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# An Inhospitable Land: Anti-Italian Sentiment and Violence in Louisiana, 1891-1924

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An Inhospitable Land: Anti-Italian Sentiment and Violence in Louisiana, 1891-1924

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of  
The University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts  
in  
History

by

Alan G. Gauthreaux

B.A., University of New Orleans, 1992

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This work is dedicated to my parents Richard and Evelyn Gauthreaux, whom will always be remembered in my work; my wife Lisa, without whose support I never would have succeeded, and my daughter, Mia Adeline.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	v
INTRODUCTION .....	1
Lynchings in Context.....	8
Italian Immigration to Louisiana .....	10
The Controversy over Italian “Whiteness” .....	12
The Struggle to Regain “White” Control of Louisiana.....	15
The Violence Continues.....	22
“Bloody Tangipahoa” .....	25
CONCLUSION.....	32
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	35
APPENDICES .....	41
VITA.....	44

## ABSTRACT

For over one hundred and sixty years, the Italian immigrants settling in Louisiana have been the subject of much scholarly research. The newly-arrived immigrants showed a propensity for hard work, and natives of the region expected them to eventually assimilate into their new surroundings. However, Italians held little understanding of race relations between blacks and whites in Louisiana as well as in the South. Because of this ignorance, the Italians suffered social, political, and racial discrimination at the hands of the white power structure in Louisiana. This discrimination culminated with several violent incidents against Italians which exposed the motives behind white control of Louisiana.

## INTRODUCTION

*“We owe it to ourselves and to everything we hold sacred in this life to see to it that this blow is the last. We must teach these people a lesson that they will not forget for all time.”*

----- Mayor Joseph A. Shakspeare,  
in his address to the  
New Orleans City Council,  
October 16, 1890, the day after  
Police Chief David C. Hennessy’s death.<sup>1</sup>

*“They [Italians] are citizens and are entitled to protection and respect, no matter what may be their peculiarities or incongruents”*

----- Editorial, *St. Bernard Voice*  
3 December 1898<sup>2</sup>

At approximately 11:00 PM, on the night of October 15, 1890, after a late dinner with a friend and fellow officer, William J. O’Connor, thirty-four-year-old New Orleans Police Chief David C. Hennessy made his way home to the residence he shared with his elderly mother located at 273 Girod Street in uptown New Orleans. Hennessey walked onto his porch, unlocked his front door, and before opening it, turned toward the street when he heard some men whispering. As he turned, shots rang out and small pellets hit Hennessy in the left chest. Hennessy reached for his service revolver and tried to return fire, but because of his wounds, he managed only to fire four shots. Police Officer J.C. Roe, who walked a beat through the neighborhood at about the same time every evening, made his way to the sounds of the gunfire and encountered the gunmen during the melee. Before firing a shot, Roe suffered a gunshot wound to the left ear. In an attempt to return fire, Roe’s weapon jammed, causing the young officer to retreat. Clutching his chest and concerned that his elderly mother might see him hurt, Hennessy staggered around the corner to the residence of Mr. Henry Gillis at 189 Basin Street where he fell on the porch.<sup>3</sup>

The *Daily Picayune* recounted O’Connor’s recollection of the events following the shooting. O’Connor, who left the chief walking a block from his home, ran to the sounds of the report of shotgun blasts. Following the trail of blood from Hennessy’s house, he found the chief on the Gillis’ front porch. O’Connor ran to the side of his friend and asked Hennessy if he knew who shot him. “Oh Billy, Billy, they have given it to me and I gave them back the best way I

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<sup>1</sup> “To Hunt The Assassins; Excitement Over The Murder of Chief Hennessy,” 19 October 1890, *New York Times*, p. 1:5.

<sup>2</sup> Editorial, *St Bernard Voice*, 3 December 1898, p. 2:1.

<sup>3</sup> John Coxe, “The New Orleans Mafia Incident,” *Louisiana Historical Journal*, Vol. 20, No. 4 (October 1937), 1068.

could.” O’Connor then asked, “Who gave it to you, Dave?” Hennessey motioned O’Connor to place his ear near Hennessey’s mouth where he whispered, “the Dagoes.”<sup>4</sup> But asked later specifically who shot him, Hennessey “shook his head from side to side in a negative way.”<sup>5</sup>

Quickly transported to Charity Hospital, Hennessey died later that evening. His funeral garnered notice from the national press as the *New York Times* reported the following day, “All day long the people crowded into the City Hall to view the body and it was almost impossible to reach the bier, which had been placed in the same room in which the body of Jefferson Davis lay in state.... The cortege moved through principal streets of the city, all of which were so crowded with people as to blockade the street cars and the passage of vehicles.”<sup>6</sup>

In his capacity as chief of police, David Hennessey saw himself as a mediator between the warring factions of the alleged Italian organized crime organizations of the city. The chief familiarized himself with the “families” in the area, and even became involved with one dispute that many historians believe led to his death. The Provenzano and Matranga factions fought for control of the New Orleans docks from 1888 to 1890 as the lucrative fruit importation business grew, expanding the New Orleans economy and creating an avenue for aggressive underworld figures to make money illegally through graft, corruption, and extortion. This battle culminated with the attempted assassination of Tony and Charles Matranga by the Provenzano family on 1 May 1890, where Tony Matranga received a leg wound after an ambush went awry. A jury later convicted the Provenzanos, but the court granted a new trial allegedly based upon the intervention of Chief Hennessey himself. On 23 January 1891, a jury acquitted the Provenzanos based upon Hennessey’s testimony.

Hennessey’s no-nonsense style earned him a reputation which angered many in underworld circles. So much so that police looked to reputed Mafia figures as the main culprits in his murder. An unparalleled roundup of suspects began in the city as police detained forty-two suspects on suspicion of committing the act, but many secured release as police narrowed down the field. Police finally arrested and held twenty-one suspects for arraignment, all reputed associates of some sort of organized crime family that operated in the New Orleans area for quite some time. Eleven of these suspects eventually stood trial for their alleged complicity in the death of Chief Hennessey: Pietro Natali, Antonio Scaffidi, Antonio Bagnetto, Manuel Polizzi,

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Gambino, *Vendetta: The True Story of the Worst Lynching In America* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1977), 1068.

<sup>5</sup> “To Hunt The Assassins; Excitement Over The Murder of Chief Hennessey,” 19 October 1890, *New York Times*, p. 1:5.

<sup>6</sup> “The Murder of the Chief; All New Orleans Excited About the Tragedy,” 18 October 1890, *New York Times*, p. 1:5. Jefferson Davis died less than a year earlier and his body placed in state in New Orleans at Gallier Hall.



Antonio Marchese, Pietro Monasterio, Sebastiano Incardona, Salvador Sunseri, Loretto Comitez, Carlo Traina, and Charles Politz. The Matrangas appeared heavily involved, although no direct evidence proved their complicity. Joseph Macheca, a wealthy shipping magnate, turned himself into authorities when he learned the District Attorney issued a warrant for his arrest.<sup>7</sup>

The following day, a *New York Times* article proclaimed that New Orleans readied itself for great social disorder as “It seems certain that the city is on the eve of a bloody race riot...”, while rumors spread that the accused men sitting in the Orleans Parish Prison planned to “kill a number of other officials.” Public sentiment against the Italian people of New Orleans in general ran high.<sup>8</sup>

The trial began on February 16, 1891, before respected jurist Judge Joshua Baker, Section A, Criminal District Court. Three hundred nineteen prosecution witnesses presented testimony. Judge Baker ordered an acquittal for Charles Matranga for lack of evidence. During the trial one of the defendants, Manuel Politz, who had behaved violently and acted unmanageable throughout the proceedings, tried to escape from the courtroom on several occasions, and even attempted suicide. The jury deliberated for two days without a break, and on 13 March 1891, found eight of the defendants not guilty, and declared a mistrial for the other three. William Grant, United States Attorney in New Orleans at the time of the trial, wrote a report on the trial to his superiors: “The evidence in the case against them (defendants) submitted to the jury is voluminous...Both as a whole is exceedingly unsatisfactory, and is not, in my mind, conclusive one way or the other.”<sup>9</sup>

However tenuous the jury’s decision, the verdict infuriated the most influential people of the city and rumors of bribery surfaced. Throughout that night, various meetings took place in the city calling for a plan of vengeance against the Italians who murdered the chief. On the following day, March 14<sup>th</sup>, a notice appeared in the local newspaper calling for all good citizens to assemble near the Clay Statue on Canal Street at 10:00 AM.<sup>10</sup> Once the crowd of ten thousand

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<sup>7</sup> “Hunting Hennessy’s Assassins,” 21 October 1890, *New York Times*, p. 1:3-4.

<sup>8</sup> “To Hunt The Assassins; Excitement Over The Murder of Chief Hennessy,” 19 October 1890, *New York Times*, p. 1:5.

<sup>9</sup> William Grant to U.S. Attorney General W. H. H. Miller, 27 April 1891, New Orleans, in *Correspondence in Relation The Killing of the Italian Prisoners*, No. 44, Historic New Orleans Collection, New Orleans, Louisiana.

<sup>10</sup> This identical call went out on in the *Daily Picayune* on September 13, 1874, when members of the “White League” demanded the removal of the Radical Republican government which had ruled the state since the end of the Civil War. At 3:00 PM, the White League battled with the forces of the Metropolitan Police, a predominantly black police force. In the ensuing melee, the Metropolitan Police lost seventy men, wounded or dead, then withdrew. The Democrats took over the state and viewed the “Battle of Liberty Place” as the beginning of the end of Republican rule in Louisiana. A monument to the battle stands behind One Canal Place at the foot of Canal Street. “Citizens of New Orleans,” *Daily Picayune*, New Orleans, p. 3: 3; “War; The Uprising of Citizens,” *Daily Picayune*, New Orleans, 14 September 1874, p. 1: 3-7.

gathered, they made their way through Congo Square on North Rampart Street, marching to the Old Parish Prison at Basin and Treme Streets. Hearing the loud marching of the crowd, Captain Lemuel Davis, warden of the prison, readied his men.<sup>11</sup>

The *Daily States* newspaper of March 14, 1891 reported the events of that day:

When the crowd poured down the Orleans, the advance guard, armed with shotguns and improved Winchesters, and numbering three hundred men, at once took possession of the main entrance of the prison and demanded of Capt. Lem Davis permission which he did not disposed [sic] to grant, and then messengers were immediately dispatched for axes and crowbars and picks which were soon at hand and then commenced a furious pounding upon the massive front gate but it did not yield to the blows showered upon it.<sup>12</sup>

Captain Davis and the other guards told the prisoners to find hiding places, but this proved for naught as the vigilantes easily found their prey. The incited mob removed Manuel Politz from the prison where the crowd carried his body through the front gates and marched to St. Ann Street where they hanged Politz from a lamppost. The vigilantes then dragged the last of the prisoners, Bagnetto, out the main entrance of the prison and hanged him by the neck in the giant oak tree in front of the prison until he expired. The crowd continued to violate his corpse, using it for target practice.<sup>13</sup>

Reactions to the lynching of the Italians brought outrage from all over the world. In San Francisco, the *Los Angeles Times* reported on March 18, 1891, “At a meeting of Italian citizens here tonight, the speakers denounced the New Orleans lynching as a bloody crime and barbarous butchery.” In Boston at Faneuil Hall, three thousand Italian residents vented their anger at the lynching. From Nashville, Italian inhabitants, “passed resolutions of sympathy with the Italians in New Orleans,” and protesting to the American and Italian governments, demanded some sort of monetary compensation for the families of the murder victims.<sup>14</sup>

Some of the populace from the city of New Orleans reacted openly with approval concerning the murders. John P. Richardson, owner of a dry goods store in New Orleans, made a statement to northern newspapers where he declared, “It looks bad on its face to those from there, but people who are acquainted with the status of affairs can do nothing but commend the action taken.” Richardson, seeking justification perhaps in his own mind for the lynching, made

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<sup>11</sup> Gambino, *Vendetta*, 81-82.

