

# Guilty Until Proven Innocent

Paul McDowell

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## Guilty Until Proven Innocent

They had been found innocent. After six months of uncertainty, the jury had finally awarded the defendants their freedom. Tomorrow, they would go back to their families and celebrate the birthday of King Umberto I<sup>1</sup> with singing, dancing, and feasting. Life would return to normal. They would go back to working on the docks, along the streets, or in the stores. The nine Sicilians accused of murdering New Orleans Police Chief David Hennessy went to sleep on March 13, 1891, with freedom in their minds and hope in their hearts. Unfortunately, seven of those nine would never experience their freedom. The next morning, thousands of New Orleans residents stormed the Parish Prison and brutally executed eleven Italians locked inside, claiming to bring justice when the American courts failed to do so. Newspapers around the United States quickly seized the opportunity, using the event to display anti-immigrant sentiments. Many newspapers favored the extreme measure to which the upper-class New Orleans residents had carried out justice upon the devious Sicilians, and only a few factions of the American press condemned such rash action. Despite different political and social reasoning, most newspapers from all around the United States shared the same underlying anti-Italian sentiment in their reports of the 1891 lynching of eleven Sicilians in New Orleans.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Italian monarch during the late nineteenth century.

<sup>2</sup> Any in-depth research on the results of immigration into the United States begins with John D. Buekner and Lorman A. Ratner, *Multiculturalism in the United States: A Comparative Guide to Acculturation and Ethnicity* (New York: Greenwood Press, 2005). John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1955), and Desmond Humphrey Joseph, *The APA Movement* (New York: Arno Press, 1969), provide excellent overviews and analyses of general American nativism around the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Alexander DeConde, *Half Bitter, Half Sweet: An Excursion into Italian-American History* (New York: Scribner, 1971), provides a good introduction to the overall Italian-American experience during the height of Italian immigration. Edwin Fenton, *Immigrants and Unions, a Case Study: Italians and American Labor, 1870-1920* (New York: Arno Press, 1957) and Donna Gabaccia, *Militants and Migrants: Rural Sicilians Become American Workers* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988), adequately describe Italian-Americans and their roles in the American labor system throughout different parts of the United States around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For information on the city of New Orleans itself during the 1890s, Joy J. Jackson, *New Orleans in the Gilded Age: Politics and Urban Progress, 1880-1896* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969), and Joy J. Jackson, "Crime and the Conscience of a City" *Louisiana History* 24, no. 4 (Summer 1968): 229-244, analyze the general background of New Orleans around the time of the 1891 lynching. To discover detailed reports of other

American nativism and extreme xenophobia plagued the entire United States around the turn of the twentieth century. Not all of this nativism, however, attacked one common ethnicity; northerners despised immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, while westerners in California loathed immigrants from eastern Asia. Residents of the South held fewer anti-immigrant convictions than most other Americans simply because immigrants were not streaming into the southern states at the same rate as they were in the North and the West. Southerners still demonstrated a strong distaste for minorities, however, and ostracized and ridiculed most people without Anglo-Saxon blood during the last half of the nineteenth century. Much of this hatred proved completely groundless, as few minorities posed a direct threat to a white majority; in fact, many minorities and most immigrants actually assured white Americans a continued social dominance. The immigrants arrived in all parts of the United States very eager for employment, and this hunger for labor forced the immigrants to work for incredibly low wages. The rapidly increasing immigrant population, which offered its labor for miniscule wages, single-handedly drove down the cost of employment for white business owners, ensuring that the owners could make more products for less.<sup>3</sup>

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lynchings of Sicilians in the South, see Clive Webb, "The Lynching of Sicilian Immigrants in the American South, 1886-1910," *American Nineteenth Century History* 3, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 45-77. For a combination of extended narrative and in-depth analysis on the events surrounding the actual lynching on March 14, 1891, see 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 and Co., 1977); Joseph Gentile, *The Innocent Lynched: The Story of Eleven Italians Lynched in New Orleans* (New York: Writer's Showcase Press, 2000); Tom Smith, *The Crescent City Lynchings: The Murder of Chief Hennessy, the New Orleans 'Mafia' Trials, and the Parish Prison Mob* (Guilford, CT: The Lyons Press, 2007); Humbert S. Nelli, "The Hennessy Murder and the Mafia in New Orleans," *Italian Quarterly* 19, no. 75 (1975): 77-95. Other works focus on different aspects of the event: J. Alexander Karlin, "New Orleans Lynchings of 1891 and the American Press," *Louisiana Historical Quarterly* 24, no.1 (January 1941): 187-204, examines the nationwide media's reaction to the event. Barbara Botein, "The Hennessy Case: An Episode of Anti-Italian Nativism," *Louisiana History* 20, no. 3 (1979): 261-279, discusses how the trial and lynching were cases of extreme nativism during a time of heightened xenophobia. For contemporary reports on the lynching, the most trustworthy works include "Correspondence in Relation to the Killing of Prisoners in New Orleans on March 14, 1891," Harvard University Library Virtual Collections, *New York Times*; *Washington Post*; *Harper's Weekly*; and the *New Orleans Picayune*.

<sup>3</sup>Gentile, *The Innocent Lynched*, 63-73.

