

REASONS WHY OUR LADY OF LORETO IS A LANDMARK by Mario Toglia, Italian American Studies Association/ Long Island

1. Our Lady of Loreto church is a Brooklyn landmark distinctive for its associations with Italian American immigration history, and especially with Italian *Catholic* immigration history. Beginning in the 1880s the New York Catholic diocese--made up of (and ruled by) primarily English-speaking Irish immigrants--faced an influx of Catholic Eastern and Southern Europeans. The Italian wave, with both language differences and highly unique and diversified religious traditions, represented a particular cultural challenge that came to be known among the hierarchy as "the Italian problem." Religious services for mostly poor immigrants from southern Italy were relegated to church basements until the diocesan hierarchy created new parishes where newcomers could worship in Italian (or even common dialects of Italian) and represent their unique devotions not just to a manifold of saints but to a variety of representations of the Virgin Mary. Each such distinctive parish formed what is called a "national church," an ecclesiastic subdivision serving a regional community of like language and culture but without a fixed geographic or territorial boundary.

Founded in 1896 and at first housed in a former Salvation Army hall on Powell Street, near Liberty Avenue in Brooklyn, the parish of Our Lady of Loreto became the fourth national Italian parish in the Diocese of Brooklyn. It drew on worshippers from the entire wider Brooklyn region and beyond. By the turn of the 20th century the congregation had become large and prosperous enough to consider building its own church. More on the construction of the church itself is narrated later in this document. As with other such national churches many Italian votive societies brought statues of their hometown patron saints to be venerated with feast-day processions and religious services, practices that continued well into the mid-twentieth century. But especially interesting here is the Marian devotion for which Our Lady of Loreto is named, which narrates the miraculous "translation" of the original home of Jesus's mother Mary from Nazareth to Italy (by way of Dalmatia) in the 13th century. Although this devotion had its formal origin in the town where the house officially came to rest (Loreto, near Ancona, on the eastern side of the central Italian peninsula), four centuries of Catholic--and especially Jesuit missionary - evangelizing in the New World had come to secure its association with travelers and migrants, dislocated by language and culture as well as geography, and made it an especially fitting devotion for immigrant congregations.[\[see footnote¹ \]](#) It is important to stress here that of the first four National Italian Catholic parish churches created on Long Island, the Italian National Church of **Our Lady of Loreto remains the oldest original national church still located in its original structure and on its original footprint.**

2. Our Lady of Loreto represents a deep-rooted part of the cultural history of its neighborhood. It remains a magnet of personal and cultural associations even for the now-dispersed communities of Italian Americans around the region. A thickly populated Italian

settlement from the 1880s until the late 1960s, Ocean Hill-East New York was a hub of Italian culture, a major focal point of Italian traditional activities and events, and a powerhouse of Italian American cultural and political life. During and after the 1960s, many forces contributed to a declining Italian-American and indeed Catholic population in the neighborhood: blockbusting, urban decline and disinvestment and race riots on the negative side and, on the positive, the new choices and housing opportunities offered by upward mobility. For some years festivals continued to draw former residents and their families back, but stores and businesses with Italian names soon disappeared, replaced by those of Caribbean and other populations, only some of them Catholic or attracted to Catholic traditions. **The only thing that stands as a memento of the neighborhood's most culturally formative era, the only resource capable of telling residents or visitors that Italians once lived, worked and worshipped here is Our Lady of Loreto Church.**

3. Our Lady of Loreto, built with a deliberate intent to exemplify the architectural and artistic traditions of Italy, reflects the high caliber of workmanship available at the time within its Italian immigrant community in the New York region, and contains certain absolutely unique construction and sculptural elements. The December 22, 1907 issue of the Brooklyn *Standard Union* described it as the ONLY PURE RENAISSANCE building in the U.S. Previously, houses and churches were built in a variety of styles: Federal, Georgian, Neo-Gothic. The year 1907 is **the very first time in the United States we have a Roman Renaissance style building.**

It is the ONLY building in New York State entirely created by an ALL-ITALIAN cadre of talented artisans: architect, builder, sculptor, interior decorator and muralist.

