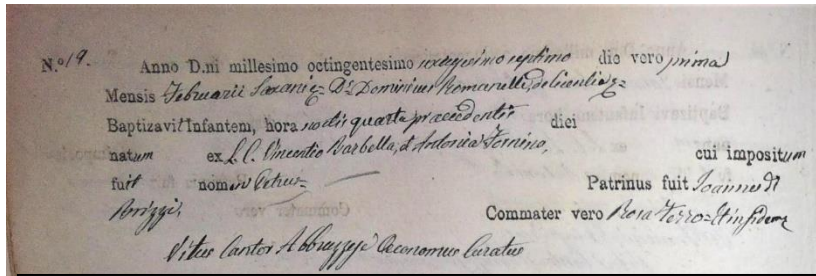


A Journey through Tragedies, Triumphs and Survival By Peter Barbella

In traveling back in my ancestral history, I've unraveled the many twists and turns that my family members had had to endure in their trials and tribulations to survive life. In that journey, I learned the importance of *la famiglia*. Family stories can go back centuries, but I prefer to begin my Italian family chronicle with Italian unification.

The first battle for Rome was raging. Giuseppe Garibaldi was locked in a battle to capture the city from the French garrisons. He was shot and wounded at the battle of Mentana, near



Pietro's baptismal record-Feb. 1, 1867 -San Giovanni Evanaelista

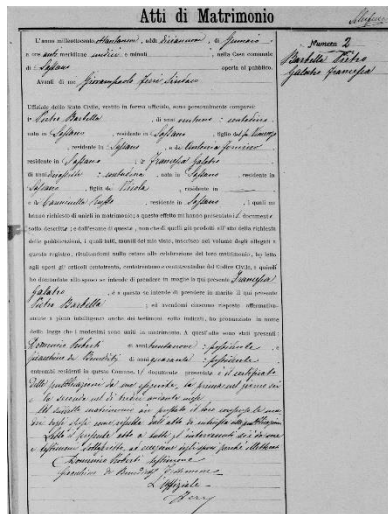
Rome. In the midst of this turmoil, on January 31, 1867, a young woman, Antonia Fornino, had her first child, a son. She and her husband, Vincenzo Barbella, named him Pietro in honor of Vincenzo's father. Oh, what a celebration there was after Vincenzo had gone to the Ufficio di Stato

Civile, and stood before Mayor Gerardo Sabini to record Pietro's birth. The mandolins came off the shelves, and music filled the air. The festive atmosphere was exceeded only by the exuberance of Vincenzo and Antonia at the birth of their first child in a united Italy.



Young Pietro grew up in Sassano, in the province of Salerno. Good health was something that eluded most of the families in this area. The promised benefits of Unification seemed to be stalled at Rome, unable to reach the people in the Mezzogiorno. Pietro had his share of maladies, but he certainly fared better than his little brother Vincenzo who died after only three years of life. To make matters worse, at age four, Pietro lost his father. With difficulty, he managed, to bear the grief with his mother Antonia and his sister Francesca. But who was going to provide their family with food? It was not an easy life, but the family drew on their relatives and struggled on.

Illiteracy made life even harder. The post-Risorgimento Italian government was at odds with the Papal States and what little education afforded by the monks and priests was stifled. Communication with the outside world was limited at best. However, stories of the great migration of Italians to the "fabulous" city of New York were common. Such tales stirred the imagination of young Pietro.



Eventually, in his late teen age years, Pietro met Francesca Galatro. They became more than good friends, and began planning a life together. Like any young suitor, Pietro wanted good things for his new *amore*. On the 19th day of January 1889, Pietro and Francesca were married in the mother church of Sassano, San Giovanni Evangelista.

Pietro and Francesca began their married life in Sassano. With difficulty Pietro found work as a farm laborer. Soon Francesca was expecting their first child. But prospects in the Mezzogiorno were dim, and growing dimmer every day. Stories about the USA, land of opportunity, filled their heads. Pietro soon made bold plans to escape the poverty of Southern Italy.

