

HAPPY BIRTHDAY USA *from Italy*

● Italy's role
in America's greatness



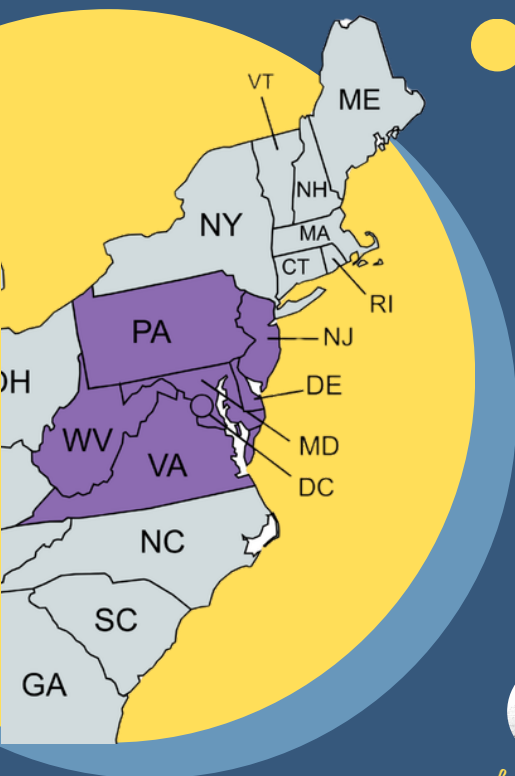
Rocco Petrone



Filippo Mazzei



John Basilone



● Unsung Italian heroes (New England)



Vincent A. Bifferato Sr.



Giuseppe Mario Bellanca



Dominic "Mimi" DiPietro



Rosa Ponselle



Joseph J. Granato



Pietro Di Donato



Pasquale de Nisco



Mario Lanza



Joey Giardello



Irma D'Ascenzo



Bruno Sammartino



Charles A. Sonma



Carlo Bellini



Luigi Persico



John Sirica



Catterina DeCarlo Nania



Thoney Pietro



Manny Alfano

HAPPY BIRTHDAY ITALY *from the US*



Culture



Tourism



Universities and Academia

250 ^{★ ★ ★} 80
USA YEARS ITALY YEARS



We the Italians

TWO ANNIVERSARIES ONE HEART

JUNE 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*



Culture



Roberto Sgalla

The United States and the Cultural Development of the Italian Republic

Over the past eighty years, Italian culture has undergone a profound transformation, also thanks to its ongoing dialogue with the United States. When we speak of culture, we are not referring only to artistic productions or forms of entertainment, but to the complex and dynamic set of knowledge, values, beliefs, habits, languages, and ways of thinking that define how a society understands itself and the world around it. In this sense, the relationship with American culture has played an important role in shaping the evolution of contemporary Italian society.

One of the most significant aspects concerns the way the individual is perceived within society. Postwar Italy was still strongly tied to traditional and rural cultural models, in which social hierarchies and formal conventions carried considerable weight. Exposure to American culture helped spread a vision more centered on the individual, personal responsibility, and the possibility of independently shaping one's own life path. This perspective did not replace the communal dimension that is characteristic of Italian culture, but it introduced a different balance between collective belonging and personal freedom.

An important contribution also came from the world of ideas and literature. In the years following World War II, American literature profoundly influenced Italian culture and writing, serving as a model of modernity, stylistic freedom, and anti-fascism. It shaped the narrative approach of Italian authors and introduced the imagery of the United States, first as a literary myth and later as a social reality.

Prominent intellectuals such as Elio Vittorini, Cesare Pavese, and Fernanda Pivano played a significant role in promoting authors such as Ernest Hemingway, John Steinbeck, and John Dos Passos. Their concise, raw, and direct prose inspired Italian Neorealist writers. Beginning in the 1950s and 1960s, the Italian cultural landscape experienced another profound shift through the translation and

promotion of groundbreaking figures such as Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, and Edgar Lee Masters, who helped spread themes of youth rebellion, travel, and the rejection of traditional values.

New storytelling models and new ways of interpreting reality found their way into Italy through a rich and reciprocal intellectual exchange.

The translation and circulation of ideas undoubtedly encouraged Italian audiences to engage with themes such as the relationship between the individual and the community, the meaning of identity, the moral dimension of personal choices, and the complexity of modern life. In this sense, literature represented one of the deepest channels of cultural exchange between the two countries.

American influence also affected the way cultural pluralism was understood. U.S. society historically developed as a mosaic of different identities, and this experience helped foster in Italy a greater familiarity with the idea that a community can be composed of diverse groups that coexist and engage in dialogue. Over time, this perspective enriched Italian cultural debate, encouraging reflection on the relationship between tradition and change, national identity and international openness.

According to a famous definition, the United States is "a nation of immigrants." The concept of nation, understood as a community of belonging and used in place of terms such as land or country, reflects the intention to integrate newcomers into American society and involve them in its decisions and choices, rather than merely offering them a destination where they can pursue their own American Dream, whether economic, religious, or political.

Another important element concerns the ethic of personal responsibility. American culture is deeply rooted in the belief that individuals are the



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protagonists of their own choices and responsible for their own destinies. In the Italian context, historically shaped by strong social and family structures, this approach contributed to a greater focus on the personal dimension of decision-making and on active participation in social life.

The cultural language of contemporary Italy also reflects this dialogue. It is not simply a matter of English words entering everyday vocabulary, but of a deeper transformation in ways of communicating and thinking. Many concepts related to social life, visions of the future, and attitudes toward change have been reinterpreted through continuous engagement with the English-speaking world, particularly the United States.

Alongside these deeper cultural dimensions, everyday life has also been influenced by this exchange. Over the decades, Italian society has developed a greater focus on quality of life, informal social interaction, and the value of leisure time. This aspect represents only one part of the broader cultural transformation that has characterized contemporary Italy, but it illustrates how ideas and habits can evolve through contact between different societies. Naturally, American influence has never erased the fundamental characteristics of Italian culture. The central role of the family, the strong connection to local traditions, and the richness of the national cultural heritage remain defining features of Italian society.

Looking back over the last eighty years, the cultural relationship between Italy and the United States appears as a continuous process of exchange. Through ideas, literature, language, and social habits, the United States has introduced new stimuli that Italy has successfully reinterpreted according to its own sensibilities.

Recognizing this contribution does not mean abandoning one's own traditions, but understanding that cultures grow precisely through encounter and dialogue. In this sense, engagement with American culture has accompanied the evolution of contemporary Italy, helping it become a more open, self-aware society capable of looking beyond its own borders.

Roberto Sgalla has served as Director of the Centro Studi Americani since January 1, 2021. During his career in the Italian National Police, he led the Office of External Relations and Ceremonial Affairs of the Department of Public Security; the Traffic Police Service; the National Observatory on Sporting Events; the Advanced Police School; and the Central Directorate for Specialized Units of the Italian National Police.



HAPPY BIRTHDAY ITALY *from the US*

Tourism



Edoardo Colombo

How America helped Italy become a more global and innovative destination

Over eighty years, American influence has contributed to transforming the way Italy welcomes visitors, organizes its services, adopts new technologies and promotes itself to the world. An influence that is cultural and conceptual, not only commercial.

In Italy we call this sector "turismo", a word that looks at the phenomenon from the demand side, from the perspective of the traveler. In America it is called the "hospitality and experience industry": a definition that looks at the same phenomenon from the supply side, from the perspective of those who welcome, and that treats hospitality as a service to be designed, measured and improved.

That vision reached Italy through hotel chains and franchising, digital platforms, business models and the millions of American tourists who arrived with precise expectations. The result is a country that learned to combine its extraordinary cultural offer with a more professional and more self-aware capacity for hospitality.

That transformation began with the travelers themselves. After the Second World War, American tourists arrived in Italy respectful of our history and curious to experience it. They also brought with them the habits of a country more advanced in terms of services: guaranteed reservations, card payments, multilingual communication, reliability standards that were not yet the norm in Italy.

Those travelers played an important role as innovation pollinators, transmitting the habits they looked for wherever they went, in hotel chains and in services, and so the Italian tourism industry learned to adapt.

Italy's extraordinary offer deserved an infrastructure equal to its quality, and it was foreign demand that made this clear.

The American hotel brands that arrived in Italy in the postwar years brought a new managerial culture and, with it, technologies that Italians had not yet encountered in everyday life. Hilton, Sheraton, Marriott and Hyatt introduced training systems, quality control, loyalty programs and revenue management. For many Italians of that era, walking into one of those hotels meant experiencing innovation firsthand: air conditioning, televisions with remote controls, microwave ovens, ice machines in the corridors. These were technologies already normal in America, and entirely new in Italy. The Rome Cavalieri, opened by Conrad Hilton in 1963 on Monte Mario, is the best-known symbol of that encounter: international standards and Italian identity proved to be allies, not rivals.

Italian hospitality absorbed the American model and reworked it, producing something original: managerial competence combined with the quality and warmth of Italian welcoming. This is the standard that distinguishes the best Italian hotels and restaurants in the world today.

The most underappreciated contribution to Italian tourism came from the millions of Italian Americans who, generation after generation, kept the image of Italy alive in American homes and neighborhoods, becoming in practice a spontaneous and unpaid tourism promotion network. Every Italian restaurant opened in New York or Chicago, every Sunday celebration with the recipes of a distant village, built over time a demand for Italy that no advertising campaign could have generated. Lidia Bastianich embodies this story better than anyone: born in Pola, arrived in New York as a twelve-year-old refugee, she became the foremost ambassador of Italian regional cuisine in the United States. Her son Joe, known to Italian audiences as a MasterChef judge, carried that same passion into the world of restaurants and wine. Her daughter Tanya founded Esperienze I



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taliane, a travel agency born directly from the requests of Lidia's television audience, people who had watched her cook dishes from Friuli and Puglia for years and now wanted to visit the places her mother had cooked from. A story that runs from forced emigration to cultural promotion, and that measures how much the Italian-American community has given back to Italy over time.

American influence also reached food culture, sometimes through contrast. When McDonald's opened on the Piazza di Spagna in Rome in 1986, the Italian reaction gave birth to the Slow Food movement, founded by the recently departed Carlo Petrini, one of the most influential ideas to emerge from Italy in the twentieth century. The presence of American fast food pushed Italy to define the value of its own gastronomic tradition with greater precision, and the challenge produced the response.

Then came the digital revolution. Venere.com, founded in Rome in the 1990s, was among the first European platforms for online hotel booking. When Expedia acquired it in 2008, an Italian startup had proven it could identify a global opportunity ahead of others, to the point of becoming a strategic acquisition for the largest American travel technology company in the world. Italian creativity and American scale produced a result that neither would have reached alone.

The most radical reinvention of the sector came from Airbnb. The story is well known: San Francisco, 2007, two penniless designers, three air mattresses and an idea that almost everyone considered unworkable. When Brian Chesky and Joe Gebbia pitched the project to investors, they were rejected more than a dozen times. Who would open their home to a stranger? Who would pay by credit card for a bed in someone else's apartment, with no front desk and no guarantees? To survive, the founders sold collectible cereal boxes dedicated to the 2008 presidential election,

"Obama O's" and "Cap'n McCain's", raising thirty thousand dollars to carry on. It was that idea that convinced Paul Graham, founder of Y Combinator, the most influential startup accelerator in Silicon Valley, to bet on them: if they had been capable of funding themselves that way, they would find a way to succeed in any situation.

The challenge was how to build trust between strangers, and Airbnb designed a system based on three mechanisms. The first was the public review, bilateral and permanent: every guest and every host accumulates a reputation visible to all, which follows them into every future transaction. The second was identity verification: name, email, phone number, identity document, elements that reduce anonymity and increase accountability. The third was the payment architecture: the credit card is charged at booking, but the money is transferred to the host only twenty-four hours after check-in.

For Italy, a country accustomed to cash and a very personal culture of hospitality, this was a cultural transformation as much as a commercial one. By 2023, short-term rentals accounted for nearly thirty percent of all tourist overnight stays in the country. A retired schoolteacher in Trastevere, a farmer in Puglia with a trullo, a family in Palermo with a spare apartment, all entered a global market that previously required capital, infrastructure and professional licenses.

That same opening of lesser-known Italy to new visitors finds its most emotional expression in Roots Tourism. Americans reconstructing their Italian ancestry through genealogy services and DNA tests seek out villages, parish archives, family names. The Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs launched the Year of Italian Roots in 2024, and demand continues to grow. These travelers reach places no guidebook mentions, bring economic resources to inland areas and help slow the exodus from small communities. The great emigration of the nineteenth century,



which brought millions of Italians to America in search of a future, today produces a reverse flow of descendants returning to find their origins.

