

THE ITALIANS IN AMERICA BEFORE THE REVOLUTION

Giovanni Schiavo

Introduction by Stephen J. Cerulli



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Philadelphia-based Italian American artist Samantha Pinto designed the portrait of Francis Vigo featured on this book's cover. Giovanni Schiavo named his press Vigo Press in honor of Francis Vigo. Schiavo fought to highlight Vigo's role in the American Revolutionary War and to integrate him into Italian American history. In this spirit, we honor Vigo's legacy with his portrait on the covers of the Giovanni Schiavo Collection.

Bordighera Press would like to thank Catherine Leonard Ellis and family for their generosity and permission to re-print this important contribution to Italian American Studies.

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GIOVANNI SCHIAVO, THE GREAT CHRONICLER OF ITALIAN AMERICA

A Critical Re-Introduction

While creating a list of monographs for scholars of Italian diasporas and cataloging the bulk of the works listed on *The Calandra Italian American and Italian Diaspora Studies Bibliography*, I learned about Giovanni Schiavo, an author of numerous volumes on Italians in the United States decades before the dawn of the “white ethnic revival.”¹ Impressed by the breadth and quantity of his work, I suggested to the dean of the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute, Anthony J. Tamburri, that *The Italians in America Before the Revolution* necessitated a reprint. It is a primer of Schiavo’s career and his final published book. The volume supports contemporary students in their study of Italian diasporic history and is a much-needed re-introduction to the great chronicler of Italian America.²

In 1898, Giovanni Schiavo was born in Castellammare del Golfo, Trapani, Sicily, to a family of tailors. He attended *liceo classico*, where he learned Latin, Greek, and French. In 1915, his father immigrated to the United States. In 1916, Schiavo followed his father to Baltimore with the rest of his family and, a few weeks after immigrating began teaching Italian at the Berlitz School of

1 A period of “awakening” for hyphenated European Americans as a social group with a history. For a primary source on this see, *Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics: The New Political Force of the Seventies* by Michael Novak. For a critical historical analysis see, *Creating the New Right Ethnic in 1970s America: The Intersection of Anger and Nostalgia* by Richard Moss.

2 The crux of Schiavo’s career is several fold: cataloguing and documenting primary sources related to Italian Americans, scholarship on the historical presence of Italians in North America, criticism of Italian Americans and Americans for their lack of knowledge of this history, and ethno-cultural critiques of Italian American institutions and leaders.

Languages. In 1917, he attended Baltimore City College, a high school, to master his English, and subsequently enrolled at John Hopkins University, where he completed a B.A. in 1919. While there, Schiavo was a part of the Student Army Training Corps, which granted him US citizenship. Even though he graduated in 1919, Schiavo continued to attend various university courses into the 1930s.³

Schiavo's early career saw him oscillate between different jobs. In 1920, he took a job as a reporter for *The Baltimore Sun*. He would return to journalism many times over the years. However, in the early 1920s, he came across an opportunity on Wall Street as a clerk. During this time, Schiavo enrolled in several graduate courses at New York University and published his writings in various outlets. Between 1923 and 1926, Schiavo worked for American Express. Part of his responsibilities included visiting Italian communities across the country and encouraging them to send remittances home through American Express. In 1927, he went on to work for an importer in Chicago. While there, he became the publisher and editor of *Il Corriere di Wisconsin*.

In 1928, Schiavo published his first book on Italian America, *The Italians in Chicago*, with a preface penned by social reformer and co-founder of Hull House Jane Addams. In 1929, he continued his localized studies of Italian Americans with *The Italians in Missouri*. His academic merits landed him a fellowship at New York University, where he was part of a team that studied the New York Boys Club of East Harlem. His intellectual pursuits continued into 1930 when Schiavo enrolled as a Ph.D. candidate in International Law and Foreign Relations at Columbia

3 For more detailed biographical information on Schiavo see: Belfiglio, Valentino J. "The Christopher Columbus of Italian-American Studies." *Italian Americana*, FALL/WINTER 1979, Vol. 5, No. 1 (FALL/WINTER 1979), pp. 37-45; Pane, Remigio U. 1985. "In Memoriam: Giovanni Schiavo (1898-1983)" In *Italians and Irish in America*, by Francis X. Femminella, 1-11. Staten Island: The American Italian Historical Association; Cavaoli, Frank J. 2011. "Giovanni Schiavo, the pioneer of Italian American Studies." *CiaoAmerica*. October 11. <http://www.ciaoamerica.net/news/2011/giovanni-schiavo-by-frank-cavaoli.html>.