Italians worked just as hard and for just as little as other immigrants of the late nineteenth century. Yet the American population still foolishly stereotyped the Italians as lazy, dirty, and devious workers who could not be relied upon, despite their tendency to work for lower wages than other laborers and their offerings to replace striking workers. Residents of New Orleans held this anti-Italian belief just as strongly as any other American, if not more so. While immigrants refrained from entering most southern states for one reason or another, Louisiana proved a monstrous exception. As a large maritime port between the Mississippi River and the Gulf of Mexico, New Orleans had attracted many seafaring immigrants throughout its history. By 1860, 38 percent of New Orleans' entire population was foreign-born, and rural Sicilians were beginning to represent a large part of that number.<sup>4</sup> By 1880, the foreign-born population had dropped to 19 percent, but most of those foreign-born residents were now Italians. Contrary to the assumptions of most upper-class residents, however, most Italians arrived in New Orleans without the intention of establishing permanent residence. Many Italian immigrants planned to return to their homeland once they had made a sufficient amount of money, and a long-term stay in the United States was usually not part of the picture.<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, many southerners still disliked the growing number of Italian immigrants throughout southern Louisiana. Some southerners, especially those with a strong Protestant faith, saw the influx of the Italians as a dangerous religious coup. They denounced the Italians'

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<sup>4</sup> While Italians are most known for immigrating to major northern cities, such as New York, Boston and Chicago, a number of Italians also immigrated to New Orleans. Louisiana held the largest Italian population prior to the Civil War, and Italians did not begin their mass migrations to northern cities until the 1880s. The Italian immigrants in the northern United States tended to hail from northern and mainland Italy, but the immigrants that arrived in New Orleans were chiefly Sicilians. While no single cause has been found to explain why Sicilians left for New Orleans in particular, most scholars agree that the similar climates of New Orleans and Sicily and the resemblances between the Gulf of Mexico and the Mediterranean Sea played a big role.

<sup>5</sup> Gentile, *The Innocent Lynched*, 8; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Population of the United States in 1860: Compiled from the Original Returns of the Eighth Census under the Direction of the Secretary of the Interior*, xxxii; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistics of the Population of the United States at the Tenth Census (June 1, 1880): Embracing Extended Tables of the Population of State, Counties and Minor Civil Divisions, with Distinction of Race, Sex, Age, Nativity, and Occupations*, compiled by Joseph C.G. Kennedy, Superintendent of the Census (Washington, 1883) I, 538-541.

Roman Catholicism, labeling it an imminent threat to the long-standing Protestant tradition in the South. Some even called the Catholic religion the “antichrist,” suspecting all the Italians of being under direct control of the Papacy. The preachers who warned of a Catholic takeover, however, were ignoring a major rift between the Italian population and the Catholic Church at the time, as many Italians of the late nineteenth century held a very weak relationship with the Papacy.<sup>6</sup>

Some native southerners disliked the Italians because of their close ties with the black community. Aligning with the Populist Party,<sup>7</sup> disagreeing with discrimination practices against blacks, and participating with former slaves or slave descendents in commercial ventures, the Italians opened themselves to glaring judgments of white southerners, many of whom had a direct association with the former Confederacy. Not only were the Italians were buying and trading from blacks around New Orleans, but they were also doing so with incredible success. Several Italian trading families in New Orleans blossomed into major businesses during this time, and many members of the southern aristocracy envied the immediate success of these Italian productions. By 1890, the famous French Quarter and French Market had been unofficially renamed “Little Palermo,” as the Italian immigrants won control of many businesses around the heart of the city. Unfortunately for the Italians, the white citizens of New Orleans did not appreciate this newfound success. As the Italians became wealthier and continued to go against the social norms of nineteenth-century New Orleans, the native residents of the city became even more infuriated with the race-defying and incredibly successful immigrants.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The Catholic Church of the late nineteenth century was routinely impeding the political unification of Italy, which greatly frustrated many Italians. Patrick J. Gallo, *Old Bread, New Wine: A Portrait of the Italian Americans* (Chicago: Nelson, Hall, 1981), 121-122; Gentile, *The Innocent Lynched*, 12.

<sup>7</sup> The Populist Party was a major political rival to the Democratic Party of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Most southerners were members with the Democratic Party, so the fact that the Italians joined the Populist Party would not have won them many friends in the South. Gentile, *The Innocent Lynched*, 7.

<sup>8</sup> *New York Times*, 9 December 1884, p.4; Gentile, *The Innocent Lynched*, 8.



The picture above, featured in the *Mascot*, a popular journal in New Orleans during the last half of the nineteenth century, illustrated mainstream New Orleans' views towards the Italian population. The upper-left part of the cartoon first labeled the Italians “a nuisance to pedestrians,” showing the Italians unproductively lying around the streets. The next description showed the Italians’ living spaces, where they were all crammed into a tiny closet like sardines. Mocking them as “afternoon’s pleasant diversions” in the next illustration, the author of the cartoon shows the Italians, almost resembling monkeys, brawling in the middle of the street. The final two portions of the cartoon displayed the white residents dragging the Italians off and then dropping them in the Mississippi River, as if the Italians were uncontrollable savage beasts who required immediate disposal. This cartoon demonstrated one of the many examples of the

<sup>9</sup> *The Mascot, An Independent Journal of the Day*, 7 September 1888, p. 8.

flagrant anti-Italianism in New Orleans and exemplified most New Orleanians' perspective towards Italians.

Contrary to the widespread belief that Italians were lazy and dangerous beasts, the Italian-born Provenzano and the Matranga families were two of the most successful businesses in New Orleans during this time. These Italian families came to dominate the lower strata of New Orleans just before the turn of the twentieth century, and they soon began to compete for control of the docks. Ultimately, the Matranga family won control, and soon after the change of command, the Provenzanos responded with several violent attacks upon their rival workforce. After nearly two years of skirmishes between the two Italian factions, the rough-and-tumble Police Chief David Hennessy<sup>10</sup> and his police force finally arrested the Provenzano leaders. Discrepancies, however, marred the trial against the Provenzanos. Nearly all of the police testimonies supported the Provenzano faction, while every other testimonial, mostly given by people connected with the Matranga faction, accused the Provenzanos of malicious intent. Some people began to suspect the possibility of an underground Italian society, and mulled its possible deals with the police department or the witnesses. After a grand jury declared a mistrial, a new trial was set for October 22, 1890.<sup>11</sup>

David Hennessy would not live to see that trial. On the foggy, rainy night of October 15, exactly one week before he was to testify, David Hennessy walked into an ambush. As he headed back to his house from the police headquarters late at night, several dark figures emerged out of nowhere and riddled him with bullets. The assassins scattered, dropping their weapons in the process. David Hennessy lived on for nearly nine more hours, during which he repeatedly

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<sup>10</sup> David Hennessy's past remains somewhat of a mystery, but it is widely believed that he was both corrupt and ruthless. According to Dr. Patrick Gallo of New York University, Hennessy was "what we nowadays call a 'gangster,' if he had not happened to line up on the side of law and order." Gallo, *Old Bread, New Wine*, 121-122.

