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Tesio's Trip to Dante City

SHERI MIGNANO CRAWFORD

Peter Tesio (1869–1923) was the first Italian instrumental music publisher in Manhattan and a teacher of the mandolin.¹ He mainly published sheet music for mandolin trios, which can be dated back to at least 1898. This narrative begins in 1905–1906, when his music publishing business had become quite successful, which enabled Tesio to broaden his interests and become more of an entrepreneur. In 1906 Tesio broke ground on his vision of building a miniature suburb away from Manhattan's bustling metropolis. Called Dante City, it became an early forerunner of a modern planned town with local conveniences, and it embodied Tesio's personal goal to honor Dante Alighieri, Italy's greatest poet, and, in so doing, to take steps toward creating a better world. One of Tesio's promotional brochures boasted that Dante City's technology would make life easier, enhance the pleasures of country life, and present an "alluring view of the new colony in colors . . . with the whiz wagons on the motor parkway" ("Dante City" 1909, 2). He envisioned transportation modes expanding vitality to more people and offering more recreational opportunities, too. One could walk, bicycle, ride the subway, or, if wealthy enough, drive to any number of destinations from the development, including parks where one could relax and enjoy the scenery. Italians were especially active in adorning these locations with commemorative statues honoring Italian contributions to America's new century. Tesio began to attract like-minded people who would help him to fulfill his dream.

At the beginning of the last century, subscription fund-raising (today we would call it crowdfunding) was often used for civic monuments. A bronze statue of Dante, built by subscription, was slated to be installed in 1911 at the triangular park on New York City's Broadway and West 64th Street. It would keep company with those of numerous Italian heroes already installed elsewhere in the city: Giuseppe Garibaldi in Washington Square and a statue of Christopher Columbus, erected to commemorate the four-hundredth anniversary of his 1492 voyage, in Columbus Circle. In 1906, a sculptural tribute to Giuseppe Verdi arrived in Verdi Square, and Giovanni da Verrazzano's statue went up in 1909 in Battery Park in anticipation of the eponymous bridge that would be completed in 1964.

The metaphoric trip to Dante City necessitated a detour due to politics and other matters, including the unsettled climate leading to the Great War. As early as 1904, Agostino De Biasi, founder and president of the Dante Alighieri

Society of New York (and editor of *Il Carroccio*, a Fascist-leaning paper), actively worked with the Italian community to get the Dante statue ready for installation by 1911. The society spearheaded new fund-raising events but experienced challenges from a different Dante society, called the Dante Society of America, a U.S.-based literary organization, which dated back to 1889.² De Biasi was strongly supported, but the statue's installation was blocked by other competitive fund-raisers such as *Il Progresso*, the city's most important Italian-language newspaper. In an ironic twist, competing to achieve the same goal led to the Dante Alighieri Society of New York's demise: It disintegrated in 1912 after failing to host a celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the unification of Italy and having been plagued with ongoing controversies. Newspaper accounts detailed the society's internal squabbles and mixed in with them propagandist messages about what constituted good art ("Dine & Defend Biondi" 1904, 3). The war delayed any commitments to completing the statue installation project.

The Manhattan Art Commission wouldn't approve the monument until 1921, when it was finally erected at West 63rd and Broadway ("Dante Rescued from Cold Storage Hell" 1921, 3). Throughout the story of the delay building the Dante tribute, Tesio stayed focused and undeterred in the pursuit of his dream city dedicated to Italy's most famous poet. Progress stalled during the war, when enthusiasm for the commemorative statue waned, but Tesio was determined to bring his own project to fruition.

In 1906, he trademarked the Latin Realty Company and bought a swath of property in the suburbs of Hicksville, New York. Tesio probably chose the name "Latin" because Latin is the root of the Romance languages, including Italian, French, and Spanish. Tesio's marketing materials were explained in these languages as well ("Hempstead News" 1909, 11). Today, if you visit Hicksville, the Dante subdivision, bounded by Jerusalem Avenue and Division Avenue, survives and still reflects its international flavor with street names honoring famous Italian inventor Alessandro Volta and Italian cities—Palermo, Milano, Roma—as well as *Il Poeta* himself.³

Tesio assumed the role of the realty company's treasurer. Upon its incorporation, Tesio attracted a world-famous celebrity, race car driver Emanuel Cedrino, to be its first president. In August 1904, Cedrino and his wife Placida (who was also his mechanic) arrived in New York⁴ and set up a home in Lynbrook, not far from Dante City. By then, the Long Island Rail Road was delivering passengers from Manhattan and elsewhere. The excursion to Nassau County was about twenty-five miles by car from Midtown Manhattan.

