

# Researching Italian Ancestry:

## *The Search for Family and Adventure*

By Michael Votto

Document photos courtesy of Suzanne Russo Adams.

Last winter, I penned an article in *Ambassador* about my family's quest for Italian citizenship *jure sanguinis*, "Dual Citizenship: One Family's Expression of Italian-American Pride." Following its publication, I was overwhelmed by the response from *Ambassador* readers and ultimately received more than 50 letters from fellow Italian Americans who were in different stages of the same process.

Many of the *Ambassador* readers who contacted me inquired about how I conducted my genealogical research and sought advice for tracking down their ancestors. Although I'm happy to share my personal experiences, they constitute a fraction of today's Italian American research experience. So, for this issue of

*Ambassador*, I've sought the advice of genealogy experts.

If you're interested in researching your Italian family history, then you are in good company. Overall interest in Italian genealogy has grown over the past 15 years, says Suzanne Russo Adams, a professional genealogist specializing in Italian ancestry for Ancestry.com and the author of the recently released book "Find Your Italian Ancestors: A Beginner's Guide." "It's less than, say, the British or German [ancestry research]," says Russo Adams, whose family hails from Sicily. "I attribute that to the fact that we haven't quite hit that generation when we can't remember who we are. We don't quite feel as a people that we've lost something yet."

### Getting started

As I mentioned in my previous article, my great-grandfather, Antonio Fuggi, left the tiny village of Vitulano for the United States. He had recently finished an apprenticeship as a shoemaker and on a December day in 1902, he left behind his mother, father and sister. He never visited his homeland of Italy again. I did not have the good fortune to meet my great-grandfather Antonio, but I consider him one of the bravest people I know. For this reason, I was always interested in learning more about his life and the village where he was born.

As the unofficial family genealogist, I began a mission to "re-discover" our family in 2005, a mission that many *Ambassador* readers may have undertaken as well. I

chose to start by speaking with the older members of my family.

It is crucial to gather as many facts from family members as possible (even if it turns out that some of those “facts” are untrue). The basic pieces of information to begin the process are your ancestors’ given names, dates of birth, village of birth and date of emigration. An often-overlooked resource are obituaries, which typically include important information about lineage, and old newspapers, while other resources include certified birth and death records of older members of one’s family. For example, by obtaining my grandmother’s birth certificate from the State of Connecticut I was able to confirm my great-grandparents’ given names, birth-dates and places of birth.

It may sound obvious, but starting within one’s family and checking out local resources are important first steps that are often overlooked, notes Russo Adams. “For Italian Americans, people are really, really anxious to do the research over in Italy and kind of skip doing the research in the U.S.,” she said. “People get hung up with the [Italian] language and records. It’s a shame, because that immigrant experience is just so rich and amazing.”

If one suspects that his or her ancestors arrived at Ellis Island, then a search through Ellis Island’s newly updated Web site ([www.ellisland.org](http://www.ellisland.org)) may be very helpful to assist with missing pieces of information. Although Ellis Island is a common port through which immigrants traveled, be prepared to look at other locations, says Russo Adams. Italian immigrants also first traveled to Boston or Canada while many Sicilians traveled to New Orleans. Earlier Italian immigrants arriving between 1820 and 1892 would have been received at Castle Garden ([www.castlegarden.org](http://www.castlegarden.org)), now known as Castle Clinton National Monument, not Ellis Island.

The bulk of Italian immigrants arrived in the U.S. between 1880 and 1930, a window that overlaps both Castle Garden and Ellis

Island. Immigration record-keeping became more detailed over time; those at Castle Gardens are not as detailed as Ellis Island, and Ellis Island’s own records improved dramatically when new standards were set in 1906, says Russo Adams.

Additionally, many records can be found for free on **Family-Search.org**, the Web site of the Family History Library operated by the Church of the Latter Day Saints in Salt Lake City, Utah, and **Ancestry.com**, a company that provides access to civil records and genealogical information for a fee. The Family History Library also offers a guide, “Italy, Finding Your Ancestors,” for downloading on its Web site in addition to a free 58-minute online video (available under the Web site’s Family History Library Research Series Online and titled “Italy Research”) to school budding family genealogists in Italian research basics, says Ruth Lapioli Merriman, manager of the library’s International Research Consultation Unit.