When Pastor Vincenzo Sorrentino and the diocese agreed to build a permanent church for his flock, he chose only experienced Italian craftsmen. The Dedication Day Souvenir Booklet states that “the beloved and energetic pastor of this church (not offending the susceptibility of some American traders) before building his church expressed his willingness to have it done exclusively by the hands of skillful Italian workers, and his wishes were carried out.” In other words, the pastor wanted his church to be **a quiet yet bold testament to the religious devotions, native traditions, and artistic genius coming from the Italian community.**

a. **Adriano Armezzani**, the building architect, had immigrated to the U.S. in 1894. His credentials included working at various basilicas in Rome: St. Paul Outside the Walls, St John Lateran and St. Peter’s. In America he collaborated with the major Italian-born sculptor Giuseppe Moretti on recent projects in Pittsburgh, PA (e.g. The Arch in Schenley Park, ca. 1896) and in Passaic, NJ (St. Stephen's Magyar Church, 1904 - now a New Jersey State Landmark). The Passaic project had brought him together with a group of Italian stonemasons/concrete construction experts from Paterson, NJ, including Antonio Federici and his two oldest sons, with

whom the architect then combined to form Armezzani, Federici & Sons. It was as this team that they took on the Brooklyn Loreto project in 1906.

Rather than settle for the brick and mortar construction so typical of American style buildings of the day, Armezzani designed Our Lady of Loreto Church in a pure Renaissance style, which could benefit from the construction skills of Antonio Federici at the same time that it could more fully reflect both the culture of its Italian congregation and the style of the original devotional church in Loreto, Italy (completed in 1587). The proportions of the nave of the new church (40 x 100), in fact, replicate the unusual long, narrow footprint of the original Holy House itself (by a ratio of 1::2.5.)

b. Credit for the actual construction of this building goes to **Antonio Federici**. Builder Antonio Federici, himself an immigrant from Castelgrande in Basilicata, was said to have a special "recipe" for the concrete "cast stone" that was used in construction of the church.

c. Credit for the sculptures decorating the facade of the church (also cast stone) go to Antonio's oldest son, **sculptor Gaetano Federici**, who had trained with the major monumental sculptors of the era, including Charles H. Niehaus (1900 Pan American Exposition) and Karl Bitter (1901). He had also apprenticed with Giuseppe Moretti (1897-1904) and collaborated with him (among other projects) on the construction of the world's largest statue, Vulcan-- Birmingham, Alabama's contribution to the St. Louis World's Fair (1904).[\[see footnote 2 \]](#)

Gaetano's two bas-reliefs (depicting St. Vincent Ferrer and St Charles Borromeo, in honor of the patron saints of the pastor and the then bishop) are set above the two side doors, flanking the main entrance door, which bears a papal coat of arms. His remarkable full-length Bernini-style sculptures of St. Peter and St. Paul flank the second course of the facade. But his tour de force is his pediment (32 feet by 10 feet) depicting a very personalized representation of the "Legend of the Holy House of Mary." Few such depictions of this miracle existed then or are extant now (and one of the rare others is actually painted by Gaetano Capone on the interior ceiling of the same church...see below), so Gaetano Federici has let his imagination free to represent the miracle. The cast stone appears a soft medium; and the flying Madonna sits fearless upon her house, protective and expectant, as if calmly awaiting a soft landing. [\[see footnote 3 \]](#)

Not only is this sculpture a remarkable representation of a difficult devotional subject, it is possibly the only known sculptural representation of it, and must certainly be the largest in the world.

d. According to a souvenir booklet issued for the Day of Dedication (April 6, 1908) the artist who painted the three murals on the ceiling was **Gaetano Capone, Jr.** a renowned painter from Maiori, the Province of Salerno. Two of his paintings are replicas of Raphael's *Transfiguration* and Murillo's *Immaculate Conception*. A third, possibly an original of his, is the *Translation of the House of Loreto*.

Primarily a landscape artist, Capone also excelled at narrative portraiture and painted some coastal seascapes as well.

e. The church decorator was another immigrant, **Serafino Biancardi**, who decorated the homes of prominent American families, as well as many of New York's well-known playhouses. An example of successful entrepreneurship, Biancardi had his own theater decorating firm in Manhattan for some 40 years.

