



# Preaching the Gospel to Anarchists and Socialists: Baptist Missionaries in Barre, 1899–1916

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By PAUL HELLER

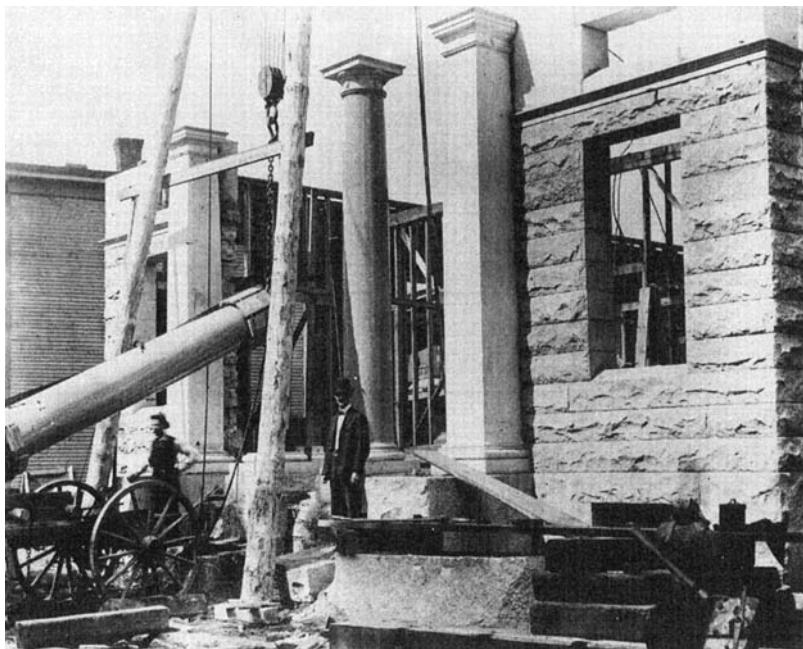
“Why is it that socialists and anarchists do not wish to listen to the gospel? I am quite sure of the fact that it is not because they are superior in intellect to those who do respond to the gospel message. The fact is, that socialists and anarchists as a class are among the most bigoted and narrow-minded people that one can well meet. This is my conclusion, after a brief sojourn in Barre, Vermont, the greatest granite center in the United States.”<sup>1</sup> One can sense the frustration felt by Rev. Antonio Mangano in 1916 after costly and arduous attempts at establishing a congregation of the Italian Baptist Church in Barre met with failure.

Ariel Bellondi had initiated the mission in the Granite City on January 1, 1899. The Home Mission Society invested \$20,000 to erect a church Rev. Bellondi designed in the style of a country chapel common in his native Italy.<sup>2</sup> The façade was fashioned of local granite and presented a

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*Vermont History* Vol. 78, No. 2 (Summer/Fall 2010): 196–207.

