The village of Canastota and the Town of Lenox is unique in that it has witnessed two distinct pioneer histories. The first began about one hundred-fifty years ago. The second had its birth pangs in 1888 but was born about 1900.

A local historian, and a descendant of the Italian-American Pioneers, recorded this history in a thesis he wrote while a student at Syracuse University. His name is Joseph T. D'Amico and his theme "The Italian Farmers of Canastota."

This theme or title is misleading in a way. Mr. D'Amico recorded so much more than just that. He gives a short history of the sections of Italy from which most of these immigrants came, a history of Canastota and the opening of the mucklands north of the village. From here on lets say pioneers instead of immigrants. Because, weren't all of our ancestors immigrants at one time or another.

In the beginning it wasn't farming that attracted the Italians to this area. This is what Mr. D'Amico says. "Previous to 1908 they were coming predominantly in response to the opportunities offered in the village; that is, labor on the railroads; in the factories, and to a lesser extent by the opportunities for setting up merchant business. During the period 1908 to 1915, a new impetus was added; now, many began to come because of the mucklands and its opportunities. During the latter period they were responding to both industry and agriculture."

"Most of the Italians had departed from Italy with the expectancy of returning after a few years. But some of them must have dispensed with this notion early for when they arrived in the village, they not only began to establish residence there, but as soon as they had enough money, they began to buy mucklands.

In a very interesting and fascinating manner these Italians began slowly at first but later with increasing rapidity, to obtain a firm
foothold on these fertile lands.

Actual ownership did not begin until 1902, although a small number of Italians were already engaged in the operation of onion farms on the share-system. In 1902 Michael Paterelli bought a five acre plot from Lucretia Thackabuty. By 1905 three others had made purchases. By 1915 a total of thirty-seven families were in possession of about 3½ acres. The average acreage per holding 9.2 acres. In 1930 a total of 155 families were in possession of about 1610 acres. Some of this lies in the neighboring township of Sullivan.

"Not only did the Italian-Americans now own most of the muck lands but practically the whole area was being operated by them, if not by direct ownership, then through the share-system. One other peculiarity that needs further comment is the comparatively small size of the holdings or farms of the Italians.

The original owners of the land possessed large tracts; always of fifty, sixty or more acres. The reason for these small farms of our "second group of Pioneers" lies in a number of factors. One is the fact that a small plot of about ten acres when planted with onions, celery, carrots, lettuce, or any other vegetable has to be hand worked and requires an astonishing amount of labor—even for a good-sized industrious family. Another factor that played an important part was that this land is comparatively expensive. In 1930 Mr. D'Amico tells us that this land was worth from $300 to $800 dollars per acre; depending naturally on locality, fertility, and means of of communication and transportation. A small holding of this size was usually, sufficient for the sustenance of practically any family. For normally such a plot brought close to $3000 per year, if not more.

Mr. D'Amico's description of the life of these early Italian-Americans closely parallels that of the hardy pioneers of English
and other descent that settled in this vicinity.

Both utilized the labor of his family to the greatest extent. The wife as well as the children labored day in and day out. Summer was no vacation for the school children, but a period during which their natural desires were almost completely restrained. During rush periods hours were long and tedious, and ten to twelve hours of backbreaking labor a day was nothing uncommon. If school was in session, the children would have to hurry home after school, change to overalls and work until dusk.

In 1930 things were taking a different turn. The labor of wives was less in evidence, even the labor of children was less common. Hours of work per day were shorter. Even after evening was no longer monotonously spent on the farms, but with the common usage of motor vehicles, these people were able to find outlets in the activities of the village. At this time also began the trend of hiring mass labor. "For instance, during the planting and harvesting seasons, due to the fact that the labor from the village was insufficient, many of the growers began sending their trucks to the nearby cities of Oneida, Utica, Rome, and even Syracuse for mass help. Negroes from other parts of the country began coming here during the rush seasons. At the present time very few of the Italian-Americans live on the farms. They live in the village and drive to their farms to work.

You will find children and grandchildren of these pioneer American farmers in every profession and trade in Canastota or nearby cities. To mention a few the Church, Teachers, Doctors, Dentists, Lawyers, Merchants, Playrights and Sports.

The concluding pages of Mr. D8Amico's book gives interesting case histories of three of the pioneer Italian-Americans. He prepared many more of these which were not included but would be
very interesting to the people of Canastota and vicinity.

The first case history is of "Mike" who came from Southern Italy. In 1888 at the age of 22, he forsook Italy for America. On reaching America he tried mining, railroad construction and other jobs. He finally settled in Syracuse and after his waiting period of five years had expired was granted his American Citizenship papers. He had sent for his wife and family in Italy. Later he moved to Canastota. This was shortly after 1896. Still later he became an agent for a number of large seed firms.

The second story is of Salvatore, a native of the city of Castiglione, on the Island of Sicily. His father was a vineyard owner. Salvatore, as a youth was not required to help his father, so he found employment elsewhere. Salvatore was dissatisfied with the conditions that he was forced to live in. The rumors and stories that came to him concerning America were almost unbelievable. He was told that in America good jobs were plentiful and wages were high. So, when he was 25 years old, he decided that he would try his fortune in America. His intentions at the time were to go America, remain a number of years, or at least until he had earned a certain amount of money. Then with this he would return home to his young wife who he was leaving behind. Like "Mike" he tried several kinds of employment. He finally returned to Italy in 1908.

In 1910 Salvatore decided to come to America again. This time with his wife and children. The wife's oldest sister, who had established residence in Canastota persuaded the two young "Pioneers" to come to this village. On arrival in the village, Salvatore immediately found work as a bridge builder. He and his family soon returned to New York City. Here they remained for the winter of 1910-11. Now no work was obtainable during this time and they decided to
return to Canastota. When they arrived in Canastota for the second
time, they immediately began to work nine acres of muckland on the
share-system. At the same time Salvatore worked on construction jobs.

Salvatore and his family raised onions on the share system
until 1922. During all this time he entertained hopes of returning
to Italy. In fact, he even sent money to that country to be deposited.
But by 1922 hopes of ever returning to that country had faded away,
and he bought a 13 acre muck farm. In this same year he also purchased
a home in the village. At the present time (1930) Salvatore operates
his onion farm.

The third story is of Sergio who was born in the province of
Marche in Central Italy. Until he was 25 years old he worked for
his father, who made a reasonable living by maintaining a machine
shop. At about this time Sergio's mother died, and he himself
stated, "I was disgusted with everything." Thought he had not heard
very much about America he decide in 1913, to come here. He departed
with no intention of returning.

Sergio, also had a friend in Canastota with whom he corresponded.
Naturally, this friend told him of the opportunities that the village
offered. Sergio came directly to Canastota, and because of the fact
that he had experience in his father's shop, he immediately found
work in the Lenox Shop as a skilled laborer.

After working here for a number of years he moved to Cortland,
remaining in that city for one year and a half. At the end of this
period he trekked back to Canastota and again back to skilled labor.
Since this time, Sergio has lived in Canastota, and has been employed
not only in his home town, but in Syracuse and Rome as well. By
trade Sergio is a cabinet maker.

In the last decade or so (remember this was written in 1939)
Sergio has bought a muck farm. This, while working in factories whenever possible, he has operated to the present time. In 1937 he built his own home in the village.

Mollie M. Smith