

Tracing My Sicilian Ancestry Turned Into an Unexpected Journey

By Victoria Greco

For months and many late nights, my head was in my computer, staring at tabs open on different online databases, scanned records, and family photos. My mission? To trace my Italian ancestry on my dad's side before visiting Sicily after I graduate from college. I have always imagined walking the same streets my ancestors once did and seeing where they used to live their day-to-day lives in late 19th-century Sicily. But first, I needed to figure out who they were.

I input the family names we knew on FamilySearch.com and Ancestry.com, slowly jotting down more and more details found in census records and draft cards. Once I found the name of who I believed was my first immigrant relative from Sicily, who shares my last name, I learned that he died at 41 years old in Chicago. This intrigued me—I had never seen his grave in our family cemetery, which we visit often. I found a website, FindAGrave.com, on which I put my relative's name and filtered the search. I cross-referenced birth and death certificates and was able to find a match for a man with the same name buried in a cemetery I had never heard of before. I figured if he is there, could anyone else be there? I searched his wife's name (my grandpa's grandma), and sure enough, she was also buried in the same cemetery right next to him. This confirmed that I had found my ancestors. I quickly scribbled their plot locations in my notebook. I told my family about everything—my dad was shocked to learn all that I had found. It did not take a lot to convince my family to go with me.

On a sunny Monday in June, we drove to a cemetery none of us had ever been to or heard about, but with the hope that we could see their names in person. We drove into the quiet cemetery to where the website recorded their locations. Oddly, the cemetery felt sacred because we were walking into something of “the past” with anticipation. My parents, my brother, and I split apart, looking row after row for about 20 minutes until we decided to ask two groundskeepers for help, and they walked with us, but after nearly 15 minutes or more of searching the same area, we found nothing. No stone with our last name. I could feel the hope I'd been carrying start to fade under the weight of doubt. Maybe I had gotten it wrong, maybe this was another dead end.

My thoughts were interrupted when my dad called out, “Hey guys! I found it!”

He was standing right in front of it, pointing at a tall, weathered gravestone. I rushed over, and there was our last name carved into the stone in capital letters. Above it were all the names I had traced in my research. Each one matched. I recognized the name of my great-great-grandmother,

and next to hers, the name of her husband. Then I saw their faces in the oval portraits glued into the stone. My papa's grandmother looked exactly like the photograph we have of her at home. I also saw my papa's grandfather, he looked cooler than I imagined him— in his photo, he had an impressive mustache. We had no photo of him at home, no clue what he looked like. I had spent so much time trying to trace him— he was the mystery man, the one who carried our last name from Sicily to America when he was only 16 years old. In this moment, all of the pieces started to fall into place.

As I stood there with my dad, something lying in the grass caught my eye. Face up, one of those oval photos was a man; the top of the photo was chipped away, but there was enough left to see the man's face. I bent down and picked it up. I didn't recognize him immediately, but there was something familiar about his face— he looked like us. I looked back at the gravestone and I noticed an empty oval-shaped slot next to the name of my great-great-grandmother's brother, another name I recognized. The photo must have fallen out due to weather conditions and age, yet we had arrived just in time to find it.

It felt like a sign that we were meant to be there that day. All the work I put into this search did not just lead us to a gravestone, but to a union of family that are generations apart. My great-great-grandma and grandpa, her parents and siblings, all crossed the Atlantic Ocean for days to give us a life here.

What started as a curiosity about ancestry turned into something even more meaningful. Persistence turned into a connection and a story to tell for generations. In the end, we didn't just find where we came from. We got to see the faces of those who made our lives possible.