University. Passing his orals in 1931, he was awarded a fellowship to study Italian International Law and wrote his thesis on Benito Mussolini's foreign policy. However, Schiavo never completed the program due to a lack of funding. Unable to publish his thesis, a requirement for the degree at the time, he was unable to complete the doctorate. He attributed this failure to the financial fallout of the Great Depression.⁴

Nevertheless, Schiavo continued chronicling and writing about Italian Americans, in major outlets such as *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*. Schiavo arguably became the first historian of Italian America with *The Italians in America Before the Civil War*, self-published by his publishing house, The Vigo Press, in 1934.⁵ It was a massive 399-page historical monograph on Italians in America, at a time, when the bulk of the scholarship, on Italian Americans, was analyzing behaviors of recent immigrants and their offspring. Many assumed, at the time, that there was no Italian American history before the 1870s. Schiavo disproved the notion by establishing an Italian American historical canon. As he noted, his book was "an attempt to rescue from oblivion the names of the Italians who helped to build the Republic," which he did by providing biographical information on figures such as the so-called "Great Navigators," the Tonti brothers, Francesco Vigo, and Filippo Mazzei, among others.⁶ This was the first of many books published by The Vigo Press.⁷ This

4 Belfiglio, Valentino J. "The Christopher Columbus of Italian-American Studies." I could not find more information on this manuscript or its title.

5 Cavaioli, Frank J. 2011. "Giovanni Schiavo, the pioneer of Italian American Studies." *CiaoAmerica*. October 11. <http://www.ciaoamerica.net/news/2011/giovanni-schiavo-by-frank-cavaioli.html>.

6 Schiavo, Giovanni. 1934. *The Italians in America Before The Civil War*. New York: The Vigo Press. 1

7 For notes on his contemporaries, see Schiavo's multivolume series *Italian-America Who's Who: A Biographical Dictionary of Italian-American Leaders*. For larger histories, see *Italian-American History: Volume 1: Italian-American History & Volume II: The Italian Contribution to the Catholic Church in America* (1947), and *Four Centuries of Italian-American history* (1952). For biographies see *Philip Mazzei: One of America's Founding Fathers* (1951) and *Antonio Meucci: Inventor of the Telephone* (1958).

moment ignited Schiavo's transformation into the great chronicler of Italian America.⁸

Towards the end of his life, and posthumously, Schiavo received much praise. Peter Sammartino, one of the founders of Fairleigh Dickerson University and its first president, wrote in the *Italian-American Digest*, "Giovanni Schiavo was a combination of a historian and investigative reporter . . . No one has approached him in the sheer quality of his investigations into the role of Italians in America, in the United States or anywhere in the world."⁹ Valentine J. Belfiglio, a professor at the Texas Woman's University, bestowed Schiavo with the title "The Columbus of Italian American Studies," describing him as one who "has done more than any other person to uncover and explore the contributions of Italians to America. He is the founder of Italian-American history."¹⁰ In a letter to historian Dominic Candeloro, Rudolph Vecoli, one of the founders of what is now the Italian Americans Studies Association [IASA] and its first president, described Schiavo as "a true pioneer of Italian American historiography when there was no field and (when) it had no academic standing."¹¹ In a paper delivered to the American Italian Historical Association [now IASA], Frank J. Cavaoli called Schiavo "the pioneer of Italian American Studies," who "provided a major thrust in the battle to overcome stereotypical images of this large ethnic

8 I choose the noun *chronicler* for a few specific reasons. As historian, a scholar who analyzes primary sources through a methodology and reaches a synthesis or original argument, Schiavo is rather lacking. As a chronicler of the Italian American experience, however, no single individual has documented as much in terms of temporal or geographical scope. He is arguably still the first historian of Italian Americans, despite the limits of his scholarship.

9 Gesualdi, Louis J. 2012. *The Italian/American Experience: A Collection of Writings*. Lanham: University Press of America. 37

10 Belfiglio, Valentino J. "The Christopher Columbus of Italian-American Studies."

11 The ANNOTICO Report, and Dominic Candeloro. 2005. "Giovanni Schiavo and Professor Rudolph Vecoli: Their Legacies: Pride vs Anti-Filiopietism." ItaliaUSA.com. May 14. <http://www.italiausa.com/ra/2137.html>. Brackets mine.

group,” and that “contemporary scholars owe a debt of appreciation . . . for his pioneering work in Italian American Studies.”¹²