<sup>11</sup> Gentile, *The Innocent Lynched*, 14-21; Smith, *The Crescent City Lynchings*, 120-124.

denied knowing who had attacked him. Despite his consistent denial, however, fellow police officer William O'Connor,<sup>12</sup> who was the first to find Hennessy following the attack, declared that Hennessy had indeed told him who had committed the assassination. According to O'Connor, "the Dagos did it."<sup>13</sup> The police force quickly rounded up scores of Italian males, while the Provenzanos made an extended effort to accuse Matranga faction of the murder. The New Orleans police chose to believe the Provenzanos' declaration and released any Italian affiliated to the Provenzanos. After deliberation, the police indicted nine suspects for the murder of David Hennessy, and a trial was set for February 28, 1891.<sup>14</sup>

The prosecution attained absolutely no evidence that proved the suspects had committed the murder. All of the accused Italians provided successful alibis, and the prosecution's reliance on witness testimonies collapsed when cross-examination of the witnesses revealed that the night of the murder was too clouded with fog and rain for anyone to clearly distinguish any individual more than five feet away. On March 13, 1891, the jury announced their verdict: the defendants were found not guilty.<sup>15</sup>

Residents of New Orleans exploded. The Italians had murdered the beloved David Hennessy, and they were now going to walk away unscathed. Many citizens believed someone had fixed the jury, and the jury members instantly became the most hated residents in the entire state of Louisiana. Local politicians immediately began pointing fingers at Dominick O'Malley,

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<sup>12</sup> O'Connor, Hennessy's police partner and close friend, claimed that Hennessy had told him that "the Dagos did it" when he first found Hennessy following the assault. Hennessy, however, repeatedly denied ever knowing the identity of attackers during the nine hours between the attack and his final death. Once Hennessy was dead, it was merely assumed that O'Connor was telling the truth, and the New Orleans newspapers instantly began constructing explanations for why the Italians would have committed the murder. *New Orleans Times*, 16 October 1890, p. 1-2; *New York Times*, 17 October 1890, p. 1; Gentile, *The Innocent Lynched*, 14-21.

<sup>13</sup> Dago is an offensive term for an Italian. The root of the term traces to the name "Diego," and it was once used as a demeaning term for Italians, Spaniards, or Portuguese. Joseph Gentile, *The Innocent Lynched*, 15; *New Orleans Picayune*, 17 October 1890, p. 1

<sup>14</sup> Gentile, *The Innocent Lynched*, 14-21.

<sup>15</sup> *New Orleans Picayune*, 14 March 1891, p. 1; Gentile, *The Innocent Lynched*, 32-40.



a local private detective who had been arrested previously in Cleveland for perjury and bribery. The Sicilians had appointed O'Malley as their agent and associate in previous court hearings, and many citizens of New Orleans held that O'Malley had been a "deadly enemy" of David Hennessy, who had been chosen over O'Malley for the New Orleans Police Chief position. For William S. Parkerson, a local politician and the mayor's right-hand man, only one thing could be done: justice. The following morning, the biggest papers in New Orleans ran the same headline: "All good citizens are invited to attend a mass meeting on Saturday, March 14 at 10 o'clock A.M., at Clay Statue," the letters boasted, "to take steps to remedy the failure of justice in the Hennessy case." In the last four words, the most prominent citizens of New Orleans declared their dire objective: "Come prepared for action."<sup>16</sup>

The Saturday morning meeting quickly became a boisterous mob, as thousands of restless citizens gathered beneath the Clay Statue in the middle of New Orleans. Following a brief rally, several local politicians led the crowd to the Parish Prison, picking up Winchester rifles from a warehouse along the way. Some of the mob broke off in an attempt to capture Jacob M. Seligman, a successful jeweler and the foreman of the jury. The mob found Seligman as he attempted to flee the city, but the police quickly rescued him. Several of his associates were able to conceal him until he could escape to Cincinnati the following day, but he soon lost his business and never quite recovered.<sup>17</sup>

The main part of the mob proceeded toward the prison. Upon hearing about the incoming mass of angry citizens, the warden of Parish Prison unlocked the Italians from their cells and frantically told them to hide on the women's side of the jail. The mob stormed towards the locked front door of the Parish Prison. As they began battering the door with a gigantic wooden

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<sup>16</sup> *New Orleans Times*, 14 March 1891, p. 1; *New York Times*, 15 March 1891, p. 1; Gentile, *The Innocent Lynched*, 34-36.