<sup>12</sup> “Retribution,” *Daily States*.

<sup>13</sup> “Chief Hennessy Avenged,” *New York Times*, 15 March 1891, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, accessed 3/14/06.

<sup>14</sup> “Italian Indignation Meetings,” *L.A. Times*, 18 March 1891, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, accessed 4/8/06.

a generalization concerning the Italians in New Orleans when he added, “They [Italians] are treacherous, revengeful, and seek their revenge in most foul and cowardly manners.”<sup>15</sup>

Mayor Shakspeare received several letters of praise from people all over the nation expressing their approval at his inaction to prevent the lynching. A W.R. Coats from Kalamazoo, Michigan, wrote, “I hold that the taking of the lives of those Maffia (sic) murderers on the 1<sup>st</sup> [fourteenth] of March was a righteous act and in the interest of true liberty and American advancement.”<sup>16</sup> In another postcard, a T. Garland in New York compared the mayor to the “pearl” of English literature when he stated, “We need a Shakspeare here to create a language that the leaders of thirty thousand thieves can understand.”<sup>17</sup> Another letter, this one from San Francisco, displayed a fervent patriotism as the writers, J. H. Porterfield and A.C. Rulafson, again compared Shakspeare to the English poet when they declared: “As Americans, we beg to present our sincere thanks for the able manner in which you ‘stayed at home and attended to your own private business,’ while the citizens of your city avenged the insult to our flag; the assassination of Hennessy, and the debauchery of the Courts and Jury. The world has produced two great Shakespeares — the English poet, and the American Mayor.”<sup>18</sup>

Italy and the United States rattled their sabers at one another for a time and the United States paid reparations to the families of the murdered men. They considered this as a “friendly act of this government in expressing to the government of Italy its reprobation and abhorrence of the lynching of Italian subjects in New Orleans,” rendering \$2,211.90 to each family of the eleven murdered men.<sup>19</sup>

In investigating the anti-Italian movement within Louisiana starting with the Hennessey affair in 1890, most historians focus primarily upon the New Orleans area rather than the state of Louisiana as a whole. Historian Daniela Jaeger explains that Hennessey’s assassination occurred as a direct result of a “white elite” working behind the scenes to eliminate any economic threat to this class of New Orleans citizens. Jaeger clarifies that the city’s white elite instigated the lynching in order to maintain economic control over New Orleans.<sup>20</sup> Focusing outside of New Orleans, the rural parishes of Louisiana not only exhibited economic motives for the violence

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<sup>15</sup> “The Lynching Justifiable,” *New York Times*, 17 March 1891, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, accessed 3/24/06.

<sup>16</sup> Letter from W.R. Coats to Mayor Joseph Shakspeare, Kalamazoo, Michigan, 19 May 1891, Mayor Joseph A. Shakspeare Papers, Historic New Orleans Collection.

<sup>17</sup> Postcard from T. Garland to Mayor Joseph Shakspeare, New York, 17 May 1891, Mayor Joseph A. Shakspeare Papers, Historic New Orleans Collection.

<sup>18</sup> Letter from J.H. Porterfield and A.C. Rulafson to Mayor Joseph A. Shakspeare, San Francisco, California, 17 March 1891, Mayor Joseph A. Shakspeare Papers, Historic New Orleans Collection.

<sup>19</sup> “Injustice to Italian Laborers,” in *Messages and Papers of the Presidents, 1789-1897, Benjamin Harrison*, [www.bklyn-genealogy-info.com/Ethnic/Ital.Injustice.html](http://www.bklyn-genealogy-info.com/Ethnic/Ital.Injustice.html), accessed 3/31/06.

<sup>20</sup> Daniela Jaeger, “The Worst “White Lynching”: Elites v. Italians in New Orleans, 1891,” Unpublished Masters’ Thesis, University of New Orleans, 2001, iii, 43.

against Italians, but also the volatile political environment of the post-Reconstruction period contributed significantly to anti-Italian sentiment within the state.

The Italian population in New Orleans certainly seized opportunities to improve their station, beginning with utilizing the skills learned in Italy with fishing and oystering in the waterways of Louisiana. Even though political leaders of both the city of New Orleans and the state of Louisiana invited the immigrants to replace the dwindling black labor force, the motives behind the invitation were political as well as economic. With the migration of many African Americans to the North, political leaders hoped, Italians might serve to reinvigorate the white constituency in the parishes formerly inhabited by black workers.

By taking jobs in the fields of the sugar and cotton parishes of Louisiana as well as maintaining a firm economic footing within the city's limits, the Italians' proved their determination to persevere economically. In Louisiana, the Italians sought to escape the weighty taxation, unequal land assignments, the constant threat of malaria, and soil depleted land from years of overuse in Italy.<sup>21</sup> However, their lack of prejudices towards the black population of the state served to make them targets for the white supremacy movement in the state at that time.

Hennessy's dying declaration, "the Dagoes," condemned the Italian community, a moderate segment of New Orleans' population (see Appendix A, Italian population in Orleans Parish), as well as other Italian communities in the outlying parishes. Italian immigrants endured the accusatory quip, "Who Killa Da Chief?" as an ethnic slur for many years after the chief's slaying. The sequence of events set in motion by the Hennessey case of the lynching of the first Italians in 1891 solidified local beliefs pertaining to race and ethnicity rooted in politics and ideologies aimed at providing cohesiveness to the white population in post-bellum Louisiana. Between 1891 and 1924, Italians joined the ranks of black sympathizers, Populists, and later with the Republican Party. Spanning an important period in Louisiana history, both from a political and an ideological standpoint, the lynching of Italians in Louisiana must be placed in the context of the continuing debate over the "whiteness" of immigrants, exactly how this classification changed with time and circumstances, and how political machinations of post-Reconstruction Louisiana struggled to regain white control of the state.

The Italians' work ethic, their socioeconomic resemblance to blacks, their unwillingness or inability to assimilate into southern society, and their lack of support for the white supremacists politics of Louisiana at the time targeted them for retribution along with African Americans in the post-Reconstruction South. This work will demonstrate where Italians fit into

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<sup>21</sup> Federal Writers' Project, Works Progress Administration of the City of New York, *The Italians of New York: A Survey* (New York: Random House Publishing, 1969), 37-38.

the politics of the “New South,” and not just the urban politics of New Orleans. The Italians challenged the script of black and white opposition in the post-bellum South, further exposing both the economic and political roots of white supremacy.

## Lynchings in Context

It is important to examine the lynching of the Italians in context with the lynchings occurring concurrently of African Americans at this period in southern history. Within only the last twenty years have scholars done serious research into lynching. During the period between 1930 and 1980, very little scholarship paid attention to lynching in America, and according to historian W. Fitzhugh Brundage, one of the foremost scholars on lynching history, when historians performed any research on the subject, they concentrated on lynchings in the South where law enforcement and the judiciary considered extralegal violence commonplace. As long as researchers investigated lynching in the South and in no other region, the phenomena seemed contained within the borders of that area. White prejudice against blacks may have existed in the North, but due to the attentive legal system and the institutions associated with that system, northern authorities tended to investigate and prosecute these offenses more thoroughly than in the South. Eventually, as southern lynchings gained more notoriety both nationally and internationally, lynch mobs in the South found it more difficult to defend the practice.<sup>22</sup>

In continuing to justify their actions of brutality, southerners responsible for the lynching of African Americans, especially the lynching of African American males, insisted that their victims had raped white women. Opponents of lynching argued that this vicious practice contained some hidden agenda cloaked behind justification “as a necessary act to stop black brutes.” Ida B. Wells, the foremost proponent of exposing the real justification behind the lynchings of African Americans, noted that where most lynchings took place, a law enforcement apparatus existed, but did not deter vigilante justice.<sup>23</sup> The act of lynching, Wells illustrated, displayed the southern white structure’s attempt to control African American male lust towards white women. Wells argued that the crime of rape “was unknown during four years of civil war, when the white women of the South were at the mercy of the race which is all at once charged with being a bestial one.”<sup>24</sup> Post-lynching investigations, when they did occur, proved that allegations against most black men for the rape of white women were unsubstantiated.<sup>25</sup>

Some whites saw the alleged crimes of black males as a way of “getting even” with the white man, or even more so, the white race. Moreover, white supremacists used lynching against

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<sup>22</sup> W. Fitzhugh Brundage, “Conclusion: Reflections on Lynching Scholarship,” *American Nineteenth Century History*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (September, 2005), 405-406.

<sup>23</sup> *Southern Horrors and Other Writings: The Anti-Lynching Campaign of Ida B. Wells, 1891-1900*, Ed. by Jacqueline Jones Royster, The Bedford Series in History and Culture (New York: Bedford/St.Martin’s, 1997), 28-29.

<sup>24</sup> Ida B. Wells, *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases* (New York: The New York Age Print, 1892), 53, 63, in *Southern Horrors and Other Writings: The Anti-Lynching Campaign of Ida B. Wells, 1891-1900*, Ed. by Jacqueline Jones Royster, The Bedford Series in History and Culture (New York: Bedford/St.Martin’s, 1997).

<sup>25</sup> Arthur F. Raper, *The Tragedy of Lynching* (Montclair, New Jersey: Patterson Smith, 1969), 37.

blacks as a means of racial dominance, politically subjugating the blacks of the South with unprecedented brutality and intimidation. Southern whites used this to its fullest potential whether the accused purposely or accidentally performed the offending act.<sup>26</sup> Sources of the day provided a plausible motive for the lynchings. W.E.B. DuBois, for instance, stated in his work, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), that “the ignorant southerner hates the Negro, the workingmen fears his competition, the moneymakers wish to use him as a laborer, [and] some of the educated see a menace in his upward development.”<sup>27</sup> DuBois also stated that while the white intellectuals and workingmen wanted blacks’ political rights to disappear, the passions of ignorant southerners “are easily aroused to lynch and abuse any black man.”<sup>28</sup>

Historian W. Fitzhugh Brundage asserts in his work, *Under Sentence of Death: Lynching in the South* (1997), that the white male participation in lynching became a way of maintaining their status at the pinnacle of the racial and gender ladder of the South.<sup>29</sup> Lynching itself became communal and ritualistic as white males exhibited this behavior to solidly justify white cohesion in the South. In context with the Italian lynchings in New Orleans, Brundage observed in his other monumental work on lynchings, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1930* (1993), that lynchings held several distinctions in the commission of the act. The size of the mobs involved with lynchings denoted the publicity an alleged crime received (reports of the lynchings in New Orleans noted the mob to be over ten thousand people). Moreover, because of the severity of the alleged crime, most often the crowds riled themselves into a frenzy, causing the death of more than one victim. These mass mob lynchings followed a procedural manifestation which Brundage characterizes as a macabre dance. The capturing of the victim, deciding where the lynching would take place, and the specific act of the lynching adhered to a ritual which demonstrated some order to a disorderly act. According to Brundage, the ritual ended with a cursory investigation which listed the perpetrators as unknown. These inquests ended the ritual. The lynchings in New Orleans followed this exact course.<sup>30</sup>

The families of blacks murdered as a result of mob lynchings rarely protested the action for fear of mob retaliation against themselves. In one instance, that of Mary Turner in 1918

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<sup>26</sup> Edward Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life after Reconstruction* (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 1992), 157.

