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## The Piazza Brothers: From Italian Immigrants to Industry Leaders in Mississippi, 1853–1914

*By Shaun Stalzer*

Through hard work and industrious spirit, the Piazza brothers became successful leaders in the agricultural, tannery, grocery, restaurant, theater, and hotel industries in Mississippi during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They represented a select group of Italians who migrated to Mississippi during the antebellum era and preceded the much larger Italian diaspora to America that occurred during the 1880s to 1920s. Upon their arrival they faced significant social and cultural obstacles while they navigated a foreign country not always receptive to Italian immigrants.



*Portrait of the Piazza Brothers<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Undated photograph of the Piazza brothers. Public Members Photos and Scanned Documents, Ancestry.com. Uploaded on January 4, 2017. Available at: [https://www.ancestryinstitution.com/mediaui-viewer/tree/9081525/person/6882701591/media/091ace56-821f-4cbb-8f58-c98ee8a560af?\\_phsrc=joR118&\\_phstart=successSource](https://www.ancestryinstitution.com/mediaui-viewer/tree/9081525/person/6882701591/media/091ace56-821f-4cbb-8f58-c98ee8a560af?_phsrc=joR118&_phstart=successSource).

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Yet they established themselves as leaders in the business community for over half a century and became synonymous with the development of the towns of Crystal Springs and Vicksburg. This work utilizes a variety of sources to document who the Piazzas were, and how they became successful business leaders in Mississippi. The primary focus will be on three of the brothers: Natale (1830–1914), Frank (1835–1907), and Vincent (1841–1924). Appendix One provides brief biographical sketches of the brothers. Appendix Two provides a small sample of the performances held at the Vicksburg Opera House while owned by the



Piazzas. Appendix Three is a list of the county taxes paid by the Piazzas in Copiah and Warren counties during this time period.

*Photograph of Natale Piazza<sup>2</sup>*

### **Italian Origins**

The Piazza brothers originally came from Faenza,<sup>3</sup> a small city in the Emilia-Romagna region of Italy, situated at the foothills of the Apennine Mountains.<sup>4</sup> The city was built during the Roman era and is well known

<sup>2</sup> Natale is wearing an Order of the Crown of Italy medal in the photograph. Undated photograph of Natale Piazza. Public Members Photos and Scanned Documents. Ancestry.com. Uploaded on September 11, 2016. Available at: [https://www.ancestryinstitution.com/mediaui-viewer/tree/61351519/person/48069433614/media/c3904ffc-4325-46d9-81a2-7fec1098e16d?\\_phsrc=joR1118&\\_phstart=successSource](https://www.ancestryinstitution.com/mediaui-viewer/tree/61351519/person/48069433614/media/c3904ffc-4325-46d9-81a2-7fec1098e16d?_phsrc=joR1118&_phstart=successSource).

<sup>3</sup> “Memorial for Natale Piazza,” Findagrave.com. Memorial 13995551. Created on April 18, 2006. Available at <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/13995551/natale-r.-piazza>.

<sup>4</sup> “Faenza,” Emilia Romagna tourism website. Accessed August 16, 2021. Available at <https://emiliaromagnaturismo.it/en/towns/faenza>.

for its ceramics and agricultural production. Little is known about the family's early history, but during the mid-nineteenth century Italy underwent considerable social and political upheaval that precipitated much of the Italian diaspora to the Americas.<sup>5</sup>

At least one brother, Natale Piazza, fought in the Italian revolutions of 1848-1849.<sup>6</sup> Military records are not available for the Emilia-Romagna region during the pre-unification era, but based on Natale's birth city, he likely served as part of the Papal States army fighting against Austrian forces.<sup>7</sup> Although the Italian armies were defeated in the 1840s during this phase of the *Risorgimento*, popular figures such as Giuseppe Garibaldi eventually led Italy to national unification in 1861.<sup>8</sup>

### Italians in Mississippi

The Piazzas moved to Mississippi in 1853, preceding the height of the Italian diaspora to America from the 1880s to the 1920s. According to historian Russell Magnaghi, the first phase of Italian immigration consisted mainly of northern Italians who arrived in small numbers, became businessmen, or entered crafts, while being rapidly assimilated into the local society. This first phase matches the Piazzas' experience perfectly. In contrast, the second phase of immigrants consisted largely of individuals from southern Italy, especially Sicily, who often became laborers on plantations. The latter group experienced greater discrimination and even lynchings in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>9</sup>

Why was Mississippi a destination for the Piazzas and other Italian immigrants? The state's close proximity to New Orleans and the relative ease of moving up the Mississippi River certainly played a role. Moreover, Italians had a long connection with the history of the region, taking part in the Hernando De Soto expedition in the 1540s and serving in various

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<sup>5</sup> John A. Davis, *Italy in the Nineteenth Century 1796-1900* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). For a more comprehensive discussion of the aftermath of the Napoleonic Era in Italy, see Alexander Grab, *Napoleon and the Transformation of Europe* (London: Red Globe Press, 2003), and Denis Mack Smith, *Italy: A Modern History*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969).

<sup>6</sup> "Natale Piazza is Dead at Age 83," *Vicksburg Evening Post*, February 28, 1914, p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> "Italy Military Records," Familysearch.org. Last edited on May 20, 2021. Available at: [https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Italy\\_Military\\_Records](https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Italy_Military_Records).

<sup>8</sup> John A. Davis, *Italy in the Nineteenth Century, 1796-1900* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 132-153. For a good biography of Garibaldi, see Lucy Riall, *Garibaldi: Invention of a Hero* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

<sup>9</sup> Russell M. Magnaghi, "Louisiana's Italian Immigrants Prior To 1870." *Louisiana History*, XXVII, (Winter 1986): 68.

capacities during the French and Spanish colonial eras.<sup>10</sup> An example from the early nineteenth century is Pierre Maspero (1771–1822), who was born in Como, Italy, and emigrated to New Orleans, where he opened the New Exchange Coffee House on Chartres Street. The coffee house became a popular meeting place for planters and merchants in the city, and an often told, but apocryphal story is that General Andrew Jackson planned the defense of New Orleans there in 1814.<sup>11</sup> These early Italians paved the way for future generations to live and settle in Mississippi.

The chart below shows the foreign-born Italian immigrant population from 1850 to 1920 at both the national and state level.<sup>12</sup> As can be seen, Mississippi represented only a small section of the Italian immigrant population in the United States. Remarkably, the Piazza brothers moved to Mississippi at a time when there were only a little over a hundred Italian immigrants in the entire state. Because of this small sample size, the Piazzas offer perhaps the best-documented example of these early Italian immigrants to Mississippi.

#### Italian Immigrant Totals, 1850–1920<sup>13</sup>

To continue this statistical analysis at the county level, the

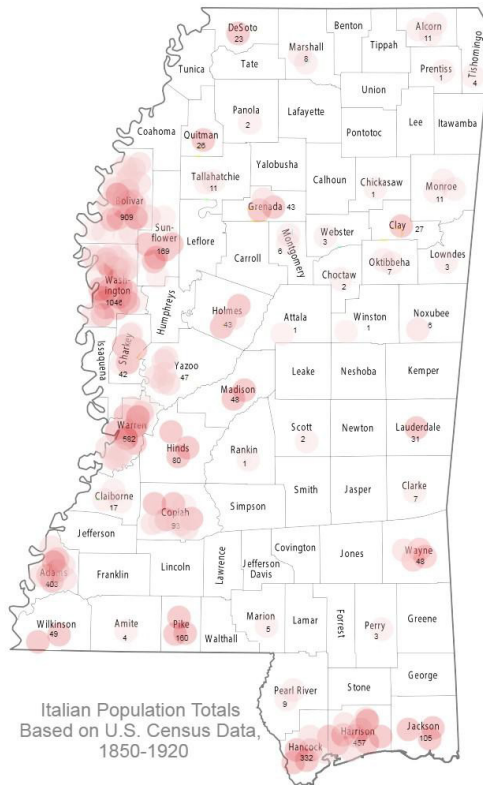
<sup>10</sup> "Italians in Mississippi," *Mississippi History Now*. MDAH. Accessed August 8, 2021. <https://mshistorynow.mdah.ms.gov/issue/italians-in-mississippi>.

<sup>11</sup> Russell M. Magnaghi, "Louisiana's Italian Immigrants Prior To 1870." *Louisiana History*, Vol. 27 (Winter 1986): 43-68. Samuel Wilson, "Maspero's Exchange: Its Predecessors and Successors," *Louisiana History*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (Spring, 1989), 191-220.