He would leave his beloved Sassano and go to the United States to find those "streets paved with gold." They saved their money for the passage. The plan was for Pietro to first make the trip and pave the way for Francesca. They packed his meager belongings and he embarked on the *Victoria*. He arrived in New York on the 30th of September 1889. Pietro likely found shelter among the many southern Italians populating the slums of Brooklyn. He found work as a rag collector.

Back in Sassano, on 12th February 1890, Francesca gave birth to a son, Vincenzo Barbella. Almost as soon as the baby was able to travel, Francesca, her mother, and the child boarded a ship for the United States to join her husband. On the 17th of December, the ship *Alesia* arrived in New York, and with great joy, the family was reunited. Later, the family expanded as Antonia Lucia was born 1891 and Francesco in 1896. The last birth, in combination with rampant disease in the Brooklyn slums, put Francesca into a weakened condition. The doctor recommended that she go back to Italy to escape the awful conditions. She returned to Sassano, but about a year later she succumbed to her illness. She was only 26 years of age. Pietro, still in Brooklyn with the children, was devastated by the news of his wife's death. How was he going to raise a family with three children by himself? Even with the help of relatives, this would be an overwhelming challenge. In his grief, he decided to return to Sassano to deal with Francesca's burial. Francesca's brother Pietro Galatro, agreed to take in seven-year-old Vincenzo and Pietro managed to scrape together enough money to return to Sassano with his two youngest children.

Pietro stayed with his mother who was delighted to meet her grandchildren. Staring at reality, Pietro realized that he had to make another bold decision. He met and courted Maria Romano from the nearby town of Teggiano. They married on 20 January 1898, and left for America the next month. Two years later, Maria gave birth to a girl, who they named Jacobina. Pietro and Maria continued to grow their family on Sacket Street in Brooklyn. Meanwhile, Pietro continued his work in the rag business. Slowly, the family began to learn the English language. In the 1900s, without the ability to read or write in English, Italian immigrants were at the mercy of the New York City aristocracy. They treated the Italians with little more respect than slaves. This oppression gave rise to *La Mano Nera* in New York City and caused further discrimination against Italians.

In 1902, Maria gave birth to Dominick and in 1907, a second son, Charles, was born. But shortly after the birth of Charles, Pietro was stricken with one of the many diseases that infected Italian peasants living in crowded, unhealthy conditions in Brooklyn. He died on the 28th of October in 1909 with his family beside him. He is buried in Holy Cross Cemetery. Since Vincenzo had already left the household, it was then up to thirteen-year-old Francesco and his stepmother Maria to provide for the family.



Photo: Consiglia DiCristofaro, from the beautiful seaside town of Vasto in the Chieti province with her grandson, Peter Barbella

Consiglia was left to fend for herself. She was unable to manage her seamstress job and raise her son at the same time. To no one's surprise, her Italian family rushed to her aid. Young Peter went to live with his grandmother, Mary Trivelli diCristofaro, in Manhattan. Nine years later, Peter's mother met and married Biagio Marinelli. They moved to Elmsford, but since the town did not have its own school, Peter attended Washington Irving High School in neighboring Tarrytown. In 1933, the village of Elmsford opened its own high school. Peter completed his senior year there and was a member of the first graduating class of Alexander Hamilton High School. He was a star athlete and class valedictorian. After graduation, despite his outstanding high school scholarship, Peter was unable to pursue a college education because the family had little means. Five years later, he married Mildred Mascola, the sister of one of Peter's high school classmates.

They soon moved to the home of Mildred's father in Tarrytown. Peter worked for General Motors, building Chevrolet automobiles. He worked hard and rose to management in the company. In January 1944, Peter and Mildred had a son who they named Peter Jr. After retiring from General Motors, Peter became active in local politics. He became the mayor of Tarrytown and served two terms. He and his wife devoted much of their lives to civic activities in the town. Unhappily, Mildred was stricken with Alzheimer's disease. Peter and Mildred joined their son in Massachusetts where they spent their final years. Mildred passed away in 1998. Peter died on 3 March, 2000.

Young Peter with grandmother



