

VENGEANCE, VIOLENCE, AND VIGILANTISM:  
AN EXPLORATION OF THE 1891 LYNCHING OF ELEVEN ITALIAN-  
AMERICANS IN NEW ORLEANS

by  
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## ABSTRACT

Caitlin Kennedy: Vengeance, Violence, and Vigilantism: An Exploration of the 1891  
Lynching of Eleven Italian-Americans in New Orleans

Under the Direction of Jessica Wilkerson and Shennette Garrett-Scott

This thesis examines the 1891 lynching of Italian immigrants in New Orleans, the subsequent news coverage by the American Press, and how the lynching was memorialized. The Italians were killed because most of the city's whites blamed them for the assassination of the chief of police. The turbulent political arena and strict racial hierarchy of post-Reconstruction New Orleans was a precarious environment for Italian immigrants; the assassination of the police chief was a pretext for their lynching. This lynching soon became national news and took on different meanings to different groups of Americans. Throughout the past century the meaning of this lynching has fluctuated based on prevailing cultural values.

This paper analyzes a variety of primary sources such as newspaper articles, letters, speeches and census data. Secondary scholarly sources are used to provide context.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	4
CHAPTER I: NEW IMMIGRANTS IN NEW ORLEANS.....	11
CHAPTER II: AN ERUPTION OF VIOLENCE.....	29
CHAPTER III: THE REACTION OF THE AMERICAN PRESS .....	52
CHAPTER IV: MEMORIALIZATION OF THE MURDERS.....	72
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	92

## Introduction

In October 1890, David Hennessey, the chief of the New Orleans police, was gunned down and killed by an unknown group of assassins in the early hours of the morning. He allegedly blamed “the dagoes” before he died due to his resulting wounds. This accusation was a harbinger of disaster for the large Italian immigrant population in the city. Dozens of Italians were round up and arrested by order of the mayor. Eventually, nineteen Italians faced murder charges the following March. There was a mistrial and the accused were acquitted.

White New Orleanians were convinced that the Mafia had bribed members of the jury and that the Italians were guilty. Newspapers demanded justice and called for a citizen’s meeting. The next day, a mob of thousands of men and women stormed the parish prison and killed eleven of the prisoners. Most were beaten to death by clubs. Two Italians were hung up on the street; their bullet-ridden bodies were a public spectacle and warning for all to see. By victim count, it was the largest lynching in American history.<sup>1</sup>

I became interested in this event after I first heard about it in one of my Italian classes. I love studying the South through a trans-Atlantic lens and have always been interested in the multicultural history of New Orleans. I decided that it was a fascinating topic to write my senior thesis on. Attending the University of Mississippi, the center of so many debates regarding historical memorialization, influenced me to examine how this

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<sup>1</sup> Lynching is defined in this paper as it is defined by the NAACP; to qualify as a lynching, a group of people must act under the pretext of justice and retribution. The intent to right a presumed wrong is what separates lynchings from race riots such as those in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and Rosewood, Florida. Blacks were lynched in far greater numbers than Italians throughout the years, but the single largest instance of lynching by victim count was the incident on March 14, 1891 in New Orleans.

lynching was remembered throughout time and to analyze what repercussions these memorializations held.

The history of this lynching illuminates many aspects of life in New Orleans during the post-Reconstruction era. This was a period of flux and change in the South. Jim Crow was in its nascent stages and waves of immigrants from China, Germany, Italy, and Ireland challenged the South's racial hierarchy. Politics and violence went hand in hand. White New Orleanians accused the Italian population of the 1890 assassination of police chief David Hennessy. The subsequent lynching was fueled by jealousy over the economic success of Italian immigrants coupled with the white population's sense of racial superiority. The lynching of the Italians in New Orleans became a national symbol that held various meanings to different groups of Americans. These various meanings and interpretations fluctuated and changed throughout the past century based on prevailing cultural values and the incident remains relevant to this day. I argue that an analysis of the lynching and its aftermath illuminate the intricate complexities of racial violence and immigration in the post-Reconstruction era south and elucidate the ever-changing perceptions surrounding the memory lynchings in the region.

The study of this lynching challenges many preconceived notions of the American South. For instance, the late nineteenth century South is not generally thought of as a hub of immigration. In the minds of most Americans, Italian immigration, in particular, was confined to New York City and New Jersey. Images of immigrants huddled under the Statue of Liberty proliferate in the public's minds; far fewer people think of immigrants arriving on the banks of the Mississippi River. Perhaps because of this, the South is frequently also viewed as solely black and white in terms of race. Jim Crow laws often

lumped Native Americans and a multitude of immigrant classes in the “colored” category. Most scholarship is deservedly focused on black and white relationships. Sometimes, the stories of other minorities and their struggles get swept to the side or forgotten. In reality, racial minorities have always existed in the South, particularly in cosmopolitan cities such as New Orleans.

To write this thesis, I scoured primary sources at the American Cultural Center in New Orleans and read newspapers from across the country to track the story in the national media. Reading newspapers from all across the United States, including its territories such as Hawaii, allowed me to examine if any regional pattern regarding perception emerged. I also read through several African-American owned newspapers to gain perspective on how the black population, both in New Orleans and across the country, viewed this event. I also studied songs and films regarding this lynching to see how it was presented in forms of entertainment. Exploring this media allowed me to see how the lynching was turned into entertainment and amusement. I also studied scholarly articles and works regarding this lynching to examine how its meaning had changed over time.

The first full length monograph of the Italian lynching case was Richard Gambino’s 1977 *Vendetta: A True Story of the Worst Lynching in America, the Mass Murder of Italian-Americans in New Orleans in 1891, the Viscous Motivations Behind It, And the Tragic Repercussions That Linger to this Day*.<sup>2</sup> Gambino’s text was the first to piece together the events of the lynching. It was significant because it postulated that the Italians might have been innocent considering Chief Hennessy’s sordid past. Gambino’s

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Gambino, *Vendetta: A True Story of the Worst Lynching in America, the Mass Murder of Italian-Americans in New Orleans in 1891 ...* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977).

text was very useful in creating a timeline of what happened and keeping track of who did what.

I used Justin A. Nystrom's *New Orleans After the Civil War: Race Politics, and a new Birth of Freedom* to understand the political, economic, and racial climate of where these events took place.<sup>3</sup> Nystrom focuses heavily of instances of political turmoil, such as the heavily contested 1872 Louisiana gubernatorial election and how they influenced acts of violence by white supremacists groups like The Colfax Massacre and the Battle of Liberty Hill. Nystrom embraces the murkiness and moral ambiguity of postbellum New Orleans and his analysis of the racial and class structure of that era was invaluable to me in writing this paper.

My analysis of lynching draws upon the rich scholarship on the history of lynching and racial terror in the postbellum United States. W. Fitzhugh Brundage's *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1930* provided me with an excellent framework to understand why lynchings happened.<sup>4</sup> Often, lynching was excused as a practice of protection for white women. Brundage argues that the motivations were often economic. Southern whites grew resentful of blacks with financial power. The notion that they offended a white woman was generally just a pretext. Brundage shows that lynching was a distinct southern tool to maintain white supremacy.

Grace Hale's *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940* focuses on how white Southerners created a common culture of whiteness after the

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<sup>3</sup> Justin A. Nystrom, *New Orleans after the Civil War: Race, Politics, and a New Birth of Freedom* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1930* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1994).



Civil War.<sup>5</sup> Hale shows how lynchings, especially spectacle lynchings, were an integral part of building that culture and oppressing blacks through violence and terror. Hale showed that lynchings were considered a form of entertainment for whites. Hale's work gave me an understanding as to what drove people to lynch and how one could ever participate in a lynch mob.

Amy Louise Wood's *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America; 1890-1940* similarly explored the social phenomena of public lynch mobs.<sup>6</sup> She specifically delved into the way media encouraged these lynchings. Newspapers normalized and encouraged the practice and media such as film and postcards allowed for whites who were not present at the lynching to enjoy the suffering of the lynching victims as if they were there. Wood's work was crucial for my understanding of the way lynching was commercialized and remembered throughout the South.

I also used a variety of historical research to understand the perception of Italian immigration to America. In *Imagining Italians: The Clash of Romance and Race in American Perceptions, 1880-1910*, Joseph P. Cosco theorizes that at the turn of the century, Americans have pleasant associations with Italy but unpleasant associations with Italians.<sup>7</sup> His work provided me with information on why immigrants chose to leave Italy and come to America.

My thesis differs from other works on the subject of the 1891 lynchings of Italians in a variety of ways. First, by tracing the aftermath of the lynching and how it operated in

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<sup>5</sup> Grace Elizabeth. Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940*(Brantford, Ont.: W. Ross MacDonald School, Resource Services Library, 2004).

<sup>6</sup> Amy Louise. Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America ; 1890-1940*(Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2011).

<sup>7</sup> Joseph P. Cosco, *Imagining Italians: The Clash of Romance and Race in American Perceptions, 1880-1910* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 2003).

historical memory, I show how Hennessy was posthumously sanctified and turned into a symbol of white supremacy. Moreover, this is the first work to explore the national reaction to the incident through the lens of the press and to examine the shifting national perspective of this event throughout the following century.

My first chapter investigates the life of Italians in New Orleans. I give context to explain the complex political and racial arena that Italians were thrust upon their arrival. I explore race relations in the city and try to explicate how white New Orleans felt about Italians and why they felt this way. Although Italians in New Orleans experienced white privilege relative to the city's blacks, they were not assimilated into white culture and were considered racially other. I also determine the factors that prompted the Italians to make the decision to migrate. Both push and pull factors were at play. They left southern Italy because of the political situation created by the 1861 unification of the country and chose New Orleans because of its abundant economic opportunities. Many Italians found jobs in the food industry. They owned grocery stores, sold fresh-caught fish and shrimp, and imported fruits from South America. Despite the derision they faced, many Italians were able to thrive economically, and some even became wealthy and powerful.

In the second chapter, I explain the factors that led up to the lynching and its immediate implications. The assassination of Hennessy provided a pretext for powerful whites to lynch Italians in order to reassert their dominance over the city and to flex the power of white supremacy in the post-Reconstruction era. I give a brief synopsis of the police force in New Orleans and a biography of Hennessey. I examine the acts of Mayor Shakespeare and the Committee of Fifty, which led to the violent actions, as incendiary and directly prejudiced towards the Italian population. I show how little protection

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Italians received from their government and how they were vulnerable to the lynching. I try to put the lynching in context with other lynchings during the time period to highlight the differences and similarities between this lynching and the typical lynchings of African Americans.

In my third chapter, I delve into press coverage immediately following this event. There was a mixed reaction across the country. The reaction of the media to this incident is textured and complicated. Northern and southern journalists had mixed attitudes regarding the lynching and praised and criticized it for various reasons. Southern papers tended to view the lynching as the right of the mob. Papers in places with high Italian immigration, such as New York, took the incident as a chance to disparage immigrants. Papers from states in the West hoped for a war with Italy that would potentially unite the country. The response was not uniform; some southern papers criticized the lynching and viewed it as a shameful act of violence. This shows a diversity of thought across the nation on topics such as extralegal violence and immigration.

In my final chapter, I examine the historical memory of this event by analyzing newspapers, popular culture, and scholarly works. Immediately after the lynching and during the first half of the twentieth century, the American press generally obtained that the lynch mob was justified in their actions. During the Civil Rights Era and after the publication of Gambino's *Vendetta*, public opinion began to shift. The Italians were treated as victims, and the lynching was condemned. Interest in the lynching peaked again in the 1990s because of the advent of multiculturalism and the centennial anniversary. Recently, it has resurfaced in the national psyche as a warning against xenophobia as tensions over the national debate on immigration have increased.

## Chapter 1: New Immigrants in New Orleans

Vito Dilorenzo left his home Italy when he was twenty years old to settle in New Orleans, Louisiana in 1880.<sup>8</sup> Through hard work and determination he was able to thrive in the city. Like so many other Italian immigrants he worked in the fresh food industry. He became the proprietor of a melon stand on the corner of Washington Avenue and Laurel Street within six years of his arrival in America.<sup>9</sup> By owning his own business he was able to be self sufficient and have some sort of disposable income. In 1886, he purchased a lottery ticket and wound up winning twenty five thousand dollars.<sup>10</sup> While many Italians did not become as wealthy as he did through the luck of the draw, the first few years of Dilorenzo's life in America mirrored the lives of thousands of Italian immigrants in New Orleans. They were able to not only survive but also financially thrive in the Crescent City.

The destination for the majority of Italian immigrants in the American South was New Orleans, Louisiana. Located at the mouth of the Mississippi River, New Orleans was the tenth largest city in the country and the largest in the South with a population of almost a quarter million in 1880.<sup>11</sup> New Orleans was also a city still recovering economically and socially from the Civil War, as it grappled with issues of race and

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<sup>8</sup> "In New Orleans," *Daily Evening Bulliten* (Maysville), August 25, 1886, accessed April 12, 2018, [https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn87060189/1886-08-25/ed-1/seq-2/#date1=1789&index=0&rows=20&words=Italian New Orleans&searchType=basic&sequence=0&state=&date2=1888&proxtext=Italians New Orleans&y=8&x=16&dateFilterType=yearRange&page=3](https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn87060189/1886-08-25/ed-1/seq-2/#date1=1789&index=0&rows=20&words=Italian%20New%20Orleans&searchType=basic&sequence=0&state=&date2=1888&proxtext=Italians%20New%20Orleans&y=8&x=16&dateFilterType=yearRange&page=3).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> "Population of the 100 Largest Urban Places: 1880," Census.gov, June 15, 1998, , accessed April 01, 2018, <https://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0027/tab11.txt>.

power. Despite the immigrant's economic gains, politically turbulent times and an established pattern of public violence within the city created a precarious environment for the thousands of Italians who would move to New Orleans during the late 1890s.

New Orleans had a unique racial antebellum history that shaped its social classes in ways much different than the rest of the South. In the seventeenth century, the Crescent City was under French control. Slavery was legal, but a large class of free blacks, or *gens de couleur libre*, emerged and prospered.<sup>12</sup> These free blacks owned and operated businesses within the city, had certain civil rights, and were largely literate. By 1803, free blacks made up twenty-three percent of the city's population.<sup>13</sup> Thus, the antebellum legal system was divided into three categories: whites, free blacks, and slaves. New Orleans was a city obsessed with racial classifications and would struggle with how those definitions would change to fit the arrival of new immigrants in a post-Emancipation world.

New Orleans had an experience during the Civil War that was different than most of the Confederacy because of its relatively speedy capture and subsequent occupation. Because of its economic importance as a port city, the quick capture of the city was vital to the Union plan to cut off trade to the rest of the Confederacy. Union General Benjamin Butler took possession of the very poorly defended New Orleans on May 1, 1862.<sup>14</sup> Butler soon became reviled by the white citizens of New Orleans. He had several male supporters of the Confederacy publicly hung.<sup>15</sup> Much to the dismay of the city's elite

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<sup>12</sup> Virginia R. Domínguez, *White by Definition: Social Classification in Creole Louisiana* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 23.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>14</sup> Justin A. Nystrom, *New Orleans after the Civil War: Race, Politics, and a New Birth of Freedom* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015), 26.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

white women, Butler issued Order 28, which stated that any woman who showed open public contempt for Union soldiers would “be regarded and held liable to be treated as a woman of the town plying her avocation.”<sup>16</sup> His comparison of ladies of elite society who protested the presence of Union troop with prostitutes created lasting shame and anger amongst white New Orleanians. In the years following the war, the city’s elites would try to “redeem” themselves and try to regain power by any means necessary.

The effects of the Civil War changed the lives of the city’s black residents in multiple ways. General Butler invited free black men to join the Union Army. The *gens de couleur libre* responded very positively and created the first three black regiments in the Civil War.<sup>17</sup> As for the enslaved, the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, explicitly excluded the city of New Orleans, but many slaves took the opportunity to run away and find freedom for themselves.<sup>18</sup> The Civil War created the chance for black people to enact their own agency and cast away the bond of slavery. When emancipation did come for the city’s enslaved population, however, the *gens de couleur libre* found themselves in a dilemma. They did not wish to be lumped together with the newly freed slaves. They saw themselves as a much higher social class and because of this, many *gens de couleur libre* began to try and pass for white.<sup>19</sup> This was a wise move considering the spike of violence against blacks in New Orleans after the Civil War.

One of the new dangers that African Americans in New Orleans had to contend with was the practice of lynching. Lynching was defined by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Associated Negro Press as “any death to an

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<sup>16</sup> General Order No. 28, May 15, 1862, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1880-), ser. 2, vol. 15:426.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>18</sup> Exec. Order No. 95, 3 C.F.R. (1863).

<sup>19</sup> Nystrom, *New Orleans After the Civil War*, 60.

individual or individuals inflicted by two or more privately organized citizens, who impose such violence with correctional intent.”<sup>20</sup> From the end of the Civil War to the mid-twentieth century, white people lynched over four thousand black men and over one hundred and thirty black women in the United States of America, with the vast majority taking place in the South.<sup>21</sup><sup>22</sup> The most common explanation for lynching was the accusation of rape of a white woman.<sup>23</sup> The vast majority of these accusations were baseless; the true reason for most lynchings was it allowed for white men to form a common, patriarchal bond while oppressing and causing terror amongst the black community.

In addition to lynchings, the black community in Louisiana also faced race riots as they attempted to assert their newfound political power. Although the Fifteenth Amendment granted all men the right to vote, Southern whites were desperate to keep that power out of the hands of those they had previously enslaved. White southerners violently attacked African Americans in attempts to oppress them. For example, in 1866 in New Orleans, Mayor Monroe ordered his police to break up a crowd of largely black men at a Republican convention; the police wound up killing thirty-four black men and three white men.<sup>24</sup> Federal Troops arrived but there was little they could do but count the

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<sup>20</sup> Christopher Waldrep, "War of Words: The Controversy over the Definition of Lynching, 1899-1940," *The Journal of Southern History* 66, no. 1 (February 2000): 81, accessed March 31, 2018, doi:10.2307/2587438.

<sup>21</sup> Crystal Nicole Feimster, *Southern Horrors: Women and the Politics of Rape and Lynching*(Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 180.

<sup>22</sup> W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1930* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 8.

<sup>23</sup> Feimster, 5.

<sup>24</sup> Nystrom, *New Orleans After the Civil War*, 67.

bodies.<sup>25</sup> The Race Riot of 1866 was one of the earliest bouts of violence during the Reconstruction era, but it would not be the last.

Louisiana Reconstruction politics got even tenser in wake of 1872 gubernatorial elections. Both the Democratic candidate, John McEnery and the Republican candidate, William Kellogg declared themselves victorious, but the Federal Government declared Kellogg the true victor to the dismay and anger of white Democrats.<sup>26</sup> In the span of three years, there were five claimants to the position of governor which truly indicates the turbulent political situation in Reconstruction Louisiana. Although the Civil War had been over for years, many Southern whites still believed there were plenty of battles to be fought.

The deadliest act of racial violence during the Reconstruction Era occurred in Colfax, Louisiana. On Easter Sunday in 1873, estimates of one hundred black men died defending their courthouse when white paramilitary groups claimed that the Democratic candidate, McEnery had won the state elections and tried to seize power.<sup>27</sup> White paramilitary groups such as the Ku Klux Klan, Knights of the White Camellia and the White League terrorized both the urban and rural black population in an effort to intimidate them from using their newfound right to vote.<sup>28</sup> Louisiana was the site of many public and violent racial riots, as Southern whites strived to tamp the political power of blacks.