<sup>12</sup> Campbell Gibson and Emily Lennon, "Historical Census Statistics on the Foreign-Born Population of the United States: 1950-1990. U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1999. Available at <https://www.census.gov/history/pdf/1910foreignbornpop.pdf>. Each census year was consulted to gather statistics: 1850 Census, Table XV, Nativities of the Population of the US, page xxxvi. Available at: <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1850/1850a/1850a-06.pdf>. 1860 Census, Table 5, Nativities of the Free Born Population, page 271. Available at: <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1860/population/1860a-22.pdf>. 1870 Census, Table VII, Nativities by Counties, page 361. Available at: <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1870/population/1870a-35.pdf>. 1880 Census, Table XIV, Native and Foreign Born Population by County, page 516. Available at: [https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1880/vol-01-population/1880\\_v1-14.pdf](https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1880/vol-01-population/1880_v1-14.pdf). 1890 Census, Table 33, Foreign Born Population by County, page 637-638. Available at: [https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1890/volume-1/1890a\\_v1-16.pdf](https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1890/volume-1/1890a_v1-16.pdf). 1900 Census, Table 34, Foreign Born Population by County, page 764. Available at: <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1900/volume-1/volume-1-p13.pdf>. 1910 Census, Table I, Foreign Born Population by County, page 1044-1059. Available at: <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1910/volume-2/volume-2-p9.pdf>. 1920 Census, Table 12, Foreign Born Population by County, page 543. Available at: <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1920/volume-3/41084484v3ch05.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

Italian Immigrant Population, 1850-1920		
Year	U.S.	Mississippi
1850	3,679	121
1860	11,677	114
1870	17,157	147
1880	44,230	260
1890	182,580	425
1900	484,027	845
1910	1,343,125	2,137
1920	1,610,113	1,841



Mississippi counties with the largest Italian populations spanning this time period were Washington (1,046), Bolivar (909), and Warren (582). There was a large uptick in Italian migration after 1880, which coincides with the second wave of mostly southern Italians noted previously. This group largely went to the Delta counties to work on plan-

tations, although a significant portion also went to the coastal counties of Hancock, Harrison, and Jackson. These coastal counties are close to New Orleans and contain the cities of Bay St. Louis, Gulfport, and Biloxi. Coming in at number three on the list is Warren County, which contains Vicksburg, where the Piazzas eventually settled and established their business empire. The map on page 65 shows where Italian immigrants settled in Mississippi.

### Mississippi Beginnings

The Piazza brothers emigrated from Italy and settled in Crystal Springs in Copiah County in 1853.<sup>14</sup> They started working in the tanning business and also were some of the earliest pioneers in the fruit and vegetable growing industry in Crystal Springs (the self-proclaimed “Tomatopolis of the World.”)<sup>15</sup>

The Piazza brothers owned a plantation and vineyard of several acres a few miles south of Crystal Springs situated along the banks of Turkey Creek.<sup>16</sup> There are references to their growing tomatoes, grapes, celery, radishes, cotton, strawberries, and peaches for market during this time period.<sup>17</sup> Their greatest success came with the production of tomatoes and grapes. Their method for training tomato plants was described as follows:

They have about two acres in the vegetable, and their mode of pruning was introduced here from Italy. The tomatoes resembled a beautiful vineyard and the golden fruit hung as thickly as clusters of grapes. The great benefit to be derived from this system of pruning, is the ripening of the fruit, nearly all at one time, hastening them into market early in the season before prices go down. All the laterals are taken out, and only one single plant allowed to remain, which is trained to a stalk—and the top cut off leaving each plant about two or three feet in height. The secret of the system is that instead

<sup>14</sup> “Natale Piazza is Dead at Age 83,” *Vicksburg Evening Post*, February 28, 1914, p. 1.

<sup>15</sup> Copiah County Historical Files. Works Progress Administration County Files. p. 13. Available via the Mississippi Library Commission: <https://mlc.lib.ms.us/wp-content/uploads/Digitized%20Microfilms%20/Copiah%20County.pdf>.

<sup>16</sup> “Trip to the Country—Tomato Growing,” *The Comet*, June 26, 1880, p. 4.

<sup>17</sup> District 1; Annual, Monthly and Special Lists: Records of the Internal Revenue Service, 1791-2006; Jan-Dec 1866. Ancestry.com. p. 55. Available at [https://www.ancestryinstitution.com/imageviewer/collections/1264/images/rhusa1862\\_101906-00068?treeid=&personid=&hintid=&queryId=79d54751764f75d173af113c72d3bee7&usePUB=true&\\_phsrc=joR126&\\_phstart=successSource&usePUBJs=true&pId=7920165](https://www.ancestryinstitution.com/imageviewer/collections/1264/images/rhusa1862_101906-00068?treeid=&personid=&hintid=&queryId=79d54751764f75d173af113c72d3bee7&usePUB=true&_phsrc=joR126&_phstart=successSource&usePUBJs=true&pId=7920165). “Vegetable Crops,” *The Comet*, March 11, 1882, p. 4. “Paragraphs of All Sorts,” *The Comet*, November 20, 1880, p. 4. “Raising Celery,” *The Comet*, January 14, 1882, p. 4.

of having so much superfluous foliage taken up by the plant it is thrown into the fruit. The French adopt a similar plan, but not so successfully as that of the Italians. Messrs. Piazza Bros. will net fully \$250 per acre from this pruning system which calls for a great deal of perseverance and attention to make it a success. We learn that they expect to bring over several Italians another year; and embark more closely in this business which they seem to so thoroughly understand.<sup>18</sup>

During the late nineteenth century, agricultural production in the Crystal Springs area was aided by the expansion of railroads across the state. The completion of the New Orleans, Jackson, and Great Northern railroad in 1858 offered service from New Orleans to Jackson, while the expansion of the Illinois Central opened up larger markets in the North such as Chicago in the 1870s.<sup>19</sup> This expansion proved to be a tremendous boon for the Piazzas' agricultural enterprises. One article summarized the nascent industry:

"Tomatoes and other vegetables were being shipped north as early as 1876, but shipping on a large scale did not begin until a decade or more later. In 1889, Crystal Springs shippers sent a representative north to investigate markets and this was apparently the start of the really big commercial shipping operations for the Copiah city. Crystal Springs had a big advantage over its northern competitors. The Crystal Springs tomatoes could hit northern markets about the time northern farmers began planting."<sup>20</sup>

The history of the relationship between the tomato and Crystal Springs solidified as the industry expanded in the twentieth century. By the time it reached its peak in 1927, Crystal Springs was reportedly the largest tomato producing region in the United States, and in the 1930s the city began an annual festival dedicated to the tomato that is still observed today.<sup>21</sup>

The Piazzas were also prodigious growers of grapes. In 1873, they grew some 20,000 pounds of grapes.<sup>22</sup> Reports indicate they grew the

<sup>18</sup> "Trip to the Country—Tomato Growing," *The Comet*, June 26, 1880, p. 4.

<sup>19</sup> "Copiah County Historical Files," Works Progress Administration County Files, pp. 181 and 187. Available via the Mississippi Library Commission: <https://mlc.lib.ms.us/wp-content/uploads/Digitized%20Microfilms%20/Copiah%20County.pdf>.

<sup>20</sup> "Meeting Your Mississippi Neighbors," *Jackson Clarion Ledger*, February 6, 1955. MDAH. Subject Files.

<sup>21</sup> "The Crystal Springs Tomato Industry—Then and Now," *The Meteor*, May 20, 1992. MDAH. Subject Files. "Good Reason to Make Merry, Real Cause for a Jubilee," *Clarion Ledger*, June 24, 1932, p. 6.

<sup>22</sup> "Local Brevities," *The Vicksburg Herald*, August 16, 1873, p. 4.



Delaware, Ives' seedling, Concord, and Catawba varieties of grapes over the years.<sup>23</sup> The success of their grape production in 1880 is described in the following excerpt:

Mr. Piazza has on hand 300 crates ready for shipping. A crate holds about 24 quarts or so many pounds. They are carefully cut and placed in the quart boxes, so as to show off the best advantage—put into the crates, and shipped to New Orleans or Chicago, wherever they command best prices. Grapes are now worth, in New Orleans, from 10 to 20 cents per pound. Mr. Piazza expects to ship between five and six tons. Those not shipped will be made into wine.<sup>24</sup>

Although the Piazzas moved on to other business ventures in the following decades, their contribution to the truck farming industry in Crystal Springs was significant. They perhaps did as much as any other family to bring the truck farming industry to Crystal Springs, and it was their success in agriculture that allowed them to pursue further business ventures in the state.

### Saddlery Business

The Piazzas also entered the tanning and saddlery business in 1854.<sup>25</sup> According to Natale's obituary, the Piazzas operated saddleries in Crystal Springs and Clinton until the end of the Civil War and also

in Vicksburg after 1870.<sup>26</sup> Few sources document their work in the antebellum period, but during the Civil War, receipts indicate that they sold leather for shoes and saddles, as well as wool and horses to the

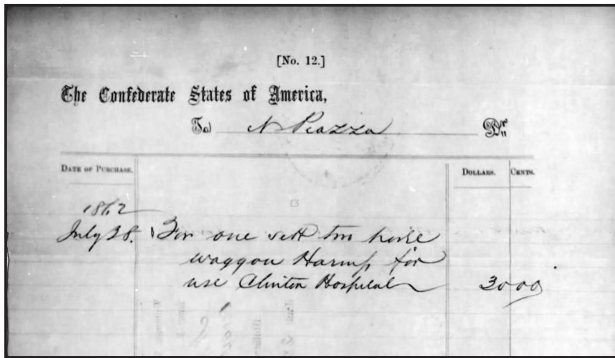
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<sup>23</sup> "Trip to the Country—Tomato Growing," *The Comet*, June 26, 1880, p. 4. "Local Matters," *The Vicksburg Herald*, July 29, 1877, p. 3. "Local Matters," *The Vicksburg Herald*, August 16, 1877, p. 3. "Crystal Springs Correspondence," *The Weekly Clarion*, July 3, 1878, p. 3.