The next chapter is already underway. Artificial intelligence is changing the way travelers search, choose and experience a destination, and once again the most relevant technologies are coming from the United States. A traveler can today plan a trip to Italy by conversing with a digital assistant that understands their preferences and suggests personalized itineraries. On arrival, they find services that speak their language in real time. The operator welcoming them uses predictive systems to anticipate demand, optimize pricing and reduce waste. The experience becomes more fluid for those who travel and more efficient for those who welcome. Italy finds itself in the same position as always: a country with an extraordinary offer that needs to learn to use new tools to express it.

Every American impulse has fertilized something Italian, producing each time something that neither country could have created alone. Eighty years of shared history are the best reason to believe it will happen again. Thank you, America, for helping Italy turn its greatest tradition into its greatest skill.

Edoardo Colombo. *Expert in digital transformation for tourism across both public administration and private enterprises. President of Turismi.ai, the Italian Association for Artificial Intelligence in Tourism. Member of the Advisory Board of the European Commission's European Capital of Smart Tourism initiative and of the Smart Tourism Task Force of the Smart Cities Council. Author of the books "Più Turismo per Tutti?" (with Paolo Verri) and "Turismo MegaTrend."*



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Universities and Academia



Paola Sartorio

The academic bond that has linked Italy and the United States for 80 years

Over the past eighty years, Italy's academic and university system has undergone a profound transformation, evolving from a period of postwar reconstruction into a fully integrated participant in global research and higher education networks. Throughout this journey, the United States has played a decisive role – not only through economic support, but also by providing models, methodologies, and international partnerships that helped shape modern Italian academia.

In the aftermath of World War II, Italy faced the challenge of rebuilding not only its infrastructure and institutions, but also its educational system. Universities, which had experienced years of isolation, needed to reconnect with the international community and update their programs, teaching methods, and research tools. The United States became a key partner in this effort, encouraging academic exchanges and introducing organizational and educational approaches that would gradually influence Italian higher education.

One of the most important instruments of this cooperation has been the Fulbright Program, established in Italy in 1948. Over the decades, the program has enabled thousands of Italian students, professors, and researchers to study and work in the United States, giving them access to some of the world's most dynamic and innovative academic environments. At the same time, numerous American scholars have conducted research and taught in Italy, creating an ongoing dialogue between the two educational systems.

The impact of these exchanges has been significant. On an individual level, many Italian academics gained exposure to interdisciplinary approaches, advanced methodologies, and research environments characterized by greater flexibility and resources. Upon returning to Italy, they helped modernize teaching and research practices, introducing innovations that gradually spread across disciplines ranging from social sciences and engineering to medicine.

At the institutional level, American influence encouraged the development of a more open and competitive academic system. Italian universities progressively adopted practices such as peer review, publication in international journals, and more transparent merit-based evaluation criteria. While the transition was not without challenges, it helped align Italy with international standards of research excellence. Scientific collaboration has been another crucial area of growth. In recent decades, joint projects between Italian and American universities have expanded significantly. Fields such as physics, biomedical sciences, engineering, and environmental studies have benefited from these partnerships, which have provided access to advanced infrastructure and global research networks. In many cases, Italian researchers have participated in major international initiatives, increasing both the visibility and competitiveness of Italy's academic community.

The presence of American institutions, foundations, and universities in Italy has also had a substantial impact. Scholarship programs, endowed chairs, and institutional partnerships have contributed to making Italian universities more international and attractive. Today, thousands of Italian students choose to continue their education in the United States each year, while a growing number of American students pursue academic programs in Italy, further strengthening this two-way exchange.

American influence has also extended to the broader role of universities within society. The concept of a university connected to industry, capable of generating innovation and transferring knowledge to the wider economy, has gradually gained ground in Italy. In recent years, incubators, start-ups, spin-offs, and university-business partnerships have become increasingly common, marking a significant shift from traditional models of higher education.



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Naturally, this relationship has never been one-sided. Italy has offered the United States important contributions in culture, scholarship, and academic tradition. Nevertheless, there is little doubt that American support has been a powerful catalyst for the internationalization and modernization of Italy's university system.

Today, in an increasingly competitive global environment, this partnership remains strategically important. The challenges posed by scientific research, digital transformation, and innovation require cooperation, shared expertise, and a common vision. In this context, the academic relationship between Italy and the United States is not merely a legacy of the past – it is an essential resource for the future.

Paola Sartorio has over 30 years of experience in international education, academic cooperation, and global affairs. Since 2013, she has served as Executive Director of the U.S.-Italy Fulbright Commission. A former university professor and United Nations official, she has worked with FAO, IFAD, UNFIP, and the UN Secretariat. Fluent in five languages, she holds a degree in Political Science and International Relations.



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USA *from Italy*

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Unsung Italian heroes



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Italy's role in America's greatness



Rocco Petrone, **the Italian American who helped put humanity on the Moon and continues to inspire future missions**

When telling the story of the Moon landing, the names most often remembered are those of the astronauts who walked on the lunar surface on July 20, 1969: Neil Armstrong, Buzz Aldrin, and Michael Collins. Yet behind that moment, which forever changed the course of human history, stood thousands of people. Among them, one figure played a decisive role in turning an apparently impossible dream into reality: Rocco Anthony Petrone.

His story represents one of the most significant examples of the contribution Italians and Italian Americans have made to the development of the United States. It is a story that brings together immigration, talent, determination, technical expertise, and a spirit of service. It is also a story that remains highly relevant today as NASA prepares to return to the Moon through the Artemis program.

Rocco Petrone was born on March 31, 1926, in Amsterdam, New York. His father came from Sasso di Castalda, a small town in the Italian region of Basilicata, while his mother was born into an Italian immigrant family in the United States. Like millions of Italian families, the Petrones brought with them deeply rooted values: a strong work ethic, respect for education, discipline, family solidarity, and the belief that each generation should create better opportunities for the next.

From an early age, Rocco displayed exceptional abilities. He earned an appointment to the prestigious United States Military Academy at West Point, one of the most selective institutions in the country. He graduated with a degree in engineering and began a military career that allowed him to develop extraordinary technical and organizational skills. He later earned a master's degree from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, further strengthening the scientific background that would prove essential in the years ahead.

During the 1960s, the United States was engaged in one of the most ambitious challenges in its history. Following President John F. Kennedy's famous 1961 speech, the nation committed itself to landing a man on the Moon and returning him safely to Earth before the end of the decade. The goal seemed almost unattainable. No one had ever attempted anything like it, and much of the necessary technology had yet to be invented. It was in this environment that Rocco Petrone's talent emerged.

Within NASA, he assumed positions of increasing responsibility until he became Director of Launch Operations for the Apollo program at the Kennedy Space Center in Florida. His task was enormous: coordinating the preparation and launch of the Saturn V, the most powerful rocket ever built at that time.

The Saturn V was an unprecedented technological marvel. Standing more than 360 feet tall and consisting of millions of components, it was the product of the work of hundreds of thousands of people. Every system had to function perfectly. A single mistake could jeopardize the mission and endanger the lives of the astronauts.

Petrone was the man responsible for making sure everything worked.

His leadership became legendary. He was known for his technical expertise, his ability to make rapid decisions, and his relentless attention to detail. He demanded the highest standards from himself and from those around him. Anyone who



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worked with him knew that nothing was left to chance.

His reputation was built on a rare combination of military discipline and engineering excellence. This blend proved essential during the most intense years of the Apollo program, when every phase required absolute coordination among research centers, private contractors, technicians, scientists, and astronauts.

When the Saturn V carrying Apollo 11 lifted off from Cape Kennedy on July 16, 1969, years of preparation stood behind that achievement, and Rocco Petrone's work was at the center of it. For millions of people around the world, it was an extraordinary spectacle. For him, it represented the culmination of years of planning, testing, simulations, and critical decisions.

Four days later, Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin would become the first human beings to walk on the Moon. Yet without a successful launch and without the vast organizational effort coordinated by Petrone, that historic moment would never have happened.

For this reason, many historians of space exploration consider Rocco Petrone one of the key figures of the entire Apollo program.

His importance extended well beyond Apollo 11. He continued to hold senior leadership positions within NASA, contributing to subsequent missions and to the broader evolution of the American space program. His expertise was so highly valued that he was entrusted with a number of strategic responsibilities at the highest levels of the agency.

His story also represents an important chapter in the history of Italians in America. Although born in the United States, Petrone always maintained a strong connection to his heritage. His life demonstrates how the contributions of Italian immigrants and their descendants have reached every corner of American society, from culture and business to politics, science, and technology.

Public attention often focuses on artists, athletes, or entrepreneurs of Italian heritage who achieved success in America. Rocco Petrone belongs to another category of individuals who may be less well known to the general public but were essential to understanding the depth of the Italian contribution to American scientific and technological progress.

His career demonstrates how the values passed down through Italian families can produce extraordinary achievements when combined with opportunity, education, and meritocracy. More than half a century after Apollo 11, his example continues to inspire.

Today, NASA is engaged in a new chapter of lunar exploration through the Artemis program. The goal is not simply to return to the Moon, but to establish a sustainable human presence there, develop new technologies, and prepare future missions to Mars.

In many respects, Artemis represents an even greater challenge than the one faced during the 1960s. While Apollo was designed to reach the Moon and return to Earth, Artemis aims to build long-term infrastructure, advanced transportation systems, lunar habitats, and international partnerships on a scale never seen before.

Yet despite the enormous technological differences, a direct connection links Apollo and Artemis.

The organizational expertise, commitment to safety, ability to manage extraordinarily complex systems, and belief that ambitious goals can be achieved through teamwork are the same principles that guided Rocco Petrone throughout his career.

Many engineers and managers involved in today's missions continue to study the lessons learned during the Apollo era. The quality-control procedures, risk-management methods, and mission-preparation practices developed during those years remain valuable references today.



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In this sense, Petrone's legacy does not belong only to the past. It lives on in the missions of the present and the future.

When the next astronauts return to the lunar surface through Artemis, they will carry with them the technical, organizational, and cultural legacy built by people like Rocco Petrone. Every new generation of explorers stands upon the foundations created by those who came before. For Italy, Petrone's story is a particular source of pride. It serves as a reminder that the Italian contribution to America's great space adventure was not marginal, but central. Through the talent of men and women of Italian heritage, Italy participated indirectly in one of the greatest achievements in human history.

His life also demonstrates how different identities can coexist and enrich one another. Petrone was fully American and deeply connected to his Italian roots. In him, two worlds came together—two nations that throughout the twentieth century developed a special relationship based on friendship, cooperation, and continuous exchange.

The Moon remains one of the most powerful symbols of humanity's ability to overcome its limitations. Behind that symbol stand both famous names and lesser-known figures. Among the latter, Rocco Petrone occupies a place of extraordinary importance.

The son of Italian immigrants who helped orchestrate the launch of Apollo 11 remains a remarkable example of what can be achieved through competence, dedication, and vision. His legacy continues to look toward the sky, accompanying humanity in its newest challenges of space exploration and reminding us that the greatest accomplishments are always the result of many people working together toward a common goal.



Renato Cantore, an Italian journalist and author, has devoted much of his research to Rocco Petrone, the NASA manager of Italian heritage who oversaw the launch of Apollo 11. He wrote the biographies *"La tigre e la Luna"* (2009) and *"Dalla Terra alla Luna. Rocco Petrone, l'italiano dell'Apollo 11"* (2019), which inspired the documentary *"Rocco Petrone, l'italiano dell'Apollo 11"*, for which he also wrote the screenplay.



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Filippo Mazzei,
**the Tuscan behind America's
revolutionary generation**

In 2026, the United States marks the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. This milestone offers an opportunity not only to celebrate the leading figures of the American Revolution, but also to rediscover those individuals who helped shape the cultural and intellectual foundations upon which the new nation was built. Among them, one of the most significant—and yet one of the least known to the general public—is Filippo Mazzei.

If Thomas Jefferson was the principal author of the Declaration of Independence, Benjamin Franklin its great diplomat, and George Washington the military leader who guided the struggle for freedom, Mazzei represented something different but no less important: a bridge between Europe and America, between Enlightenment thought and the emerging constitutional experience of the United States, between the Italian civic tradition and the construction of the first great modern democracy.

Born in 1730 in Poggio a Caiano, Tuscany, Mazzei was a physician, merchant, agronomist, traveler, writer, and political thinker. Above all, he was a genuine citizen of the eighteenth-century world. His life unfolded across Italy, the Ottoman

Empire, England, France, and America, following the geography of ideas that characterized the Age of Enlightenment. Long before a true Atlantic community existed, Mazzei embodied its spirit, convinced that liberty, knowledge, and progress knew no borders.