In addition to the Colfax Massacre, there was another riot in New Orleans stemming from the 1872 gubernatorial election. The Battle of Liberty Place was a

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>27</sup> LeeAnna Keith, *The Colfax Massacre: The Untold Story of Black Power, White Terror and the Death of Reconstruction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 71.



showdown in the streets of New Orleans between the White League and the Metropolitan Police, a unit created by Republican governor Henry Warmouth to protect his personal political interests.<sup>29</sup> The White League was an anti-black, anti-Republican, paramilitary group that believed they were the successors of the soldiers of the Confederacy; they promised the city a second chance for white racial glory.<sup>30</sup> It was largely a youth movement. Members of the White League tried to restore the Democratic candidate, McEnery, for governor and killed eleven Metropolitan Police officers, by the time Federal forces arrived to shut them down.<sup>31</sup> While many white New Orleanians viewed this riot positively, it earned New Orleans a national reputation as a place of disorder and violence.

The end of Reconstruction saw a shift in the demographics in New Orleans and Louisiana. Federal troops left the city in 1877. For the first time in over ten years, New Orleans was free from federal occupation. The White League celebrated their exit by ringing bells and firing cannons in the streets.<sup>32</sup> The black population was nervous; their protection was leaving and they were more vulnerable than ever. Many blacks began to leave Louisiana; in some parishes, the black population decreased by as much as one third.<sup>33</sup> Many white planters in these parishes began to consider ways to replenish the workforce and create a white majority population.

Many planters began to see European immigration as a way to establish white majority rule in Louisiana and to expand the white workforce. In an 1884 publication of

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<sup>29</sup> Nystrom, *New Orleans After the Civil War*, 173.

<sup>30</sup> Reid Mitchell, *All on a Mardi Gras Day: Episodes in the History of New Orleans Carnival* (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 72.

<sup>31</sup> Nystrom, *New Orleans After the Civil War*, 174.

<sup>32</sup> "The New Southern Policy," *The New York Times*, April 25, 1877, accessed April 1, 2018, <https://search-proquest-com.umiss.idm.oclc.org/docview/93634093?pq-origsite=summon>.

<sup>33</sup> Keith, *The Colfax Massacre*, 47.

*The Louisiana Planter and Sugar Manufacturer*, the publication of Louisiana Sugar Planters Association, it was noted that “Italians have proven to be first rate laborer in Louisiana.”<sup>34</sup> They also believed that Italians would easily assimilate into the white southern culture by being “rapidly absorbed by the population and become first-rate citizens.”<sup>35</sup> Believing that Italian immigration was the solution to their labor problems, many organizations like the Louisiana Sugar Planters Association began to recruit labor from Sicily and other parts of Southern Italy. Many Democratic newspapers praised the efforts and claimed that the influx of Italians would create a white majority in the state.<sup>36</sup>

Italian immigration to Southern Louisiana did not start during the post-Reconstruction era. The history of Italian immigration to Louisiana spreads centuries. Italians had been amongst the first explorers of the New World. Henri di Tonti, an Italian explorer from Napoli, was Robert de la Salle’s second in command on his journey through the American South East during the seventeenth century.<sup>37</sup> Italian immigration to Louisiana continued to trickle in throughout the centuries of Spanish and French control. By the time of the Civil War, there were enough Italians in New Orleans to form two regiments of soldiers for the Confederacy.<sup>38</sup> Prior to the 1880s, other groups of European immigrants were more prominent in New Orleans, however. Germans flocked to the Crescent City to avoid the 1848 Revolution and thousands of Irish found refuge from the

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<sup>34</sup> "Excellent Results," *The Louisiana Planter and Sugar Manufacturer* 22 (1884): 222, accessed April 1, 2018, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.hb15jo;view=1up;seq=1>

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> George E. Cunningham, "The Italian, a Hindrance to White Solidarity in Louisiana, 1890-1898.," *The Journal of Negro History* 50, no. 1 (1965): 22, accessed April 1, 2018, doi:10.2307/2716406.

<sup>37</sup> Jayur Madhusudan Mehta, "Spanish Conquistadores, French Explorers, and Natchez Great Suns in Southwestern Mississippi, 1542-1729," *Native South* 6, no. 1 (2013): 36, accessed April 1, 2018, doi:10.1353/nso.2013.0002.

<sup>38</sup> A. Margavio and Jerome Salamone, *Bread and Respect: The Italians of Louisiana* (Place of Publication Not Identified: Pelican Publishing, 2014), 62.

Potato Famine.<sup>39</sup> However, the few Italian immigrants had been shaping the city for decades and had found their niche in New Orleans society.

The majority of Italians immigrated to Louisiana in the late nineteenth century. This wave of Italian immigration was unique in the history of Italian immigration to the United States. In most northern cities, the immigrants found work in factories, as opposed to the agricultural labor in the South.<sup>40</sup> In New Orleans, Italians were recruited to work on sugar plantations in parishes outside of the city; many of them arrived during the months of September to December, peak cane harvesting time.<sup>41</sup> Originally, most were single males, but many tried to save enough money to bring their families over once they started to earn money. Once they saved enough capital, the immigrants would also move from the surrounding parishes into the city. Sugarcane harvest was back-breaking labor in the heat and humidity and the majority of immigrants wanted to leave that line of work as soon as they possibly could.<sup>42</sup> Owning a business in the city was seen as a hallmark of the American Dream and an avenue to financial freedom.

For some immigrants, New Orleans was not even the first step of their journey. An 1881 *Times-Picayune* article described the arrival of thirty-two Italians who had been recruited from New York City to work on sugar plantations.<sup>43</sup> By 1891, there were some thirty-thousand Italians, the vast majority Sicilians, in New Orleans, comprising

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<sup>39</sup> Nystrom, *New Orleans After the Civil War*, 54.

<sup>40</sup> Margavio and Salomone, *Bread and Respect*, 97.

<sup>41</sup> Vincent Scarpaci, "Walking the Color Line : Italian Immigrants in Rural Louisiana, 1880-1910," in *Are Italians White?: How Race Is Made in America* (Routledge, 2003), 62.

<sup>42</sup> Joseph P. Reidy, "Mules and Machines and Men: Field Labor on Louisiana Sugar Plantations, 1887-1915," *Agricultural History* 72, no. 2 (April 1998): 196, accessed April 1, 2018, [http://www.jstor.org.umiss.idm.oclc.org/stable/3744378?pq-origsite=summon&seq=1#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](http://www.jstor.org.umiss.idm.oclc.org/stable/3744378?pq-origsite=summon&seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents).

<sup>43</sup> *Times Picayune* (New Orleans), January 11, 1881.

approximately eleven percent of the city's population.<sup>44</sup> Italian immigrants had to adapt to the city and New Orleanians had to adapt to their presence.

There were many factors that compelled the new Italian immigrants to cross the Atlantic and settle in the American South; many of these reasons had to do with trouble in their homeland. Over the centuries Sicily had been colonized by the French, Savoy, and Austrian empires.<sup>45</sup> This constant change of power meant that Sicily was exposed to many different cultures and ideas and each of the countries left their mark on the Mediterranean island. Unfortunately, it also meant that the island and its people were often exploited and marginalized because they were on the periphery of many empires. Sicilian peasants suffered for centuries under the feudal system, lack of sovereignty, and incessant famines.

The 1861 unification of Italy did little to ease the island's suffering. Sicily was still on the outside looking in and Italians on the peninsula looked down on them. In 1863, the prime minister, Massimo d'Azeglio, called Sicilians a population "without morals, without values, and without learning."<sup>46</sup> Italians on the mainland also saw Sicilians as racially other and believed that their lack of economic development was a result of their "African contamination."<sup>47</sup> Northern Italians used this perceived racial difference as a pretext to take advantage of Sicilians. After unification, there was a conscription in which the poor southerners were forced into military service to protect the

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<sup>44</sup> James Knowles, *The 19th Century: A Monthly Review*, May 1891.

<sup>45</sup> Margavio and Salomone, *Bread and Respect*, 24.

<sup>46</sup> Lucy Riall, *Sicily and the Unification of Italy: Liberal Policy and Local Power, 1859-1866* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), 6.

<sup>47</sup> Stefano Luconi, "The Lynching of Southern Europeans in the Southern United States: The Plight of Italian Immigrants in Dixie," in *The US South and Europe: Transatlantic Relations in The Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2013), 27.

landed rich.<sup>48</sup> This bred discontent that was only exacerbated by the notorious grain tax that the peasants were forced to pay to their new government. Known as the Grist Tax, many farmers had to mortgage their land just to pay this tax.<sup>49</sup> This led to a large number of landless poor turning to a life of crime and banditry to the chagrin of those who still owned property. Sicilian peasants received no protection from the federal government from the increasing number of bandits. Instead of improving the situation of Sicily, the unification of Italy actually exacerbated the lot of many Sicilians.

It was in this desperate environment that the Sicilian mafia would form. The growing problem of banditry caused peasants to look for other forms of protection which led to the creation of *Cosa Nostra*, the Sicilian mafia. The mafia did not have particularly sinister beginnings; groups of Sicilian farmers formed to protect themselves against countryside bandits.<sup>50</sup> The mafia provided a service of protection to its members, the demand for which only increased with the abolition of feudalism and the introduction of private property rights.<sup>51</sup> However, this practice soon escalated. Peasants had to pay dues to the *mafiosos* or they would be targeted themselves. Violence ensued and, as a result, the island of Sicily had the highest homicide rate in the world at the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, the central government in Rome and *Cosa Nostra* were constantly at odds with each other which only caused more friction. Rome dismissed Sicilians as violent barbarians and blamed their Arabic roots for the murder rates. Many poor Sicilians found themselves trapped in a situation where their central government did

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<sup>48</sup> Margavio and Salomone, *Bread and Respect*, 28.

<sup>49</sup> Ibsn. 27.

<sup>50</sup> Diego Gambetta, *The Sicilian Mafia: The Business of Private Protection* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 4.

<sup>51</sup> Ibsn. 80.

<sup>52</sup> Margavio and Salomone *Bread and Respect*, 188.

not care for them and their local government was corrupted by the Mafia. This political instability compounded with famine, lack of arable land, violent banditry, and severe unemployment are some of the conditions that caused the great migration of Sicilians to leave their homeland.

From the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth century, tens of thousands of Italians left their ancestral home in search of economic opportunities and a better life. The southern half of the peninsula and the island of Sicily, known as *Mezzogiorno*, experienced the largest outpouring of immigrants because of the tense political climate and constant threat of danger. These Italians took advantage of the new technology of steam-powered ocean liners to sail across the Atlantic and beyond in hopes to escape the poverty, famine, and violence that plagued them. They scattered across the globe; some wound up in Tunisia, and others settled in Argentina.<sup>53</sup> The most popular destination was the United States of America.

Thousands of immigrants selected New Orleans as their port of destination for myriad reasons. New Orleans and Sicily had a historically established connection. Because of the recruitment of southern sugar planters, many Sicilians were somewhat familiar with the city or had at least heard of it. Additionally, before the cultivation of the citrus industry in Texas and Florida, the United States imported the majority of its citrus fruits such as oranges and lemons from Sicily, with New Orleans being the point of entry.<sup>54</sup> From the early part of the nineteenth century, there had been an established shipping line between Palermo, the capital of Sicily, and New Orleans.<sup>55</sup> The two cities

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<sup>53</sup> Marco Rimanelli and Sheryl L. Postman, *The 1891 New Orleans Lynching and US-Italian Relations: A Look Back* (New York: Lang, 1992), 57.

<sup>54</sup> Margavio and Salomone *Bread and Respect*, 32.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

had an established connection, and so many Sicilians chose to immigrate to a city of which they had at least marginal familiarity.

Besides readily available employment in the plantation fields, there were many cultural and social reasons Sicilians decided to immigrate to southern Louisiana. Often, they would migrate in order to be reunited with family who had immigrated prior. It was common for the man of the family to immigrate first and work to save up enough money to bring his wife, children, and even extended family across the Atlantic to New Orleans. Outside of Italy and New York, southern Louisiana had the highest population of Italians in the world. Italian immigrants were the majority of the population in a few small towns like Tickfaw and Independence.<sup>56</sup> In New Orleans, the French Quarter was even temporarily dubbed “Little Palermo,” after the capital of Sicily, because of the large Italian population occupying the space.<sup>57</sup> It was appealing to immigrants to choose a destination where there was a familiar community. The Italian language was widely spoken in these areas and a network of other immigrants supported each other and eased the transition to their new lives in America.

New Orleans also provided some unique advantages to immigrants. Although its climate differed from Sicily’s, New Orleans heat and humidity were still preferable to the frigid snowy winters of northern ports of immigration like New York and Boston. Furthermore, New Orleans had the presence of a unique Creole culture that mirrored Mediterranean culture. Unlike most cities in the United States, Catholicism was the dominant religion of New Orleans. Almost all of the Italians immigrants were Roman

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<sup>56</sup> Margavio and Salomone *Bread and Respect*, 38.

<sup>57</sup> Barbara Botein, "The Hennessey Case: An Episode in Anti Italian Nativism," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 20 (1979): 262, accessed April 1, 2018, [https://www.jstor.org/stable/4231912?seq=1#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/4231912?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents).

Catholic, and New Orleans was a place where they could practice their faith and avoid hostility that was present in other parts of the country. Additionally, the Creole culture put an emphasis on good wine and good food, something that Sicilians were very familiar with.

Italian immigrants brought elements of their foodways to the United States. Some immigrants brought very little to America save for crusts of bread, preserves, and cheese. In December of 1880, *The Daily Picayune* noted that a new batch of immigrant arrivals brought with them “boxes of ill-smelling cheese.”<sup>58</sup> Although they did not have a lot of material goods they were rich in traditions regarding food.

It was in part because of this propensity for foodways and, concurrently, food markets, that many Italians were able to find economic success in New Orleans. Although the majority of Italians began their time in Louisiana working in the sugar cane or strawberry fields, typically, it would only take one generation for a family to save up and go from working on a plantation to owning a business. By 1891, there were at least three-thousand Italian operated businesses in the city of New Orleans.<sup>59</sup> The majority of these businesses were grocery stores or other food-related business.

It was a natural transition that most Italians found jobs cultivating or selling food. Professions in the food industry did not usually require a fluency in English. They instead required the international language of exchange and taste. In the parishes surrounding the city, some Italians who were previously farmers back in Sicily eventually came to own their own land and began to harvest their own fruits and vegetables.<sup>60</sup> During the week

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<sup>58</sup> *Daily Picayune* (New Orleans), December 17, 1880.

<sup>59</sup> Margavio and Salomone *Bread and Respect*, 138.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.



they would haul their produce into New Orleans on wooden wagons to sell.<sup>61</sup> Similarly, men who were fishermen back in Sicily continued their practice. They caught shrimp and fish in the Gulf of Mexico and sold them on the docks. Other Italians owned pasta factories or restaurants in the French Quarter.<sup>62</sup> Many New Orleanians, both white and black, came to rely on the Italian markets for their fresh food supplies.

In part because of their economic success, Italian immigrants experienced some degree of white privilege in New Orleans. During the post-Reconstruction era, white Southerners had fashioned a sense of common whiteness to solve the problems of a post Civil war era and built a culture based on segregation.<sup>63</sup> This new culture was extended to American whites, white Creoles and European immigrants such as the Irish and German. Once immigrated, Italians were deemed worthy of rescue, reform, and inclusion into whiteness as well. For example, in the issue of *The Louisiana Planter and Sugar Manufacturer*, the planters believed that Italian workers would absorb the values of the white community in southern Louisiana. Furthermore, Italians were not subjected to Black Codes, segregationist Jim Crow laws, or anti-miscegenation laws.<sup>64</sup> It was legal for them to marry white Southerners; in fact, the majority of second-generation immigrants chose to do so.<sup>65</sup> In general, Italian immigrants were not denied any basic political or legal rights.

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<sup>61</sup> Justin Nystrom, "Italian New Orleans and the Business of Food in the Immigrant City: There's More to the Muffuletta than Meets the Eye," in *He Larder: Food Studies Methods from the American South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2013), 133.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940* (Brantford, Ont.: W. Ross MacDonald School, Resource Services Library, 2004), 1.

<sup>64</sup> Jennifer Guglielmo, *Living the Revolution: Italian Women's Resistance and Radicalism in New York City, 1880-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 7.

<sup>65</sup> Margavio and Salomone *Bread and Respect*, 138.

Italian immigrants had many special privileges compared to the black population in Southern Louisiana. As white sharecroppers, it was easier for them to advance and save to buy their own land and businesses.<sup>66</sup> Blacks spent generations in debt to white plantation owners. Furthermore, Louisiana allowed for Italians to gain voting rights after two years of residency, regardless of citizenship.<sup>67</sup> Italians were actively encouraged by whites to go to the polls whereas the black population was being violently barred from the booth by organizations like the Ku Klux Klan and the Knights of Camilla.<sup>68</sup> Sometimes, Italian immigrants also took part in the violence against blacks. For instance, the Sicilian Joseph Mancheca founded “The Innocents” in 1868. It was an organization of immigrants that supported the Democratic party and led violent attacks on the black population in New Orleans during election times.<sup>69</sup> Mancheca also participated in the Battle of Liberty Hill on the side of the White League in 1874.<sup>70</sup> Clearly, some Italians fully embraced white supremacy. After centuries of being racially oppressed in their own homeland, it was appealing for some Italians to take advantage of the American South’s racially segregated hierarchy and be the ones with the power even if it meant violently oppressing the black population.

Despite some Italian’s participation in activities that promoted white supremacy, there was a general lack of immediate assimilation to white culture. One reason for this was the relationship between the city’s blacks and the Italian immigrants. They worked under the same conditions as blacks, so the city’s whites saw Italians beneath themselves.

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<sup>66</sup> Scarpaci, *Walking the Color Line*, 62.

<sup>67</sup> Rimaneli and Postman, *The 1891 New Orleans Lynching*, 14.

<sup>68</sup> Keith, *The Colfax Massacre*, 71.

<sup>69</sup> Michael L. Kurtz, "Organized Crime in Louisiana History: Myth and Reality," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 24, no. 4 (1983): 362, accessed April 1, 2018, [https://www.jstor.org/stable/4232305?seq=1#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/4232305?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents).

<sup>70</sup> Nystrom, *New Orleans After the Civil War*, 220.

There was a lack of daily hostility between the blacks and Italians as Italians were unfamiliar with Jim Crow culture.<sup>71</sup> In the city, it was also common for blacks and Italians to occupy the same neighbourhood because they were the poorest classes in the city.<sup>72</sup> Whites began to associate Italians with blacks. Their plan to promote white supremacy and the Democratic party in the state by encouraging Italian immigration had failed. To add to their consternation, Italians, by and large, did not vote for the Democratic party that supported the rich white elites. Italian immigrants voted for Populist parties instead.<sup>73</sup> They did not have the same political goals as the whites in the city had. Whites were disgusted that the majority of Italians did not immediately participate in Jim Crow and frustrated that the immigrants did not add numbers to the Democratic ballot.

Because of these frustrations, animosity towards Italians amongst the white New Orleanians grew. The whites began to see Italians as a separate lower race than themselves. In October 1899, a ship with eight-hundred Italian immigrants arrived in New Orleans.<sup>74</sup> The *Weekly Thibodaux Sentinel* in Southern Louisiana snidely remarked that “where they will all be able to find stalls to peddle fruit is a mystery” and staunchly asserted that “Louisiana need not feel proud of the acquisition.”<sup>75</sup> Italians were still above blacks in the complex racial hierarchy of the South, but they were seen as lower than white Americans and most other European immigrants.

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<sup>71</sup> Scarpaci, *Walking the Color Line*, 63.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid. 66

<sup>73</sup> Sheryl Postman *Parallels of lifestyle: Southern Italians in The United States South- New Orleans 1891* in *The 1891 New Orleans Lynching and US-Italian Relations* (New York: Peter Lang 1992) 47

<sup>74</sup> "State of Louisiana," *The Weekly Thibodaux Sentinel and Journal of the 8th Senatorial District*, October 19, 1889, accessed April 1, 2018, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn88064492/1889-10-19/ed-1/seq-2/>.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

In addition to the Italians' political views and associations with blacks, whites were slow to accept the immigrants for other reasons. The vast majority of immigrants spoke no English upon arrival to Louisiana and only half were literate.<sup>76</sup> The language barrier prevented Italians from being understood by Americans and many Americans assumed that the Italians were ignorant since they did not speak English.

