One of the best ways to learn about the historical experiences of Italian immigrants in our region is by collecting, preserving, and interpreting the objects they left behind. Two artifacts recently added to the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania’s collection — a ceremonial banner from Pittsburgh’s Regina Coeli Catholic Church and a silver-plated baptismal font from the First Italian Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh — help answer important questions about the Italian American religious experience: How important was religion to the lives of Italian immigrants? Did their Old World faith survive the voyage? What Pittsburgh churches were founded exclusively for Italian immigrants?

Although they were Catholics, turn-of-the-century Italian immigrants practiced a mystical folk religion characterized by belief in superstition, saint worship, and community-centered religious festivals, rather than the more formal Catholic religion that we know today. Upon arrival in America, immigrants often found these beliefs unwelcome in established Catholic churches and, in response, decided to form their own religious institutions. In New York, Chicago, Boston, Philadelphia, and other American cities, Italian immigrants opened parishes embracing their Old World religious practices and directed by Italian-speaking priests. Following this nationwide trend, Pittsburgh became home to a number of Italian-Catholic parishes, including Saint Peter the Apostle in the Hill District, Our Lady Help of Christians in East Liberty, Immaculate Conception in Bloomfield, and perhaps most importantly, Regina Coeli in the Manchester neighborhood of Pittsburgh’s North Side.

Founded in 1907 when a sizable number of Italian immigrants migrated to Manchester from their original places of residence in the Lower Hill District, Regina Coeli soon became the spiritual center of the North Side Italian immigrant community. One way its parishioners celebrated their faith was at religious festivals, or feste, held in honor of Saint Anthony. At these annual festivals, members of the Società San Antonio di Padova, a religious and fraternal organization affiliated with Regina Coeli, paraded a banner adorned with the image of Saint Anthony through the streets of Pittsburgh for all to admire and worship. Consisting of an image of Saint Anthony embroidered on a gold silk field, this ceremonial banner reveals the Italian immigrants’ devotion to both the Catholic religion and the particular saint in which they placed their hope and trust.
"TURN-OF-THE-CENTURY ITALIAN IMMIGRANTS PRACTICED A MYSTICAL FOLK RELIGION CHARACTERIZED BY BELIEF IN SUPERSTITION, SAINT WORSHIP, AND COMMUNITY-CENTERED RELIGIOUS FESTIVALS."

Above: The c. 1920 Banner of Saint Anthony from Regina Coeli parish
While many immigrants preserved the religious traditions of the Old Country, other foreign-born Italians sought spiritual enlightenment from a different religion: Presbyterianism. At the turn of the 20th century, the American Presbyterian Church recognized that the flood of European immigrants to the United States represented a large body of potential converts. As a result, Presbyterian churches in major American cities began converting Italian immigrants to Presbyterianism by establishing outreach missions in Italian neighborhoods. In 1892, the long-standing East Liberty Presbyterian Church established a mission on Larimer Avenue, one of the city's many Little Itlys, in order to spread the faith to Italian immigrants living in the neighborhood.

Some foreign-born Italians, disenchanted with the teachings of the Catholic Church, were immediately attracted to Presbyterianism and joined the new church shortly after their arrival in the city. Other converts had been affiliated with Protestant sects prior to immigration and found that they had much in common with Pittsburgh's Presbyterian community. Still others joined the faith after being regularly exposed to the tenets of Presbyterianism in English grammar and conversation classes offered by the neighborhood missionaries.

In 1899, the Presbytery of Pittsburgh decided to reorganize the prosperous mission into the First Italian Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh and, in 1903, erected a church at the corner of Larimer Avenue and Mayflower Street. The congregation eventually changed its name to Trinity Presbyterian Church. The institution provided a place for religious rites of passage, namely baptism and marriage, and sponsored religious and secular events and activities for its members throughout the 20th century. In later years, a second Italian Presbyterian Church opened in Pittsburgh, a testament to the size of the city's Italian Protestant community.

Austere in design, the Presbyterian baptismal font sharply contrasts with the colorful, richly adorned Regina Coeli banner, perhaps indicating some of the inherent differences between the folk characteristics of Italian Catholicism and the more traditional elements of established Presbyterianism. The baptismal font, however, is equally significant as a historical artifact since it served as the ceremonial vessel by which the Presbyterian faith was passed on to younger generations of Italian immigrants in Pittsburgh, thus preserving Trinity Presbyterian Church as one of the city's vital Italian American religious institutions.

Whether they carried on the faith of their ancestors or decided to join other denominations, Pittsburgh's Italian immigrants relied on religion to bring balance and stability to their lives in the New World, establishing ethnic parishes that ultimately became important centers of Italian community life. In later years, many of these religious institutions began to decline. Regina Coeli closed its doors in the early 1990s after substantial numbers of Italian Americans moved out of Manchester and into suburban communities around Pittsburgh. Trinity Presbyterian Church remains, but suffers from declining membership with each passing year.

Even though they have all but disappeared, Pittsburgh's Italian ethnic parishes constitute an integral aspect of Western Pennsylvania's religious history. Collecting, preserving, and interpreting the ceremonial artifacts once used by the parishioners of these institutions ensures that this history will never be lost or forgotten. ©
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