His encounter with Benjamin Franklin in London proved to be one of the defining moments of his life. Franklin immediately recognized in him a man of intelligence, curiosity, and remarkable organizational ability. Through that relationship, Mazzei began to see the American colonies as a place where the ideals of liberty might be translated into concrete political institutions. When he arrived in Virginia in 1773, his meeting with Thomas Jefferson altered the course of his life and, in some measure, the course of American history. A deep friendship emerged between the two men, founded upon an extraordinary intellectual affinity. Jefferson saw in the Tuscan an enlightened European capable of grasping the universal significance of the American experiment. Mazzei, in turn, recognized in the future President one of the most authoritative interpreters of the struggle for freedom then unfolding in the colonies.

Their friendship extended far beyond personal affection. They shared agricultural projects, scientific interests, cultural passions, and above all a common political vision. Both believed that government should rest upon the consent of the governed, that power should be limited and accountable, and that liberty was the foundation of human dignity. Their correspondence and conversations reveal an ongoing exchange of ideas that helped shape the political vocabulary of the American Revolution.

There was also a lesser-known but highly significant dimension to their relationship: wine. Mazzei was deeply rooted in the agricultural culture of Tuscany and regarded viticulture not merely as an economic activity, but as an



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expression of European civilization itself. Jefferson shared that sensibility. Through Mazzei, the future President deepened his knowledge of Italian viticulture and developed a particular appreciation for Vino Nobile di Montepulciano, which he would later remember among the finest wines of Europe.

This was about far more than personal taste. For Jefferson, as for Mazzei, wine represented an element of the culture of liberty: the product of territories, communities, traditions, and accumulated knowledge that reflected the highest achievements of civil society. In this sense, Vino Nobile became a symbol of a deeper exchange between Tuscany and America, between European culture and the political project of the new Republic. Through Mazzei, Jefferson discovered not merely a wine, but a vision of public life grounded in the quality of social relations, the value of local communities, and the conviction that liberty and culture must advance together.

It is no coincidence that many scholars have noted the affinity between certain formulations employed by Mazzei and the principles later enshrined in the Declaration of Independence. In 1774, the Tuscan patriot wrote that all men are by nature equally free and independent. This statement encapsulated one of the core principles of European Enlightenment political thought and would find a powerful echo in the Declaration's famous assertion that all men are created equal.

It would, of course, be inaccurate to attribute authorship of the Declaration to Mazzei. Jefferson remains the principal architect of that document, which transformed the course of world history. Yet it would be equally misleading to ignore the role that the intellectual dialogue between the two men played in shaping a shared political language. Great ideas rarely emerge in isolation. More often, they are born through encounters, exchanges, and cultural cross-fertilization. In this sense, Mazzei was one of the protagonists of the transatlantic laboratory in which many of the fundamental categories of modern constitutionalism took shape.

During the War of Independence, his contribution was not merely intellectual. He undertook diplomatic missions, sought European support for the American cause, facilitated political and commercial contacts, and helped strengthen relations between the New World and the Old. In every respect, he served as one of the principal intermediaries between the American Revolution and European public opinion.

Yet Mazzei's significance extends well beyond his contribution to independence itself. What makes his figure particularly important is his ability to interpret the birth of the United States as a universal event. He understood that the American Revolution was not simply about thirteen colonies separating from Great Britain. It represented the affirmation of a new form of political community founded upon individual liberty, civil equality, representative government, and limited power.

From this perspective, Mazzei became one of the earliest interpreters of the universal meaning of the American experiment. Through his writings and public advocacy, he helped spread knowledge of American institutions throughout Europe and presented the new Republic as a political model worthy of careful attention. Long before the United States emerged as a global power, many Europeans first encountered the American experience through Mazzei's work.

His story also demonstrates how modern constitutionalism emerged from the encounter of different cultures. The American Revolution was not solely an American phenomenon. It was also the product of the circulation of people, ideas, books, experiences, and relationships linking both sides of the Atlantic. In that process, Italy made a contribution that is too often overlooked. Filippo Mazzei was perhaps its most distinguished representative.

He was not a jurist, nor did he develop a systematic constitutional theory. Yet he helped disseminate the principles of liberty, human dignity, civil equality, and limited



HAPPY BIRTHDAY USA *from Italy*



Italy's role in America's greatness

government that remain at the core of contemporary constitutional democracies. His importance lies less in constructing a formal doctrine than in helping ideas and values circulate until they became a shared political inheritance.

The historical significance of Filippo Mazzei has not remained confined to scholarly circles. The United States itself has progressively recognized the contribution of the Tuscan patriot to the formation of American political culture. A particularly significant acknowledgment came on August 5, 1994, when Congress approved House Joint Resolution 175, which became Public Law 103-371 and established Italian-American Heritage and Culture Month. In its introductory "Whereas" clauses, Congress explicitly recognized that the famous phrase in the Declaration of Independence stating that "all men are created equal" had been inspired by the writings of the Italian immigrant and patriot Filippo Mazzei.

This recognition followed earlier commemorations marking the 250th anniversary of Mazzei's birth in 1980. On that occasion, the United States Postal Service issued the commemorative airmail stamp "Philip Mazzei – Patriot Remembered," while Italy issued a corresponding commemorative stamp of its own. These were more than philatelic tributes. Together, they symbolically acknowledged Mazzei's role as one of the earliest and most influential cultural mediators between the two sides of the Atlantic.

If Jefferson represents the political face of the Declaration of Independence and Franklin its diplomatic and scientific dimension, Mazzei embodies its transatlantic character. He was the conduit through which ideas, experiences, values, and aspirations crossed the ocean and helped forge a common language of liberty. Though not a jurist, he helped create the intellectual climate in which modern constitutionalism could find one of its highest expressions.

Two hundred and fifty years after 1776, remembering Filippo Mazzei means remembering that the birth of the United States was also the product of a dialogue among different cultures and civilizations. Among the voices that helped shape that dialogue was that of a Tuscan Italian who made liberty, rights, and human dignity the foundation of a universal vision of politics. For this reason, Filippo Mazzei deserves to be remembered as one of the great pioneers of the relationship between Italy and the United States: a figure too often overlooked in the history of the American Revolution, yet one of the earliest interpreters of the community of values that continues to bind these two great democracies today.



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HAPPY BIRTHDAY USA *from Italy*



Italy's role in America's greatness



John Basilone,

A hero for America, a source of pride for Italian Americans

As Host Nation Community Relations Specialist for U.S. Army Garrison Italy, I often reflect on the individuals who embody the deep bond between the United States and Italy. Among them, John Basilone holds a unique place. Born in 1917 in Buffalo, New York, to Italian immigrant parents, Basilone earned the Medal of Honor for his heroic actions at Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands on October 24–25, 1942. During the battle, he kept machine-gun positions operational, repaired weapons under enemy fire, and carried ammunition through hostile lines. At Iwo Jima in February 1945, he destroyed an enemy bunker, assisted a disabled tank trapped in a minefield, led the assault forward, and was ultimately killed in action. His sacrifice was recognized posthumously with the Navy Cross in 1948.

John Basilone became one of the greatest military heroes in American history and a powerful symbol for the Italian American community during one of the most difficult periods it ever faced. The son of Salvatore Basilone, who emigrated from Colle Sannita in the province of Benevento, and Dora Pagliaroli, whose family came from Abruzzo, he was raised with values deeply rooted in Italian culture: family, hard work, faith, and a strong sense of duty. Those principles guided him throughout his life and found their highest expression on the battlefield.

Following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, hundreds of thousands of Italians living in the United States suddenly found themselves under suspicion. Many were classified as “enemy aliens,” subjected to travel restrictions, government monitoring, and discrimination. Although Italian Americans were already deeply integrated into American society, the war against Fascist Italy generated fear and prejudice that affected entire communities.

In that environment, Basilone’s example carried enormous significance. His actions demonstrated beyond question that Americans of Italian descent were willing to sacrifice their lives for the United States just as readily as any other citizens. His story helped transform public perceptions of Italian Americans, providing a powerful symbol of loyalty, patriotism, and courage.

After Guadalcanal, Basilone became a national celebrity. The U.S. government brought him home to participate in War Bond drives, where he spoke before thousands of Americans and helped raise millions of dollars to support the war effort. Despite the recognition and opportunities that accompanied his fame, he declined assignments far from combat. He believed his place was alongside the Marines fighting in the Pacific and insisted on returning to the front lines.

In addition to the Medal of Honor and the Navy Cross, Basilone received numerous other decorations, including the Purple Heart, the Presidential Unit Citation, and the Asiatic-Pacific Campaign Medal. He remains the only enlisted Marine of World War II to receive both the Medal of Honor and the Navy Cross for actions in separate battles.



HAPPY BIRTHDAY USA *from Italy*



Italy's role in America's greatness

His legacy endures today. Schools, streets, parks, and monuments across the United States bear his name. For Italian Americans, Basilone represents far more than a military hero. He symbolizes the vital contribution made by the Italian American community to the building and defense of the United States. His courage helped erase stereotypes and suspicions, creating a story of pride and redemption that continues to inspire new generations of both Americans and Italian Americans.

Basilone's story is not simply a chapter of military heroism. It is a moral and cultural bridge that continues to connect our two nations, including here in Vicenza, where American service members and Italian citizens share spaces, values, and responsibilities every day. Vicenza is home to the largest concentration of U.S. Army personnel in Italy. The city was liberated by American forces on April 28, 1945, after years of occupation and hardship. That moment marked not only the end of a painful chapter but also the beginning of a relationship built on gratitude, trust, and a sense of closeness that extended far beyond a military presence. The people of Vicenza saw American soldiers not only as liberators, but as young men who had crossed an ocean to restore freedom and dignity to a land that was not their own.

Ten years later, in 1955, American troops returned to Vicenza not as a temporary force, but as a permanent presence committed to collective security and cooperation with the local community. For more than seventy years, the American presence has been an integral part of the social fabric of Vicenza, enduring through decades of political and cultural change while remaining grounded in mutual respect and partnership. It is a relationship renewed every day through the collaborative work of the local community, U.S. Army Garrison Italy, SETAF-Africa, and the 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team, the "Sky Soldiers."

Within this context, Basilone's legacy becomes especially meaningful. His courage at Guadalcanal and Iwo Jima, his humility in rejecting privilege, and his determination to return to combat and stand beside his fellow Marines continue to resonate with American service members stationed in Vicenza today. Many of them, serving far from home and carrying out demanding missions in support of SETAF-AF or the 173rd Airborne Brigade, see in Basilone a model of integrity and selfless leadership.

His story reminds us that military service is not simply a profession. It is a moral commitment to one's team, one's community, and the values one has sworn to defend. Basilone's life demonstrates that greatness is not defined by rank, but by the choices made in moments of adversity. It is a message that continues to inspire today's Soldiers and Marines, once again bringing together two nations and two peoples through a shared story of service, sacrifice, and freedom.



