Room Three: Work and Economic Integration

Business and Banking

While they succeeded in many industries, Italian-Americans in California achieved their greatest financial success in business and banking. As early as 1875, Italians in the Bay Area were organizing Building and Loan organizations, and by 1885, they had organized the Italian Chamber of Commerce on the Pacific Coast. One of the early prominenti (or prominent community members) was Andrea Sbarboro. Most famous for his work as president of the Italian-Swiss Colony, which became famous for its wines, Sbarboro also organized building and loan associations in San Francisco and Oakland, and founded the Italian-American Bank in 1899. Located initially on the corner of Sacramento and Montgomery, the Italian-American Bank was the first Italian commercial bank in the United States. However, history remembers another California Italian-American banker for his ability to bring banks not only to Italians, but Americans in general.

Amadeo Giannini or A.P. as he was often referred to, had two major innovative ideas. The first was that banks should be able to help small customers with individual savings and personal loans. The other was that banks should be in their customers' neighborhoods, in the form of branches. To do this, he opened the Bank of Italy in 1904. He would later change its named to Bank of America. Giannini's bank took off in the aftermath of the 1906 earthquake, as his competitors declared a bank holiday. Instead, Giannini saved most of his bank's gold and records before the fire destroyed his building, and dipped into his personal finances to help Little Italy rebuild. His investment paid off immensely, as members of the community switched to bank with him, and he was able to realize his vision of bank branches until Bank of America became one of the largest personal banks in the nation. Giannini was one of the first California Italian-American businessmen who were able to expand his clientele beyond the Italian population.