As to how and why Tesio selected the daredevil Cedrino, we can only speculate. They were both Torinese and caught up in the innovative swirl of technology. Turin, home of the auto manufacturer Fiat, had led the industrial

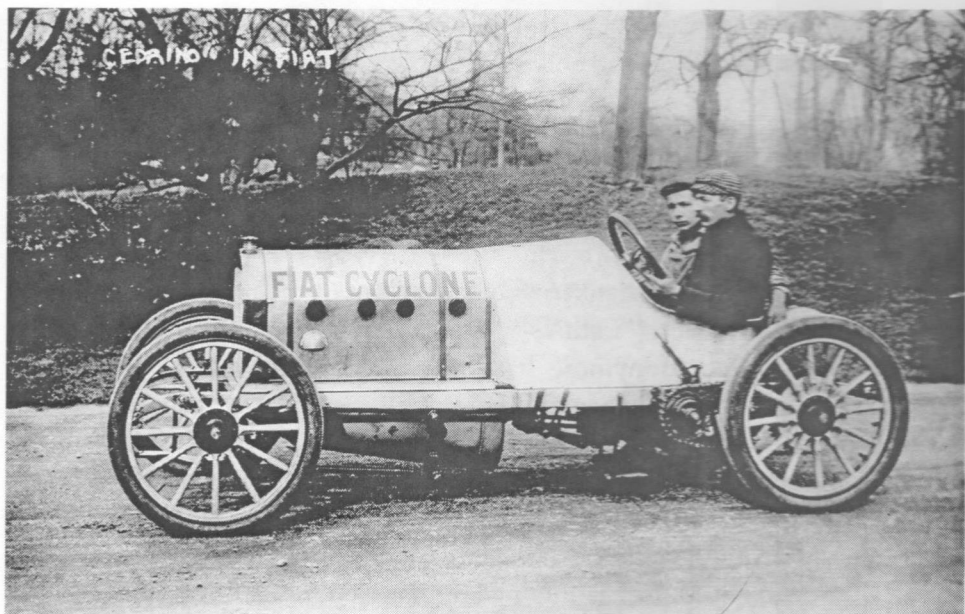


Figure 1. Emanuel Cedrino, right, at the wheel of the Fiat Cyclone.

revolution, and Cedrino had made his name with the company driving its race cars (Figure 1). (Another Fiat driver, Ralph De Palma, took over driving Cedrino's Fiat Cyclone after he was killed in an accident—and a musical tribute to his velocity appeared in the Tesio music catalog as the "Fiat" polka with a dedication to De Palma.⁵)

Cedrino's glamorous star power may have helped Tesio to attract even more buyers to Dante City: Before debuting on the racetracks in the United States, Cedrino had served as personal chauffeur to Queen Elena of Italy ("Cedrino Breaks Neck" 1908, 1). He had led a celebrity lifestyle and was setting speed records of seventy-seven miles an hour in his Cyclone ("New Record for Auto Speed" 1908, 6). With Cedrino as president, Tesio's company began to promote and sell lots to a wide range of interested parties. Brochures were distributed to potential clients looking for an alternative lifestyle and a summer bungalow away from Manhattan.

Tesio wasted no time giving promotional interviews and hiring civil engineers, contractors, and public relations people. The Latin Realty Company surveyed the property in October 1907 and broke ground in the unincorporated Hicksville's District 17 ("Tax Sale Notice" 1908, 22). Louis W. Keller, a building contractor, secured a contract to build homes and cottages for the Dante City Construction Company ("News from Hicksville" 1914, 8). One of Tesio's mandolin students and a well-known architect named Eusebio Ghelardi may have played a role in finding suitable materials and in the construction of the lodgings themselves ("Interest Centres" 1924, 5). Tesio's far-reaching

network of business friends and colleagues, coupled with his notoriety as a successful music publisher and entrepreneur, were working to his advantage.