### **Pitfalls, Common Misconceptions and Research Tips**

When researching your ancestry, avoid companies that offer to research links to nobility or provide a family coat of arms for a fee, says Lapioli Merriman, whose family is also of Italian descent. “A lot of people get sucked in by those companies that offer to find their genealogy or their coat of arms. And then they think they’re descended from royalty or nobility,” she said. “Most of the immigrants, we were peasants.”

Those starting to research a family history should watch out for common misconceptions that might influence their research as well. For example, it is widely (and incorrectly) thought that immigrants arriving at Ellis Island automatically became citizens of the United States. Not true, says Russo Adams, who notes that “Ellis Island was simply the port station that people went through.” Instead, look for alien registration files and ship passen-



“Finding Your Italian Ancestors” by Suzanne Russo Adams offers practical advice on how to search centuries-old records for family information.

ger lists at Ellis Island and other possible ports of U.S. entry.

Similarly, many descendants of Italian immigrants incorrectly believe that their names were changed upon arriving at Ellis Island. That is rarely true, says Russo Adams, who noted that, “The ships’ passenger lists were filled out at the port of embarkation, where the emigrants’ native language was spoken. When they were received at Ellis Island, there were hundreds of interpreters who knew the language.” Instead, immigrants often changed their own names to better assimilate or as they became increasingly comfortable with the English language. “A’s became O’s or they get lopped off the end. Names like ‘Bianco’ became ‘White’ and ‘Bevilacqua’ became ‘Drinkwater.’”

Additionally, many people make incorrect assumptions about their family’s point of origin based on their last name. “Some people think if they have a name that’s the same as a town or a city, like Messina or Ferrara, then that’s where they’re from,” said Lapioli Merriman. “But I would say in 90 percent of the cases, that’s not true.”

The biggest problem that Lapioli Merriman sees is researchers who have no idea where their family hails from in Italy—or those whose assumptions are wrong. “Then we have to start doing research in the U.S. to ➤



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find records that would help identify where they came from,” she said, adding that in such cases the researcher would have to search immigration records from Ellis Island or other ports like Boston or New Orleans, in addition to other naturalization records. Other researchers may know their family was from a locale like Reggio Calabria, for example, but are unsure as to whether that name refers to the province or town, which would have kept different records.

And then there are the researchers who learn that what they thought were family facts are just not true: first or last names are wrong, years of immigration or towns of origin are incorrect. “A lot of people will swear by what someone remembers, rather than what’s in the records,” Lapioli Merriman said. “So you have to gently dissuade them that some of these family memories just aren’t true. Sometimes they’re fine with it, sometimes they’re not.”

Russo Adams suggests searching for spelling variations, researching one generation at a time, searching for whole families, and learning your ancestors’ local dialect, which may appear on any remaining records. Italians were “return migrators,” says Russo Adams, often taking frequent trips back and forth across the Atlantic to visit home and return for work on railroads, mines or other construction projects. Accordingly, it also may help

to search passenger lists for the years surrounding the date of an ancestor’s immigration, as records may not appear for one voyage but might be found for a previous or subsequent one.

In addition to searching travel records, researchers may be able to benefit from work done by others who share their family name or history. One group, Pursuing Our Italian Names Together (P.O.I.N.T.)—a network of Italian family historians with more than 20 active chapters across the United States—connects Italian Americans with others pursuing research. The group can be found on the Web at [www.point-pointers.net](http://www.point-pointers.net) and also offers a database of Italian surnames to its members. Another group, The Italian Genealogical Group of New York, ([www.italiangen.org](http://www.italiangen.org)) has worked to extract and catalog information from New York’s records “because so many Italians just stopped in New York when they got there,” says Lapioli Merriman. A search of their Web site will yield records numbers for marriage licenses so that researchers can write New York archives and request copies.

The Family History Library also maintains a number of online forums, found online at [forums.familysearch.org](http://forums.familysearch.org), where those researching Italian ancestry can post a question to be answered by professional genealogists and other forum users. A

quick glance at the Web site reveals queries titled “Unable to find grandparents in Italy,” “Searching Italian records,” and “La Masa Family.” Who knows? Your questions already may have been answered.

