

10-2013

## Mission Work, Conversion, and the Italian Immigrant in Turn-of-the-century New York City

Alexandra A. de Luise  
*CUNY Queens College*

**[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)**

Follow this and additional works at: [https://academicworks.cuny.edu/qc\\_pubs](https://academicworks.cuny.edu/qc_pubs)



Part of the [American Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

de Luise, Alexandra A., "Mission Work, Conversion, and the Italian Immigrant in Turn-of-the-century New York City" (2013). *CUNY Academic Works*.

[https://academicworks.cuny.edu/qc\\_pubs/371](https://academicworks.cuny.edu/qc_pubs/371)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Queens College at CUNY Academic Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Publications and Research by an authorized administrator of CUNY Academic Works. For more information, please contact [AcademicWorks@cuny.edu](mailto:AcademicWorks@cuny.edu).

“Mission Work, Conversion, and the Italian Immigrant in Turn-of-the-century New York City”

Alexandra de Luise

Queens College/CUNY, New York

Oct. 2013

Behind the façade of a stately 1817 Federal Style two-story row building at 149 Mulberry Street in Little Italy, the legendary New York City ethnic enclave, lies the details of a little-known tale of Italian-American religiosity. In 1817, it was the home of Stephen Van Rensselaer, lieutenant governor of New York. It later became a cheese factory and the site of a succession of restaurants. Today, it is a souvenir shop.

However, over 100 years ago, it was a library and evangelical mission center for Italian immigrants living in the neighborhood by the name of Anson Phelps Stokes Italian Free Library. Established in July 1894, the catalyst for its fruition was Antonio Arrighi, a Protestant minister and well-known figure in the community. While the supposed mission of the library was to educate and socialize the Italian immigrant into the New World, so to speak, Arrighi also capitalized on it by identifying those ready for religious conversion and hence, Americanization. He envisioned the library as an institution for identifying potential converts. In addition, he was supported by Anson Phelps Stokes and his wife Helen Louisa, two fervent Protestant and wealthy benefactors. Their commitment to the financial health of the operation guaranteed it success and longevity for more than two decades.

A few years ago, I spoke about this library at an IASA conference presentation as evidence of a growing Italian reading population. Its very existence counteracted

the often-heard refrain that Italians didn't read. Returning to this library now with added insight, I want to present to you today connections that exist between Italian patronage of this library and the large number of conversions to Evangelical faith at the nearby Italian Evangelist Church credited to Reverend Arrighi during this same time.

Antonio Arrighi was a Methodist minister born in Florence, Italy. His dramatic life is told in his autobiography called *The Story of Antonio the Galley Slave*. In it, he recounted his remarkable journey from Italy to America in 1860 as a cabin boy on a ship, to his rise from illiterate immigrant to college student, which was then followed by theological study. He returned to Italy in 1869, where he was ordained as a minister in the Italian Protestant church. While in Florence preaching the gospel, he left for America a second time, at the request of the Italian Evangelical Church, as a delegate to the general council of the Presbyterian alliance that was meeting in Philadelphia in 1880. There, he met Morris K. Jessup, the President of the New York City Mission and Tract society, an evangelical organization. Jessup asked Arrighi if he could do mission work for the Italians at the Five Points House of Industry. He worked there until 1886, after which time he led a congregation at the nearby Broome Street Tabernacle.

According to a newspaper account at the time, starting the library was Arrighi's inspiration. He sought funds through a column he wrote in the publication, *The New York Mission Monthly*, soon catching the attention of Mrs. Stokes. She placed at his disposal money so that he could repair the building. He longed for such a space where

'Italians could freely obtain the books they needed,' as well as serve as a refuge from urban temptations (N.Y. Tribune, 1894). With a fine building secured, Arrighi served as its director, along with his wife, son, and fourteen teaching assistants.

Different protestant religions vied with one another to start missionary work among the Italian immigrants in the later part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in lower Manhattan, and these included Presbyterian, Episcopal, Methodist and Baptist. Arrighi 's plan was ambitious when he said in 1896, "how can we better Christianize and Americanize the 100,000 Italians living in this great city? There is no class of people so teachable as the Italians, so willing and ready to conform to our American ways, if properly taught (New York City Mission & Tract Society, p.46)." There was a conviction at that time that by converting Italians to Protestantism, it would more quickly Americanize them (Mondello, 84).

Anson Phelps Stokes and Helen Louisa, who financially supported the library with an annual endowment, were an extremely wealthy old New York family, and prominent figures in social and business activities. The library took the husband's name and became known as the **Anson Phelps Stokes Italian Free Library** although the interest in its welfare was strictly that of the wife. Helen was a wealthy socialite of evangelical faith. She leased the building and supplied the library with books, as well as paid the staff. Her steady philanthropy to the poor of this Italian community made her a well-loved patron and annual visitor to the library, especially at Christmastime.