<sup>17</sup> *New York Times*, 15 March 1891, p. 1-2; Gentile, *The Innocent Lynched*, 34-35.

beam, some citizens remembered a side door to the cells. A group of men armed with shotguns and pistols charged inside and began hunting for their prey. Soon after the men had entered the side door, the front door was bashed open and the leading participants of the mob busted inside the prison.<sup>18</sup>

The non-Italian prisoners, fearing for their own lives if things got out-of-hand, told the attackers that the Italians had fled to the women's side of the jail. Upon reaching the women's section, an elderly African-American woman told them to look upstairs. The Italians above the women's corridor stood no chance; four of the accused and two non-related Italians were gunned down instantly, as each assassin fired at point-blank range. Another part of the mob found three others in a nearby corridor and quickly murdered them as well. One of the victims was later found with forty-two bullet holes.<sup>19</sup>

Manuel Polizzi, one of the innocent, was dragged outside and hanged on a gaslight as he begged for mercy. As men pulled on the rope, raising his struggling body higher off the ground, the rope snapped and Polizzi came crashing down. Someone found a clothesline nearby and within a few minutes Polizzi was raised again. Yet Polizzi would fight on; he grabbed the line with flailing hands and desperately pulled on it, gasping for air. Polizzi's struggle only fueled the mob's fire, and the agitated crowd dropped him down one last time and decided to tie his hands. As he was raised a third time, several people in the crowd grabbed their Winchester rifles and shot the helpless Polizzi, finally killing him. Minutes later, Antonio Bagnetto would hang as well. Unlike Polizzi, however, Bagnetto was lucky enough to be dead before he was hanged. Several of the prisoners were able to escape the mob's wrath, yet by the time the citizens of New

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<sup>18</sup> *New York Times*, 15 March 1891, p. 1-2; Gentile, *The Innocent Lynched*, 28-29; Smith, *The Crescent City Lynchings*, 220-223.

<sup>19</sup> *New York Times*, 15 March 1891, p. 1-2; *New Orleans Times*, 15 March 1891, p. 1; Gentile, *The Innocent Lynched*, 28; Smith, *The Crescent City Lynchings*, 224-230

Orleans sat down to lunch, eleven Italians had been slain, and four of whom had nothing to do with the Hennessy trial. Nonetheless, not one Italian in the entire prison ever admitted to knowing who killed Police Chief David Hennessy, even with guns pointed at their heads. The mystery remained: “Who killa de chief?”<sup>20</sup>

That night the newspapers feasted. As the Italian government cried foul, newspapers from all around the country jumped on the event, from Tacoma, Washington, to New Haven, Connecticut. Most reports supported the event, celebrating the lynching as a victory for Americans everywhere. A few newspapers, however, questioned the act and mocked the chaotic way in which the New Orleans citizens had responded to the verdict. Either way, the violent lynching of eleven Italians on March 14, 1891 brought great upheaval to people around the country and allowed many reporters to demonstrate their anti-immigrant feelings through their writings.<sup>21</sup>

Most of the papers around New Orleans reacted in similar fashion. They aligned with the New Orleans mob, celebrating the lynching and the triumph of American justice. The newspapers treated the mob-leading politicians as heroes, who had bravely stood up for their country. The *New Orleans Picayune* proclaimed that “when the ministries of the law fail,” such forceful action was required. The New Orleans papers emphasized the jury’s suspicious failure to convict the Italians and the moral need to right the wrong. The newspapers belittled the violence against the Italians and highlighted how few Italians the mob had attacked throughout the whole debacle. According to the local papers, death had only been given to the ones who had deserved such a fate. In a state with one of the largest Italian immigrant populations at the time,

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<sup>20</sup> *New Orleans Times*, 15 March 1891, p. 1; *New York Times*, 15 March 1891, p. 1-2; Gentile, *The Innocent Lynched*, 28-30; Smith, *The Crescent City Lynchings*, 225-227.

<sup>21</sup> *Tacoma Daily News*, 14 March 1891, p. 1; *New Haven Register*, 14 March 1891, p. 1; *New York Times*, 15 March 1891, p. 1-2.

this reaction in and around New Orleans does not prove peculiar. The lynching sent a clear warning to any future Italian immigrants to New Orleans, and the majority of white citizens were glad that such an opportunity for a warning arose.<sup>22</sup>

Despite not having even remotely similar immigrant situations, many other southern newspapers also supported the actions of the mob. Much of the support drew upon a basic allegiance to fellow southerners. Less than thirty years since the Confederacy's fall, many white southerners still held a sense of genuine brotherhood with their fellow southerners. The widespread Democratic Party, which controlled much of the South and many of its major newspapers, also contributed far-reaching support for the mob's actions. Like their Republican rivals, the southern Democrats disliked minorities and magnified their ill effects upon American society whenever they found the chance. The *Knoxville Journal* called the event a "work of vindication," while the report in the *Dallas Morning News* boasted that New Orleans "rose in its might" and "wreaked vengeance upon the Sicilian assassins who relentlessly slew David C. Hennessy." The front headline of the *Macon Weekly Telegraph* boldly proclaimed "Justice Satisfied!" Most southern papers treated the mob as a procession of saints instead of a riot of merciless murderers. The *Knoxville Journal* described the storming of the Parish Prison as an "orderly" occurrence, and noted how the people "dispersed quietly" once the measures had been taken. Likewise, the *Dallas Morning News* noted that the storming mob was "not an unruly midnight mob," and the citizens of New Orleans were merely ensuring the preservation of justice. In a completely contradictory statement, the *Macon Weekly Telegraph* noted how a "mob of cool-headed men, lawyers, doctors . . . quietly decided that some action must be taken . . . swiftly and surely visited." No city in the South had experienced the same immigration issues

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<sup>22</sup> *New Orleans Times*, 15 March 1891, p. 1; *New Orleans Picayune*, 15 March 1891, p. 1; Gentile, *The Innocent Lynched*, 8-9, 74-81.

as New Orleans, and yet many of the major southern newspapers still celebrated the lynching of the eleven Sicilians.<sup>23</sup>

Most of these southern papers attempted to focus on the legal need for the lynchings. The journalists in the South emphasized the ineffectiveness of the jury and the presence of underground Italian deals, rather than highlight the treachery committed by the mob. Nevertheless, the anti-immigrant fervor that existed around the country underlay the entire event. Had anti-Italianism not existed in New Orleans and William O'Connor not conjured up the idea that "the Dagos did it," the Italians would not have been imprisoned, tried, and subsequently lynched. Although they maintained few immigrant problems themselves, the southern states and their newspapers still chose to join the wealthy citizens of New Orleans in slandering the Italians and accusing them of secret societies. While not openly denouncing immigrants, the newspapers of the South still sent a clear message to all immigrants: stay out, or else.<sup>24</sup>

