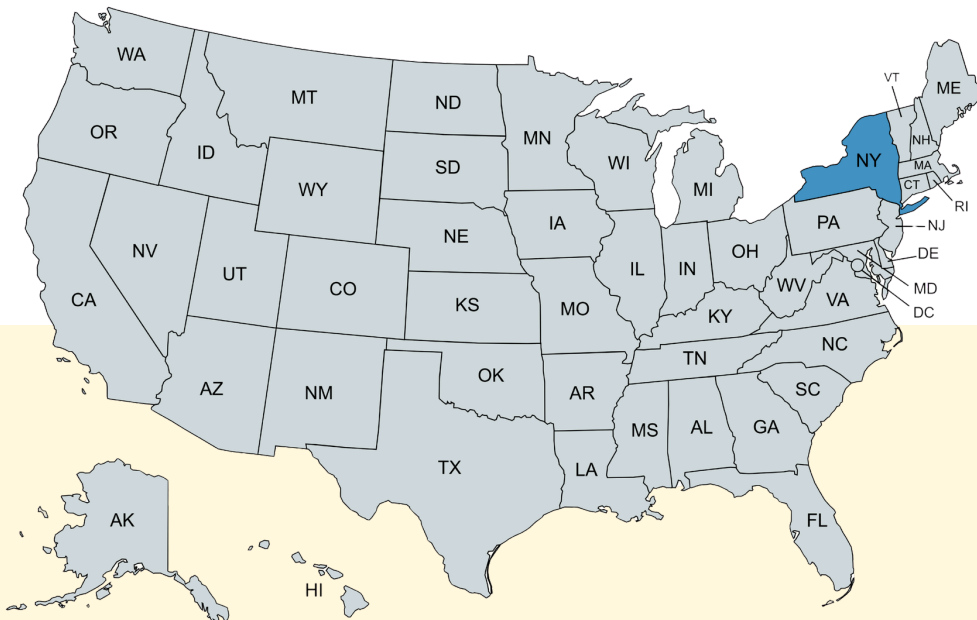
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# HAPPY BIRTHDAY USA *from Italy*

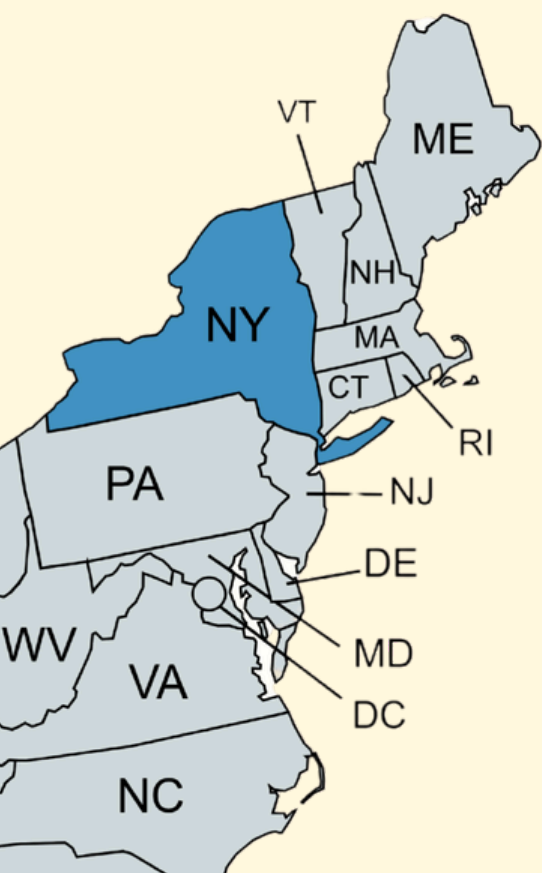


## Unsung Italian heroes



## New York Area

End of April 2026



**Manhattan** - From Piedmont to New York, the legacy of Luigi Palma di Cesnola

**Brooklyn** - Frank Serpico, the Italian American officer who changed Brooklyn

**Hudson Valley** - Charles Paterno, the Napoleon of skyscraper builders

**Harlem** - Harlem, civil rights, and Italian identity. The role of Vito Marcantonio

**Rochester** - The Voice of Italian Americans. Jerre Mangione in Rochester

**Mohawk Valley** - The builder of community. The legacy of Charles Gaetano in Utica

**Staten Island** - John Dabbene and his lasting impact on Staten Island

**Buffalo** - Teresa Bellissimo, Buffalo's unsung culinary pioneer

**Queens** - Geraldine Ferraro, a key figure for Queens and New York

**Manhattan** - Cesidio Perruzza and the true story of the Rockefeller Center Christmas tree

**Long Island** - From Suffolk County, Long Island to the Civil War. The remarkable rise of Francis B. Spinola

**Manhattan** - Carlo Barsotti and the making of Italian American identity in New York

**The Bronx** - Pietro Cinelli, the founder of Little Italy in the Bronx

**Westchester** - Dominic Altieri, carving out a monumental role in a new world

**Queens** - Paul A. Vallone, an unsung hero of Queens' Italian American community



# HAPPY BIRTHDAY USA *from Italy*



## Unsung Italian heroes



*Luigi Palma di Cesnola*

### **New York From Piedmont to New York, the legacy of Luigi Palma di Cesnola**

General Luigi Palma di Cesnola was one of the most remarkable Italian American figures of the nineteenth century, a man who left a deep mark on both the military and cultural history of New York State. Born on June 29, 1832, in Rivarolo Canavese, in Piedmont – then part of the Kingdom of Sardinia – he came from a minor noble family and was raised with a strong sense of discipline and honor. He took part in the Italian Risorgimento campaigns, experiencing firsthand the patriotic fervor that would shape his youth and character.

In the 1860s, he chose to emigrate to the United States, settling in New York. Like many Europeans of the time, he sought opportunity in a nation undergoing rapid growth and transformation. When the American Civil War broke out, he enlisted in the Union Army and quickly rose to the rank of colonel in the 4th New York Cavalry. He demonstrated courage and strategic ability in several engagements, eventually attaining the rank of brigadier general. During the conflict, he was captured by Confederate forces and held prisoner for several months. His military conduct earned widespread respect and, years later, he was awarded the Medal of Honor, the highest military decoration in the United States. His service contributed directly to the defense of the Union and enhanced the reputation of New York regiments.