Conversely, according to some scholars, Schiavo is not without criticism. Despite merited praise, his scholarship has notable limits. In 1935, in a review of *The Italians in America Before the Civil War*, Carl Wittke, a prominent historian of US immigration, criticized Schiavo, arguing that he “never quite succeeds in arranging . . . [his chapters] in anything like a logical narrative pattern, which might present something of a synthesis of Italian influences upon America. There is too much about individual immigrants and hardly anything about the life of Italian groups.”¹³ This lack of social history, scholarly synthesis, and hyper-focus on individuals was a pattern that continues into this book – his final publication. According to historian Stefano Luconi, Schiavo’s “filiopietistic approach has long bulked large in the examination of the early stages of the Italian experience in North America.”¹⁴ This filiopietistic methodology is especially noticeable when Schiavo hones in on colonial leaders and explorers, such as Filippo Mazzei and Christopher Columbus. Luconi extends this assessment further when he notes that scholarship included in “*the Italians in America Before the Civil War* . . . has engaged itself almost exclusively in a hagiographic defense of Italian immigrants . . . to counter negative stereotypes of Italians as foreigners incapable of assimilation into their adoptive country.”¹⁵ With that in mind, it is evident that Schiavo’s contributions are paradoxical. Where on the one hand, he examines the unappreciated history of the Italian American contribution to the United States, thus lifting a veil off a buried ethnic history; on the other, said history lacks a critical

12 Cavaioli, Frank J. “Giovanni Schiavo, the pioneer of Italian American Studies.”

13 Wittke, Carl. 1935. “Reviewed Work: The Italians in America before the Civil War by Giovanni Schiavo.” *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* Vol. 21, No. 4 (March 1935) 560-562.

14 Luconi, Stefano. “Reviewed Work(s): Building Little Italy: Philadelphia’s Italians before Mass Migration by Richard N. Juliani.” *Italica*, Vol. 76, No. 1 (Spring, 1999) 121-122.

15 Ibid.

examination, and in most cases, is a wholesale celebration, instead of a scholarly analysis, of those contributions.

While the importance and watershed of Schiavo's work is undeniable, his biases towards *italianità* and rose-colored sentiments of North American history require acknowledgment and reckoning. In a public debate, with journalist Luigi Barzani Jr., Schiavo outright denied the existence of the Mafia.¹⁶ A great irony, considering, at that time, Carmine Gallante was one of the most prominent *Mafiosi* in America, whose family also hailed from Castellammare del Golfo.¹⁷ He also uncritically celebrated the United States and European colonization of North America and fought to inject Italian Americans, *en masse*, into this history. In the 1930s and 1940s, this notion is debatably defensible due to the lack of common understanding and scholastic knowledge of Indigenous American history and the brutal processes of colonization. However, by 1976, with the rise of the American Indian Movement [founded in 1968] and its literature, awareness of the brutality of North American colonization was well documented, easily available, and known among academia and the American public.¹⁸ Another example of his bias towards *italianità* is apparent in Schiavo's repudiation of pre-Columbian Viking presence in North America as "purely academic" since it decenters the Italian-born Christopher Columbus in history.¹⁹

Despite the limits of his scholarship, Schiavo made many persuasive points on the inadequacies of Italian America. Much of Schiavo's ethno-cultural commentary remains applicable today. Observing the lack of histories on Italian Americans, in 1934, Schiavo argued, "The writing of American History for a long time was monopolized by Eastern college professor of Teutonic descent

16 Barzani, Luigi, and Giovanni Schiavo. 1969. "Sicilians and Others." *The New York Review*. September 04. <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1969/12/04/sicilians-and-others-2/>.

17 Sullivan, Kevin B. 2014. "When Bushwick Was Bonanno." *Narratively.com*. November 11. <https://narratively.com/when-bushwick-was-bonanno/>

18 See *The Italians in America Before The Revolution* and Chapters II through XI in *The Italians in America Before The Revolution*.

19 Schiavo. *The Italians in America Before the Revolution*. 43

who . . . were more . . . interested in the doings of Anglo-Saxon settlers than in those other immigrant groups.”²⁰ In mainstream academia, the issue somewhat remains, in part due to the lack of Italian American studies programs at the doctoral level, where the creation of such historical scholarship could bloom.

In this volume, Schiavo also lamented that Italian Americans have an “inferiority complex.”²¹ He contends, “Such inferiority complex could have been eradicated a long time ago if the Italians had had the benefits of an enlightened leadership like that of the Jews in America, plus their splendid philanthropy and spirit of co-operation.”²² This argument resonates today. For instance, not a single major Italian American organization or group is pushing to sponsor a doctoral-level Italian American studies program.²³ In an interview, when asked for advice on how to conduct research in Italian American studies, Schiavo exclaimed, “If you want to write anything about the Italians the first thing you have to do is to study the language. Learn Italian history and Italian geography. Go to Italy and see things for yourself.”²⁴ One would imagine that this is a prerequisite for “enlightened leadership” as well.