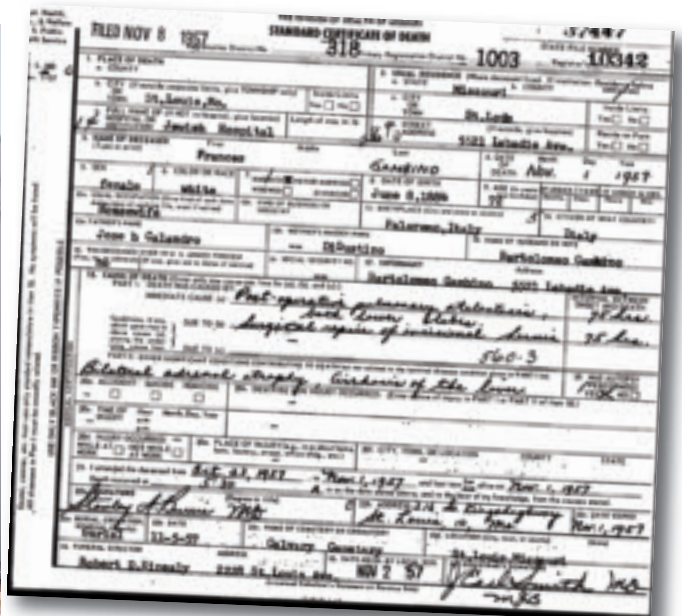
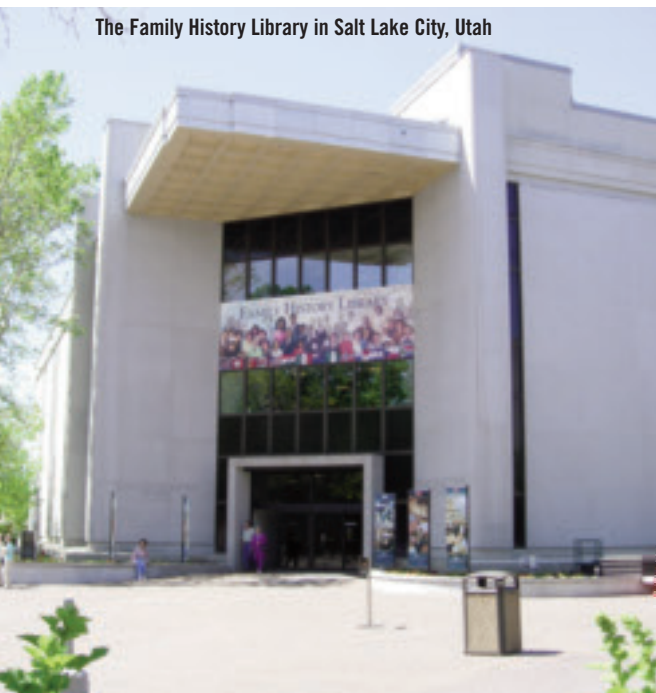
### Accessing Italian records

After researching U.S. records, you may feel ready to tackle those in Italy. But hold off on buying plane tickets—many of Italy’s civil documents are catalogued and on file here in the U.S. The Family History Library has been collecting Italian documents for the past 50 years and now has between 65 and 75 percent of all Italian registration documents—civil birth, marriage and death certificates in addition to military service records—on film, according to Lapioli Merriman. The library is currently undergoing a project to digitize that information, which will eventually be available online.

A visit to the library’s International Floor will provide access to centuries of Italian records. But prior to traveling, Lapioli Merriman counsels that prospective visitors should thoroughly review the library’s catalogs online. Through the Internet, visitors can obtain film numbers for Italian records, learn whether those films are in the library or stored in a vault off-site, and make arrangements for the films they need to be waiting for their review upon arrival.

For those who can’t travel to Salt Lake City, a visit to any of the ➤

The Family History Library in Salt Lake City, Utah



library's Family History Centers, which are located across the United States and around the world, will give you access to the same records. Staffed by volunteers, these centers allow researchers to order copies of the films they need for the cost of shipping and view them on site.

How are these records available? Another common misconception is that very little records remain in Italy. "You will hear that 'all the records have been destroyed,'" says Russo Adams, "but quite honestly, many are well preserved and available." One notable exception is Italian passport applications, which were often destroyed because "it wasn't thought that they were very useful," says Lapioli Merriman. In recent years, Brigham Young University's Immigrant Ancestors Project ([new.iap.byu.edu](http://new.iap.byu.edu)) has digitized the surviving applications from Italy's Port Cities like Naples and Genova, which are now available online.