## Manhattan

After the war, Cesnola entered a new phase of his life. Appointed U.S. consul to Cyprus, he developed a deep passion for archaeology and led extensive excavation campaigns that brought to light thousands of artifacts from ancient Cypriot civilization. Monumental statues, sarcophagi, votive objects, and ceramics revealed a rich and largely unknown history. The so-called Cesnola Collection became one of the most significant archaeological collections of its time.

This collection was purchased by the newly established Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and formed one of the foundational cores of its permanent holdings. In 1879, Cesnola was appointed the museum's first director, a position he held until his death in 1904. During his twenty-five years of leadership, the Metropolitan evolved from an ambitious young institution into an internationally recognized cultural landmark. Cesnola worked tirelessly to expand its collections, strengthen its reputation, and promote the idea of a public institution dedicated to education and the broad dissemination of culture.

New York State owes him a great deal for at least three fundamental reasons. First, for his military contribution during the Civil War, which reinforced the State's role in preserving the Union. Second, for providing the Metropolitan Museum with an extraordinary artistic legacy that would become one of New York's most important cultural symbols worldwide. Finally, for embodying the example of an immigrant who successfully integrated and made a decisive contribution to the civic and cultural development of American society.

Italian by birth and American by choice, Luigi Palma di Cesnola stands as a bridge between Piedmont and New York, between the spirit of the Risorgimento and modern America. His legacy still lives on in the galleries of the Metropolitan Museum and in the historical memory of New York State, which, thanks to his vision and determination, strengthened its place in the international cultural landscape.



**We the Italians**  
Editorial Staff



# HAPPY BIRTHDAY USA *from Italy*



## Unsung Italian heroes



*Frank Serpico*

### **the Italian American officer who changed Brooklyn**

Frank Serpico stands as one of the most compelling figures in Brooklyn's modern history, a man whose courage and integrity helped reshape public trust in law enforcement during a critical period. Born in Brooklyn in 1936 to Italian immigrant parents, Serpico grew up in a typical postwar Italian American household, where values such as honesty, respect, and duty were deeply rooted.

He joined the New York Police Department in the late 1950s and soon became aware of a widespread problem: systemic corruption within the force. Throughout the 1960s, in many precincts across New York – including Brooklyn – it was common practice for officers to accept bribes or ignore illegal activities in exchange for payments. This system, often referred to as “the pad,” involved hundreds of officers.

Unlike many of his colleagues, Serpico refused to take part. His stance went beyond personal ethics and became a broader fight against an entrenched system. For years, he reported misconduct through internal channels, but his complaints were largely ignored. As a result, he became increasingly isolated and faced growing risks.

In 1970, after his concerns failed to produce action, the story became public through an investigation

## Brooklyn

by the New York Times. This led to the creation of the Knapp Commission, tasked with investigating police corruption. Serpico testified openly, breaking a long-standing code of silence that had protected wrongdoing for decades.

His actions had a direct impact on Brooklyn. The revelations triggered meaningful reforms: stricter oversight of police officers; increased transparency in law enforcement operations; stronger internal disciplinary systems.

These changes helped improve the relationship between communities and the police, especially in a borough as large and diverse as Brooklyn, now home to more than 2.5 million residents. The most dramatic moment of his life came in 1971 during a drug raid in Brooklyn. Serpico was shot in the face and seriously wounded. The circumstances surrounding the incident were never fully clarified, but many suspected he had not been properly supported by fellow officers due to his whistleblowing.

After recovering, Serpico left the police force in 1972. His story became a national symbol of resistance to corruption, influencing changes in policing culture across the United States. His Italian heritage played a meaningful role in shaping his character. Raised in an immigrant family, he embraced values of justice and dignity that guided his actions, even under extreme pressure. He never sought to be seen as a hero, but simply as someone doing what was right.

Today, his legacy remains relevant. In a complex city like New York, and especially in Brooklyn, his impact can still be felt. Frank Serpico's story shows that one individual can challenge and change an entire system by refusing to compromise.



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# HAPPY BIRTHDAY USA *from Italy*



## Unsung Italian heroes



*Charles Paterno*

### **The Napoleon of skyscraper builders**

Canio Paternò, known in the United States as Charles Vincent Paterno, was born in 1878 in Castelmezzano, in the heart of Basilicata, southern Italy. His father, Giovanni, was a bricklayer who understood early on that America offered opportunities unimaginable in the struggling Italian South of the late nineteenth century. After emigrating to New York, he sent for his family a few years later, bringing young Canio into the dynamic and demanding world of a rapidly expanding city.

Gifted with sharp intelligence and strong determination, Canio pursued higher education and earned a medical degree from Cornell Medical School. Yet his life took a decisive turn when his father died. He abandoned medicine and joined his brother Joseph in the construction business. From that decision grew one of the most influential real estate enterprises in early twentieth-century New York. Paterno was eventually nicknamed “the Napoleon of Manhattan skyscraper builders” for his ability to design and develop innovative, functional buildings tailored to the needs of America’s growing middle class.

## Hudson Valley

His buildings were not simply residential structures; they symbolized New York’s transformation from an industrious port city into a modern metropolis. It is estimated that Paterno developments housed tens of thousands of residents in more than seventy-five buildings across neighborhoods such as the Upper East Side, Morningside Heights, and Washington Heights.

Yet beyond Manhattan’s skyline, a more personal and symbolic dimension of his story emerges along the Hudson River and in what we now call the Hudson Valley region. In the 1920s, when Washington Heights was still evolving, Paterno purchased a large tract of land overlooking the Hudson River. There he built a spectacular residence – a European-style castle complete with towers, battlements, and architectural details inspired by medieval Italy. The so-called Paterno Castle dominated the landscape. It was visible from New Jersey and from boats traveling up and down the Hudson. More than a private home, it was a statement of identity. The structure reflected Paterno’s Lucanian roots and his desire to bring a piece of Europe to the banks of the Hudson while celebrating the success he had achieved after an immigrant childhood marked by uncertainty and sacrifice. The castle quickly became a visual landmark and helped shape the residential identity of Washington Heights.

