



# WHITE ON ARRIVAL

Italians, Race, Color, and  
Power in Chicago,  
1890–1945



THOMAS A. GUGLIELMO

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THOMAS A. GUGLIELMO

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In memory of my mother, Mary Loretta, and my grandfather, Angelo.

For the Guglielmo and Smith families.

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## WHITE ON ARRIVAL

“Yusuf rest in peace,  
Let the hate cease.”  
Manifest

## INTRODUCTION

In January 1942, Ed Peterson, an African American from Chicago, wrote a letter to the *Chicago Defender*. With America's wartime propaganda machine glorifying the nation's past, Peterson was irritated that this past so often ignored African Americans. Instead, thrifty, hard-working European immigrants supposedly made America—settling its untamed wilderness, laboring in its factories, and farming and peopling its vast frontier. “One would imagine,” wrote Peterson, “that the colored race never did any thing to build up the country.” Moreover, he argued, European immigrants arrived in the United States with privileges that most African Americans could only dream of:

The immigrants had all the advantages of coming to the open American white freedom while Negroes had to continue in bondage, at least of thought—for a long while due to the prejudices of the native whites. The immigrant was given encouragement and in time full opportunity to share in the social life of the whites anywhere. . . . The white immigrant found his unions and his white congressional politician. . . . The white immigrant finds his way to the top social ranks, though at one time he was a pal of the colored youths who might have lived in his neighborhood. Friends in childhood, in maturity the white one lives in the quiet, healthful suburbs, while the colored one lives in the dusty, dirty restricted neighborhood and can never leave it.<sup>1</sup>

Other African Americans shared these sentiments. In one typical editorial cartoon from the *Chicago Defender*, an African-American man attempts in vain to open an “equal rights” safe. In the background, Uncle Sam whispers to “the foreigner” (a man with stereotypically Italian features—handle-bar mustache, dark, curly hair, dark eyes): “He’s been trying to open that safe for a long time, but doesn’t know the combination—I’ll give it to *you*.”<sup>2</sup>





*Chicago Defender*, September 27, 1924.

This study is, in part, an exploration of the ideas expressed by Peterson and the *Defender* cartoon. Were Italian immigrants and their children readily accepted as whites with easy access to America's "equal rights" safe? Were they "given encouragement and in time full opportunity to share in the social life of the whites anywhere?" Was it only in childhood that they befriended "Negroes" in the neighborhood and that over time they escaped these areas in search of "quiet, healthful suburbs"? Most broadly, this study explores Italians' encounters with race in Chicago. I am interested in questions of identity—how Italians came to understand



*Chicago Defender*, November 29, 1924.

themselves racially over time—and questions of power—what Italians' precise location was in Chicago's developing racial structure; whether this location changed much over time; and what consequence this location had on their everyday lives, opportunities, and social relations.

Beginning in earnest with the onset of mass migration from Italy (particularly southern Italy) in the late nineteenth century and continuing well into the twentieth century, racial discrimination and prejudice aimed at Italians, South Italians, Latins, Mediterraneans, and "new" European immigrants were fierce, powerful, and pervasive. Italians had their defend-

ers, to be sure, but their detractors—from individuals in particular Chicago neighborhoods to powerful institutions like the U.S. federal government, newspapers, and race science—were more vocal and numerous. And some of this anti-Italian sentiment and behavior questioned Italians' whiteness on occasion. This questioning occurred at the highest levels of national power when, for instance, congressmen in 1912 seriously debated and doubted whether Italians were “full-blooded Caucasians.” It also occurred in Chicago where in 1910, one local anthropologist informed newspaper readers: “If you don’t like the brunette, if you prefer a pure white skin . . . and feel certain that the future welfare of the United States depends on the prevalence of this type, then you will be justified in favoring the exclusion of Italians.”<sup>3</sup>