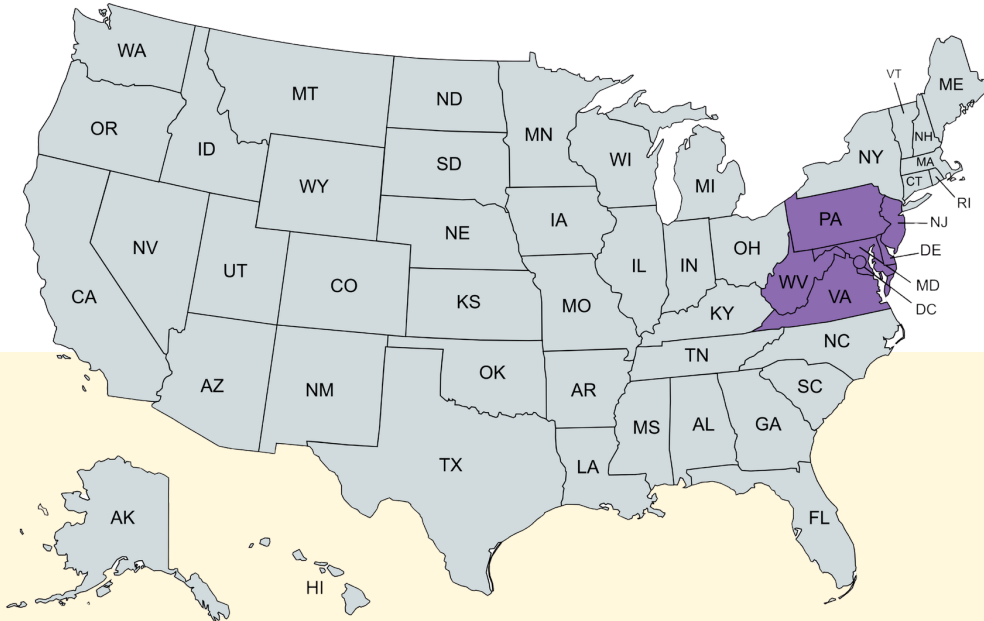
*With 32 years of service in Vicenza with the U.S. Army, **Anna Ciccotti** has dedicated her career to strengthening dialogue between the American military community and Italian institutions. As a Host Nation Community Relations Specialist and Advisor, she earned a degree in languages and a master's in strategic communication, later specializing in journalism, public relations, institutional relations, and business management.*



HAPPY BIRTHDAY USA *from Italy*

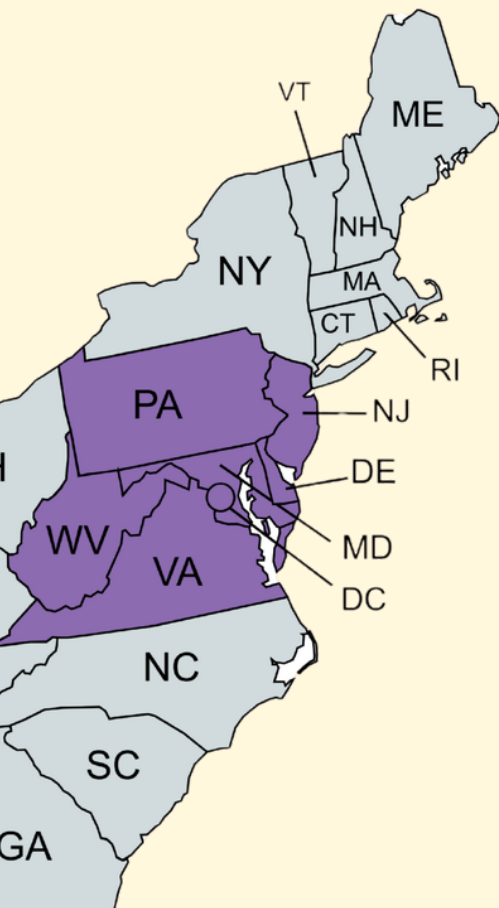


Unsung Italian heroes



East

End of June 2026



Delaware - Vincent A. Bifferato Sr - Vincent A. Bifferato Sr. and a lifetime of service to Delaware

Delaware - Giuseppe Mario Bellanca - Giuseppe Mario Bellanca, the Italian who made Delaware an aviation powerhouse

Maryland - Dominic "Mimi" DiPietro - Dominic "Mimi" DiPietro, the lion of Baltimore's Little Italy

Maryland - Rosa Ponselle - The Italian American voice that changed Maryland

New Jersey (Newark) - Joseph J. Granato - Monsignor Joseph J. Granato. The Italian American giant who saved the heart of Newark

New Jersey (Hoboken) - Pietro Di Donato - "Three Circles of Light" and the stories we inherited

Pennsylvania - Pasquale de Nisco - The miracle of Roseto. How Pasquale de Nisco planted the seeds of longevity in Pennsylvania

Pennsylvania (Philadelphia) - Mario Lanza - Mario Lanza and the rise of Italian American pride in Pennsylvania

Pennsylvania (South Philadelphia) - Joey Giardello - Joey Giardello, South Philadelphia's world champion

Pennsylvania (Pittsburgh) - Irma D'Ascenzo - Irma D'Ascenzo, the first woman to serve on Pittsburgh's city council

Pennsylvania - Bruno Sammartino - From Abruzzo to Pittsburgh. The making of a legend

Virginia - Charles A. Somma - The man who forever changed Richmond's cultural life

Virginia - Carlo Bellini - The Italian professor who helped build Virginia's future

Washington DC - Luigi Persico - Luigi Persico, the Italian sculptor who carved America's civic ideals into the U.S. Capitol

Washington DC - John Sirica - John Sirica in Washington DC. A Judge, a city, a legacy

West Virginia - Catterina DeCarlo Davia - The heroine of Monongah. The impact and legacy of Catterina DeCarlo Davia in West Virginia

West Virginia - Thoney Pietro - Thoney Pietro, the man who paved West Virginia

New Jersey - Manny Alfano - How one unsung hero from New Jersey gave Italian Americans a national voice



HAPPY BIRTHDAY USA *from Italy*



Unsung Italian heroes



Vincent A. Bifferato Sr. and a lifetime of service to Delaware

Vincent A. Bifferato, Sr., was one of the youngest people ever appointed by a Delaware governor to the Delaware Superior Court. At age 30, he became a judge in 1968 and served for 32 years, until 2000. Prior to his elevation to the bench, he was elected to the Delaware House of Representatives from 1964–1966. He was the son of Italian immigrants Luigi “Louis” and Carmella “Mary” Bifferato.

When I first became a lawyer in 1986, Judge Bifferato hired me as his law clerk for one year. It was the most important experience of my professional career. His consistent and innate sense of fairness, practical approaches to solving complex problems, and respect for his fellow Delawareans (from all walks of life) influenced me most. A man with a strong sense of family, he exhibited an old-fashioned work ethic. He never said lawyers “practiced” or judges “judged.” We “worked.” Before each day, as we headed to the courtroom, he would come past my office and bellow, “Rick, let’s go to work.”



Richard A. DiLiberto Jr. is an attorney, former Delaware State Representative, and one of the most respected leaders in the Italian American community in the United States. Since 2006, he has served as Chairman of the Delaware Commission on Italian Heritage and Culture, promoting Italian culture, education, and Italian American heritage. He is active nationally through numerous civic organizations.

Delaware

“Judge Biff” as he was affectionately known, took a keen and genuine interest in young lawyers and their professional development. He served as an adjunct professor at Widener University Delaware Law School and established a program of free continuing legal education seminars for young lawyers, which later became known as the “Judge Vincent Bifferato Superior Court Trial Practice Forum.” He also patiently mentored new judges. The Delaware State Bar Association awarded him its Distinguished Mentoring Award, which I was humbled to present.

He would help lawyers become better advocates by making himself available and offering advice. But he did not embarrass anyone in the courtroom. “Compliment in public, criticize in private” was his mantra.

After retiring from the bench, he re-entered private practice with his sons, and focused on alternative dispute resolution, by mediation and arbitration, helping litigants resolve their cases without the need for costly, time-consuming, and risky court litigation.

In retirement, he traveled to Italy more than a dozen times. He reconnected with his father’s family, and on the next trip took his entire family to Italy to meet their relatives.

Judge Bifferato died July 25, 2014, working up to one month before his passing. He and his wife, Marie (his high school sweetheart), were married nearly 55 years. He was very proud of his children, Katy, Vincent, Jr., and Connor, and six grandchildren. I have a 1998 letter by Judge Bifferato prominently displayed in my law office. In it, he writes “You will always have a special place in my heart.” And... he in mine.



HAPPY BIRTHDAY USA *from Italy*



Unsung Italian heroes



Giuseppe Mario Bellanca

the Italian who made Delaware an aviation powerhouse

Few individuals have left a mark on Delaware as profound as Giuseppe Mario Bellanca. Born in 1886 in the Sicilian town of Sciacca, Bellanca arrived in the United States in 1911 carrying little more than talent, determination, and an extraordinary vision for the future of flight. Over the following decades, he would become one of the most influential pioneers in American aviation and a central figure in Delaware's industrial development.

Today, Bellanca is widely remembered as the "Father of Delaware Aviation," a title earned through innovation, entrepreneurship, and a legacy that transformed the state into an important center of aerospace manufacturing.

Bellanca's fascination with aviation began long before airplanes became a common sight in the sky. Trained as an engineer, he quickly established himself as one of the most creative aircraft designers of his era. His early aircraft demonstrated remarkable efficiency, speed, and reliability at a time when aviation was still in its infancy.

Delaware

The turning point for Delaware came in 1927 when Bellanca moved his operations to New Castle. Encouraged in part by members of the influential du Pont family, he founded the Bellanca Aircraft Corporation and established a manufacturing facility that would soon gain worldwide recognition.

The impact on Delaware was immediate and long-lasting. Bellanca's factory produced more than 3,000 aircraft, creating jobs, attracting skilled workers, and positioning New Castle at the forefront of the rapidly growing aviation industry. At a time when many American communities were searching for economic opportunities, Bellanca helped make Delaware a destination for technological innovation and industrial excellence.

What distinguished Bellanca from many of his contemporaries was his relentless pursuit of efficiency. His aircraft were known for their exceptional range and fuel economy, qualities that enabled pilots to attempt record-breaking flights across vast distances. Bellanca-designed airplanes set numerous world records for endurance, speed, and long-distance travel, helping prove that aviation could connect continents and transform global transportation.



HAPPY BIRTHDAY USA *from Italy*



Unsung Italian heroes

Among the most famous aircraft associated with his company was the Miss Veedol, which in 1931 became the first airplane to complete a nonstop flight across the Pacific Ocean. The achievement captured international attention and demonstrated the reliability of Bellanca's engineering. It was one of many milestones that established his reputation as one of the world's leading aircraft designers.

Bellanca's success story is also an inspiring chapter in the broader history of Italian Americans. Like millions of immigrants who arrived in the United States seeking opportunity, he combined the creativity and technical skills he had developed in Italy with the possibilities offered by his adopted country. His Sicilian roots remained an important part of his identity even as he became a celebrated American innovator.

More than six decades after his death in 1960, Bellanca's influence can still be seen across Delaware. The historic Bellanca Airfield remains a symbol of the state's aviation heritage, while museums and preservation efforts continue to celebrate his accomplishments.

Giuseppe Mario Bellanca did more than design airplanes. He helped shape Delaware's economy, expanded the boundaries of aviation, and demonstrated how an immigrant from Italy could change the course of a state's history. His story stands as one of the most significant and positive Italian contributions to Delaware, a legacy of innovation that continues to inspire new generations.



We the Italians
Editorial Staff



HAPPY BIRTHDAY USA *from Italy*



Unsung Italian heroes



Dominic "Mimi" DiPietro,
the lion of Baltimore's Little Italy

Maryland boasts a centuries-old history, enriched over time by the contributions of countless communities that have shaped its identity. However, when looking at the Italian American heritage in the state, few figures emerge with the same strength, passion, and tangible impact as Dominic "Mimi" DiPietro. Widely considered an authentic local legend, DiPietro rightfully belongs in the pantheon of great Italians who have left a mark on Maryland that goes far beyond politics and takes root in the very heart of the state's culture.

The son of Italian immigrants, Mimi was born, raised, and lived his entire life in Baltimore. His humble origins, steeped in strong family values, endowed him with a profound sense of belonging and an unwavering pride in his roots. This Italian American identity was the driving force behind his entire public career. For decades, DiPietro represented "Little Italy" on the Baltimore City Council, becoming not just an administrator, but the patriarch and protector of a hardworking and vibrant community.

His historical merit, and the success for which he will always be remembered in Maryland, is tied to a crucial battle for the very survival of his cultural heritage. During the years of the American infrastructure boom, urban planners

Maryland

had mapped out a series of massive highway projects. These new concrete arteries threatened to gut the historic heart of Baltimore, and the plans literally called for tearing down the century-old homes, squares, and churches of Little Italy to make way for high-speed traffic. It was the potential erasure of decades of Italian immigration history in Maryland.

Faced with this existential threat, DiPietro's action was decisive and relentless. He fought fiercely, street by street and resolution by resolution, against the bulldozers of blind progress. Through extraordinary tenacity, he mobilized the residents and forced institutions to reroute the highways, physically saving the homes and businesses of his people.

Today, the most tangible sign of his time on this earth is the physical and cultural preservation of the neighborhood. If Baltimore's Little Italy did not become a highway interchange, but instead remained the vibrant and colorful culinary and social hub that everyone knows, the credit is almost entirely his. The neighborhood is now a tourist gem and an economic engine for all of Maryland, a place where residents and visitors flock to breathe in the authentic Italian atmosphere, enjoy culinary excellence, and participate in traditions passed down through generations.

Dominic "Mimi" DiPietro changed Maryland by proving that urban development must never come at the expense of memory and community identity. His figure stands as that of an Italian American giant, a man who protected the history of his family and his homeland, gifting the state of Maryland an invaluable cultural heritage that continues to thrive today.



We the Italians
Editorial Staff



HAPPY BIRTHDAY USA *from Italy*



Unsung Italian heroes



Rosa Ponselle

**the Italian American voice that
changed Maryland**

Rosa Ponselle arrived in Maryland as an internationally celebrated opera star, but she would become something even more significant: one of the architects of Baltimore's modern cultural life.