There were also economic reasons why white Americans did not accept Italian immigrants. Italians had a track record for labor protests. These protests occurred in both rural and urban settings. In one case, Italian farmers burned down the sugar house of Coulon Plantation when the owner did not pay them their wages.<sup>77</sup> In the city, one black-owned newspaper reported on a strike of thirty-five Italians in front of a shoe factory.<sup>78</sup> These instances show that Italians took agency and demanded fair treatment. Italians were not the docile labor force that white planters had originally believed them to be.

Despite the obstacles that they faced in the post-Reconstruction world of New Orleans, several Italian immigrants were able to not only survive but also thrive and become very wealthy. During the late nineteenth century, these families were very closely intertwined. One of these families were the Machecas, headed by Joseph Macheca, the founder of the Innocents. Macheca also founded Macheca Bros., importers

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<sup>76</sup> Joseph P. Cosco, *Imagining Italians: The Clash of Romance and Race in American Perceptions, 1880-1910* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 2003), 3.

<sup>77</sup> Scarpaci, *Walking the Color Line*, 65.

<sup>78</sup> *Weekly Pelican* (New Orleans), February 12, 1887, accessed April 1, 2018, [http://infoweb.newsbank.com.umiss.idm.oclc.org/iw-search/we/HistArchive/?p\\_product=EANX&p\\_theme=ahnp&p\\_nbid=A53P56ORMTUyMjYyNDk3MC43ODc1MDU6MT0xNT0xMzIuMTc0LjI1NC4yNTA&p\\_action=doc&d\\_viewref=search&s\\_lastnonissuequeyrname=3&p\\_queryname=3&p\\_docnum=25&p\\_docref=v2:12B765BAD85C2138@EANX-12BEB22A5F97BCF0@2410315-12BBC9766A04A720@2-12ECC3716A33F480@](http://infoweb.newsbank.com.umiss.idm.oclc.org/iw-search/we/HistArchive/?p_product=EANX&p_theme=ahnp&p_nbid=A53P56ORMTUyMjYyNDk3MC43ODc1MDU6MT0xNT0xMzIuMTc0LjI1NC4yNTA&p_action=doc&d_viewref=search&s_lastnonissuequeyrname=3&p_queryname=3&p_docnum=25&p_docref=v2:12B765BAD85C2138@EANX-12BEB22A5F97BCF0@2410315-12BBC9766A04A720@2-12ECC3716A33F480@)No Headline.

and wholesalers of tropical, Mediterranean and domestic fruits.<sup>79</sup> Macheca's fruit company was the first to import tropical fruit from South and Central America to North America.<sup>80</sup> Because of their business, New Orleans became the largest fruit importer in the United States.<sup>81</sup> Macheca revolutionized the fruit industry and became one of the wealthiest and most powerful men in the city.

The two other biggest Italian families in New Orleans, the Provenzanos and the Matrangas, depended on the Machecas for business. The Provenzano's managed a stevedoring business on the docks that Macheca used to import his fruit.<sup>82</sup> The Matranga's operated the French Market near the docks and sold the fruit brought in from the steamers.<sup>83</sup>

These three Italian families found economic success in the post-Reconstruction era New Orleans. Despite all of the challenges and stereotypes they had to overcome, they had made it. However, one event on the night of October 15th, 1890 would change the destinies of the Machecas, Provenzanos, and Matrangas forever.

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<sup>79</sup> Andrew Morrison, *Industries of New Orleans: Her Rank, Resources, Advantages, Trade, Commerce and Manufactures;... Conditions of the Past, Present and Future* (1885), 84, accessed April 1, 2018, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=njp.32101061450514;view=1up;seq=80>.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> Rimanelli and Postman, *The 1891 New Orleans Lynching*, 58.

<sup>82</sup> "THE PROVENZANOS ACQUITTED.: END OF A TWELVE DAYS' TRIAL IN NEW-ORLEANS.," *The New York Times*, January 24, 1891, accessed April 1, 2018, <https://search-proquest-com.umiss.idm.oclc.org/docview/94913881?pq-origsite=summon>.

<sup>83</sup> Rimanelli and Postman, *The 1891 New Orleans Lynching*, 58.

## Chapter 2: An Eruption of Violence

On the night of October 15, 1890, David C. Hennessey of the New Orleans Police Department took a stroll through the French Quarter. He had left a meeting at Central Station and was headed towards the home that he shared with his widowed mother on Girod Street.<sup>84</sup> It had just rained so the glow of the city's new electric street lights would have been reflected from the murky puddles of water on the nearly empty street.<sup>85</sup> A hazy fog hung about the humid air. Hennessey was tired; he had worked a long shift as superintendent and chief of police and it was half an hour until midnight.<sup>86</sup>

Suddenly the peaceful night was shattered. Shots rang out across the night and gun smoke clogged the air. A spray of bullets sailed toward the thirty-two-year-old police officer. A total of six bullets found their way into his body. Three ripped apart his abdomen, lodging themselves into his intestines. Another burrowed into his chest, and two more into his right leg and left elbow, respectively.<sup>87</sup> Hennessey screamed in surprise and agony. His good friend and colleague, Officer Bill O'Connor, heard the commotion from several blocks away and sprinted towards the scene where he found his chief crumpled on the pavement.<sup>88</sup> O'Connor held the bleeding and broken Hennessey in his

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<sup>84</sup> *Daily Tobacco Leaf Chronicle* (Clarkesville), October 17, 1890, accessed April 4, 2018, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn88061072/1890-10-17/ed-1/seq-3/>.

<sup>85</sup> Robert C. Reinders and Dennis C. Rousey, "Policing the Southern City: New Orleans, 1805-1889.," *The Journal of American History* 84, no. 2 (1997): 160, doi:10.2307/2952606.

<sup>86</sup> *Daily tobacco leaf-chronicle*. 17 Oct. 1890.

<sup>87</sup> Richard Gambino, *Vendetta: A True Story of the Worst Lynching in America, the Mass Murder of Italian-Americans in New Orleans in 1891 ...* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977), 3.

<sup>88</sup> Ibsn.

arms and asked him who had made the attempt on his life. Hennessey allegedly only uttered one word: “*Dagoes*.”<sup>89</sup>

This alleged accusation would set forth a chain of events culminating in one of the largest lynchings on American soil. Nineteen Italians were charged with the assassination of the white police chief and eleven would eventually be lynched. The lynching was condoned by the local government and had a wide array of repercussions on the local and international scene. The assassination of Hennessey provided a pretext for powerful whites to lynch Italians in order to reassert their dominance over the city and to flex white supremacist power in the post-Reconstruction era.

After the Civil War, the New Orleans Police Department underwent serious structural changes and David Hennessey had grown up amidst them. The New Orleans Metropolitan Police was founded in 1866 by Republican Governor Henry Warmoth.<sup>90</sup> The New Orleans Metropolitan Police was a true symbol of Reconstruction. They were composed of men from all races and nationalities and former Union soldiers.<sup>91</sup> David Hennessey’s father, David Hennessey Sr., was a member of this force.<sup>92</sup> He had been a former Union scout in the cavalry and stayed in New Orleans after the war. To white New Orleanians, Hennessey Sr. and the other members of the Metropolitan police force were seen as symbols of Republican oppression. The Metropolitan police force were thusly hated by the city’s white elites and often criticized in the newspapers. *The New Orleans Democrat*, for instance, declared that the Metropolitan Police Force was “a brood of repulsive

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<sup>89</sup> Derogatory slang for Italians

<sup>90</sup> Justin A. Nystrom, *New Orleans after the Civil War: Race, Politics, and a New Birth of Freedom* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015), 105.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 76

<sup>92</sup> Gambino, *Vendetta*, 3.

monstrosities which have rifled and disgraced Louisiana.”<sup>93</sup> As the years of Reconstruction rolled on, tensions would transform into physical violence.

As a Union veteran and member of the Metropolitan Police force, Hennessey’s father was a hated man in Reconstruction New Orleans. He was killed by Arthur Guerin, a former Confederate soldier in 1867.<sup>94</sup> Guerin was acquitted of the homicide.<sup>95</sup> This left young Hennessey fatherless at the age of seven but was far from the most violent clashes between the Metropolitan Police Force and former Confederates.

The largest demonstration was the Battle of Liberty Place. Members of a paramilitary group known as the White League and the Metropolitan Police Force clashed in the streets over the 1872 gubernatorial elections. Ten Metropolitan Policemen were killed and the White League celebrated a victory.<sup>96</sup> The Metropolitan Police force was decimated and the election of 1876 was their death knell when anti-Reconstructionist Governor Francis T. Nicholls installed his own police force in place of the Metropolitans in an effort to “redeem” the city.<sup>97</sup>

During the post-Reconstruction years, the Democratic-controlled police force was largely ineffective. The force was unlike the Metropolitan Police; they were all white, and target racial minorities. The New Orleans Police Department had a reputation

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<sup>93</sup> "A Political Lottery," *The New Orleans Democrat*, January 12, 1876, accessed April 5, 2018, [https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn88064616/1876-01-12/ed-1/seq-2/#date1=1866&index=3&rows=20&words=Metropolitan New Orleans Police&searchType=basic&sequence=0&state=Louisiana&date2=1877&proxtext=New Orleans Metropolitan Police&y=0&x=0&dateFilterType=yearRange&page=1](https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn88064616/1876-01-12/ed-1/seq-2/#date1=1866&index=3&rows=20&words=Metropolitan%20New%20Orleans%20Police&searchType=basic&sequence=0&state=Louisiana&date2=1877&proxtext=New%20Orleans%20Metropolitan%20Police&y=0&x=0&dateFilterType=yearRange&page=1).

<sup>94</sup> Gambino, *Vendetta*, 27

<sup>95</sup> "Arthur Guerin," *Semi-Weekly Louisianan* (New Orleans), August 6, 1871, accessed April 5, 2018, [https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83016631/1871-08-06/ed-1/seq-2/#date1=1870&index=4&rows=20&words=David Hennessey&searchType=basic&sequence=0&state=&date2=1889&proxtext=David Hennessey&y=18&x=20&dateFilterType=yearRange&page=1](https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83016631/1871-08-06/ed-1/seq-2/#date1=1870&index=4&rows=20&words=David%20Hennessey&searchType=basic&sequence=0&state=&date2=1889&proxtext=David%20Hennessey&y=18&x=20&dateFilterType=yearRange&page=1).

<sup>96</sup> Leonard Nathaniel Moore, *Black Rage in New Orleans: Police Brutality and African American Activism from World War II to Hurricane Katrina* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2015), 176.

<sup>97</sup> Dennis Charles Rousey, *Policing the Southern City: New Orleans, 1805-1889* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996), 127.



for being unproductive and corrupt. This was largely due to the fact that they were underpaid and undertrained. A police officer in New Orleans would only make fifty-five dollars a month; the salary for an average police officer in New York was more than double that.<sup>98</sup> Police officers even had to supply their own whistles and uniforms.<sup>99</sup> Due to the low pay, the New Orleans police force did not attract the best people for the job and the force had a high turnover rate. Private detectives were generally more effective at solving crimes than the police force.

This was the state of the force that young David Hennessey joined. Unlike his father, Hennessey was a Southern Democrat and fit right in with the squad led by Southern Redeemers.<sup>100</sup> Hennessey quickly rose through the ranks as he was never opposed to brute force or violence. He made detective at the age of only twenty-one.<sup>101</sup> Hennessey made national news and earned widespread acclaim for the apprehension of Giuseppe Esposito, a Sicilian wanted in Italy for two premeditated murders, two cases of robbery, two attempts at murder and a case of extortion by violence.<sup>102</sup> This was his first foray into the underground world of Italian crime. Hennessey was a mere twenty-three years old at the time.<sup>103</sup> Hennessey made headlines again in 1884 when he was put in charge of security at the New Orleans World Fair. He was in charge of a force of three

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<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

<sup>99</sup> George E. Waring and George Washington Cable, *History and Present Condition of New Orleans, Louisiana, and Report on the City of Austin, Texas* (Washington: G.P.O., 1881), accessed April 5, 2018, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=wu.89072960289;view=1up;seq=10>.

<sup>100</sup> "Crimes of the Mafia," *New York Times*, October 20, 1890, accessed April 5, 2018, <https://search-proquest-com.umiss.idm.oclc.org/docview/94823827?pq-origsite=summon>.

<sup>101</sup> Gambino, *Vendetta*, 28

<sup>102</sup> "A Famous Italian Bandit," *New York Times*, July 13, 1881, accessed April 5, 2018, <https://search-proquest-com.umiss.idm.oclc.org/docview/93911293?pq-origsite=summon>.

<sup>103</sup> Gambino, *Vendetta*, 28.

hundred men “far superior to the regular city force.”<sup>104</sup> Hennessey was a promising young star of the law enforcement world and would rise in the echelons of the New Orleans police force.

Yet, Hennessey had a darker side. There were rumors that he was a secret partner in a brothel.<sup>105</sup> He was indicted for the murder of a fellow police officer, Thomas Devereaux, in 1881.<sup>106</sup> He was tried for this murder and got off by arguing self-defense. He left the force for a few years and returned when Mayor Joseph A. Shakespeare appointed him as Chief of Police in 1888.<sup>107</sup> Hennessey had a murky past and could have had enemies both within the force and outside of it. Many people could have wanted him dead.

Despite his questionable past, David Hennessey was selected to lead the New Orleans Police Force. Mayor Shakespeare revolutionized the police force in New Orleans. He raised pay, which attracted better police officers.<sup>108</sup> He also decreased petty crime by closing sixty-seven casinos in the city.<sup>109</sup> To lead the new force, Shakespeare appointed David Hennessey as chief in 1888, an unusual choice given Hennessey’s sordid past. Yet, under Hennessey, violent crime rates in New Orleans were lower than

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<sup>104</sup> "The New Orleans Expedition," *New York Times*, December 6, 1884, accessed April 5, 2018, <https://search-proquest-com.umiss.idm.oclc.org/docview/94268873?pq-origsite=summon>.

<sup>105</sup> Nystrom, *New Orleans After the Civil War*, 221.

<sup>106</sup> "Indicted," *Bismark Tribune*, December 2, 1881, accessed April 5, 2018, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85042331/1881-12-02/ed-1/seq-5/>.

<sup>107</sup> Joy Jackson, "Crime and the Conscious of a City," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 9, no. 3 (Summer 1968): 235, accessed April 5, 2018, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4231019>.

<sup>108</sup> Henry Rightor, *Standard History of New Orleans, Louisiana, Giving a Description of the Natural Advantages, Natural History ... Settlement, Indians, Creoles, Municipal and Military History, Mercantile and Commercial Interests, Banking, Transportation, Struggles against High Water, the Press, Educational ... Etc.* (Chicago: Lewis Publishing Company, 1900), 105.

<sup>109</sup> Gambino, *Vendetta*, 63.

those in rural areas of Louisiana because of the new improvements to the police force.<sup>110</sup> Hennessy came to be considered one of the best chiefs of police in the entire country and the best chief of police New Orleans had ever seen in the eyes of the white community.<sup>111</sup> He was best known for being an expert on all things “Mafia” and the *New York Times* described him as knowing “the secrets of the worst Italian secret societies transplanted from Italy.”<sup>112</sup>

Hennessy’s entanglement with Italian crime made Italians to be the prime suspects in his assassination. Other than this motive, the evidence that Italians shot him is purely circumstantial. One witness a few blocks away from the shooting swore he heard the “Sicilian whistle.”<sup>113</sup> Sawed-off Lupara rifles, a favorite execution weapon of the Mafia, were found at the scene of the crime.<sup>114</sup> It is impossible to know whether Hennessy’s accusation that the “*Dagoes*” were responsible for the shooting was a conjecture or if he perhaps saw an Italian criminal he was familiar with. It could have easily just been a guess by Hennessy, seeing how dark and foggy the night was, compounded by the fact of how unpopular he was amongst the Italian criminal scene. Furthermore, his companion, Bill O’Conner could have easily fabricated the story of his accusation. There is a large gray area when it comes to knowing who killed the chief, and it likely to forever remain a mystery.

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<sup>110</sup> Kevin J. Mullen, *Dangerous Strangers: Minority Newcomers and Criminal Violence in the Urban West, 1850-2000* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 11, accessed April 5, 2018, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/olemiss/detail.action?docID=307730>.

<sup>111</sup> “Chief Hennessy’s Ways,” *Indianapolis Journal*, October 20, 1890, accessed April 5, 2018, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn82015679/1890-10-20/ed-1/seq-2/>.

<sup>112</sup> “Shot Down At His Own Door,” *New York Times*, October 17, 1890, accessed April 5, 2018, <https://search-proquest-com.umiss.idm.oclc.org/docview/94844845?pq-origsite=summon>.

<sup>113</sup> James Knowles, *The 19th Century: A Monthly Review*, May 1891.

<sup>114</sup> Marco Rimanelli and Sheryl L. Postman, *The 1891 New Orleans Lynching and US-Italian Relations: A Look Back* (New York: Lang, 1992), 74.

Furthermore, Hennessey did not die at the scene of the crime and lived for several more hours that night and did not reveal any more information regarding the attack. After he was shot, the police chief was taken to Charity Hospital in an ambulance.<sup>115</sup> Initially, Hennessey did not believe that the wounds were fatal and he told his visiting mother he “would be home by and by.”<sup>116</sup> He was not in much pain, except when moved, and he requested the doctor for several glasses of milk (he was a teetotaler).<sup>117</sup> He was completely conscious and lucid. Hennessey did not die until nine o’clock the next morning after he fell asleep; he died of hemorrhaging in the stomach due to one of the lodged bullets.<sup>118</sup> During the last hours of his life, no one questioned him any further about his assassins and Hennessey did not offer up any information. The fact that the bright detective did not offer up any theories could mean that he had no idea who had attempted to take his life; he just assumed it was Italians because of his reputation in the community and his investment in stereotypes of the immigrant population.

No one was more upset at Hennessey's death than Mayor Shakespeare whom immediately led the charge in finding his assassins. The circumstantial evidence of the Sicilian whistle and Lupara rifles coupled with Hennessey’s alleged accusation was enough to cause Shakespeare to go on a violent anti-Italian spree. Just hours after the shooting, Shakespeare gave these orders to the police: “Scour the whole neighbourhood! Arrest every Italian you come across!”<sup>119</sup> Police officers arrested dozens of Italians without any proof other than the fact they could not speak English.<sup>120</sup> The shoddy police

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<sup>115</sup> "Shot Down At His Own Door." *New York Times*, October 17, 1890.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Gambino, Richard *Vendetta*, 2.

<sup>118</sup> "Shot Down At His Own Door." *New York Times*, October 17, 1890.

<sup>119</sup> Gambino, Richard, *Vendetta*, 7

<sup>120</sup> "The Mafia," *Harper's Weekly*, March 28, 1891, 226.

work and intentional racial profiling that night would set the stage for what was to follow—a persecution of Italians rather than an effective investigation of the murder.

Mayor Shakespeare despised the Italian immigrants in his city and used them as scapegoats for New Orleans' problems. Shakespeare had been elected to the mayor's office in 1880 and once more in 1888. Besides his political career, Shakespeare labored as an ironworker.<sup>121</sup> Shakespeare was the son of a Swiss immigrant and married a German immigrant, but he was highly nativist and prejudiced toward Italian immigrants.<sup>122</sup> For instance, he wrote a letter to the mayor of Athens, Ohio, about the subject after the other mayor asked him to describe the Italian population. Shakespeare believed that Italians were “filthy in their person and in homes” and blamed them for the city's epidemics.<sup>123</sup> In the same letter, he asserted that Italians brought violence to the community, stating “ a very large percentage are fugitives from justice” who immigrated to escape Italy's judicial system and continue their criminal lives in America.<sup>124</sup> Shakespeare saw Italians as so unfit for citizenship that he even daydreamed about deporting them.<sup>125</sup> This letter reveals deep-seated hatred toward Italian immigrants. Shakespeare's preconceived notions about Italians no doubt influenced his call for the roundup of Italians the night of Hennessey's assassination.