All of this said, however, Ed Peterson’s remarks contained more than a kernel of truth. In the end, Italians’ many perceived racial inadequacies aside, they were still largely accepted as white by the widest variety of people and institutions—naturalization laws and courts, the U.S. census, race science, anti-immigrant racialisms, newspapers, unions, employers, neighbors, realtors, settlement houses, politicians, and political parties. This widespread acceptance was reflected most concretely in Italians’ ability to naturalize as U.S. citizens, apply for certain jobs, live in certain neighborhoods, marry certain partners, and patronize certain movie theaters, restaurants, saloons, hospitals, summer camps, parks, beaches, and settlement houses. In so many of these situations, as Peterson and the *Defender* well recognized, one color line existed separating “whites” from the “colored races”—groups such as “Negroes,” “Orientals,” and sometimes “Mexicans.” And from the moment they arrived in Chicago—and forever after—Italians were consistently and unambiguously placed on the side of the former. If Italians were racially undesirable in the eyes of many Americans, they were white just the same.

They were so securely white, in fact, that Italians themselves rarely had to aggressively assert the point. Indeed, not until World War II did many Italians identify openly and mobilize politically as white. After the early years of migration and settlement, when Italy remained merely an abstraction to many newcomers, their strongest allegiance was to the Italian race, not the white one. Indeed, one of the central concerns of this book is to understand how *Italianita*’, as both a racial and national consciousness, came to occupy such a central part of many Italians’ self-understandings. For much of the turn-of-the-century and interwar years, then, Italians were white on arrival not so much because of the way they viewed themselves, but because of the way others viewed and treated them.

To make better sense of these arguments, two conceptual tools are critical. First is the simple point that we take the structure of race seriously. Race is still too often talked about as simply an idea, an attitude, a consciousness, an identity, or an ideology.<sup>4</sup> It is, to be sure, all these things—but also much more. It is also rooted in various political, economic, social,

and cultural institutions and thus very much about power and resources (or lack thereof). Particularly helpful on this point is sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, who argues that we use “racialized social system” as an analytical tool. In all such systems, he argues

the placement of people in racial categories involves some form of hierarchy that produces definite social relations between the races. The race placed in the superior position tends to receive greater economic remuneration and access to better occupations and/or prospects in the labor market, occupies a primary position in the political system, is granted higher social estimation . . . often has a license to draw physical (segregation) as well as social (racial etiquette) boundaries between itself and other races, and receives what Du Bois calls a “psychological wage.” The totality of these racialized social relations and practices constitutes [a racialized social system].<sup>5</sup>

Such a system existed throughout the nineteenth- and twentieth-century United States. Whether one was white, black, red, yellow, or brown—and to some extent Anglo-Saxon, Alpine, South Italian, or North Italian—powerfully influenced (along with other systems of difference such as class and gender) where one lived and worked, the kinds of people one married, and the kinds of life chances one had. Thus, race was not (and is not) completely about ideas, ideologies, and identity. It is also about location in a social system and its consequences.

To understand fully these consequences, one more conceptual tool is critical: the distinction between race and color. Initially, I conceived of my project as a “wop to white” study, an Italian version of Noel Ignatiev’s *How the Irish Became White*. I quickly realized, however, that Italians did not need to become white; they always were in numerous, critical ways. Furthermore, race was more than black and white. If Italians’ status as whites was relatively secure, they still suffered, as noted above, from extensive racial discrimination and prejudice as Italians, South Italians, Latins, and so on.

Nor was this simply “ethnic” discrimination. To be sure, few scholars agree on how best to conceptually differentiate between race and ethnicity. Some have argued that whereas race is based primarily on physical characteristics subjectively chosen, ethnicity is based on cultural ones such as language and religion. Others have maintained that “membership in an ethnic group is usually voluntary; membership in a racial group is not.” Still others have argued that “while ‘ethnic’ social relations are not necessarily hierarchical, exploitative and conflictual, ‘race relations’” almost always are.<sup>6</sup> None of these distinctions, while all valid in certain ways, is very helpful for our purposes. None of them, that is, helps us to better understand Italians’ social experiences in the United States. After all, a group like the “South Italian race” was purported to have particular cultural and physical characteristics; included both voluntary and involuntary mem-

