

Uguccione Ranieri and the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge

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The Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, one of the largest suspension bridges in the world, connecting the districts of Staten Island and Brooklyn, was inaugurated in New York on 21 November 1964. The story behind the naming of the bridge dedicated to the memory of the Italian explorer, Giovanni da Verrazzano, the first European to reach the mouth of the Hudson River where the Big Apple rises today, is a story of political and diplomatic commitment to gain recognition for the Italian contribution to the creation and development of the city. An unusual story, in which the naming of an architectural work or monument, as in the majority of cases, did not aim to celebrate the importance of a well-known figure, but rather to recognise a figure, who would otherwise have remained unknown.

One of the protagonists of the story was Uguccione Ranieri di Sorbello - at the time Director of the Italian Institute of Culture in New York and correspondent for the Ministry of Italian Foreign Affairs - with a keen interest in the explorer from Greve del Chianti and a desire to rediscover this barely known figure in either the USA or Italy. Article after article, Uguccione led a campaign of information in the Italian and American daily newspapers to valorise the achievements of Verrazzano. The campaign began in the late Fifties with the proposal of naming the transatlantic liner of the Italian national shipping lines to replace the *Andrea Doria*, which had just sunk. The campaign was unsuccessful: the managers of the company *Società di Navigazione Italia* opted for "Leonardo da Vinci", as they did not consider the name of Verrazzano to be sufficiently well-known, in their opinion. Uguccione argued from the pages of the weekly paper "L'Europeo", backed by Indro Montanelli, claiming that to call a ship Leonardo da Vinci «is like Alitalia baptising two new planes Basalt and Travertine».

However, the fuse had been lit and the battle moved to New York. The news spread of the imminent construction of the longest bridge in the world over the Narrows of the Hudson River and Uguccione sided with the group of illustrious people who officially became the "National Committee to honour Giovanni da Verrazzano". They thought it perfectly justifiable to dedicate the work to the man, who sailed the river almost a century before Henry Hudson, the explorer from whom the river takes its name. This group included, among others, Carlo de Ferrariis Salzano, the Italian consul general at the time in New York; Lino Lipinsky de Orlov, curator at the Museum of the City of New York; John La Corte, president of the Italian Historical Society of America and Fortune Pope, son of Generoso Pope, a successful entrepreneur and founder of "Il progresso italo-americano", the first, popular, daily newspaper in Italian edited in America.

First they installed a diorama of the arrival of Verrazzano in the Museum of the City of New York, correcting the version according to which the history of the city was said to have begun with Hudson. This was followed by the donation to the Federal Hall National Memorial of the gonfalon bearing Verrazzano's crest and finally, the campaign to recognise the Italian explorer reached its peak in November 1964 with the inauguration of the bridge. The political and diplomatic battle ensured the name of Verrazzano, as yet almost unknown to New Yorkers, was chosen above names such as "Staten Island Bridge" or even "Roosevelt Bridge". The Americans could not fail to make their own mark by removing a "z" from Verrazzano's name thanks to a typing error in the Italian encyclopaedic dictionary of the time - or so they said -

when the law was passed to name the bridge. However, Uguccione's commitment did not end there: on his return home, he actively took part in the diplomatic operations in the following years, which saw the city of Carrara donate three blocks of marble to install a monument in memory of Verrazzano in Providence, Rhode Island, for which Uguccione himself wrote the inscription.

Today, Italy and the USA recognise Giovanni da Verrazzano as one of the four great Italian explorers, together with Columbus, Vespucci and Caboto, who set sail unaware of the existence of another continent and of the importance of the change their discoveries would have made throughout the world. Part of the credit goes without doubt to Uguccione, who hailed the event that day from the pages of *Corriere della Sera*, with the words:

Today, beneath the vertiginous span of his bridge, framed by the sea for the onlookers, appears the enchanted mountain of the New York skyscrapers. That is not Asia, Giovanni. That is not what you dreamt of. And yet it is the fruit of your dreams.

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