

CENTENNIAL CELEBRATION
OF THE FEAST OF
SAINT SEBASTIAN
IN MIDDLETOWN



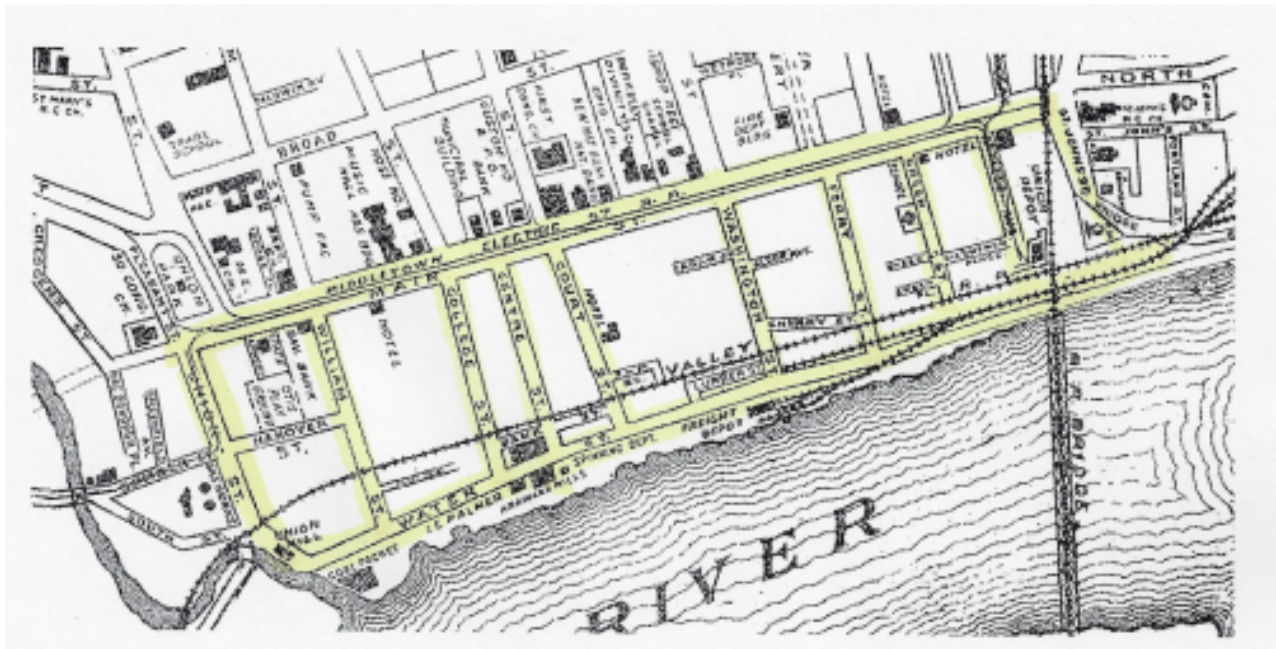
1921-2021

In the Beginning

The Feast of St. Sebastian in Middletown celebrates its 100th Anniversary this year. The Anniversary date marks the first major celebration of the Feast by the immigrants who came to Middletown from Melilli, Sicily.

The first people from Melilli who settled in Middletown arrived in 1895¹. The original settlers sent letters back to Melilli indicating the availability of work and jobs. In an abbreviated time, the colony of Melillesi in Middletown grew to several hundred and then several thousand people. The impact of World War I (1915-1918) slowed the flow of new immigrants but it began anew after 1919.

It was during this time period that small groups of Melillesi² began to hold meetings in remembrance of their annual religious celebration honoring the Patron Saint of their hometown.³ By 1921 the annual Celebration of the Feast of St. Sebastian had become a major event in the Sicilian community which was located predominantly in the North End of the City on the East Side in between Main Street and the Connecticut River.