<sup>27</sup> W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Ed. by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Teri Hume Olivier (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999), 44 (clarification added).

<sup>28</sup> DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 44.

<sup>29</sup> *Under Sentence of Death: Lynching in the South*, Ed. by W. Fitzhugh Brundage (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 7.

<sup>30</sup> W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Lynching in the New South, Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1930* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 41-50; Philip Dray, *At The Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America* (New York: random House, 2002), 82-85.

Savannah, Georgia, verified the frustration of blacks in the South over the wholesale lynching of their people. Turner, eight months pregnant at the time, discovered that her husband had been lynched and she vowed to see his executioners brought to justice. A lynch mob retaliated brutally, hanging Mary Turner's body upside down, dowsing her with gasoline and igniting her on fire. While Mary Turner was still alive, one of her executioners cut her eight-month-old fetus from her body and defiled it as well.<sup>31</sup> The distinguishing factors between this case and the lynching of the Italians in 1891 New Orleans show the dichotomy between the families of blacks and the families of the Italians who were lynched. Italian officials as well as the Italian populations from around the country vehemently protested the lynching of the eleven men in New Orleans. As result of these protests, the American government paid an indemnity to the families of the murdered men.<sup>32</sup> It is doubtful that southern governments would consider any restitution to the families of black lynching victims.

The preservation of southern honor certainly did not justify the lynching of the Italians in New Orleans, but it did help to expose the motives of the lynchers of blacks: political repression and the protection of white supremacy. In addition, at the time of the Hennessey assassination, the Italians did not meet whites' expectations concerning their assimilation into southern society, either through their political or racial alliances. Not meeting those expectations summoned the wrath of the white power structure in a manner they established in dealing with their perceived threat of African Americans — lynching.

#### Italian Immigration to Louisiana

When the first Italians made their way from the Northern Mediterranean region of Europe to Louisiana, they hardly expected to face a subsequently hostile environment. The first Italians in Louisiana showed promise economically as the end of the American Civil War saw an increasing exodus of black labor from the cotton and cane regions of the state. With the unification of Italy and Sicily in the mid-1860's, one monarch ruled the medium-sized kingdom. Seeking to improve their station in life and escape the dreaded "vendettas" in their homeland, not to mention the lack of farmland and the constant threat of disease, Italians made their way to the United States, establishing their homes in places like New Orleans, New York, and Chicago. Already used to the climate, Italians settled easily in the South. Unfamiliarity with local customs in a strange land, new immigrants set up their own little communities in American cities known as "Little Italys." Louisiana, with its vast inlets and outlets to the Gulf of Mexico, helped the

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<sup>31</sup> *Without Sanctuary: Lynch Photography in America*, Ed. by James Allen, Hilton Als, Congressman John Lewis, and Leon F. Litwack (Santa Fe: Twin Palms Publishers, 2002), 14-15.

<sup>32</sup> "Italian Indignation Meetings," *L.A. Times*, 18 March 1891, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, accessed 4/8/06.



Italians of New Orleans thrive at importing fruit, stevedoring, fishing, oystering, and ordinary dock labor where they profited from the competition with other minorities.<sup>33</sup> The one ruling facet of life in Louisiana, since the state's inception, became politics, and this facet became the undoing of any hope of equal measure the Italians may have desired with the whites of the city, or the state of Louisiana for that matter.<sup>34</sup>

The hatred Louisianians exhibited against the Italians did not appear suddenly. The planters of Louisiana welcomed Italian immigrants as a change in the labor force, and government officials invited immigrants to come to Louisiana in an effort to repopulate the predominantly black parishes in 1865, where planters showed frustration and disdain for black laborers.<sup>35</sup> With the expansion of markets overseas and new workers coming to the area, many city and state leaders realized that the new immigrants could benefit in increasing the area's profitability while satisfying the state's need for agricultural labor.<sup>36</sup>

The Italians who arrived in New Orleans in those early days maintained their traditional customs brought over from their home country. By 1890, three thousand twenty-two hundred Italians settled in the New Orleans area, making their homes in sections of the city like the French Quarter and along St. Claude Avenue (see Appendix A, Italian population of Orleans Parish). Because of these opportunities in various business and work ventures, Italian settlements began to grow steadily in America as well as in the South. This provided for newer immigrants to become better acclimated to their new surroundings more easily.<sup>37</sup>

After the Civil War, in September of 1865, black and white radicals united to form the Republican party of Louisiana. Because of this union, the Democrats of Louisiana sought to populate former black parishes with newly-arrived white immigrants.<sup>38</sup> The hopes of politicians in post-Civil War Louisiana especially heightened with the anticipated influx of white immigrants that would insure white supremacy in Louisiana.<sup>39</sup> Early immigrants in the area felt comfortable with their predicament as many of them settled in Louisiana due to the similarity in

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<sup>33</sup> Andrew Cunningham, "The Italian as a Hindrance to White Solidarity in Louisiana, 1890-1898," *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 50, No. 1 (January, 1965), 24.

<sup>34</sup> Daniela Jaeger, "The Worst "White Lynching": Elites v. Italians in New Orleans, 1891," Unpublished Masters' Thesis, University of New Orleans, 2001, 33.

<sup>35</sup> Robert L. Brandfon, "The End of Immigration to the Cotton Fields," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, Vol. 50, No. 4 (March 1964), 593.

<sup>36</sup> Jean Ann Scarpaci, *Italian Immigrants in Louisiana's Sugar Parishes: Recruitment, Labor Conditions, and Community Relations, 1880-1910* (New York: Arno press, 1980), 33.

<sup>37</sup> A.V. Margavio and J. Lambert Molyneaux, "Residential Segregation of Italians in New Orleans and Selected American Cities," *Journal of Louisiana Studies*, Vol. XII, No. 4 (Winter 1973), 639-640.

<sup>38</sup> Cunningham, "The Italian, A Hindrance to White Solidarity in Louisiana, 1890-1898," 23.

<sup>39</sup> Barbara Botein, "The Hennessy Case: An Episode in Anti-Italian Nativism." *Louisiana Historical Journal*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (Summer, 1979), 262.

the climate to that of the Mediterranean.<sup>40</sup> In addition, Italy at that time experienced both industrialization and declining prices for agricultural goods grown on their farms, which in turn drew the rural farm worker from the farm to the city. The crowding of Italian cities soon slackened with mass emigrations to the United States.<sup>41</sup>

Many newly-arrived Italians in rural areas worked jobs normally occupied by blacks.<sup>42</sup> Immigrant Italians showed no prejudice against African Americans as many Democratic politicians first hoped. Eventually, some white Democrats equated the Italians socially and politically with the African Americans, in turn stripping them of any claim to being white.<sup>43</sup>

### The Controversy over Italian “Whiteness”

Although Louisiana authorities invited the Italians to Louisiana in the hopes of increasing post-Civil War economic vitality, the Italians fell within a class system based upon racial injustice. This system predicated itself upon the Italians’ association with blacks whom the white elites considered “inferior and suspect,” condemning the Italians’ behavior as not fitting into the perception of the southern capitalist system.<sup>44</sup>

Italians and blacks lived and socialized together without disrespecting either each other’s cultures or their lifestyles. Italian immigrants working on a plantation held no animosity toward an African American overseeing a cane cutting crew.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, further evidence exists as to the peaceful coexistence of Italians and blacks in Louisiana as the *St. Bernard Voice* reported on a small school near Monroe, Louisiana, where, “along with little negro boys and girls, are two Italian children.” The teacher at the school, Mary Cook, stated that the Italian childrens’ parents agreed to let the children attend, and Cook “did not know she was doing anything wrong by letting the children attend the school with negro pupils.”<sup>46</sup> Martin Behrman, a powerful Democratic leader in the state at the turn of the twentieth century, observed the cooperation between blacks and Italians in New Orleans when he commented, “They divided the work by agreement and they stand together when there is trouble over wages and so forth.”<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Cunningham, “The Italian, A Hindrance to White Solidarity in Louisiana, 1890-1898,” 24.

<sup>41</sup> Brandfon, “The End of Immigration to the Cotton Fields,” 605.

<sup>42</sup> Cunningham, “The Italian, A Hindrance to White Solidarity In Louisiana, 1890-1898,” 24.

<sup>43</sup> Brandfon, “The End of Immigration to the Cotton Fields,” 610 (emphasis added).

<sup>44</sup> Vencenza (Jean) Scarpaci, “Walking the Color Line: Italian Immigrants in Rural Louisiana, 1880-1910,” in *Are Italians White?*, Ed. by Jennifer Guglielmo and Salvatore Salerno (New York: Taylor and Francis Books, 2003), 61-63.

<sup>45</sup> Scarpaci, “Walking the Color Line: Italian Immigrants in Rural Louisiana, 1880-1910,” in *Are Italians White?*, 61-63.

<sup>46</sup> “Two Italian Children Attend Same School as Negroes,” *St. Bernard Voice*, Chalmette, Louisiana, 19 December 1908, p. 16:7.

<sup>47</sup> *Martin Behrman of New Orleans: Memoirs of a City Boss*, Ed. by John R. Kemp, (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), 52.

In classing Italians “non-white” based on their associations and interactions with blacks, elitist distinctions stemmed from their perceptions of Italians based upon a caste system deeply entrenched in their homeland. According to historian Jean Scarpaci, northern Italians viewed southern Italians as poor and racially inferior. American policymakers enhanced this distinction between northern European immigrants and southern Italians, declaring southern Italians best-suited for low-paying menial labor which African Americans usually performed. Thus, the racism southern Italians experienced in the United States as well as Louisiana followed them from Italy. At first, Italians shared the same socioeconomic status as rural workers with African Americans; they became viewed in the eyes of white natives as different socially and racially, stigmatizing Italians as a class equal to African Americans.<sup>48</sup>

Despite such perceptions, the people of St. Bernard Parish made observations at the time portraying Italians as industrious, hardworking, and most of all, frugal, praising them for their diligence. The *St. Bernard Voice*, a farmers’ weekly newspaper, proclaimed that because of their inclination toward truckfarming (a truckfarm grows strictly vegetables), the Italians made a valuable contribution to the economy of Louisiana (see Appendix B, Italian population of St. Bernard Parish). The *Voice* stated, “The Italian is innately a hard worker, a close observer, and a tireless student” which “made them well-suited for the occupation of truckfarming.” The paper also elaborated that the Italians of St. Bernard Parish demonstrated pleasure in their work and consistently keep their grounds clean and neat, causing other nationalities in the area to attempt to meet the Italians’ standard of appearances. The only disappointment that the newspaper exhibited was the dissatisfaction with the Italians’ frugality. This measure of their personal fiscal responsibility cast doubt, according to the newspaper, as to whether the Italians could be considered good citizens. The *Voice* opined, “If the Italian immigrant became a little more involved with American ideals and did not put away every cent he made,” he may become an American citizen, contributing more to the local economy.<sup>49</sup>

The Italians’ unwillingness or inability to adapt to American culture, or southern culture, caused many Americans to believe that Italians possessed an inherent propensity to commit the worst of crimes. Historian Michael Kurtz presents the theory that most Italian immigrants who made their way to Louisiana tried to escape the harassment of the Sicilian Mafia, and he argues that Mayor Shakspeare utilized the chief’s death as a retaliatory measure, drawing on anti-Italian sentiment because the Italians supported Shakspeare’s opponent in the mayoral election of

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<sup>48</sup> Scarpaci, “Walking the Color Line: Italian Immigrants in Rural Louisiana, 1880-1910,” in *Are Italians White?*, 61, 63.

