

BRAVO BUSTI ... by Sal Martoche



When I was a boy the only thing I knew about the name “Busti” is that it was the street that ran parallel just to the west of Seventh Street, where I grew up, and that according to my mom it was once called Front Avenue. We pronounced it “BUST-ee” and giggled when we said it, for the obvious reasons that would appeal to 10 and 11 year old boys.

I was in high school before I realized that the correct pronunciation was “BOOST-ee” and that the street was named after an Italian, born in Milan on 17 October 1749. Paolo Busti was the second and most important general agent of the Holland Land Company, a Dutch syndicate that purchased 3.25 million acres in what is now Western New York, and was responsible for the early development of these lands. The com-

pany was known as an enlightened and successful land speculation enterprise in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Busti established that company’s main office in Batavia, and others in Buffalo, Ellicottville and Westfield, New York. He was the idea man, the money man who had the contacts and vision to “make things happen” for the Holland Land Company. When he immigrated from Europe, he settled in Philadelphia, the United States headquarters for the Holland Land Company, and only visited Western New York twice during the 24 years he was associated with the company. In spite of that fact he had an enormous impact on the future of Buffalo and Western New York.

Busti had previously made a name for himself in the business world in Europe where he worked in his uncle’s bank and acquired a positive reputation for his ethical and skillful behavior. He was reputed to be scrupulously honest and when the financial conglomerate running the Holland Land Company needed a new agent, he was an obvious and popular choice. He immediately hired Joseph Ellicott, a good friend, as an agent and surveyor for the company he would lead for the next 24 years. Ellicott was the man on the ground in Western New York. He was a meticulous surveyor and engineer who laid out the streets of Buffalo. Ellicott’s Uncle Andrew, also a surveyor and an engineer who laid out the city of Washington, DC, was a great influence on him. In fact, Ellicott and Busti were a team, each playing his important role.

As Steve Cihon pointed out in an article he wrote for the Buffalo News in 2019 it took three tries to get a street named after Busti. The original Busti Avenue was rechristened Genesee Street and the streets that are now known as Upper and Lower Terrace Streets were once known as Busti Terrace, when his name was dropped for a second time. Finally in 1930 the present

Busti Avenue was named in his honor. A town in Chautauqua County bears his name and Batavia celebrates him, but he is practically forgotten in Buffalo.

Although Ellicott has gotten and deserves credit for his own role in founding Buffalo, in fact, Paolo Busti is the founder of Buffalo! It was he who directed the work of the great engineer Joseph Ellicott; it was he who raised the money and attracted the settlers; and most of all it was he who helped Buffalo successfully beat out the Village of Black Rock as the future great Western New York city and the western terminus of the Erie Canal, thus assuring its place as an industrial and mercantile power. So Italian Americans can honestly say that Buffalo, New York, was founded by an Italian.

He will have a special place of honor in the new Culturale Centrale Italiano being built in Buffalo. No Busti, maybe no Buffalo? Grazie and Bravo Busti.