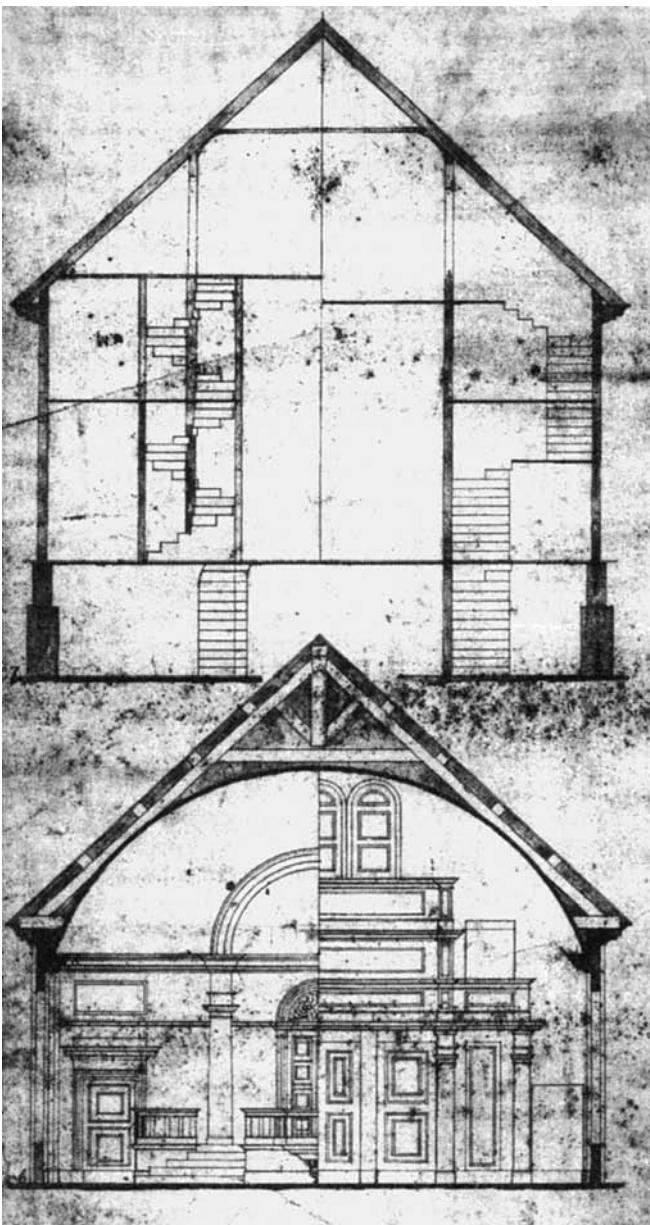
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*Ariel Bellondi on the steps of the Italian Baptist Church while under construction, c. 1907. Courtesy of the Vermont Division for Historic Preservation.*

superficially grand entrance with Doric columns in a style that must have seemed as unlikely in Barre one hundred years ago as it does today. Bellondi intended to build the whole structure of granite, but sufficient financial support was never sustained by the few converts he could claim in Barre, and the remaining walls were framed in milled lumber and sheathed in brick. As reported by James M. Bruce, superintendent of foreign work for eastern states (Baptist Missions), in 1909: "His plans for the chapel were beautiful, but somewhat more ambitious than the available resources would warrant. He had in mind a classic temple architecturally imposing, though of moderate dimensions, which should be constructed entirely of handsome silver-grey granite from the famous Barre quarries. It was a serious disappointment to him that he could not fully carry out this plan, and after a prolonged but unsuccessful effort to raise the necessary funds, he found himself broken in health, and relinquished the work and went home to Italy."<sup>3</sup>

In the 1880s, Protestant religious denominations sought to establish



*Transverse sectional drawings of the Italian Baptist Church, found beneath the altar in the early 1970s. Courtesy of the Vermont Division for Historic Preservation.*

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congregations within immigrant communities. For Methodists and Baptists, these evangelical efforts were preceded by missionary efforts in Italy in the 1870s.<sup>4</sup>

The Baptist Church in America initiated their proselytizing efforts in the northeastern United States with English-speaking missionaries, and by 1889 they had instituted Sunday schools in New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut.<sup>5</sup> Ariel Bellondi, born in 1872 in Stedella, Italy, emigrated to the United States to attend Colgate University in Hamilton, New York, at that time a Baptist seminary. His father had been among the first evangelical ministers in Italy and had suffered harassment and intimidation by the Roman Catholics there. As reported in the May 1905 issue of *The Home Mission Monthly*, the magazine of the American Baptist Home Mission Society,

There was a concurrence of providential events in the inception of the work. The Buffalo Baptist Union in its survey of the needy fields of that city, turned towards the large and growing settlements of Italians, with a deepening conviction that effort should be made to evangelize them. In the classrooms of Colgate University was a young Italian, Mr. Ariel B. Bellondi, who had come to this country for a theological education. The Baptist Union adopted the work, and the Baptist Home Mission Society contributed generously to his support. The mission was attended from the outset with success. Thus was the city of Buffalo honored in being the birthplace of the first Italian Baptist Church in the United States.<sup>6</sup>

Under the auspices of the American Baptist Home Mission Society, young Ariel instituted the model of Baptist missionaries of Italian heritage working with Italian populations. He was able to establish a vibrant and self-sustaining parish among the Sicilians of Buffalo, and church elders, satisfied with this achievement, sought to proselytize elsewhere.