Not all southern papers celebrated the lynchings, however. The *Charlotte News* diverted from its fellow southern newspapers, citing the crowd for "murderous work," during which the "officers of the law . . . cheered the mob." The *Charlotte News* never once defined the mob participants as law-abiding citizens, as did nearly every other newspaper around the country. The *Mobile Register* claimed that there was "no good reason for the lynching," and that it would "increase the spirit of lawlessness." Similarly, the *Houston Post* reported that the event was a "monstrous tragedy." The reports largely mocked the attackers, construing the event as a chaotic

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<sup>23</sup> *Knoxville Journal*, 15 March 1891, p. 5; *Dallas Morning News*, 15 March 1891, p. 10; *Macon Weekly Telegraph*, 15 March 1891, p. 1.

<sup>24</sup> Gentile, *The Innocent Lynched*, 87-100; *New York Times*, 15 March 1891, p. 1-2.

free-for-all, brought upon by savage men bent on murdering helpless victims. Despite these few exceptions, however, most of the South took pride in the mob's actions.<sup>25</sup>

Like many reports in the South, the northern newspapers also emphasized the failure of the jury rather than focusing on the transgressions against the Italians. From Chicago to New York, northern journalists criticized the trial results, although they expressed far more reluctance to celebrate the mob's work than most southern newspapers. Italian immigrants, numbering over one million by 1900, had a much larger presence throughout the North, so any rash report that openly celebrated the mob's actions would have been an unwise political and personal move. Nevertheless, northerners held some of the most extreme anti-immigrant feelings in the entire country. As numerous migrants from southern and eastern Europe began flocking to the United States during the late nineteenth century, many Americans began to worry about the incredible rate of immigration. Unlike the South, which experienced declining numbers of foreign-born residents during the late nineteenth century, the North began to experience a large new wave of immigrants, mostly hailing from Italy, Poland, Austria-Hungary, and Russia. New York's immigrant population rose more than 300 percent between 1860 and 1900, from 383,717 to 1,270,080. With proportionally similar increases in many other northern cities such as Chicago and Philadelphia, many Americans began to worry about their country's future. Most native-born Americans and many older Irish and German immigrants saw the new immigrants as shifty, unclean day-laborers who were quickly taking all the blue-collar jobs away and polluting American society. Citizens began protesting against the constant immigration, calling for new laws to stop the endless flow of inferior ethnicities into their nation. When the government did not respond immediately, some Americans took matters into their own hands and began

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<sup>25</sup> *Charlotte News*, 16 March 1891, p. 2,4; *Mobile Register*, 15 March 1891, p. 1; *Houston Post*, 15 March 1891, p. 3.

practicing incredibly intense discrimination against the newcomers. Since Italians marked a large proportion of the immigrant population around the turn of the twentieth century, Americans were eager to treat Italians as harshly as any other ethnic group.<sup>26</sup> Northern journalists proved little exception to the widespread anti-Italianism throughout the region, and this intrinsic prejudice clearly marred their reports of the 1891 lynching in New Orleans.<sup>27</sup>

Nevertheless, the immigrant-heavy environment in which the northern newspapers resided duly affected their treatment of the event. As the reporters in the North began composing their own reports of the incident, Italians in many major cities held mass gatherings and collected money to send to the victims' families in New Orleans. These gatherings drafted petitions and openly condemned the mob's actions in New Orleans, and the potential for a massive Italian riot prevented any northern newspapers, especially those located around a large Italian population, from candidly supporting the lynchings. Any northern journalist who valued his job or his life did not completely endorse the series of events in New Orleans; instead, they celebrated subliminally.<sup>28</sup>

On the surface, most northern newspapers eased up on the Italian victims. The *Washington Post* mocked the lack of protection given to the Italians by the Parish Prison authorities, stating that "no material resistance was offered by the police or sheriff to the work of the citizens." *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* also criticized the New Orleans authorities, noting how the mob was "openly encouraged by the police, and met with no serious resistance at

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<sup>26</sup> One example of the drastic anti-Italian xenophobia occurred in Buffalo in 1888. After one Italian killed another, the police superintendent arrested 325 Italians, virtually all Italian males in the entire city. After thorough searches, only two were found with weapons. When asked why he had arrested so many Italians, the superintendent merely stated that Italians routinely carried concealed weapons and the public had demanded such drastic measures. Luciano J. Iorizzo and Salvatore Mondello, *The Italian Americans* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1980), 81-82.

<sup>27</sup> Gentile, *The Innocent Lynched*, 4-8; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Twelfth Consensus of the United States Taken in the Year 1900*, compiled by Joseph C.G. Kennedy, Superintendent of Census (Washington, 1901) I, Pt. 1, lxix, cix.