<sup>49</sup> “The Italian as a Farmer,” *St. Bernard Voice*, Chalmette, Louisiana, 18 July 1908, p. 2:1.

1888.<sup>50</sup> Historian Richard Gambino supplemented Kurtz's deduction in arguing that New Orleans condoned the lynching as a means of ethnic control.<sup>51</sup>

Unfair as it seemed, ethnic bias determined the perceived criminal proclivities of Italian immigrants. Researchers A.V. Margavio and Jerome J. Salamone suggest in their work, *Bread and Respect: The Italians of Louisiana* (2002), that the association of Italians with organized crime is mythical. Most Italians who came to this country were law-abiding citizens, they argue, and any association with a natural propensity to commit crime based upon one's ethnic background unfairly stigmatizes Italian Americans.<sup>52</sup>

The racial classification of Italians also became important to the southern white ideology. With these immigrants, nativists considered them white as long as they did not attempt to upset the white power structure in the South. Historian Thomas A. Guglielmo argued in his work, *White on Arrival: Italians, Race, Color, and Power in Chicago* (2003), that native whites considered Italians white as long as they refrained from associating with non-white groups. Guglielmo states that in the early part of the twentieth century, scientific opinions relied on race/color classifications where Italians held a firm grip on the white category. In addition, historically, Italians were considered white as a result of their roots in Etruscan and Greek civilization, while at the same time Angles and Saxons lived a barbaric existence in Northern Europe. Guglielmo insists that if native American whites were unwilling to consider Italians white, the rest of western civilization could not claim that right either.<sup>53</sup>

In continuing this "whiteness" debate, historian Mathew Frye Jacobsen, in his work, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (1998), agrees with Guglielmo, urging further that because Italians took jobs and lived close to blacks, southern whites labeled the Italians black according to local custom.<sup>54</sup> Jacobsen elaborated that Italians occupied a "racial middle ground" within the Jim Crow atmosphere of the postbellum South, and in continuing their association with blacks, southern whites considered the Italians in a class equal to African Americans.<sup>55</sup> As Italians fell lower on the white societal ladder, according to the

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<sup>50</sup> Michael Kurtz, "Organized Crime in Louisiana: Myth or Reality?" *Louisiana Historical Journal*, Vol. XXIV, No. 4 (Fall 1983), 363.

<sup>51</sup> Gambino, *Vendetta*, 130.

<sup>52</sup> A.V. Margavio and Jerome J. Salamone, *Bread and Respect: The Italians of Louisiana* (New Orleans: Pelican Publishing, 2002), 188.

<sup>53</sup> Thomas A. Guglielmo, *White on Arrival: Italians, Race, Color, and Power in Chicago, 1890-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 6-7, 29, 30-31, 36-37. The scientific opinion which Guglielmo cited originated as a result of the observations of Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, an eighteenth century geneticist.

<sup>54</sup> Matthew Frye Jacobsen, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 57.

<sup>55</sup> Jacobsen, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 57.

ideology of mostly white supremacists, the white power structure justified the lynching of Italians.

### The Struggle to Regain “White” Control of Louisiana

The seat of conservative Democratic politics in Louisiana rested in New Orleans with a political machine known as “The Ring.” Although this machine stood as the main policymaker for the New Orleans area, a rural movement called the “Bourbons” (named for their ideological resemblance to the post-French Revolution Bourbons who advocated a return to ultra-conservative governance of France) mirrored the same ideals as the Ring, working behind the scenes in the rural parishes to combat any opposition of returning Louisiana to white rule dismantled through Reconstruction.<sup>56</sup>

The Bourbon “mentality” became popular in the cotton producing parishes of the state where whites stood in the minority. The Bourbons identified themselves with rich landholders and portrayed themselves as the guardians of southern paradigms, while also depicting their character as that of gentlemen who desired a return to the racial separation attributed to antebellum Louisiana. More importantly, they exhibited a fear of African Americans normally impressed within the ranks of poor whites.<sup>57</sup> This meant that the Bourbon Democrats held no special place for the new immigrants in their political system as no distinction between the Italian and the African Americans existed in either social or political terms. According to historian Andrew Rolle, in the 1880’s, Italians in Louisiana did not assimilate into southern culture, much less could they draw on the white supremacists’ recollections of the Old South. They drew further disdain from white supremacists as Italians often joined groups that opposed anti-black sentiment.<sup>58</sup>

Despite the pronouncements of Democratic idealists, more serious issues surfaced which saw the rise of dissatisfaction with economic circumstances of blacks, poor whites, and even the Italians in farming communities all over the state. An economic depression between 1870 and 1897 saw prices for produce brought to market by the poor farmer decline sharply. The farmers blamed no one; it just fell to the market in which they produced the goods, goods which proved a commodity in low demand. This followed a period of increasing surpluses which overwhelmed demand worldwide. In addition to the overproduction of agricultural goods by American farmers and the increased supply versus demand, revolutions in transportation caused a need for prices

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<sup>56</sup> Interview with Dr. Arnold R. Hirsch, Professor of History, University of New Orleans, March 5, 2007.

<sup>57</sup> William Ivy Hair, *Bourbonism and the Agrarian Protest: Louisiana Politics, 1877-1900* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1969, 23-24.

<sup>58</sup> Andrew Rolle, *The Italian Americans: Troubled Roots* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1980), 82.

for the transport of goods to market to rise suddenly. Domestic crops also rose in steep competition with overseas markets and the prices of these goods dropped correspondingly. In essence, railroad companies held the monopoly and did not change their desire for profit to help the smalltime farmer. These three factors caused the poor farmer to experience widespread debt and this continued as long as the “crop-lien system” remained intact.<sup>59</sup> The less the farmer produced, the more the debt grew.

Out of this dissatisfaction with this economic system, the Farmers’ Alliance arose to fight for the poor farmer who loathed corporations and upper-class whites who made decisions based on their own interests, never considering the impact on the small and tenant farmers. However, where the Farmers’ Alliance found willing participants due to the lack of anti-black sentiment among Democratic Party adherents, it appeared their battle in the South made for a substantial threat to the Bourbons.<sup>60</sup>

With the Bourbons bracing themselves for an intense political battle against the rising anti-Democratic factions, a political party emerged addressing the concerns of not only the Farmers’ Alliance, but also the Southern Alliance and an alliance of black farmers. The Populist Party (a result of the agrarian revolt) rose as a response to rising costs of bringing goods to market, the lack of educational opportunities for blacks and poor whites, and the corruption and graft associated with Louisiana elections as a result of the Democratic Party’s struggle to maintain white power within the state. Populists embraced efforts to help blacks through their political platform by seeking to end lynching through legislation, ending the convict-lease system, and pledging to fight for African Americans’ political rights.<sup>61</sup> With these declarations, the Populists’ intentions seemed honorable to blacks seeking equal political status with whites, but in working to equalize blacks in the South, old wounds reopened, causing more aggressive animosity on the part of white supremacists throughout the South. Populist ideals attracted a great following in the South and promised to be a formidable adversary to not only the Democrats, but other political parties in Louisiana as well.<sup>62</sup> But despite their proclamations and intended actions on behalf of African Americans in the South, the Populists failed to include

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<sup>59</sup> John D. Hicks, *The Populist Revolt: A History of the Farmers’ Alliance and the People’s Party* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1931.), 55-58.

<sup>60</sup> Hicks, *The Populist Revolt: A History of the Farmers’ Alliance and the People’s Party*, 95.

<sup>61</sup> R. Jean Simms-Brown, “Populism and Black Americans: Constructive or Destructive?” *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 65, No. 4 (Autumn, 1980), 351; Jack Abramowitz, “The Negro in The Populist Movement,” *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 38, No. 3 (July, 1953). “So far as Negroes were concerned there were bound to be attracted to a party that bid openly for their support, particularly when Republicans were moving in the direction of a lily-white party in the South.” 286-287.

<sup>62</sup> Jack Abramowitz, “The Negro in The Populist Movement,” *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 38, No. 3 (July, 1953), 287.

blacks to a great extent within their movement, thus alienating them in much the same way as the Democrats.<sup>63</sup>

The Democratic Party in Louisiana tried to hold on to the lost ideals of the “Lost Cause,” Robert E. Lee, and chivalry. The Populists insisted that the Democratic power structure feared black dominance over the white people of Louisiana, while the Bourbon Democrats held the Populist movement in check through fraudulent election processes meant to create a foundation for the white power base. Their hold on political power dictated the use of fraudulent acts resulting in the same politicians remaining in office to carry on the white solidarity movement. More importantly, the Democratic Party absorbed the Populist beliefs in an attempt to stifle any reform movements.<sup>64</sup>

The Democratic Party in Louisiana, primarily composed of ex-Confederates, formulated a platform for former slave owners to be compensated, and to repudiate the Constitution of 1868 which they argued created an atmosphere of fraud, corruption and did not express the desires of the people of Louisiana. This policy brought the issue of white supremacy to the forefront, and enumerated the dogma that the blacks could not consider themselves American citizens and in any way equal to whites<sup>65</sup>

Because of their semi-inclusion of blacks, the Populist movement held true for both Italians and African Americans pertaining to their economic and political survival. In an effort to secure their solidarity, white supremacists began assuming the role of executioner when it came to determining who stood in the way of this course. The Italians clearly stifled the Democrats attempts to rally whites to the banner of domination in Louisiana.<sup>66</sup>

The Populists hoped to garner the black vote in rural Louisiana, while at the same time conquering the racism exhibited by lower class whites against the black rural population.<sup>67</sup> Populists theorized that poor whites viewed their status as one of an economic nature rather than that of race, and marked a period where poor whites struggling to survive both as tenant and

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<sup>63</sup> Simms-Brown, “Populism and Black Americans: Constructive or Destructive?,” 353.

<sup>64</sup> Henry Clay Dethloff, “Populism and Reform in Louisiana,” Unpublished Dissertation, University of Missouri, Ph.D., 1964, 129.

<sup>65</sup> Dethloff, “Populism and Reform,” 133. “The Louisiana Populist deplored the machine politics, the fraud, corruption, and lawlessness which existed in his state and which prevented the proper functionings of government.” 124, 138.

<sup>66</sup> Cunningham, “The Italian, A Hindrance to White Solidarity In Louisiana, 1890-1898,” 26; Andrew Rolle, *The Italian Americans: Troubled Roots* (New York: MacMillan Publishing, 1980), 82.