4. Our Lady of Loreto is a highly significant exemplar of cast stone construction in the United States. The journal *Architecture* had a special article on this building in its September 1908 issue, just five months after the church's day of dedication. *Architecture* describes this church to the reader thusly: "A most advanced example of the application of concrete to ornate architecture."

Some other key comments are:

"What is novel and worthy of note in the structure is the number of intricate concrete moldings and details, the design and execution of which are far ahead in quality, of any similar work that has gained publicity."

"With the exception of one line of short cast-iron intermediate columns, the entire construction is of concrete, slightly reinforced in places against internal stresses, but for the most part either of block or mass work."

The construction of Our Lady of Loreto Church was so **unique in construction history**, that the 2003 issue of the Construction History Society newsletter (printed in Great Britain) remembered this building in its publication some 95 years after its completion. "Alongside the large firms just described, numerous smaller design-build firms operated in the major and minor cities across America. ... Federici Armezzani & Co. were design-builders operating out of Paterson, New Jersey, in the early twentieth century, and as such were responsible for the remarkable reinforced-concrete church of Our Lady of Loreto in Brooklyn, New York (Concrete Church with Ornamental Cast Concrete Details 1928)."

5. Our Lady of Loreto rests on a section of land owned some three centuries earlier by Pietro Cesare Alberti, a Venetian immigrant considered to be the first Italian to settle in New Netherlands (1635). Alberti is so identified by an Italian Historical Society of America monument honoring him at Battery Park in Manhattan. [\[see footnote 4\]](#)

6. As a Marian veneration, Our Lady of Loreto is uniquely associated with various portrayals of emigration and immigration and symbolizes the transport, survival and integration of peoples and cultures beyond the ordeals of travel and dislocating change.[\[see footnote 5\]](#)

7. Besides three historic New York City districts commemorating immigrant neighborhoods where Italian immigrants lived, there are only four landmarks related to the Italian American

experience in New York City nominated under Criterion A for Ethnic history: The Lisanti Chapel in the Bronx; the Giuseppe Verdi Monument in Manhattan; Our Lady of Mount Carmel Grotto and the Garibaldi-Meucci House on Staten Island. There is no such landmark honoring Italian American life on Long Island.

Our Lady of Loreto, which features the contributions of Italian immigrants to New York City, New York State, and the United States, adds a highly important component to this larger Italian American history, which is significantly under-represented in the roster of New York landmark designations.

Our Lady of Loreto Church plays a very important part in histories of the American Roman Catholic Church, the Italian immigrant experience, a Brooklyn neighborhood, and architecture.

- a. In the history of architecture, it is considered an excellent example of the application of concrete to decorative construction and perhaps the earliest ecclesiastical structure built in cast-stone on Long Island. In the history of American construction, it is the first house of worship created in pure Renaissance style.
- b. In response to the unfriendly attitude of the American Catholic Church (circa 1880-1920), it represents the right of an unwelcomed ethnic group to worship in its own language, with its own customs and traditions.
- c. As a visible symbol of workmanship, it makes a strong statement about the creative talents of a people regarded negatively during the early years of immigration.
- d. For Ocean Hill-Brownsville (Brooklyn), it is the most evident reminder, last remaining structure that Italians were a vibrant part of that neighborhood's changing demographics. In a neighborhood devoid of any cultural space, artistic performers would all find a home here. Having the first church in the U.S. built in pure Renaissance style would be a distinctive honor for the area.
- e. Our Lady of Loreto as a landmark nominated under criterion A would be the only one located on Long Island (i.e. Brooklyn, Queens, Nassau and Suffolk counties), an area heavily populated by those of Italian ancestry. Granting this building landmark status will have an effect on the greater Italian-American community; it will give evidence that their ancestors had an impact in the region's history. Right from its inception, this church represented the influx of Italian immigrants who were its parishioners. They anchored themselves in the community holding on to their homeland traditions, yet becoming patriotic Americans. Their ethic of hard work, family values and love of this country [note the outside memorial to those military men killed during World War II] were cemented into the neighborhood around the building.