Shakespeare's convictions were simply not true. As examined in the previous chapter, most Italian immigrants were hard working people just trying to provide for their families. The majority were not criminal; in fact, many had fled Sicily in part because of the Mafia violence. Ironically, as they were being labeled as violent criminals, Sicilian

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<sup>121</sup> Ancestry.com, 1880 United States Federal Census.

<sup>122</sup> Ancestry.com, 1870 United States Federal Census.

<sup>123</sup> *Joseph A. Shakespeare to C.H. Grosvenor. June 9, 1891. New Orleans, Louisiana.*

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

immigrants were extremely vulnerable to violent crimes and unlikely to receive justice in New Orleans. Between 1866 and 1891, ninety-four Italians were murdered in New Orleans.<sup>126</sup> Only a total of five murderers were ever convicted.<sup>127</sup> The New Orleans police and the municipal government did not take violence against Italian immigrants seriously, and Italian immigrants were not afforded the benefits of the American justice system. Mayor Shakespeare's other assumption that Italians caused disease was also incorrect. Diseases did spread quickly through Italian neighbourhoods, but not because of Italian's hygiene. It was a result of their cramped and population-dense living conditions. Even though his preconceived notions about Italian immigrants were false, Mayor Shakespeare's ideas about Italians influenced the way he led the investigation for the Hennessy assassins.

Shakespeare's order to arrest Italians was carried out with gusto. Within three hours of Hennessey's death, five dozen Italians had been charged with his death in an atrocious breach of justice.<sup>128</sup> Even more would be arrested in the next twenty-four hours. In Central Police Station, every cell and office was crammed full of incarcerated Italians.<sup>129</sup> They were not afforded any legal counsel.<sup>130</sup> Additionally, there was considerable amount of mistreatment of the prisoners at the hands of the police. An article in *The New York Times* noticed the "bruised legs and scarred craniums" of several of the Italians and implied police violence.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Rimanelli and Postman, *The 1891 New Orleans Lynching*, 61.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> John Baiamonte, "'Who Killa Da Chief' Revisited: The Hennessey Assassination and Its Aftermath, 1890-1991," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 33, no. 2 (Spring 1992): 123, accessed April 5, 2018, [https://www.jstor.org/stable/4232935?seq=1#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/4232935?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents).

<sup>129</sup> Gambino, Richard. *Vendetta*, 14.

<sup>130</sup> "Indictments Found at Last," *New York Times*, November 22, 1890, accessed April 5, 2018, <https://search-proquest-com.umiss.idm.oclc.org/docview/94817615?pq-origsite=summon>.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

Police brutality of prisoners in New Orleans was common during the late nineteenth century. When asked about the conditions of the prisons, some police officers would cynically smile and admit that “our jails are not very healthy around here.”<sup>132</sup> Violence was considered an acceptable way to mete out justice. As a hated minority, the Italian immigrants were very likely to be abused in the prison system. Not only were they physically beaten, they were robbed. Some Italian prisoners had the rings on their fingers confiscated and their money was taken away by police officers.<sup>133</sup> Theft was just another way for the police officers to take advantage of the vulnerable Italian prisoners. Considering that they were being charged with the assassination of the police chief, they no doubt felt the full brunt of the outrage and anger of the New Orleans Police Department.

Italian officials were incensed with the treatment of the Italian community in New Orleans. The Italian Consulate in New Orleans, Pasquale Corte, sent a letter to Mayor Shakespeare that begged that the prisoners “be treated with the same consideration of those of other nationalities.”<sup>134</sup> He also personally visited the Governor and Attorney General of Louisiana to complain about the treatment of the prisoners and the unwarranted mass arrests.<sup>135</sup> Corte immediately wrote to Baron Fava, the Italian Ambassador to Washington, and brought up the questionable nature of the methods of the investigation.<sup>136</sup> Corte’s immediate concern reveals the fear in the Italian community of

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<sup>132</sup> "Chief Hennessy's Ways," *Indianapolis Journal*, October 20, 1890, accessed April 5, 2018, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn82015679/1890-10-20/ed-1/seq-2/>.

<sup>133</sup> "Italian Prisoners Abused," *New York Times*, November 6, 1890, accessed April 5, 2018, <https://search-proquest-com.umiss.idm.oclc.org/docview/94799419?pq-origsite=summon>.

<sup>134</sup> Gambino, *Vendetta* 12

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>136</sup> Patrizia Famá Stahle, *The Italian Emigration of Modern Times: Relations between Italy and the United States concerning Emigration Policy, Diplomacy and Anti-immigrant Sentiment, 1870-1927* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016), 56.

retaliation from the white community for their alleged crimes. Rather than reaching out to the government in Italy immediately, Corte tried to appeal to elected officials. This was an attempt at integration of American society by using the tools available to American citizens. The Italian American community had some hope that the U.S. government would protect them. Their hope was misplaced.

The pleas to Mayor Shakespeare fell on deaf ears as he continued his extralegal investigation. On October eighteenth, two days after Hennessey had died, Shakespeare delivered a vitriolic speech to the city council. Without any hard evidence, Shakespeare boldly blamed Hennessey's death on "Sicilian vengeance" and stroked the community's fears that Italian "murder societies" had "stained our streets with blood."<sup>137</sup> The speech also served as a rallying cry for action. Shakespeare ominously exclaimed, "We must teach these people a lesson that they will not forget for all time!"<sup>138</sup> This foreshadowing threat separated Italians from the general population and was met with thundering applause from the white audience. Although there was scant proof, city officials already had it in their minds that Italians were to blame for the death of their police chief. They believed that Mafia activity existed in their community and it was up to them to put a stop to it.

Their fear boded well for Shakespeare's political agenda. After his inflammatory speech, City Council unanimously passed a resolution authorizing Shakespeare to create a committee of private citizens to "thoroughly investigate the matter of the existence of secret societies or bands of oath-bound assassin's...and to devise the necessary

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<sup>137</sup> Joseph A. Shakespeare, "Speech to City Council," speech, New Orleans, in *Vendetta: A True Story of the Worst Lynching in America, the Mass Murder of Italian-Americans in New Orleans in 1891* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1977).

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.



means...for the uprooting and total annihilation of such hell-born associations.”<sup>139</sup> The creation of this committee further incited fears of Mafia violence in the community and allowed Shakespeare even more personal control over the investigation.

The committee of civilians would come to be known as “The Committee of Fifty,” although it had eighty-three members.<sup>140</sup> It set a precedent that gave prominent figures in the community a large say in what should have been an investigation undertaken by the city government. Shakespeare appointed his political allies and the city’s elite; there were no blacks or Italians on the Committee of Fifty.<sup>141</sup> They were all prominent white men. Col. Thomas N. Boylan, chief of the Boylan Private Police was on the committee.<sup>142</sup> The president of the biggest ice company in New Orleans, Maurice J. Hart, was a member as well.<sup>143</sup> Other members, like John C. Wickliffe, owned newspapers and had a large voice in New Orleans politics.<sup>144</sup> The committee was an avenue of which the city’s elite could not also take power but also money. The City Council gave the paid members of the already wealthy members of the committee fifteen thousand dollars for their troubles.<sup>145</sup>

Members of the Committee of Fifty were eager to push Mayor Shakespeare’s agenda of creating fear and intimidating the Italian community. On October 23, newspapers in New Orleans published an open letter from the committee addressed to the

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<sup>139</sup> Gambino, Richard. *Vendetta*, 20.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> "Obituary 4," *New York Times*, May 25, 1902, accessed April 5, 2018, <https://search-proquest-com.umiss.idm.oclc.org/docview/96218331?pq-origsite=summon>.

<sup>143</sup> Ancestry.com, New Orleans City Directory.

<sup>144</sup> "Sprung From the Lottery," *New York Times*, September 26, 1891, accessed April 5, 2018, <https://search-proquest-com.umiss.idm.oclc.org/docview/94915120?pq-origsite=summon>.

<sup>145</sup> Gambino, *Vendetta*, 20.

city's Italians.<sup>146</sup> The letter encouraged the city's Italians to provide them the names and history "of every bad man, every criminal, and every suspected person of your race."<sup>147</sup> With few other leads, the committee called for white New Orleanians to identify Italians perceived to be suspicious. If the assassination of Hennessey was "beyond doubt" the Sicilian Mafia, as Shakespeare had claimed in his address to city council, then why did the Committee of Fifty cast such a broad net for information?<sup>148</sup> The committee's open letter concludes with a threat toward the Italian community, promising to put an end to Sicilian crime in their city "peaceably and lawfully if we can, violently and summarily if we must."<sup>149</sup> This letter echoes the same threats as Mayor Shakespeare's speech to the city council.

This letter served several purposes for the committee. First, it showed that the committee was eager to gather intel on Italian secret societies. It also was intended to have the Italian community turn on each other by having them betray others in their community. The larger purpose of this letter, however, was to give the white public the appearance that the committee was taking action. This letter was published in English, not Italian. What is more, over half of Italian immigrants were illiterate anyway and would have no way of discerning meaning from the letter.<sup>150</sup> The letter was primarily directed at the whites in New Orleans to reassure them that the committee was doing work and not a waste of taxpayer money.

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>147</sup> Committee of Fifty to All Italian Americans. October 23, 1890. New Orleans, Louisiana.

<sup>148</sup> Shakespeare, Joseph A. "Speech to City Council." Speech, City Council Room, New Orleans, October 18, 1890.

<sup>149</sup> Committee of Fifty to All Italian Americans. October 23, 1890. New Orleans, Louisiana.

<sup>150</sup> Joseph P. Cosco, *Imagining Italians: The Clash of Romance and Race in American Perceptions, 1880-1910* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 2003), 3.

The atmosphere of fear of Italians and the empowerment of civilians to aid in the investigation as if they were part of the judicial system, made the imprisoned Italians especially vulnerable. On October 17, the day of Hennessey's funeral, a newspaper salesman named Thomas Duffy asked to visit Antonio Scaffidi, one of the men accused of Hennessey's murder in the Parish prison; he told the deputies at the prison he could help identify the man.<sup>151</sup> As soon as the Italian was brought before him, Duffy drew a concealed revolver and shot Scaffidi in the left side of the neck about an inch away from his windpipe.<sup>152</sup> Deputies pounced on Duffy and hauled him off to another prison as he showed no remorse and cried out, "If there were seventy-five men like me in New Orleans, we'd run all the dagoes out of the city."<sup>153</sup> Scaffidi was taken to the hospital and told everyone who would listen that he was innocent and did not know who killed Hennessey, even as he bled profusely from his neck.<sup>154</sup> Scaffidi survived the attack and, once healed, was taken back to Parish Prison. Duffy was convicted of assault of a deadly weapon and served only six months in Parish Prison.<sup>155</sup>

The murder attempt on Scaffidi as he was being held prisoner indicates the toxic environment New Orleans had become for Italians in the days after the Hennessey murder. The outpour of anti-Italian sentiment by newspapers and the mayor, coupled with the posthumous glorification of the slain police chief, had a deep effect on the beliefs of white New Orleanians. The attack on the leader of the police frightened white citizens as police were seen as their protectors and a line of protection against African Americans

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<sup>151</sup> "Bold Murder in a Prison," *Indianapolis Journal*, October 18, 1890, accessed April 7, 2018, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn82015679/1890-10-18/ed-1/seq-2/>.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid..

<sup>153</sup> Gambino, *Vendetta*, 42

<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 43

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

and immigrants. White New Orleanians felt threatened. Mayor Shakespeare's creation of the Committee of Fifty and calls for justice empowered them and gave them agency. The fact that an armed man could enter a jail with a weapon and discharge it on a murder suspect also shows how little the guards cared about the protection of the prisoners. The anxiety over proposed secret societies—and belief that they could be torchbearers of authority—would stay with white New Orleanians for several months, just as the lack of consideration for the safety and health of the accused Italians would stay with city officials. This atmosphere would cause grave problems for the city's Italians in the upcoming months.

After publishing their threatening letter addressed to the Italian population, the Committee of Fifty's next move was to indict nineteen of the arrested Italians. The fact that a group of civilians arbitrarily chosen based on wealth and connections had the power to charge people with murder was a huge break in precedence for the proceedings of a police investigation. The City of New Orleans was shocked when one of the arrested Italians turned out to be Joseph P. Macheca.<sup>156</sup> Macheca was a wealthy fruit importer and had integrated into New Orleans elite society.<sup>157</sup> He was fluent in English and was a Democrat.<sup>158</sup> The members of the Committee of Fifty could have felt threatened by his success and some even had competing businesses. The indicted men would be put on trial in March.

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<sup>156</sup> Ibid 44

<sup>157</sup> Rimanelli and Postman, *The 1891 New Orleans Lynching*, 54.

<sup>158</sup> "Crimes of the Mafia," *New York Times*, October 20, 1890, accessed April 5, 2018, <https://search-proquest-com.umiss.idm.oclc.org/docview/94823827?pq-origsite=summon>.

Machecca was the most prominent Italian put on trial. The rest came from a wide variety of much more humble backgrounds. Antonio Scaffidi was a vegetable seller.<sup>159</sup> Antonio Bagnetto was listed in the 1880 census as a scenic painter.<sup>160</sup> Peter Natali and Rocco Geraci were day laborers.<sup>161</sup> The majority of Italians set to be put on trial were poor and had to rely on Machecca for legal aid.

The trial was a highly anticipated event in New Orleans and the Italian prisoners were set to be charged in two groups.<sup>162</sup> Nine men were charged on the first day of the trial. Over seven hundred and eighty potential jury members were interviewed; they were all white men.<sup>163</sup> Black men were barred from serving on juries.<sup>164</sup> Because of Machecca's wealth, the defense was able to obtain legal representation. Their attorneys were a former Confederate senator and a former district attorney.<sup>165</sup> The trial documents are sadly lost to history. There is no way to tell what evidence the lawyers presented in the Italian defense. It is impossible to tell whether the famous lawyers or lack of evidence saved them. Ultimately on March 13, 1891, the jury called a mistrial for Polizzi, Monasterio, and Scaffidi. They would have to be tried again. The six other Italians that were tried that day were declared "not guilty."<sup>166</sup>

The whites of New Orleans was incensed. Buying into the mafia hype, many believed that the jury had been bribed by the underground society to not charge the

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<sup>159</sup> Ancestry.com, 1880 United States Federal Census.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

<sup>162</sup> Gambino, *Vendetta*, 71.

<sup>163</sup> Barbara Botein, "The Hennessey Case: An Episode in Anti Italian Nativism," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 20 (1979): 268, accessed April 1, 2018, [https://www.jstor.org/stable/4231912?seq=1#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/4231912?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents).

<sup>164</sup> Heather Cox. Richardson, *The Death of Reconstruction: Race, Labor, and Politics in the Post-Civil War North, 1865-1901* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 12, accessed April 7, 2018, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/olemiss/reader.action?docID=3300408&query=>.

<sup>165</sup> Gambino, *Vendetta*, 72.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid., 77.

Italians.<sup>167</sup> Many whites truly believed that the accused men had killed Hennessy and they felt that justice had failed them. Their captain of police, the protector of white supremacy, had been assassinated, and now the American legal system did not produce the results they had wanted. They felt betrayed by their judicial system. They wanted results. The morning after the jury had released their decision, the newspapers in New Orleans printed the following advertisement: "All good citizens are invited to attend a mass meeting on Saturday, March 14th at 10 o'clock AM, at the Clay statue, to take the steps to remedy the failure of justice in the Hennessy case. Come prepared for action."<sup>168</sup>

Several members of the Committee of Fifty signed the advertisement, a clear call to action that incited violence.<sup>169</sup> Mayor Shakespeare was in town as was Francis T. Nicholls, governor of Louisiana.<sup>170</sup> Neither of them took any action to stop the mob of thousands from forming, despite the news.

A mob of thousands steadily formed at the foot of the Henry Clay statue on St. Charles Avenue on the morning of March 15, 1891. The statue was often a starting point for parade routes during Mardi Gras season.<sup>171</sup> Much like at Carnival, there was excitement and anticipation in the air. Only this time it was tinged with anger and determination. Members of the Committee of Fifty led the mob. The main leaders were W.S. Parkerson and John C. Wickliffe. They each gave speeches to the crowd of

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<sup>167</sup> "Death to the Mafia," *The Washburn Leader*, March 21, 1891, accessed April 7, 2018, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85000631/1891-03-21/ed-1/seq-3/>.

<sup>168</sup> "Mass Meeting." *Times Picayune* (New Orleans), March 14, 1891.

<sup>169</sup> Gambino, *Vendetta*, 72.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.* 79.

<sup>171</sup> Nystrom, *New Orleans After the Civil War*, 115.

thousands that demanded action in the name of Hennessy. The crowds cheered the leaders of the mob on by name.<sup>172</sup>

The mob acted swiftly and efficiently. They marched to Parish Prison and broke through the gate with a battering ram and crowbars.<sup>173</sup> The guards and the warden made no attempt to stop them. The mob killed eleven Italian prisoners; three who had been acquitted, three had been mistried, and six had not even been tried at all.<sup>174</sup>

The Italians were shown no mercy. The corpse of James Caruso, a stevedore who was killed, was riddled with forty-two bullets.<sup>175</sup> The mob strung up some of the Italians as a warning to the Italian community. Emmanuele Polizzi was hung on a lamp post and Antonio Bagnetto was hung on a tree.<sup>176</sup> The desecration of the bodies served a two-fold purpose. It was a warning for the Italians to remind them who was in control of the city.

This lynching was a thoroughly modern spectacle that brought the Non-Italian New Orleanians together. Although the idea of lynching is often thought of as a backward and backwoods ritual, this lynching relied heavily on modern technologies.<sup>177</sup> Printing presses and newspapers announced the meeting for the lynching. Mob members would have taken streetcars to the Henry Clay Statue and to the Parish Prison.<sup>178</sup> This lynching did not take place at night in the countryside. It took place in broad daylight in a cosmopolitan city with a population of thousands.

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<sup>172</sup> "Wholesale Lynching," *Watuaga Democrat*, March 26, 1891, *Chronicling America*.

<sup>173</sup> Gambino, *Vendetta*, 83.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>175</sup> James Knowles, *The 19th Century: A Monthly Review*, May 1891.

<sup>176</sup> John E. Coxe, "The New Orleans Mafia Incident," *Louisiana Historical Quarterly* 20 (October 1937): 1088.

<sup>177</sup> Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940* (Brantford, Ont.: W. Ross MacDonald School, Resource Services Library, 2004), 203.

<sup>178</sup> *The WPA Guide to New Orleans: The Federal Writers Project Guide to 1930s New Orleans, with a New Introduction by the Historic New Orleans Collection* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), 159.

According to historian Amy Louise Woods, this was the norm for most spectacle lynching, which took place in the center of cities.<sup>179</sup> In 1915, a crowd of several hundred businessmen lynched Leo Franks, a Jewish factory owner accused of murder in the streets of Atlanta, Georgia.<sup>180</sup> In 1916, Jessie Washington, a black man accused of raping and murdering a white woman was lynched by a crowd of ten thousand in front of City Hall in Waco, Texas<sup>181</sup>. Spectacle lynchings were very public and involved hundreds, sometimes thousands, of participants. In general, lynchings were bonding activities for white communities to come together and celebrate their collective whiteness publicly. It sent a message to all outsiders about who was in control of the city.

