

— HISTORY —

Willimantic's Little Italy was thriving community

Part one of two

During the late 19th century, the composition of Connecticut's immigrants changed radically. Earlier settlers came from northern and western Europe. Those who arrived in the late 19th and early 20th centuries came mainly from southern and eastern Europe, particularly from Italy, Russia and the disintegrating Austro-Hungarian Empire. By 1910, 55 percent of Connecticut's immigrants came from southern or eastern Europe.

Connecticut's Italian population came primarily from the Mezzogiorno in southern Italy. The contadini, or peasants, eked out a precarious existence by farming land for absentee owners. The rise of the American citrus fruit industry reduced the demand for Italian fruits, further damaging the marginal agricultural economy. Thus, Italians departed in great numbers, and many came to Connecticut. Often people from the same villages would migrate in "chains" of friends and relatives following one another. For

example, natives of Melilli in Sicily settled in Middletown. Large Italian-American communities grew in New Haven and Waterbury, where Italians came seeking unskilled and semiskilled jobs in the emerging factory economy.

Italian immigrants maintained and built close-knit neighborhoods of homes, markets, shops and restaurants. Life revolved around the family, often the only refuge in a strange and sometimes unfriendly environment. By 1910, Connecticut's Italian-born population was exceeded only by those of Irish birth or descent.

Charles Dondero (1855-90) was one of the first Italians to settle in Willimantic. He was born in the village of Cornia in the province of Genoa. He immigrated to the United States in 1872, and settled in Boston where he married the



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Genoan-born Bacigalupo.

The couple moved to Milford, Mass. in 1875 and opened a fruit and ice cream business. Hearing of the opportunities in Willimantic, the Donderos moved to the borough in 1879, and Charles opened an open-air fruit store on the corner of Railroad and Main, and later established a store at 102 North St. Mrs. Dondero took over the business after Charles' premature death, and ran the business until 1900. She handed the business over to her sons and became involved in real estate, building properties on Valley Street.

Louis Dondero, who took over the running of the store, would play a significant role in local history. He became a racing enthusiast, and raced horses across New England. In 1908 he purchased a horse in California called Donnybrook, and in 1909 he raced it at the Fairgrounds track (Recreation Park) in Willimantic, in a private contest with Truman R. Sadd's famous horse,

Goldbeater, in three heats with the proceeds going to the recently opened St. Joseph's Hospital. Over 6,000 witnessed the race,

and the new hospital benefited greatly.

(Continued next week)



Charles Dondero, circa 1885

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