<sup>28</sup> *New York Times*, 15 March 1891, p. 1; Gentile, *The Innocent Lynched*, 89-92.

the prison.” The *Inter Ocean*, a large Republican newspaper in Chicago,<sup>29</sup> sympathized with the Italians despite still exhibiting a strong anti-Italian sentiment. The report vividly described the event as a “massacre,” brought upon by a “savage mob;” yet the headline still called the Italians “murderers” and “slayers,” despite no proof that they committed the murder. Both the *Philadelphia Enquirer* and the *Baltimore Sun* also put down the mob while degrading the victims at the same time, labeling the Italians as deadly “assassins.” Even though they had been found not guilty and no sufficient evidence had linked them with the murder of David Hennessy, the northern papers still accused the Italians of committing the murder. Thus while not actively encouraging the act of the lynchings, several major northern newspapers made a conscious effort not to free the Italians of their murderous label.<sup>30</sup>

This murderous label demonstrated the North’s double-standard for the event, which led to confusing contradictions. While depicting the mob as a violent slaughtering machine, the northern papers nevertheless provided thorough rationale for the mob’s actions. *The Philadelphia Enquirer* boasted how the mob went to the Parish Prison to “slay [the Italians] in their cells without mercy,” eliciting images of a violent butchering, yet noted how “the acquittal of the accused yesterday came like a thunder clap from a clear sky.” *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*, a very popular national magazine based in New York, even published John C. Wickliffe’s<sup>31</sup> justification for the event on April 4, 1891.<sup>32</sup> Several other newspapers followed

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<sup>29</sup> Almost all of the leading politicians and citizens of New Orleans belonged to the Democratic Party, so a Republican-run newspapers that dominated the North, such as the *Inter Ocean*, would have denounced the lynching if only because their political rivals caused and supported the event.

<sup>30</sup> *Washington Post*, 15 March 1891, p.1; *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*, 19 March 1891, p.1; *Chicago Inter Ocean*, 15 March 1891, p.1; *Philadelphia Enquirer*, 15 March 1891, p.1-2; *Baltimore Sun*, 16 March 1891, p.2.

<sup>31</sup> John C. Wickliffe, whose father was the governor of Louisiana from 1856 to 1860, was a leader in the lynching. Appointed by the Mayor of New Orleans to the Committee of Fifty (a group of leading citizens given to power to decide what to do with the accused Italians), Wickliffe proved instrumental in the decision to storm the Parish Prison. Gentile, *The Innocent Lynched*, 74.

<sup>32</sup> The published interview occurred three long weeks after the event, so Wickliffe had undoubtedly been able to prepare his exact words for this interview.



suit, and soon the memory of a violent mob disappeared as Wickliffe's rationalization began to circulate around the country. Using his background in politicking and his uncanny ability to appeal to the common citizen, Wickliffe swiftly and effectively rationalized the lynching by citing the constitutional need to correct the government when it failed to perform its duty.<sup>33</sup> He bragged that the people had "executed the law upon the men found guilty," ignoring the fact that every Italian had clearly been found not guilty by the jury.<sup>34</sup>

As Wickliffe defended himself in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, William S. Parkerson<sup>35</sup> found a similar opportunity to announce his own rationalization when the *New York Illustrated American*, another popular periodical of the time, interviewed him in the weeks following the event. While not as overtly racist as Wickliffe, Parkerson nevertheless defended his actions and expressed no regret. As these interviews circulated around the United States, the American people gradually forgot about the brutal violence instigated by the mob and began to approve of their fellow countrymen's effective response. The northern newspapers initially reported the event with delicacy and precaution, but within a few short weeks the papers began endorsing the mob's justifications, circulating them around the rest of the country.<sup>36</sup>

Even the newspapers throughout the West held underlying prejudices against the Italians. Although most of the western reports gave a fairly objective account of the event for that time period, they still erroneously accused the Italians as members of the Mafia and labeled them as merciless killers. The *San Francisco Bulletin* clearly reported that the jury found the accused not

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<sup>33</sup> While the United States Constitution does state that the people must correct the government when it goes awry, no proof of jury tampering had ever been found. In this case, the thought that the governmental system did not fulfill its duty proved merely an opinion, not a fact, and Wickliffe's justification is therefore groundless. During this time of heightened xenophobia, however, many people would have readily assumed Wickliffe's opinion as a hard fact.

<sup>34</sup> *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 16 March 1891, p. 1-2.; *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, 4 April 1891, p. 1

<sup>35</sup> Parkerson was another member of the Committee of Fifty and a leading participant in the lynching. His interview was published on the same day as Wickliffe's interview, so he also had three long weeks to prepare his justification for the media.

<sup>36</sup> *New York Illustrated American*, 4 April 1891, p. 1; Gentile, *The Innocent Lynched*, 74-86.

guilty, yet hastily called them “Sicilian assassins” who had murdered David Hennessy. *The Idaho Statesman* emphasized the role of the Mafia in its report, despite the fact that there was no valid proof of the Mafia’s existence at this time. The initial wire from the *San Jose Mercury* reported that the Italian victims were “alleged murderers,” providing much more defense for the lynched victims than most other newspapers. Yet the very next sentence of the report stated that the jury had “failed” to convict the eleven “members of Lamafia,” clearly demonstrating the writer’s underlying belief that the victims were truly guilty. The *Tacoma Daily News* of Washington provided an almost southern-like prospective, blindly citing the Italians as “members of the Mafia society, a lawless organization of Italians.” The Tacoma paper even resorted to manufacturing its own truths, declaring that the Mafia “had decreed the assassination of several [other] prominent citizens,” a statement that had not been reported anywhere else, even in New Orleans.<sup>37</sup>

The western newspapers proved the kindest to the Italians for various reasons. While Italian immigrants numbered in the thousands in California, Italians elsewhere in the West were few and far between. The West’s mixed reaction to the event reflected the fact that most westerners simply did not have to deal with the same European immigration influx that the North did. Americans of the western United States still demonstrated incredible nativism, however, but they directed most of their nativism towards the Asian population, which accounted for a huge proportion of the immigration to the western part of the country. More often than not, American westerners held any kind of European, no matter the exact cultural background, in higher esteem than most Asians, who were infiltrating the West during this time in vast numbers. The westerners treated Asians like the New Orleanians treated Italians, with jealousy and spite, for

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<sup>37</sup> *San Francisco Bulletin*, 14 March 1891, p. 3; *Idaho Statesman*, 14 March 1891, p. 1; *San Jose Mercury News*, 14 March 1891, p. 2; *Tacoma Daily News*, 14 March 1891, p. 1.