Even if they were not the ones pulling the trigger, members of the lynch mob participated in the lynching ritual. They witnessed it and experienced it with all of their senses. They heard the victims begging for mercy; they smelled the gunpowder in the air. Often lynch mob participants celebrated the extralegal killing and they would collect souvenirs to remember the day forever. Across the South, mob participants would scramble to collect bits of clothes, hair, or even organs of the victims.<sup>182</sup> There was a market for this paraphernalia and pieces of mob violence and corpses of the victims literally became consumer items.<sup>183</sup> On March 14, 1891, mob participants clambered to get pieces of bark and leaves from the tree where Bagnetto's body hung.<sup>184</sup> Women

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<sup>179</sup> Amy Louise Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America ; 1890-1940*(Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2011), 5.

<sup>180</sup>W. Fitzhugh. Brundage, *Under Sentence of Death: Lynching in the South* (University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 159.

<sup>181</sup> Patricia Bernstein, *The First Waco Horror: The Lynching of Jesse Washington and the Rise of the NAACP* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 2008), 3.

<sup>182</sup> Hale, *Making Whiteness*, 218.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

<sup>184</sup> Sarah Fouts, "The Mafia, La Raza, and the Spanish-Language Press Coverage of the 1891 Lynchings in New Orleans," *Journal of Southern History* 83, no. 3 (2017): 511, doi:10.1353/soh.2017.0161.



dipped their handkerchiefs in the blood of the victims to take home with them.<sup>185</sup> Mob participants commemorated their day with gruesome physical reminders.

Women played a specific and gendered role in the New Orleans lynch mob. Not only did they sop up blood with their handkerchiefs for mementos of remembrance, they also spurred the male leaders on by shouting from balconies above the scene.<sup>186</sup> One of the common arguments of the day in approval for lynching was the protection of fragile white womanhood since many of those lynched were accused of rape. Most of the victims of lynching were black men, but some other minorities were also accused of sex crimes. In 1886, an Italian immigrant was lynched in Vicksburg for the attempted rape of a white ten-year-old girl.<sup>187</sup> Many of the accusations were pure fabrication and mainly a pretext for violence. Lynching was considered a patriarchal duty in which white men restored their masculine dominance and shielded femininity.<sup>188</sup> Lynching was a gendered crime and was an expression of white patriarchal values and white women largely approved of the practice.

The New Orleans lynch mob saw themselves as extensions of the state, meting out justice. This was the case in many instances of lynch mobs, particularly if the lynching ritual was similar to public executions.<sup>189</sup> In New Orleans, the mob was led by members of the Committee of Fifty. These were local leaders in the community. Participants in the mob would have felt validated by the presence of the ruling class. They felt as if they were carrying out the wishes of the greater community. Southerners

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<sup>185</sup> Gambino, *Vendetta*, 87.

<sup>186</sup> "Hennessy Case," *Lafayette Advertiser*, March 21, 1891.

<sup>187</sup> "A Fearful Crime," *Daily Telegraph* (Monroe), March 29, 1886, accessed April 7, 2018, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn88064499/1886-03-29/ed-1/seq-2/>.

<sup>188</sup> Wood, Amy Louise. *Lynching and Spectacle* 7.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*, 46

viewed lynching as a form of popular justice.<sup>190</sup> Many white Southerners practiced placed codes of honor at a higher priority than actual codes of law.<sup>191</sup> Jailbreaks and denial of true court justice by ways of lynching were not uncommon occurrences when it came to lynching.

This particular lynching was fostered by the toxic atmosphere of anti-Italian sentiment and the desire for vengeance by any means necessary created by Mayor Shakespeare. The lynching also had implicit economic benefits for white businessmen. Shakespeare endorsed the lynching saying that the victims “deserved killing and they were punished by peaceful, law-abiding citizens. They took the law in their own hands and we were forced to do the same.”<sup>192</sup> Shakespeare not only lauded the efforts of the lynch mob but used the word “we” and included himself in with their actions. He was aware that his actions after the assassination and lack thereof after the threatening newspaper articles contributed to the lynching. This is a prime example of how some Southern leaders saw lynching as a beneficial experience for their communities. Many rich white businessmen were similarly pleased with the outcome of the lynching. John P. Richardson, who owned the largest dry goods store in the city was satisfied with the results and stated that it was “just the thing that should have occurred.”<sup>193</sup> Many white businessmen benefited economically from the death of Joseph Machecha and the end of his monopoly on the docks. They lifted the lynching up as something justifiable because it also protected their business interests.

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<sup>190</sup> Stewart E. Tolnay and E. M. Beck, *A Festival of Violence: An Analysis of Southern Lynchings, 1882-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 86.

<sup>191</sup> Brundage, W. Fitzhugh. *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1930*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1994 4.

<sup>192</sup> Rimanelli and Postman, *The 1891 New Orleans Lynching*, 149.

<sup>193</sup> "The Lynching Justified," *New York Times*, March 17, 1891, accessed April 7, 2018, <https://search-proquest-com.umiss.idm.oclc.org/docview/94869996/35453EDDB54A41E1PQ/1?accountid=14588>.

Although the lynching was met with very little repercussions on the local level, there were some on the international level. Italy was incensed and cut off diplomatic ties with the United States. Saverio Fava, the Italian ambassador, was recalled from his post in Washington.<sup>194</sup> Italy demanded that the members of the lynch mob be brought to justice and called for reparations. Consul Corte believed that war was imminent.<sup>195</sup> The federal government was pressured to condemn the lynching. President Harrison called the incident “deplorable.”<sup>196</sup> The lynch mob was never punished, but the federal government paid twenty-five thousand dollars in reparations to the victims’ families to restore ties with Italy in 1892.<sup>197</sup>

Anti-Italian and nativist sentiment grew all over the country and often sparked violence. One of the members on the Committee of Fifty, William Parkerson, embarked on a national speaking tour to call for restrictions on immigration.<sup>198</sup> Louisiana, especially, saw an increase in violence against Italians. Five Italian men were lynched in Tallulah and three were lynched in Hanville in 1896.<sup>199</sup> The 1891 lynching set a precedent in the federal government intervening in lynchings against Italian Americans. In 1893 in Denver, Italian Daniel Ariata was lynched for the murder of a Civil War

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<sup>194</sup> "Baron Fava Is Recalled," *New York Times*, April 1, 1891, accessed April 7, 2018, <https://search-proquest-com.umiss.idm.oclc.org/docview/94839884?pq-origsite=summon>.

<sup>195</sup> "New Orleans Threatened," *New York Times*, March 17, 1891, accessed April 7, 2018, <https://search-proquest-com.umiss.idm.oclc.org/docview/94869952/B6C55C53051B4FCEPQ/8?accountid=14588>.

<sup>196</sup> Coxe, "The New Orleans Mafia Incident," 1096.

<sup>197</sup> "A Settlement with Italy," *New York Times*, April 15, 1892, accessed April 7, 2018, <https://search-proquest-com.umiss.idm.oclc.org/docview/95017619/358E5CDF7A964285PQ/4?accountid=14588>.

<sup>198</sup> "Parkerson Will Be the Orator," *Waterbury Evening Democrat*, June 13, 1891, accessed April 7, 2018, [https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn94053256/1891-06-13/ed-1/seq-1/#date1=1891&index=0&rows=20&words=New Orleans Parkerson William&searchType=basic&sequence=0&state=&date2=1892&proxtext=william parkerson new orleans&y=13&x=18&dateFilterType=yearRange&page=1](https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn94053256/1891-06-13/ed-1/seq-1/#date1=1891&index=0&rows=20&words=New+Orleans+Parkerson+William&searchType=basic&sequence=0&state=&date2=1892&proxtext=william+parkerson+new+orleans&y=13&x=18&dateFilterType=yearRange&page=1).

<sup>199</sup> A. Margavio and Jerome Salamone, *Bread and Respect: The Italians of Louisiana* (Place of Publication Not Identified: Pelican Publishing, 2014), 202.

Veteran in a bar.<sup>200</sup> Much like the lynching in New Orleans, the lynch mob broke into his jail cell and hacked up his body for souvenirs. Using the New Orleans lynching as precedent, ambassador Fava was able to pressure the federal government to pay reparations to Ariata's family just as they had for the Italians in New Orleans.<sup>201</sup> This was a unique feature of lynching against Italians. Black families of lynch victims never received any form of compensation from the local or federal government.

The assassination of police chief Hennessy and the consequent lynching of Italian Americans in New Orleans had varying impacts on the local and international level. White dominance had been reasserted in New Orleans and much of the rest of the country had intense nativist feelings. Because of the range of repercussions, this incident was widely dissected in the local and national press in the following months and was given a variety of meanings across regional lines.

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<sup>200</sup> Stephen J. Leonard, *Lynching in Colorado, 1859-1919* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2002), 137.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

### Chapter Three: The Reaction of the American Press

On March 14, 1891, a mob lynched eleven Italian Americans in New Orleans. They believed that the Italians had assassinated their beloved police chief, David Hennessy. The incident made national news and sparked fears in Americans that Italy might retaliate, taking on national significance and symbolic importance. The reaction of the press to this incident, however, was not unified and varied across different regions of the country. Some newspapers saw the killings as tragic, senseless acts of violence of which the country should be ashamed. Other newspapers praised the lynch mob as bearers of justice, using their god-given right to avenge the death of the beloved police chief. Others took the opportunity to disparage Sicilian immigration. Newspapers used this story to further their own political agendas.

In two of the most thorough treatments of the lynching and its context, scholars argue that the lynching elicited a uniform response. American historian Richard Gambino argues that “newspapers were united in their endorsements of the lynching” and Italian historian Giose Rimaneli claims that northern newspapers simply echoed southern approval for the lynchings.<sup>202</sup> Yet a systematic analysis of newspaper reports shows that many American newspapers, even a few in the South, criticized the violent incident and condemned the actions of New Orleanians. The reaction of the media to this incident is much more textured and complicated than scholars have claimed; northern and southern

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<sup>202</sup> Richard Gambino, *Vendetta: A True Story of the Worst Lynching in America, the Mass Murder of Italian-Americans in New Orleans in 1891, the Vicious Motivations behind it, and the Tragic Repercussions that Linger to this Day*, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977), 31.

Giose Rimaneli, “The 1891 New Orleans Lynching: Southern Politics, Mafia, Immigration and the American Press” in *The 1891 New Orleans Lynching and US-Italian Relations: A Look Back* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992), 85.

journalists had mixed attitudes regarding the lynching and praised and criticized it for various reasons.

Newspapers presented the lynching and its resulting issues in multiple and profound ways. Coverage varied from region to region, with each part of the country supporting or opposing the incident for myriad reasons. The mixed reactions of the press are evidence of a period of flux and division in American history. The late nineteenth century saw the end of Reconstruction and the beginnings of Jim Crow. It was also a time of unprecedented European immigration and budding modernity. The varying ways that newspapers reported this event indicate how some Americans perceived racial violence and how they sought to make sense of racial hierarchy amidst a period of change and growth.

The lynching of the Italians in New Orleans sent shockwaves through the state of Louisiana, the nation, and the world. Unsurprisingly, many white, southern papers lauded New Orleanians for taking justice into their own hands. Additionally, such papers viscously disparaged Italian immigrants and were overtly racist. Papers with predominantly white readership attacked Italian immigrants based on their perceived non-whiteness, imagined propensity for violence, and lack of fluency in the English language. Across the country, the press used this lynching as an opportunity to take assorted stances on racial hierarchy and violence, immigration, gendered notions of honor and respectability, and American ideals. Upon inspection, these editorials speak to how one event ushered in debates related to a host of issues with which many Americans grappled during the late nineteenth century.

In the late nineteenth century, white newspapers in the South and the Southwest praised lynch mobs and often celebrated lynchings, particularly the lynchings of racial and ethnic minorities. For instance, the lynching of Mexicans by white mobs was commonplace in the American Southwest during the second half of the nineteenth century. Newspapers, like the *Daily Ranchero* out of Brownsville, Texas, maintained that members of lynch mobs were good citizens and who sought to protect their community.<sup>203</sup> San Francisco's *Placer Times* actually advocated for violence against Mexican Americans and maintained that the lynchers should hang Mexican American criminals on the first available tree branch they see.<sup>204</sup> Newspapers across new states in the Southwest—the spoils of the Mexican-American War—published poems, ballads, and cartoons supporting and glorifying the unlawful killings of Mexican Americans.<sup>205</sup> For many Americans, reading about the lynchings of Mexican Americans was a form of entertainment and quite commonplace.

Likewise, most southern newspapers supported the lynchings of African Americans. Between 1880 and 1930 eighty-five percent of lynching victims in the South were black.<sup>206</sup> After the end of slavery, white southerners used lynching as a tool to control the black population as a means to maintain white male supremacy.<sup>207</sup> Many southern newspapers rationalized mob violence against African Americans and vindicated those involved in lynchings.<sup>208</sup> The protection of white womanhood and virtue

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<sup>203</sup> William D. Carrigan and Clive Webb, *Forgotten Dead: Mob Violence against Mexicans in the United States, 1848-1928*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press 2013), 26.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>206</sup> Fitzhugh Brundage, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1930* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 8.

<sup>207</sup> Stewart E. Tolnay and E. M. Beck, *A Festival of Violence: an Analysis of Southern Lynchings, 1882-1930*, (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 87.

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*

was the most common reason that lynch mobs claimed when they murdered African American men. In reality, economics and social control were often the actual cause of most lynchings. Still, many white men and women rationalized the violence as an attempt to protect white womanhood, giving lynching an honorable gloss.<sup>209</sup> Southern papers, also justified and defended lynching as a way to preserve and protect white womanhood.<sup>210</sup> In doing so, the press became a tool of white supremacy. Newspapers that recounted the lurid details of lynchings of African American men helped standardize and normalize the practice by making it appear acceptable and even socially respectable.<sup>211</sup>

Given the fact that so much of the American press was blatantly racist and supported lynching, it is not all that unsurprising that many editorials across the country praised the lynching of the eleven Italians in New Orleans of March 1891. In many ways, the endorsement of the New Orleans lynchings was a continuation of a tradition in which the white press accepted and defended violence against racial minorities under the guise of law and order.

One of the methods the American press used to justify the lynching of the group of eleven Italians in New Orleans was to laud the lynch mob. Multiple newspapers made special note that the mob was comprised of upper-class citizens. the *New York Times* reported that the mob was composed of New Orleanians “of the best element.”<sup>212</sup> the *Louisiana Democrat* of Alexandria, Louisiana, likewise noted how the vanguard of the

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<sup>209</sup> Tolnay and Beck, *A Festival of Violence*, 88.

<sup>210</sup> Crystal Nicole Feimster, *Southern Horrors: Women and the Politics of Rape and Lynching* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 163.

<sup>211</sup> Amy Louise Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890-1940* (Chapel Hill, NC: University Of North Carolina Press 2011), 10.

<sup>212</sup> "Chief Hennessy Avenged!" *New York Times*, March 15, 1891, accessed April 8, 2018, <https://search-proquest-com.umiss.idm.oclc.org/docview/94862078?pq-origsite=summon>.



mob was composed of the wealthiest and most well-respected citizens. Tradesmen and mechanics followed their lead.<sup>213</sup> The *Colfax Chronicle* out of Colfax in central Louisiana told its readers that the prominent members of the mob made no attempt to hide their face or their actions.<sup>214</sup> Indeed, the mob was comprised of powerful citizens including future governor of Louisiana, John Parker, and future mayor of New Orleans, Walter Flower.<sup>215</sup> Newspapers in favor of the lynching highlighted the respectability of the members of the lynch mob in order to justify the killings. The lynchers were respectable and well known; prominent physicians and lawyers helped break into the jail and later shot bullets into the corpses. The fact that they did not hide their faces with masks or anything else shows that they were not ashamed of their actions.

Other papers praised the lynch mob for its efficiency. Newspapers across the South often described lynch mobs as cohesive units to justify their actions and make them appear reasonable.<sup>216</sup> The stories revolving around the lynching in New Orleans were no different. Reporters described the mob as acting swiftly and with purpose as they broke into the parish prison and killed the eleven Italian prisoners. The *St. Tammany Farmer* out of Covington, Louisiana, went so far as to say that it was the “most orderly uprising ever witnessed in the world’s history” noting the “perfect order and discipline throughout.”<sup>217</sup> Similarly, in Little Rock, the *Arkansas Gazette* described the mob as deliberate and determined and claimed that there was no “unnecessary disorder, rioting or

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<sup>213</sup> "The Outcome," *The Louisiana Democrat* (Alexandria), March 18, 1891, accessed April 8, 2018, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn82003389/1891-03-18/ed-1/seq-2/>.

<sup>214</sup> "Bloody Vengeance," *Colfax Chronicle*, March 21, 1891.

<sup>215</sup> Marco Rimaneli and Sheryl L. Postman, *The 1891 New Orleans Lynching and US-Italian Relations: A Look Back* (New York: Lang, 1992), 24.

<sup>216</sup> Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle*, 10.

<sup>217</sup> "A Popular Uprising in New Orleans," *St. Tammany Farmer*, March 21, 1891, accessed April 8, 2018, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn82015387/1891-03-21/ed-1/seq-2/>.

pillaging.”<sup>218</sup> The *Thibodaux Sentinel* from Thibodaux, Louisiana, described the mob in even more glorious terms, writing that “the people rose in the grandeur of their strength and meted out that punishment that the law was powerless to inflict.”<sup>219</sup> Papers described the prison break-in as systematic and well organized to convince their readers of the legitimacy of the mob's actions. People would be more likely to support a lynch mob that appeared to have leadership and was efficient because it made their actions seem more justifiable and reasonable. Furthermore, descriptions like those in the *Thibodaux Sentinel* reveal that many people viewed the mob as efficient and modern, something to be celebrated.

The papers that praised the lynch mob were mostly located in the South. This would make sense because many white southerners would specifically feel the need to defend the practice of lynching since the majority of lynchings in the country occurred in the South.<sup>220</sup> Furthermore, the news coverage reflects wealthy white southerners’ obsession with the idea of honor. According to historian Fitzhugh Brundage, in the South, codes of honor were more important and more respected than the law.<sup>221</sup> Revenge was a respected value and many white southerners obsessed over social rank. In the eyes of many southerners, it was a good and noble thing that the mob avenged Chief Hennessy. It made sense for southern papers, in particular, to praise the lynch mob and describe it as being high-class and honorable because it reflected their values.

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<sup>218</sup> *Arkansas Gazette* (Little Rock), March 15, 1891.

<sup>219</sup> "The Avenging Death," *The Weekly Thibodaux Sentinel and Journal of the 8th Senatorial District*, March 21, 1891, accessed April 8, 2018, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn88064492/1891-03-21/ed-1/seq-2/>.

<sup>220</sup> Stewart E. Tolnay and E. M. Beck, *A Festival of Violence*, 87.

<sup>221</sup> Fitzhugh Brundage, *Lynching in the New South*, 4.

Many papers from across the country defended the institution of lynching in less subtle ways. Plenty of papers reverently described lynching as a way for the common people to rise up, assert authority, and enact justice. In the capital of Texas, the *Austin Weekly Statesman* described the lynching as the people of New Orleans exercising their “mighty prerogative of sovereignty.”<sup>222</sup> The *Oregonian* in Portland approved of the mob by explaining to their readers that occasionally the law must be cast aside and people must create new tools to deal with their problems.<sup>223</sup> Closer to the site of the lynchings, the *Louisiana Democrat* claimed that thanks to the actions of the lynch mob, “justice and respect for the law shall rule in New Orleans.”<sup>224</sup> White Americans saw public spectacle lynchings as an appropriate means of keeping the social order by maintaining their white supremacy.<sup>225</sup> These newspaper sources indicate that white Americans not only saw lynching as a viable method of justice but also as a right that they possessed and could execute whenever they thought necessary. In fact, the *Pittsburgh Post* approved of the lynching, claiming that it was “American in character.”<sup>226</sup> Many white Americans from the North to the South viewed their “right” to lynch as a part of their identity as Americans, as sacred as their right to freedom of speech, religion, and press. Many Americans viewed lynching as an appropriate way to exert power, especially over racial

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<sup>222</sup> “Vengeance!” *Austin Weekly Statesman*, March 19, 1891, accessed April 8, 2018, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn86088296/1891-03-19/ed-1/seq-2/>.