His decision to build there was strategic as well as symbolic. Paterno recognized the scenic and real estate potential of the cliffs overlooking the river. He developed residential complexes that maximized Hudson views, incorporating green spaces and forward-looking architectural solutions. Although he died in 1946, the castle itself had already been demolished in 1938 to



# HAPPY BIRTHDAY USA *from Italy*



## Unsung Italian heroes

make way for Castle Village, a residential complex that still occupies the site and continues to offer some of the most striking views of the Hudson River and the George Washington Bridge.

Paterno's impact on the Hudson Valley area extends beyond architecture. His developments helped open up previously marginal areas, fostering stable, well-connected communities. His attention to landscape, light, and livability anticipated modern concepts of residential urban planning.

Today, his legacy remains visible along the Hudson's shores – solid buildings, harmonious complexes, and panoramic vistas that continue to define the character of Washington Heights and northern Manhattan, an integral part of the greater Hudson Valley region. From the mountains of Basilicata to the cliffs above the Hudson, Charles Paterno transformed an immigrant dream into a lasting imprint on the American landscape.

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***We the Italians***  
*Editorial Staff*



# HAPPY BIRTHDAY USA *from Italy*



## Unsung Italian heroes



### *Vito Marcantonio*

#### **Harlem, civil rights, and Italian identity. The role of Vito Marcantonio**

Vito Marcantonio was a central figure in the political and social history of New York City, particularly in the Harlem neighborhood. A member of the United States Congress for several terms between the 1930s and 1950s, Marcantonio is remembered as one of the most important defenders of civil rights and as one of the great Americans of Italian origin who influenced the entire United States, with a particular impact on Harlem and New York City.

Born in 1902 in East Harlem to a family of Italian immigrants from Campania, Marcantonio grew up in a working-class environment marked by economic hardship but also by strong community solidarity. His Italian origins – particularly tied to the traditions of small towns in Southern Italy – deeply influenced his political vision. From a young age, he developed a strong concern for the most vulnerable, shaped by firsthand experience of the marginal conditions typical of immigrant communities.

After studying law, Marcantonio quickly embarked on a political career, becoming the representative of the East Harlem district in Congress. His work was characterized by a constant commitment to workers, immigrants, and ethnic minorities. At a time when Harlem

## Harlem

was rapidly changing, becoming a crossroads of cultures – Italian, African American, and Puerto Rican – Marcantonio became a leading advocate of an inclusive and supportive vision of coexistence.

Among his greatest achievements was his defense of civil rights, particularly for the African American community. In a period marked by strong racial discrimination, Marcantonio stood out for his political courage, supporting anti-lynching legislation and fighting for equality. At the same time, he was a strong supporter of workers' rights, backing social reforms and welfare policies inspired by the New Deal.

His connection to Harlem was genuine and constant. He was not a distant politician, but a representative deeply rooted in the community. He spoke directly with residents, listened to their needs, and sought practical solutions. This closeness earned him strong electoral support and broad respect, even among different communities. Marcantonio also represented an important symbol for Italian Americans. At a time when they often faced prejudice, his example showed how the son of Italian immigrants could become a leading figure in American political life while maintaining a strong connection to his roots. His Italian identity was never a limitation, but rather a resource that enriched his vision and his public service.

The cultural and social legacy of Vito Marcantonio in Harlem is remembered as fundamental. He helped make the neighborhood an example of multicultural coexistence and civic participation. His political action concretely improved the lives of thousands of people, leaving a positive legacy that is still appreciated today and taken as a model of inclusivity, respect, social justice, and the building of a fair and peaceful community that sees different cultures as a source of richness.



**We the Italians**  
Editorial Staff



# HAPPY BIRTHDAY USA *from Italy*



## Unsung Italian heroes



*Jerre Mangione*

### **The Voice of Italian Americans.**

Jerre Mangione was a figure of extraordinary cultural and social importance for the Rochester area, in the state of New York. A writer, essayist, and academic of Italian descent, Mangione was able to portray with depth and sensitivity the experience of Italian immigrants in the United States, making a decisive contribution to giving dignity and visibility to a community that was often marginalized.

Born in 1909 to Sicilian parents, Jerre Mangione grew up in Rochester, a city that in the early twentieth century was welcoming a growing number of immigrants from Italy. His Italian roots – particularly Sicilian – were central to both his personal development and his literary work. Mangione not only never denied these origins, but transformed them into the beating heart of his writing, helping to build a cultural bridge between Italy and the United States. His most famous book, *Mount Allegro* (1943), is considered a classic of Italian American literature. In this autobiographical work, Mangione recounts the life of the Sicilian community in Rochester with an affectionate yet critical eye, highlighting the challenges of

## Rochester

integration, generational conflicts, and the cultural richness brought by immigrants. The book was highly successful and helped change the perception of Italian Americans within the broader American cultural landscape.

Beyond his literary success, Mangione also played an important role as an academic. He taught for many years at the University of Pennsylvania, yet he always maintained a strong connection to Rochester, the city he considered his home and point of reference. Through his academic work and publications, he contributed to establishing Italian American studies as a serious and meaningful field of research.

Another key aspect of his impact was his commitment to public service. During World War II, he worked for the United States government, helping to improve relations between Americans and communities of Italian origin at a time marked by suspicion and discrimination. This commitment shows that Mangione was not only a writer, but also a cultural mediator capable of positively influencing society.

His contribution to the Rochester area has been lasting. Through his writings, Mangione gave voice to the history of the local Italian community, transforming it into a universal narrative. He helped strengthen the identity of Italian Americans in the city, offering them a sense of pride and belonging. Even today, he is celebrated as one of the most important symbols of the Italian contribution to the region's cultural development.



# HAPPY BIRTHDAY USA *from Italy*



## Unsung Italian heroes

Ultimately, Jerre Mangione represents one of the great Italian Americans who left a deep and positive mark on a specific area of the United States. His work enriched Rochester not only culturally, but also on a human level, helping to build a more inclusive society that is more aware of its roots. His legacy continues to live on as an example of how Italian heritage can become a powerful force for creating value and integration.



