

# The Per Niente

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Joe Petrosino

Giuseppe (Joseph) Petrosino was born in Salerno, Italy, and immigrated to the United States with his family in 1873. As a boy, he shined shoes outside Police Headquarters on Mulberry Street. At the age of eighteen, he began his career in the public service with the Department of Sanitation (then under the jurisdiction of the Police Department).

Fluent in many Italian dialects, Petrosino aided the police by working undercover as an informer in Lit-

tle Italy.

When he joined the Police Department in 1883, Petrosino was the city's shortest officer, at five feet and three inches tall. Police Commissioner Theodore Roosevelt personally promoted him to Sergeant of Detectives in 1895.

While investigating anarchists in the United States, Petrosino warned President McKinley of threats against his life; however, the warning was not heeded and the President was assassinated in 1901.

Within ten years, Petrosino was named lieutenant and given command of the new Italian Squad, a unit created to combat the crime organization known as the Black Hand. Under his leadership, several thousand arrests were made, and more than 500 offenders were sent to prison. Crimes against Italian-Americans dropped by fifty percent.

Petrosino was killed while on assignment to Pal-

ermo, Sicily. When his body was returned to New York, thousands of mourners formed a funeral procession which marched from Little Italy to Calvary Cemetery in Queens.

Lt. Petrosino was the only New York police officer who had died in the line of duty outside the United States. The park named in his honor is located just north of the Renaissance Revival edifice at 240 Centre Street, which served as Police Headquarters from 1910 to 1971.

## A few of Petrosino's cases

- Convinced an innocent man, Angelo Carboni, was being sent to the electric chair, Petrosino tracked the real killer down through two countries and over four weeks, using disguises, impersonations, informants, and cunning police sense. He saved the innocent Italian-immigrant from death, and sent the real killer down.
- Under his command, the Italian Legion shut down an insurance scam that preyed on naive immigrants (1899). They were convinced to sign onto life insurance, but the seller made himself the beneficiary. The innocent immigrant always died soon after.