<sup>223</sup> J. Karl, “New Orleans Lynchings of 1891 and the American Press,” *Louisiana Historical* 2, no. 24 (1941): 192.

<sup>224</sup> “The Outcome,” *The Louisiana Democrat* (Alexandria), March 18, 1891, accessed April 8, 2018, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn82003389/1891-03-18/ed-1/seq-2/>.

<sup>225</sup> Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: the Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940* (New York, NY :Vintage Books, 1999), 203.

<sup>226</sup> Karl, “New Orleans Lynchings of 1891 and the American Press.”, 193.

minorities. This was not only a southern belief but also a nationwide belief, even if northerners did not act on it as often.<sup>227</sup>

Many newspapers claimed a general approval of lynching in the American public as another way to justify the New Orleans incident. Popular newspapers endorsed the lynching by claiming that the lynching was widely approved. In one of their editorials, the *Arkansas Gazette* bluntly stated that “no one deploras it,”<sup>228</sup> showing little regard to the Italian-American population. Similarly, the *Feliciana Sentineal* out of St. Francisville, Louisiana, commended the lynching by asserting “not a man of West Feliciana but sympathizes with the good men of New Orleans and applauds their determined action.”<sup>229</sup> Likewise, the *Lafayette Advertiser* of southern Louisiana claimed that four-fifths of the population supported the lynching.<sup>230</sup> This does not seem like a thoroughly researched statistic, but rather, a way of convincing the readers that the lynching was justified because it was so widely accepted. This reporting sought to present the incident as more palatable to readers by assuring them that everyone felt very positively about the prison break in and subsequent lynchings.

The presence of women at the lynching offered further testament to the validity of the lynching for some. Also in the article in the *Lafayette Advertiser* the author notes that the ladies of New Orleans waved their handkerchiefs from balconies, signifying their approval as the mob killed the Italians.<sup>231</sup> It was not uncommon for women to be present

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<sup>227</sup> Stewart E. Tolnay and E. M. Beck, *A Festival of Violence*, 87.

<sup>228</sup> “Quiet Again,” *Arkansas Gazette* (Little Rock), March 17, 1891.

<sup>229</sup> “Deferred Justice Comes at Last,” *Feliciana Sentinel* (St. Francisville), March 21, 1891, accessed April 8, 2018, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn88064555/1891-03-21/ed-1/seq-2/>.

<sup>230</sup> “The Hennessy Case,” *Lafayette Advertiser* (Lafayette, LA) March 21, 1891.

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*

at lynchings and to be photographed in the crowd.<sup>232</sup> Nonetheless, the scene revealed a contradiction of belief: women could participate and be present at barbarous and violent lynchings, despite the fact that one of the main justifications of the institution was the protection of white femininity.<sup>233</sup> During the Victorian era, society saw women as fragile and delicate. Moreover, women were thought to have a greater sense of morality than men. The *Lafayette Advertiser* included the approval of the women in their story because white women were seen as symbols of virtue. By showing that white women approved of the lynching, they furthered their argument that the lynching was justifiable and morally sound.

Some papers in the American West had a very specific and unique reason for approving the lynchings. They believed that the lynchings would incite a war with Italy and that the resulting war would unite the North and the South and heal the sectional wounds that still lingered from the Civil War. The *Oregonian* in Portland claimed “a foreign war would unite our people as one man; then indeed there would be no North and no South.”<sup>234</sup> The *Herald* in Albany, Oregon, hoped for a war and mused “whenever any foreign danger menaces the supremacy of the old stars and stripes, the sectional feelings are buried and North and South are forgotten in the one and indivisible country.”<sup>235</sup> These sentiments came out of Oregon, a state technically part of the Union but still minimally involved in the Civil War. The dream of a war uniting the North and the South was not present in the newspapers in the states more directly affected by the Civil War, but the

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<sup>232</sup> Amy Louise Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890-1940* (Chapel Hill, NC: University Of North Carolina Press 2011), 75.

<sup>233</sup> Crystal Nicole Feimster, *Southern Horrors: Women and the Politics of Rape and Lynching* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 5.

<sup>234</sup> *Oregonian* (Portland), April 1, 1891.

<sup>235</sup> *The Herald* (Albany), April 4, 1891.

musings of the Oregon papers reveal the desire and hope that some that western states held for a more united country.

Most papers that supported the lynching called into question the race of the Italian victims or at least tried to differentiate them from the white population. This made it clear to their readers that the lynching took place not only to enact revenge but also to maintain white supremacy. These racist sentiments were likely amplified by the fact that the eleven Italians were accused of killing the chief of police. Many whites saw the killing of an officer of the law as an unshakable attack on the white community at large.<sup>236</sup> Chief Hennessey was the second most powerful man on the New Orleans police force when he was assassinated in October of 1890. The whites in the city respected him because of his tough crackdown on crime, particularly in Italian and black neighbourhoods.<sup>237</sup> When the Italian men that he attempted to control were charged with his assassination, the white community felt threatened. They did not want Italian immigrants taking over their city. This made the lynching perfectly defensible to many newspapers. At the same time many editorialists saw Chief Hennessey was a symbol of white supremacy and control, they made an effort to distinguish Italians as nonwhite. The victims of the lynching were deliberately set apart from the white community.

All of the victims were Sicilian, and reporters took the opportunity to distinguish Sicilians from mainland Italians. They described Sicilians as distinctively inferior, not truly European and therefore, not truly white. The *Lewiston Teller* out of the brand new state of Idaho, called Sicilians “a baser kind of Greek,” lowering their status amongst

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<sup>236</sup> Fitzhugh Brundage, *Lynching in the New South*, 77.

<sup>237</sup> John V. Baiamonte, Jr., “Who Killa da Chief” Revisited: The Hennessey Assassination and Its Aftermath, 1890 -1991,” *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 33, No: 2, (Spring, 1992), 119.

other Mediterranean people<sup>238</sup>. The *Opelousas Courier* out of Opelousas, Louisiana, wrote that there was “scarcely any affluity between Sicilians and Italy Proper.”<sup>239</sup> The paper went on to describe Sicily as the birthplace of the Mafia and cited differences in their dialect from mainland Italy, claiming that it was “inexcusable that they speak some kind of Italian Patois that they, therefore, belong to the same race as the Italian People.”<sup>240</sup> Many Americans saw Sicilians as backward and violent people who had no place in a civilized world.

Not only did most Americans deem Sicilians as culturally inferior, they viewed them as racially inferior. The *Arkansas Gazette* further elaborated on the issue of their race in their editorials claiming that many Sicilians had “Arab blood in their veins”<sup>241</sup> and that their violence was “a direct and reasonable result of their Bedoin descent.”<sup>242</sup> These assertions reflected eugenic thought. According to historian Stefano Luconi, those espousing the pseudoscience of eugenics emphasized the African and Arab “contamination” of Italians during the latter half of the nineteenth century.<sup>243</sup> These assertions were especially prevalent in the race-obsessed, post-Reconstruction South. The insistence by some that Sicilians were not Italians reveals a complex racial hierarchy; southern Europeans were inferior to northern Europeans, Italians were inferior to other

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<sup>238</sup>“The Dreaded Mafia,” *Lewiston Teller*, December 11, 1890, accessed April 8, 2018, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn82007023/1890-12-11/ed-1/seq-2/>.

<sup>239</sup> “No Room For the Mafia,” *Opelousas Courier*, November 1, 1890, accessed April 8, 2018, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83026389/1890-11-01/ed-1/seq-1/>.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid.

<sup>241</sup> “What is the Mafia,” *Arkansas Gazette* (Little Rock, AR), March 19, 1891.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid.

<sup>243</sup> Stefano Luconi, “The Lynching of Southern Europeans in the Southern United States: the Plight of Italian immigrants in Dixie,” in *The US South and Europe: Transatlantic Relations in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2013), 127.

Europeans, and Sicilians were inferior to Italians. America had an obsession with racial labels and stratum, particularly in the South where Jim Crow was just beginning to form.

The press also associated the inherent racial inferiority of Sicilians in particular and Italians in general to their propensity for violence during the coverage of the 1891 lynchings. These views were particularly strong in the newspapers of southern Louisiana. The *Thibodeaux Sentinel* warned that “If the Italian Government does not want her assassins and murders killed in the United States let her keep them at home,” implying that Italy produced violent criminals<sup>244</sup>. The *Lafayette Advertiser* described New Orleans’s Italians as “bloody thirsty aliens”<sup>245</sup> and the *Opelousas Courier* went even further and depicted Italians as “a gang of desperate foreigners ready to do any bloody work for hire.”<sup>246</sup> Southern Louisianans had more exposure to Italian immigrants than most of the country and their anti-Italian feeling particularly prevalent in their papers. By demeaning Italians as a people, the lynching of eleven of them became more acceptable.

However, the South was not the only hotbed of Anti-Italian sentiment at the time. Other areas of high Italian immigration held similar views. New York City was the destination for most Italian immigrants and most immigrants there were looked down upon there as they were in New Orleans. Newspapers in New York reacted much like newspapers in southern Louisiana. The *New York Times* published a scathing editorial that implied the Italians in New Orleans were highly violent just two days after the lynching that read:

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<sup>244</sup>“The Avenging Death,” *The Weekly Thibodeaux Sentinel and Journal of the 8th Senatorial District*, March 21, 1891, accessed April 8, 2018, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn88064492/1891-03-21/ed-1/seq-2/>.

<sup>245</sup>“The Hennessy Case,” *Lafayette Advertiser*, (Lafayette, LA), March 21, 1891.

<sup>246</sup>“No Room For the Mafia,” *Opelousas Courier*, November 1, 1890, accessed April 8, 2018, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83026389/1890-11-01/ed-1/seq-1/>.



These sneaking and cowardly Sicilians, the descendants of bandits and assassins, who have transported to this country the lawless passions, the cut-throat practices, and the oath-bound societies of their native country, are to us a pest without mitigation. Our own rattlesnakes are as good citizens as they.<sup>247</sup>

Sicilians were portrayed as lawless and having ties to the Mafia, although many immigrated to the United States to, in fact, avoid Mafia violence.<sup>248</sup> Furthermore, this editorial also shows that Italian immigrants were seen as subhuman as the author compares them to rattlesnakes.<sup>249</sup> The equivalence of Italian immigrants to animals would have further excused the actions of the lynch mob. New Yorker's anti-Italian sentiment was in part a reaction to the growing population of Italian Americans. Outside of Italy, New Orleans had the second highest population of Italians and New York had the highest.<sup>250</sup> Portraying Italian immigrants as violent and unruly further excused and justified the actions of the mob, as well as anti-Italian beliefs.

Other newspapers disparaged and dehumanized Italians for reasons other than their assumed violence. The *St. Landry Clarion* out of Opelousas acknowledged that not all Italian immigrants were directly involved with the Mafia. It implied, however, that all Italian immigrants were horrible humans since they protected the Mafia and refused to speak against it.<sup>251</sup> The *Clarion* referred to the Italian code of *Omerta* in which members of the Mafia would not give up other member's names when interrogated.<sup>252</sup> Although this was a common practice, it was irresponsible journalism to assume that all Sicilians

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<sup>247</sup> Editorial" *New York Times*, (New York, NY), March 16, 1891.

<sup>248</sup> Postman and Rimanelli, *The 1891 New Orleans Lynching and U.S. Italian Relations*, 46.

<sup>249</sup> "Editorial" *New York Times*, (New York, NY), March 16, 1891

<sup>250</sup> "Population of the 100 Largest Urban Places: 1880,"

<https://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0027/tab11.txt> (June 15,1998)

<sup>251</sup> "Immigration," *St. Landry Clarion* (Opelousas), March 21, 1891, accessed April 8, 2018, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn88064250/1891-03-21/ed-1/seq-1/>.

<sup>252</sup> Diego Gambetta, *The Sicilian Mafia: the Business of Private Protection* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1998), 85.

followed this code and were connected to the Mafia. Other papers, like the *Opelousas Courier*, criticized the immigrant's inability to speak English.<sup>253</sup> Similarly, in Texas, the *Fort Worth Weekly Gazette* claimed that Italian immigrants were "fruit dealers of the very lowest type, men who just arrived to this country and scarcely speak a word of English."<sup>254</sup> This not only attacked Italian immigrants on the basis of their lack of English but also on their failure to assimilate into the acceptable white culture of the South. Southern newspapers presented Italian immigrants as racially different and culturally inferior to excuse their lynching, much in the same way lynchings against blacks and Mexicans were excused.

Several Louisiana and New York papers insisted that it had nothing to do with race, often in the same breath that they racially demeaned the immigrants. In New York, *Harper's Weekly* maintained that "to class all Italians and all Sicilians together would be the most glaring offense."<sup>255</sup> The *Lafayette Advertiser* claimed that most Italians were "distinct and have no sympathy with the treacherous and despicable Mafia element."<sup>256</sup> No paper vehemently asserted that race had nothing to do with with the lynching than the *St. Tammany Farmer*, as it bluntly stated that the lynching was "not an uprising against Italians, Sicilians or any race of people."<sup>257</sup> The paper made a special note that the mob passed by multiple fruit stands operated by Italian vendors and did not attack any of

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<sup>253</sup> "No Room For the Mafia," *Opelousas Courier*, November 1, 1890, accessed April 8, 2018, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83026389/1890-11-01/ed-1/seq-1/>.

<sup>254</sup> "Italians Did It," *Fort Worth Weekly Gazette*, October 23, 1890, accessed April 8, 2018, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn86088529/1890-10-23/ed-1/seq-10/>.

<sup>255</sup> "The Mafia," *Harper's Weekly*, (New York, NY), March 28, 1891, 226.

<sup>256</sup> "The Hennessy Case," *Lafayette Advertiser* March 21, 1891.

<sup>257</sup> "A Popular Uprising in New Orleans," *St. Tammany Farmer*, March 21, 1891, accessed April 8, 2018, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn82015387/1891-03-21/ed-1/seq-2/>.

them, therefore proving “that the race question had nothing to do with it.”<sup>258</sup>The *St. Tammany Farmer* praised the actions of the mob that lynched eleven Italian Americans whom, according to the American legal system, were innocent. Yet it ended its editorial by saying “Italians and Sicilians are welcome here (southern Louisiana) as long as they obey the laws and they will be protected in all the rights and privileges of citizenship.”<sup>259</sup> The fact that papers in areas that were bitterly racist towards Italians would claim that race had nothing to do with the lynching of eleven Italian Americans shows that these papers were aware of the racism that influenced the event and were eager to downplay it in order to appear more respectable themselves.

Overall, the majority of American papers tried to justify the slaying of the eleven Italian Americans in New Orleans in March of 1891. They attempted to make the mob appear respectable, controlled, and competent while they portrayed the victims as racially inferior, deserving, and violent. They followed the American tradition of defending lynching as a tool for everyday day people to enact their own justice and as a right of white citizens.

Distinct regional patterns from the coverage emerge as well. Papers in some western states approved of the lynching because they believed it would lead to a more united country. Meanwhile, praise for the lynch mob was the strongest in South because of their culture revolving around honor and white supremacy. Criticism of Italian immigrants was the most visible in the papers of the places with high populations of Italians, namely southern Louisiana and New York City.

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<sup>258</sup> Ibid.

<sup>259</sup> Ibid.

It is important to note that no one region was united in its coverage of the lynching. Even though the majority of American newspapers approved of the lynchings, a significant minority did not. The papers that were critical of the lynching were located in both the North and the South. The existence of these papers disproves some historians' assumptions that the American press was unified in its approval of the lynchings.

Some papers criticized the city of New Orleans and the lynch mob because they were concerned about the international repercussions. The press in Chicago worried about retaliation from Italy because several of the lynching victims were citizens of the kingdom of Italy.<sup>260</sup> A small town Texas paper, the *Brenham Weekly Banner*, even discussed the logistics of a naval war with Italy.<sup>261</sup> The paper believed that Italy could send gunners into the Gulf of Mexico "and pepper New Orleans to its heart's content", but was confident that the Kingdom of Italy was not capable of sending ships up the Mississippi River.<sup>262</sup> Even though their concerns never came to fruition, they were well justified. In 1891, Italy possessed the world's third-largest navy and the United States' navy was vastly inadequate by comparison.<sup>263</sup> The anxiety that these papers expressed was almost the exact opposite of the enthusiasm of the western newspapers that believed that a war with Italy could heal the country's divisions.

Several papers criticized the lynching in New Orleans and even the institution of lynching. A few of these were even in the South. The *Atlanta Constitution* stated that it was "preferable to allow a few criminals to go unpunished than to plunge society into

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<sup>260</sup> Baiamonte, "Who Killa da Chief" 122.

<sup>261</sup> *Brenham Weekly Banner*, March 26, 1891, accessed April 8, 2018, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn86089443/1891-03-26/ed-1/seq-6/>.

<sup>262</sup> Ibid.

<sup>263</sup> Postman and Rimanelli, *The 1891 New Orleans Lynching and U.S. Italian Relations*, 3.

anarchy under the reign of the mob.”<sup>264</sup> This paper believed strongly that the law should be upheld, and it was better for society to pardon criminals than to resort to violence. This view highly contrasts with the majority of southern papers that saw mob vigilantism as legitimate as the laws of the United States.

The *Atlanta Constitution* was not the only southern paper to criticize the institution of lynching in their coverage of the New Orleans incident. In an article entitled “The Massacre” in the *Daily Tobacco Leaf Chronicle* out of Clarksville Tennessee, the journalist described the lynchings as a “scene of deplorable death and tragedy.”<sup>265</sup> This paper saw no moral justification of the murders and stated that “all good citizens must and do regret the taking of a human life without warrant of law.”<sup>266</sup> This view was in direct conflict with the public opinion that claimed that citizens should be able to enact their own justice when the law fails them. Rather, the *Daily Tobacco Leaf Chronicle* urged its readers to have respect for the law and for others.<sup>267</sup> This instance of morality sets it apart from other southern papers. Even the fact that the article was titled “The Massacre” says a lot about their perspective on the events of March 14, 1891. The *Thibodaux Sentinel* in Louisiana, for instance, titled their piece “The Attempt to Make a Proper Killing of a Few Midnight Assassins.”<sup>268</sup> The title alone gives away how they perceived Italians; the *Daily Tobacco Leaf Chronicle* saw them as victims while the *Thibodaux Sentinel* believed that the Italians were all killers and got what they deserved. The *Daily Tobacco Leaf* is a rare southern paper that both rejected the southern institution

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<sup>264</sup> Karl, “New Orleans Lynchings of 1891 and the American Press.,” 189.

<sup>265</sup> “The Massacre,” *Daily Tobacco Leaf Chronicle* (Clarkesville), March 18, 1891.

<sup>266</sup> Ibid.

<sup>267</sup> Ibid.

<sup>268</sup> “The Attempt to Make a Proper Killing of a Few Midnight Assassins,” *The Weekly Thibodaux Sentinel and Journal of the 8th Senatorial District*, March 28, 1891.

of lynching and urged its readers to respect the law and racial minorities like Italians. Another southern paper, the *St. Louis Republic* from Missouri, also took pity on the victims of the lynchings and said that they were slain on “proof on being Dagoes (old slang used to refer to Italians).”<sup>269</sup> This paper criticized the lawlessness of the lynch mob and recognized that there was indeed a racial component to the lynchings.

