Room One: The Early Immigrants

Italians in the Spanish and Mexican Eras

Italians were some of the first explorers of California. From 1687 to 1711, Father Eusebio Chino (probably pronounced Kee-no) traveled in northern Mexico and Lower California. He was the first person to prove that Lower California was a peninsula, not an island. Early Italian visitors to the shores of California were sailors and fishermen. Most of them had already emigrated to Peru or other South American ports. After Mexico gained its independence, ships were needed to provide the settlements with provisions, and these ships often included captains and sailors of Italian origin.

Some would argue that the first Italian politician in California was Pietro Bandini, who came from Peru to San Diego in 1800. He and his family became involved in local politics in the early part of the 19th century, and they sided with the American attempt to annex California. In fact, the Bandini's house served as the headquarters for Commodore Stockton, and Bandini's granddaughters made the first U.S. Flag in California to present to the visiting officers.

As early as the 1840s, settlers from Genoa began to arrive in the valleys of northern and central California after hearing their Ligurian (the region that includes Genoa) sailing relatives talk about how ideal the valleys were for viticulture. Despite the fact that Liguria is not a major wine producing region in Italy, the wine industry in California was mostly built by Genoese.