**William Liani.** *An evangelist believer, an Italian business developer and relationship builder who embraced We the Italians at the concept time and always supported the idea behind. Born in Rome, engineer, Italian ice hockey, roller hockey and american football professional (when he was younger). An evangelist of the Italian Cultures and recipes and wines, William has been the first We the Italian Ambassador.*



# HAPPY BIRTHDAY USA *from Italy*



## Unsung Italian heroes



*Charles Gaetano*

### **The builder of community. The legacy of Charles Gaetano in Utica**

Charles A. “Chuck” Gaetano (1923–2022) was one of the most influential figures in the modern history of Utica and the Mohawk Valley in New York State. The son of Italian immigrants, he grew up in a household that carried from Italy not only language and traditions, but above all a work ethic rooted in sacrifice, craftsmanship, and pride in one’s trade. During the Great Depression, he learned early on the skills of bricklaying and plastering – abilities that would become the foundation of an extraordinary career in the construction industry.

A veteran of World War II, Gaetano served as a “Seabee” in the United States Navy, helping build military infrastructure under demanding conditions. He was later recalled to serve during the Korean conflict. His military experience strengthened his discipline, leadership, and deep sense of responsibility toward the community – values that defined his life and career.

In the 1950s, he launched his own business as a building contractor. In 1970, he officially established the Charles A. Gaetano Construction Corporation, which would grow into one of the leading construction firms in Central New York. Over the decades, the company played a decisive role in shaping the architectural identity of Utica and the broader Mohawk Valley.

## Mohawk Valley

Among its most iconic projects was the restoration and modernization of the Stanley Theatre, one of the city’s cultural landmarks. Gaetano Construction’s work was instrumental in preserving and revitalizing this historic venue, transforming it into a vibrant center for performances and community events. Equally significant were the improvements to the Utica Memorial Auditorium, a multipurpose facility hosting sports and cultural activities, where the company undertook major façade and roofing renovations.

In the healthcare sector, participation in the development of the Wynn Hospital – now part of the Mohawk Valley Health System – stands as one of the firm’s most important recent contributions, strengthening medical infrastructure across the region. Gaetano also played a key role in historic and residential redevelopment projects. The renovation of the Olbiston Apartments, a landmark 1900 building, and the transformation of the Lofts at Globe Mills from former industrial mills into modern apartments are concrete examples of urban renewal in the Mohawk Valley.

A central chapter of Gaetano’s legacy is tied to Utica University. His company constructed numerous campus buildings, contributing to the institution’s academic and athletic growth. In 2002, the Charles A. Gaetano Stadium was inaugurated in his honor, recognizing his longstanding support of the university. The stadium includes the Connie Gaetano Plaza, dedicated to his wife and partner in philanthropy.

Through his work, Charles Gaetano did more than construct buildings – he helped build the modern identity of Utica and strengthen the fabric of the Mohawk Valley community.



**We the Italians**  
Editorial Staff



# HAPPY BIRTHDAY USA *from Italy*



## Unsung Italian heroes



*John Dabbene*

### **John Dabbene and his lasting impact on Staten Island**

John Dabbene's contributions to the Italian American community on Staten Island, New York, and well beyond have had and will continue to have long-lasting effects. A former president of the New York State Commission for Social Justice, Mr. Dabbene confirmed his role in fostering a positive image of Italian Americans in the United States and combating anti-Italian American bias and stereotypes. His work with community organizations helped build an infrastructure that enables these groups to continue and grow to this day.

For 43 years, he was a senior electrical engineer for Consolidated Edison, where he was responsible for the design of protection, instrumentation, control and alarm systems for electrical installations of power plants and substations.

During his eight-year tenure as chairman of the Garibaldi-Meucci Museum in Rosebank, Staten Island, New York, Mr. Dabbene initiated many innovative programs, restructured the facility's mission to encompass more programming, including language classes, exhibitions and speakers. These features were established and flourished long before other museums joined the effort to reach out to their local communities.

## Staten Island

Through his efforts members and non-members continue to attend and enjoy events and participate in activities sponsored by the Museum in the spirit of honoring the lives and contributions of Antonio Meucci, the true inventor of the telephone, and Giuseppe Garibaldi, the hero of two worlds, whose only footprints in North America are those in New York, where he lived for several months in Meucci's house (currently the Museum) on Staten Island (1850-1851).

Bringing people together and fostering interdenominational relationships were among Mr. Dabbene's strengths for which he will be well remembered. His service as president of the Staten Island Chapter of Arba-Sicula, and as a representative to the National Conference of Christians and Jews serve as an extraordinary example of collaboration and collegiality. His devotion and commitment to community-related activities brought him recognition to serve on the boards of the National Italian American Media Foundation and the Friends of the College of Staten Island and the City University of New York.

Through Mr. Dabbene's untiring efforts, as president, he instituted the first scholarship program for the Father Vincent R. Capodanno Lodge, Order of the Sons and Daughters of Italy in America, and developed library-donation and positive-image programs for local elementary and high schools, as well as for local colleges. In 1982, the Lodge honored Mr. Dabbene by selecting him as Italian American Man of the Year.



# HAPPY BIRTHDAY USA *from Italy*



## Unsung Italian heroes

John Dabbene left an important mark on Staten Island through his civic, cultural, and institutional commitment. Through his work, he helped strengthen dialogue among communities, institutions, and local organizations, encouraging initiatives that highlighted the island's history and identity. Dabbene supported educational, cultural, and social projects that involved residents of many different backgrounds, helping make Staten Island a more cohesive place and more aware of its heritage. His ability to build lasting networks and collaborations helped promote cultural development and civic participation across the island. Even today, his example continues to inspire initiatives aimed at strengthening the sense of community and the value of local memory.



**Frances Curcio.** *Interest in the Garibaldi Meucci Museum on Staten Island motivated Frances' publication of "The Case of Antonio Meucci and the Telephone: Just the Facts". Her NYC Council proposal to rename streets adjacent to the Museum "Antonio Meucci Way" and "Giuseppe Garibaldi Way" was accepted and will occur in April.*



# HAPPY BIRTHDAY USA *from Italy*



## Unsung Italian heroes



### *Teressa Bellissimo,* **Buffalo's unsung culinary pioneer**

In the story of Buffalo's rich Italian American heritage, few names are as quietly influential as Teressa Bellissimo. While her creation – the Buffalo wing – has become a global culinary staple, her legacy extends far beyond a single dish. Bellissimo represents the spirit of ingenuity, hospitality, and cultural pride that defines Buffalo's Italian American community.

