Room One: The Early Immigrants

Who were They, and Why did they Come?

The majority of Italian immigrants to California came from northern Italy. This differed from New York and other eastern cities, which received a southern Italian immigrant majority. Many of the early settlers were fishermen, who had sailed up the coast from Italian enclaves in South America, most significantly from Peru. New immigrants from Italy often came after hearing their relatives and friends talk about their experiences in California. Initially, almost all of the immigrants were men, who intended to return to Italy after making some money. At the same time, there were families that were settling and buying real estate in California, showing that some intended to move permanently.

Things that we associate with Italian-American culture, like community and extended family, seem to be products of the immigration experience rather than imports. Italian families that moved to California only did so in the nuclear sense of the term. Italians at the time were more likely to put themselves in regional terms, such as "Ligurian," "Lombardian," or "Sicilian," rather than the umbrella term "Italian." U.S. Immigration statistics reflected this regionalism, by differentiating northern and southern Italians. Unlike other major immigrant groups, there was not an extreme push factor for northern Italians until the 1880s. There was not a famine, war, or religious persecution. Instead, the early immigrants came initially on the recommendations of their friends and family and as a natural migration from other Italian immigrant enclaves.

The more urgent factors in getting Italians to leave their homeland were just around the corner.