No. 149642

TRIPPLICATE  
(To be given to  
declarant)

## UNITED STATES OF AMERICA


### DECLARATION OF INTENTION

(Invalid for all purposes seven years after the date hereof)

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA In the DISTRICT Court  
NORTHERN DISTRICT OF ILLINOIS of UNITED STATES of CHICAGO

I, **JOSEPH IMBURGIA**  
now residing at **1114 Vernon Park Place** and my other name used has been used, now declare that:  
occupation **Unemployed** aged **30** years, do declare on oath that my personal description is:  
Sex **Male**, color **White**, complexion **Dark**, color of eyes **Brown**,  
color of hair **Black**, height **5** feet **9** inches; weight **170** pounds; visible distinctive marks  
**none**  
race **Italian (South)**, nationality **Italian**  
I was born in **Palermo, Italy** on **March 28, 1909**  
I am **married**. The name of my **first** husband is **Mildred**  
we were married on **April 8, 1939** at **Joliet, Illinois**  
I was born at **Voglia, Italy** on **November 5, 1904** entered the United States  
at **New York, N.Y.** on **unknown** for permanent residence therein, and now  
resides at **with me** I have **3** children, and the name, date and place of birth,  
and place of residence of each of said children are as follows:  
**Rose Mary - Feb. 20, 1930; Anthony - Jun. 5, 1931; Auguste Jan. 15, 1935;**  
**all born in Chicago and reside with me.**  
I have **NOT** heretofore made a declaration of intention: Number \_\_\_\_\_, on \_\_\_\_\_  
at \_\_\_\_\_  
my last foreign residence was **Italy**  
I emigrated to the United States of America from **Naples, Italy**  
my lawful entry for permanent residence in the United States was at **New York, N.Y.**  
under the name of **Imburgia, Giuseppe** on **Sept. 28, 1912**  
on the vessel **Mendoza**  
I will, before being admitted to citizenship, renounce forever all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign prince, potentate, state, or sovereignty, and particularly, by name, to the prince, potentate, state, or sovereignty of which I may be at the time of admission a citizen or subject; I am not an anarchist; I am not a polygamist nor a believer in the practice of polygamy; and it is my intention in good faith to become a citizen of the United States of America and to reside permanently therein; and I certify that the photograph affixed to the duplicate and triplicate hereof is a likeness of me.  
I swear (affirm) that the statements I have made and the intentions I have expressed in this declaration of intention subscribed by me are true to the best of my knowledge and belief: So help me **God**  
Subscribed and sworn to before me in the form of oath shown above in the office of the Clerk of said Court, at **Chicago, Illinois** this **25th** day of **July** anno Domini, 1939. Certification **14-12-1939** from the Commissioner of Immigration and Naturalization showing the lawful entry of the declarant for permanent residence on the date stated above, has been received by me. The photograph affixed to the duplicate and triplicate hereof is a likeness of the declarant.  
**JOSEPH IMBURGIA**  
[SEAL] Clerk of the U.S. DISTRICT Court  
By **Clifford King** Deputy Clerk.  
U. S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR  
IMMIGRATION AND NATURALIZATION SERVICE

No. 192299



**Joseph Imburgia**

Joseph Imburgia's Declaration of Intention form to naturalize, Chicago, July 25, 1939. National Archives and Records Administration, Great Lakes Branch, Chicago, Illinois.

bers; and was a category created in Italy and used extensively in the United States to explicitly rank and exploit certain human beings.

How, then, to navigate between Italians' relatively secure whiteness and their highly problematical racial status, without resorting to unhelpful conceptual distinctions between race and ethnicity? The answer, I contend, is race and color. I argue that between the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries there were primarily two ways of categorizing people based on supposedly inborn physical, mental, moral, and cultural traits. The first is color (which roughly coincides with today's census categories): the black, brown, red, white, and yellow races. Color, as I use it, is a social category and not a physical description. "White" Italians, for instance,

could be darker than “black” Americans.<sup>7</sup> Second is race, which could mean many things: large groups like Nordics and Mediterraneans, medium-sized ones like the Celts and Hebrews, or smaller ones like the North or South Italians.