Born to Italian immigrant roots, Teressa Bellissimo embodied the values of hard work, family, and resilience. Alongside her husband Frank, she operated the Anchor Bar on Main Street in Buffalo, a modest neighborhood establishment that would unknowingly become the birthplace of an international phenomenon. In 1964, faced with a late-night crowd and limited kitchen options, Bellissimo improvised.

Using chicken wings – then considered scraps – she fried them, tossed them in a signature hot sauce, and served them with celery and blue cheese dressing. What began as a simple solution quickly became a sensation. The Buffalo wing was born, transforming both the local food scene and Buffalo's identity on the global stage.

Yet what makes Teressa Bellissimo an “unsung hero” is not just the invention itself, but the character behind it. She did not seek fame or recognition. Instead, she remained devoted to her restaurant, her customers, and her family.

## Buffalo

The Anchor Bar became more than a place to eat: it became a gathering space, a cornerstone of community, and a symbol of Buffalo pride.

Bellissimo's story is deeply rooted in the Italian American experience. Like many immigrants and their families, she built something meaningful from humble beginnings. Her creativity and determination reflect the broader contributions of Italian Americans who have shaped Buffalo through food, culture, and entrepreneurship.

Today, Buffalo wings are enjoyed across the world, from local pizzerias to international chains, but their origin remains firmly tied to one woman's kitchen in Buffalo, New York. Despite the global recognition of the dish, Teressa herself remains relatively unknown outside her hometown. That quiet legacy is precisely what makes her story so powerful.

She reminds us that greatness does not always come with headlines. Sometimes, it comes in the form of a warm meal, a welcoming space, and a moment of inspiration that changes everything. Teressa Bellissimo's impact is lasting, not only because of what she created, but because of how she lived – grounded in family, community, and tradition. In celebrating her, we honor not just the inventor of the Buffalo wing, but a woman whose story reflects the heart of Buffalo itself.



**Danielle Salasavage** is the National Vice President of the Italian Sons & Daughters of America for the Western New York District, is the treasurer of the Buffalo Italian Heritage Festival, assistant treasurer for the Federation of Italian American Societies of Western New York, chairman of the Italian Heritage Day Parade, and secretary for the Centro Culturale Italiano di Buffalo's Board of Directors.



# HAPPY BIRTHDAY USA *from Italy*



## Unsung Italian heroes



*Geraldine Ferraro,*  
**a key figure for Queens and New York**

In the political and social landscape of New York City, few figures have left as deep a mark as Geraldine Ferraro. Born and raised in the borough of Queens, Ferraro was not only a major figure in national politics, but also a symbol of progress, representation, and opportunity for her local community. Her positive impact on New York – and especially on Queens – is still evident today.

The daughter of Italian immigrants, Ferraro fully embodied the values of the Italian American tradition: determination, a strong sense of family, and a deep commitment to hard work. Her roots, grounded in the immigrant experience, allowed her to truly understand the everyday challenges faced by families in Queens, an area long defined by its rich mix of ethnic communities. This close connection to the neighborhood made her political work authentic and deeply connected to the people she represented.

Her career began in the judicial system, where she distinguished herself as a prosecutor, handling complex cases with skill and integrity. Later, as a member of Congress, she represented Queens with determination, advocating for women's rights, working families, and underserved communities. Her work helped strengthen a sense of representation for a community that had often been overlooked, giving a voice to those who were rarely heard.

## Queens

The moment that made her a historic figure came in 1984, when she was selected as the vice presidential candidate on the Democratic ticket alongside Walter Mondale. Ferraro became the first woman in United States history to be nominated on a presidential ticket by one of the two major political parties. This milestone marked a turning point not only for women, but for American society as a whole, showing that new possibilities were finally opening at the highest levels of political leadership.

Beyond her electoral achievements, Ferraro was also among the founders of the National Organization of Italian American Women, helping to elevate the role of Italian American women in society. Through this organization, she promoted culture, leadership, and opportunity, strengthening the identity and visibility of a community that had often been underrepresented.

Her impact on Queens was especially significant. Ferraro became a role model for generations of young people, proving that those from working-class backgrounds could achieve extraordinary success. She helped elevate the image of the borough, bringing it into the national spotlight and showcasing its cultural and human richness.

But her legacy goes beyond politics. Geraldine Ferraro reshaped perceptions of women's roles in American society and strengthened the sense of pride within New York's Italian American community. Her example continues to inspire those who believe in the importance of civic engagement, representation, and inclusion. Ultimately, Ferraro was not just a pioneer, but a positive force who helped transform New York and Queens, leaving behind a lasting legacy of progress, opportunity, and hope.



**We the Italians**  
Editorial Staff



# HAPPY BIRTHDAY USA *from Italy*



## Unsung Italian heroes



### *Cesidio Perruzza,* **and the true story of the Rockefeller Center Christmas tree**

There are lights that, every year in the heart of winter, set New York aglow and speak to the entire world. They are the lights of the Rockefeller Center Christmas tree – towering, dazzling, alive with thousands of reflections that shine in the eyes of those who stop to look. It is one of the most famous, photographed, and shared images of the Big Apple. Yet behind those lights lies a story that doesn't shine in quite the same way – and perhaps for that very reason, it feels more real.

It is a story that smells of earth and hard work, of departures with no return, of dreams packed into a single suitcase. It is the story of Cesidio Perruzza.

Born in 1884 in San Donato Val di Comino, a small village tucked among the mountains in the southern edge of Lazio near the Abruzzo border, Cesidio learned early what life demanded. His schooling ended after the third grade, and soon came the time for difficult choices. In 1901, at just seventeen years old, he crossed the ocean. Like millions of Italians, he left everything behind – family, language, the star-filled winter skies above the mountains of San Donato that he loved so deeply. He carried with him only a few certainties: to work, to endure, to build.

## Manhattan

The America he found was not the land of dreams and promises. It was dust, construction sites, and blistered hands. Cesidio became a digger, a blaster – a man capable of shaping rock with strength and courage. They called him “Joe Blaster,” a name that says more than a thousand words. That young man from Ciociaria worked relentlessly, saved his money, and eventually managed to bring his young wife Gerarda – whom he had married just before leaving – to New York.

Then came the Great Depression. America slowed, faltered, collapsed – but on construction sites, something endured. Amid steel and dynamite, men from faraway lands kept working, kept building the city. Many of them were Italian. Among them was Cesidio.