Middletown's North End/ East Side Neighborhood- Home to the Sicilian immigrants- 1920

¹ Mr. Angelo Magnano arrived in Middletown in 1895. He was born in Sortino, Sicily in 1853 and his family moved to Melilli in 1860. In 1866 he arrived in Virginia. He signed up with Barnum & Bailey Circus and ended up living in Bridgeport before moving to Middletown. He passed away in 1925 at the age of 67. ***The History of Saint Sebastian Patron Saint of Melilli- Professor Paolo Magnano (SPECIAL THANKS TO PROFESSOR MAGNANO FOR PROVIDING HIS HISTORY OF MELILLI)***

² "If we take a look at the establishment of the followers of St. Sebastian, in this city, we can affirm that the idea of honoring him was born with first Melillesi who settled in Middletown, Conn. In fact, as soon as our colony gathered the number of about fifty Melillesi, St. Sebastian began to be celebrated every year on May 4th; by having a Mass celebrated in his honor at St. John's Church. And later, with the increase of immigration, the formation of a group of musicians, which was given the name of "Saint Sebastian Band" performed without any compensation, thus giving the Celebration a major boost." ***Life of St. Sebastian- Martyr -Patron Saint of Melilli and of Middletown, Connecticut- Cesare Corvo***

³"However, among the emigrants, the nostalgia for the affections and abandoned traditions was very strong; so they did their utmost to continue them even in the land of America. ***The History of Saint Sebastian Patron Saint of Melilli- Professor Paolo Magnano***

As time passed and the Sicilian colony continued to grow the May 4th celebration in honor of St. Sebastian also began to expand. Italian immigrants who had settled in Cromwell and Portland began to attend the festivities held in Middletown's Sicilian riverfront neighborhoods. The celebrations took place in the Sicilian neighborhoods, mostly in the North End "with lots of free food and drink"⁴ The first parties were sponsored by Antonio Amenta who had a grocery store. As the Feast continued to expand the Sons of Italy Society took over the sponsorship.

In 1913 Sicilians living in the Court Street neighborhood formed a more formal feast Committee. The Chairman was Santo Cannata who had a grocery store which he allowed the Feast to use during the celebration. During the World War I time period the St. Sebastian Feast celebration was not held but following the end of the war and an enormous increase in new arrivals to Middletown from Melilli it was greatly expanded.

Italian-American businessmen in the Court Street area set up a formal St. Sebastian Feast Committee. This Committee included Santo Cannata, Sebastiano Marchese, Mike Marino, Carmelo Miceli, Rosario Morello, Joe "Fish" Ruggeri and others. On May 4th 1921, a large group of immigrants from Melilli gathered at the Marino Store for the celebration.⁵

A major catalyst for the expanded celebration of the Feast of St. Sebastian occurred when Sebastiano Marchese⁶ a "humble, honest and hard-working laborer who came from Melilli to Middletown in 1903 also brought with him profound memories of St. Sebastian whom he had venerated since childhood."



Sebastiano Marchese with his statue of Saint Sebastian

⁴ **Italians in Middletown 1893-1932 The Formation of an Ethnic Community- Peter Baldwin**

⁵ ***The History of Saint Sebastian Patron Saint of Melilli- Professor Paolo Magnano***

⁶ Sebastiano Marchese was born in Melilli on 25 April 1872. From an early age he distinguished himself, in his native town, for his skill in sculpting and drawing, despite being self-taught, as he had not attended art schools. He was among the first immigrants who promoted the construction of the church of San Sebastiano in Middletown and created the statue of the patron saint of Melilli. He passed away in Middletown, March 31, 1955. ***The History of Saint Sebastian Patron Saint of Melilli- Professor Paolo Magnano***

“It was truly incredible, surprising and miraculous how, Sebastiano Marchese, who did not know how to read or write and who had never studied design or sculpturing was able to prepare a sculpture of St. Sebastian” for the annual Festa.