<sup>67</sup> Inverarity, “Populism and Lynching in Louisiana, 1889-1896: A Test of Erikson’s Theory of the Relationship Between the Boundary Crisis and Repressive Justice,” 266.

independent farmers forced them to seek political redress for their depressed condition.<sup>68</sup> Poor whites tested this theory by fusing with the Republican Party whose ranks also grew with discontented whites from the Democratic Party seeking a just and equal society based upon suffrage for all those citizens deserving of the right. By 1895, though, the national Republican Party lost interest in blacks, and exhibited more of an interest in the industrializing North and its emerging business opportunities.<sup>69</sup> The Democrats thus altered their emphasis from economic to racial interests with their policy of disenfranchising the blacks of the South Louisiana.<sup>70</sup>

To accomplish the goal of disenfranchisement of African Americans in Louisiana, Murphy J. Foster, elected governor in 1892, proposed to the legislature a suffrage amendment based upon property and educational requirements. The House and Senate passed the amendment in 1894 and would put it in front of the people in the election of 1896. The amendment would serve a twofold purpose: first, to neutralize black support for the Populists and Republicans, and second, to keep whites from splitting their votes between three parties.<sup>71</sup> The Italians, citing their solidarity with the African Americans, protested with the Populists against the amendment with a parade in New Orleans. The Italians marched behind an Italian flag and exercised their right to protest. The *Times Democrat* saw the protesters as “obnoxious,” venting further in stating, “they interfere in American politics, and tell us what kind of a constitution, what system of laws, and what suffrage is acceptable to them as Italians.”<sup>72</sup>

Between 1892 and 1896, the Populists performed well in Louisiana elections and even ran a candidate for governor in the latter year. However, their policies appeared too progressive for the “solid South,” causing the older white power structure to retain its influence over the people. The Populists’ collapse in 1896 brought an end to any hope of an equalizing factor in the South, despite the lack of cohesion with the whites in the party. Their survival would have demonstrated that whites and blacks in Louisiana stood united as a powerful political force.<sup>73</sup> The white elite of Louisiana viewed anyone who believed in the equality of blacks as an obstacle in the movement toward white cohesion. Political memories died hard in Louisiana, and Italians’ alliances with the blacks in Louisiana meant that the Italians became stigmatized. The lynching of Italians, in turn, became part of the battle for political control of the state of Louisiana.

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<sup>68</sup> Allen P. Schindler, “The Setting for Recent Politics,” in *The Louisiana Purchase Bicentennial Series in Louisiana History. Vol VII: Louisiana Politics and Paradoxes of Reaction and Reform, 1877-1928*. Ed. by Matthew Schott (Lafayette: Center for Louisiana Studies, University of Louisiana, 2000), 15.

<sup>69</sup> Simms-Brown, “Populism and Black Americans: Constructive or Destructive?,” 355.

<sup>70</sup> Inverarity, “Populism and Lynching in Louisiana, 1889-1896: A Test of Erikson’s Theory of the Relationship Between the Boundary Crisis and Repressive Justice,” 266.

<sup>71</sup> Cunningham, “The Italian,” 29.

<sup>72</sup> “The Italian Parade,” *Daily Picayune*, New Orleans, 25 March 1896, p. 4:4.

<sup>73</sup> Abramowitz, “The Negro in The Populist Movement,” 288.



With the political atmosphere dictated by the Democratic Party and the state legislature firmly in the control of forces bent on disenfranchising both African Americans and Italians, protests from the Populists and the Republicans echoed as the election of 1896 drew near. Seeking improvements in the state constitution, Populists and Republicans both agreed with revisions to the document, but not at the cost of alienating blacks and Italians who could contribute not only politically to the region, but economically. The amendment ultimately failed in the election of 1896, but Democrats maneuvered a call for a constitutional convention to permanently disenfranchise African Americans in Louisiana.<sup>74</sup>

But in June 1896, the Louisiana legislature passed a new election law which accomplished part of the disenfranchisement goal. The Election Law of 1896 created assessors who acted as registrars, and mandated that “persons applying to register should complete an application form in his own handwriting in the presence of an assessor or registrar,” with the latter essentially functioning to disenfranchise black voters by demonstrating their inability to either write their name, or “figure his age in terms of years, months, and days.” Mayor Martin Behrman commented that the Election Law of 1896 “was intended to get as many white men on the rolls as possible and keep out as many negroes as possible by giving the registrar of voters great authority.”<sup>75</sup> Now that the Democrats perfected a method to disenfranchise blacks, Democratic leaders needed only a constitutional convention to statutorily restrict foreigners, namely Italians, and those who could not own property from voting. The state legislature passed a resolution on this same date calling for a constitutional convention.<sup>76</sup>

But before the Convention could be called, another Italian lynching took place. On the 8<sup>th</sup> of August, 1896, newspaper headlines declared, “Trio Lynched in St. Charles” (see Appendix C, Italian population of St. Charles Parish).<sup>77</sup> Charged with the murder of Jules Gueymard, a prominent St. Charles Parish businessman, Lorenzo Saladino, along with Decino Sorcoro and Angelo Mancuso, suffered the wrath of a violent crowd just before midnight. The mob lynched Sorcoro and Mancuso in an unrelated incident.

The crime for which Saladino stood accused at the time of his death occurred the Tuesday night prior to the lynching. Gueymard stood on the gallery of a dock waiting for a ship to arrive in Hahnville carrying some freight bound for his business. When the ship arrived, a shot

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<sup>74</sup> Cunningham, “The Italian,” 31.

<sup>75</sup> *Martin Behrman of New Orleans: Memoirs of a City Boss*, Ed. by John R. Kemp (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1977) 45.

<sup>76</sup> “The New Election Law,” *Times Democrat*, New Orleans, 23 June 1896, p. 4:2.

<sup>77</sup> “Trio Lynched In St. Charles,” *Daily Picayune*, New Orleans, 8 August 1896, p. 2:2-3.

rang out, killing Gueymard instantly. The *Daily Picayune* reported, “Suspicion pointed to the Sicilian (Saladino) who bears a bad character. He had threatened Mr. Gueymard’s life because the latter testified against him in a suit brought because Saladino endeavored to defend New Orleans creditors.” When authorities searched Saladino’s house, they found a shotgun that the suspect stated had not been fired in three months. One barrel showed evidence of firing. A “Mrs. Matorno,” a woman living in his building, claimed Saladino came in late that night and whispered under his breath, “I got him!”<sup>78</sup> The newspapers lamented that a Sheriff Ory saved the young Italians as the crowd sought to lynch him that night.

Police officials arrested Sorcoro and Mancuso based upon the suspicion of their commission of the murder of a Spanish yardman working on the Ashton Place Plantation near Boutte Station, Don Roxino. Sorcoro and Mancuso stood accused of the crime of “wanton and cowardly murder.” The “old man” walked through the woods a week before the lynching when Sorcoro and Mancuso attacked him, according to the newspaper, then “overpowered him and he was prostrate on the ground they beat him into insensibility.”<sup>79</sup>

On the night of the lynching, a crowd of men made their way to the courthouse jail yard. Sounds heard from the jail signified someone tried to chisel the doors open. According to the *Daily Picayune*, the mob dragged Saladino, Sorcoro, and Mancuso from their cells into the jail yard. Saladino, on his knees begging the crowd for mercy, stated, “I no killa Mr. Gueymard. . . I sleepa!” Saladino kept repeating himself, but to no avail. The crowd hanged him from an “A” frame in the jail shed, just a few yards from the jail doors. “Haul him up, boys!” came from the crowd. Saladino, in his last words, stated to the lynch mob, “If there is a God, you alla will be punished.” One of the mob yelled, “Hang the Dago,” then Saladino and the other three died a few minutes later.<sup>80</sup> At the funeral two days later, the blacks of St. Charles Parish showed their sympathy for the dead Italians as the *Times Democrat* witnessed “a large number of negroes and Italians were present at the burial, and went home from the scene terror-stricken.” The *Times Democrat* added that whites in St. Charles Parish feared this show of solidarity between the Italians and the blacks served as the planning stage for a possible revolt to get revenge for the killings, but the uprising never materialized.<sup>81</sup>

The Italian government sought to discover the truth, despite the lack of cooperation by local authorities. The *Daily Picayune* reported that the incident in St. Charles Parish, “bids fair to

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<sup>78</sup> “The Triple Lynching in St. Charles Parish,” *Daily Picayune*, New Orleans, 10 August 1896, p. 1:2-3.

<sup>79</sup> “Triple Lynching,” *Daily Picayune*, 10 August 1896

<sup>80</sup> “Triple Lynching,” *Daily Picayune*, 10 August 1896.

<sup>81</sup> “Two Crimes Avenged; Lynching of Three Italians in Hahnville,” *Times Democrat*, New Orleans, 10 August 1896, p. 1:7.

give rise to international complications similar to the New Orleans lynching, and is probable that a demand for indemnity will be made, should any of them turn out to be Italian.”<sup>82</sup> The editorials of the *Daily Picayune* finally decided at this time to cease their generalizations about Italians when they admitted, “While it is true there are a great many good and worthy Italians among us, it is equally true that there are a large number who are not desirable, being criminals who have fled their own country, or who have been forcibly deported by their government.” However conciliatory they may have felt, the editors of the newspaper opined, “For the presence of the worst element of these people in our country the Italian government is largely responsible.” Here the contradictions unveiled themselves as the nationalities of all three men (and those in 1891 for that matter) came into consideration.<sup>83</sup> The *Daily Picayune* speculated as to the resolution of indemnity when it opined, “The United States government is under no obligation to afford greater protection to foreigners than to her own citizens,” and should not be compelled to pay any indemnity to the families of the slain Italians.<sup>84</sup>

The Italian Consul of Louisiana, Charles Papini, conducted an investigation into the lynching and identified Sorcoro as one Salvatore Arena, who came to the United States from Cacama, Italy, in 1891 at the age of twenty-seven. Papini identified Mancuso as Guiseppe Vontorelli, also from Cacama, aged forty-eight. The two men made their living as farmers in the Hahnville area at the time and associated with the dead Spaniard, Don Roxini. In concluding his investigation, Papini learned that Sheriff Ory lay sleeping during the whole incident. Papini’s efforts came to naught; the investigation lost any motivation for discovering the truth concerning these murders, evidence that mob justice came swiftly, mercilessly, and appeared condoned by the non-Italian white population of the state of Louisiana.

Despite Papini’s lack of evidence as to identifying the murderers, the Italian government proved that the three dead Italians had been subjects of King Humbert at the time of their deaths, and therefore their families became entitled to an indemnity from the United States government. The government rendered \$6,000 to each family, an amount much greater than that given to the victims of the 1891 New Orleans lynching. The *Times Democrat* reasoned that the murder of Julian Gueymard “so foul naturally gave good reason” for the lynch mob to exact revenge on Sorcoro (Arena), Mancuso (Vontorelli), and Saladino. Attributing the crowd’s reaction to Gueymard’s murder as “passionate heat,” the newspaper justified the lynching in stating, “The white people up here are determined that the wanton murder by the Sicilians and Italians must

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<sup>82</sup> “Italian Minister Asks for Particulars,” *Daily Picayune*, New Orleans, 12 August 1896, p. 7:3-4.

<sup>83</sup> Editorial, *Daily Picayune*, New Orleans, 12 August 1896, p. 4: 3-4.

