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Building Little Italy: Philadelphia's Italians Before Mass Migration

Richard N. Juliani

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Philadelphia's first Italian immigrants arrived in the mid-eighteenth century. Artists and scholars, tradesmen and entrepreneurs, they established a new community--one of the first 'Little Italies' in America--that would provide not just a home but a sense of belonging for later arrivals. Richard Juliani tells the story of early Italians in the City of Brotherly Love: why they chose that city, what their lives were like, where they lived, and how they interacted. Examining Italian settlement from pre-Revolutionary times up to the eve of mass migration in the 1870s, he shows how these early pioneers created the basic structure of the community that would continue into the twentieth century. Juliani has devoted thirty years of research--combing through newspapers, public archives, religious records, business documents, and files of private organizations--to recapturing the creation of a community. He describes such factors as regional origins, methods of migration, and population growth; patterns of age, sex, income, and occupation; family structure and living arrangements; and the formation of communal institutions. But more than providing data, Juliani explores the private lives of many individuals in the Italian community--notably business leaders who spearheaded fraternal societies and political clubs--and tells how early immigrants made a significant contribution to the city's life. He also compares the Philadelphia community with other Italian colonies, particularly in New York, and shows how, after years of being looked upon in a favorable light, a more negative view toward Italians began to emerge. The early Philadelphia Italian community has never before been studied despite the existence of a large body of records from this period. Building Little Italy provides a rare opportunity to witness the origins of an ethnic community. By presenting a meticulously detailed profile of the Italian immigrant experience through its early stages of development, it captures a piece of local history that has been too long ignored.

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