much of the same envious reasons.<sup>38</sup> Fortunately for European immigrants, they more closely resembled the Americans physically, and the western Americans subsequently treated the European immigrants better than most Asian newcomers.<sup>39</sup>

In their own newspapers, Italian-Americans called the debacle an outrage, some even calling for revenge. This call for retribution only made matters worse, however, as it provided the American people with another reason to suspect the Italians of underlying violence. Most of the outside world abhorred the mob's actions. The *Post* in London famously called the event a "deplorable page in American history," and the newspapers in Berlin insisted that the United States government should hunt for the murderers and justify the victims' deaths. The newspapers in Italy were unsurprisingly furious and cried for swift punishment upon the American people. The Italian government even threatened war if the United States government did not issue an apology and offer some sort of financial reimbursement for the deaths of its citizens. Unfortunately for the Italians, however, many Congressmen applauded the efforts of the New Orleans citizens, and even President Benjamin Harrison hesitated to issue an apology. Theodore Roosevelt, who would lead the country ten years later, cheerfully called the event a "rather good thing." For a brief time, the United States and Italy braced for conflict, waiting for the other to make the first move. As an unpopular president nearing re-elections, Harrison desperately needed to regain the support of many American voters. Southerners especially disliked their current president, a northern Republican, and Harrison needed some way to rekindle his relationship with the white southern voters. He tried to please his potential electors by waiting a considerable time to denounce the lynching, but the possibility of conflict with Italy ultimately forced him to put the fate of his country before the fate of his presidency. Finally,

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<sup>38</sup> Like the Italians in New Orleans, some Asians in the West became successful businessmen and made as much if not more money than many whites of the area.

<sup>39</sup> Gentile, *The Innocent Lynched*, 63-73.

nine months after the lynching, President Harrison realized the Italians were serious and gave into the Italian demands. He issued a lukewarm apology along with \$25,000 to the families of the three Italian citizens who had been murdered.<sup>40</sup>

While most newspapers across the country provided rationale for the mob's actions, even more newspapers accused the Mafia of underlying the legal process in New Orleans. Virtually every newspaper in the United States, no matter the regional location, agreed that the Mafia tampered with the jury and deeply influenced the verdict. The invention and spread of the term "Mafia" proved the most basic example of anti-Italian sentiment. Before 1890, the Mafia was known to exist only in Italy and Sicily, where it provided underground protection when the government failed to do so.<sup>41</sup> The padrone system, not the Mafia, existed in New Orleans and many other American cities, and this padrone system in no way resembled the Italian Mafia organization. While the Italian padroni, or bosses, provided Italians with labor opportunities and effectively took care of their people's well-being in the United States, they also exploited their Italian brethren for financial advancement and personal gain. Unlike the Mafia, the padrone system existed only for the benefit of a few select people, rather than for the good of many Italians. Nevertheless, most American newspapers, looking for a catchy term that would increase their own profits, modified the perception of the padrone system and claimed that the Mafia lay behind the scandal. The confusion between the padrone system and the true Mafia

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<sup>40</sup> Many contemporaries agreed that Italy's navy was superior to that of the United States during this time, a belief that helped steer Harrison away from conflict with Italy. Several naval officers also used this incident as an excuse to reinvest in the United States Navy, and seven years later, American naval powers were able to fight and defeat Spain in the Spanish-American War. *Washington Post*, 15 March 1891, p.1, 16 March 1891, p.1; Gentile, *The Innocent Lynched*, 92-93; Richard Gambino, *Blood Of My Blood: The Dilemma of the Italian-Americans* (New York: Anchor Books, 1974), 118. *New York Times*, 17 March 1891, p. 4.

<sup>41</sup> Esposito, an infamous outlaw in Sicily and New Orleans during the 1870s and 1880s, was credited with bringing the Mafia to New Orleans and the rest of the United States. Most scholars now agree that Esposito was not a member of the Mafia, however, and that he more resembled a bandit or common outlaw than a member of the Mafia system. The *New York Times* in 1881 called him "a genuine Italian...black-eyed, swarthy, and wicked," and this description has been credited as the first widely publicized anti-Italian defamation in the United States. Gentile, *The Innocent Lynched*, 50-54; *New York Times*, 9 July 1881, p. 8.

organization proved a costly error on behalf of the Italians, as the American people began fearing the potential dangers of such a crooked underground society.<sup>42</sup>

At a time when anti-Italianism abounded throughout the nation, Americans unsurprisingly accepted the Mafia idea. For many newspapers and their readers, the Mafia proved the only plausible reason for such a failure in the American court system. Some people claimed to have evidence for the existence of the Mafia in the United States, but virtually all of those claims proved groundless. Both the Provenzano faction and David Hennessy claimed to have evidence of a Mafia in New Orleans, but this evidence was never brought forth in either the Provenzano or Matranga trial. If the Mafia did indeed exist, it would never have resorted to the extent of legality that the Italians in New Orleans did. A true Mafia did not bring another faction to court, as happened with the Provenzano case, when the Matranga faction testified against the Provenzanos. Yet the police and press continued to publicize the Mafia concept around the time of the Hennessy trial, and these constant warnings of secret Italian societies undoubtedly affected many opinions on the matter. As the New Orleans newspapers began to publish the concept of a Mafia, more newspapers around the country followed suit. Within a matter of days, the press had invented the Mafia in the United States.<sup>43</sup>

Italians all around the country quickly denounced any relations to the Mafia in a variety of public ways. Secrecy and a code of silence trademarked the Italian Mafia throughout its history, so any open denouncement of the Mafia clearly went against the common Mafia principles. From New York to California, hundreds of thousands of Italians publicly denied any

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<sup>42</sup> Gentile, *The Innocent Lynched*, 11, 49-53, 59-62.