The impact on those attending the May 4 celebration in 1921 was astounding when they first viewed Marchese’s statue of St. Sebastian. “When the statue was first presented before the faithful gathered to celebrate the Feast there were tears in the eyes of all who were present. From that point on the celebration of the Feast assumed a solemn rhythm which manifested itself in greater participation from the community in Middletown and the surrounding towns.”. The collection of funds for the celebration of the Feast was the first step towards the creation of a movement for a new church of St. Sebastian to be located in Middletown.

Creation of Saint Sebastian Church & Parish

While the events in 1921 served as a major starting point for raising funds for development of a new St. Sebastian Church in Middletown it was only a beginning. In May of 1927 a special meeting was called by Salvatore Mazzotta the owner of a substantial construction company.⁷ The fifteen- member committee created an “Executive Building Committee” specifically to work towards raising money to build the Church. Mazzotta was elected President and Salvatore Adorno another prominent



St. Sebastian Feast Celebration-May 13, 1928 – “The Auction” to raise money for the Church

Middletown businessman became Vice President.⁸ Sebastian Muscatello served as the Treasurer. The following week representatives of the Committee met with Bishop John Nilan to seek approval to build the Church of St. Sebastian. The Bishop turned down their proposal indicating that priests at St. John’s

⁷ Salvatore Mazzotta was born in Melilli and came to the United States as a young man. He not only owned the Mazzotta Construction Company but he had also been elected to the City Council in 1923. Page 150- **Italians in Middletown 1893-1932 The Formation of an Ethnic Community- Peter Baldwin**

⁸ Salvatore Adorno among other things owned the Grand Theatre and other real estate in downtown Middletown. **Italians in Middletown 1893-1932 The Formation of an Ethnic Community- Peter Baldwin**

Church spoke Italian and that should be sufficient. Despite being turned down by Bishop Nilan the Committee held a special public meeting at the St. Aloysius Hall building on Main Street and started raising funds. This meeting held June 5, 1927 received \$23,000 in pledges. The Committee continued on with their fund raising. Eventually Bishop Nilan relented and authorized the Committee to present several sites for location of the new facility. Bishop Nilan selected the properties on Washington Street where the Church was eventually built.⁹ Additional pledges and fund raising took place through the 1929 time period into 1930. By this time the Great Depression of October 1929 was well established. Despite the economic turmoil the Committee was able to raise a total of \$51,000 in cash which was a record for fundraising in the Hartford Diocese at that time.



St. Sebastian Feast Celebration-May 13, 1928- Court Street – Thousands attended

The two original parcels (referred to as the “Donovan and Douglas parcels”) approved by Bishop Nilan on Washington Street were purchased. In addition, in October of 1930 a parcel directly to the west of those on the corner of Broad and Washington Streets was acquired. Known as the “Brewer Property” this elegant private home was to become the Rectory for the new Church. Bishop Nilan appointed Father Alvaro Santolini to supervise the construction of the church. On January 28, 1931 the formal “ground breaking” ceremony took place with Father Santolini “turning the first spadeful of earth.”¹⁰

Salvatore Mazzotta’s construction company had been named the contractor for the project. Mazzotta provided most of his services at cost and made several financial contributions to the project. Volunteers from the Sicilian community in addition to providing financial pledges and cash also volunteered their construction services providing two weeks of free work to help build the Church. By December 6, 1931 “the first Mass was celebrated in the basement by Father Santolini”. Two weeks later Bishop Nilan named Father Rocco Guerriero “who had served as the assistant pastor at Our Lady of Lourdes parish in Waterbury to direct the affairs of St. Sebastian Church.

⁹ **Tenth Anniversary of the Founding of St. Sebastian Church and Parish- Commemorative Book**

¹⁰ **Page 10 - Tenth Anniversary of the Founding of St. Sebastian Church and Parish- Commemorative Book**

On October 2, 1932 Reverend Maurice F. McAuliffe, Auxiliary Bishop of Hartford laid the cornerstone and by December of that year St. Sebastian Church was “dedicated for divine service”.¹¹



The charter members of the Knights of St. Sebastian.