In 1931, at the construction site of the RCA Building – the future symbol of Rockefeller Center – Christmas approached quietly. There were no decorations, no gifts. Only cold, exhaustion, uncertainty, and days that all felt the same. And yet, right there, an idea was born.

Cesidio looked at that empty stretch of cold concrete and imagined a sign – not something grand, not something perfect, but something human. He organized a collection among the workers to buy a tree, and together they planted it in the heart of the construction site. Then they decorated it with whatever they had: paper, electrical wires, tinfoil salvaged from detonators... small fragments of life turned into light.

That tree was more than just a tree. It was a quiet declaration. It said that even in poverty, beauty can be created; even in hardship, dignity can be found... even far from home, a sense of community can endure.



# HAPPY BIRTHDAY USA *from Italy*



## Unsung Italian heroes

The following year, they did it again. Two years later, in 1933, that gesture became a tradition: Rockefeller Center lit its first official tree. The lights multiplied, the spectacle grew, and the world watched – without knowing.

In 1999, Governor Mario Cuomo, the son of Italian immigrants, presented the Perruzza family with a photograph dated December 24, 1931. It shows workers lined up for their pay, faces worn, caps pulled low over their eyes. Among them are Cesidio and his brother Loreto. Beside those men stands a fragile, glowing tree. On the back, a handwritten note reads: “New York thanks the people of San Donato Val di Comino,” and just below it, “I am from Salerno.”

Perhaps that is the true meaning of it all. Because the story of the Rockefeller Center Christmas tree is not just a holiday tradition. It is the story of Italian immigration – of men and women who started with nothing, who built cities, who endured hardship, and who left their mark without asking for anything in return. And every year, when those lights are switched on, they illuminate more than just a tree. They illuminate a memory.

Within those lights, even today, there is a piece of Italy.



**Germana Valentini** is a television writer and author with expertise in the history of Italian emigration to the United States, as well as in the culture and culinary heritage of Italian American communities. In 2023, she wrote her first book, *Veniero, Stories of Italian Emigrants in New York*, and in 2024 she edited the Italian edition of *Dining with Joe DiMaggio*.



# HAPPY BIRTHDAY USA *from Italy*



## Unsung Italian heroes



### *Francis Spinola*

#### **From Suffolk County, Long Island to the Civil War. The remarkable rise of Francis B. Spinola**

Francis B. Spinola's story begins on the North Shore of Long Island and stretches across battlefields, legislative chambers, and the evolving identity of a young nation. Born in Suffolk County in 1821, Spinola would go on to become one of the most consequential figures of his era, carving out a legacy that blended public service, military leadership, and cultural identity in ways that still resonate today.

Long before he made history, Spinola was building a reputation in Brooklyn as a lawyer and rising civic leader. After being admitted to the bar in 1844, he quickly immersed himself in public life, serving multiple terms as an alderman. Even in these early years, he stood out not just for his ambition, but for his presence. He was known as a relentless debater, someone who approached politics with intensity and conviction. Yet, in a political era defined by personal grudges, Spinola earned a rare distinction: he had many political opponents, but no personal enemies.

That balance between toughness and respect would define his career.

## Long Island

Spinola's ascent through state politics was steady. He served in both the New York State Assembly and Senate, becoming a prominent Democratic voice during a time of national division. But his defining moment came with the outbreak of the American Civil War.

Despite having no formal military training, Spinola volunteered for service in 1862. What followed was remarkable. He rose to the rank of brigadier general, organizing and leading what became known as Spinola's Empire Brigade. His leadership was not the product of textbooks or academies, but instinct. Contemporaries described him as having a "genius for command," a natural ability to lead men in moments of chaos and consequence.

At the Battle of Wapping Heights in 1863, Spinola led Union forces into combat, sustaining injuries alongside his troops. It was a moment that encapsulated his leadership style: present, aggressive, and unflinching. More importantly, it revealed a deeper layer of his character. Though a loyal Democrat with strong partisan ties, Spinola placed country above party when it mattered most. In the crucible of war, his allegiance shifted fully to the preservation of the Union.

After the war, Spinola returned to public life with renewed stature. He reentered the State Assembly and became an influential figure in New York's political and business circles. As immigration reshaped the region, he also emerged as a key voice within the growing Italian American community, embodying a dual identity that was still taking shape in the 19th century.



# HAPPY BIRTHDAY USA *from Italy*



## Unsung Italian heroes

In 1887, Spinola reached another historic milestone when he was elected to the United States Congress, becoming the first Italian American to serve in that role. It was a breakthrough moment, not just for him, but for a community seeking representation and recognition in American public life.

Throughout his career, Spinola remained deeply connected to “the people.” He advocated for fairness in economic policy, pushed back against monopolistic power, and supported labor interests. His politics were combative, but his purpose was rooted in public service. Spinola’s life was cut short in 1891 when he died of pneumonia while still in office. He was laid to rest in Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn, leaving behind a legacy that defies simple categorization.

In many ways, Francis B. Spinola was ahead of his time, a bridge between identities, institutions, and ideals that continue to define leadership today.

His legacy lives on today thanks in part to the Italian American Heritage Society, which recently debuted the Francis B. Spinola Award for outstanding leadership. St. John’s basketball coach Rick Pitino, also a Long Island native, was presented with the inaugural award at center court of Madison Square Garden this year.



**Chris Vaccaro** is an Emmy Award-winning media executive, professor, and author. He is the founder/executive director of the Italian American Heritage Society of Long Island, a U.S. Press Officer of the Federation of Italian Baseball and Softball, an executive trustee of the Italian American Baseball Foundation, and the sports columnist for NIAF Ambassador Magazine.



# HAPPY BIRTHDAY USA *from Italy*



## Unsung Italian heroes



### *Carlo Barsotti*

#### **and the making of Italian American identity in New York**

Carlo Barsotti stands as one of the most consequential yet often overlooked figures in the shaping of Italian American identity at the turn of the twentieth century. At a time when Italian immigrants arrived in the United States with little more than hope and regional loyalties—often identifying more with their village than with a unified Italy—Barsotti emerged as both a practical guide and a cultural architect.