<sup>84</sup> “The Way It Will Be Settled,” *Daily Picayune*, New Orleans, 17 August 1896, p. 4:4.

stop, and they have adopted the severe method of lynching to teach them that they mean business.”<sup>85</sup>

As the furor over the St. Charles lynchings subsided, the controlling Democratic Party moved forward with its disenfranchisement campaign. The Constitutional Convention of 1898 convened on 8 February 1898 and lasted until the 21<sup>st</sup> of May of that year. One of the most powerful political organizations in the state, The “Choctaw Club,” sought to use the convention to “put the negro out of politics” for good. Organized in March of 1897 by Democratic powerhouse Martin Behrman (mayor of New Orleans from 1904-1920), the Choctaws considered themselves good Democrats, “organized against a Republican party.”<sup>86</sup> The Choctaw Club wanted to use the Italian vote to defeat the planters in predominantly black parishes. To accomplish this, they proposed a “grandfather clause” which essentially “permitted illiterate and propertyless whites to vote if their grandfather or father voted prior to January 1, 1867.” This created controversy as the *Times Democrat* opined that the Choctaw Club sought to make “the Dagoes citizens and disenfranchise the Negro, and God knows if there is any difference between them it is largely in the darkies’ favor,” as the Italians “are as black as the blackest Negro in existence.”<sup>87</sup>

The commencement of the Spanish-American War in 1898 later that year averted attention away from any mistakes the legislature made during their deliberations for approval of the constitution. Nevertheless, in adopting the grandfather clause, the legislature adopted the revisions to the Constitution of 1898 with all its controversies. The lesson Italians learned from this political wrangling showed they needed to adopt southern prejudices in order to be accepted into the fold of southern society, or face political alienation like African Americans.<sup>88</sup>

#### The Violence Continues

In observing the political maneuvering surrounding the Constitutional Convention of 1898, the Italians in Louisiana nearly lost their political rights with their associations and solidarity with African Americans. The memories of these alliances remained fresh in the minds of white Louisianians and even though the constitution provided them political rights, the anti-Italian sentiment continued without abandon. In the summer of 1899, the tiny hamlet of Tallulah, Louisiana, in Madison Parish (see Appendix D, Italian population of Madison Parish), suffered an event of some renown that has received minimal attention in local history annals. An Italian

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<sup>85</sup> “Two Crimes Avenged,” *Times Democrat*, 10 August 1896, p. 1:7.

<sup>86</sup> *Martin Behrman of New Orleans: Memoirs of a City Boss*, 35-36.

<sup>87</sup> “The Convention,” *Times Democrat*, New Orleans, 22 March 1898, p. 10:1-5.

<sup>88</sup> Cunningham, “The Italian,” 36.

storekeeper named of Joe DeFatta owned a herd of sheep that grazed behind his store on Front Street. The land buttressed the claim of a well-respected member in the community, Dr. J. Ford Hodge. Hodge continually warned DeFatta concerning the sheep being on his land, but DeFatta ignored the warnings. On the night of July 19, 1899, Hodge shot and killed one of DeFatta's sheep. DeFatta went to see the doctor the next morning at his office and warned him not to do it again. Hodge forced DeFatta to leave and thought the matter ended. That evening as the doctor walked past DeFatta's store after dinner with another man, a Mr. Kauffman, DeFatta and one of his brothers, Charles, blurted an insult to Hodge. Charles then attacked Hodge, forcing him to the ground. As Hodge began to draw a pistol from his jacket, Joe DeFatta produced a double-barreled shotgun, firing both barrels into the doctor as he lay on the porch in front of the store, striking him in the abdomen and the hands.<sup>89</sup>

Another brother, Frank DeFatta, owned a store just down Front Street from his brother. Hearing the gunshots, Frank and two of his associates, Sy Deferroche and John Cereno, rushed down the street toward Joe's store carrying shotguns and long knives. Sheriff Colman Lucas quickly subdued Frank, Deferroche, and Cereno, bringing them to the city jail. Joe and Charles DeFatta barricaded themselves into their home just a few blocks from Joe's store. After a brief struggle, Sheriff Lucas arrested Joe and Charles. As he attempted to bring them to the city jail where the other three Italians sat, a crowd of two hundred fifty citizens overpowered Sheriff Lucas and his deputies, taking custody of Joe and Charles DeFatta. The crowd took Joe and Frank into a nearby field where the brothers blamed each other for the wounds Dr. Hodge sustained. The crowd, deaf to their protestations, hurriedly hanged the two brothers.

Turning their attention to the jail, the crowd broke in and seized Frank DeFatta, Deferroche, and Cereno, forcing them out of their cells and hanging them in the jailhouse yard. The *Daily Picayune* reported, "Not a shot was fired, and the crowd was orderly and quiet, but very determined."<sup>90</sup> Unlike the other lynchings documented here, voices of reason attempted in vain to have the intended victims spared. The *Daily Picayune* further documented the event in support of this action as the newspaper reported: "A good many citizens pleaded for the lives of the Sicilians, but to no avail." In previous documentations, any accounts of Italians' lynchings portrayed the merciless actions of crowds devoid of any emotions. In the Tallulah case, it appeared the voice of reason finally spoke, though not persuasively enough to save the lives of

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<sup>89</sup> "Complete Details," *Daily Picayune*, New Orleans, 22 July 1899, p. 1:1-2.

<sup>90</sup> "Complete Details," *Daily Picayune*.

the DeFattas, Deferroche, and Cereno. As anti-Italian sentiment escalated to violence, it appeared that some members of the Tallulah mob began to display some semblance of a conscience.<sup>91</sup>

Newspapers reported the past criminal activities of the victims to offer some justification for their murders. Two years before his death, Frank DeFatta stood accused of shooting an African American who allegedly stole a watermelon from the front of his store. Although nothing could be proven, citizens of the small town strongly believed Frank committed the murder. A year prior to his death, Joe DeFatta allegedly shot and killed one Pat McKenzie, a landing keeper, in cold blood. A jury later cleared him of the charge based upon a technicality, but again, citizens still whispered of his guilt. The *Daily Picayune* reported that, “They (the DeFattas) had frequently made their boasts that they would do as they pleased...They have...become more open and violent in their actions and their talk...”<sup>92</sup>

In an editorial from the same issue of the *Daily Picayune*, on July 22, 1899, the newspaper demonstrated that the anti-Italian sentiment began to lose any affirmation in the state. The paper opined:

As to the lynching itself, it was one of the numerous acts, that have done so much to cast dishonor on the good name of Louisiana...this un-called for popular violence is the result of the contempt and disregard into which the courts have brought by the almost inexhaustible resources for the delay of action.<sup>93</sup>

The repercussions from the Tallulah incident again threatened to cause an international incident between the United States and Italy. The Italian newspaper, *The Fanulla*, recalled the earlier cases of lynching and expressed “the hope that the Italian government will demand and insist upon an explanation of and satisfaction for the lynching.”<sup>94</sup> Rumors spread that Madison Parish officials strongly urged Italians to leave the parish, as their lives might understandably be in danger. The rumors proved false, but a panic ensued, causing many Italians to flee Tallulah for their lives.

During the panic, Italian officials made a visit to Tallulah as part of a fact-finding mission on 24 July 1899. E. Cavali, the Italian counsel from New Orleans, and Nicholas Piazza from Vicksburg, Mississippi, commended the town officials, including Pat Henry, Mayor of Tallulah, for their hospitality and cooperation. The investigators allegedly issued a report, but the report

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<sup>91</sup> “Complete Details,” *Daily Picayune*.

<sup>92</sup> “Complete Details,” *Daily Picayune*.

<sup>93</sup> Editorial, “The Lynching of the Italians,” *Daily Picayune*, New Orleans, 22 July 1899, p. 4:2.

<sup>94</sup> “Italians Ask For Protection,” *New York Times*, 23 July 1899, p. 1:5.

was of no consequence. Although rumors of reparations paid to the victims' families circulated, government officials made no effort to provide compensation.<sup>95</sup>

### “Bloody Tangipahoa”

During the latter part of the nineteenth century, anti-Italian sentiment thrived in Louisiana, driving itself into the twentieth century. The stereotyping of Italians as belonging to a criminal organization continued and authorities at the time tried to dispel the rumors. One source at the time commented, “When a native American shoots somebody, or a German, or Frenchman, or any other nationality shoots a man, the newspapers do not give us dark hints about murderous organizations.”<sup>96</sup> Despite protestations to the contrary, Tangipahoa Parish saw a resurgence of the violence based upon this stereotype of Italians, culminating in painful and disturbing memories of the Hennessey assassination.

Tangipahoa Parish (see Appendix E, Italian population of Tangipahoa Parish) began as a conglomeration of several parishes including St. Mary and part of the short-lived West Florida republic in 1869. Far removed from the bustling metropolis of New Orleans, Tangipahoa and its surrounding cities still saw its share of racially and politically-motivated violence, and with stereotypical southern grandeur, the bulk of this violence focused on the black population. Starting at the end of the Reconstruction period, the lynching of blacks became a common practice as the Knights of the White Camellia, the violent arm of the Louisiana Democratic Party with the same ideology as the Ku Klux Klan, lynched unsuspecting blacks in their attempt to regain control over the area in the white Democratic political arena. One of their leaders in the area, Judge Thomas C.W. Ellis, despised Republican rule, and vowed to rid the state of the anti-Democratic influences; this included blacks, immigrants, or any other denizens who sought to return the state to Republican domination.<sup>97</sup>

In order for Democrats to exert this control, they had to meet their objective of a white controlled parish without having their methods of achieving that goal questioned. The Knights of the White Camellia and their “Phantom Riders” terrorized blacks and could do so because leading Tangipahoa Parish officials belonged to the white supremacist group. The lynchings and murderous rampage continued until the parish received the moniker “Bloody Tangipahoa.”<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> “Italians Ordered Out Of The Parish,” *Daily Picayune*, New Orleans, 23 July 1899, p. 2:3-4; “Italian Officials Visited Tallulah,” *Daily Picayune*, New Orleans, 26 July 1899, p. 1:2-4.

<sup>96</sup> *Martin Behrman of New Orleans: Memoirs of a City Boss*, 10-11.

<sup>97</sup> John V. Baiamonte, *Spirit of Vengeance: Nativism and Louisiana Justice, 1921-1924* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), 1.

<sup>98</sup> Baiamonte, *Spirit of Vengeance: Nativism and Louisiana Justice, 1921-1924*, 3-5.

Some whites within the parish displayed dissatisfaction at the extreme techniques used to influence people and frighten the populace, and vowed to stand in opposition. One of these individuals, Judge Robert R. Reid, lost a family member when elements of Ellis's group, in an attempt to get Reid to relent from his public attacks on the Knights of the White Camellia, and the "White Caps," another white supremacist group in the area, lost his brother to an assassination attempt on Reid's life. The violence continued and citizens began to express doubts about the judicial system. Even if authorities caught the culprits (provided they were not law enforcement officers involved in the lynchings themselves), inhabitants of the parish expressed that remarked at the lack of justice against the murderers and the leniency of the courts. From 1882 to 1889, white supremacist groups such as the Knights of the White Camellia managed to lynch blacks suspected of murder or various crimes. Factions within the white supremacist groups began to form, causing widespread confusion and animosity amongst themselves, killing blacks from one farm to the other.<sup>99</sup>

The violence escalated so badly that the governor of Louisiana at the time, Murphy J. Foster, launched an investigation into the killings, of which no records have survived. However, despite the violence, Italians continued to migrate to the area in the hopes of making their fortunes in strawberry farming. The United States government formulated a special commission in 1907 (known as the Dillingham Commission) which investigated the assimilation of foreigners into American society for four years, ending in 1911. Like the earlier Italians who migrated to the area, these immigrants "fought their way inch by inch through unreasoning hostility and prejudice to almost unqualified respect or even admiration."<sup>100</sup> But because of their cultural, social, and political proclivities, namely their willingness to perform menial tasks once consigned to slaves, Italians became the newest targets in Tangipahoa Parish.