Back row (l to r) Sebastian LaBella, Paolo Scionti, Giuseppe Fortuna, Gaetano Salafia, Joseph Milardo, Sebastiano Marchese, Bartolo Ventura, Eduardo Muscatello, Salvatore Cannatta and Giuseppe La Bella
Front Row sitting (l to r) Joe “Fish Ruggeri, Salvatore Greco, Cesare Corvo, Sebastian “Mike” Marino
Father John Keane, Sebastiano Pappalardo, Carmelo Russo and Sebastian Pattavina



About Saint Sebastian



St. Sebastian stained glass window-Middletown



St. Sebastian Church, Palatine Hill, Rome, Italy

The history of Saint Sebastian is well known. He was born of a noble family which was originally from Mediolanum (now Milan) in AD 256 in the Roman Province of Gallia Narbonensis (near what is now Marseille in Provence, France). His father passed away shortly after Sebastian was born and his mother moved the family back to Mediolanum. Sebastian was a Christian at an early age. He studied in Milan and although a Christian decided to enter military service in the Roman Army under the Emperor Carinus. Carinus was defeated by Diocletian who enlisted the assistance of Maximian to jointly serve as Emperors of the Roman Empire. Within a brief period of time Sebastian rose in rank to become one of the Captains of the Praetorian Guards- an elite group in the Roman Army charged with protecting the Emperor. During this entire time period Sebastian had kept his Christian faith a secret.

Emperor Diocletian had continued the Roman practice of persecuting, torturing and killing Christians. In AD 286 Sebastian was accused of being a Christian. When Emperor Diocletian was informed, he became enraged and ordered that Sebastian be taken out to a field in Rome and killed by being shot to death with arrows by archers from Mauritania. The archers seized Sebastian and tied him to a tree and shot him repeatedly with arrows and left him for dead. Irene, the widow of St. Catulus recovered his body and found that he was still barely alive. She nursed him back to health.

Sebastian refused to stay hidden and intentionally revealed himself to Emperor Diocletian and publicly criticized the Emperor for his cruelty against Christians. He told the Emperor-“Diocletian- I am a man returned from the tomb to warn that your day of judgement is coming. You have bathed Rome with the blood of the servants of God..for this and your other crimes God will judge you and you will be damned forever.”¹² Diocletian immediately ordered that Sebastian be seized and beaten to death with wooden clubs. His body was then thrown in an open sewer on the side of the road. The date was January 20, 286 AD. He was thirty-two years old. Eventually his body was recovered and secretly buried in part of the catacombs in Rome at a location which later became the basilica of St. Sebastian (San Sebastiano fuori le mura). Saint Sebastian is considered the patron saint of soldiers and athletes and during the Middle Ages was regarded as a saint with a special ability to intercede and protect from plague.

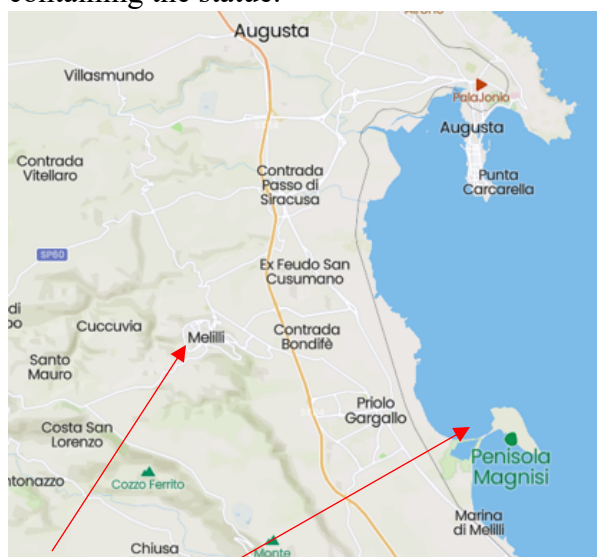
¹² Page 7- *Life of St. Sebastian- Martyr -Patron Saint of Melilli and of Middletown, Connecticut- Cesare Corvo*

