

ALLIANCE CHAPTER FORMED IN FRAMINGHAM

Every immigrant group has been forced to deal with discrimination. Unlike other immigrant groups, however, Italian Americans kept silent when newspapers were unfair and harshly critical. After all, their “Old Country” experience with politicians and police were never good. Civic officials were rarely trustworthy. So, they maintained a steady code of silence. In fact, Italians tended to distrust all social, political, and cultural contacts in America. Instead, most stayed to themselves within small social circles.

One New Orleans night in 1896 illustrates the fever pitch of discrimination against Italians and people from Sicily. Sicilians were recruited to work around the clock on plantations to replace freed black slaves following the Emancipation.

While conducting an investigation of rival Italian gangs, the city’s superintendent of police, David C. Hennessey, was shot and killed. As he lay dying, he was asked if he knew who shot him. Hennessey shook his head and said, “no”.

Nevertheless, the Mayor of New Orleans ordered the police to round up every Italian they could find. That night, more than a hundred Italians were arrested. In the end, though, only nine of the accused were put on trial. Even though no Italians were put on the jury, the evidence for their defense was so strong that they were all acquitted in a “Not Guilty!” finding.

However, instead of being released, they were returned to their jail cells while a mob estimated at 10,000 people waited outside screaming for revenge. They tore down the prison gates and cheered as two of the Italian men were riddled with bullets until their heads were blown off. The other jailed Italians were forced out of their cells to be lynched. Their bodies were then gleefully used for target practice.

A New York Times editorial on March 16, 1897, praised the mob for taking justice into their own hands. Italians were also lynched in several cities in Colorado as well as in Louisiana and other southern states. Local ordinances forbid Italian immigrants from going to white schools. Classified as “brown” Italians were considered too much like blacks, and in any case, they were a swarthy brown.

Among the most violent critics of Italians and, by the way, of Christopher Columbus, was the Klu Klux Klan. Massachusetts Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, in discussing the violence in New Orleans said that “the mob believed that the crime was the work of a secret society known as the Mafia; and that the failure to convict was due either to terror of this secret organization or to bribery of the jury by its agents.”

Even today, many normal Italian Americans shy away from the spotlight. Nevertheless, the recent anti-Columbus movement in Framingham has sparked genuine indignation and resentment. In one single night, some 200 Italian Americans and their friends of various racial and ethnic backgrounds joined the Italian American Alliance's effort to begin a Framingham Chapter. On February 6, a second organizing event promises to recruit even more members.

Columbus was a man of his time. However, he was not guilty of the charges brought against him by malicious revisionist historians. Columbus is part of the Italian American DNA. When hostile voices called Italian Americans wops, dagos, and Guineas, and screamed for them to "Go back to where you came from." Italian Americans could retort, "Hey, go back to where YOU came from." "It was an Italian who charted the route so we could find our way here."

The modern Italian American generation, unlike the past, is filled with educated people. An attack on Columbus is taken personally. Even the few Italian American politicians who have acted against Columbus have found themselves shamefully disgraced at a level of contempt that will last long after they have passed away.

The anti-Columbus crowd will never change. Hopefully, they will at least be able to understand.

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