This race/color distinction was, of course, never absolute. Even the most astute sociologists could pass unknowingly between discussions of, on the one hand, Alpines and Anglo-Saxons, and on the other hand, blacks and browns. Still, some people and institutions were very clear on the distinction. For example, the federal government’s naturalization applications throughout much of the early twentieth century asked applicants to provide their race and color. For Italians, the only acceptable answers were North or South Italian for the former and white for the latter. And other examples abound: the race/color distinction helps explain why “undesirable Dagoes” were never the target either of violence during Chicago’s “Negro”/“white” riot in 1919 or of the city’s countless all-“white” restrictive covenants; why politicians could both rail against “the one race [Italians] that has more killers in it than any other” and at the same time openly welcome them into the Democratic Party’s all-white electoral coalition; and why famous racist Lothrop Stoddard could condemn southern and eastern Europeans as “lower human types” and at the same time concede that “if these white immigrants can gravely disorder the national life, it is not too much to say that the colored immigrant [from Asia, Latin America, and Africa] would doom it to certain death.” Most important, then, for all of its discursive messiness, the race/color distinction was crystal clear when it came to resources and rewards. In other words, while Italians suffered greatly for their putative *racial* undesirability as Italians, South Italians, and so forth, they still benefited in countless ways from their privileged *color* status as whites.

These systems of difference, however, did change from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries. In time, after immigration restriction in 1924, the rise of Nazi racialism in the 1930s and early 1940s, and the migration of several million African Americans from the U.S. South to the North and West in the interwar and World War II years, many Americans lost interest in delineating the racial distinctions between Alpines and Anglo-Saxons; the “American dilemma” or color line became their primary concern. By World War II, race and color came to mean the same thing and new terms like “ethnicity” and old ones like “nationality” emerged to explain differences previously thought to be based on race but not color. With some exceptions, Italians became an ethnic or nationality group, as race increasingly referred solely to larger groups like “whites” and “Caucasians,” “Negroes” and “Negroids,” “Orientals” and “Mongoloids.”<sup>8</sup>

Like all history books, this one owes much to existing scholarship. Indeed, without the groundbreaking work on race, immigration, and whiteness of the last few decades, this study would not have been possible. My

hope, nonetheless, is to build on and challenge these literatures in certain ways. Regarding race studies, scholars in numerous disciplines have embraced the notion of race as a social construction, but few studies have fully explored the intricacies of the construction process. We have excellent studies on race-making and the state, science, medicine, mass culture, empire, urban space, and so forth.<sup>9</sup> However, few studies have attempted to explore the interaction of many of these sites and institutions in a particular place and time. I attempt to do this here by paying particularly close attention to the “cultural” and “material,” as well as to the micro- and macrolevels of human experience.