<sup>24</sup> "Trip to the Country—Tomato Growing," *The Comet*, June 26, 1880, p. 4.

<sup>25</sup> Untitled Article. *The Yazoo Herald*, October 27, 1876, p. 3.

<sup>26</sup> Natale Piazza is Dead at Age 83," *Vicksburg Evening Post*, February 28, 1914, p. 1.



*Receipt for a Two Horse Wagon Harness*<sup>27</sup>

Confederate army.<sup>28</sup> This materiel was important for the war effort, and the Piazzas likely stayed busy during the war years. For example, the voucher on page 68, dated July 28, 1862, documents a set of harnesses for a two-horse wagon fabricated by the Piazzas that was used for a hospital in Clinton.

Further research indicates that the same wagon harness was used by the Confederate army, which created a makeshift hospital on the first floor of Provine Chapel on the campus of Mississippi College in Clinton. Both Confederate (in 1862) and Union forces (in 1863) used the chapel as a hospital for wounded soldiers during the war.<sup>29</sup>

After the war, the Piazzas opened a saddle and harness business in Vicksburg on Washington Street. Records indicate that the Piazzas operated the saddlery from 1871 until 1911.<sup>30</sup> After moving to Vicksburg, Natale partnered with William Beaty, who had already been operating a saddlery in the city since at least 1855.<sup>31</sup> The Piazza and Beaty partnership lasted until 1873, when they dissolved the partnership amicably, and the Piazza brothers took over sole ownership of the Washington Street location.<sup>32</sup> In 1876, Natale also briefly partnered with Joseph L. Maganos in a sewed and screw-wired boot factory located on Washington and Crawford streets. The factory employed nine people,

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> There is no indication from military records that the Piazzas saw service during the war. "Confederate Papers Relating to Citizens or Business Firms, 1861-65," Fold3.com. National Archives. Available at <https://www.fold3.com/image/49792616>.

<sup>29</sup> Walter Howell, *Town & Gown: The Saga of Clinton and Mississippi College* (Clinton, MS: Walter Howell Books), 131. See also Richard and Nannie McLemore, *The History of Mississippi College* (Jackson, MS: Hederman Bros.), 77.

<sup>30</sup> "Natale Piazza is Dead at Age 83," *Vicksburg Evening Post*, February 28, 1914, p. 1.

<sup>31</sup> "New Saddlery Warehouse," *Vicksburg Daily Whig*, July 7, 1855, p. 3. "Advertisement," *The Vicksburg Herald*, December 6, 1868, p. 4. "Advertisement," *The Vicksburg Daily Times*, September 14, 1871, p. 1.

<sup>32</sup> "Dissolution of Partnership," *The Vicksburg Herald*, April 16, 1873, p. 1.

and its goal was to make Vicksburg the “shoe market of the South.”<sup>33</sup> No mention of the success of the boot factory can be found, however, and Maganos had moved on to the saloon business by 1884.<sup>34</sup> Nonetheless, Natale continued in the saddlery profession and in 1896 furnished the Vicksburg Hospital with a regulation army ambulance that replaced an old vehicle worn out by an increase in malaria and smallpox cases in the area.<sup>35</sup> In 1911, Natale suffered a stroke and was unable to continue working in the profession.



*William Tillman's Saddlery Store on Washington and Clay Streets in Vicksburg, circa 1861–1865 (one block away from where the Piazzas's saddlery was located after the war).<sup>36</sup>*

In addition to the saddlery store, the Piazzas also owned or leased a variety of other businesses during this time period in Vicksburg, almost all concentrated on Washington Street. These businesses included an opera house, hotels, a saloon and oyster house, a grocery and dry goods

<sup>33</sup> “Jos. L. Maganos & Co.,” *The Vicksburg Herald*, September 1, 1876, p. 8.

<sup>34</sup> “Card of Thanks,” *The Vicksburg Herald*, June 29, 1884, p. 4.

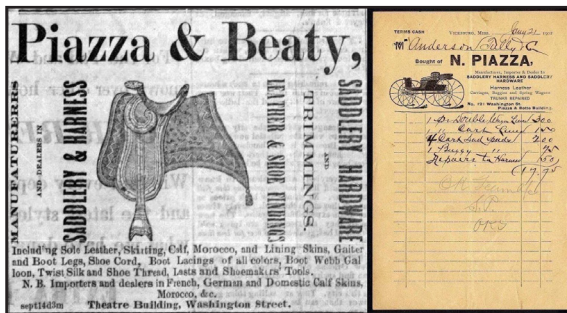
<sup>35</sup> “News Items,” *The Daily Commercial Herald*, October 24, 1896, p. 6. “Ordered an Army Ambulance,” *The Daily Commercial Herald*, August 4, 1896, p. 5.

<sup>36</sup> “Street view in Vicksburg, Miss.,” Library of Congress, accessed August 15, 2021, available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2013649018>. *Vicksburg City Directory*, 1860. (H. C. Clarke, Publisher), accessed August 18, 2021, available at <https://sites.rootsweb.com/~holler/dir1860.htm>.

store, billiard tables, barber chairs, a mineral well, and a cigar store.<sup>37</sup>

### Saloon, Restaurant, and Grocery Businesses

Frank Piazza opened a saloon known as “The Bank” in late 1865 at the corner of Washington and Crawford streets in Vicksburg. It advertised the best brands of wines, liquors, and cigars and was located under the Vicksburg theater. In 1868, his business model appears to have shifted, as he began offering fresh oysters on the shell to patrons.<sup>38</sup> By 1873, he advertised fresh fish, oyster, and beef lunches every day, and offered families reduced prices.<sup>39</sup> On Christmas Day that year, he served oyster soup, roasted pig, wild turkey, and red fish.<sup>40</sup>



*Newspaper Advertisement and Receipt for Piazza's Saddlery Store<sup>41</sup>*

The 1870 Census offers insight into the individuals whom Frank Piazza employed at the saloon-restaurant. He relied on immigrants and persons of color as well as other Italians: J. Cunio (bartender) and L. S. Lastaly (bartender), as well as Benjamin Buckearty (bartender) from France. The Black staff included S. Camper (cook), L. Bricksby (domestic

<sup>37</sup> The mineral well was on Vincent Piazza's property on East Grove Street near 5th North Street in Vicksburg. The water was sold for 25 cents delivered anywhere in the city, or 10 cents in person. Series 1208 Privilege Taxes. Record Group 29 Auditor. MDAH. The Piazzas paid taxes on the following businesses from 1870-1899: retail liquor, opera house, saddlery and harness store, hotel, merchant, pool and billiard tables, barber chairs, cigar store, and grocery.

<sup>38</sup> “Bank Saloon,” *The Vicksburg Herald*, October 10, 1868, p. 2.

<sup>39</sup> “Piazza's Bank Saloon,” *The Vicksburg Herald*, December 10, 1873, p.3.

<sup>40</sup> “Lunch at Piazza's Today,” *The Vicksburg Herald*, December 25, 1873, p. 4.

<sup>41</sup> “Advertisement,” *The Vicksburg Daily Times*, September 14, 1871, p. 1. “N. Piazza Business Receipt.” Public Member Photos and Scanned Documents, Ancestry.com. Uploaded on June 3, 2019. Available at [https://www.ancestryinstitution.com/mediaui-viewer/tree/9081525/person/6882701591/media/82a9b87b-90f0-4834-9a13-62a6e6e06a99?\\_phsrc=joR118&\\_phstart=successSource](https://www.ancestryinstitution.com/mediaui-viewer/tree/9081525/person/6882701591/media/82a9b87b-90f0-4834-9a13-62a6e6e06a99?_phsrc=joR118&_phstart=successSource).

servant), and George Williams (porter).<sup>42</sup>

The Bank Saloon is not mentioned in newspapers after 1874, but Frank Piazza did open a grocery store at the corner of Cherry and Grove streets that he operated continuously until his death in 1907 (after which his son, John, took over the business).<sup>43</sup> Frank's brother, Louis Piazza, also owned a grocery and dry goods store on Grove Street from 1889 until his death in 1897.<sup>44</sup>

Frank Piazza was also president of the Italian benevolent society, Margherita di Savoia, a fraternal organization for the Italian community of Vicksburg. Although little is known about this organization, in the 1890s the society held an annual picnic at Magnolia Hall Grove four miles southeast of the city. The event celebrated the beginning of the Italian revolutions in 1848, and the society was named after the Italian queen of the same name.<sup>45</sup> Their tacit acceptance in the community was demonstrated by the notable guests in attendance: George S. Irving, president of the Warren County Board of Supervisors, and U.S. Representative T. C. Catchings.<sup>46</sup>

On the other hand, local merchant Vincent Bonelli also attended the picnic, which is of interest because in 1874 he and two of his brothers had to temporarily flee Vicksburg due to threats from a local lynch mob.<sup>47</sup> Such threats highlight just how precarious daily life for Italian immigrants could be in the South (a fact only confirmed by the rise of lynchings during this time). As Gauthreaux states, "The racial classification of Italians also became important to the southern white ideology. With these immigrants, nativists considered them white as long as they did not attempt to upset the white power structure in the

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<sup>42</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, 1870. Vicksburg Ward 4, Warren County, Mississippi. Ancestry.com. Available at [https://www.ancestryinstitution.com/imageviewer/collections/7163/images/4273809\\_00512?usePUB=true&\\_phsrc=s1m153&\\_phstart=successSource&usePUBjs=true&pId=36486853](https://www.ancestryinstitution.com/imageviewer/collections/7163/images/4273809_00512?usePUB=true&_phsrc=s1m153&_phstart=successSource&usePUBjs=true&pId=36486853). Additional genealogical searches for these employees yielded no results.