In doing so, she became much more than a legendary performer – she became one of the most influential figures in Maryland's artistic history and a driving force behind the development of Baltimore's operatic tradition.

Born Rosa Ponzillo in 1897 to Italian immigrant parents from southern Italy, she grew up in a household where music was an essential part of daily life. Her family's roots were in Caiazzo, near Naples, and the values of hard work, discipline, and devotion to family remained central throughout her life. Like many children of Italian immigrants, she balanced her American opportunities with a strong connection to her heritage.

Ponselle's rise to fame was extraordinary. Without the traditional conservatory training enjoyed by many European opera stars, she was discovered by the famous tenor Enrico Caruso and made her Metropolitan Opera debut in 1918. The performance launched one of the most

Maryland

remarkable careers in opera history. Over the next two decades, she became one of the Metropolitan Opera's leading stars, admired for the richness, power, and beauty of her voice.

Her repertoire included some of the most demanding roles in opera, and audiences across the United States and Europe regarded her as one of the era's finest singers. Music critics frequently placed her among the greatest sopranos ever to perform on the operatic stage.

Yet Ponselle's most lasting impact may have come after her retirement from active performance. In the 1930s she settled permanently in Maryland, building Villa Pace, her magnificent estate in Baltimore County's Greenspring Valley. The residence became one of the region's most distinctive landmarks and remains an important part of Maryland's architectural and cultural heritage.

Rather than withdrawing from public life, Ponselle dedicated herself to nurturing the next generation of artists. She became Artistic Director of the Baltimore Civic Opera Company and played a central role in elevating the city's musical reputation. Through her leadership, Baltimore strengthened its position as a major center for opera and classical music.

Ponselle also devoted countless hours to teaching and mentoring young singers. Many aspiring performers from Maryland and beyond sought her guidance, benefiting from the knowledge and experience of a woman who had reached the pinnacle of the international opera world. Her influence extended far beyond the classroom, helping create a vibrant artistic community that continued to flourish long after her own performances had ended.



HAPPY BIRTHDAY USA *from Italy*



Unsung Italian heroes

Today, Rosa Ponselle is remembered not only as a world-renowned soprano but also as one of the Italian Americans who made a transformative contribution to Maryland. Through her artistry, leadership, philanthropy, and commitment to education, she helped shape Baltimore's cultural landscape for generations.

Her story is a powerful reminder of how an immigrant family's daughter rose to international prominence and then chose to invest her talent, prestige, and energy in the community she called home. Few individuals have done more to enrich Baltimore's artistic life, and few Italian Americans have left a more enduring legacy in Maryland.



We the Italians
Editorial Staff



HAPPY BIRTHDAY USA *from Italy*



Unsung Italian heroes



Monsignor Joseph J. Granato

**the Italian American giant who saved
the heart of Newark**

New Jersey is a state shaped by the hard work, culture, and resilience of countless immigrants, but few figures have left such a profound and lasting mark on its social fabric as Monsignor Joseph J. Granato. Passing away in December 2021, Monsignor Granato was not only a spiritual leader for over half a century, but a true hero of social urban planning, a tireless defender of his community, and one of the greatest Italian-Americans to have had a transformative and positive impact on the state of New Jersey.

Born and raised in New Jersey to immigrant parents from the Campania region of Italy, Joseph Granato always embodied the fundamental values of his homeland: the importance of solidarity, the sanctity of family, and a visceral attachment to his roots. This cultural heritage guided every step of his extraordinary life and his long ministry. His home, both spiritual and material, became the historic parish of St. Lucy, located in the beating heart of the "First Ward," the neighborhood traditionally known as Newark's Little Italy. Here, Monsignor Granato served as a beloved and respected pastor and guide for over fifty years.

New Jersey (Newark)

His greatest achievement, and what makes him a secular hero as well as a religious one, emerged during one of the darkest and most complex periods for the development of American cities. In the 1960s and 1970s, Newark was overwhelmed by brutal so-called "urban renewal" plans. The public administrations of the time, armed with bulldozers and cold blueprints, threatened to raze entire historic neighborhoods, dispersing communities that had spent decades building a cohesive social fabric. The First Ward was in the crosshairs, destined to be wiped out to make room for cold infrastructure and depersonalizing complexes.

Faced with this devastating prospect, Monsignor Granato did not merely pray or passively protest: he went into the trenches. He fought with courage and sharp political intelligence against the bulldozers that would have destroyed "his" Little Italy and wiped away the memories of thousands of Italian-American families.

The Monsignor's most tangible and resounding success was his ability to transform protest into a concrete project. Not only did he halt total destruction, but he also became a builder and a visionary for his people: he promoted, funded, and spearheaded the creation of Villa Victoria.



HAPPY BIRTHDAY USA *from Italy*



Unsung Italian heroes

This vast affordable housing complex, specifically designed to provide subsidized housing for families and a dignified senior citizen residence, was an absolute triumph of local social urban planning. Villa Victoria acted as a bulwark against gentrification and uprooting. It literally saved the neighborhood, guaranteeing a decent roof over the residents' heads and allowing the Italian roots and strong identity of the First Ward to remain alive to this day.

Beyond defending his parishioners' homes, Granato preserved the soul of the neighborhood by protecting its traditions. He was a fundamental pillar in keeping alive and promoting the venerable Feast of St. Gerard Maiella at St. Lucy's—a devotion originating in Southern Italy that still attracts thousands of the faithful today to a National Shrine, cementing Newark as a hub of Italian-American spirituality.

Today, looking back at the history of New Jersey, Monsignor Joseph J. Granato is remembered as a giant of civic engagement. His life teaches us that pride in one's Italian heritage, combined with an enlightened vision, can become an unstoppable driving force for social justice. Through his dedication and his courage to stand up to the powerful, he changed New Jersey for the better, leaving behind a legacy built not just of bricks, but of hope, community, and immense dignity.



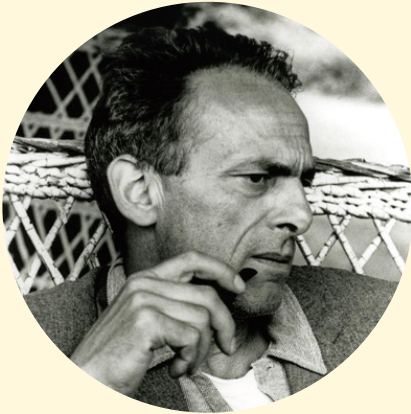
We the Italians
Editorial Staff



HAPPY BIRTHDAY USA *from Italy*



Unsung Italian heroes



Pietro Di Donato

"Three Circles of Light" and the stories we inherited

Like many Italian Americans of my generation, I grew up hearing stories long before I understood their significance.

Every Italian American family has them: stories of grandparents who crossed the Atlantic with little more than determination, fathers who worked endless hours so their children could have opportunities they never knew, and mothers who held families together through sacrifice and faith. As a young man, I listened to those stories without fully appreciating their meaning. Only later did I realize they were more than family memories. They were history.

The first time I read Pietro Di Donato's *Three Circles of Light*, I found myself thinking less about Hoboken and more about my own family. The names and places were different, but the emotions were familiar: family, sacrifice, hard work, respect for parents, and hope for the next generation.

Most readers know Di Donato through *Christ in Concrete*, the landmark novel that brought national attention to the struggles of Italian immigrant laborers. *Three Circles of Light* offers something different. It takes us back before tragedy and allows us to experience immigrant family life while the father is still present – teaching, guiding, and shaping the future of his children.

New Jersey (Hoboken)

In *Christ in Concrete*, fatherhood is largely defined by loss. In *Three Circles of Light*, it is defined by presence. We see lessons taught through example, sacrifices made without complaint, and affection expressed through daily actions rather than words. Many of us knew men like that.

Di Donato captured the lives of fathers who worked in construction, factories, shops, and trades, and mothers who preserved traditions while adapting to a new country. He understood these people because he was one of them.

His importance extends far beyond literature. Few writers have had a greater impact on preserving the authentic story of Italian Americans in New Jersey. Through his novels and memoirs, Di Donato documented the lives of immigrant families in Hoboken and throughout the New York–New Jersey region at a time when their experiences were largely ignored by mainstream American culture. He gave voice to construction workers, laborers, craftsmen, mothers, and children whose sacrifices helped build the cities, neighborhoods, industries, and institutions that shaped modern New Jersey.

Di Donato was among the first Italian American authors to bring these stories to a national audience. Long before universities, museums, and heritage organizations began documenting the Italian American experience, he was preserving it through literature. His work challenged stereotypes by presenting Italian immigrants not as caricatures but as complex human beings defined by dignity, faith, resilience, and ambition.

For New Jersey in particular, his legacy is profound. Hoboken was not merely the setting of his stories; it became a symbol of the immigrant experience that transformed entire communities across the state. Generations of Italian Americans saw their parents and grandparents reflected in his pages. In that sense, Di Donato



HAPPY BIRTHDAY USA *from Italy*



Unsung Italian heroes

did more than write about New Jersey's Italian American community – he helped define how that community understood itself and how its history would be remembered.

Having spent years around Newark's Italian American community, I often encountered people whose lives echoed those found in his pages. Whether their roots were in Hoboken, Newark, Jersey City, Brooklyn, or elsewhere, their memories shared common themes: fathers who worked tirelessly, mothers who held families together, and neighborhoods that functioned as extended families.

I worked through school at Alfone's Florist in Newark. Looking back, I realize the flower shop was more than a job. Through weddings, funerals, holidays, and everyday conversations, I witnessed the values and traditions that helped define our culture. Much of what I saw reminded me of the world Di Donato described.

What strikes me most about his writing is that he never romanticized immigrant life. He understood the dangers of construction work, the uncertainty of employment, and the pressures facing families trying to establish themselves in America. Yet he also understood their dignity.

At a time when Italian Americans are too often viewed through stereotypes, Di Donato presented something far more important: ordinary people living extraordinary lives of perseverance, faith, sacrifice, and hope. The stories of our ancestors deserve better than caricatures. They deserve the truth.

That is why books such as *Three Circles of Light* remain important. They remind us that preserving history is not simply an academic exercise. It is a responsibility. The generation that built our churches, civic organizations, mutual aid societies, and cultural institutions is disappearing. Unless we preserve their stories, much of their experience may disappear with them.

Today, my own efforts are focused on helping preserve that legacy through educational initiatives, cultural programs, and advocacy, including support for Italian Heritage and Cultural Commissions modeled after the success of the New Jersey Italian Heritage Commission. Through fact-based educational programs, the Commission has helped students better understand the authentic contributions of Italian Americans.

If *Three Circles of Light* teaches us anything, it is that stories matter. The stories we inherit shape who we are. The stories we preserve help shape who we will become.

The generation that came before us entrusted those stories to our care.

Now it is our turn to ensure they are never forgotten.



Robert DiBiase has dedicated decades to careers in communications and municipal utilities, while passionately advancing Italian American heritage. Chairman Emeritus of the New Jersey Italian Heritage Commission, he has promoted education, scholarships, cultural exchange, Sister City partnerships, and Made in Italy initiatives. As Chair of the Italian American Legacy Task Force, he works nationwide to encourage legislation recognizing Italian American contributions and combating bias and prejudice.



HAPPY BIRTHDAY USA *from Italy*



Unsung Italian heroes



Pasquale de Nisco

The miracle of Roseto. How Pasquale de Nisco planted the seeds of longevity in Pennsylvania

At the end of the nineteenth century, the hills of eastern Pennsylvania were home to a community of Italian immigrants who had fled poverty, coming almost exclusively from the village of Roseto Valfortore in Puglia. They worked in slate quarries under extremely harsh conditions. Their initial settlement was chaotic, marked by tension, isolation, and distrust. Everything changed in 1897 with the arrival of a man destined to transform that rough encampment into a model of life envied by all of America: Father Pasquale de Nisco.

A Catholic priest of proud Italian origins, de Nisco arrived in Pennsylvania bringing with him much more than just religious faith: he brought the foundational values of Italian culture. His vision was clear and ambitious: to transform a fragmented workforce into a true community. Under his vigorous leadership, the Church of Our Lady of Mount Carmel was built, immediately becoming the beating heart of the town. But de Nisco's achievements were not limited to the altar. He acted as a true unofficial mayor and a social mediator. He taught the miners how to cultivate the land, distributing seeds and bulbs so that every house would have its own garden and flowers, restoring dignity and beauty to the streets. He encouraged the foundation of mutual aid societies to protect workers, pacified labor disputes, and promoted civic education and literacy. Thanks to his tireless work, Roseto stopped being a mere dormitory for laborers and flourished, becoming a prosperous, safe, and united town.

