

A Tour of Chambersburg - Trenton's Little Italy

by Jeanine Botta

Editor's Note: Jeanine Botta is compiling research for The Little Italy Guidebook, a collection of sketches of Little Italy neighborhoods in North America, and collecting photos for The Little Italy Calendar, a related 12-month wall calendar. A web developer, Jeanine's interest was sparked after a visit to Chambersburg, in Trenton, NJ. Chambersburg reminded her of another Little Italy neighborhood, and she began to search for books on the subject. When her search failed to turn up a single publication, she decided to research and write the book.

As real estate prices soar in large cities, the Bohemian neighborhoods of yesterday are beyond most people's means. Many look to smaller cities to recover what was lost - and never look back. With its rivertown charm, proximity to Philadelphia and New York City, an impressive arts community, and affordable homes and lofts, Trenton appeals to artists and business owners alike. Curving around the Delaware River, New Jersey's historic capital city offers graceful architecture and an amalgam of colorful, lively neighborhoods. Chambersburg - Trenton's Little Italy - is one of the city's treasures, and many consider the Chambersburg Restaurant District to be the culinary capital of the Garden State.

In the 1880s, Trenton was an industrial hub, center of the nation's pottery interest, and home to John A. Roebling Works, manufacturer of steel for suspension bridges and employer of thousands. The city's iron, steel, and pottery works flourished, as did manufacturers of bricks, textiles, hardware, jewelry, lumber, railing, and other products. Work was plentiful, and Trenton attracted southern Italians looking to escape poverty, plague, and exploitive working conditions.

Ethnic groups settled in uniform clusters. Italians gravitated toward Chambersburg, building row houses that fanned out north of the Roebling factories. At first, Italian immigrants filled a demand for cheap labor, but in time, they became artisans, business owners, doctors, lawyers, teachers, and elected leaders.

Settlers: English, Scotch, German, and Irish immigrants settled in Trenton in great numbers between 1830 and 1870. Beginning around 1900, thousands of Austrians, Czechoslovakians, Italians, Poles, and Hungarians arrived in Trenton, and more of these groups followed throughout the next twenty years.

Origins: Chambersburg's Italian Americans trace their roots to the Campania and Sicily regions. Many came from the village of Casandrino, and *Festa della Madonna de Casandrino* - feast of Our Lady of the Assumption - honors the patroness of Casandrino.

Boundaries: Covering roughly one square mile, Chambersburg is bounded by Hamilton Avenue to the north, Chambers Street to the east, and Liberty Street to the southeast. The official southwestern border is South Clinton Avenue, but some argue that South Broad Street - two blocks over - is the true southwestern border.

Parish: St. Joachim Church was built in 1901 to accommodate Chambersburg's burgeoning Italian population. Sunday masses still feature readings in Italian.

Population Today: More than 30 ethnicities are represented among Chambersburg's approximate 8,600 residents. Over 2,400 report having Italian ancestry, and ten percent of those are first generation Italians. Latin and South Americans as a whole make up more than half of the population, with Guatemalans strongly represented. Irish, German, Polish, Puerto Ricans, and African Amer-



ADJACENT TO CHAMBERSBURG, the Roebbling Complex spans 45 acres in all. In 1996, the City of Trenton restored the central area of the complex to accommodate 66,000 square feet of office space, the 142,000 square foot mixed use Roebbling Market, and an affordable rental unit for senior citizens. Photo: Jeanine Botta.

icans constitute substantial numbers as well.

Places: The Chambersburg Restaurant District features more than a dozen fine and casual dining establishments, in addition to popular taverns, bakeries, and small eateries that sell espresso, cappuccino, ices, and sweets. Call the Mercer County Chamber of Commerce for its helpful guide at (609) 393-4143. Some Burg restaurants are rated in the Zagat survey as well.

Feasts: The Feast of Our Lady of the Assumption - sometimes called the "Feast of Lights" - has been celebrated in Chambersburg since 1906. The feast begins the Wednesday after Labor Day and runs through the following Monday, with solemn procession on Sunday.

Joe DiMaggio's Corner: Joe DiMaggio frequented Rossi's Bar & Grill at the corner of Morris Avenue and Franklin Street from the early eighties until shortly before his death. A friend of owner Al Rossi from their days in the minor leagues, the former Yankee Clipper would visit when he was in New York or Philadelphia. Al's son Mike Rossi says that aunt Pearl Trotto's soups were a favorite of Joe's, and he'd sometimes call ahead

to make sure Pearl was in. Mercer County dedicated Joe DiMaggio's Corner in 1999.

Mysterious Chambersburg: Award winning author Janet Evanovich has immortalized Chambersburg in her blockbuster Stephanie Plum mystery series, keeping millions of readers entertained since 1994. Although the neighborhood is fictionalized, truth and fiction overlap: Chambersburg is called "the Burg," its residents are called "Burgerbits," and like heroine Plum, many Burgerbits are of Italian and Hungarian descent. Evanovich's latest in the series - *To the Nines* - is currently on the *New York Times* Bestseller List.

Real Estate: Most Burg residents live in row houses built early in the twentieth century, some of which are divided into apartments. A one-bedroom rental costs from \$600 to \$800 a month, a two-bedroom from \$750 to \$850. A semi-detached, three-bedroom house costs from \$50,000 to \$80,000, while larger detached houses costs closer to \$110,000. Industrial space in the Chambersburg area leases for \$3 to \$6 per square foot, and sells for \$10 to \$50 per square foot.