<sup>43</sup> "Frank Piazza & Son," *Vicksburg Evening Post*, January 17, 1907, p. 8. "Frank Piazza is Dead," *The Vicksburg Herald*, July 6, 1907, p. 5.

<sup>44</sup> "Burglary on Grove Street," *Vicksburg Evening Post*, September 4, 1889, p. 4.

<sup>45</sup> "The Society of Margarita de Savoia," *Vicksburg Evening Post*, June 16, 1890, p. 4.

<sup>46</sup> "The Italian Picnic," *Vicksburg Evening Post*, June 8, 1891, p. 1.

<sup>47</sup> "A Voice from the Departed," *The Vicksburg Herald*, August 18, 1874, p. 1. "Vincent Bonelli Returns," *The Vicksburg Herald*, August 20, 1874, p. 1.

South.”<sup>48</sup> A second possibility was the threat of economic competition that such immigrant businessmen represented to the nativist members of the community. The Bonelli example provides too few details to know what happened conclusively, but other lynching cases of Italians offer more information.<sup>49</sup>

### Natale as Italian Consul

Natale Piazza was also the Italian Royal Consular Agent for Mississippi, serving in that post for some thirty years.<sup>50</sup> The most urgent matter that required his attention during his term in office was the lynching of Italians in the region.<sup>51</sup> The number of Italians lynched in the South is estimated to be at least twenty-four, resulting from six separate incidents dating from the years 1886 to 1910. As consul for Mississippi, Natale Piazza personally aided in the investigation of three of these incidents: Vicksburg, Mississippi, in 1886; Tallulah, Louisiana,

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<sup>48</sup> Alan Gauthreaux, *An Inhospitable Land: Anti-Italian Sentiment and Violence in Louisiana, 1891-1924*. Master's thesis, (University of New Orleans, 2007), 14. See also: Alan Gauthreaux, "An Inhospitable Land: Anti-Italian Sentiment and Violence in Louisiana, 1891-1924." *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 51, no. 1 (2010): 41-68.

<sup>49</sup> For more information on the concept of varying degrees of whiteness, see: Brent Staples, "How Italians Became White," *The New York Times*, October 12, 2019. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/10/12/opinion/columbus-day-italian-american-racism.html>; and Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

<sup>50</sup> "Natale Piazza is Dead at Age 83," *Vicksburg Evening Post*, February 28, 1914, p. 1.

<sup>51</sup> The most infamous, and best studied, case of the lynching of Italians came in 1891 when eleven Italians were lynched by a mob of nearly 10,000 in New Orleans after the death of police chief David Hennessy. For a more in-depth analysis of the 1891 lynching consult: Alan Gauthreaux, "An Inhospitable Land: Anti-Italian Sentiment and Violence in Louisiana, 1891-1924," Master's Thesis, (University of New Orleans, 2007); Richard Gambino, *Vendetta: The True Story of the Largest Lynching in U.S. History* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977). Patrizia Salvetti, *Rope and Soap: Lynchings of Italians in the United States* (Bordighera Press, 2017). Jessica Barbata Jackson, *Dixie's Italians: Sicilians, Race, and Citizenship in the Jim Crow Gulf South* (LSU Press, 2020).

in 1899; and Erwin, Mississippi, in Washington County in 1901.<sup>52</sup>

The first reported lynching of an Italian in Mississippi occurred in 1886 in Vicksburg. Federico Villarosa, an Italian fruit vendor, was arrested for the attempted rape of a ten-year-old girl. After being taken to the county jail, the local sheriff requested that the governor send the militia to maintain order, but they ultimately failed to prevent a mob from hanging Villarosa from a tree in front of the jail. This case is notable because it was the only example of an Italian victim in which the justification for the lynching was an alleged sexual crime (as opposed to economic competition or the victim's ethnicity). The Italian-language press in the U.S. condemned the extrajudicial killing, stating that lynchings were typically reserved for those who had already confessed to crimes or who were found guilty in court. Despite protests from Italian officials and the press, no actions were taken against any of those who lynched Villarosa.<sup>53</sup>

The second example occurred when five Sicilians were lynched in Tallulah, Louisiana, just across the Mississippi River from Vicksburg, in 1899. The victims included three brothers, Frank, Joseph, and Rosario Defatta, as well as Giovanni Cirano and Guiseppe "Joe" Defina, all of whom were natives of Sicily, working as fruit vendors and grocers in the small Louisiana town. The three brothers were naturalized U.S. citizens, while the other two were still Italian citizens. Disagreements allegedly began with Dr. J. Ford Hodge over a goat kept by one of the Defattas, leading to a physical altercation, the doctor being injured, and ending ultimately with the lynching of the Italians by unidentified

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<sup>52</sup> The six lynchings are Vicksburg, Mississippi, in 1886; New Orleans, Louisiana, in 1891; Hahnville, Louisiana, in 1896; Tallulah, Louisiana, in 1899; Erwin, Mississippi, in 1901; and Tampa, Florida, in 1910. Lynchings of Italians also occurred outside the South: Louisville, Kentucky, in 1899; Denver, Colorado, in 1893; and Walsenburg, Colorado, in 1895. Additional attacks against Italians that are connected more with the history of labor protests and violence also occurred in Eureka, Nevada, in 1879; Ashdown, Arkansas, in 1901; and Davis, West Virginia, in 1903. See Patrizia Salvetti, *Rope and Soap: Lynchings of Italians in the United States*, (New York: Bordighera Press, 2017), p. 41-166. Jessica Barbata Jackson, *Dixie's Italians: Sicilians, Race, and Citizenship in the Jim Crow Gulf South* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2020), 83 and 101-126. Patrizia Famà Stahle, "The Italian Emigration of Modern Times," (PhD diss., University of Southern Mississippi, 2010), 70-162. It is important to note that the number of Italians lynched is small in comparison to the data for African Americans lynched during this same time period (with one estimate placing the number at 3,446). Mississippi also led the nation in lynchings with a total of 581 for both races according to the Tuskegee Institute. C. W. Johnson, "Tuskegee University," Tuskegee University Archives. Available at: <http://archive.tuskegee.edu/repository/digital-collection/lynching-information/>.

<sup>53</sup> Patrizia Salvetti, *Rope and Soap: Lynchings of Italians in the United States*, (Bordighera Press, 2017), 42.

members of the community.<sup>54</sup>

Natale Piazza helped with the investigation into the murders of the five Italian men, working alongside Enrico Cavalli, a representative of the Italian consulate for Louisiana.<sup>55</sup> According to one source, “The investigators studied citizenship papers at the parish courthouse, viewed the scene of the attack on Dr. Hodge, examined the sites of the hangings and conferred with several witnesses to the grisly incident.” Natale also paid the funerary cost to have the men reinterred in a Vicksburg cemetery.<sup>56</sup>

In his official communications, Natale noted the difficulties of getting any sworn affidavits as part of the investigation due to fears of reprisal from the community. He was skeptical of the local coroner and sheriff’s impartiality and was incredulous that the people responsible for the lynching could not be identified in a town of only 400 people. He ultimately believed the lynching occurred because of ethnic animosity, jealousy of the town’s merchants because of the success of the Tallulah Italians, and finally opposition to allowing the Italians to vote. He recommended that the governor get involved so that those responsible could be brought to justice.<sup>57</sup>

The lynching horrified the Italian community, and Italy sought justice for the families of the victims. Efforts were led by the Italian ambassador, Baron Francesco Fava, who unsuccessfully pleaded with U.S. Secretary of State John Hay to use his authority to have the state attorney general intervene. Despite assurances of good faith from State Department representatives, local officials were reluctant to investigate the matter and in the end none of the guilty were held responsible. However, after two years the U.S. finally agreed to pay an indemnity

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<sup>54</sup> Edward F. Haas, *Guns, Goats, and Italians: The Tallulah Lynching of 1899*, North Louisiana Historical Association, vol. XIII, Nos. 2 & 3, 1982. See: <http://sites.rootsweb.com/~lamadiso/articles/lynchings.htm>. For a more complete description of what transpired see: *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States*, U. S. Dept. of State, (Washington, 1901), 440-466 and 715-736. Available via the University of Wisconsin: <https://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/EAQEQP7GTIAOM8F>. See also N. Walzer. “Tallulah’s Shame” in *Harper’s Weekly*, August 5, 1899, p. 779. Available at <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015039259802&view=page&seq=1&skin=2021>.