Pennsylvania

However, de Nisco's true masterpiece was measured by science decades after his death, giving life to what medicine studies today in textbooks as the Roseto Effect. In the 1960s, Dr. Stewart Wolf noticed a statistical anomaly that was hard to believe: in Roseto, heart attacks were virtually nonexistent among men under 65, and the overall death rate from heart disease was less than half that of neighboring towns. Researchers investigated thoroughly. They discovered that the Rosetans' diet was by no means healthier than average: they cooked with lard, consumed a lot of meat, smoked, and worked in dusty quarries. They didn't exercise or do yoga. What, then, was their protective shield?

The answer was social cohesion. The solid community foundations laid decades earlier by Pasquale de Nisco had created a society free from the deadly stress caused by modern isolation and anxiety. In Roseto, families lived in multigenerational homes, neighbors constantly helped one another, successes were celebrated together, and difficulties were absorbed by the group. No one was ever left alone.

The story of Pasquale de Nisco and the Roseto Effect is one of the most powerful and fascinating testaments to Italy's positive impact in the United States. It shows that the Italian contribution to America was not limited to physical infrastructure, art, or cuisine, but included the export of a winning human and social model. De Nisco demonstrated that deeply rooted Italian values—the sacredness of the family network, the importance of the town square as a gathering place, neighborhood solidarity—were not just nostalgic traditions, but literally an antidote to illness. He transformed a corner of Pennsylvania into a haven where the "American Dream" took on a higher meaning: not just the achievement of individual economic success, but the construction of a long, healthy, and, above all, shared life.



We the Italians
Editorial Staff



HAPPY BIRTHDAY USA *from Italy*



Unsung Italian heroes



Mario Lanza

and the rise of Italian American pride in Pennsylvania

Few Italian Americans have had a greater cultural impact on Pennsylvania, and especially on Philadelphia, than Mario Lanza. Blessed with one of the most extraordinary voices of the twentieth century, Lanza became a global ambassador for both Italian culture and the city where he was born and raised. Through his music, films, and public image, he helped shape a more positive perception of Italian Americans while bringing pride and international recognition to Philadelphia's Italian American community.

Born Alfred Arnold Cocozza in Philadelphia in 1921, Mario Lanza was the son of Italian immigrants. His father, Antonio Cocozza, came from the region of Campania, while his mother, Maria Lanza, was the daughter of immigrants from Sicily and possessed a beautiful soprano voice that inspired her son's love of opera. Growing up in South Philadelphia, one of the most vibrant Italian American neighborhoods in the United States, Lanza was immersed in the traditions, language, music, and values of his heritage from an early age.

Pennsylvania (Philadelphia)

He adopted the stage name Mario Lanza in honor of his mother's family name and quickly emerged as one of the most gifted vocal talents of his generation. Possessing a powerful tenor voice that combined technical brilliance with emotional intensity, he achieved something few artists had ever done: he brought opera to the masses. Before Lanza, opera was often viewed as an elite art form enjoyed primarily by dedicated enthusiasts. Through recordings, radio broadcasts, concerts, and Hollywood films, he introduced millions of Americans to the music of Verdi, Puccini, and other Italian masters.

His success was remarkable. During the 1940s and 1950s, Lanza became one of the world's best-selling classical singers. His recordings sold millions of copies, and films such as *The Great Caruso* transformed him into an international superstar. At a time when television and cinema were becoming dominant forms of entertainment, Mario Lanza served as a bridge between popular culture and classical music, making Italian opera accessible to audiences who had never before experienced it.

For Philadelphia, his achievements carried special significance. Lanza became one of the city's most famous native sons and a symbol of what the children of immigrants could accomplish in America. His success demonstrated that talent, dedication, and cultural pride could overcome social barriers and stereotypes. Generations of Italian Americans in Pennsylvania saw in him a reflection of their own aspirations and struggles.



HAPPY BIRTHDAY USA *from Italy*



Unsung Italian heroes

His influence extended far beyond entertainment. At a time when Italian Americans were still seeking full acceptance within American society, Lanza projected an image of sophistication, artistry, and excellence. He helped replace negative stereotypes with a narrative centered on culture, achievement, and contribution. Through his fame, countless Americans developed a deeper appreciation for Italian music, language, and traditions.

The impact of Mario Lanza on Philadelphia remains visible today. The city honors him through cultural events, memorials, and continuing recognition of his legacy. His story is deeply woven into the history of South Philadelphia, where his rise from the son of immigrants to an international icon remains a source of pride.

More than six decades after his passing, Mario Lanza continues to be remembered as one of the greatest Italian Americans in history. His voice brought the beauty of Italian culture to millions, elevated the reputation of Philadelphia's Italian American community, and left an enduring mark on Pennsylvania. In doing so, he became far more than a singer – he became a cultural ambassador whose legacy continues to inspire both Italian Americans and music lovers around the world.



We the Italians
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HAPPY BIRTHDAY USA *from Italy*



Unsung Italian heroes



Joey Giardello,
South Philadelphia's world champion

As the United States approaches its 250th anniversary, it is worth pausing to honor not only national figures, but the local Italian American men and women whose lives quietly strengthened their communities in lasting ways. One such figure is Joey Giardello – born Carmine Orlando Tilelli – a South Philadelphia icon whose story embodies perseverance, identity, and neighborhood pride.

Giardello was born in Brooklyn in 1930 to an Italian American family with roots in Calabria, the rugged, mountainous toe of the Italian peninsula from which so many of South Philadelphia's founding families descend. Though not Philadelphia-born, he moved to the Lower Moyamensing neighborhood of South Philadelphia as a young child, settling in the shadow of East Passyunk Avenue. Like so many children of immigrant families in the neighborhood, he grew up in a working-class world defined by tight-knit families, corner businesses, parish churches, and social clubs that preserved Italian traditions while forging a new American identity.

Pennsylvania (South Philadelphia)

It was there that Giardello found boxing, training in the storied Passyunk Avenue gyms that shaped generations of the city's fighters. His path to the ring was unconventional: at fifteen, he enlisted in the U.S. Army using a cousin's friend's name – Joey Giardello – to get around the age requirement. He served in the 82nd Airborne Division, learned to box in Army competitions, and when he returned to civilian life, kept the name. It was the one he would carry to the top of the world. Through relentless dedication across the 1950s and into the 1960s, he built a reputation for technical skill and defensive mastery – even as corrupt underworld figures repeatedly blocked him from a title shot.

In 1963, he reached the pinnacle of his sport, defeating Dick Tiger to become World Middleweight Champion. The victory was a personal triumph – but it was also a moment of collective pride for South Philadelphia and its Italian American community. At a time when many immigrant families were still fighting for recognition and respect in American society, Giardello's achievement demonstrated what discipline, resilience, and hard work could produce. He became a living symbol of upward mobility, representing both his neighborhood and the broader Italian American experience at its most aspirational.

His legacy is still visible on the streets of South Philadelphia today. A seven-foot bronze statue, sculpted by Carl LeVotch – a South Jersey artist who grew up just blocks away and had crossed paths with Giardello in the neighborhood as a boy – was unveiled on May 21, 2011, at the triangle formed by 13th Street, Mifflin Street, and East Passyunk Avenue, directly in front of the international headquarters of Filitalia International, the organization that also houses the History of Italian Immigration Museum, where Giardello's story is preserved alongside the broader contributions of



HAPPY BIRTHDAY USA *from Italy*



Unsung Italian heroes

Italian Americans across sports, culture, business, politics, and military service. LeVotch noted that the years of punishment in the ring had already made Giardello's face a work of art – his task was simply to capture it in bronze.

His life is a reminder that some of the most meaningful contributions to American society come not from those in the national spotlight, but from local heroes whose impact is felt most deeply in the neighborhoods they never stopped calling home



Saverio Nestico is a Philadelphia-based entrepreneur and the International President of Filitalia International, one of the leading Italian American organizations in the world. The son of founder Pasquale Nestico, he leads a network of chapters across the United States and Italy dedicated to promoting the Italian language, culture, and heritage. He is committed to engaging younger generations and strengthening the ties between Italy and the United States.



HAPPY BIRTHDAY USA *from Italy*



Unsung Italian heroes



Irma D'Ascenzo

**the first woman to serve on
Pittsburgh's city council**

Italian immigrants and their descendants left an indelible mark on Pittsburgh, the largest metropolitan area in American Appalachia. Whether in the fields of business, politics, education, sports, or entertainment, Italian Americans occupied important roles that shaped the region. Many even broke the proverbial glass ceiling as the first in their respective fields. Such is the case of Irma D'Ascenzo, the first woman to serve on Pittsburgh's City Council.

Born in 1905 to Frank and Mary Manella, D'Ascenzo was raised in Hazelwood, a working-class neighborhood of Pittsburgh that was once home to immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe. She graduated from Cathedral High School, Duff's Business Institute, and the University of Pittsburgh. One of seven children, D'Ascenzo and her siblings all had careers in social work. They followed in the footsteps of their father, an Italian immigrant from Ateleta who helped newly arrived Italians become American citizens. In 1923, she married Frank D'Ascenzo, a construction supervisor, and had two children, John and Rosemary.

Pennsylvania (Pittsburgh)

D'Ascenzo had a long career in politics. She served in the Allegheny County Democratic Committee, the Pennsylvania Federation of Democratic Women, and the Democratic Women's Guild of Allegheny County. In December 1955, she was appointed by Pittsburgh Mayor David L. Lawrence to replace Councilman Emmanuel Schifano, who was elevated to a Judgeship. Before her nomination, she worked as the secretary and chief examiner of the City's Civil Service Commission. D'Ascenzo was reelected to City Council three times, serving until her untimely death. She wrote, "Little did I dream during the years I was active in social, civic and political affairs that I was to become the first woman in the 200-year history of Pittsburgh to serve in City Council... This was the greatest challenge of my life... after a short period of adjustment, I became an accepted and integral part of an aggressive municipal team involved in the exciting rebirth of the world's industrial giant."

It was often noted that D'Ascenzo was a devoted mother, grandmother, and homemaker, roles that served her well while at the helm of the Council's Committee on Parks and Recreation and Libraries. As Chairwoman, she oversaw the city's parks, playgrounds, and swimming pools and was lauded for her passionate efforts to improve the city's recreational spaces for people of all ages.

Besides her achievements in politics, D'Ascenzo was active in numerous educational and civic organizations, including the Gumbert School for Girls, Carnegie Institute, Allegheny County Smoke Control Advisory Committee, Allegheny County Housing Authority, Allegheny County Redevelopment Authority, Catholic Laymen's Education Association, Consolata Society for Foreign Missions, and the Red Cross, which won her a citation from President Franklin D. Roosevelt during World War II. She was also involved in the Italian Sons and Daughters of America, Sons of



HAPPY BIRTHDAY USA *from Italy*



Unsung Italian heroes

Columbus, University of Pittsburgh's Italian Room Committee, and Boy's Towns of Italy, the latter earning her the Order of the Star of Italian Solidarity.

D'Ascenzo died in a car accident in 1970. Her professional papers are held by the University of Pittsburgh Library System's Archives & Special Collections.



Melissa Marinaro is Director of the Italian American Program at the Senator John Heinz History Center in Pittsburgh. She oversees the Italian American Collection, educational initiatives, and community outreach. An expert on postwar Italian immigration and Italian American folk traditions, she authored "Highlights from the Italian American Collection" and co-directs the Italian Diaspora Archives Resource Map (IDARM) Project.



HAPPY BIRTHDAY USA *from Italy*



Unsung Italian heroes



Bruno Sammartino

From Abruzzo to Pittsburgh. The making of a legend

Every city has figures who come to symbolize its values. For Pittsburgh, one of those figures is undoubtedly Bruno Sammartino. While he achieved worldwide fame as one of the greatest professional wrestling champions of all time, his importance extends far beyond sports. For generations of Pittsburgh residents, and especially for the city's Italian American community, Sammartino represented resilience, hard work, loyalty, and the belief that adversity can be transformed into success.

His story began far from Pennsylvania. Bruno was born in 1935 in Pizzoferrato, a small town in Italy's Abruzzo region. His childhood was shaped by the hardships of World War II. During the Nazi occupation, his family endured extreme poverty and lived in constant danger. Like many Italian families seeking a better future after the war, the Sammartinos chose emigration. In 1950, they arrived in Pittsburgh, joining thousands of fellow Italians who had helped build the city's neighborhoods, factories, churches, and businesses.

Pennsylvania

At first, America was not easy for young Bruno. He spoke almost no English and struggled to fit in. His immigrant background made him an outsider at school, and he often found himself isolated. Yet those difficulties became the foundation of his future success. Determined to improve himself, he dedicated countless hours to physical training. What started as a way to gain confidence eventually became a path to greatness.

