

Isolani Beginnings in Martinez

by Vince S. Ferrante
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Attempting to nail down the first of anything while going back in time can be a daunting task. The access of written records is critical. Without that, you piece together the puzzle as best you can. That applies here as we uncover the Isolani beginnings in Martinez, the county seat of Contra Costa County. Often times ethnic groups were left off census records in the early days, perhaps due to a lack of interpreters or for other reasons unexplained. Also, the 1890 federal census records are scant, due to most being destroyed by fire. Our available sources are listed below.

Not unlike Pittsburg, Martinez sits on the shores of the Sacramento Delta, which at one time flourished with fish. Salmon and shad were among the primary harvest. In the late 1800's, Martinez also developed an Italian fishing village along the shoreline area in close proximity to Alhambra Creek and adjacent to Granger's Wharf. A large influx of immigrants arrived from Isola delle Femmine as well as from the neighboring villages of Saint Elia, San Vito Lo Capo, Cattolica and Sferacavallo. The men, of course, would arrive first from the Old Country. Many stayed in the "arcs" or small houseboats as we call them today. Many others stayed in the boarding houses which later became central to leisure activities. They would



Alhambra Creek, Home to Many of the Martinez Fishing Fleet.
Courtesy of Martinez Historical Society



Net Drying Racks on Grangers Wharf ca.1910
Adult in forefront might be Giovanni Flores, an early fish buyer. Courtesy of Martinez Historical Society

secure work, acquire a residence or property of their own and save up to send for their family. This process could take years. An industrious group, they not just manned the fishing boats and the nets, they eventually filled all the occupations that made up a fishery maintaining nets to processing the fish in canneries.

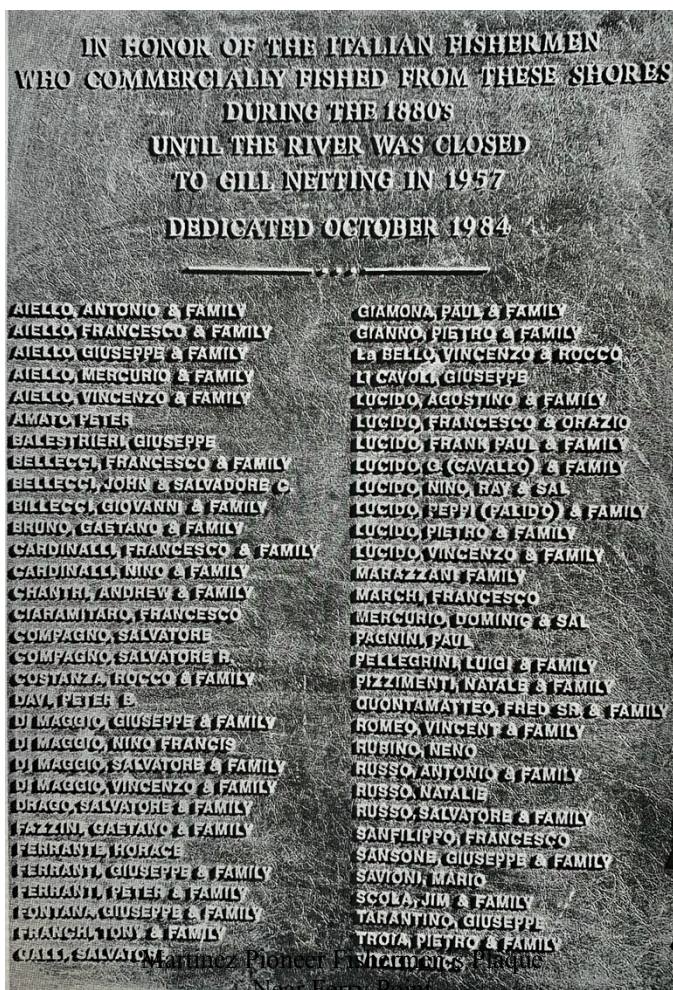
The following are among the first documented Isolani to settle in Martinez, chiefly as fishermen. Giuseppe Fontana emigrated to Martinez in 1895. Giovanni Flores emigrated to America in 1890 and was an early fish buyer in California receiving his license in 1893. Salvatore Costanza emigrated in 1895 and was also an owner of a market. Salvatore along with his brothers opened a

macaroni factory on Howard St. Giovanni Billeci and his adopted son Francisco Giardino-Billeci, both

arrived in 1898. Giovanni, my 2nd great grandfather initially made a go of it as early as 1882 in St. Louis before hitting hard times. He then went back to Isola to recuperate and finally made his way to Martinez. He would become a boss with the Alaska Packers Association.

We know that many Isolani' "fisher" families resettled from the Sicilian fishing village of New York Landing in Black Diamond (present day Pittsburg). Paolo Giamona arrived in Pittsburg in 1898 and relocated to Martinez in 1900. He was followed by his father in law Giuseppe Ferranti who arrived in Pittsburg in 1891 and then moved to Martinez in 1902. Giuseppe DiMaggio, the father of famed baseball brothers Joe, Vince and Dom arrived in Pittsburg in 1898 and moved to Martinez in 1903. Of note is that following the 1906 Great San Francisco Earthquake many families escaped the catastrophe and relocated to the towns of Martinez and Pittsburg to join relatives. Other notable surnames include Cardinalli, Costanza, Lucido and Russo. Many of these surnames are still recognized in Martinez and can also be found in Pittsburg and Monterey to this very day, as many "followed the fish" to Monterey while others stayed in the delta area finding success in other occupations when the delta was closed to commercial fishing.

Martinez still maintains much of its early fishing legacy in the form of many buildings including the "Little Italy" Shoreline residential neighborhood and the family commercial markets which are noted with historical markers. The Alhambra Creek area, where many of the fishing boats once moored, the net tanning vats can still be seen. St. Catherine's of Siena Catholic Church and cemetery dates from the early 1870's where many of our fisher family ancestors were laid to rest and the Fishermen's Monument stands at the Martinez Marina. Our Isolani history in Martinez really makes for a beautiful walk "in the footsteps of our ancestors". Just ask your Nanno.



Near Ferry Point
Courtesy of Martinez Historical Society

Source Information:

1. *History of Contra Costa County*, Slocum & Co., San Francisco (1882).
2. *Martinez: A California Town*, Martinez Historical Society (1982).
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4. *Images of America, Martinez*, Martinez Historical Society (2004).
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6. Bellecci, John, *3 Generations of Success - Sicilian To American: Values for Immigrants and All Who Want to Succeed*, IUniverse (2008).
7. Gumina, Deanna Paoli, *The Italians of San Francisco 1850-1930*, J.S. Ozer (1978).