Unfortunately, just as Latin Realty started to sell lots, Cedrino died tragically in a speed race in May 1908. Tesio lost not only a business partner but also a good friend. As a result, Tesio promoted himself from company treasurer to president. He was determined not to allow setbacks or even this sad tragedy to delay his project. However, within the year, Tesio was being challenged in the newspapers. A Harlem banker who backed out of the planned community began to openly complain ("Latin City Is Planned for Hempstead Plains" 1909, 11). This disgruntled anonymous banker "declared Dante City busted." The reporter who published the negative comments of the disenchanted financial backer balanced those remarks with Tesio's own optimism. He had read the full-color brochures and in contrast affirmed that Dante City was "too pretty to be allowed to fail" and it "connote[s] an interesting and invaluable addition." Tesio did not "abandon all hope," as Dante warned those entering the Inferno. He stayed true to his course, maintained his convictions, and continued selling lots, which were, however, not going as fast as he would have preferred.

Poetry societies were gearing up for the 1921 commemoration of the six-hundredth anniversary of Dante's death. During the decade leading up to this date, Tesio composed a musical tribute to the great poet, titled "Dante City." His waltz featured a half-tone image of the beloved Florentine poet on the front cover sheet. In 1911 he had published the famous Bolognese mandolin professor Francesco Tentarelli's march "A Trip to Dante City," composed to promote Tesio's project. Tesio also published a waltz titled "Laurestina," composed by the Sicilian-born piano and violin teacher Ferdinand Guarneri. The title acknowledges the laurel wreath that crowns the poet in traditional depictions. Interviewed in front of his home about the planned community in Hicksville, Tesio, ever the salesman, invited readers to visit the city as soon as possible. Speaking in English and in Italian, he urged readers, "Venite, venite presto per non pentirvi dopo"⁶ ("Dante City" 1909, 2).

In 1914 the Dante City Construction Company began building Dante City's bungalows ("News from Hicksville" 1914, 8). The suburban Hempstead plains surrounding Hicksville lent themselves to a garden city concept in urban planning. Tesio described it as a future "colony," a "settlement," and a "future municipality" ("Latin City Is Planned for Hempstead Plains" 1909, 11). He himself had already sold a few lots to the "chefs at Café Martin" for an upscale hotel restaurant ("Latin City Is Planned for Hempstead Plains" 1909, 11). However, during World War I, the war effort became a constant distraction, and more pressing matters took priority; yet, in spite of these political obstacles, Tesio kept busy selling and building Dante City. Like Dante himself, he thrived on an active civic life, and he attracted the support of Italian *prominenti* as well

Notes

1. This is a subsection of a chapter titled "The Renaissance Man on Eighth Avenue," which will appear in Sheri Mignano Crawford's forthcoming book *Italian Mandolin Heroes in America*.
2. Founded in 1881 by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, James Russell Lowell, and Charles Eliot Norton.
3. Long Island Rail Road to Hicksville, Nassau County. Walk south on Jerusalem Avenue until Dante Avenue, turn west to enter the neighborhood. Division Street is the western boundary. Levittown is adjacent to Dante City.
4. They arrived at Ellis Island on August 13, 1904, aboard the *La Touraine*, line 12. Readers can see a photo of the racing star with his wife preparing for the 1905 Vanderbilt Cup race, three years before Cedrino's death http://www.vanderbiltcupraces.com/blog/article/the_vanderbilt_cup_race_driver_who_was_developing_a_unique_city_near_hicksv
5. Tesio catalog #224, Series Two. Composed by Giulio "Julius" Provenza and published in 1909 with a dedication to the "famous race car driver Ralph De Palma."
6. My freely translated sentence of Tesio's answers during an interview at his home: "Come, come soon or you will repent having not taken this opportunity."
7. An analysis of Nassau County Real Estate archives, records, and New York newspapers indicates that approximately 97 percent of the 250 lots were sold. A special thank you to Howard Kroplick, town historian of North Hempstead and Al Velocci, volunteer at the Nassau County Department of Parks, Recreation, and Museums.
8. Dr. Alexander Marchisio's notes indicate he had treated Tesio for the condition of chronic interstitial nephritis since 1908.

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