¹ "Not surprisingly...this particular Marian devotion would soon come to stand for that very mobility--the astonishing portability--of Italian Christianity, a wonderful symbolism for a pilgrim and even a migrant church. Like all Mary legends...the legend of Our Lady of Loreto wraps both Faith and Church in the safe haven of motherhood--the Great Motherhood of the Virgin Mary. But the builders of this church may also have understood its devotional play on another, deeper level of symbolism...of **the built structure** itself...a structure that refuses--literally--to be destroyed. It transforms it back into a symbol of the faith that survives displacement; indeed that thrives on it. Surely these were among the deeper meanings that immigrant worshippers attached to this devotion. Home, it says, reassuringly, is wherever you carry your faith. Faith is wherever you make your home. **The Santa Casa of Loreto [in Italy] itself captures this real--this concrete--sense of the indestructibility of faith. Our Lady of Loreto in Brooklyn captures it too. Like an ark of the covenant it is solid, yet movable, permanent yet adaptable. Full of the promise of survival--even of transcendence--through the storms of change."**

http://www.flaviaalaya.com/flaviaalaya.com/The_Loreto_Story.html accessed [2015]). See also: Karin Velez: Ph.D. (History), September 2008 Dissertation (Princeton): "Resolved to Fly: The Virgin of Loreto, the Jesuits & the Miracle of Portable Catholicism in the Seventeenth-Century Atlantic World"; and Adrienne Hamilton, M.A. (Art History), June 2008 Thesis (U. Oregon): "Translating the Sacred: Piety, Politics and the Changing Image of the Holy House of Loreto."

² The statue of Vulcan was constructed inside St. Stephen's Magyar Church in Passaic, NJ, as the church was under construction by Armezzani, Federici and Sons. This Church is listed on the New Jersey State and National Registers.

³ "The clerestory windows along the upper nave appear to have been designed on the model of the windows of the Santa Casa as these appear in a woodcut print from the 16th century volume: *Sancta Maria de Loreto, Das ist, Warhaffte Beschreibung der Wunderlichen ...*, by Pietro Giorgio Tolomei. [See Item C] There appears to be some effort to "shadow" or replicate the Italian Santa Casa in both shape and design elements, so that the Romanesque simplicity of the pictured original still controls and dominates the baroque decorative elements of the new church. Notice also that the Federici's Mary is posed and the clothing draped (and the angels positioned) much as they are imaged in this print, suggesting Federici--always a diligent researcher--had seen and was adapting the image on the cover of this text." [Note by Flavia Alaya]

⁴ Research at the Offices of the City Register at the Brooklyn Municipal Building by Prof. Marilyn Verna of the Italian Genealogical Group has shown that in 1687 the property on which the church rests was owned by the children of Peter C. Alburtus.

⁵ It is Federici's commanding sculpture of "the house of Mary," a shrine in medieval times for Christian pilgrims to the Holy Land, and its translation to a safe haven in Europe (lest it be destroyed by marauding armies) that can almost be seen as a herald to events occurring today.

After Our Lady of Loreto was made the patroness of aviators by Pope Benedict XV in 1920, the image of Our Lady of Loreto as medallions were carried on some well-known flights in the history of aviation. It was on the "Spirit of St. Louis", the aircraft with which Charles Lindbergh (1927) flew over the Atlantic Ocean without any stopover, and on the airships named "Norge" and "Italia", used by Italian explorer Umberto Nobile in flying over the North Pole (1926 and 1928). It was in the "Santa Maria", the S.55 airplane which Francesco De Pinedo used in crossing the Atlantic Ocean on his "Four Continents" voyage (1927). (Europe to Africa to South America, then North America),

The astronaut James McDivitt, out of his own volition, got permission from NASA to bring a medal of Our Lady of Loreto on the first LEM, on the Apollo 9 flight in March 1969. Because of its association with air flight, a non-denominational American military organization, The Army Aviation Association of America even created an Order of Our Lady of Loreto.

With the removal of an interior statue of Our Lady of Loreto, this Brooklyn church now has only two representations of the legend of the House of Mary: a ceiling painting by Gaetano Capone and the exterior pediment by Gaetano Federici. No other ecclesiastical structure in the United States can claim this.