

The Struggle for Its Name

The Verrazzano Bridge Opened Forty Years Ago, but to Be Named After the Italian Explorer Wasn't Easy

by Michelle DeMarco

On November 21, 1964 the six-lane upper deck of the Verrazzano-Narrows Bridge, named in honor of the Italian explorer Giovanni da Verrazzano, was finally opened. As the fortieth anniversary of the bridge nears, it is important to note that without the persistent intervention of John N. LaCorte and the Italian Historical Society of America, it might be called the Narrows, the Brooklyn-Staten Island, or even the JFK Bridge. Verrazzano would not receive the recognition he so rightly deserves for his great explorative accomplishments.

In the sixteenth century Francis I, of France, commissioned Florentine navigator Verrazzano to find a passage to Asia. In 1524 he arrived on the coast of North Carolina and then sailed north to Newfoundland. Passing Sandy Hook, New Jersey he sailed into the Hudson River. Verrazzano's report became the first description of the northeast coast.

Unfortunately, Verrazzano is seldom mentioned historically and is, therefore, unrecognized as the European founder of New York harbor. Instead Henry Hudson, who arrived eighty years later, is given the credit. In fact, Theresa Capece Rosen, of the Italian Historical Society stated, "Hudson used Verrazzano's maps to locate this territory." But until the middle of the twentieth century the general population had never even heard of Verrazzano.

Talks of creating a crossing between Brooklyn and Staten Island began as early as 1888. However, financial constraints and delays in the approval process prevented the proposed project's progression.

In 1946 Robert Moses recommended the building of a Narrows Bridge. That same year, the New York Legislature authorized construction of a bridge between Fort Hamilton in Brooklyn and Fort Wadsworth on Staten Island. The Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority (TBTA) then paid the Army \$26 million for the land at Fort Hamilton and Fort Wadsworth. In 1957, as plans were on their way to build the bridge, John N. LaCorte and the Italian Historical Society of America sponsored the dedication of the bridge to Verrazzano. Mayor Robert Wagner and Governor Harriman of New York pledged



The Verrazzano Bridge

their assistance in naming the bridge after Verrazzano. Furthermore, at the request of the Society, governors of New Jersey, South Carolina, Rhode Island and Maine all issued proclamations verifying that these states were founded by the explorer.

Robert Moses, however, insisted that 'Verrazzano' was much too long and difficult to pronounce. LaCorte countered that other bridges and landmarks possessed names that were not easy to pronounce. According to Mrs. Rosen, "LaCorte used the name Koskiusko to support his argument."

In 1960, Governor Rockefeller signed the bill, which declared that the bridge should be named Verrazzano though the Chamber of Commerce had openly opposed it. It

seemed that LaCorte and the Italian Historical Society had finally won. Then President John F. Kennedy was assassinated.

Thousands of signatures were obtained to change the bridge's name to honor of the slain president instead. LaCorte then called Attorney General Robert Kennedy immediately after the assassination. He had once met with LaCorte to have another Italian, Joseph Bonaparte, recognized as founder of the FBI. Kennedy assured him that the bridge would not be re-named. According to Rosen Robert Kennedy had said it was the fair thing to do because the bridge's name had already been established and many other landmarks and monuments

were set to be named after the president.

Following the opening of the Verrazzano-Narrows Bridge some newspapers omitted Verrazzano's name- referring to it as simply the Narrows Bridge or even the Brooklyn-Staten Island Bridge. LaCorte called upon then Attorney General Louis Lefkowitz for support. Lefkowitz agreed to aid them in their seemingly endless struggle. After an appeal to then governor John D. Rockefeller, 'Verrazzano' became the name most commonly used in the media.

Against all odds, the bridge was given its rightful name amidst a long struggle of the Italian American community to gain recognition for its many positive accomplishments.

Due to space limitations, we are only able to present a partial listing. For a more complete list that includes the New York Metropolitan region, go on line to "New York's Italian American Community Calendar: The Most Comprehensive Listing of Italian and Italian American Events for New York" at www.qc.edu/calandra/community, or please contact Geoffrey Claroni Assistant Director for Community Programs at gclaroni@frobinqc.edu at the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute, Queens College/CUNY

On display August 30, 2004 through October 15, 2004
Albero della vita
Featuring the mixed media art of Christopher Priore.
Italian American Museum in transitional residence at the John D. Calandra Italian American

Institute, 28 West 44th Street, 17th floor, Manhattan
Contact: (212) 642-2020
<http://www.italianamericanmuseum.org>

On display September 21, 2004 through October 24, 2004
Italiani d'america (Italians in America)
Photographs by Ernesto Bazan.
Sponsored by the Italian Academy for Advanced Studies in America at Columbia University.
Casa Italiana
1161 Amsterdam Avenue at 116th Street, Manhattan
Contact: (212) 854-2306

itacademy@columbia.edu
<http://www.italianacademy.columbia.edu>

On display October 1 - 31, 2004
Sicily - A Visual Passage
An exhibition of black and white photographs by Janine Cortese Coyne, photographer, depicting the people of Sicily and the Aeolian Islands.
Sponsored by the DaVinci Society of Wagner College.
Wagner College, Horrmann Library
One Campus Road, Staten Island
Contact: Frank Polizzi (718) 390-3377

fpolizzi@wagner.edu

On display October 1, 2004 through November 12, 2004
Medici on Wall Street: Portraits from the Uffizi Gallery
Twenty magnificent 16th and 17th century portraits of the powerful Medici family, the world's fine art patrons, in an unprecedented loan from the prestigious Uffizi Gallery in Florence. Part of the "Splendor of Florence" festival, an eleven-day festival of free cultural, educational, culinary, and musical events centered around distinguished Florentine

artists, September 30 - October 10.
Federal Hall National Memorial
26 Wall Street, Manhattan
Admission: free
Contact: (212) 945-0505
<http://www.splendorofflorence.com>

On display September 7, 2004 through December 31, 2004
Italian Ghost Town, Vecchio Romagnano al Monte
Photography exhibit presented by Rosaria Vigorito.
at The Gallery at Chelsea Eye, 157 West 19th Street, Manhattan
and at David Ryan's Salon, 429 West 46th Street, Manhattan
Contact: Rosaria Vigorito (917) 680-8479 lapassione@rosariavigorito.com
<http://www.rosariavigorito.com>

Continued on page 4