Room Five: Little Italy, San Francisco

North Beach

From the 1860s, Italians also flooded the North Beach neighborhood. The reason for this was simple: it offered the best housing for poor people, and continued to do so well into the 20th century. In the 1930s, 35 percent of pre-World War I Italian immigrants still lived within the confines of Little Italy, and 80 percent of post-World War I arrivals lived in North Beach. However, after the war, a generation that had just grown up moved to the Richmond District or Marin County, areas that weren’t ethnically dominated. At the same time, these first and second generation Italian-Americans often returned to North Beach for church, shopping, and dining out.

The center of the neighborhood was Washington Square, dominated since 1884 by Saints Peter and Paul Church. The priests worked hard to combat the anti-clericalism that was prevalent in Little Italy, fostered by Italian nationalism, the Freemasons, benevolent societies, and anarchists. Two key elements of this project were citizenship and English language classes. As more and more Italian-American children learned English in public school and taught their parents at home, these classes became less popular.