The papers from the South that lamented the lynchings were from all across the region; Georgia, Tennessee, and Missouri. However, no extant papers in Louisiana seemed to take issue with the lynching. The papers that took pity on the Italian victims had negligible Italian populations themselves compared to southern Louisiana. It is, however, very intriguing that they would stand up against lynching in the way that they did. According to Amy Louise Wood, it was not until well into the twentieth century that southern newspapers would begin to highly castigate the practice of lynching against blacks.<sup>270</sup>

Some newspapers in New York denounced the lynchings of Italians, as well. The *Sun*, another New York paper, had an opinion far different than the *New York Times*. It was highly critical of both the city of New Orleans and its people. It suggested that the city, not the federal government, should be responsible for paying reparations to the family.<sup>271</sup> Furthermore, the *Sun* slammed the citizens of New Orleans, noting other incidents when lynch mobs had caused problems in the city and lamented the fact that the same city could potentially be the cause of an international crisis.<sup>272</sup> Perhaps the *Sun* just did not want the entire country to be at fault for the actions of a southern city already

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<sup>269</sup> Karl, “New Orleans Lynchings of 1891 and the American Press.”, 188.

<sup>270</sup> Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle*, 21.

<sup>271</sup> “Talking Now of Damages,” *The Sun* (New York, NY), March 17, 1891.

<sup>272</sup> *Ibid.*

known for its proclivity towards racial violence. Unlike the *New York Times*, the *Sun* did not have any sweeping racial generalizations that faulted all Italian immigrants. If anything it was sympathetic to their plight and looked down upon the southerners whom had committed the violence against them.

The variety of reactions the American press had to the incident in New Orleans is more varied and complex than previously thought. Papers had multiple reasons for defending or criticizing the incident. The papers that approved the lynching believed that the lynching was a respectable restoration of law and order and a necessary tool for white Americans. Even though many papers claimed that the killings had nothing to do with race they racially demeaned the victims of the lynching and the Italian American community as a whole. They also used the episode of the lynching to define racial hierarchies and to police the boundaries of white male supremacy. Besides justifying the institution of lynching, some papers had other reasons for praising the lynchings, such as hoping for a war with Italy.

The papers that criticized the mob and the practice of lynching had varied reasons for doing so as well. Some papers were highly sympathetic to the lynching victims; others bemoaned the loss of law in order when a society devolved into mob violence. Some northern papers, like *The Sun*, were upset with the damage that the incident caused to international relations and were frustrated with the way New Orleans made the rest of the country look to the world. Other papers worried about the reactions of the Italian American communities and were fearful of a war with the kingdom of Italy.

Most Americans got their news from the papers and so how the papers framed this incident was paramount to how Americans understood and perceived the institution of

lynching and Italian Americans. Some Americans, like the readers of the *Louisiana Democrat*, learned about the New Orleans incident and read that lynching was a viable tool of law and order. Readers of the *Atlanta Constitution*, on the other hand, would read about the incident and come away with a completely different take; lynching and mob rule was a direct step away from law and order. Many of the editorials also provided readers with the framework with which to rank Italian Americans within the racial order and in American society. Although some papers like the *Daily Tobacco Leaf*, urged readers to respect the law and all other Americans, papers in southern Louisiana were vehemently racist and no doubt contributed to the environment that led to the lynching of at least ten other Italian immigrants in the state before the turn of the century.<sup>273</sup>

This incident was not forgotten over time. It continues to be interpreted to this day. Americans have given the incident different meanings throughout the last century.

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<sup>273</sup> Richard Gambino, *Vendetta*, 96.



## Chapter 4: Memorialization of the Murders

Southerners are obsessed with their history; it is a region steeped in often misplaced nostalgia and memories help create a collective identity. Historical memory is an active ongoing process of interpretation and editing.<sup>274</sup> In the South and elsewhere, perceptions of history, its people, and events, shift with current social values. New forms of media and remembrance are invented, utilized, and change the way humans think of yesteryear. Collective memory is an important part of people's identity. It helps define who we are and how we fit in with a group.<sup>275</sup> Collective memory is highly imperfect; some history gets changed, people get marginalized, and it can be difficult to separate the truth from a romanticized and falsified view of the past. Historical memory, by its very nature, is selective.

The proliferation of various interpretations of the assassination of Hennessy and the subsequent lynching indicate the complexities of racial stratification, immigration, and extralegal violence that Americans faced at the end of the nineteenth century. Memories of this event have fluctuated and metamorphosed over the following decades as well. Particularly, views on the culpability of the Mafia in the assassination and Hennessy's character have shifted dramatically. A close reading of newspaper articles, scholarly articles, physical memorials, and various forms of entertainment reveal that

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<sup>274</sup> W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Where These Memories Grow: History, Memory, and Southern Identity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 5.

<sup>275</sup> Ibsen. 4.

Americans' interpretations of this event have shifted in conjunction with society's values and ideas on race and immigration.

New Orleans is a city teeming with dynamic historical remembrance. Tourism is the number one industry in New Orleans.<sup>276</sup> After Hurricane Katrina, the city has worked to redefine its tourism in terms of food, music, and history; these are known as the trinity of tourism.<sup>277</sup> Visitors to the city can explore a variety of museums such as the National World War II Museum and the nation's oldest Civil War Museum. They can take a variety of tours and visit sites of historic significance by airboat, segway, and horse-drawn carriages. There are ghost tours, cemetery tours, and even cocktail tours where guests can enjoy hurricanes and praline liquor while learning about the history of prohibition in the city.<sup>278</sup>

Oftentimes, the commercialization and tourism can be problematic in a variety of ways. It can cause economic harm to some of the residents of the city. The growth of the tourist industry has pushed many African-Americans and lower-income residents outside of their homes in the French Quarter.<sup>279</sup> It can also be quite exploitative. After Hurricane Katrina, there were buses that gave tours of destroyed neighbourhoods; people's pain and trauma became commercialized for tourist consumption.<sup>280</sup> Furthermore, the New Orleans tourism industry often waters down the religion of voodoo to palm readings and

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<sup>276</sup> Rebecca Sheehan, "Tourism and Occultism in New Orleans Jackson Square: Contentious and Cooperative Publics," *Tourism Geographies* 14, no. 1 (February 9, 2012): 74, accessed April 9, 2018, doi:10.1080/14616688.2011.610349.

<sup>277</sup> Kevin Fox Gotham, "(Re)Branding the Big Easy," *Urban Affairs Review* 42, no. 6 (July 1, 2007): 834, accessed April 9, 2018, doi:10.1177/1078087407300222.

<sup>278</sup> "Drink and Learn," *Drink and Learn*, accessed April 10, 2018, <http://drinkandlearn.com/>.

<sup>279</sup> Kevin Fox Gotham, "Tourism Gentrification: The Case of New Orleans Vieux Carre (French Quarter)," *Urban Studies* 42, no. 7 (June 2005): 1099, accessed April 9, 2018, doi:10.1080/00420980500120881.

<sup>280</sup> Gotham, "(Re)Branding the Big Easy," 838.

voodoo dolls and perpetuates stereotypes and misinformation.<sup>281</sup> History and the past are reconstructed to be more sensational than accurate to appeal more to tourists.

There have also been problems with what aspects of its past the city chose to recognize and how they chose to commemorate it. New Orleans has been under scrutiny in recent years for the prominent collection of Confederate statues. A 2015 city council vote mandated the removal of the Monument to the Battle of Liberty Place and statues of Jefferson Davis, P. T. Beauregard, and Robert E. Lee.<sup>282</sup> The statues were originally erected in effort to promote the Lost Cause, a white movement which attempted to glorify the Confederacy and minimize slavery as a cause of the Civil War. Mayor Mitch Landrieu stated that the landmarks were not a true reflection of the city.<sup>283</sup> There was considerable backlash in the white supremacist community and multiple protests. The removal of these statues is an example of how public remembrance of the past can be reinterpreted and presented.

There is a lack of tangible public remembrance of the 1891 lynching in a city which prides itself on its history. With the exception of Hennessy's tomb, there are no physical memorializations of the event in the city of New Orleans. There are no historical markers in the French Quarter detailing its past as the hub for Italian immigrant life; there is no plaque or memorial that remembers the lives of the fourteen slain Italians at the

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<sup>281</sup> Michelle Y. Gordon, "'Midnight Scenes and Orgies': Public Narratives of Voodoo in New Orleans and Nineteenth-Century Discourses of White Supremacy," *American Quarterly* 64, no. 4 (December 2012): 768, accessed April 9, 2018, doi:10.1353/aq.2012.0060.

<sup>282</sup> Tegan Wendland, "With Lee Statue's Removal, Another Battle Of New Orleans Comes To A Close," NPR, May 20, 2017, , accessed April 10, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2017/05/20/529232823/with-lee-statues-removal-another-battle-of-new-orleans-comes-to-a-close>.

<sup>283</sup> Darran Simon and Steve Almasy, "Final Confederate Statue Comes down in New Orleans," CNN, May 20, 2017, , accessed April 10, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/05/19/us/new-orleans-confederate-monuments/index.html>.

former site of the Parish prison near Congo Square in the Treme.<sup>284</sup> The official website for the city of New Orleans lists Lafayette Square, the site of the Henry Clay statue, as a “site for inaugurations, yearly pilgrimages by school bands, and jazz concerts for over 150 years”.<sup>285</sup> It neglects to mention that it was the initial meeting spot for the lynch mob of thousands of citizens who targeted unarmed minorities. The lack of physical reminders of the events of March 14th, 1891, reflect the city’s current reluctance to bring this dark moment in history to the public’s attention and an erasure of public remembrance of that particular episode in history.

The one physical reminder, Hennessy’s grave sight site, was erected in 1892, two years after his assassination.<sup>286</sup> The construction of this monument coincides with the beginning of the Lost Cause Movement. The Lost Cause was a movement by organizations like the Daughters of the Confederacy designed to memorialize and glorify the Confederacy and the South’s past; one of their primary ways of achieving this was through the construction of physical monuments. These monuments downplayed the role of slavery in causing the Civil War and were physical reminders to the community of white supremacy.<sup>287</sup> As explained in chapter three, newspapers and politicians memorialized Hennessy as a martyr for the cause of white supremacy after his death. His grave and memorial are reflective of the values of the Lost Cause.

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<sup>284</sup> Gambino, Richard. *Vendetta: a true story of the worst lynching in America, the mass murder of Italian-Americans in New Orleans in 1891, the viscous motivations Behind It, And the tragic Repercussions That Linger to this Day*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977. 81

<sup>285</sup> "Lafayette Square," NewOrleansOnline.com, , accessed April 10, 2018, <http://www.neworleansonline.com/directory/location.php?locationID=1343>.

<sup>286</sup> "News of the Week," *Livingston Enterprise*, June 4, 1892, accessed April 9, 2018, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn86075261/1892-06-04/ed-1/seq-3/>.

<sup>287</sup> Ned Crankshaw, Joseph E. Brent, and Maria Campbell Brent, "The Lost Cause and Reunion in the Confederate Cemeteries of the North," *Landscape Journal* 35, no. 1 (2016): , doi:10.3368/lj.35.1.1.

The location of his grave is very important in placing Hennessey within the Lost Cause mythology. Hennessey was buried in Metairie Cemetery, considered the most picturesque and upper-class cemetery in the city limits.<sup>288</sup> This is indicative of Hennessey's high status within the community. Furthermore, Metairie Cemetery was the original resting place for many political and military leaders of the Confederacy. President Jefferson Davis was originally buried there in 1889 before being interred at Hollywood Cemetery at Richmond Virginia in 1893.<sup>289</sup> Albert Sidney Johnston, the highest-ranking official on either side who died in battle during the Civil War, was also originally laid to rest there before his remains were transported to the Texas State Cemetery.<sup>290</sup> P. G. T. Beauregard, the Confederate's hero of the First Battle of Bull Run, was buried there in 1893 and his body remains there to this day.<sup>291</sup> The move to bury Hennessey with the All-Stars of the Confederacy was completely purposeful. Police Chief Hennessey had been a tool for white supremacy during his life and city officials saw to it that he was buried right next to the major heroes of the Confederacy. This further cemented his status as an emblem of white supremacy and perpetrated his racist legacy.

The very design of the monument also reflects the values of the Lost Cause and attempts to exalt Hennessey as a martyr. The monument is quite stately. It is a plain shaft of Hallowell granite that stands at an intimidating twenty-six feet tall.<sup>292</sup> It cost the city of New Orleans four thousand dollars<sup>293</sup>. This was a hefty amount considering that the city

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<sup>288</sup> *The WPA Guide to New Orleans: The Federal Writers Project Guide to 1930s New Orleans, with a New Introduction by the Historic New Orleans Collection* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), 190.

<sup>289</sup> *Ibid.*, 195.

<sup>290</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

<sup>291</sup> *Ibid.*, 195.

<sup>292</sup> "Current Topics," *Iron County Register* (Ironton), January 7, 1892, accessed April 9, 2018, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84024283/1892-01-07/ed-1/seq-2/>.

<sup>293</sup> "The Latest News," *The Progressive Farmer* (Winston), January 5, 1892, accessed April 9, 2018, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn92073049/1892-01-05/ed-1/seq-3/>.

was also responsible for paying reparations to the families of the lynch victims to the tune of five thousand dollars a piece at the time of its construction.<sup>294</sup> The city's investment is indicative of its commitment to white supremacy and the police authority that was used to maintain that hierarchy.

The inscription on this monument is blatantly reflective of the values of the Lost Cause Era. The inscription reads:

*His life was honorable and brave*

*His fidelity to duty was sealed with his death.*

*Mortally wounded by assassins Oct. 15, 1890*

*Died Oct. 16, 1890*

*Superintendent of New Orleans City Police May 2,*

*1888, to Oct. 16, 1890<sup>295</sup>*

According to historians of the Lost Cause, memorials would often reference universally appealing ideas such as honor, duty, and loyalty in order to vindicate those being memorialized in their death and to make their lives more palatable to the public<sup>296</sup>.

Hennessy's epitaph includes all three of these traits. By whitewashing his monument, city officials were able to replace Hennessy's questionable past with noble morals in the public mind. This further justified the actions of the lynch mob; they were avenging an

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<sup>294</sup> *The True Northerner* (Paw Paw), March 30, 1892, accessed April 9, 2018, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85033781/1892-03-30/ed-1/seq-6/>.

<sup>295</sup> "David C. Hennessy (1858-1890) - Find A Grave..." (1858-1890) - Find A Grave Memorial, , accessed April 10, 2018, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/5834135/david-c.-hennessy>.

<sup>296</sup> Crankshaw, "The Lost Cause", 2.

honorable keeper of safety in the community, not some crooked cop with a murky past. It acted much in the same way monuments erected by the Daughters of the Confederacy did.

The reveal of his memorial in the summer of 1892 was another chance for the citizens of New Orleans to partake in the memorialization ritual and the creation of the mythology of chief Hennessey. It was a large congregation of both prominent citizens and government officials.<sup>297</sup> Among the attendees were members of the police force, former mayor Shakespeare, and current mayor John Fitzpatrick.<sup>298</sup> Former Mayor Shakespeare gave an address and the “immense gathering” present would have once again been exposed to the blaming of the lynch victims and the glorification of Hennessey.<sup>299</sup> Listening to the speeches and reading the inscription would have left the crowds feeling mournful for the loss of Hennessey and therefore also vindicated at the actions of the mob that lynched the Italians.

White southerners commercialized lynchings in the at the turn of the century by selling photos and recordings, producing postcards, and producing shows. These forms of entertainment impacted the way participants and nonparticipants alike would remember the lynchings; they helped foster the notion that public lynchings were events worth celebrating. For example, photos and recordings of the lynching of Henry Smith, a black man who was burned alive, in Paris, Texas, were sold all across the country in the name

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<sup>297</sup> "News of the Week," *Livingston Enterprise*, June 4, 1892, accessed April 9, 2018, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn86075261/1892-06-04/ed-1/seq-3/>.

<sup>298</sup> "Monument to Hennessey," *Arizona Republican* (Phoenix), June 3, 1892, accessed April 9, 2018, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84020558/1892-06-03/ed-1/seq-1/>.

<sup>299</sup> *Ibid.*

of amusement in 1893<sup>300</sup>. It was a way for whites who were not present at the mob to partake in the ritual. In Southern Louisiana, remembering the lynching of the Italians was a popular form of entertainment. For example, *The St. Mary Banner*, from St. Mary Parish, featured an advertisement for “stereopticon views of the Hennessy Assassination” at the local opera house two weeks after the lynching.<sup>301</sup> The show promised prospective audience members “brilliant scenes of Italy, Mafia etc” and to recreate scenes of the lynching.<sup>302</sup> A stereopticon was a machine that projected photographic images onto a screen and dissolves one image onto the next.<sup>303</sup> This night of entertainment in the small community of St. Mary Parish, shows how new forms of technology were harnessed to commodify and normalize lynchings. Lynching was a way for the Southern whites to come together and build community.<sup>304</sup> The industry of commercial entertainment pertaining to lynchings ensured that the community building would carry on even after the lynching itself had occurred.

Besides picture shows, music was a popular way for the white community to remember and celebrate lynching. After the assassination of Hennessy popular musician, Fred Bessel wrote a folk ballad called “Hennessey Murder”.<sup>305</sup> The song has a religious

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<sup>300</sup> Wood, Amy Louise. *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America ; 1890-1940*. Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2011. 75

<sup>301</sup> "Opera House," *St. Mary Banner* (Franklin), March 28, 1891, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn88064384/1891-03-28/ed-1/seq-3/>.

<sup>302</sup> Ibid.

<sup>303</sup> Yair Solan, "'Striking Stereopticon Views': Edith Wharton's 'Bunner Sisters' and Nineteenth-Century Magic Lantern Entertainment," *Studies in American Naturalism* 7, no. 2 (2012): 135, accessed April 10, 2018, doi:10.1353/san.2012.0019.

<sup>304</sup> Wood, 8.

<sup>305</sup> Marco Rimaneli and Sheryl L. Postman, *The 1891 New Orleans Lynching and US-Italian Relations: A Look Back* (New York: Lang, 1992), 21.



somber, tone and sanctifies Hennessey, calling him “brave” and “a good man”.<sup>306</sup> The song ends with the claim that all of New Orleans mourns for Hennessey: “Tis not alone the murdered man who suffered this crime/ But the hearts of all good citizens lay hurt from time to time”.<sup>307</sup> This song was meant to unify the city. It was successful; it sold ten thousand copies of sheet music in the last months of 1890.<sup>308</sup> Motivated by his first song’s success, Bessel took the March lynchings as an opportunity to turn more profit by writing another song entitled “Hennessey Avenged”.<sup>309</sup> This song promoted the lynching and directly referred to Italians as “assassins from a foreign soil” and praised the lynch mob for showing its “Southern Blood”.<sup>310</sup> These songs not only provided entertainment, but also unity and vindication to the white people of New Orleans. Songs about lynchings were particularly accessible to the poor, who could not always afford to buy tickets to picture shows or partake in other media regarding lynching.

In the final years of the nineteenth century, the assassination and the lynching continued to be referenced in newspapers, particularly in relation to the international crisis with Italy. Most of the papers did so with discriminatory tones that condemned the victims of the lynching. In 1895, *The Salt Lake Herald* out of Salt Lake City, Utah referred to the victims of the 1891 lynchings as “a dozen vile wretches of Calabria and

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<sup>306</sup> Norm Cohen, *American Folk Songs: A Regional Encyclopedia* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2008), 341.

<sup>307</sup> Ibid.

<sup>308</sup> Rimanelli and Postman, 21.

<sup>309</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>310</sup> Samuele F. S. Pardini, *In the Name of the Mother: Italian Americans, African Americans, and Modernity from Booker T. Washington to Bruce Springsteen* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2017), 14.

Sicily”.<sup>311</sup> In an article detailing the reparations to the victim’s family *The True Northerner* from Paw Paw, Michigan commented that “it was doubtful that the lynched were evermore valuable to their families”.<sup>312</sup> This phrase minimized the painful loss that the Italian families had to deal with. This article also took the opportunity to squeeze in some anti-immigration rhetoric into the column commenting that “such costly citizens should be kept in their own country”.<sup>313</sup> Papers from all over the country used discriminatory tones during the final years of the nineteenth century because the issue of federal reparations to the families of the victims had made the story into a national one, rather than just a regional one. The dehumanizing language and disregard for immigrant life was a continuation of the pattern of prejudice that emerged in the national press weeks after the lynching as detailed in the third chapter.

