

# That's Amore: South Strabane Township native exploring Washington's Italian Heritage

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For nearly a century and a half, the United States has been renowned as “The Land of Opportunity.” This is where millions of people elsewhere across the globe – seeking a more prosperous and, perhaps, safer life – have settled, and attempt to settle.

Tina Calabro’s grandparents were among those immigrants. Pasquale and Agostina Calabro “were among the four million Italians who left for the United States between 1880 to 1930,” she said.



*Virginia Aloia, top left, the oldest daughter of immigrants Giuseppe and Letizia Aloia, tended to her younger siblings as their parents operated their farm in the south end of Washington. This photo is from the 1920s.*

Hundreds ended up in Washington, and nurtured families there and in surrounding towns and villages. Adults – and teens – worked in coal fields, glass factories and steel facilities. Many Italian immigrants started businesses, including groceries, barber shops, shoe repair stores, clothing shops and furniture stores.

The Italian influx fueled a population boom in the city, which jumped from 4,292 in 1880 to 24,545 in 1930, a six-fold increase over a half-century. And the Italian influence in her hometown intensified Calabro’s interest in her heritage.

“This great wave of immigration: Where did people go?” she asked. “What occupations did they pursue? They weren’t welcome in every kind of workplace.”

“I was thinking specifically of people in the city of Washington, which was a microcosm of this immigration,” she said. “All of this inspired me to look into their histories.”

And so she has.

Calabro, who grew up in South Strabane Township, has made her heritage a personal passion. Over the past five years, she has gathered life stories from descendants of Italian immigrants who settled in Washington, then had them preserved in the Italian Heritage Collection in the Hood Local History Center at Citizens Library in the city.



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*Tina Calabro*

"It's a collection of articles and books. We also collect digitized photos and other things," said Calabro, founder and voluntary manager of the project. "We're still growing the collection. This is just about the city of Washington. If it was any larger than that, (the project) wouldn't be doable."



She noted it "was inspired by my parents' love of their Italian American community," a testament to the late Bruno Calabro and Josephine Matullo Calabro.

The collection launched in 2017, an endeavor that materialized with the support of Sandy Mansmann, executive director of Washington County History and Landmarks Foundation. Mansmann had previously completed a collection of oral histories from members of the African American community in Washington, which Calabro said

*Jean and Frank Insana reside in the Washington neighborhood where he grew up. His father, Gabriel, emigrated to the U.S. with his father, Antonio, and brother, Frank.*

served as a guide for her project.

Through her research, she found until about 1950, Washington had three predominantly Italian-American neighborhoods: Tylerdale; the western end of the Chestnut Street business district; and at the southern end of the Main Street business district, including Maiden Street.

The Calabro clan had earlier settled in the West End, off Chestnut. Tina's paternal grandfather opened a grocery there in 1925 that would operate into the late 1960s.

Overseeing development of the collection has been a formidable task, but her dedication to the community goes beyond that endeavor. Calabro also was a member of the committee to revive an annual Italian festival in the city.

While working on the project, she interacted with members of the Primo Italiano Lodge No. 2800, Sons and Daughters of Italy. The club was working on reviving an annual festival. The initial Washington Italian Festival took place in 2017, a resurrection of an event that was held in the 1980s before expiring.

Last year's festival was canceled because of COVID-19, but will return Sept. 24 and 25 at the Main Street Pavilion, its usual venue. The kickoff that Friday will feature a pre-paid spaghetti dinner and free concert by Nick Fiasco, and the main event on Saturday will run from 12 to 9 p.m. Italian American health care workers will be honored the second day.



*Frank Sonson Sr. born in 1892, operated a store on Chestnut Street in Washington . A relative, Andy Sonson, is pictured here. Frank Sr.'s parents had the surname of Sansone when they arrived form Italy, but officials at Ellis island misspelled it.*

And that's not all Calabro has done.

Her crowning achievement, perhaps, may be “Remembering Their Lives: Stories of Italian Immigrants to Washington, Pennsylvania Told by Their Descendants.” It is an ornately styled book, featuring a cover with retro photos of three Italian American families from the city, and 356 pages of compelling written and oral histories and more photos. She interviewed descendants for each of the 17 oral histories.

Familiar local names abound in the tome, including Mancuso, Passalacqua, Nicoletta, Sonson, Insana, Marasco and Trapuzzano.

The book was published in April. For information on purchasing the book, or accessing a free PDF of it, visit <https://www.primoitaliano.org/family-history>.

The first person she interviewed for the project was Frank “Fuzzy” Mancuso, who became another inspiration. Tina writes in the book that she and Mancuso had a compelling conversation inside the funeral home after her mother died in 2016. Frank was 89 at the time and well-versed in Washington’s Italian American history.

“Frank’s reminiscences ... suggested that other descendants of Washington’s first Italian immigrants still had many stories to share ... Suddenly, I realized that these stories needed to be collected before the storytellers passed from our midst,” she said.

Calabro interviewed Fuzzy before his passing in 2019.

Through her research and own reminiscences, she has learned that settling in the states was not always easy for Italian immigrants. Some were met with disdain and discrimination. Occasionally, harsh discrimination.

Frank Sonson Jr., whose father was born in Pittsburgh to Italian immigrants, related a particularly distasteful experience that his father had. In an interview for the book, he said: "Oh, well, my dad, as soon as he came and settled in Washington, PA, there was signs in the window. I hate this name, but it said, 'Help wanted: Dagos need not apply.'

"You can't do that anymore in our country," he said. "Because they have laws."



*Lucido and Angelina Marchione, front center and right in this 1950s photo, met and married in Italy before coming to America. They raised four daughter on East Maiden Street: Florence, front; from left, Vera, Louise and Millie.*

Yet despite hardships, Calabro pointed out many of the oral historians stressed that Italian "immigrant families developed close friendships with their non-Italian neighbors, customers, etc."

"It always fascinated me to think about how they changed their lives by moving here," Calabro said. "It always puzzled me that (often) there was very little contact with the family back in Italy. It was difficult to do anything but send letters. For my (four) grandparents, there was no traveling back to Italy and never seeing your family again."

She said her grandfather, Pasquale Calabro, came to America alone and worked in mines in West Virginia.

"It was common that a husband would immigrate to the United States first, find work and the wife would come later," Tina said. "My grandmother (Agostina) didn't come over for seven years."

Tina, who now resides in the Highland Park section of Pittsburgh, is one of four siblings, all of whom are familiar with their heritage. She has two younger sisters, Cathi Lombardo and Cara Lytton, and a brother, Patsy, longtime co-owner of David's Limited, a stylish clothing store that shuttered in downtown Washington a year ago after 49 years of operation.

Although her grandparents were unable to return to Italy to visit their families, Tina knows the boot-shaped nation well.

"I've been in Italy 11 times and connected with both sides of my family over the past 20 years," she said. "I was very motivated to bringing them together."

Just as she has been motivated by her ongoing project.