<sup>55</sup> “Tallulah Lynching,” *Natchez Democrat*, July 25, 1899, p.1. Edward F. Haas, *Guns, Goats, and Italians: The Tallulah Lynching of 1899*. North Louisiana Historical Association, vol. XIII, Nos. 2 & 3, 1982. See: <http://sites.rootsweb.com/~lamadiso/articles/lynchings.htm>. “That Tallulah Affair,” *Natchez Democrat*, July 25, 1899, p. 3. “Signor Cavelli Returns from Tallulah,” *Vicksburg Dispatch*, July 25, 1899, p. 4.

<sup>56</sup> Edward F. Haas, *Guns, Goats, and Italians: The Tallulah Lynching of 1899*. North Louisiana Historical Association, vol. XIII, Nos. 2 & 3, 1982. See <http://sites.rootsweb.com/~lamadiso/articles/lynchings.htm>.

<sup>57</sup> Patrizia Salvetti, *Rope and Soap: Lynchings of Italians in the United States*, (New York: Bordighera Press, 2017), 99-101.



of \$4,000 to two of the victims' families. Even then, this indemnity, or "blood money," was only given to those who were still Italian citizens because the U.S. government refused to recognize any claims for those who were naturalized citizens.<sup>58</sup>

The third lynching occurred in 1901 when a father and son, Giovanni and Vincenzo Serio, were lynched in Erwin, Mississippi, in Washington County. Another individual, Salvatore Liberto, was also injured in the attack. The Serios were transient vendors of fruit and vegetables and were killed by rifle shots while they were sleeping outdoors on the roof of a house owned by a friend. The cause of this shooting supposedly arose out of an earlier altercation that resulted when a horse the Serios owned trespassed onto the plantation of G. B. Allen. This case differed from the other lynchings in that these men had not been accused of a crime before they were assassinated and some eight months had passed between the initial incident and their murders.<sup>59</sup>

The response of the Italian ambassadors and the U.S. government followed a similar pattern in each lynching case. Any protests by the Italian officials were met with statements of regret for the tragedy and the promise that everything would be done to find and punish the offenders. Yet while investigations were ordered by the governors of Mississippi and Louisiana, the local authorities refused to make any serious effort to identify the perpetrators of the crimes, and no one was ever charged.

The motivations for these three lynchings had notable reverberations for the Piazzas. Not only did Natale help investigate each incident personally, but the history and experience of the Piazzas, and in particular Frank and Louis Piazza, closely mirrored that of the victims, as they were all members of the grocery industry in their respective towns. The Defatta brothers had lived in the Tallulah area for at least six years prior

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<sup>58</sup> "Italian Comment on Lynching," *Vicksburg Dispatch*, July 25, 1899, p. 2. "Government Will Pay Indemnity For Tallulah Lynching," *The Weekly Democrat*, October 17, 1900, p. 8. "Tallulah Lynching," *Natchez Democrat*, December 4, 1900, p. 4. "Tallulah Lynching," *Vicksburg Evening Post*, January 30, 1901, p. 2. *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States*, U.S. Dept. of State, (Washington, 1901), pp. 440-466 and 715-736. Available via the University of Wisconsin: <https://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/EA-QEQP7GTIAOM8F>. Patrizia Famà Stahle, "The Italian Emigration of Modern Times," (PhD diss., University of Southern Mississippi, 2010), 107. Available at <https://aquila.usm.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1965&context=dissertations>. Patrizia Salvetti, *Rope and Soap: Lynchings of Italians in the United States* (New York: Bordighera Press, 2017). Available at <http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/modlang/carasi/courses/0000000.SPRING.17.TEACHING/03.ITAL-AM.spring17/04.ITAM.COURSE.MATERIALS/ITAM.ARTICLES/SALVETTI.complete.pdf>.

<sup>59</sup> Patrizia Salvetti, *Rope and Soap: Lynchings of Italians in the United States*, (New York: Bordighera Press, 2017), 111-130.

to the incident, and Frank Defatta had obtained significant commercial success in the local grocery business by owning two stores. The Defatta brothers' grocery businesses thus likely threatened certain members of the Tallulah community, which could have been a precipitating factor in the lynching.<sup>60</sup> These tragedies must have deeply resonated with the Piazzas, given their similarities with the victims and the tangible threat to their very way of life.

### The Theater Business

Success in the agriculture, tanning, and restaurant businesses allowed the Piazzas to expand their empire to include ownership of the Vicksburg Opera House. As owner, Natale Piazza attempted to provide the best theatrical entertainment for the city by soliciting the most popular performers available and by improving the physical appearance of the theater. His ownership lasted from 1869, when he first took over, until 1898 when a fire destroyed the building and he moved on to other ventures.<sup>61</sup>

Various predecessors to the Vicksburg Opera House had existed on the corner of Washington and Crawford streets during the nineteenth century. From 1853 to 1869, the theater at this location was commonly referred to as Apollo Hall, although it was also called Washington Hall and the Vicksburg Theater in local newspapers.<sup>62</sup> From 1870 to 1872, it was also known as Thompson's Opera House after the then lessee and manager, J. W. Thompson.<sup>63</sup>

Theater in Vicksburg dated back to at least 1836.<sup>64</sup> Although Natchez had the more established theatrical community in the antebellum era, by mid-century Vicksburg garnered considerable attention from traveling stage companies and performers. In general, theatrical troupes from larger cities in the North, and also from Europe, visited Vicksburg

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<sup>60</sup> Jessica Barbata Jackson, *Dixie's Italians: Sicilians, Race, and Citizenship in the Jim Crow Gulf South* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2020), 83.

<sup>61</sup> "Notice," *The Vicksburg Herald*, November 19, 1869, p. 2.

<sup>62</sup> "The Campbells are Coming," *Vicksburg Daily Whig*, December 13, 1854, p. 2. "Untitled," *The Vicksburg Herald*, September 28, 1869, p. 3. "P. F. Edwards Advertisement," *Vicksburg Daily Whig*, February 6, 1855, p. 4. "A. Waltemeyer Advertisement," *The Vicksburg Daily Times*, February 22, 1868, p. 4.

<sup>63</sup> "The City," *The Vicksburg Daily Times*, September 14, 1870, p. 1.

<sup>64</sup> James Smith Ferguson, "A History of Music in Vicksburg, Mississippi, 1820-1900," (PhD Diss., University of Michigan, 1970), 77. For examples of early broadsides for the Vicksburg Theater in 1838 see: "Broadsides Collection," Images 1710-1713, MDAH, Available at: <https://da.mdah.ms.gov/series/broadsides/detail/532422>.

during the late fall through spring months on established circuits that followed major transportation lines throughout the South.<sup>65</sup>

Theater in the nineteenth century consisted of a variety of popular performances, including operas, dramas, tragedies, minstrel shows, pantomimes, concerts, circuses, comedies, burlesques, brass bands, magic acts, lectures, and photographic exhibitions. Countless performances were held at the Vicksburg Opera House during its reign as the leading entertainment venue in the city. A small sample of advertised performances (see Appendix Two) in Vicksburg newspapers demonstrate the type and variety of acts at the theater. Such performances were generally not by local performers, but by traveling theatrical troupes.<sup>66</sup>

From 1869 to 1898, when Natale Piazza and his business partner, James Botto, owned the Vicksburg Opera House, they utilized two methods to improve the theater and attract more patrons. The first involved frequently renovating the building to make it more aesthetically appealing to audiences, while the second involved attempting to secure the best and most popular performers of their day.<sup>67</sup>

In 1873 they made repairs and improvements to the opera house, which included bringing an artist from New Orleans to create scenery for the stage and building a secondary egress into the back alley in order to alleviate concerns in case of fire.<sup>68</sup> In 1884, a carpenter from Chicago was hired to build scenery, and a new drop curtain was installed with a landscape design in the center surrounded by twenty spaces for local advertisements.<sup>69</sup> Also at this time, notable local architect William Stanton was hired to raise the front of the building thirty feet to accommodate the

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<sup>65</sup> Guy Herbert Keeton, "The Theatre in Mississippi From 1840 to 1870," (PhD Diss., Louisiana State University, 1979), 25.

<sup>66</sup> For a discussion of the history of minstrelsy consult the following: Robert C. Toll, *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); Annemarie Bean, James Vernon Hatch, and Brooks McNamara, *Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1996); and Frank Davidson Costellow, "The Rise, Development, Decline, and Influence of the American Minstrel Show," (PhD diss., New York University, 1952).