My work also draws on European immigrant historiography, which has made great advances in the last several decades. Still, historians in this field have often discussed immigrants’ incorporation into the American polity, economy, and society without any reference at all to race and color issues. This blind spot is particularly glaring given the fact that immigrants to the United States entered a world in which every resource imaginable was distributed, at least to some degree, according to race and color considerations. Following scholars like Matthew Jacobson, Robert Orsi, and David Roediger, I argue that race and color deeply structured Italians’ everyday lives. Indeed, when it came to *fare l’America*—making it in America—Italians’ whiteness was their most prized possession. Therefore, to understand Italian immigrant experiences—indeed any immigrant experiences—one must talk about race and color. These are not optional “variables” but central to the story.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, this study is deeply indebted to whiteness historiography and the indispensable work of David Roediger, James Barrett, Theodore Allen, Alexander Saxton, and many others.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, I challenge several key arguments in much (though not all) of this historiography, especially the claim that European immigrants arrived in the United States as “in-between peoples” and only became fully white over time and after a great deal of struggle.<sup>12</sup> Numerous scholars in a wide range of disciplines have uncritically accepted this argument.<sup>13</sup> I contend that challenges to Italian immigrants’ color status were never sustained or systematic and, therefore, Italians never occupied a social position “in between” “colored” and “white.”<sup>14</sup> Often failing to understand the distinctions between race and color, some scholars have assumed that challenges to a group’s *racial* desirability as, say, Latins or Alpines, necessarily called into question their *color* status as whites. This was not the case. Italians, for instance, could be considered racially inferior “Dagoes” and privileged whites simultaneously.<sup>15</sup> This point is vividly apparent when one compares their experiences with those of groups whose whiteness was either really in question (e.g., Mexican Americans) or entirely out of the question (e.g., African Americans and Asian Americans).

Studying these sorts of race and color issues in Chicago offered several advantages. Along with New York and Philadelphia, it was one of the three

great American destinations of Italian immigrants throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Chicago's first and second generation Italian population always paled in comparison to that of New York but was roughly equal to Philadelphia's throughout these years.<sup>16</sup> Chicago also offers an extremely rich set of source materials thanks to a prolific group of settlement workers, the University of Chicago's sociology department, and the 118 oral histories in the Italians in Chicago Project. Chicago Italians shared churches, schools, workplaces, saloons, parks, and settlement houses with people from all over the world and of all race and color classifications—Asians, Mexicans, myriad European groups, and native-born Americans of all hues. This kaleidoscopic mix makes an Italian race and color story in Chicago rich and exciting. Finally, Chicago, more than any other city, stands at the heart of America's urban North color narrative. The city was always among the most popular destinations for southern African-American migrants and the site of major events like the "Race Riot" of 1919 and postwar violence in places like Cicero and Trumbull Park. Furthermore, scholars—beginning with the Chicago Commission on Race Relations, the Chicago School of Sociology, and Horace Cayton and St. Clair Drake, and continuing on through the years with Lizabeth Cohen, James Grossman, Arnold Hirsch, Thomas Philpott, Allan Spear, William Tuttle, and others—have kept Chicago at the center of questions about race, color, and the urban North.<sup>17</sup>

My study begins in the late nineteenth century when Italian mass migration to the United States began in earnest and when southern Italian immigrants began to significantly outnumber their northern compatriots. It ends in World War II when race and color collapsed and Italian Americans began openly mobilizing around a white identity. There are limitations to this time frame. It would be interesting, for instance, to know something about Italians' race and color experiences prior to mass migration and the enormous influx of southern Italians, as well as after the Second World War when deeply racialized and colorized New Deal policies took root, millions of "white" Americans fled to the suburbs, the "second ghetto" emerged, decolonialism spread abroad, and social justice movements led by people of "color" gained power and prominence. I leave these questions, gladly, to another historian.

The book opens with a general chapter on Italian immigrants' race and color experiences in Italy and Chicago between the late nineteenth century and World War I—the era of migration and settlement. The book then examines the postwar years through a series of overlapping stories about Italians' encounters with race and color in Chicago at different historical moments. These stories, organized more or less chronologically and each having its own chapter, deal with the following: the Chicago Color Riot of 1919 and neighborhood race and color relations in its aftermath (chapter 2); the debate over and restriction of "new" immigration in the early 1920s (chapter 3); the rise of Italian organized crime—represented by gangsters



like Al Capone and Johnny Torrio—during the era of Prohibition (chapter 4); mayoral politics in the late 1920s and early 1930s (chapter 5); the rise of fascism and the Italian-Ethiopian War of 1935–1936 (chapter 6); industrial and craft unionism as well as left-wing politics during the Depression and World War II (chapter 7); and, finally, private and public housing in Chicago's Italian neighborhoods from the late 1930s through World War II, when major African-American migration to Chicago resumed (chapter 8).