The antagonism against Italians began in February, 1908, when lumber mills in the Kentwood area began laying off employees, but kept the Italians on the payroll. The companies running the mills justified their actions because the Italians worked harder and displayed more dedication to their jobs than the native whites who worked at the mills.<sup>101</sup> This action created resentment amongst the native population of Tangipahoa and served as a catalyst to a continuing reign of terror; this time, that reign of terror lashed against the population of Italians in the area. On 1 March 1908, Charles Pittaro, an Italian merchant living in the Kentwood area, received a

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<sup>99</sup> Baiamonte, *Spirit of Vengeance: Nativism and Louisiana Justice, 1921-1924*, 2.

<sup>100</sup> Senate, *United States Immigration Commission (1907-1910), Immigrants in Industries: Part 24: Recent Immigrants in Agriculture*, 61<sup>st</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> sess. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1911), 39, 242, 282.

<sup>101</sup> Baiamonte, *Spirit of Vengeance: Nativism and Louisiana Justice, 1921-1924*, 12.



letter from a city resident, ordering Pittaro and his family to pack and leave his home before any danger befell them. The state militia, Company I of the Louisiana State Militia arrested six men in connection with the threats and the matter later dissipated.<sup>102</sup>

Later that year, on the 23rd July, 1908, three Italian brothers, Joe, George, and Tony Liambisi saw themselves embroiled in a chase pursued by possees of lawmen as a result of the alleged wounding of Walter Simmons, a mill worker in Natalbany. George and Tony made their escape while local law enforcement captured their brother Joe and arrested him for the shooting. The residents of Tangipahoa Parish held the Simmons' family in high regard and his wounding angered the residents to the point that a mob gathered outside the jail where deputies held Joe Liambisi under close guard. In an effort to save his life, Joe Liambisi agreed to lead deputies to where other Italians may have been hiding his brother. The search continued near the small hamlet of Tickfaw, north of Natalbany where the sheriff's posse found the brothers hiding. A shootout ensued, killing a ten-year-old boy named Tony Gatano, and wounding three other Italians there.<sup>103</sup>

On 23 July 1908, Walter Simmons died at Charity Hospital. Despite the threats of mob violence which permeated from the area, no lynchings of the Liambisis took place.<sup>104</sup> On that same night, unknown assailants bombed an Italian grocery store, forcing some Italians to rethink their settlement plans. Even though no one sustained injuries as a result of the blast, then Governor Newton Crain Blanchard ordered a small detachment of National Guardsmen to the area in the hopes any further violence might be quelled. As a result of the intensification of violence, the *Times Democrat* reported, "forty Italians from Natalbany arrived in the city (New Orleans) yesterday morning...as they declare they will not go back to Tangipahoa."<sup>105</sup>

Soldiers in the area also stood guard in the city of Kentwood as well, seeking to pacify the local population bent on mob justice as the Kentwood Vigilance Committee, formed after the shooting of Walter Simmons, issued a proclamation where the Italians, "were ordered to leave town under pain of death."<sup>106</sup> Italians took the warning seriously and vacated the small town, leaving only half their original population of two hundred to suffer the injustices planned for the remaining citizens. Judge Tom Ellis recounted the events forcing the occupation of the militia in his diary: "Trouble in Natalbany with Italians, Man named Jno. Simms was of Magnolia killed

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<sup>102</sup> "Six Arrested in Kentwood and Guarded by Militia," *Times Picayune*, 2 March 1908, p. 1:6.

<sup>103</sup> "Trouble with Italians," *Times Democrat*, New Orleans, 23 July 1908, p. 1-2: 7, 5.

<sup>104</sup> "Aroused Over Robbery," *Times Democrat*, New Orleans, 24 July 1908, p. 1:7.

<sup>105</sup> "Soldiers in Natalbany," *Times Democrat*, New Orleans, 25 July 1908, p. 7: 5-6.

<sup>106</sup> "Soldiers Now On Duty in Kentwood," *Times Democrat*, New Orleans, 29 March 1908, p. 1: 5-6.

by a Dago. State troops sent up to Hammond, when a Dago home was dynamited.”<sup>107</sup> As with the Hennessey case, the St. Charles lynching, and the lynching in Tallulah, the Italian consulate felt it necessary to become involved, launching an investigation into the events affecting the Italians in Kentwood and Natalbany. The events of the previous months quieted, and eventually the National Guardsmen and the threat of vigilante violence died down. On 27 July 1908, the governor recalled the troops, and for a time, Tangipahoa Parish stayed quiet.

The unrest in Tangipahoa occurred as a result of the economic atmosphere surrounding the area where Italians proved economically competitive with the natives in the area.<sup>108</sup> In actuality, the incidents that occurred in Tangipahoa echoed the Hennessey Affair. If it had not been for the actions of the state’s highest executive, and some quick-thinking law enforcement officers within the parish, another incident of the magnitude of the New Orleans lynching would have materialized, forcing an all-out conflict between the Americans and the Italians. As with the previous occurrences, the animosity toward the Italians of Tangipahoa died down for a time.

The last recorded incident that caused a furor in Tangipahoa involving the Italian population of that parish followed proper procedural machinations in order to adjudicate punishment. The impulsive manner of justice dispensed at the hands of community leaders and white dogmatists came to an end near the beginning of the twentieth century as civilized society prevailed over the primitive vigilance of the 1890’s. However, the veil of anti-Italian prejudice displayed prevalence as the last recorded case proved a difficult and convoluted web of murder and conspiracy. In the end, six men paid for their crimes with their lives.

On 8 May 1921, Mrs. Dallas Calmes, the wife of a grocery owner in Independence, Louisiana, heard a noise in the early hours of the morning outside her back door. Mrs. Calmes awoke her husband who immediately grabbed his pistol and ran to the back door. When he opened the door, gunshots rang out, mortally wounding Mr. Calmes as his wife tried desperately to bring his bullet-riddled body back into the house. Calmes later died from his wounds. After an intensive manhunt and investigation, a Tangipahoa grand jury indicted six men for the attempted robbery of the Farmers and Merchants Bank of Tangipahoa and for the murder of Dallas Calmes: Joseph Rini, Andrew Lemantia, Roy Leona, Joseph Giglio, Joseph Bocchio, and Natale Deamore. The rear of the bank sat adjacent to the Calmes’ backyard.

Police also held as a “person of interest” by the name of Leonardo Cipolla who stood accused of the murder of two Italian men, Joseph Gaeto and Dominick DiGiovanni. Gaeto had

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<sup>107</sup> Diary of T.C.W. Ellis, Ellis Family Papers, 24 July 1908, L.S.U. Libraries, Hill Memorial Library Manuscript Collection, Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

<sup>108</sup> Baiamonte, *Spirit of Vengeance*, 13.

been employed as a former mechanic in Deamore's garage. What did these two murders have to do with the attempted bank robbery in Independence? Police opined that Cipolla intended to silence the two men in an effort to conceal the identity of the others involved in the attempted bank robbery.<sup>109</sup> New Orleans Police asserted Cipolla as the reputed "Mafia chieftain" having connections with not only the Mafia, but the terrorist group the "Black Hand." The case against Cipolla eventually collapsed, but one of the accused later stated that the DiGiovanni-Gaeto murder happened as a coincidence. Police still maintained that Cipolla arose as the new "Godfather" of New Orleans and protected him in the Ninth Precinct Stationhouse to insure his safety.<sup>110</sup>

One of the suspected killers sought to redeem himself in suggesting that he turn state's evidence in exchange for a lesser sentence. Natale Deamore identified the other five as the culprits, thus sealing their fate; not only did Deamore confess and identify the other men involved in the murder of Mr. Dallas Calmes, but forces beyond their control worked behind the scenes to insure their guilt. In addition, an unidentified ten-year-old boy identified the men as well. Later, Deamore changed his mind and accepted what possible fate which befell his co-conspirators.<sup>111</sup> Indicted for the crimes mentioned above, the six defendants were brought back to the scene of the crime in Independence, then to the parish seat in Amite where they would later stand trial.

Through two trials, guilty verdicts reached in each of them, Judge Robert Ellis sentenced Joseph Rini, Andrew Lemantia, Roy Leona, Joseph Giglio, Joseph Bocchio, and Natale Deamore to hang for the murder of Dallas Calmes. Appeals filed in the case warrant particular attention. The presiding judge in the case refused to recuse himself, thus bringing another issue for appeal. Judge Robert Ellis led the local Knights of the White Camellia, the terrorist arm of the Democratic Party in Louisiana.<sup>112</sup> In the Louisiana State Supreme Court case entitled *State v. Rini, et al.*, 95 So. 400 (La. 1922), the defendants asserted that the "Hon. Robert S. Ellis has on numerous occasions discussed this case openly and publicly with the citizens of Tangipahoa Parish, Louisiana, expressing the belief that your defendants were guilty of said charge of murder and should be hanged."<sup>113</sup> Judge Ellis's assertion could have presented the defense with grounds for a mistrial in present-day terms as a judge in any proceeding must avoid the appearance of

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<sup>109</sup> "Vendetta Feared As Police Bare Big Bandit Plot," *Times Picayune*, 10 May 1921, p. 1:8.

<sup>110</sup> Baiamonte, *Spirit of Vengeance*, 35-37.

<sup>111</sup> "Refuses to Tell Police of Crime," *Times Picayune*, 15 May 1921, p. 12:4.

<sup>112</sup> Baiamonte, *Spirit of Vengeance*, p. 5-9, 13-14.

<sup>113</sup> *State v. Rini, et al.*, 95 So. 400 (La. 1922), 402-404. Judge Robert Ellis was the son of Judge Thomas Ellis, and an active member of the Amite Chapter of the Ku Klux Klan.

impropriety as the trier of fact. However, in this instance it appeared these standard dicta of judiciary practice and ethics threw caution to the wind and reflected the political as well as the prejudicial atmosphere which prevailed in early twentieth century Louisiana against Italians.

Although defendants' counsel alleged charges of jury tampering, the court found no evidence to support the claim. On 9 May 1924, three years after the initial crime, the executioners led the convicted men to the gallows in Amite, Louisiana, in the early morning hours. Extra guards stood watch in and around the jail to insure no prison break took place. Warden of the Orleans Parish Prison officiated at the executions where each man received his punishment "with clocklike precision." Prior to his execution, Andrew Lamantia (wrongly reported in the newspapers of the day as "Andre") attempted to stab himself in order to cheat the hangman. Bleeding profusely from a wound in his side, authorities hanged him anyway.<sup>114</sup>

The *Times Picayune* pointed out several unanswered questions which the newspaper posed in order to show some sort of conspiracy surrounded the murders of Dallas Calmes, Joseph Gaeto, and Dominick DiGiovanni. Where did the defense money come from? Who benefited from the murders? The newspaper queried: "What men, free in New Orleans, had interests that made it worthwhile to use every effort to save these six men that the Louisiana courts declared guilty of murder, among lesser crimes?" The newspaper raised these questions as a result of the defendants' claim they had neither the money nor the means to make the money to provide for their own defense.<sup>115</sup>

The *Rini* case served as a reminder to Italians that the white population of Louisiana still possessed animosity toward them, despite the passage of time since the Hennessey affair. At first congenial to the newcomers, native Louisianians later perceived the Italians as intruders into their white societal domain. The Italians' socioeconomic kindred with African Americans in the South and their lack of prejudice toward blacks brought the wrath of the controlling white elite to bear on the Italians. The alliances the Italians made with African Americans expressed their desire to become American citizens, using political and economic avenues to achieve those ends. With their political activity, the Italians exposed themselves to vicious and open discrimination aimed at limiting or halting their active participation in Louisiana politics. Branded as undesirable and racially, economically, and socially equivalent to blacks in Louisiana, the Italians' best effort to overcome these distinctions came to naught between 1891 and 1924; these distinctions were predicated upon the Italian's economic success which posed a threat to other white business owners in the state, and their lack of political allegiance to the white Democratic

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<sup>114</sup> "Gunmen Meet Death Stoically On Gallows," *Times Picayune*, 10 May 1924, p. 1: 4-7.