<sup>67</sup> James Botto served as a bookkeeper and secured performances for the opera house. U.S. Census Bureau, 1900. Vicksburg Ward 4, Warren County, Mississippi. Ancestry.com. Available at [https://www.ancestryinstitution.com/imageviewer/collections/7602/images/4120352\\_00281?usePUB=true&\\_phsrc=slm154&\\_phstart=successSource&usePUBJs=true&pId=28454641](https://www.ancestryinstitution.com/imageviewer/collections/7602/images/4120352_00281?usePUB=true&_phsrc=slm154&_phstart=successSource&usePUBJs=true&pId=28454641).

<sup>68</sup> "Local Brevities," *The Vicksburg Herald*, August 20, 1873, p. 4.

<sup>69</sup> "The Opera House," *The Vicksburg Herald*, September 19, 1884, p. 4.

construction of an ornamental frontispiece.<sup>70</sup> Further additions included new scenery, ornamental gold leaf painting, a guard chain on the front of the stage, chandeliers brought in from Cincinnati, elegant scarlet and blue lambrequins made for the box seating, and new curtains.<sup>71</sup> In 1887, new scenery was painted by St. Louis artists, which included a gothic room, plain room, parlor scene, and a Romeo and Juliet balcony scene.<sup>72</sup> Renovations thus occurred frequently, and helped to improve the overall experience for theatergoers.

One of the main concerns for Piazza and Botto was procuring what they considered family-friendly acts for audiences on a regular basis. For example, Piazza and Botto canceled a scheduled performance of an all-female minstrel company, “Adamless Eden,” because of its “questionable character”.<sup>73</sup> The exact nature of the show is difficult to gauge from available sources, but in 1887, the show returned to Vicksburg at a rival theater.<sup>74</sup> Reviews for the 1887 show noted that the performers “give far better entertainment than their predecessors. Nearly all the members are talented either vocally or instrumentally. The girls are younger and ever so much better looking than those of the other party.”<sup>75</sup>

Natale Piazza advocated the arrest of unruly audience members on two separate occasions. In 1881, the Piazzas petitioned the city police to arrest any person who interfered with the entrance to the theater (no indication was given as to why).<sup>76</sup> More directly, in an 1896 editorial entitled “A Public Annoyance,” one journalist noted the “disgust of the better element . . . for some of the obstreperous occupants of the gallery.” Asked what should be done about the disturbances, Natale stated that if a few of the disorderly could be arrested and fined, then such behavior might be curbed.<sup>77</sup>

The Piazza Opera House burned on April 4, 1898. According to newspapers, the fire started in S. O. Pitt’s drug store on the first floor, followed by the Piazza harness factory and buggy warehouse. Natale

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<sup>70</sup> “A First Class Opera House at Last,” *Vicksburg Evening Post*, May 26 1884, p. 4. “Our Theatre,” *The Vicksburg Herald*, June 10, 1884, p. 4. For more information on architect William Stanton, see: ELMALVANEY, “Architects of Mississippi: William Stanton,” Preservation in Mississippi Blog, January 5, 2012. Available at <https://misspreservation.com/2012/01/05/mississippi-architects-william-stanton/>.

<sup>71</sup> “The Opera-House,” *The Vicksburg Herald*, September 23, 1885, p. 4.

<sup>72</sup> “The Opera House,” *The Vicksburg Herald*, September 3, 1887, p. 3.

<sup>73</sup> “Not in Vicksburg,” *The Vicksburg Herald*, November 13, 1884, p. 4.

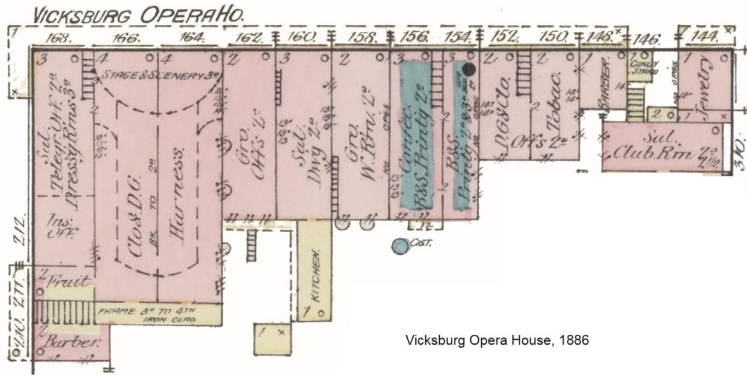
<sup>74</sup> “People’s Theater Advertisement,” *The Vicksburg Herald*, January 26, 1887, 4.

<sup>75</sup> “An Adamless Eden,” *The Vicksburg Herald*, January 27, 1887, p. 4.

<sup>76</sup> Untitled Article. *The Vicksburg Herald*, October 18, 1881, p. 3.

<sup>77</sup> “A Public Annoyance,” *The Daily Commercial Herald*, October 28, 1896, p. 5.

had a large stock of carriages, buggies, saddles, harnesses, and other merchandise estimated at \$8,000 in value destroyed in the fire. The second floor included offices rented to doctors and insurance brokers. The third floor was the opera house. Natale Piazza was asleep in his private room on the third floor and nearly lost his life in the fire.<sup>78</sup> He only had insurance coverage of \$15,000 for the entire building, while total damages were estimated at \$125,000.<sup>79</sup>



1886 Sanborn Insurance Map for the Vicksburg Opera House.<sup>80</sup>

After the fire destroyed the opera house, there was some interest in the community to rebuild, but Natale and his associate, James Botto, decided to construct an office building at the same location instead.<sup>81</sup> The Piazza and Botto building was constructed by H. L. Lewman of Louisville, Kentucky, and completed in early 1899.<sup>82</sup> Some of its first tenants were the Postal Telegraph Company, the Merchants National Bank, and Piazza's saddle and harness shop.<sup>83</sup>

<sup>78</sup> "Opera House Burned," *Vicksburg Evening Post*, April 5, 1898, p. 4.

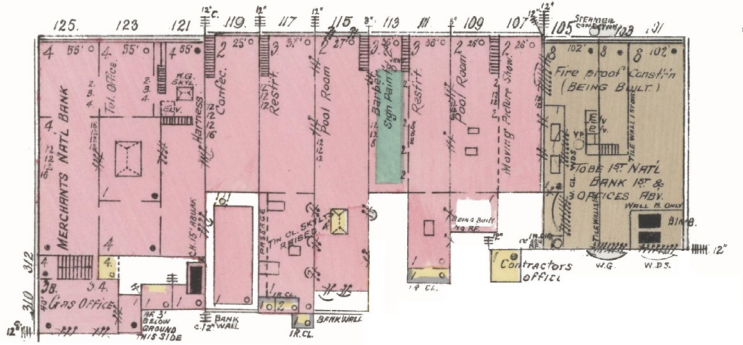
<sup>79</sup> "Opera House in Flames," *Vicksburg Dispatch*, April 5, 1898, p. 4. "Editorial Brevities," *Weekly Clarion Ledger*, April 14, 1898, p. 2.

<sup>80</sup> Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Vicksburg, Warren County, Mississippi. Sanborn Map Company, April, 1886. Map. [https://www.loc.gov/item/sanborn04536\\_001/](https://www.loc.gov/item/sanborn04536_001/).

<sup>81</sup> "Natale Piazza is Dead at Age 83," *Vicksburg Evening Post*, February 28, 1914, p. 1.

<sup>82</sup> ELMALVANEY, "Builder Pics: M. T. Lewman & Co.," *Preservation in Mississippi Blog*, February 24, 2011. Available at <https://misspreservation.com/2011/02/24/builder-pics-the-lewmans/>.

<sup>83</sup> "Local Lines," *Vicksburg Evening Post*, April 19, 1899, p. 4.



Piazza-Botto Building, 1907

1907 Sanborn Insurance Map for Washington and West Crawford streets. Notice the Opera House replaced by the Merchants National Bank and the soon-to-be built 1st National Bank.<sup>84</sup>

### The Hotel Business

The Piazzas also entered the hotel industry, further cementing their status as leaders in the Vicksburg community. Vincent Piazza opened the Pacific Hotel located on Washington and Veto streets in 1879.<sup>85</sup> The hotel was centrally located next to the railroad depot, landing, and telegraph/exchange offices. Advertisements noted that it was open all night and offered meals for all arriving trains.<sup>86</sup>

A number of other hotels existed in Vicksburg in the nineteenth century, including Vicksburg Hotel (1826–1843; 1929–1967), Washington Hotel (1838–1970s), Prentiss House (1843–1890), and Carroll Hotel (1891–1967).<sup>87</sup> Historical information and exact dates for years of operation for the hotels is difficult to ascertain due to inconsistent sources and overall lack of information. But by the late 1880s, the local press began clamoring for bigger and better hotels to accommodate the demands of a growing city. The Washington Hotel and Prentiss House were built prior to the Civil War, but by the 1880s had become outdated

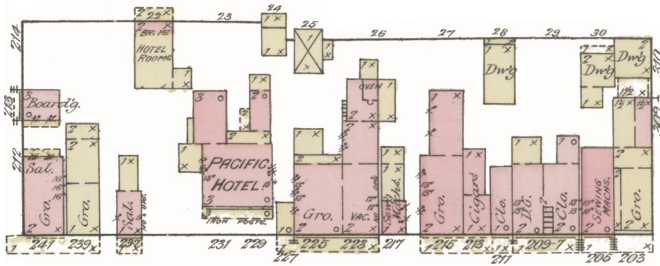
<sup>84</sup> Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Vicksburg, Warren County, Mississippi. Sanborn Map Company, May, 1907. Map. [https://www.loc.gov/item/sanborn04536\\_005/](https://www.loc.gov/item/sanborn04536_005/).