In the end, this study is about both stasis and change. Italians arrived in Chicago white and remained that way for the rest of their time in America. This part of the story is very much about stasis, power, and privilege. One of the more disturbing things I discovered in the many oral histories of Chicago Italians was a deeply distorted sense of the past. Many interviewees—often contrasting themselves explicitly with African Americans—spoke proudly of the ways in which they pulled themselves up by their bootstraps by working hard and shunning government assistance.<sup>18</sup> And, of course, these narratives have some truth to them. Many Italians did work hard and their success in America is, in part, a testament to this fact. However, the idea that they, unlike groups like African Americans, did it all by themselves without government assistance could not be more inaccurate. Indeed, the opposite was often the case. Italians' whiteness—conferred more powerfully by the federal government than by any other institution—was their single most powerful asset in the “New World”; it gave them countless advantages over “nonwhites” in housing, jobs, schools, politics, and virtually every other meaningful area of life. Without appreciating this fact, one has no hope of fully understanding Italians' experiences in the United States.

But this study is also about change and about how Italian immigrants and their offspring came to understand themselves in new ways—first as Italians and Italian Americans, then as whites. And related to these changes, particularly those regarding color, were shifting social relations between Italians and their various neighbors and co-workers in Chicago. In the early years of migration and settlement, many observers remarked on Italians' tolerance and openness on color issues. This was certainly the case in the South where white supremacists often denounced Italians for wholly lacking “the instinct . . . against mingling with the negroes.” This was the case in Chicago too where numerous observers from settlement house workers to sociologists commended Italians for their refreshingly underdeveloped color consciousness and their harmonious relations with African Americans and other “colored” groups.<sup>19</sup>

These virtues, sadly, did not last long. As Italians learned more about the color line and their precise location along it, heretofore harmonious relations became less so and color consciousness increased. Of course, there were exceptions to the rule and I hope to highlight some of these in the pages that follow. But this general shift in Italian behavior and thinking is

unmistakable. Having grown up not far from Howard Beach, Queens, and Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, where Italian Americans were at the center of “racial” violence in the late twentieth century, I want more than anything else to better understand this fateful shift. These events, more than any historiographical or theoretical debates, brought me to this project. This book—though about another time and place—still seeks to shed light on these tragic events, as well as remind us of an earlier, more promising time.

# 1

## EARLY ITALIAN CHICAGO

Nineteenth-century Chicago was the quintessential boom town. When incorporated in 1833, it was a lonely, swampy outpost of several hundred people located where a small river ran into Lake Michigan. No more than fifty years later, it was one of the largest cities and most important manufacturing and commercial centers in the world. With jobs aplenty in any number of industries—steel, clothing, timber, packing, mail-order, railroads—workers flocked to the city from all over the United States, much of Europe, and, at different times, parts of Asia and Latin America. As a result, the city's population exploded, going from just over 100,000 in 1860 to over ten times that number thirty years later. By 1920, Chicago had just over 2.7 million inhabitants, making it the second most populous city in America and one of the largest in the world. And while roughly an equal share of native-born Americans and immigrants made Chicago's spectacular growth possible, the city increasingly became a foreign-born Mecca during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By 1900, immigrants and their children constituted almost 80 percent of Chicago's inhabitants.<sup>1</sup>

Among the many immigrant groups coming to Chicago were Italians, whose communities were transformed in these years both quantitatively and qualitatively. With its roots in the mid-nineteenth century migration of a handful of Genovese fruit sellers, saloonkeepers, and restaurateurs, Chicago's Italian population soared between 1880 and World War I. Continually fed by an ever-increasing number of immigrants, new Italian communities sprouted up all over Chicago and older communities burst their boundaries. In 1870, there were 552 foreign-born Italians in Chicago, by 1890, the population had grown to 5,685; by 1920, it had grown another ten times to 59,215. By this year, Italians were the fourth largest foreign-born group in Chicago behind Poles, Germans, and Russians. But these years were hardly about population growth alone. Also extremely impor-

tant was the changing origin of these immigrants. Starting around 1880, northern Italians became increasingly outnumbered by their southern *connazionali* (compatriots), who, by virtually all accounts, were poorer, less educated, less skilled, and darker in complexion. By 1919, a Department of Public Welfare study estimated that more than three-quarters of Chicago's Italians had come from the *Mezzogiorno* (southern Italy).<sup>2</sup>