Baptist Church officials noted a sizable Italian population in Barre that was not committed to Catholicism and anticipated a path to success similar to the one in Buffalo. What they had not anticipated was the very different character of the Italian immigrants from northern Italy. Skilled craftsmen from the area around Cararra arrived in Barre with a sense of alienation from the Catholic priests who preached an acquiescence to the established order. These immigrants had fled a homeland with an almost feudal class system for a new land with economic promise. Skilled carvers of granite could earn as much as \$10 a day in Barre in 1910, and laborers in the quarries earned over \$2.<sup>7</sup>

Settling in Barre's North End, the Italian stone workers established a colony of like-minded émigrés from Lombardy and Tuscany who did not seek the solace of a Catholic congregation, although 99 percent of the citizens of their native land were Catholic.<sup>8</sup> Roberto Burrattini, a



*Ariel Bellondi, architect  
and first pastor of Barre's  
Italian Baptist Church.  
Courtesy of the Aldrich  
Public Library.*

Works Progress Administration literacy teacher in Barre in the 1930s, noted that the majority of "Vermont's Italian workers came from that section of Italy which had practically broken with the church. Now if the priests of the Roman Catholic Church had not been able to curb the anti-religious element at home, how could they do so here?"<sup>9</sup> Thus many people remained hostile to religion in any form or shape. "'Neither God nor Master,' was the motto which guided many."<sup>10</sup> Burrattini observed in Barre, "On Sunday morning, during the time for religious services, the Italians walk up the street, and stop to talk to friends, in good weather; or they go hunting or fishing, but not to church."<sup>11</sup>

The anticlericalism of this wave of immigrants had its roots in a political struggle in their native land that had Vatican officials allied with oppressive elements in Italy to thwart attempts at Italian unification. The Roman Catholic Church feared that its religious monopoly would be threatened by a unified country. The Catholic hierarchy in America was allied with the Vatican and, naturally, continued to alienate the immigrants from the Italian north. One indication of this hostility toward the Church of Rome may be inferred from the comparative level of Church giving by Italians: "A missionary in Chicago calculated the

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annual contributions to the Church per 10,000 population of various ethnic groups with equivalent means as follows: Poles, \$65,000; Irish, \$40,000; Germans, \$30,000; Italians, \$3,000.”<sup>12</sup>

Nevertheless, Protestant missionaries perceived a ripe opportunity for promoting their sects in Barre, where there were thousands of Italians with no allegiance to Catholicism. “The Methodist Church established a mission in the north section of town to conduct kindergarten classes, to care for the children of those who worked, to conduct religious services and also to teach English to the foreign born parents.”<sup>13</sup> Rather than devote their efforts to building a granite chapel, the Methodist mission held services in a borrowed outdoor theater (later they rented a vacant railroad building) and concentrated their initial efforts on programs for children.<sup>14</sup> The Hedding Methodist Episcopal Church of Barre, established in the early 1800s, assumed some responsibility for the mission by 1903 and offered substantive support. In contrast to the Baptist mission, the efforts of the Methodists were administered and executed by women (Vermont Conference Women’s Home Missionary Society). The successful result was characterized as a “miracle in Americanization.”<sup>15</sup> Consequently, many Italian residents of Barre remain Methodists to this day.