<sup>115</sup> "Gunmen Meet Death Stoically On Gallows," *Times Picayune*, 10 May 1924, p. 1: 4-7.

power structure of Louisiana. For the Italians, vying to become American citizens proved to be a daunting task, one not without its sacrifices documented within this work.

## CONCLUSION

Although Hennessy's killers remain unknown, most researchers and historians believe the men lynched paid with their lives for their presumed association with the Mafia, and an injustice vindicated. Others believe, like Michael Kurtz, Anthony Margavio, and Jerome Salamone, that most preconceived notions of guilt indicted Italian Americans merely because of their ethnicity. Hennessy's death served as a trigger to eliminate Italian-Americans, or at least convey the message of stern nativism. For whatever reason, the lynching of the eleven Italians on March 14, 1891, displayed the willingness of native populations to place the blame on immigrants for an agreeably heinous crime. White supremacists believed Italians, Mafia or not, deserved their just rewards as being in league with the Republicans, Populists, and their black allies to topple the Bourbon Democracy of late nineteenth century Louisiana.

Unlike the Hennessey Affair, the perpetrators of the subsequent lynchings refused to wait for a jury verdict. The issue of whiteness, or what southern society considered "white," determined their political worth. The uniqueness of the Italian predicament saw their acceptance as a means of increasing the white population of the state of Louisiana in the hopes of providing white solidarity; then that uniqueness faced the wrath of a well-entrenched Bourbonism bent on reverting Louisiana back to an antebellum mindset.

The Hennessy affair and its aftermath cultivated a mindset amongst the white nativist sect of the American population. But this sentiment proved not mutually exclusive to just the South. The Sacco and Vanzetti case in Massachusetts showed that the anti-Italian sentiment (with its economic and political facets) did not confine itself below the Mason-Dixon Line.

On the 11<sup>th</sup> of September 1920, Niccola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti stood accused of the 15<sup>th</sup> of April, 1920, robbery and murder of a paymaster at a shoe factory in Braintree, Massachusetts, where they alleged stole over \$16,000.00 from the company's payroll. American authorities classified the two men as Italian nationals and with the "red scare" three years earlier, the suspicion of the United States government seemed warranted. The mere mention of radicals plotting to overthrow the government caused a furor in the country at the time. The League of Democratic Control, a known communist organization in the United States, vowed to secure representation for Sacco and Vanzetti and stated that, "the two men are the victims of a plot to railroad them to prison because they are Reds and that they are innocent of the crime which they are charged."<sup>116</sup> With Sacco and Vanzetti convicted, the government could make a more substantial case for limiting immigration, citing that letting foreign radicals into the country

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<sup>116</sup> "Reds Will Defend Alleged Slayers; Charged Two Radicals Are Victims of Department of Justice Plot," *New York Times*, 30 May 1921, p. 22.

could infiltrate and decimate the workings of democracy.<sup>117</sup> With government pressure, circumstantial evidence, and public sentiment divided over their guilt, a jury convicted Sacco and Vanzetti on all counts and Judge Webster Thayer sentenced the two to death. After several appeals calling for a new trial, and three stays of execution, the state of Massachusetts electrocuted the two on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of August 1927. Many supporters of Sacco and Vanzetti, along with historians, believed that the United States government determined their guilt because of their immigrant status and their political anarchist views toward an overthrow of democracy.

Even though scores of U.S. citizens seemed angered by the alleged acts of Sacco and Vanzetti, these same citizens seemed content to let the courts dispense justice. Vigilantism in the South utilized violence to exact perceived southern justice, a more lawful means to insure the immigration of “undesirables” needed regulation, and, in turn, prevent further violence against one particular race due to stereotypes perpetrated by the white power structure. Efforts to limit immigration in part proved successful with the limitation of Chinese arrivals in 1885. With the Immigration Act of 1924, this legislation clearly passed as a measure to limit or prohibit immigration from Eastern and Southern Europe, which set quotas at a two-percent of the “total of any given nation’s residents in the U.S. as reported in the 1890 census.” Reformers reasoned that limiting the immigration from these areas, criminal elements riding on the honest immigrant’s coattails might find another country to corrupt with their unlawful behavior.<sup>118</sup>

The tragedy of the working Italian experience in southern history served as an example of naivety in an age of political manipulation, racial classification, economic turmoil, and the dispensation of justice based upon only the perception of guilt. The white power structure of Louisiana accepted the Italian immigrants with open arms provided they could contribute to the maintenance of white power within the state. The Italians only strove to create a better life for themselves and their families, but due to their lack of racial prejudice towards blacks, they encountered an onslaught of racial discrimination and hatred which they did not understand. Instead, Louisiana taught the immigrants the lessons of democracy and economics at the end of a rope — that is, until native Louisianians came to the realization that Italians were human as well. This realization became evident when Italians took on a more active role in Louisiana’s political process without any interference. With the election of Italian American, Robert S. Maestri, to the office of mayor of New Orleans (1936-1946), this demonstrated that whites of the area finally

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<sup>117</sup> Lisa McGirr, “The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti: A Global History,” *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 93, No. 4 (Spring, 2007), 59 pars., 2-3.

<sup>118</sup> “Immigration Act of 1924,” 26 May 1924. [www.u-shistory.com/pages/h1398.html](http://www.u-shistory.com/pages/h1398.html).

accepted Italians on social and political terms, and no longer would Italians in New Orleans or anywhere else in Louisiana have to endure the slander of “Who Killa Da Chief?”<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Joan B. Garvey and Mary Lou Widner, *A Beautiful Crescent: A History of New Orleans* (New Orleans: Garmer Press, 1984), 233.



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## APPENDICES

*Note: Total population figures are exclusive of other races and nationalities included within the census, and are not necessary for purposes within this work.*

### Appendix A

#### Population Figures for Orleans Parish 1880 – 1910

<b>Year of Census</b>	<b>White Population</b>	<b>Black Population</b>	<b>Italian Population</b>	<b>Total Parish Population</b>	<b>Percentage of Italians v. total Population</b>
<b>1880</b>	158,367	57, 617	1,995	216,090	.9 %
<b>1890</b>	177, 376	64,491	3,622	242,839	1.5%
<b>1900</b>	208,946	77,714	5,866	287,104	2%
<b>1910</b>	249,403	39,282	8,066	339,075	2.4%

*Source:* U.S. Census Office. *Tenth Census of the United States, 1880, Part I.* Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1882; U.S. Census Office. *Eleventh Census of the United States, 1890, Part I.* Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1895; U.S. Census Office. *Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900, Part I.* Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1901; U.S. Census Office, *Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910, Part I.* Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1911.

### Appendix B

#### Total Population Figures for St. Bernard Parish 1880-1910

<b>Year of Census</b>	<b>White Population</b>	<b>Black Population</b>	<b>Italian Population</b>	<b>Total Parish Population</b>	<b>Percentage of Italians v. total Population</b>
<b>1880</b>	2,104	2,288	2	4,106	.04%
<b>1890</b>	2,347	1,977	15	4,326	.34%
<b>1900</b>	2,832	2,197	123	5,081	2.4%
<b>1910</b>	3,343	1,933	238	5,277	4.5%

*Source:* U.S. Census Office. *Tenth Census of the United States, 1880, Part I.* Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1882; U.S. Census Office. *Eleventh Census of the United States, 1890, Part I.* Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1895; U.S. Census Office. *Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900, Part I.* Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1901; U.S. Census Office, *Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910, Part I.* Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1911.

## Appendix C

### Population Figures for St. Charles Parish 1880-1910

<b>Year of Census</b>	<b>White Population</b>	<b>Black Population</b>	<b>Italian Population</b>	<b>Total Parish Population</b>	<b>Percentage of Italians v. total Population</b>
<b>1880</b>	1,401	5,746	4	7,161	.05%
<b>1890</b>	1,986	5,751	0	7,737	-----
<b>1900</b>	2,970	6,102	626	9,072	6.9%
<b>1910</b>	4,487	6,720	254	11,207	2.3%

*Source:* U.S. Census Office. *Tenth Census of the United States, 1880, Part I*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1882; U.S. Census Office. *Eleventh Census of the United States, 1890, Part I*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1895; U.S. Census Office. *Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900, Part I*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1901; U.S. Census Office. *Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910, Part I*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1911.

## Appendix D

### Total Population Figures for Madison Parish 1880-1910

<b>Year of Census</b>	<b>White Population</b>	<b>Black Population</b>	<b>Italian Population</b>	<b>Total Parish Population</b>	<b>Percentage of Italians v. total Population</b>
<b>1880</b>	1,261	12,645	2	13,906	.014%
<b>1890</b>	931	13,204	-----	14,135	-----
<b>1900</b>	899	11,422	5	12,322	.04%
<b>1910</b>	1220	9,455	152	10,676	1.42%

*Source:* U.S. Census Office. *Tenth Census of the United States, 1880, Part I*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1882; U.S. Census Office. *Eleventh Census of the United States, 1890, Part I*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1895; U.S. Census Office. *Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900, Part I*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1901; U.S. Census Office. *Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910, Part I*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1911.



APPENDIX E

Total Population Figures for Tangipahoa Parish  
1880-1910

<b>Year of Census</b>	<b>White Population</b>	<b>Black Population</b>	<b>Italian Population</b>	<b>Total Parish Population</b>	<b>Percentage of Italians v. total Population</b>
<b>1880</b>	5,608	4,104	7	9,638	.07%
<b>1890</b>	7,943	4,698	8	12,655	.06
<b>1900</b>	12,248	5,375	97	17,625	.5%
<b>1910</b>	15,170	9,135	1,621	29,160	5.5%

*Source:* U.S. Census Office. *Tenth Census of the United States, 1880, Part I*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1882; U.S. Census Office. *Eleventh Census of the United States, 1890, Part I*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1895; U.S. Census Office. *Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900, Part I*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1901; U.S. Census Office. *Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910, Part I*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1911.

## VITA

Born in Marrero, Louisiana, in 1963, Mr. Gauthreaux expressed a love of history from a very early age, which he attributes to his maternal grandfather, Alvin A. Le Blanc.

After a tour of duty with the United States Army, Mr. Gauthreaux spent two years with the Orleans Parish Criminal Sheriff's Office assigned to the old Parish Prison located at the corner of Tulane Avenue and Broad Street, New Orleans.

After his law enforcement service, Mr. Gauthreaux attended college at the University of New Orleans from 1987 to 1992, where he majored in History with a minor in Paralegal Studies. Entering the workforce after graduation, Mr. Gauthreaux worked as a paralegal for various law firms specializing in legal research and composing appellate briefs.

Returning to college in 1999, Mr. Gauthreaux received a secondary certification in Social Studies in 2003. He is currently an 8<sup>th</sup> Grade Social Studies teacher with the Jefferson Parish Public School System, assigned to Harry S. Truman Middle School in Marrero, Louisiana.

Mr. Gauthreaux is also a member in good standing of the American Historical Association, the Southern Historical Association, the Great War Society, and the Beta Lambda Chapter of the Phi Beta Delta Honor Society for International Scholars. Mr. Gauthreaux has also published articles to his credit; the most recent appeared in *Civil War Times* magazine in the October 2006 issue.