This pattern did not improve during the first half of the twentieth century. If anything the sentiment for the Italian victims due to a rise of nativism and racial tensions. The first years of the twentieth century were the peak of Italian immigration to the United States; three million Italians arrived between 1900 and 1915.<sup>314</sup> In the early 1920s long held nativist fears held by white Americans helped create restrictive anti-immigration laws.<sup>315</sup> Italians were still not considered white in the South. For instance, in 1922, a court cleared a black man from Alabama on miscegenation charges, because it

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<sup>311</sup> "Society of the Sicilly Mafia," *The Salt Lake Herald* (Salt Lake City), August 18, 1895, accessed April 10, 2018, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85058130/1895-08-18/ed-1/seq-16/>.

<sup>312</sup> *The True Northerner (Paw Paw)*, March 30, 1892, accessed April 9, 2018, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85033781/1892-03-30/ed-1/seq-6/>.

<sup>313</sup> Ibid.

<sup>314</sup> Samuel L. Baily, *Immigrants in the Lands of Promise: Italians in Buenos Aires and New York City, 1870-1914* (New York: ACLS History E-Book Project, 2005), 13.

<sup>315</sup> Julia G. Young, "Making America 1920 Again? Nativism and US Immigration, Past and Present," *Journal on Migration and Human Security* 5, no. 1 (January 2017): 2, accessed April 10, 2018, doi:10.14240/jmhs.v5i1.81.

could be demonstrated that his Sicilian wife was not white.<sup>316</sup> Additionally, the first two decades of the twentieth century saw the height of extralegal violence in this country. Although spectacle lynchings had been replaced with more secretive lynchings in the dead of the night, America's penchant for extralegal and racial violence had not ended. In the summer of 1919, there were twenty-five race riots spanning across the country and seventy-six lynchings over the course of a month and a half.<sup>317</sup> The atmosphere of racial tension and a resurgence of lynching influenced national press to celebrate the 1891 lynching of Italians.

A close reading of newspapers, city guides, and scholarly work reveals that the white population remained adamant in the guilt of the Italian victims and the vindication of the lynch mob. The story of the New Orleans 1891 lynching would occasionally pop up in "On This Day in History" articles or obituaries for politicians who had held power during that time, such as former president Benjamin Harrison.<sup>318</sup> Editorialists and reporters continued to assert the fault of the Italians and praised the lynch mob because white America still continued to accept, and even treasure, the practice of lynching.

Whenever the story of the Italian lynching was mentioned in papers, the editors were quick to come to its defense. Italians continued to be disparaged. *The Watauga Democrat* from Boone, North Carolina, insisted that the "Italians who were killed were

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<sup>316</sup> Stefano Luconi, "The Lynching of Southern Europeans in the Southern United States: The Plight of Italian Immigrants in Dixie," in *The US South and Europe: Transatlantic Relations in The Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2013), 128.

<sup>317</sup> Alana Erikson, *Encyclopedia of African-American Culture and History*, 2nd ed., vol. 5 (Detroit, MI: Macmillian, 2006), s.v. "Red Summer," accessed April 10, 2018, [http://go.galegroup.com.umiss.idm.oclc.org/ps/i.do?p=GVRL&u=mag\\_u\\_um&id=GALE|CX3444701069&v=2.1&it=r&sid=summon](http://go.galegroup.com.umiss.idm.oclc.org/ps/i.do?p=GVRL&u=mag_u_um&id=GALE|CX3444701069&v=2.1&it=r&sid=summon).

<sup>318</sup> *The Lafayette Advertiser*, March 16, 1901, accessed April 10, 2018, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn86079068/1901-03-16/ed-1/seq-1/>.

not worth the protection of any decent government”.<sup>319</sup> Likewise, the actions of the lynch mob continued to be justified. In 1914, *The Arizona Republican* from Phoenix, Arizona, called the lynchers “the best citizens of New Orleans” and commended them for their “good order”.<sup>320</sup> Many papers also continued to highlight the racial difference between whites and Italians. *The Pacific Commercial Advertiser* from Honolulu in the then territory of Hawaii claimed that Italians were “a racial link connecting the black and white races”.<sup>321</sup> Sentiments of newspapers from around the country and its territories during this time of heightened racial violence remained similar to sentiments expressed in the weeks directly following the lynching. Both Democratic and Republican newspapers praised the lynching and condemned the victims, revealing an alliance across the aisle amongst white Americans to defend the practice of lynching in this incident.

One black-owned newspaper interpreted the 1891 New Orleans lynching very differently from these white papers. *The Broad Ax* was a Utah based black newspaper that started in 1895, a time when the black population in the state was less than one thousand.<sup>322</sup> Julius F. Taylor, a former slave, was its founder, editor, and publisher. The newspaper was somewhat controversial; Taylor was a sharp critic of the appeasement policies of Booker T. Washington and his views were so radical that he had to move his paper to Chicago after rising tensions with the Church of Latter Day Saints.<sup>323</sup> He

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<sup>319</sup> *Watuaga Democrat*, August 17, 1899, accessed April 10, 2018,

<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn82007642/1899-08-17/ed-1/seq-2/>.

<sup>320</sup> "The Great Trials of History," *Arizona Republican* (Phoenix), February 18, 1914, accessed April 10, 2018, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84020558/1914-02-18/ed-1/seq-14/>.

<sup>321</sup> "Italian Laborers," *The Pacific Commercial Advertiser* (Honolulu), August 22, 1899, accessed April 10, 2018, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85047084/1899-08-22/ed-1/seq-7/>.

<sup>322</sup> "The Broad Ax.," News about Chronicling America RSS, , accessed April 10, 2018, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84024055/>.

<sup>323</sup> *Ibid.*

advocated racial equality and provided extensive coverage of lynching during World War One when African Americans were risking their lives for this country but paying with their lives at home.

*The Broad Ax* provides vital information in understanding how African-Americans perceived the lynching of Italians. In a November 1900 article entitled “Some Things for The Negro to Consider Before He Votes”, Taylor lists out the problems of the turn-of-the-century Republican party and claims that “the negro has kept the Republican Party in power for thirty-five years, bestowing them presidencies and getting janitorships in return”.<sup>324</sup> He lists the problematic actions of Roosevelt and William McKinley. Regarding Harrison's presidency, Taylor asserted “this country under a Republican has paid 800,00 dollars to the indemnity of the Italians lynched in New Orleans and not a cent for the thousands of murdered negroes”<sup>325</sup>. In making this point, Taylor calls out the federal government’s glaring hypocrisy. Between 1882 and 1901, more than one hundred people were lynched each year; the bulk of them being black people living in the American South.<sup>326</sup> Federal anti-lynching bills were never passed through the Senate, members of the lynch mobs would often go unpunished, and families of the victims were never offered any restitution. Taylor makes a point that unlike the dead Italians, who had a foreign power lobbying for them, no government ever took the lost black lives into consideration. The view of *The Broad Ax* shows how this event was interpreted by some

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<sup>324</sup> "Some Things for the Negro to Consider Before He Votes," *The Broad Ax* (Salt Lake City), November 3, 1900, accessed April 10, 2018, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84024055/1900-11-03/ed-1/seq-4/>.

<sup>325</sup> Ibid.

<sup>326</sup> Kelley, Robin D. G., and Earl Lewis. *To Make Our World Anew*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005. 28

African- Americans; they felt cheated that non-Americans could receive recourse for lynchings but they could not.

While the federal government had come to the aid on the behalf of the Italians, the city of New Orleans was far less inclined to do so. In 1904, *The Times Picayune* printed a two hundred and thirteen-page sixth edition visitor's guide to the city of New Orleans. It generally describes the different streets and historic sites. The guide is a Lost Cause text that minimized the horrors of slavery and its effect on the city. For instance, when describing an Ursuline nunnery, it makes a special note of how after Emancipation none of the slaves owned by the nuns chose to accept freedom due to their kind treatment.<sup>327</sup> The guide espouses the virtues of the Lost Cause and upholds white supremacy. As for the treatment of immigrants, the guide lets visitors know exactly what the city's stance on Italians and the lynching were. It maintains the criminality of those killed by the lynch mob and extends the label of Mafia criminal to all Italians, claiming that in the time leading up to Hennessey's assassination "scarcely a month passed without some terrible secret murder, directly traceable to this society".<sup>328</sup> It also highlights them as "dark", once again putting them in the category of racial other and separate from whites.<sup>329</sup> The guide book also offers a blurb of information regarding The Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart and states that the nuns "are doing noble work to instruct these immigrants duties to God, neighbour, and country".<sup>330</sup> This indicates a fascinating possibility that in the eyes of white Southerners, Italian immigrants, while racially distinct from whites, could possibly be assimilated into white culture and earn the

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<sup>327</sup> *The Picayune's Guide to New Orleans* (New Orleans, LA: Picayune, 1904), , accessed April 10, 2018, <https://babel-hathitrust-org.umiss.idm.oclc.org/cgi/pt?id=loc.ark:/13960/t6ww82h21;view=1up;seq=1>. 29.

<sup>328</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>329</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>330</sup> Ibid 27.

privileges therein. *The Times Picayune* guidebook shows that Italians were still considered criminal within the city; it does, however, show a glimmer of the possibility of assimilation.

The tides would slowly change, however, due to a number of historical forces. Life became better for Italian immigrants in America. Italians became considered to be less racially other. By the 1940s, anthropologists announced that there were only three races: white, Asian, and black.<sup>331</sup> With this shift in racial thinking, Italians became included into white culture across the United States. This included New Orleans. After World War II, Italy went through a period of economic boom and there was considerably less immigration from Sicily.<sup>332</sup> Residents of New Orleans were quicker to accept second generations than they had their parents. Second generation Italians were more likely to speak English and intermarry with the white population. The phenomenon of suburbanization and increased economic power caused many Italian Americans to leave the French Quarter for the safer suburbs.<sup>333</sup> New Orleanians could no longer judge them for living in the cramped and disease-ridden spaces or their inability to speak English. Italians began to receive invitations to previously all-white Mardis Gras Ball in the 1950s.<sup>334</sup> During the 1960s an Italian, Victor Schiro, ran for mayor and won.<sup>335</sup> Schiro's

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<sup>331</sup>Nell Irvin Painter, "Opinion | What Is Whiteness?" *The New York Times*, December 21, 2017, , accessed April 10, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/21/opinion/sunday/what-is-whiteness.html>.

<sup>332</sup> Lucy Riall, *Europe 1789-1914: Encyclopedia of the Age of Industry and Empire*, vol. 4 (Detroit, MI: Shribner's Sons), s.v. "Sicily," accessed April 10, 2018, [http://go.galegroup.com.umiss.idm.oclc.org/ps/i.do?p=GVRL&u=mag\\_u\\_um&id=GALE|CX3446900773&v=2.1&it=r&sid=summon](http://go.galegroup.com.umiss.idm.oclc.org/ps/i.do?p=GVRL&u=mag_u_um&id=GALE|CX3446900773&v=2.1&it=r&sid=summon).

<sup>333</sup>Justin Nystrom, "Italian New Orleans and the Business of Food in the Immigrant City: There's More to the Muffuletta than Meets the Eye," in *He Larder: Food Studies Methods from the American South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2013), 138.

<sup>334</sup>Vincent Scarpaci, "Walking the Color Line : Italian Immigrants in Rural Louisiana, 1880-1910," in *Are Italians White?: How Race Is Made in America* (Routledge, 2003), 73.

<sup>335</sup>Gambino, 96.

main legacies as mayor were shutting down city swimming pools rather than segregate them and banning Civil Rights marches in the city.<sup>336</sup> Just a few generations removed from experiencing racial prejudice themselves, New Orleans Italians now participated in the oppression of blacks; a true marker of acceptance and power in white Southern society.

The mid-twentieth century also saw a sharp, nationwide intolerance for lynching and the advent of Civil Rights. This created an atmosphere for a more critical look at the events in New Orleans in 1890 and 1891. The most influential work on the subject was Richard Gambino's 1977 *Vendetta: A True Story of the Worst Lynching in America, the Mass Murder of Italian-Americans in New Orleans in 1891, the Viscous Motivations Behind It, And the Tragic Repercussions That Linger to this Day*. Since its publication, every work on the subject had drawn from Gambino's ideas. Gambino was the scholar to first to suggest that Hennessy was not murdered by Italians, but by political rivals. Gambino also takes into account the racial complexities of that era and is incredibly sympathetic toward the victims of the lynchings. The publication of his work marks a vagary in the way Americans viewed the lynching.

The 1990s showed a renewed interest in the lynching as it reached its one-hundredth anniversary. Scholarly work followed Gambino's lead and was sympathetic to the Italian victims. Marco Rimanelli and Sheryl Postman's collection of essays *The 1891 New Orleans Lynching and US-Italian Relations*, compounds on Gambino's ideas and speculates that the lynching was a high ranking government conspiracy meant to evict

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<sup>336</sup>Leonard Nathaniel. Moore, *Black Rage in New Orleans: Police Brutality and African American Activism from World War II to Hurricane Katrina* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2015), 73, accessed April 10, 2018, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/olemiss/reader.action?docID=570405&query=>.



Italians from the fruit industry and cajole Italians to become white supremacists.<sup>337</sup> This claim was not quite adequately defended. While that was a partial result of the lynching, there is no evidence to prove that it was the motivation. However, much of Rimanelli and Postman's arguments build off of Gambino's.

In addition to the centennial anniversary of the lynchings, the 1990s was the advent of multiculturalism in America. A response to the conservative race trends of the 1980s, multiculturalism celebrated racial and ethnic diversity and unity.<sup>338</sup> Aspects of multiculturalism can be found in the 1999 film *Vendetta* released by HBO. This film is directly based off of Gambetta's text. The film is overall sympathetic to the Italians and antagonistic to the white New Orleans politicians. The story is told through the eyes of Gaspare Marchesi, a fourteen-year-old who is among those arrested for the assassination of Hennessy.<sup>339</sup> Having the protagonist be a young boy was a method of garnering sympathy from the audience because his innocence made the violence that surrounded his life seem all the more glaring. In Italians are depicted as hardworking, eager to assimilate into American culture, and friendly towards African-Americans. The media was finally being sympathetic to the victims of the lynch mob.

The film begins with a slide that states it is "based on a true story" Although it is based on historical fact, there is plenty of dramatization thrown in to appeal to the audience. There is a romantic subplot between Gaspare and Claire, a fictional Irish immigrant character. This subplot highlights Gaspare's youth and shows a unity between immigrant classes, which would have been appealing to audiences in the 1990s. Gaspare

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<sup>337</sup> Rimanelli and Postman, 2.

<sup>338</sup> Eve Benhamou, "From the Advent of Multiculturalism to the Elision of Race: The Representation of Race Relations in Disney Animated Features (1995-2009)," *Exchanges: The Warwick Research Journal* 2, no. 1 (October 2014): 156, accessed April 10, 2018, <https://exchanges.warwick.ac.uk/article/view/106>.

<sup>339</sup> Gambino, 71.

also makes friends with several African-American boys which also highlights aspects of multiculturalism. Additionally, a great deal of the movie center around the trial. It is marketed as a courtroom drama; it was an interesting decision given the fact that no courtroom records of the trial exist. Even though the film altered and added facts to increase its entertainment value, it brought the issue of the lynching back into the minds of many Americans across the country for the first time in a century.

The lynching has reached national relevancy once again over the past few years. Mentions of the 1891 lynchings proliferate in think pieces dealing with topics regarding immigration and xenophobia. In 2012, author Ed Falco wrote a piece for CNN entitled “When Italian Immigrants were the Other”. Falco gives a brief synopsis of the lynch mob, chronicles the hardships of the multitudes of Italian American families in America, and muses

We've forgotten the depth of prejudice and outright hatred faced by Italian immigrants in America. We've forgotten the degree to which we once feared and distrusted Catholics. If we remembered, I wonder how much it might change the way we think about today's immigrant populations, or our attitudes toward Muslims?<sup>340</sup>

Although there is no mention of it explicitly, this article was published at the same time as the national debate regarding the construction of a mosque near Ground Zero. Falco's article is a cry for understanding. He describes the country's antagonistic past in regards to Catholicism and applies the same logic to Islam to reveal the pattern of fear in America for the outsider. He uses the incident of the violent lynchings to warn America of what can happen when xenophobia takes hold and to show that even the most vilified of groups in the eyes of Americans can grow to be accepted.

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<sup>340</sup> Ed Falco, "When Italian Immigrants Were 'the Other'," CNN, July 10, 2012, , accessed April 10, 2018, <http://www.cnn.com/2012/07/10/opinion/falco-italian-immigrants/index.html>.

There have been more references to the lynching in the media following the campaign and election of Donald Trump. One 2016 BuzzFeed article that was solely about the lynching was entitled “How a 125 year old Mass Lynching Tried to Make America Great Again”, a play of Trump’s campaign slogan, Make America Great Again.<sup>341</sup> The article gives an in -depth analysis of the lynching and criticizes, then presidential candidate Trump. It also notes that some of Trump's political allies Chris Christie, Rudy Giuliani, and Paul Manafort speak about Mexicans and Muslims “ in the same tone and language that was once reserved for their Italian-American ancestors, targeted by the nativist movement that began in the late 19th century<sup>342</sup>.” In a period of time when the nation is extremely divided on immigration, BuzzFeed uses the story of the lynching as a warning not let history repeat itself, similar the Falco article.

There is an Italian American Museum and Cultural Center located a few blocks from Lafayette Square, where the lynch mob met.<sup>343</sup> The museum is composed of one large room and focuses on Italian contributions to the food and music of New Orleans. It also houses the Louisiana American Italian Sports Hall of Fame. There is but one small blurb about the lynching on an informational board about immigration. The museum chooses to focus on the happier aspects of Italian life in New Orleans and minimizes the impact of the lynching. Perhaps this is in an effort to not be seen as victims and focus on the positive contributions of Italians to the community.

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<sup>341</sup> Adam Serwer, "How A 125-Year-Old Mass Lynching Tried To Make America Great Again," BuzzFeed, , accessed April 10, 2018, [https://www.buzzfeed.com/adamserwer/how-an-1891-mass-lynching-tried-to-make-america-great-again?utm\\_term=.lnBnnZnPXa#.tpb66Y6B5W](https://www.buzzfeed.com/adamserwer/how-an-1891-mass-lynching-tried-to-make-america-great-again?utm_term=.lnBnnZnPXa#.tpb66Y6B5W).

<sup>342</sup> Ibid.

<sup>343</sup> "American Italian Cultural Center," Go to American Italian Cultural Center., , accessed April 11, 2018, <http://americanitalianculturalcenter.com/museum/>.

The cultural lense Americans use to view this event has shifted dramatically. The original interpretations of the 1891 New Orleans lynchings were influenced by the strict racial hierarchies of the Jim Crow South and an acceptance of extralegal violence. The anti-Italian interpretations were strengthened during the first few decades of the twentieth century due to increased nativism and greater instances of extralegal violence. Interpretations shifted after the assimilation of Italians to white culture and the Civil Rights Era. Recently, more thought has been given to the Italians role as victims of a terrible crime, not perpetrators of one. The media used to portray this lynching has also changed. Technology has shifted from stereopticons to feature films. New mediums will one day be used to interpret these events. Even though the mediums have changed Americans still consume information regarding this lynching. This is a testament as to how historically significant it is.

The lynching has taken on new meanings as well. To blacks it represented how little the government cared for them; Italian lynch victims received reparations while they did not. The lynching was once used as reasoning to restrict immigration by white Americans. Now it is used as a call for acceptance and a warning for xenophobia. The American people's perception of this lynching shows how memories and remembrances can fluctuate as cultural values change. Historical memory is a selective process and is forever ongoing and forever changing.

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