Generally, the Baptist churches felt obliged to establish separate congregations for the immigrants rather than incorporating them into their existing churches. The Baptist mission had a discrete hierarchy and leadership, and, in matters of administration, there appears to have been little cooperation among the two Baptist entities at each end of Barre’s Main Street. Rev. Mangano, whose successful mission in Brooklyn was to become a model for the immigrant church, recommended separation. “If the converted foreigners speak little English and are of the laboring class, the attempt is always a failure. The vast majority of church-members will not mix with them and the Italians feel keenly their isolation, the social gulf between the races, and their own shabby clothes.”<sup>16</sup> Mangano also reported that established Baptist clerics were often at a loss dealing with immigrant members of their congregation.<sup>17</sup>

After his triumph in Buffalo, Rev. Bellondi was stunned by how he was received in Vermont. “The attitude of many of the people was not simply one of indifference, but of hostility to the truth. In their alienation from the Roman Church they had swung to the extreme of opposition to all churches. Not a few had adopted anarchistic views.”<sup>18</sup>

In 1903, a few years after Bellondi arrived in Barre, a sensational murder took place at the Socialist Labor Party Hall. Amid mounting tensions between anarchists and socialists, Elia Corti, the well-known granite carver and anarchist, was killed by a bullet from the gun of

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Alessandro Garetto, a socialist. The shooting resulted in the conviction and imprisonment of Garetto.

Rev. Bellondi publicly defended Garetto, whom he claimed was a scapegoat as a consequence of the longstanding feud between the anarchists and socialists. Corti, Bellondi asserted, was not an anarchist, although the anarchist leaders swore to the contrary.<sup>19</sup> “And, oh how they lied,” the minister remarked. “Corti was a good fellow, liked by all. He went to a few of their meetings, but he was not one of them. I have talked to his brothers and his relatives. If he sometimes went with them, it was only because he liked everybody. Garetto, or anyone else, had no grudge against him. He had no enemies.”<sup>20</sup>

When Ariel Bellondi allied himself with one side in the political turmoil that swept through Barre, he may have sealed his fate among the anticlerical Italians who were predominant in the city, and ensured the failure of his mission. His stand reminded the immigrants in Barre’s North End of the Roman Catholic priests at home who zealously defended the status quo and allied themselves with the “padroni,” the oppressive class of landowners in Italy. It is impossible to determine if Bellondi’s ultra-conservative views evolved from his antipathy toward the Barre anarchists, or if the failure of his ability to attract a congregation is attributable to his interest in preserving the established order.

Shortly after his public defense of Garetto, Bellondi was dismissed and, exhausted, he returned to Italy for an extended rest. He reappeared in Lawrence, Massachusetts, in 1912, pleading with striking textile workers to return to the mills. Bellondi spoke against the Bread and Roses strike and later conspired with the Italian ambassador to discredit an antifascist who had been making public statements unflattering to Mussolini.<sup>21</sup> It is not surprising that his missionary efforts were unsuccessful in Barre.

The Italian style chapel in Barre was completed under the direction of Dr. W. A. Davison, a Vermont Baptist. At the dedication on September 17, 1909, Supt. Bruce reported that the chapel was filled to capacity, but only twenty or so of the congregation were Italian immigrants, a surprisingly low turnout for the dedication of a new chapel dedicated to serving the Italian community. Bruce’s report shows an appreciation for the character of the Italian settlement:

The Barre Italian Colony is important, not only numerically, but on account of its superior character. It is mostly from Northern Italy. There are many Carrara marble cutters and the prevailing mental and moral quality is above that of Sicilian laborers and peasants. Skeptical, socialist, and even anarchistic ideas are more or less current, not, however, in the way of lawlessness or violence. And the

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people's minds are more open to simple and real religion than those of unquestioning Roman Catholics.<sup>22</sup>

Although the dedication was tepidly received by the Italian colony, Supt. Bruce felt that there was reason to feel hopeful about the future of the mission. A new pastor from Montreal, Rev. Castellini, was installed, and some dozen parishioners attended an informal evangelistic service after the ceremony. Supt. Bruce optimistically concluded his report, "There is good reason to expect a steady advance of the Italian work at Barre in the favorable conditions now established there."<sup>23</sup>