In my view, his significance lies not only in what he built, but in how he understood the needs of his people. Barsotti assisted Italian immigrants in the most immediate and tangible ways: helping them secure housing, find employment, and navigate an unfamiliar and often hostile system. In many respects, historians have labeled him a kind of “padrone,” a term used for labor brokers who connected immigrants with work. Yet to reduce him to that label alone misses the breadth of his vision. Barsotti was not merely facilitating survival; he was cultivating dignity, structure, and a sense of belonging.

## Manhattan

He recognized that economic stability was foundational. Through the founding of the Italian American Bank in New York, Barsotti created a financial institution that Italian immigrants could trust at a time when mainstream banks often excluded or exploited them. This was more than banking; it was empowerment. It allowed immigrants to save, invest, and participate in American economic life with a measure of security.

Equally transformative was his founding, in New York too, of *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, the most influential Italian-language newspaper in the United States. Through its pages, Barsotti gave voice to a community that had largely been silenced or misrepresented. The paper did not simply report news—it advocated, educated, and unified. It highlighted the social issues facing Italian immigrants, from labor exploitation to discrimination, and in doing so, it fostered awareness and collective identity.

Perhaps most striking is Barsotti’s deep sense of Italian nationalism. At a time when many immigrants had no cohesive national identity tied to Italy—having come from regions that predated unification—Barsotti actively promoted a shared Italian pride. He did this not only through journalism but also through the commissioning of public monuments in New York City honoring figures such as Giuseppe Garibaldi, Christopher Columbus, and Dante Alighieri. These monuments were both symbolic and strategic: they asserted the cultural legitimacy and historical contributions of Italians in a public American space. Yet they were not without controversy, as debates arose over representation, funding, and the political implications of these figures.



# HAPPY BIRTHDAY USA *from Italy*



## Unsung Italian heroes

Barsotti's life was not without hardship. His financial ventures eventually faltered, leading to bankruptcy, and *Il Progresso Italo-Americano* was ultimately purchased by Generoso Pope. Still, even in decline, the structures he created endured beyond him.

His philanthropic efforts and cultural leadership left a lasting imprint in New York. Barsotti helped transform a fragmented immigrant population into a more unified Italian American community, one that carried a sense of pride and identity well into the late twentieth century. He understood that survival was only the beginning —what his community needed was voice, visibility, and validation.

In that sense, Carlo Barsotti was not simply a facilitator of opportunity; he was a builder of identity. And that is why he deserves recognition not just as a historical figure, but as an unsung hero of the Italian American experience.



**Maria Fosco** joined the Calandra Italian American Institute/CUNY in 1986 and testified in the *Scelsa v. CUNY* civil rights case which recognized Italian Americans as a protected group. She helped found the Italian American Museum, where she serves as Vice President and Trustee. A recipient of Italy's Cavaliere and Ufficiale honors, Maria serves on several Italian American boards.



# HAPPY BIRTHDAY USA *from Italy*



## Unsung Italian heroes



### *Pietro Cinelli,* **the founder of Little Italy in the Bronx**

In the last 1890s, Italian immigrants moved from the crowded tenements in East Harlem, a densely populated Italian neighborhood at the time, to the Belmont section of the Bronx, to work on the green spaces known as the New York Botanical Garden and the Bronx Zoo. The area was not yet developed- a rural hinterland with space to plant gardens. A wealthy Italian immigrant named Pietro Cinelli bought land, developed apartment houses to accommodate the flux of recent Italian immigrants, and asked the Archdiocese of New York for an Italian church.

Pietro Cinelli was born in Pertegada, Italy, province of Udine in the Friuli Venezia Giulia region of Italy in 1863. He immigrated to the United States in 1894 and settled in the Bronx, in an area referred to as the Belmont neighborhood, which included Arthur Avenue. As he acquired real estate holdings and ownership of two motion picture theatres, he began the building of what would soon be referred to as Little Italy in the Bronx.

## The Bronx

The first theater originally opened as the Hughes and was later known as Cinelli's Italian American Savoy Theatre and still later, simply the Savoy Theatre. It served as a social anchor, a cultural institution for all ages. In 1981, continuing its mission to serve as a cultural beacon for the community, the Enrico Fermi Cultural Center, part of the Belmont Branch of the New York Public Library system replaced the Savoy Theatre. It serves as a neighborhood library, a cultural hub with an extensive collection of Italian language materials and archives which document the immigrant experience.

Preserving the Italian culture and language also meant securing a location for Italian immigrants to practice their faith. As more and more Italian immigrants took up residence in the Belmont neighborhood, a committee was formed, led by Mr. Pietro Cinelli to ask Father Daniel F.X. Burke, the Italian-speaking Pastor of St. Philip Neri to open a mission in Belmont.

Fr. Burke petitioned Archbishop Farley who granted the request. The first mass was celebrated on June 13, 1906, in a storefront on 187th Street. A basement church was built on in 1907, and the upper Church was built in 1917, dedicated to Our Lady of Mt. Carmel. Interesting fact, the church in East Harlem, which was built by Italian immigrants who worked at night to complete construction in 1887 was also dedicated to Our Lady of Mt. Carmel.



# HAPPY BIRTHDAY USA *from Italy*



## Unsung Italian heroes

Pietro Cinelli's life was not free of challenges and threats. In fact, he resisted threats from the Black Hand, a criminal organization that preceded the modern Mafia. Due to his resistance, his daughter Elisabetta was kidnapped in August of 1904 by the Black Hand. She was released several days later thanks to her father's tenacity.

After a life lived preserving Italian language, culture and traditions. Mr. Cinelli passed away in 1936. The Cinelli family coat of arms remains visible today on a building above Full Moon Pizzeria on Arthur Avenue.



**Anna Malafronte** was raised in The Bronx and lived in Italy where she attended High School and returned for a second master's degree. In 1999 she was hired at the Consulate General of Italy. Anna currently holds leadership positions at NIAF, the Italian American Forum, the Italian Welfare League, the Fieri Scholarship Fund and Our Lady of Mount Carmel School.



# HAPPY BIRTHDAY USA *from Italy*



## Unsung Italian heroes



*Dominic Altieri,*

**carving out a monumental role in  
a new world**

For over 125 years the traditions of southern Italy have profoundly shaped the character of Westchester County's architecture and landscape, most prominently witnessed in stucco building façades, public works of stone, and a wide spectrum of natural enhancements.

