

Little Italy: A Floodplain Neighborhood



The “Upper Levee” along the Mississippi River was the center of Italian culture in St. Paul from the 1880s to the middle of the 1900s. Known as “Little Italy,” this neighborhood lived intimately with the river.

Community Beneath a Bridge

In the 1880s, Italian immigrants joined German and Polish-born squatters on the swampy flats of the Upper Levee, between present day Chestnut Street and the High Bridge. The settlers built shacks from scrap lumber, tin and tarpaper, and elevated them on piles to prevent spring floods from entering. Eventually, as the Upper Levee was built up with refuse from the city, the Italians bought titles to the land and built more substantial houses.

The river figured daily in the life of Little Italy’s residents. An early resident named Guiseppe recalled, “The water in the Mississippi was clear and shallow. Harriet Island was a popular boating and picnic beach reached by row boats from the Levee.” Women washed clothes in the river, and boys dove from log booms. Fish were netted and sold commercially in the city. But by the early 1900s, the river had become very polluted and carried a foul stench; the river became more nuisance than asset.

While surrounded by a noisy, bustling city, Little Italy had a rural character in the early 1900s. Ducks, chickens and goats were quite common, and most residents had gardens where they grew tomatoes, endive, peppers, zucchini, and other vegetables. Early residents obtained their water from a nearby spring.

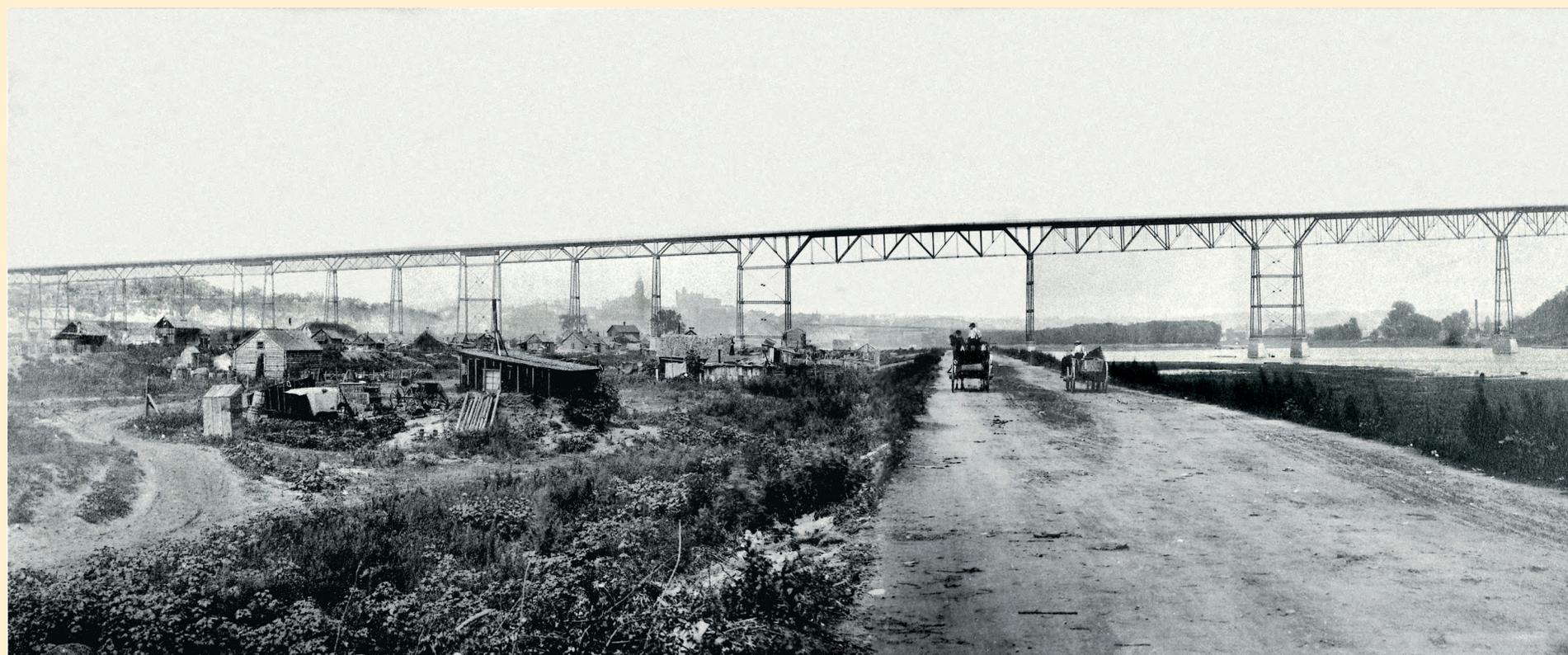
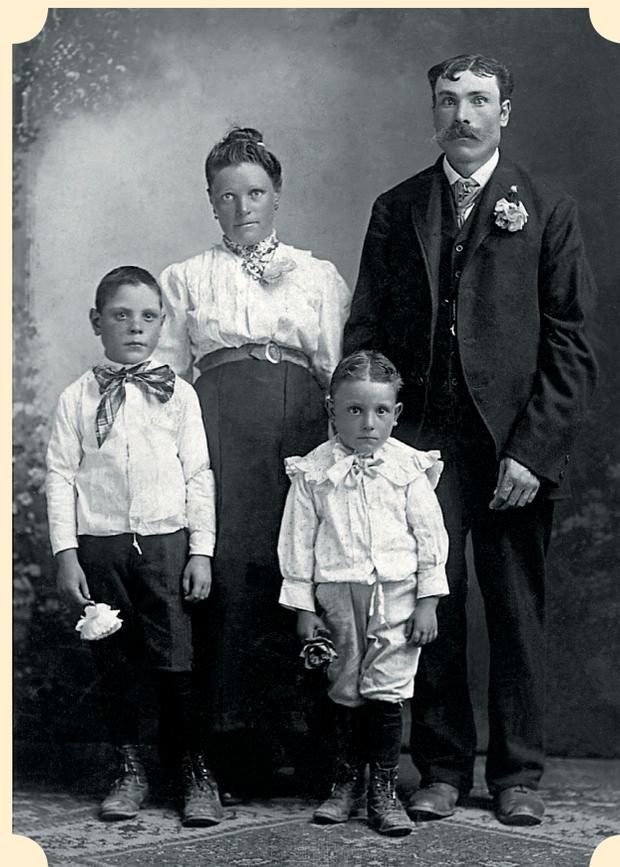