By the 1960s, Bruno Sammartino had become one of the biggest attractions in professional wrestling. His extraordinary strength, athletic ability, and natural charisma made him a fan favorite. He captured the WWWF World Heavyweight Championship in 1963 and held it for an unprecedented length of time. Even decades later, his championship reign remains one of the most remarkable achievements in the history of professional sports entertainment.

What made Sammartino unique, however, was not simply winning titles. Fans admired him because he represented something larger. Unlike many sports stars, he projected honesty, humility, and integrity. He avoided controversy, remained devoted to his family, and carried himself with dignity throughout his career. These qualities resonated deeply in Pittsburgh, a city built on the values of hard work, sacrifice, and community.

For Pittsburgh's Italian Americans, Sammartino became a source of pride during a period when ethnic communities were still fighting stereotypes and seeking broader acceptance. He showed that an immigrant from a small Italian village could become one of the most respected public figures in America without abandoning his roots. He spoke proudly of his heritage, maintained strong ties to Italy, and never forgot the struggles that had shaped his early life.



HAPPY BIRTHDAY USA *from Italy*



Unsung Italian heroes

His influence reached beyond wrestling arenas. Throughout his life, Sammartino supported charitable causes, participated in community events, and remained closely associated with Pittsburgh. In many ways, he became an unofficial ambassador for the city. When people across America heard the name Bruno Sammartino, they often thought of Pittsburgh as well.

Today, his legacy continues to be felt throughout Western Pennsylvania. He is remembered not only as a champion athlete, but as a symbol of the immigrant experience and of the contributions Italian Americans have made to the region. His journey from wartime Italy to international stardom mirrors the story of countless families who came to Pittsburgh seeking opportunity and helped shape the city's identity.

Among the Italians who have left a positive and lasting mark on the United States, Bruno Sammartino stands in a special category. He did not change Pittsburgh through politics or business. He changed it by becoming a living example of courage, determination, and pride in one's heritage. In doing so, he inspired generations and strengthened the bond between Pittsburgh and its vibrant Italian American community.



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HAPPY BIRTHDAY USA *from Italy*



Unsung Italian heroes



Charles A. Somma

The man who forever changed Richmond's cultural life

The Byrd Theater, located at 2908 W. Cary Street in Richmond, Virginia stands as a testament to the leadership and vision of Charles A. Somma. Born in Richmond on January 15, 1890, to Nicolas and Theresa Meyers Somma, Charles spent his youth working with his father in the ice cream manufacturing business. Soon thereafter, he started pursuing his interest in vaudeville houses and movie theaters, purchasing an interest in the Dixie Theater in 1913.

Over the next few years, Somma and his partner Walter Coulter acquired several more theaters in Richmond, including the Hippodrome, Globe, Fifth Street, and the Bluebird Theaters. While establishing himself as an impresario, bringing movie and vaudeville acts to the theaters in Richmond, Somma obtained a controlling interest in State Fair of Virginia in 1927.

Charles Somma's vision was to modernize the fair that had previously been focused on agriculture in Virginia. Each year during this presidency one day of the fair would be recognized as Children's Day, when all children under the age of 16 would be admitted for free. Through his leadership, he would bring a variety of entertainment to the State Fair, including auto racing.

Virginia

Wanting to build a theater of his own, Somma purchased lots along Westhampton Avenue in December 1927 to build the Byrd Theater, at a cost of \$900,000 (approximately \$17 million today).

During its construction, the Richmond Times-Dispatch was looking forward to the opening of a theater that would be one of the largest entertainment houses in the city of Richmond.

Charles Somma opened the Byrd Theater on December 24, 1928, with a showing of the movie "Waterfront" to a packed house. According to the Theater Historical Society of America, the Byrd Theater was built in the Italian Renaissance style, and featured seating for 916 in the orchestra and another 476 in the balcony.

The interior of the Byrd Theater "was decorated with eleven grand Czechoslovakian crystal chandeliers, imported Italian and Turkish marble, hand-crafted velvet drapes and oil painted canvases of Greek mythology." The theater was technologically advanced as well, featuring a centralized vacuum system and air-conditioning – a relatively new luxury in 1928. To top it off, adjacent to the stage was a grand Wurlitzer organ to provide entertainment before and after screenings of the newest movies in town.

When the Great Depression came, Charles Somma helped to support the community he loved through philanthropic efforts. In 1931, Somma donated \$5,000 (about \$110,000 today) to save Richmond's minor league baseball team from bankruptcy – he would become the team's general manager for several years as well. He also spearheaded a charity drive that helped raise the funds to build a new home for the Gary family, who's home had been destroyed by fire in 1934.



HAPPY BIRTHDAY USA *from Italy*



Unsung Italian heroes

In 1936, Somma and his business partner, Walter Coulter donated a \$24,000 Wurlitzer organ to the Broad Street Methodist Church. In a series of court proceedings in 1936, Somma was able to defeat the century-old "Blue Law" that forbid the showing of movies on Sundays in Virginia. The Circuit Court in Petersburg, Virginia ruled that showing movies on Sundays were a necessity because they improved the morale and physical welfare of the people.

In 1938, Charles Somma opened the Henrico Theater in Highland Park, a suburb of Richmond. Hailed as one of the best examples of Art Deco design in Henrico County, the theater "was constructed with the most up-to-date features possible: air-

conditioning, high-tech lighting and projection equipment, superior acoustical treatment, streamlined and cushioned seats, plush fabrics throughout, neon tube façade lighting at night, and plenty of adjacent parking."

Charles Somma also served as a Richmond city councilor for during the 1930s and as president for the Richmond Chapter of the National Association of Circus Saints and Sinners. Although he was only 53 when he died on December 25, 1943, Charles Somma left a legacy of service and philanthropy and is remembered as an impresario who forever changed the entertainment landscape in Richmond, Virginia.



Martin Novak is an Italian American community leader and president of the Italian Heritage and Cultural Society in Burke, Virginia. His maternal grandparents immigrated to the United States from San Cataldo, Sicily, at the beginning of the 20th century. Passionate about genealogy and family history, he is committed to preserving and promoting Italian heritage, culture, and traditions for future generations.



HAPPY BIRTHDAY USA *from Italy*



Unsung Italian heroes



Carlo Bellini

The Italian professor who helped build Virginia's future

When people think about the Italians who left a lasting mark on the United States, they often remember explorers, artists, entrepreneurs, or political figures. Yet some of the most profound contributions came through education. One remarkable example is Carlo Bellini, a Florentine intellectual whose influence helped shape the future of Virginia and, indirectly, the development of higher education across America.

Born in Florence in 1735, Bellini belonged to the rich intellectual tradition of the Italian Enlightenment. At a time when Tuscany was one of Europe's most vibrant centers of culture and learning, he developed the linguistic and humanistic knowledge that would eventually make him a pioneering figure in American education. His life took a decisive turn when he became associated with Philip Mazzei, the Tuscan patriot, entrepreneur, and close friend of Thomas Jefferson.

Bellini arrived in Virginia in 1773, just as the American colonies were moving toward independence. While many immigrants focused on trade, agriculture, or politics, Bellini found his greatest opportunity in the world of ideas. Through his friendship with Jefferson and his connections within Virginia's intellectual circles, he became part of a group that believed education would be essential to the success of the new republic.

Virginia

His most important achievement came in 1779, when he was appointed professor at the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg. The appointment was historic. Bellini became the first professor of modern languages at an American university. At a time when higher education focused almost exclusively on Latin and Greek, he introduced the study of living European languages, teaching both Italian and French.

This may seem like a modest innovation today, but it represented a revolutionary change in American education. Bellini understood that a modern nation needed citizens who could communicate with the wider world, engage with contemporary literature, diplomacy, science, and commerce, and participate in the international exchange of ideas. His vision helped move American higher education beyond its colonial foundations and toward a more global perspective.

The impact on Virginia was significant. Through his teaching, Bellini educated young men who would become leaders of the early United States. More importantly, the academic model he helped create became a prototype for future American universities. The department he established at William & Mary provided both the physical and curricular framework that many institutions later adopted when developing their own modern language programs.

For Virginia's cultural history, Bellini represents a powerful example of the state's longstanding connection to international talent and ideas. He brought the intellectual traditions of Florence to Williamsburg and helped create an educational environment that reflected the aspirations of a new nation. His work complemented the efforts of Jefferson and other Virginia visionaries who believed that education was essential to democracy.



HAPPY BIRTHDAY USA *from Italy*



Unsung Italian heroes

For Italian Americans and Italians living in Virginia today, Carlo Bellini's story carries special meaning. Long before the large waves of Italian immigration of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, he demonstrated that Italian culture, scholarship, and innovation could enrich American society. He helped establish a positive Italian presence in Virginia decades before Italian communities became widespread throughout the United States.

Unlike many historical figures whose contributions are measured through wealth or political power, Bellini's legacy is found in classrooms, libraries, and universities. Every student who studies a modern language at an American college benefits, in some small way, from the path he helped create.

Among the Italians who have had a positive and enduring impact on the United States, Carlo Bellini deserves special recognition. By bringing the intellectual spirit of Florence to Virginia, he helped shape American education and left a legacy that continues to influence generations of students more than two centuries later.



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Unsung Italian heroes



Luigi Persico,
**the Italian sculptor who carved
America's civic ideals into the U.S.
Capitol**

Italian sculptor Luigi Persico helped the young United States give tangible form to its civic ideals by shaping some of the earliest major sculptural programs at the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C. In a city that was still defining itself as the nation's capital, Persico's allegories – America, Justice, Hope, and the Constitution – turned political principles into an everyday public experience, visible to lawmakers and visitors alike.

Born in Naples in 1791, Persico came to the United States in 1818. He worked first in Pennsylvania (including Lancaster and Harrisburg) and then in Philadelphia before moving into higher-profile federal commissions in Washington, where national identity was being expressed not only in speeches and laws but also in stone and marble.

Washington DC

Persico gained recognition for a bust of the Marquis de Lafayette tied to Lafayette's celebrated 1824–1825 visit, a moment when Americans renewed their emotional connection to the Revolutionary generation. That success helped open doors in Washington, where sculptural commemoration was becoming part of the country's political language, about who the nation honored, and how it chose to remember.

His most lasting contribution is the "Genius of America" pediment on the Capitol's east central front (1825–1828). The composition is explicit in its civics: "America" stands beside a shield marked "USA," inscriptions reference July 4, 1776, and the Constitution, and Justice lifts her scales. President John Quincy Adams even shaped the iconography, urging Persico to replace a too-pagan Hercules with the figure of Hope so that the program would read as a moral narrative about a Union anchored in law and looking forward with confidence.

Congress also commissioned Persico's marble statues War and Peace (ordered in 1829), which arrived in 1834 and were installed in 1835 in niches flanking the Rotunda doors on the east front. For a developing republic, the pairing mattered: it suggested that national power ("War") should be tempered by restraint and civic aspiration ("Peace"), presented not as private virtues but as public architecture, values literally set into the seat of government.



HAPPY BIRTHDAY USA *from Italy*



Unsung Italian heroes

Persico's impact on Washington, D.C., is still evident today. The Capitol's East Front is one of the city's defining vistas, and Persico's works helped set an early standard for how federal Washington would use classical imagery to communicate American democracy to the world. Even after the original sandstone and marble pieces deteriorated, the Capitol preserved Persico's vision: during the 1958–1962 East Front extension, the "Genius of America" figures were removed, restored, and reproduced in Georgia White marble, and War and Peace were likewise replicated and reinstalled. In other words, Persico did not just decorate a building—he helped give the capital a civic face that the United States has chosen, again and again, to keep.



Claudio Tanca is Marketing & Events Coordinator at the Italian Cultural Society of Washington, DC, where he promotes Italian language and culture. A dual U.S.-Italian citizen, he has spent more than 15 years leading international communications for global health and social impact organizations. Fluent in English, French, and Italian, he is dedicated to strengthening ties between Italian and American communities.



HAPPY BIRTHDAY USA *from Italy*



Unsung Italian heroes



John Sirica

in Washington DC. A Judge, a city, a legacy

When people hear the name John Sirica, they often think of the Watergate scandal, where Sirica played a decisive role in bringing the truth to light by encouraging testimony and investigations that ultimately led to the resignation of President Richard Nixon. Yet for the people of Washington, D.C., Sirica's importance went far beyond a single case. For decades, he was one of the most influential figures in the city's legal system, helping shape the administration of justice in the nation's capital and becoming a symbol of integrity, discipline, and public service.