It is likely that the superintendent was attempting to put a good face on a bad situation. Just two years later it was noted in the annual report of 1911 that "anarchy and socialism of an atheistic type here have their chief center among Italian-speaking people; and here the chief Italian anarchistic paper is published [Luigi Galleani's *Cronaca Sovversiva*]. No God, no future life, no supernatural religion of any sort, are their doctrines."<sup>24</sup>

Rev. Castellini lasted only one year. In 1912 it was reported that Bel-londi's and Davison's successor had moved to Buffalo, friendly territory in comparison. Although the 1912 annual report attempts to depict the situation favorably, only one baptism was reported, and the administration had been entrusted to a lay person.<sup>25</sup> The next few years saw the mission in decline and, in 1916, Antonio Mangano made one last attempt to rescue the effort from its trajectory of failure.

This charismatic luminary of the Baptist missionary movement was an accomplished scholar. Italian born, Mangano was a graduate of Colgate University and a product of graduate studies at Brown, Columbia, and Union Theological Seminary. His mission in Brooklyn, New York, was generally considered the most successful of the efforts to convert Italian immigrants. His 1917 sociological treatise, *Sons of Italy*, a detailed study of Italian life in America, is still in print and comprises an insightful treatise on immigrant culture. The fact that he married the niece of a highly placed church official only enhanced his ascent of the hierarchical church ladder.

In 1916, Rev. Mangano inspected the Barre mission during his summer vacation and made the discouraging assessment that, in spite of the hours and dollars invested, "anti-religious sentiment was so strong that only a very few of the people could be reached. The work was at a very low stage up to the last summer. A little Sunday school and a sewing class was all that remained of Italian work. My experience was most interesting, though at times disheartening. Everywhere I went people said to me, 'You must not talk of religion here, for the Italians will hoot you out of town' and then they told me how several years ago they had driven an Italian Priest from the city."<sup>26</sup>



*Rev. Antonio Mangano,  
pastor, First Italian Baptist  
Church of Brooklyn.  
From The Baptist Home  
Mission Monthly 29  
(September 1907).*

Mangano decided to give a series of lectures on Italy and Italian history as a way to make contact with immigrant citizens, but he met with great difficulty in securing a venue for the speeches. Finally, through the help of a friend, he was able to procure the use of the Socialist Labor Party Hall on Granite Street, the same building where Corti had been killed several years earlier. The only condition on the use of the hall was that he "refrain from speaking on religion or politics." Rev. Mangano gamely delivered a slide presentation to an audience of about 250 people. At the conclusion he was amazed that no one offered applause. "They were as quiet as though at a funeral, and this is very strange for an Italian audience, especially when fine views of their own country are shown to them."<sup>27</sup>

Mangano found later lectures were poorly attended and surmised that his efforts had been sabotaged by anticlerical elements in town. Rumors that he was a priest were "sufficient to shut all ears" to anything that he might have to say. In desperation, Mangano began offering English lessons. "I found that a number of these rabid socialists and anarchists were perfectly willing to study English and that gave me a point of contact. But when I suggested that the classes would be held in the Italian Baptist Mission, they politely informed me that they did not care to go inside the building."<sup>28</sup>

"My experience in Barre showed me that the preaching of the

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gospel at that stage would not be effective among those people.”<sup>29</sup> The accuracy of Mangano’s conclusion about the mission was painfully obvious.

The efforts in Barre did not come to a complete end with Mangano’s assessment. There were additional pastors who did not preach but rather chose to lead by example, but even that commitment began to dwindle. The last listing in the city directory for a clergyman at the Italian Baptist Mission was in 1927; and by 1935, the building was listed as being the lodge hall of the Improved Order of Red Men.

Vacant during the years of World War Two the building has again been dedicated for religious services. Today it is the home of the Morning



*Morning Star Fellowship building, formerly the Italian Baptist Church, Brook Street, Barre, Vermont, 2010. Photograph by the author.*

Star Fellowship (Church of God of Prophecy), an evangelical Protestant denomination.

