

PESCIA'S PLACE

The Italian Settlement of Carlton

by

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The Italian immigrants who settled in Melbourne were not wealthy and, therefore, sought cheap accommodation. The areas most favoured were the north-east of the city and South Carlton, especially the area around the Exhibition Gardens and across to the Pelham Gardens. For many years, the area was known as North Melbourne and extended to Pelham Street, then to Grattan Street, and right across Parkville to present day North Melbourne. As settlement occurred and spread north, new municipal wards were created. The suburb of Carlton [to present day Fenwick Street] extended at first only to Elgin Street, then to Princess, followed by Church, McPherson and finally Park Street as its northern boundary. The railway at its northern end divided Carlton from its next neighbour, Brunswick. It is interesting to note that Church Street continues to exist by its original name across Nicholson Street in North Fitzroy in North Carlton it is known as Fenwick Street.

The area north of Princess Street was for many years a series of blue-stone quarries. It was not until the 1880s that the North Carlton area became settled. It was in this environment that the Italian-speakers came to live.

In 1854, North Melbourne, of which Carlton was part, already had nearly 7,000 people. The area must have been slow to develop because Newtown, which comprised present day Collingwood and Fitzroy, had a population of over 17,000 people for the same year.

There were many impediments to Carlton's growth. We have already mentioned the blue-stone quarries in the area but possibly the most difficult to overcome was the Reilly Street drain which ran along present day Princess Street. The quarries and the drain caused drainage problems which are still in evidence today in many streets in north Carlton as water constantly seeps through the paths and blue-stone kerbs. Because of this, it seems that there was no development north of

Fenwick Street as late as 1878. In the following year, the Member for Carlton asked the Minister for Public Works to make funds available for filling the quarry holes in North Carlton.

By 1881, residential development north of MacPherson Street was only four percent of the 1861 residential concentration so that Carlo Pescia, who built his grocer's store on the corner of MacPherson and Canning Streets in 1885 must have been one of the earliest settlers in the quarry filled area.

Pescia's name is one of the most interesting discovered in the Sands and McDougall Register of that period. It is interesting because there is a house on the corner of Canning and MacPherson Streets, North Carlton, with Pescia's Building written above the front door.

Carlo Pescia had been a digger around the Daylesford area in the 1850s and 60s. He then transferred to Melbourne and was a fruiterer-greengrocer at the Eastern Market from 1876 to 1883. In that year he transferred to 135 Rathdowne Street, Carlton as a grocer. In 1885 he opened a grocery shop in Canning Street, in the building that bears his name. In 1889 Pescia opened a restaurant at 110 Lonsdale Street, diversifying his interests and investments. However, the house in Canning Street remains. It was purchased by an Italian immigrant family in the 1950s and the family lived in it for many years, turning the shop into part of the dwelling. It was recently renovated and made into a charming residence. The young Italo-Australian owner, Joe Donnoli, has insisted on retaining the verandah over the footpath with some of the original posts still in position; the bricks have been cleaned and taken back to their original colour. The young owner's love of the house and tasteful renovations have maintained for posterity, at least for some time, a little corner of history.



Pescia's place on the corner of Canning and Macpherson Street with his name still visible.

Even after Pescia built his residence - grocer's shop, the blue-stone quarries continued to exist for many years as we find maps dated 1885 with these huge holes still very much in evidence, especially at the northern end of Drummond and Rathdowne Streets.

According to Frank Lancaster Jones, in his study "The Italian population of Carlton", the history of Carlton and North Carlton has always been working class. It is true that the villas owned by some rich families did exist and some are still visible, as for example some of the fine residences along Drummond Street, close to Victoria Street, which have become University Colleges or apartment houses. Possibly one of the finest houses in the area was Sir Edmond Barry's residence in Rathdowne Street, opposite the exhibition gardens. The old villa later became part of the Children's Hospital and is now part of a modern block of offices constructed on the site.

So that the Italians came to a working class area

where housing was cheap and close to their place of work, if they worked in the city or in one of the factories in the industrial suburbs: Fitzroy, Collingwood or Brunswick. Carlton itself had little industrial concentration, with four flour mills and some small industrial enterprises. Some of the flour mills are still to be seen along the sides of the old inner circle railway which ran along Park Street North Carlton.

Possible employers of at least some of the Italians in the area were the monumental stone masons' yards of which there were several. The closest industrial concentration was Brunswick with its numerous clay quarries and the manufacture of bricks, tiles and sewage pipes.

As the Italians continued to arrive in greater numbers in the 80s and 90s, they continued to settle in Carlton, especially south of Pelham Street, constituting nearly one percent of the entire population of the suburb. The area was a great focus because of its boarding houses which were mainly for unmarried males who gathered in the Italian-run boarding houses. Only a small percentage lived north of Pelham Street. With the unfavourable economic conditions which developed in the early 90s, the Italians departed for other areas, possibly for the rural districts where they may have had a better chance to earn a living. This theory, however, does not always hold true because in the same period we note a movement of Italian-speakers from wine growing areas such as Nagambie and Tabhilk along the Goulburn, to other rural areas.

In Melbourne itself, small groups still remained, in particular the Viggianese musicians. Jones does support the view that the musicians from Viggiano and Marsicovetere settled in Carlton and by 1893 they had achieved quite a considerable concentration of residents of Italian or Swiss- Italian origins.

The Muschialli family also settled in North Carlton and established a number of enterprises. Like Pescia they were urban pioneers who ventured into an area with gaping holes filled with stagnant water and rubbish, and infested with snakes and rats. One may suppose that the land was cheap, hence the attraction to build in the area. But the proximity of North Carlton to the city itself could not have been lost on the people who settled north of Princess Street.