<sup>43</sup> *New Orleans Times*, 15 March 1891, p. 1; *New York Times*, 15 March 1891, p. 1-2; Gentile, *The Innocent Lynched*, 58-62, 89-91.

connections with the Mafia, making the existence of such an apparently widespread organization implausible at best.<sup>44</sup>

While not all newspapers openly celebrated the 1891 lynching of eleven Sicilians in New Orleans, every single one exhibited anti-Italian prejudice in one way or another. From San Francisco to New York, the entire country believed that the victims were guilty. Even the newspapers that eased up on the eleven lynched Sicilians demonstrated clear prejudice against the Italian people. The same anti-Italian fervor that plagued the Hennessy case lasted well into the twentieth century, and the belief in the Mafia's existence in the United States never disappeared. The trial of those accused of David Hennessy's murder and the subsequent lynching of eleven Sicilians soon became lost in history,<sup>45</sup> but the event nevertheless altered the American outlook towards Italians for many years afterward.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Gentile, *The Innocent Lynched*, 58-62, 89-91.

<sup>45</sup> Edward Holmes, a native New Orleanian born in 1922, never recalled having heard of the Hennessy trial or the lynching of eleven Sicilians just a few decades prior. "I've never heard of anything like that," he commented, "but people didn't like Italians, that was for sure." Almost forty years after the incident, the event had been discarded, even in New Orleans; yet the legacy of anti-Italianism clearly kept on chugging.

<sup>46</sup> Gentile, *The Innocent Lynched*, 107-115.

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Located in Maryland, this newspaper held similar beliefs as other northern papers and reported the lynching in a similar way to the *New York Times* and *Philadelphia Enquirer*, reluctant to overtly praise the mob's actions, but subliminally doing so nonetheless.

*Charlotte News*, 1891.

Although located in the South, this newspaper displayed much more rationalized thinking about the incident, especially considering the time period. Unlike most other southern papers, the *Charlotte News* did not express any reluctance to criticize the mob's actions.

*Chicago Inter Ocean*, 1891.

Republican-run newspaper. Chicago held one of the largest Italian populations just before the turn of the twentieth century, so the Republicans, although firmly against immigration, had to be cautious with word choice when reporting the event.

"*Correspondence in Relation to the Killing of Prisoners in New Orleans on March 14, 1891*,"  
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This collection of correspondence contains letters written between Italian and American officials that dealt directly with the incident. The Italians quickly blame the United States officials, while the United States officials try to talk their way out of the blame.

*Dallas Morning News*, 1891.

Texas had few Italian immigrants, yet this newspaper still openly praised the mob's actions. Bordering with and having a similar political background to Louisiana contributed to the Dallas newspaper's treatment of the event.

*Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, 1891.

Published in New York City, this illustrated newspaper covered many popular topics in the given time. This journal was the first to publish one of the mob leader's justifications, clearly demonstrating their underlying support for the mob.

*Harper's Weekly*, 1891.

New York-based national journal that covered many social affairs in the United States. Provided much more defense for the Italian victims than most other northern newspapers of the time.

*Houston Post*, 1891.

Located relatively close to New Orleans, but did not share the same enthusiasm for the mob as other southern newspapers. Proved largely critical of the entire debacle and defended the Italians fairly well in a time of heightened xenophobia.

*Idaho Statesman*, 1891.

Based in Boise, this newspaper largely followed trends in other larger newspapers in the West, expressing gentler opinions about the event than most eastern and southern reports due to lack of experience with Italian and other European immigrants.

*Knoxville Journal*, 1891.

Large Tennessee newspaper that exhibited sincere approval of the mob's actions and rashly accused the jury and the Mafia, following the pattern of most southern newspapers then dominated by both the Democratic Party and their Confederate backgrounds.

*London Post*, 1891.

Popular newspaper in Great Britain that publicly criticized the lynchings. Not too keen on American behaviors in this event and made no effort to conceal its critique.

*Macon Weekly Telegraph*, 1891.

Southern paper that shared similar sentiments as the *Dallas Morning News*, *Knoxville Journal*, and most other southern newspapers. Praised the mob's actions and slandered the jury and the Italian victims.

*Mobile Register*, 1891.

Based in Alabama, this newspaper did not share other southerners' opinions about the lynching. Largely accused the mob and adopted a surprisingly critical tone towards the entire event.

*New Haven Register*, 1891.

Connecticut newspaper dominated by the Republican Party, this paper did not encourage the mob but subtly praised it nonetheless, displaying the anti-immigrant beliefs that the Republican Party held. Attempted to straddle the fence, just in case of Italian backlash.



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One of several major newspapers in New Orleans, the *Picayune* exhibited the same anti-Italian sentiment that populated mainstream New Orleans during this time, attempting to appeal to the common New Orleanian and make some profit in the process.

*New Orleans Times*, 1890-1891.

Another major newspaper in New Orleans, the *Times* unsurprisingly expressed strong anti-Italian sentiment in an Italian-populated city and was eager to please both the common citizen and the wealthy aristocrat of New Orleans.

*New York Illustrated American*, 1891.

A popular national magazine that supplied the public with one of the mob leader's rationalizations for the event, subsequently expressing its underlying support for the lynching.

*New York Times*, 1881, 1884, 1890-1891.

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*Philadelphia Enquirer*, 1891.

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*San Francisco Bulletin*, 1891.

Western newspaper that held kinder words for the Italians involved in the event. This paper showed minimal racism towards the victims, but this was because most of the *Bulletin's* racism was saved for the Asian immigrants.

*San Jose Mercury News*, 1891.

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*Tacoma Daily News*, 1891.

This Washington-based newspaper demonstrated fairly overt racism for a western newspaper, manufacturing its own myths about the Mafia. Held far more anti-Italian sentiments than most other newspapers around the West.

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