Photo above: Little Italy as it appeared around 1889. Located on the Mississippi River’s Upper Levee below the High Bridge, this isolated Italian community survived for over half a century. *Photo: Minnesota Historical Society.*

Photo at left: This 1938 portrait depicts one of several families that resided in Little Italy. Most of the families living in Little Italy originated from two small towns in southern Italy. *Photo: Minnesota Historical Society.*



The Italian Immigrants

Most of the Italians living in Little Italy had been farmers who left Italy because of land shortages, malaria, droughts, and high taxes. Employment opportunities attracted them to the growing city of St. Paul. Many of the men were employed by the railroad bordering their community. The life of a railroad laborer was difficult and working conditions were harsh. The men typically worked ten or more hours a day for a daily pay of approximately \$1.50. Injury and death from explosions, cave-ins, exposure, and train collisions were not uncommon.



Location of Little Italy along Mississippi River

Demise of Little Italy

The Upper Levee community was subjected to frequent springtime floods, but its residents were generally able to endure. In 1952, however, the Mississippi River breached the dike, forcing the evacuation of most residents and causing structural damage to their homes. This flooding prompted the City of St. Paul to rezone the area for industrial use and to allow for the construction of Shepard Road. The last residents were evicted in 1959 despite their protests. Many of the displaced residents resettled on St. Paul’s East Side.



Photo above: “Governor” Todora and Mrs. Todora rowed through the streets of Little Italy during the flood of 1952. *Photo: Minnesota Historical Society.*

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