<sup>85</sup> “Brevities,” *The Vicksburg Herald*, February 9, 1879, p. 3.

<sup>86</sup> “Pacific House,” *The Vicksburg Herald*, April 19, 1881, p. 1.

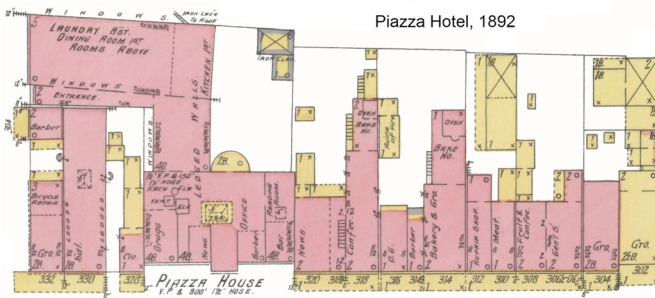
<sup>87</sup> Thomas Richardson, In and about Vicksburg: An Illustrated Guide Book to the City of Vicksburg, (Wentworth Press, 2016); “Warren County Historical Files,” Works Progress Administration County Files, 687-688; p. 779. Available via Mississippi Library Commission: <https://mlc.lib.ms.us/wp-content/uploads/Digitized%20Microfilms%20Warren%20County.pdf>.

and needed repair.<sup>88</sup> The Pacific House and Vicksburg Hotel also needed expansion during this time period.<sup>89</sup>



Pacific Hotel, 1886

1886 Sanborn Insurance Map for the Pacific Hotel.<sup>90</sup>



Piazza Hotel, 1892

1892 Sanborn Insurance Map for the Piazza Hotel.<sup>91</sup>

<sup>88</sup> "Notice," *The Vicksburg Herald*, June 12, 1885, p. 1. "The Prentiss House," *Vicksburg Evening Post*, December 8, 1890, p. 1. "The Old Prentiss House," *Vicksburg Evening Post*, January 30, 1891, p. 4.

<sup>89</sup> "Hotels," *The Vicksburg Herald*, June 2, 1885, p. 2.

<sup>90</sup> Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Vicksburg, Warren County, Mississippi. Sanborn Map Company, April 1886. Map. [https://www.loc.gov/item/sanborn04536\\_001/](https://www.loc.gov/item/sanborn04536_001/).

<sup>91</sup> Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Vicksburg, Warren County, Mississippi. Sanborn Map Company, April 1892. Map. [https://www.loc.gov/item/sanborn04536\\_002/](https://www.loc.gov/item/sanborn04536_002/).



*Exterior Drawing of the Pacific House Hotel.*<sup>92</sup>

Paying careful attention to these developments, Vincent Piazza pushed for building a larger, more modern hotel in place of the Pacific.<sup>93</sup> In 1889, work began to demolish the old Pacific House and to expand the foundation onto Veto Street. The architect was William Stanton, and the hotel increased in estimated value from \$50,000 to \$75,000.<sup>94</sup> Construction of the Piazza Hotel, as it was named, was completed in 1890 and expanded the total footprint of the original hotel. The main building on Washington Street had four stories and a basement, while the wing on Veto Street contained two stores, with a dining room on the second floor. The third and fourth floors contained a total of 114 guest rooms.<sup>95</sup> A modern steam heating plant was installed in the hotel in 1906, and the cuisine was described as the “very best the market affords.”<sup>96</sup>

In 1901, physical ailments caused Vincent Piazza to transfer control of the hotel to Jay Chandler temporarily, but Vincent returned to running the hotel in 1905.<sup>97</sup> In 1909, due to Vincent Piazza’s continued illness, the hotel was sold to Vincent Lavecchia. Piazza remarked that construction costs of the original hotel totaled \$85,000, and that the estimated value

<sup>92</sup> Thomas Richardson, *In and about Vicksburg: An Illustrated Guide Book to the City of Vicksburg*, (Wentworth Press, 2016).

<sup>93</sup> “Local Lines,” *Vicksburg Evening Post*, April 6, 1886, p. 4. “News Items,” *The Vicksburg Herald*, April 9, 1886, p. 4.

<sup>94</sup> “Local Lines,” *Vicksburg Evening Post*, April 6, 1886, p. 4. “News Items,” *The Vicksburg Herald*, April 9, 1886, p. 4.

<sup>95</sup> “Breaking Ground for the New Hotel,” *Vicksburg Evening Post*, May 25, 1889, p. 4.

<sup>96</sup> “Hotel Piazza,” *The Vicksburg American*, February 23, 1906, p. 1. “Hotel Piazza,” *The Monday Morning News*, June 17, 1907, p. 13.

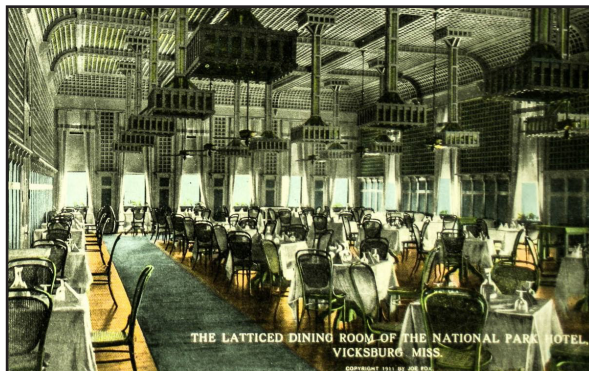
<sup>97</sup> “The Hotel Men,” *The Vicksburg Herald*, September 15, 1901, 3. “Ready for Business,” *The Vicksburg Herald*, October 28, 1905, p. 5.



for the furniture, building, and lot had now increased to \$135,000 (or roughly \$4 million in today's dollars). The name was changed to the National Park Hotel upon transfer of ownership.<sup>98</sup> With this sale, the era of Piazza hotel ownership in Vicksburg ended after three decades. Such continuity is a testament to the influence the Piazzas held in the Vicksburg community over the years.



*Exterior of the National Park Hotel, Undated.<sup>99</sup>*



*Interior Dining Room of the National Park Hotel in 1911.<sup>100</sup>*

The twentieth century was not kind to Vicksburg's historic hotels. In the decades following 1910, the city began to decline. Then on December

<sup>98</sup> "The Piazza Hotel Sold," *The Vicksburg Herald*, August 3, 1909, p. 5.

<sup>99</sup> "National Park Hotel, Vicksburg, Miss." Cooper (Forrest Lamar) Postcard collection. MDAH. Available at <https://da.mdah.ms.gov/series/cooper/detail/18889>.

<sup>100</sup> "The Latticed Dining Room of the National Park Hotel, Vicksburg, Miss." Cooper (Forrest Lamar) Postcard collection. MDAH. Available at <https://da.mdah.ms.gov/series/cooper/detail/19508>.

5, 1953, a tornado ravaged much of downtown Vicksburg, leaving a path of destruction in the historic business district that led to many buildings being razed. In the 1960s and 1970s, urban renewal projects resulted in the demolition of many dilapidated buildings, including the Washington Hotel, the Piazza-Botto building, the Carroll Hotel, and the Piazza Hotel (National Park Hotel).<sup>101</sup> Thus these historic buildings that represented the halcyon days of Vicksburg came to an unceremonious end.



*Washington Street, c. 1910–1920. The Piazza Hotel is on the left.*<sup>102</sup>

## Conclusion

The Piazza brothers are an excellent example of how, through hard work, tenacity, and entrepreneurship, Italian immigrants rose to the top of the business world in Mississippi. The Piazza brothers first migrated to America and settled in Mississippi at a time when there were just over a hundred other Italians in the state. They used their experience and valued expertise to build a sizable empire in the agricultural, tannery, grocery, restaurant, theater, and hotel businesses. They not only became respected businessmen, but also served their fellow Italian compatriots when they were under the greatest threat from nativist sentiment and attack. Natale's work as consul, in particular, helped the Italian government investigate the lynchings of Italians, and he also attempted to give solace to the families of the victims. The story of the Piazzas is

<sup>101</sup> Kenneth P'Pool, "National Register of Historic Places Multiple Property Documentation Form. Vicksburg, Mississippi," MDAH, 1992, pp. 10-11.

<sup>102</sup> Library of Congress. [Washington Street, Vicksburg, Miss.] Detroit Publishing Co., c. 1910-1920. Available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2016814142>.

illustrative of successful Italian immigrants' contributions to the state and provides fresh insight into Mississippi's rich ethnic history.