The years from the late nineteenth century through World War I were a complicated and difficult time for many Italian immigrants—particularly those from southern Italy. Many Chicagoans and their various institutions, often drawing extensively on ideas from Italy, degraded *meridionali* (southern Italians) mercilessly and viewed and treated them as racial undesirables. Italians did, however, have their allies in Chicago—among them settlement house workers, ward politicians, and Catholic priests—who defended them faithfully. More important, for all of the racial discrimination and prejudice that many Italians faced as Latins, Mediterraneans, southern Italians, and “new” immigrants, they were still accepted as white.

Italians may not have viewed matters in quite the same way. Chicago's main Italian-language newspaper, *L'Italia*, agreed with this general color categorization but did not openly or often advertise the point. Instead, it appeared far more interested in *la razza italiana* (the Italian race) than in *la razza bianca* (the white race). The mass of everyday Italians, on the other hand, may not have immediately grasped either the importance of Chicago's color line or their precise location along it. As for Italians and race, again “community” perspectives differed. *L'Italia*, for one, along with some middle-class leaders, worked tirelessly in these years to build a more unified Italian racial/national community, in part, to defend its members from the vicious and frequent racist attacks directed against them. However, these efforts had only a minimal effect on the racial/national consciousness of many everyday Italians. By World War I, Italy remained for many a distant abstraction at best. Town and regional loyalties reigned supreme.

## Migration and Settlement

From 1870 on, more than twenty-six million Italians officially declared their intention to emigrate.<sup>3</sup> Of these millions, a fraction went to Chicago; still a smaller fraction eventually settled there. Who were these Italians arriving and settling in Chicago, and why and how did they come? In the early years, Italian immigration to Chicago (as to so many other U.S. cities) consisted primarily of two groups: First, and most numerous, there were young men primarily from the *Mezzogiorno* who were in search of temporary work and who had little intention of settling in the United States permanently. They wanted to find work, save their earnings, and send them

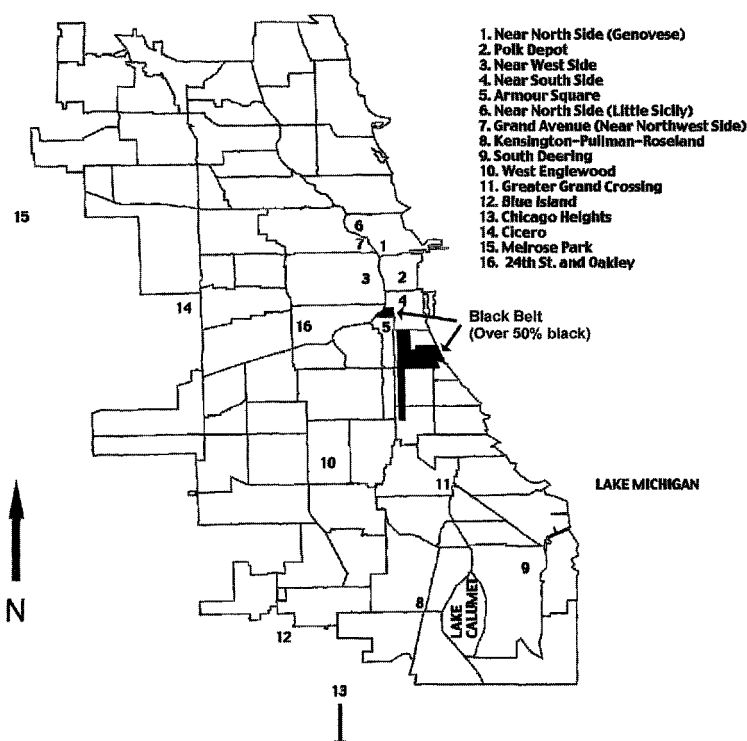
back home to their families.<sup>4</sup> Some of these men would travel back and forth between Italy and the United States annually; others would stay in the United States for several years, make enough money to buy land back home, and then return to Italy. As Alessandro Mastro-Valerio, an Italian-language newspaper editor from Chicago's Near West Side, noted in 1895, "Italians do not come to America to find a home, as do the British, Teutons, Slavs, and Scandinavians, but to repair the exhausted financial conditions in which they were living in Italy. . . . They leave the mother country with the firm intention of going back to it as soon as their *scarsellas* shall sound with plenty of *quibus*." And statistics bear this observation out. Between 1908 and 1923, close to 60 percent of all Italian immigrants to the United States eventually returned home. In 1908 alone, returnees outnumbered immigrants by almost two to one.<sup>5</sup>