Anson Phelps Stokes Italian Free Library was serving both as a mission library and a free public library. As a mission library, it provided social services to the poor.

Like other mission libraries in the city, there was a perceived need to make good reading freely available, at first with religious tracts, then with a more general collection, which might have included fiction, history and biography. Some mission libraries had reading rooms that were open to the public. The library was a free public library because of its popular reading selections and because it had a circulating collection, at least of the children's books upstairs. The practice of a free library funded by a philanthropist was also not unusual. Arthur Bostwick, a major force in the NYPL system of the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in quoting Andrew Carnegie in 1889, said that philanthropists had 3 ways of disposing of their immense wealth, two of which were held to be improper. One would be to leave the great fortunes to their children; the second unwise way to dispose of it would be to leave it for public uses. The best way to dispose of great wealth was to spend it while alive for the public good. Carnegie's so-called 'Gospel of Wealth' contended that surplus wealth should be considered as a sacred trust, to be administered during the lives of its owners, by them as trustees, for the best good of the community in which and from which it had been acquired (Bostwick, p.20). And so it was that Mrs. Anson Stokes steadfastly supported the Italian Free Library with an annual endowment.

A major function of Protestant ministry was to provide both spiritual and social benefits to the congregation and its potential converts. The services in the Italian language as well as classes to learn English and the Sunday school for children were very popular. Moreover, the Italian free library not only served 250 patrons a day in their reading, but it also offered rooms upstairs where there were clubs and classes, and

Italian girls would be taught sewing. In the basement, several nurses instructed parents on the proper care of children's ailments. By directing this institution, Arrighi said he was being "repaid in his efforts by evangelizing these people." Describing how Italians would enter the library, "strangers among strangers, many friendless, homeless and homesick, they would come to the library, find news, and homesickness would be cured, and by reading some of the books, sorrow soon forgotten." (Arrighi, 69<sup>th</sup> annual report, p.51).

A catalog of the collection, published in 1896 of its books and periodicals is worth examining (Catalogo generale). This catalog, with an introduction by Arrighi, gives us a unique glimpse into Italian's leisure reading interests at this early time. The collection of more than 3,000 books, partially donated by the Italian government, was a popular one, serving the interests of the Italian immigrants, with books on history, poetry, science, travel, natural history and novels-called 'romanze cuore'--relatively current and comparatively cheap books. Noteworthy is the large number of books on the subjects of religion and theology, in number almost equaling its holdings in history and biography. Italian newspapers were also available, and their popularity was evident in the increased attendance by patrons on mail days. Among the 32 newspaper and magazine subscriptions being received, several were religious in nature, including. The Christian Advocate, The Evangelist, L'Italia evangelica and L'Evangelista.

In 1898, perhaps prompted by a comment that needed a response, Arrighi wanted to make sure those reading the *New York City Mission Monthly* knew that the library was not associated with the NYC Mission, a Christian organization to which he

was employed (Arrighi, 1898-99, p.487). Arrighi asserted that it was simply the generous nature of Mrs. Stokes, who had wealth and means to finance library operations so that it could flourish and be a magnet for the Italian American community.

Yet, there can be no doubt that there was a religious undertone to the library; Helen's' husband Anson, was a manager of the New York City Tract Society (Smith-Rosenberg 278). Helen herself was involved in "religiously oriented secular charities." According to Carroll Rosenberg in *Religion and the Rise of the American City*, "These charities espoused decidedly evangelical and missionary aims- Identical to those which characterized the city missions, sharing the pietistic expressions of the period with some charities having an evangelical commitment (1978, pp.278-79). It is evident that through her continuous support of the library, first for 14 years at 149 Mulberry, then for an additional 8 years at the Broome Street Tabernacle, this library became her penitence. At her church where she worshiped, the Episcopal Church of the Heavenly Rest, she announced her gift to her parish and told the laity how the library was for the use of the crowded Italian colony centered on Mulberry street (1899, *The Sun*). She wished that a public library should 'spring up furnished with works in the Italian language—instructive, moral and entertaining for their exclusive use' (NY. *Evangelist* 1894).

Arrighi waived in his public pronouncements about the library, on one hand saying it served a non-sectarian purpose, and with the other saying the library was doing settlement work, evident in the Bible classes offered. He oftentimes referred to the patrons of the library as being "strangers from Rome," a reference not to their place of

birth, but rather to a passage in the Bible which said:

“On the day of Pentecost there were in Jerusalem ‘strangers from Rome’ who doubtless carried with them back to Rome tidings of that great day, and were instrumental in founding the church there. “

The idea of establishing a church, a church that Arrighi would claim as his own for his congregation, was the linchpin of his hopes and dreams.