The model of missions to the immigrant community has assumed different forms over the years and continues in America's urban centers to address the needs of new ethnic groups from yet new lands of origin. The missionary efforts of the Baptists in Barre appear in retrospect to have been well intentioned with the appointment of native Italian clergy, but years of oppression abetted by religious institutions in their native land, as well as progressive political views of the Italian immigrants to central Vermont, doomed the Baptists' ability to recruit a congregation for their Italian chapel on Brook Street.

Even the successful Baptist missions for Italians saw fundamental changes or dissolution in only a few decades. At the flagship church in Buffalo, the mission evolved as situations changed. "The area around the church became less Italian and more mixed in ethnic makeup."<sup>30</sup> As a new generation of Italians grew up speaking English, the church services rendered in Italian were phased out, and by the mid to late 1920s were supplanted with English. Finally, the name was changed from "The First Italian Baptist Church" to the "Edison Street Baptist Church."<sup>31</sup>

The Italian missions, where successful, served as a transition for the immigrant congregations until, through assimilation, the churches assumed the role of full partner with the American Baptist Church. Where they were unsuccessful, as in Barre, they were unfavorably perceived as an equivalent to the Catholic Church in Italy and in opposition to the immigrants' political ideals. The fate of the Italian Baptist Church in Barre was to disappear completely, leaving an Italian style granite chapel as the only artifact of its existence.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Antonio Mangano, "Italian Work in Barre," *Missions: A Baptist Monthly Magazine* 7 (June 1916): 476.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> James M. Bruce, "Italian Chapel at Barre," *The Baptist Home Mission Monthly* 31 (November 1909): 467.

<sup>4</sup>F. Aurelio Palmieri, "Italian Protestantism in the United States," *Catholic World* 107 (May 1918): 178.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 185.

<sup>6</sup>E.E. Chivers, "Our Baptist Italian Mission Work," *The Home Mission Monthly* 27 (May 1905): 187.

<sup>7</sup> Antonio Mangano, *Sons of Italy* (New York: Missionary Education Movement, 1917), 29.

<sup>8</sup> Mari Tomasi, "The Italian Story in Vermont," *Vermont History* 38 (1960): 77.

<sup>9</sup> Roberto Burrattini, "Italians and Italian Americans in Vermont." Unpublished Manuscript, Vermont Historical Society (Barre, Vt.: Works Progress Administration 193?), 21.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 22.

<sup>12</sup> Rudolph J. Vecoli, "Prelates and Peasants: Italian Immigrants and the Catholic Church," *Journal of Social History* 2 (1969): 238.

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<sup>13</sup>Tomasi, "The Italian Story in Vermont," 77.

<sup>14</sup>Corrine Eastman Davis, *One Hundred Fifty Years of Methodism in Barre* (Montpelier, Vt.: Capital City Press, 1948), 92.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 96.

<sup>16</sup>Mangano, *Sons of Italy*, 166.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

<sup>18</sup>"Italians. First Fruits of Harvest. Barre, Vt.," *Baptist Home Mission Monthly* 25 (September 1903): 236.

<sup>19</sup>*New York Times*, 1 Nov. 1908: C8.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

<sup>21</sup>Peter D'Agostino, *Rome in America* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 238.

<sup>22</sup>Bruce, "Italian Chapel at Barre," 467.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 468.

<sup>24</sup>"From the Home Lands," *Missions: American Baptist International Magazine* 2 (May 1911): 355.

<sup>25</sup>Vermont Baptist State Convention. Minutes of the Vermont Baptist Anniversaries (Rutland, Vt.: The Tuttle Company, 1915): 30.

<sup>26</sup>Mangano, "Italian Work in Barre," 476.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 477.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid.

<sup>30</sup>Graham Miller, *Edison Street Baptist Church* (Buffalo, N.Y.: Edison Street Baptist Church, 1996), 26.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 63.