But, as Mastro-Valerio himself admitted, many migrants stayed. No doubt having talked the matter over with their spouses, parents, siblings, and/or children, a good number of Italian "birds of passage" eventually chose to settle in America and to arrange for their families to join them there in the future. These families were the second major group of Italian migrants. Many years later, scores of Chicago Italians—men and women like Philomena Mazzei, Valentino Lazzaretti, Marietta Interlandi, Lawrence Spallitta, Domenic Pandolfi, Antoinette De Marco, and many others—recalled in oral interviews that this was the way their families had come to the United States.<sup>6</sup>

But why did these Italians choose Chicago? As an industrial center, a fast-growing city, and the busiest of U.S. railroad hubs, Chicago offered immigrants interested in making money innumerable opportunities. Italians found jobs in Chicago's many bustling factories and construction projects, as well as in the city's vast hinterlands in mines and on railroads. Just as important, Italians went to Chicago because their family members and *paesani* were already there. The vast majority of Italian immigrants to Chicago carefully constructed intricate migration chains from particular towns in Italy to particular neighborhoods in the United States. And prior to the transatlantic trip, they were often in close contact with family members, who in many cases found jobs and housing for them in advance and arranged to meet them at the Dearborn Station in downtown Chicago upon their arrival.<sup>7</sup>

As an increasing number of Italian migrants chose to make Chicago their home, older Italian settlements grew and many newer ones came into being. By World War I, the Chicago area had nearly two dozen distinct Italian communities both close to downtown in the river wards, as well as farther away in Kensington, Melrose Park, and Chicago Heights.<sup>8</sup> The river ward communities housed by far the largest number of Italians in these early years. The two oldest of these were a Genovese settlement on the Near North Side and Polk Depot just south of the Loop. Peddlers, saloon-keepers, and restaurateurs developed the former in the mid-nineteenth

## Chicago's Italian Communities, c. 1920



century just to the north and east of where the Chicago River and its north branch meet. Organized around the Church of the Assumption, which was built in 1881, this North Italian enclave had 455 residents in 1884 and never grew to much more than twice that number.<sup>9</sup> South of this settlement, around Dearborn Station amid Chicago's vice district, was another small Italian colony, Polk Depot. Many of this neighborhood's first Italians came from Potenza in Basilicata as early as the 1870s; but, by the end of the nineteenth century, it quickly became the destination of many other southern Italians from towns and cities in Calabria, Campania, Abruzzo, and Molise. Although known to many Chicagoans as the "Dago District," Polk Depot was also home to African Americans and an assortment of European groups. Regarding the neighborhood's Jones School, one housing reformer noted in 1913: "Probably more nationalities are represented [there] than in any other school in Chicago."<sup>10</sup>

As both migration and settlement increased in the early years, Italian Chicago expanded well beyond these two initial colonies. Spilling out of Polk Depot to the west across the southern branch of the Chicago River,