Along with being a primer of Schiavo’s opus, this reprinting is one of utility and re-introduction. John Viola, former president of the National Italian American Foundation [NIAF] and co-host of the

20 Schiavo. *The Italians in America Before the Civil War*. 1

21 Schiavo. *The Italians in America Before the Revolution*. 3. The introduction is debatably the most important section of the book, because it contains suggestions and critiques that remain relevant in 2022.

22 Ibid.

23 For more on this see: Tamburri, Anthony Julian. 2021. “More Graduate Italian-American Studies to Bridge the Gap of Our Cultural Knowledge.” *La Voce Di New York*. March 04. <https://www.lavocedinewyork.com/en/arts/2022/03/04/more-graduate-italian-american-studies-to-bridge-the-gap-of-our-cultural-knowledge/> and Tamburri. 2022. “Where Ignorance Reigns, Life Is Lost”: The Dangers of Neglecting History.” Anthony’s News Letter. <https://anthonyjuliantamburri.substack.com/p/where-ignorance-reigns-life-is-lost>. August 01.

24 Belglio. 256

Italian American Podcast, demonstrates an example of this utility in a piece he wrote on Salvatore Catalano, noting, “it was one of these rare texts, long ago purchased at a collectible bookstore . . . which . . . lead me to the answers I sought. Giovanni Schiavo’s . . . ‘*The Italians in America Before the Civil War*’ provided two whole chapters of clarification and expansive new details.”²⁵ May this book, too, provide such illumination and launch greater research worthy of graduate dissertations.

The necessity of re-introduction is two-fold. There has not been any republication of Schiavo’s volumes, in almost a quarter of a century, since the reprint of *Four centuries of Italian-American History* in 2000. However, perhaps more importantly, much of Schiavo’s critical commentary on Italian America remains pertinent. For these reasons, we believe that Giovanni Schiavo deserves a critical re-introduction. From here, scholars of the Italian diaspora can continue Schiavo’s endeavors and dig deeper into the figures, facts, and events presented in this book. *The Italians in America Before the Revolution* is the optimal initial re-introduction to the work of Giovanni Schiavo, the great chronicler of Italian America.

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25 Viola, John M. "The Curious Case of Salvatore Catalano." *Ambassador* Vol. 27, Iss. 3. (Spring 2016) 44-48.

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FOREWORD

Although this volume includes a few pioneers who came between 1783 and 1800, the word "REVOLUTION" is used because the reader would more easily identify that period.

Some of the chapters, furthermore, are reprinted from my previous works, especially *Italian-American History*, Vol. I, 1947, Vol. II, 1949, and *Four Centuries of Italian-American History*, 1952. Most of them are revised and updated, particularly the bibliography. In some cases, as in the chapters about Vigo, Mazzei, Niza, Vespucci, I have re-evaluated their place in American history, or at least modified it or clarified it. Nevertheless, my study on Mazzei published in 1951 (54 large pages, with three photographs, 44 facsimiles, and 244 footnotes — not to be confused with my 7-page chapter in my book, *Four Centuries* published a year later) still remains the only scholarly work on Mazzei to this day — until a copy of the first article by Mazzei, as translated by Jefferson, signed "Furioso" and inserted as a supplement in the *Virginia Gazette* is found, here or abroad. But I have my doubts, as explained in Chapter 21.

I have added three Appendices because I am fed up with the raids on my books by a pack of petty thieves who have been ransacking them for over thirty years, palming off as the fruit of their own research what has taken me over forty years of hard labor in many parts of the world, untold sacrifices and God only knows how many thousands of dollars. A little fortune which, if invested in buying and selling potatoes, would have made me rich.

The fact is, as I have shown in Appendix C, that practically nothing about the Italian pioneers in America was known before I came along with my 1934 book and, even before that, with my 1930 articles in *Atlantica* magazine. And that is true not just of the names, but especially of the illustrations which took me years and years to locate and thousands of dollars to have photographed. Thus, thanks to my intellectual honesty, whereby I gave full credit to the institutions and organizations that provided me the copies, anybody today can obtain the same copies with only a few dollars, giving the same credit I have given in my *Four Centuries*. But where would the indefatigable researcher have known where to look for those documents and illustrations, if I had not made those sources known to the world?

As for my work, I don't have anyone to thank. Not one Italian-American society, civic organization, fraternal association, foundation, individual, has given me a plugged nickel.

Finally, I want to pay tribute to my late wife, Anne Maher Schiavo, the most patient woman in the world, without whose enduring understanding and love my books could not and would not have been written.

GIOVANNI SCHIAVO

February 12, 1976.