

Verrazzano and the Discovery of Staten Island

Jerry Krase (November 22, 2014)



Given that we are currently celebrating the 50th anniversary of a misspelled bridge I thought an excerpt from my book, "The Staten Island Italian American Experience," briefly telling how Staten Island came to be first sighted by Giovanni da Verrazzano in 1524 and how six years later he was consumed in the Caribbean might be of interest.

If anyone were to take a stroll through almost any commercial section of New York City today and take in the many sights, smells, and sounds that surround them, they couldn't help but to notice the impact of Italians on our fair city.

From ubiquitous Pizza Parlors in virtually every neighborhood, including those in Orthodox Jewish areas such as Borough Park which are "Kosher" and those in Moslem communities which advertise

that they are “Halal,” to rarefied accessory shops and boutiques on our most elegant avenues of Manhattan, “Italian” is a household name in New York. At a much deeper level, “America’s City,” or “Gotham” as it is also known, is also very Italian. As Frank J. Cavaoli, wrote in “American Colonial Italian American Historiography:” Italian Americans have had a lasting impact on the development of early America. Peter Sammartino (1904-1992), founder of Fairleigh Dickinson University and a strong advocate of Italian American History, advanced this point by stating, “If we take the sum total of the influences of philosophy, of government, and in jurisprudence, discoveries, exploration, the influence on literature, on music, on art, on architecture and on science, then America would not have been the country it is without the contributions of Italians, and this stretches from the thirteen to the nineteenth centuries.”

We certainly must begin our historical journey in this volume with the story of how Staten Island came to be first sighted by Giovanni da Verrazzano in 1524. In the early part of the Sixteenth Century, what we know of New England, and the Middle Atlantic States of the United States of America were hardly explored, by Europeans that is. Florida had been discovered by expeditions financed by Spain, and the more northern Atlantic regions were already frequented by the English and Portuguese. In fact these more northern areas were for more than a century well-known fishing and whaling areas. Some European monarchs and traders, thought perhaps that somewhere between the northern and southern realms of the New World there was more direct route to the East and sent out many expeditions to investigate.

Once such monarch was Francis I of France. King Francis I did as so many others of the time had done; he chose an Italian, in this case the well-seasoned mariner Giovanni da Verrazzano to head the French-financed expedition to find a shorter western route to China and bring back its riches. Most historians believe that Giovanni Verrazzano was born in 1485 at his family's castle, Castello Verrazzano, near the city of Florence. Later, as a young man he traveled to France, learned the seafarer's trade and became a successful captain.

For the costly and potentially dangerous search for the illusionary middle passage to the Orient, Verrazzano was outfitted with a total of four vessels by the King of France. Rather quickly two were quickly lost to the waves and another was sent back home with loot from raids made along the Spanish coast. The last of the four, his own flagship, La Dauphine, measured 100 tuns and had a crew of fifty men that included his mapmaker brother Girolamo da Verrazzano. It is important to note that it was Giovanni's brother Girolamo's 1529 Map of the World which, along with that of the Western Hemisphere by another mapmaker, Vesconte de Maggiolo, in 1527, that documented for posterity Verrazzano's many discoveries.

On this particular trip in search of a shorter western passage Giovanni Verrazzano made a few stops along what are today the Carolina coastlines on his way northward. As he sailed along the shorelines he passed by, without notice, several major bays and estuaries. At the time, the vast extent of the North American continent was not well known. Large bays and estuaries were seen as possible entrances into passages to the Orient. Verrazzano continued northward until he reached what we now know of as the coast of New Jersey. It was at this point that he stumbled upon the vast outer Bay of New York into which he sailed. Where this larger bay narrowed he anchored La Dauphine which was just at the entrance to a well sheltered and very deep harbor.

This is how he described his brief visit:

“The people are almost like unto the others, and clad with feather of fowls of diverse colors. They



came towards us very cheerfully, making great shouts of admiration, showing us where we might come to land most safely with our boat. We entered up the said river into the land about half a league, where it made a most pleasant lake [the Upper bay] about 3 leagues in compass; on the which they rowed from the one side to the other, to the number of 30 in their small boats, wherein were many people, which passed from one shore to the other to come and see us. And behold, upon the sudden (as it is wont to fall out in sailing) a contrary flaw of wind coming from the sea, we were enforced to return to our ship, leaving this land, to our great discontentment for the great commodity and pleasantness thereof, which we suppose is not without some riches, all the hills showing mineral matters in them. " (Morrison 1971)

Verrazzano's last voyage to explore the New World was in the year 1528 and it was during this trip that he came to his rather horrible demise. Having had mostly good experiences with the native Americans he encountered elsewhere on his several trips he was led to believe that he would receive much the same treatment after landing on an island in the Carribean. Instead of the predicted hospitality by friendly peoples, he and his crew encountered instead a violent reception by a hostile tribe that proceeded to capture and then kill him. As his brother Giralomo and the rest of the crew observed with horror from the deck of La Dauphine they also butchered him on shore. Even more gruesomely, they proceeded to roast some pieces of the renowned explorer over a fire and then consume them as they watched from the ship. Excerpted from: Chapter I, "Verrazano and the Discovery of Staten Island ",

The Staten Island Italian American Experience, Staten Island: The DaVinci Society of Wagner College, 2007.

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