John Joseph Sirica was born in 1904 to an Italian immigrant family. His father had arrived in the United States from Campania, while his mother was an Italian American. Like many children of immigrant families, Sirica grew up without wealth or privilege. His early years were marked by hard work and determination. Before pursuing a legal career, he worked various manual jobs and spent time in boxing gyms, experiences that helped forge the toughness and resilience that would later define his judicial career.

Washington DC

His rise was a classic American success story. After earning a law degree, Sirica built a respected legal practice in Washington and eventually entered public service. In 1957, President Dwight Eisenhower appointed him to the United States District Court for the District of Columbia. Over the following decades, he became one of the most recognizable and influential judges in Washington.

For local residents, Sirica represented something unique. At a time when Washington was growing rapidly and facing complex social and political challenges, he embodied the principle that the law must be applied fairly and consistently. His courtroom became known for discipline and accountability. Lawyers, defendants, and public officials alike understood that Judge Sirica demanded seriousness, preparation, and respect for the judicial process.

His reputation earned him the nickname "Maximum John," a reference to his willingness to impose tough sentences when he believed circumstances required them. Yet the nickname tells only part of the story. Beneath his stern public image was a judge deeply committed to the idea that justice should protect the public and strengthen confidence in institutions. For many Washington residents, he became the face of a legal system that was firm but fundamentally fair.

Sirica's influence on Washington, D.C., was especially significant because he served as Chief Judge of the United States District Court for the District of Columbia, one of the most important courts in the nation. In that role, he helped oversee a judicial system operating at the intersection of local governance and federal power. His leadership contributed to the court's reputation for professionalism and independence during a critical period in American history.



HAPPY BIRTHDAY USA *from Italy*



Unsung Italian heroes

Although Watergate brought him international attention, his lasting legacy in Washington rests on decades of service to the city and its people. Through thousands of cases and countless decisions, he helped shape the culture of the federal court system in the capital. His career reinforced the principle that no individual, regardless of status or influence, should stand above the law.

For Washington's Italian and Italian American community, Sirica's story remains a source of pride. He demonstrated that the son of an immigrant from southern Italy could rise to one of the most respected positions in American public life while maintaining the values of hard work, perseverance, and personal responsibility that characterized so many Italian American families.

He did not build monuments or create businesses. Instead, he helped strengthen one of the most important institutions of democracy: the rule of law. In doing so, he left an enduring legacy in Washington, D.C., and became a powerful example of the contributions Italian Americans have made to the nation's capital.



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HAPPY BIRTHDAY USA *from Italy*



Unsung Italian heroes



Catterina DeCarlo Davia,

The heroine of Monongah. The impact and legacy of Catterina DeCarlo Davia in West Virginia

The history of Italian immigration in West Virginia finds one of its most extraordinary, powerful, and symbolic figures in Catterina DeCarlo Davia, originally De Carlo, married name Davia. Remembered and celebrated as the Heroine of Monongah, Catterina profoundly changed the perception and historical memory of the state through an epic act of love, resilience, and silent protest that shattered the oblivion surrounding the worst mining disaster in United States history.

Born in Domegge di Cadore, in the province of Belluno, on November 21, 1864, Catterina emigrated to the United States with her husband, Vittorio Davia, in search of a better future in the rich but dangerous coalfields of West Virginia. The couple settled in Monongah, integrating into a community where Italian labor represented the backbone of the local extractive economy. Their dream of prosperity soon clashed with a reality of grueling labor, exploitation, and constant challenges of integration in an environment that was not always welcoming.

West Virginia

The fate of Catterina and countless other families changed forever on the morning of December 6, 1907. A devastating underground explosion in the Fairmont Coal Company's mines number 6 and 8 killed hundreds of miners, including at least 171 officially registered Italians, although the actual estimates are much higher due to the widespread system of unregistered piece-rate workers. Vittorio was one of the countless victims, leaving Catterina alone with five children in a foreign, hostile land marked by strong prejudice against newcomers.

Catterina's extraordinary merit lies not in industrial inventions or political office, but in how she chose to process a devastating loss and, simultaneously, expose the inhumane conditions and total lack of safety that had caused the massacre. While the mining companies tried to downplay the event and shift the blame, she carried out an unwavering form of protest that would mark the history of the region.

For twenty-nine years, every single day, Catterina performed a solemn and exhausting ritual. She walked over three miles from her home to the entrance of the destroyed mine. There, she would fill a heavy sack with coal and carry it back on her shoulders, emptying it in the yard in front of her house. To anyone who asked her the reason for that grueling act, she answered with disarming resolve, explaining that she did it to lighten the enormous weight her dead still had to bear down there.



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Unsung Italian heroes

Day after day, that daily accumulation turned into an actual hill of coal, also known as the hill of love. It was not just an intimate tribute, but a colossal monument visible to the entire town. It was a perpetual warning that prevented local institutions and public opinion from drawing a veil of silence and forgetfulness over the tragedy and the industry's guilt.

Catterina demonstrated extraordinary resilience. Despite absolute poverty and initial isolation, she refused to be broken. She managed to raise her five children, ensuring them a decent existence fully integrated into the American social fabric, while simultaneously becoming the moral pillar for the countless widows of Monongah who faced the same desperate hardships.

Today, her impact on West Virginia is recognized on both institutional and academic levels. Her figure is the subject of gender and labor history studies, with research and testimonies preserved in the archives of West Virginia University. Catterina transformed the pain and marginalization of Italian Americans into a universal symbol of dignity and the fight for human rights. Today, she is considered one of the greatest Italian figures in America, a woman whose unwavering fortitude allowed an entire community to put down roots, defend its memory, and indelibly and positively shape the modern history of West Virginia.



We the Italians
Editorial Staff



HAPPY BIRTHDAY USA *from Italy*



Unsung Italian heroes



Thoney Pietro,

the man who paved West Virginia

The history of West Virginia's infrastructural development is inextricably linked to the genius, hard work, and masonry skills of Italian immigrants. Among the figures who have most shaped the face of this state, Thoney Pietro, born Ferdinando Pietro in the Italian region of Calabria, unequivocally stands out. Arriving in the United States carrying only his baggage of ancient artisanal skills, this extraordinary immigrant transformed from a humble bricklayer into one of the largest and most influential contractors in the entire region, leaving a literal and tangible mark on the territory.

Thoney Pietro's contribution to the development of West Virginia is not measured in debates or laws, but in tons of stone, bricks, and mortar. Settling in Morgantown in the early twentieth century, Pietro realized that the rapid expansion of the city and its university required solid, safe, and lasting infrastructure. Capitalizing on the technical mastery typical of the Italian construction tradition, he soon became known as the man who literally paved West Virginia. His crews of workers, often made up of fellow immigrants to whom he offered work, protection, and dignity, built countless brick roads, massive retaining walls, and sturdy bridges. Many of the picturesque red brick streets that still characterize and beautify the historic neighborhoods of Morgantown and surrounding areas today are the direct result of his entrepreneurial vision and flawless work ethic.

West Virginia

If public infrastructure represents his tireless service to the community, his personal architectural masterpiece is undoubtedly the famous Pietro's Castle. Built between the 1920s and 1930s with his own hands and the help of his most trusted workers, this majestic building resembles a true European fortress set in the Appalachian landscape. The structure, featuring intricate stonework, elegant arches, and formidable masonry, was not just his private residence, but a three-dimensional manifesto of the longevity and superiority of Italian craftsmanship. Today, Pietro's Castle is proudly listed on the United States National Register of Historic Places, forever protecting the memory of this brilliant builder.

Thoney Pietro's merits, however, go far beyond simple commercial and engineering success. He was a pioneer who used his wealth and influence to actively improve the community that had welcomed him. Deeply generous and tied to the values of his homeland, he became a pillar of local philanthropy, so much so that he later donated his magnificent castle estate to the Church so that it could become a place of peace and spiritual retreat available to others.

Through the streets still traveled by thousands of citizens, the stone walls that support the hills, and the castle that dominates the landscape, Thoney Pietro demonstrated how Italian ingenuity could literally lay the foundation for the future of a nation. His life represents a lasting testimony of a great Italian who used his craft to have a positive, profound, and permanent impact on the history and territory of West Virginia.



We the Italians
Editorial Staff



HAPPY BIRTHDAY USA *from Italy*



Unsung Italian heroes



Manny Alfano,

How one unsung hero from New Jersey gave Italian Americans a national voice

There are certain individuals whose impact extends far beyond their own lifetime. Dr. Manny Alfano was one of those rare people. To many across the nation, he was a fearless leader, an unwavering advocate, and a legendary defender of Italian American heritage. To me, he was a close friend, a mentor, and an inspiration whose influence continues to guide me every day.

For decades, Dr. Alfano stood at the forefront of the fight against stereotyping, denigration, and discrimination directed at Italians and Italian Americans. New Jersey, his home state, had one of the largest Italian American populations in the United States, and it was the community he loved and served throughout his life. Long before these issues received widespread attention, Manny recognized the lasting damage caused by negative portrayals and cultural bias. He dedicated himself to ensuring that Italian Americans would be treated with dignity and respect, and that future generations would inherit not only a rich heritage, but also the pride that comes with understanding it.

The importance of Manny Alfano to New Jersey cannot be measured simply by the organizations he founded or the campaigns he led. His greatest

New Jersey

contribution was helping create a stronger sense of identity and confidence among generations of Italian Americans. He believed that communities thrive when people understand their roots and appreciate the contributions of others. Through his work, he encouraged thousands of people to become more active citizens, more engaged community members, and better ambassadors for their heritage.

Manny possessed a rare combination of passion, courage, and determination. He was never intimidated by powerful institutions, media organizations, or political pressures. When others remained silent, he spoke out. When others dismissed stereotypes as harmless jokes, he challenged them directly. He understood that prejudice often begins with misrepresentation, and that combating those misconceptions required persistence, education, and leadership.

Throughout New Jersey, Manny became a respected civic leader. He worked with local organizations, cultural groups, educators, elected officials, and community advocates to promote a more accurate understanding of Italian American history. He championed educational initiatives, supported cultural events, and encouraged historical preservation efforts that enriched communities throughout the state. His work helped ensure that the achievements of Italian Americans were not forgotten, but recognized as an important part of New Jersey's broader story.

One of the most important aspects of Manny's legacy was his impact on young people. He believed that heritage should never be taken for granted. He wanted younger generations to understand the sacrifices, values, and accomplishments of those who came before them. By promoting education, cultural awareness, and civic participation, he helped inspire countless young Italian Americans to become leaders in their own communities.



HAPPY BIRTHDAY USA *from Italy*



Unsung Italian heroes

One of his greatest achievements was founding the Italian American One Voice Coalition (IAOVC) in 1992. He envisioned a national organization that would unite Italian Americans to speak with “one voice” against bias, discrimination, and cultural misrepresentation. What began as an initiative rooted in New Jersey soon evolved into a nationwide movement, connecting individuals, organizations, and communities across the United States.

While New Jersey was the home base from which Manny launched many of his efforts, his vision was always national in scope. He understood that the challenges facing Italian Americans were not confined to one state. He worked tirelessly to build partnerships and alliances from coast to coast. Today, IAOVC advocates for Italian American communities throughout the country, responding to issues wherever they arise, supporting educational initiatives, defending cultural heritage, protecting historical figures and monuments, and promoting a more accurate understanding of Italian American contributions to American society.

Manny’s legacy can be seen not only in New Jersey, but in every community where Italian Americans have found a stronger voice, greater representation, and renewed pride in their heritage. The organization he created continues to serve as a national advocate, demonstrating that the values he championed – unity, dignity, education, and civic engagement – remain relevant to Italian Americans across the nation.

I feel fortunate to have worked beside Manny for many years. He was a mentor whose wisdom, guidance, and example shaped my own approach to advocacy and leadership. He taught me that defending what is right is rarely easy, but it is always worthwhile. His leadership was defined not by personal recognition, but by service to others and commitment to a cause greater than himself.

When I became President of the Italian American One Voice Coalition following Manny’s passing in 2022, I was both honored and humbled. No one could ever replace Manny Alfano. But I felt a profound responsibility to continue the work he began and preserve the mission he created.

Today, every time IAOVC challenges a stereotype, protects a monument, defends Columbus Day, educates the public, or celebrates Italian American achievements, we are building upon the foundation Manny established. His voice may no longer be with us, but his spirit continues to inspire all of us who carry his mission forward.

His was truly ONE VOICE that became the voice of many.

Thanks, Manny.



André DiMino is a prominent Italian American advocate and community leader. He serves as President of the Italian American One Voice Coalition (IAOVC), the nation’s largest anti-bias organization for Italian Americans. A longtime activist, speaker, and educator, he has dedicated decades to defending Italian American heritage, combating stereotypes, promoting cultural pride, and advancing community engagement across the United States.