Consider the Hudson River town of Dobbs Ferry. In 1885 a mere six Italians resided there, while by 1920 the village population, which had more than doubled, was 60% southern Italian immigrants from the province of Avellino in Campania who had made the town their home. Many of the new arrivals settled on Main and Palisade Streets, where they re-created hilltop piazzas, gardens and stucco dwellings reminiscent of their former homeland. Houses made of clapboard were covered with stucco, stone retaining walls were constructed, fig trees were planted and backyard shrines erected.

## Westchester

An impressive reinterpretation of southern Italian vernacular architecture can be seen in the work of Dominic Altieri, a stonemason from the village of Bovino, who settled in Dobbs Ferry and infused the memories of his birthplace in the design and construction of his family's home—the "house of his dreams," according to his daughter, Val Coletti—on Main Street. It's an inviting four-story dwelling with a distinctive façade of stonework porticos and porches; town residents referred to it as "the Palazzo."

Shortly afterward, in 1923, Altieri would build a replica of the cathedral in the Avellino hilltop village of Calitri, using stone from area quarries. Our Lady of Pompeii Church still stands on Palisade Street, as does his "Palazzo" on Main, an enduring testament to the Altieri legacy.

Less than 15 miles north of Dobbs Ferry one can hear the refreshing sounds of waterfalls and enjoy the magnificence of the New Croton Dam, an area landmark. Far more than an extraordinary feat of civil engineering inspired by Roman ingenuity, it's a place layered with history and grandeur. Its story was largely shaped by the hands of Italian stonemasons who settled in the Hudson River towns of Dobbs Ferry, Ossining and Croton-on-Hudson (as well as neighborhoods in lower Manhattan and the Bronx).

Completed in 1906, the new dam and water transport system was designed to address the rapidly increasing demand for clean water in New York City. The dam stands 300 feet high; the 150-foot deep water system ran for 33-miles and required precise stone-cutting and placement to withstand the pressure of 19 billion gallons of water. Their construction took fourteen years of arduous and perilous labor. At the time of its completion, the dam was the tallest in the world!



# HAPPY BIRTHDAY USA *from Italy*



## Unsung Italian heroes

Westchester's New Croton Dam stands as not only a great feat of engineering but also a monument to the immigrant labor that made it possible. Although the over 2000 Italian masons who were the backbone of its construction were never formally credited, their work shaped the infrastructure that helped New York City thrive.

Today, their legacy lives on not just in historical records but in the enduring and imposing presence of the dam itself. In 1978, the New Croton Dam was officially added to the National Register of Historic Places, a lasting tribute to the skill, sacrifice, and endurance of those who built it.



**Carla Gambescia** is an Italian cultural "edu-tainer," award-winning author of *"La Dolce Vita University: An Unconventional Guide to Italian Culture from A to Z"*, travel journalist, lecturer and photographer. She has written about and toured all of Italy's regions on foot or by bicycle and speaks on myriad topics of Italian cultural interest throughout the US.



# HAPPY BIRTHDAY USA *from Italy*



## Unsung Italian heroes



*Paul A. Vallone,*

**an unsung hero of Queens' Italian American community**

New York City has long been shaped by the contributions of Italian Americans—builders, public servants, executives, and community leaders whose legacies often extend far beyond headlines. Among these unsung heroes is Paul A. Vallone, a man whose life embodied service, family, and deep pride in his Italian heritage.

A native New Yorker, Paul served for eight years as a New York City Council Member representing District 19 in Northeast Queens. As Chair of Economic Development, he worked tirelessly to improve the lives of his constituents, securing record-breaking funding for schools, parks, libraries, public safety, and community programs. His focus was never recognition, but results—ensuring families had stronger neighborhoods and better opportunities.

## Queens

Education was especially close to his heart. During his tenure, Paul helped secure 4,500 additional school seats, easing overcrowding and expanding access for thousands of students. Today, the Paul Vallone Community Campus, home to PS 169 and Bell Academy, stands as a lasting tribute to his commitment to education and future generations.

His impact can be seen throughout Northeast Queens. The Paul A. Vallone Animal Care Center of NYC reflects his compassion for animals and his advocacy for shelters in every borough. “Paul A. Vallone Way” at Bowne Park honors his dedication to parks and quality of life. He was also instrumental in advancing the Veterans Memorial Plaza at Francis Lewis Park, a new facility for the Alley Pond Environmental Center, and the Center for the Women of New York at Fort Totten.

Paul’s public service continued as Deputy Commissioner of the NYC Department of Veterans’ Services. There, he led the Vallone Veterans Resource Center Initiative, ensuring veterans and their families had access to free, in-person benefits assistance, quietly making a meaningful difference in their lives. Having been raised in Queens myself, I had the pleasure of seeing Paul within the community, where his presence was always felt. He carried a positive, genuine, and uplifting aura that reflected his authentic commitment to the people he served.

Beyond public life, Paul was a devoted husband to Anna-Marie and loving father to Catena, Lea and Charlie. He was a soccer coach, drummer, and someone who embraced life with warmth and enthusiasm, especially during the Christmas season, which he celebrated with deep faith and joy. His guiding principle—“God, Country, Family”—passed down from his father, the Honorable Peter Vallone Sr., remained central to all he did.



# HAPPY BIRTHDAY USA *from Italy*



## Unsung Italian heroes

Paul was deeply proud of his Italian heritage. He was a member of the Order Sons of Italy and the Borgetto Society, and a recipient of the Man of the Year Award from Italian Charities of America. In 2015, he helped revive the annual Columbus Day Italian Heritage Celebration at City Hall, honoring Italian American contributions to New York City. He often said he was a proud Italian American because of the courage of his ancestors from Sicily (Caltanissetta, Canicattì, Reisi, and Prizzi) who helped shape his path.

Paul A. Vallone was gone too soon, yet his impact endures in Queens and across New York City. Though he never sought the spotlight, his legacy as a public servant, community builder, and proud Italian American stands as a lasting example of dedication and heart. In the story of New York's Italian American community, he remains a true unsung hero whose life will continue to inspire generations.



**Silvia Rosselli Davi** is the author of *Renaissance Minds*, an educational blog and podcast focused on celebrating Italian and Italian American culture, in partnership with the NIAF and the Italian American Heritage Society of Long Island, where she highlights the origin, significance and impact of Italian culture globally.