### **Appendix One. Abbreviated Biographies of the Piazza Brothers.**

John Piazza: (December 2, 1827–May 12, 1908): born Giovanni Damiano in Faenza on December 2, 1827; according to newspaper articles, John remained in Italy and lived in Bologna. He visited America in 1890 to celebrate the completion of the Piazza Hotel and died May 12, 1908, in Vicksburg.<sup>103</sup>

Natale Piazza: (September 5, 1830–February 28, 1914): born Natale Raffaele in Faenza; fought in the first Italian Wars of Independence in 1848-1849; settled in Crystal Springs in 1853; operated a tannery in Clinton throughout the Civil War; grew tomatoes, grapes, etc. on farm in Crystal Springs; owned the theater building at corner of Washington and Crawford streets in Vicksburg; owned saddlery store on Washington Street; owner of Vicksburg Opera House; built Merchants National Bank building after fire destroyed opera house; Italian Consul for Mississippi for thirty years; investigated Tallulah lynchings of 1899; died February 28, 1914.<sup>104</sup>

Frank Piazza: (February 7, 1835–July 5, 1907): born Francesco Gaspare in Faenza; owned a saloon and restaurant known as "The Bank" under the opera house in Vicksburg in 1865; opened an account at Freedman's Bank for his wife Mary; in an altercation with Black deputy sheriff Charles H. Smith; owned a grocery store on Cherry and Grove streets; died July 5, 1907.

Joseph Piazza: (September 5, 1832–March 21, 1904): born Guiseppe Antonio in Faenza in September 1838; moved to New York in 1855; moved to Crystal Springs in 1865 at request of his brothers; engaged in fruit business; moved to Vicksburg; 1858 married Effizia Conterno in New York; had three sons (August, Julius V., and Amadio Frank); 1872 returned to Crystal Springs; son Julius became one of the largest

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<sup>103</sup> "A Family Reunion," *The Daily Commercial Herald*, October 2, 1890, p. 4. "Untitled," *Vicksburg Evening Post*, July 6, 1891, p. 1. "Death of John D. Piazza," *The Vicksburg American*, May 13, 1908, p. 1.

<sup>104</sup> "Natale Piazza is Dead at Age 83," *Vicksburg Evening Post*, February 28, 1914, p. 1.

fruit importers of Chicago, and Amadio connected with United Fruit Company in New Orleans; died in 1904.<sup>105</sup>

Louis Piazza: (November 9 1839–July 16, 1897): born Luigi Domenico in Faenza on November 9, 1839; 1870 census listed as mechanic; tanner on 1880 census; owned a grocery store on Grove and North streets in Vicksburg in 1889; died July 16, 1897.

Vincent Piazza: (July 24, 1841–January 5, 1924): born Vincenzo Gaspare in Faenza on August 25, 1841; owner of the Pacific House hotel in Vicksburg in 1879; owned plantation on Sunflower River, eight miles east of Arcola station on the Mississippi Valley Railroad; opened the Piazza Hotel in May 1891; sold mineral water from a well on Vincent Piazza's property on Grove and North streets; paid privilege tax on billiard tables and barber chairs; took break from hotel business in 1901 due to illness but returned in 1905; died November 18, 1923.

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<sup>105</sup> "Joseph Piazza," *The Vicksburg Herald*, March 23, 1904, p. 5.

## Appendix Two. Sample Performances.

Sample Performances at the Vicksburg Opera House, 1869-1898		
Date	Performance	Type
Oct. 20, 1869	"Honeymoon: Or How to Rule a Wife": Effie Warren	Comedy
Apr. 28, 1870	La Rue's Minstrels & Brass Band	Minstrel
Sep. 15, 1871	William Carleton, Irish Comedian	Comedy
Mar. 9, 1872	Blind Tom	Pianist
Mar. 27, 1873	Martinetti Ravel Pantomime Troupe; Jacko the Brazilian Ape	Pantomime
Oct. 30, 1874	Wallack Comedy Co.	Comedy
Jan. 22, 1875	Tony Denier's Pantomime Troupe	Comedy
Oct. 13, 1877	Sprague & Blodgett's Original Georgia Minstrels	Minstrel
Nov. 16, 1877	Harry Robinson's Minstrels	Minstrel
Feb. 8, 1878	South Carolina Minstrels & Brass Band	Minstrel
Apr. 24, 1878	German Opera Troupe & Military Band	Opera
Oct. 11, 1881	Milton Nobles	Dramatic Comedy
Jan. 6, 1882	Morton's Big 4 Minstrels	Minstrel
Feb. 11, 1882	Fay Templeton's Star Opera Co.	Opera
Jun. 15, 1882	Oscar Wilde	Lecture
May 9, 1883	Eclectic Dramatic Club	Drama
Jan. 29, 1884	M. B. Leavitt's Gigantean Minstrels	Minstrel
Nov. 9, 1884	Grau's Famous New York Opera Co.	Opera
Jan. 21, 1886	Zera Semon with Bell's Original Marionettes	Minstrel
Feb. 23, 1888	Bartram & Burbidge Comedy Co.	Comedy
May 15, 1888	Panorama of Ireland	Photograph Exhibit
Mar. 24, 1889	Hillyer's Lilliputian Wonders & Grand Gift Carnival	Exhibition
Sep. 12 1891	Richards & Pringle's Famous Georgia Minstrels	Minstrel
Jan. 17, 1892	Al G. Field & Co's Famous Minstrels	Minstrel
Mar. 2, 1893	Primrose & West's Famous Minstrels	Minstrel
Feb. 21, 1895	Swedish Quartette Co.	Concert
Feb. 20, 1897	Prof. Louis Favor-X Ray Exhibition	Exhibition
Feb. 17, 1898	Frawley Comedy Co. of San Francisco	Comedy
Apr. 5, 1898	N. C. Goodwin presenting "A Gilded Fool"	Unknown

Appendix Three. County Taxes

Personal Tax Assessments for the Piazza Brothers <sup>106</sup>							
Copiah County							
1874	N. Piazza	6 cows, \$60	2 horses, \$150	4 mules, \$225	3 carriages, \$75	merchandise, \$1,500	
1882	N. Piazza	9 cattle, \$65	2 horses, \$100	3 mules, \$350	5 carriages, \$200	1 watch, \$25	2 guns, \$70
1882	N. Piazza	merchandise, \$800					
1883	N. Piazza	8 cattle, \$55	5 horses, \$200	5 mules, \$250	5 carriages, \$125	1 watch, \$35	merchandise, \$600
1884	N. Piazza	9 cattle, \$90	7 horses, \$525	4 mules, \$300	8 carriages, \$200	1 watch, \$25	merchandise, \$800
1884	L. Piazza	1 mule, \$75	1 carriage, \$25	1 watch, \$30			
1884	John Piazza	1 horse, \$75	1 carriage, \$25				
1885	L. Piazza	1 mule, \$100	1 carriage, \$35	1 watch, \$6			
1885	Joe Piazza	8 cattle, \$100	5 horses, \$400	3 mules, \$250	5 carriages, \$200	merchandise, \$1,000	
1892	John Piazza	1 horse, \$50					
1896	Joseph Piazza	3 horses, \$75	2 mules, \$60	2 carriages, \$30			
1896	John Piazza	1 horse, \$40	1 carriage, \$15	1 piano, \$40	4 cows	6 hogs	
1897	Joseph Piazza	3 horses, \$90	3 mules, \$90	3 carriages, \$40	1 watch, \$10		
1897	John Piazza	1 horse, \$40	2 carriages, \$40	1 piano, \$40	4 cows		
1898	Joseph Piazza	2 horses, \$50	3 mules, \$50	4 carriages, \$30			
1898	John Piazza	1 horse, \$20	1 watch, \$15				
1899	Joseph Piazza	2 horses, \$50	2 mules, \$50	2 carriages, \$30	2 watches, \$25		
1899	John Piazza	2 mules, \$60	1 carriage, \$15	4 cows			
Warren County							
1871	Frank Piazza	1 watch, \$150	merchandise, \$1,050				
1889	N. Piazza	1 horse, \$75	1 carriage, \$50	merchandise, \$3,500			
1889	Louis Piazza	1 horse, \$25	1 carriage, \$15	merchandise, \$150			
1897	Louis Piazza (estate)	1 horse, \$35	1 carriage, \$10	1 piano, \$75			
1897	Frank Piazza	1 horse, \$50	1 mule, \$40	2 carriages, \$30	merchandise, \$800		
1897	N. Piazza	1 horse, \$25	1 watch, \$10	merchandise, \$3,500			
1897	Piazza Hotel	household furniture, \$3,000					
1900	Frank Piazza	1 horse, \$40	1 mule, \$60	1 carriage, \$30	merchandise, \$900		
1900	Piazza Hotel	household furniture, \$3,000					
1900	John Piazza	1 horse, \$40	1 carriage, \$20	merchandise, \$250			
1900	N. Piazza	merchandise, \$2,500					
1900	Vincent Piazza	piano, \$150	watch, \$25				

<sup>106</sup> Series 1202, County Tax Rolls, 1818-1902. Record Group 29 Auditor. MDAH. See boxes: 3634, 3635, 3636, 3637, 3638, 3639, 3656, 3784, 3785, 3786, 3787, 3788, 3959.