



## Lt. Giuseppe “Joe” Petrosino

Lt. Joe Petrosino was a New York City Police Officer who was a pioneer in the fight against organized crime. The various crime fighting techniques that Petrosino pioneered during his law enforcement career are still practiced by various agencies in the fight against organized crime.

**Giuseppe "Joe" Petrosino** was born on August 30, 1860 in Padula, a small town in the Province of Salerno, Campania in 1874, Petrosino and his family emigrated to the United States.

On October 19, 1883, he joined the New York City Police Department. During his service, he became friends with Theodore Roosevelt, who was police commissioner of New York City at the time. On July 20, 1895, Roosevelt promoted him to Detective Sergeant in charge of the department's Homicide Division, making him the first Italian/American to lead this division.

The pinnacle of his career came in **December 1908** when he was promoted to Lieutenant and placed in charge of the Italian Squad, an elite corps of Italian/American detectives specifically assembled to deal with the criminal activities of organizations like the Mafia, which Petrosino saw as a blemish to decent Italians and his native country.

### The Black Hand & Enrico Caruso

One notable case in Petrosino's stint with the Italian Squad was when the famous Italian tenor Enrico Caruso, who was performing at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York City, was being blackmailed by gangsters who demanded money in exchange for his life. It was Petrosino who convinced Caruso to help him catch those behind the blackmail.

### Assassination of William McKinley

A second notable case in Petrosino's stint with the Italian Squad was his infiltration of an Italian-based anarchist organization that assassinated King Umberto I of Italy. During his mission, he discovered evidence that the organization intended to assassinate President William McKinley during his trip to Buffalo. Petrosino warned the Secret Service, but McKinley ignored the warning, even after Roosevelt, who had by this time become Vice-President of the United States, vouched for Petrosino's abilities. As a result, McKinley was assassinated by Leon Czolgosz during his visit to Buffalo's Pan-American Exposition on September 6, 1901.

## Arrest of the Don

Petrosino's investigations into Mafia activities led him to Don Vito Cascio Ferro, the capo of the Mafia in New York. In 1903, Petrosino arrested him on suspicion of murder, but Cascio Ferro was acquitted. He later returned to Sicily, where he became increasingly involved with the Sicilian Mafia.

In 1909, Petrosino made plans to travel to Palermo, Sicily, on a top secret mission. However, because of the incompetence of Thomas Bingham, New York's police commissioner, the New York Herald published the story of Petrosino's mission on February 20, 1909, just days before his departure. Even though he was aware of the danger and was told to cancel his trip, Petrosino headed to Palermo as planned. However, this decision would prove fatal. Petrosino wrongly believed that the Sicilian Mafia would not kill a policeman, as they did not in America.

## Death

On March 12, 1909, after arriving in Palermo, Petrosino received a message from someone claiming to be an informant, asking the detective to meet him in the city's Piazza Marina to give him information about the Mafia. Petrosino arrived at the rendezvous, but it was a trap. While waiting for his 'informant,' Petrosino was shot to death by Mafia assassins.

Vito Cascio Ferro was arrested for Petrosino's murder but was released after an associate provided an alibi. However, he later claimed to other crime figures that he *had* killed Petrosino, which helped propel him into the position of *capo di tutti capi* (boss of bosses). Ironically Ferro died in prison in 1943 after being arrested in 1927 on a murder charge he probably did *not* commit.

On April 12, 1909, Petrosino's funeral, which was attended by 250,000 people, was held in Manhattan. New York City declared the day of his burial a holiday to allow its citizens to pay their respects. A small plaza just north of the old NYPD Headquarters at 240 Center Street in Manhattan was renamed in his memory

## In popular culture

- Among the numerous honors, awards and recognitions received includes a small park in Greenwich Village, New York City, formerly known as Kenmare Square, was named after Petrosino in 1987. Lieutenant Joseph Petrosino Square Park as well as the Joe Petrosino Prize for Investigative Reporting which was also named in his honor.
- Petrosino's story would be discussed on the 2-hour History Channel program *Godfathers*, which featured commentary concerning his life by Mario Cuomo, former governor of New York, and Bernard Kerik, former police commissioner of New York City.
- Three biographical films have been made of Petrosino's life including Sidney M. Goldin's *The Adventures of Lieutenant Petrosino* (1912) as well as *Pay or Die* (1960) starring Ernest Borgnine and *The Black Hand* (1973) starring Lionel Stander.

**Adapted from information received from Wikipedia.com and various other sources. Researched and submitted by Salvatore J. Mangano, PNP, Italian Heritage Chair**