

# Bank on Italian Museum opening in Little Italy soon

BY JAMES S. WOODMAN

Joseph V. Scelsa, who displays open nostalgia for his Italian American upbringing, isn't fond of "The Sopranos." From their little-known interment during World War II to their thuggish stereotype in today's popular media, Italian Americans, according to Scelsa, are a group under-appreciated and largely lacking an accurate depiction in American history. This will begin to change soon, Scelsa hopes, with the opening of the first part of his new Italian American Museum on Grand St. sometime in August.

Given their substantial presence in New York, it is surprising that the city has gone so long without a museum dedicated to Italian Americans; nevertheless, Scelsa's will be the first. Though the opening will be modest — only a single room featuring several relics and photographs from the early 20th century — it will signify the beginning of the museum's piecemeal expansion that could eventually make it a major Downtown attraction.

For the museum, Scelsa, the museum's president and director, has purchased 10,000 square feet of space in three contiguous tenements on the corner of Grand and Mulberry Sts., which he will slowly convert into museum space.

There already are two other museums dedicated to Italy in the United States — in New Orleans and San Francisco — but Scelsa said his museum is the first to be formally recognized by the Italian government. He also said that his museum will be the only one in America that



The first part of the Italian American Museum is expected to open at Grand and Mulberry Sts. next month in a former bank that was once the center of life in Little Italy. Joseph V. Scelsa, right, the museum's founder, hopes to expand the museum into the adjacent buildings in the coming years.

focuses solely on the Italian experience in this country.

Scelsa — who was a sociology professor and vice president at Queens College — first got the idea for the museum after he and a colleague put on several exhibits about Italian Americans at the New York Historical Society in the late 1990s. To Scelsa's knowledge, there had never been even a single exhibit expressly

about Italian Americans in New York City before these shows.

"We knew we were on to something important and culturally significant. After studying it for a year we decided that we needed our own museum," Scelsa said.

Since then, Scelsa has put together a board of trustees and added a number of honorary chairpersons for the fledgling museum that now includes Matilda



Downtown Express photos by Elizabeth Robert

Scelsa plans to keep the room largely as it is for the museum's opening. He may also display some photographs of Italian immigrants from the early 1900s.

"I want this to be a soft opening," Scelsa said of the museum's upcoming inauguration. He will simply open the doors, let people come in at their leisure, and have a more publicized ceremony some time around Labor Day, after they

Cuomo, the wife of former New York State Governor, Mario Cuomo; Peter Vallone Sr., former speaker of the City Council; and Katharine LaGuardia, granddaughter of three-term mayor of New York, Fiorello LaGuardia.

Scelsa also sought funding from the public at large to buy the buildings for \$10 million last March.

When he came upon the property on Grand St., he knew immediately that "this was it." They were situated in the heart of Little Italy, the epicenter of the Italian immigration around the turn of the century. (Though the Italian presence in that area has substantially shrunk since then, Scelsa considers it still a "cultural and emotional capital for Italian Americans.")

Not only was the buildings' location ideal, but the middle tenement at 155 Mulberry St. already contained a museum display in itself — a first-floor bank and ferryboat ticket sales office, which was mostly frequented by Italian Americans and has been left untouched since the early 1930s. The location, Scelsa said, was "more than just a bank," it was a community hub for the Italian American community in its most vibrant era — the 1920s.

The single room that the working bank once occupied has been remarkably preserved. A long white marble countertop, flanked with jail-like bars that once protected the bank's tellers, still divides the room. The original cash machines and other banking implements also stand as they were nearly a year ago, only now under protective glass boxes.

"When you consider the short period of time I have worked on this project, having a building in seven years is pretty remarkable."

"have worked some of the kinks out."

"This is not my line of business," Scelsa said. "I have been in education my whole life."

Scelsa plans to run the museum for several years, but when it becomes a significantly larger operation, he says he will hire a fulltime director.

After Scelsa opens the bank portion, he plans to begin expanding into the building on Grand St. adjacent to that of the bank. In a year, he hopes to turn what is now a barbershop at that location into the museum's second exhibit. The barber who owns the adjacent shop is ready to retire, anyway, Scelsa said.

The expansion into the barbershop is what Scelsa calls the "short term plan."

"We can do this without any major renovation," Scelsa said of the expansion into the barbershop. "But after that, we really have to figure out the master plan for the museum."

Scelsa hopes for a large lobby area in the finished museum that would create the effect of walking into a Roman forum. In addition to that and ample exhibit space, the museum, he hopes, will include a library and film screening room.

"It's going to work like Legos," Scelsa said. "We're going to build it one block at a time."

Beyond his short-term plan, Scelsa has no estimate as to when the entire museum will be finished. "Years from now," was as much of a guess as he gave.

Scelsa said that he wants his museum to serve also as a "secular cathedral" for Italian Americans. Unlike many New Yorkers, Italian Americans have few places to congregate, Scelsa said. The museum would hopefully change that.