Some Italian locales have begun to digitize their records. Cosenza ([www.archivi.beniculturali.it/ASCS/](http://www.archivi.beniculturali.it/ASCS/)), Verona ([archivio.comune.verona.it/nqco.nitent.cfm?a\\_id=8084](http://archivio.comune.verona.it/nqco.nitent.cfm?a_id=8084)), and the Archivio di Stato di Mantova ([ricerchefamiliari.lombardinelmondo.org/](http://ricerchefamiliari.lombardinelmondo.org/)) all offer a host of records online. Plus, Firenze offers an online catalog of baptisms dating to the 1400s ([www.operaduomo.firenze.it/archivio/archivio\\_fedi.asp](http://www.operaduomo.firenze.it/archivio/archivio_fedi.asp)).

Whether examining Italian records in the U.S. or Italy, it helps to familiarize oneself with language that commonly appears on Italian records. "It just takes a little practice and you can do it," says Lapioli Merriman. "You don't need to speak the language; you just need familiarity with some key words and phrases."

Once researchers have exhausted all resources in the United States and cannot get access to Italian records via correspondence, then it's time to consider traveling to Italy, says Russo Adams. "Each situation is different," she explains. "Some

people have great fortune and are able to write letters and get more information from church archives in Italy—which are the most important records you would need to go farther back on your family tree beyond the government records that are pretty accessible via film through the Family History Library and its satellite Family History Centers."

Although Italian civil records weren't unilaterally kept until Napoleon required them in the early 1800s, Italian parish records often date back to the 1500s, when the church's Council of Trent mandated record keeping. "Keep in mind, though, that parish priests have custodianship of their own records and often times will not allow, for various reasons, a lay researcher to access them—it just depends on the priest, parish, etc.," Russo Adams cautions. "Some research can be done in Diocesan archives...it will depend on where in Italy they are researching and the temperament of the local church and government officials."

While in Italy, many Americans mistakenly seek Italian genealogical or historical societies to further their search and are often disappointed when they come up empty-handed. But in Italy, the focus is more on heraldry and finding genealogical links to nobility rather than researching family history regardless of class, says Lapioli Merriman.

### Reaching out

Some researchers merely want to know where their family came from, and for them the process would stop when they've traced their family tree as far back as possible. But for others, the goal is actually reconnecting with long-lost family in Italy.

For those researchers, once as much factual information as possible has been gathered, the next step is the Italian white pages ([www.piaginebianche.it](http://www.piaginebianche.it)) or a similar tool in order to search the current residential listings in the village, town or city where one's family originated.

On the Pagine Bianche search engine all that is necessary is the last name (*cognome*) and city (*citta*) in order to conduct a search. My search in "Vitulano" for members of the "Fuggi" family resulted in four matches. Thereafter, I sent a letter in Italian to each of the families that I had located in which I described our family history and connection to their village. Sample letters can be found in Russo Adams' "Finding Your Italian Ancestors."

Within two weeks of sending my letters, I received an e-mail from Anna Fuggi. As it turns out, her great-grandfather and mine were cousins and each of the Fuggi families in Vitulano were (not surprisingly) related. The entire family was overjoyed that we had contacted them and immediately hoped that we would visit in person as soon as possible. In the meantime, Anna visited the town hall (*Comune*) for me and was able to locate family records with information that was previously unknown by our family in the United States.

For those who are interested in family history and dual citizenship, please consider combining the projects and perhaps discovering relatives in Italy. If my experience is any indication, then they will be thrilled to hear from you. Good luck in your search! ▲



Author Michael Votto stands with his cousin Anna Fuggi (center) of Vitulano, with whom he was reunited after researching his family history, and wife, Amanda (left).

Michael Votto is an attorney and entrepreneur from New Haven County, Connecticut. His previous article, "Dual Citizenship: One Family's Expression of Italian-American Pride," is available online in *Ambassador* Vol. 20 No. 2 at [www.niaf.org/ambassador/ambassador\\_magazine.asp](http://www.niaf.org/ambassador/ambassador_magazine.asp). Michael Votto can be reached at [ambassador@niaf.org](mailto:ambassador@niaf.org).