Saint Sebastian and Melilli

The Feast of Saint Sebastian in Middletown came about as a result of the devotion of the Sicilian immigrants from the town of Melilli in the Province of Siracusa, Sicily. The original community was built by the Sicilians- indigenous natives who inhabited that area of Sicily -around 728 BC during the reign of King Iblone, In 726 BC Greeks arrived from the town of Megara in Greece and with the approval of King Iblone occupied the village along the waterfront and named it Megara Iblea.

The Romans took control of Megara Iblea around 213 BC and made many of the inhabitants slaves and prisoners. They eventually demolished the buildings leaving only the foundations and walls which can still be viewed today. The inhabitants who escaped went into the hills above Megara Iblea which is the present-day location of Melilli. A small urban center was built with houses and open- air market areas. A main road ran through the center of the village.¹³

In late April of 1414 a sailing ship coming from an Adriatic port was wrecked on the rocks near the Island of Magnisi near present day Marina di Melilli. Fortunately, none of the sailors aboard the ship were killed. They immediately began searching for a wooden case which contained a statue of Saint Sebastian whom they credited with saving their lives. They found the wooden case but to their surprise they were unable to lift it up. In a short time, word reached the Bishop in the nearby town of Siracusa and in a matter of days, he along with a large procession of followers arrived at the site to see the wooden case containing the statue.



Melilli Magnisi Island



Church of Saint Sebastian – Melilli, Italy

Despite their best efforts the people of Siracusa were unable to budge the wooden case which had settled into the sand in the sea. Word spread to the nearby towns, including Melilli and by May 1st, 1414 the priest and a number of followers from Melilli found themselves at the shipwreck site. When the people from Melilli arrived, the wooden case containing the statue appeared to lift out of the muddy water. The priest was able to pick up the wooden case and easily place it on his shoulders. The priest together with his following then headed back to Melilli where they planned to bring the statue of Saint Sebastian to the Church of San Nicolo' (known as the Chiesa Madre or main church of Melilli). As they entered the town a poor leper by the name of Pannisca ran up to the wooden case and kissed it. He was immediately and completely cured. When the priest went to pick up the wooden case it suddenly became

¹³ Chapter I Melilli- *The History of Saint Sebastian Patron Saint of Melilli- Professor Paolo Magnano*

impossible to move which was taken by the crowd as a sign that Saint Sebastian wanted to have a church built and dedicated to him at that location.¹⁴The rest- as they say -is history. The church was built and many additional miracles took place and were recorded. Eventually the celebration of Saint Sebastian in Melilli became an annual event complete with participation of thousands of devoted followers in Melilli and in nearby towns.



**Photo of the Feast of St. Sebastian, Melilli taken from the Church looking into the Piazza
-about 1890**

¹⁴ This historic description can be found in a document located at Saint Sebastian Church in Melilli in books of Father Blasio Siracusa a dedicated follower of St. Sebastian and is also mentioned in the memoirs of Father Paolo Mirabella in 1775. Page 14. *Life of St. Sebastian- Martyr -Patron Saint of Melilli and of Middletown, Connecticut- Cesare Corvo*



“I Nuri” running in Melilli -Original Photo around 1890



“I Nuri” running in Middletown 2013



Feast of St. Sebastian – taken at the Red Wing site-North Main Street, Middletown 1940



Feast of St. Sebastian- taken at the Coleman grounds off Washington Street, Middletown 1950s



Feast of Saint Sebastian -1950

The Statue with the Marching Band and Knights of St. Sebastian in front of the Church



Feast of St. Sebastian- 2014 Members of the Marching Band

*CENTENNIAL CELEBRATION OF THE FEAST OF SAINT SEBASTIAN
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