By 1905, Arrighi’s congregation had grown so large as to take over the entire Broome Street Tabernacle, according to Kenneth Miller (1962, pp.114); this made his church the largest in the world of any Italian Evangelical church. Arrighi achieved this practically singlehandedly because of his strong personality and ability to speak in Italian. That he might have also been aided in achieving this through a steady stream of patrons to the library-- 250 a day-- is more than likely.

The Library’s closing in 1909 and transfer of its book collection to the Broome Street Tabernacle, where it was integrated into their existing library, may have been a consequence of the formation beginning in 1901 of the branch system of the New York Public Library. Under the gift to the city of five million dollars by philanthropist Andrew Carnegie, this led to the consolidation into the New York Public Library system of many free, independent libraries throughout the city, as specified by his five million dollar gift.

Up through the library’s closing and even beyond until Arrighi’s retirement from religious service in 1911, he used the library and then the Broome Street Tabernacle Italian Reading Room as places to meet potential converts and to work towards his goal of converting, as Antonio Mangano noted (1917, p. 155), ‘all the Italians of this city.’ His

motivation was to free Italians from the superstitions and saint worship that he felt kept Italians ignorant and provincial, as he watched them during processions on Saint days. Although never actualizing an entire population's conversion to Protestantism, Arrighi's success was in uniting 1200 Italians to his Italian Evangelical Church, seemingly a handful at a time, and overseeing upwards of 500 Italian children in its Sunday school. This was a singular achievement for one religious leader at that time.

After 1916, the Italian Evangelical Church merged into integrated congregations and Italians began moving to outlying areas. Protestant proselytism among Italian immigrants, as noted by historian Salvatore Mondello, had reached its high point by World War I and declined sharply thereafter (Social Science, 1966, p.90).

In conclusion, the library represented a type of institution for the perceived betterment of this Italian population. It was an example of how a library could be used in settlement work, as a social service, while recruiting patrons to the Protestant faith. It survived through the generosity and commitment of two society patrons and a library director. It is unlikely that the Italian Free library would have endured as long as it had without the coming together of these individuals, each needing the other in order to carry out their life's mission. The library served as the religious instrument by a few in power to deal with the swelling Italian population during this period of rapid change, with the intended outcome of having them conform to American patterns of behavior.

#### WORKS CITED

Arrighi, A. (1911) *The Story of Antonio the galley slave, a romance of real life in three parts*. New York: F.H. Revell. Web. <http://books.google.com>.

Arrighi, A. "Italian Evangelical Church, 395 Broome Street "(1896) 70<sup>th</sup>, New York City Mission & Tract Society Annual Report p. 45-49.

(Arrighi, A.) "Italian Evangelical Church, Broome Street Tabernacle (1898-1899), 73<sup>rd</sup>, New York Mission & Tract Society Annual Report, p.484-88.

Arrighi, A. "Italian Evangelical Church, 395 Broome Street" (1895) 69<sup>th</sup>, New York City Mission & Tract Society Annual Report, p.45-51.

Bostwick, Arthur Elmore (1921), "The Library as a field for philanthropy," *The Library and Society*, p.19-26. <http://www.munseys.com/disknine/libso.pdf>

*Catalogo generale della Biblioteca Gratuita, sala di lettura per gli italiani 149 Mulberry At. N.Y., Founded in the year 1894 by Mrs. Ansom (sp.) Phelps Stokes (1896)*. New York, Stamperia e Libreria Italiana.

"The Italian reading rooms, opening of the new quarters provided by Mrs. Anson Phelps Stokes." *New York Tribune*. (1894) Jy 23, p.3.

"The Italians in New York." *New York Evangelist* (1894). Jy 12, p. 28

Mangano, A., & Missionary Education Movement of the United States and Canada. (1971). *Sons of Italy; a social and religious study of the Italians in America*. New York, missionary education movement of the United States and Canada, 1917. New York, J. S. Ozer.

Miller, K. D., & Miller, E. P. Z. (1962). *The people are the city; 150 years of social and religious concern in New York City*. New York: Macmillan.

Mondello, S. (1966) "Protestant Proselytism among the Italians in the USA as reported in American magazines," *Social Science* Apr 1, 84-90.

Smith-Rosenberg, C. (1971). *Religion and the rise of the American city; the New York City mission movement, 1812-1870*. New York: Cornell University Press.