

The Benincasa family of Caposele

The uncertain origins

In the last article, centered on the Caprio family, I was unable to insert, for reasons of space, the numerous Girolamo Benincasa-Alfonsina Caprio branch. For this reason I decided to recover and treat the Benincasa family of Caposele.

The greatest difficulty was the absence from the town of people with the surname Benincasa to whom it was possible to rely for research. The Benincasa family, in fact, although present and known in Caposele in the first half of the last century, gradually moved to other areas, until the definitive abandonment of the town of origin, represented by the sale of the Benincasa palace located in via Pietraquaresima, little before the 1980 earthquake.

In the '800 exponents of the family were mayors of Caposele, e.g. Nicola Benincasa, surgeon, from 1835 to 1838, and Donato Maria Vincenzo, pharmacist, from 1864 to 1870. There were teachers with the surname Benincasa, eg. Don Giovanni, elementary teacher, with a high bearing and with an old-fashioned teaching method, a little rigid; and Don Camillo, also an elementary school teacher, who taught until the 1940s. I would like to mention the courageous protest, under fascism, on the occasion of the 1939 revolt against the expropriation of the Sele waters: at the time, showing dissent was not a thing to do light-heartedly, and in fact he was punished along with the others who dared to protest: he was sent to confinement in Montefalcione. After World War II, he continued to teach in Caposele until about the 1940s (he was also a teacher of the director of "La Sorgente", engineer Nicola Conforti). Even after moving their residence, some Benincasas continued to return to their native country, at least in the Summer: it is remembered Donna Rosa (the daughter of the teacher Don Giovanni), who married in 1945 with a young lawyer from Mercato San Severino, Giuseppe Guercio, and moved to Rome. She returned for years to enjoy Summer holidays in a wing of the Benincasa palace, together with her family (she had at least three children), until the 1960s.

It was the recent history of the Benincasa palace that allowed me to find a key to the family's history since the 1800s: in the mid-1900s the family home was divided into 3 parts, belonging to different but connected branches (see graphic). It is a situation that is often seen when a good that belonged to a common ancestor, a good that has a high emotional and symbolic value, rather than being left to only one of the descendants, is divided into more or less equal parts between the different children. In fact, the family continued to dwell in its various branches consisting of cousins who remained in Caposele (and which I mentioned briefly at the beginning of the article), until these did not pass away:

- left wing: Francesco "Don Ciccio" Benincasa (1887 - ~ 1965, son of Girolamo C1) lived there, with his wife Angela Papio. Some of Francesco's many brothers and sisters also lived in this part of the building: the parish priest Don Donato; Marietta and Silvia, both unmarried;
- central wing: initially belonged to Giuseppe Benincasa C3; later his son lived there: the teacher Don Camillo Benincasa (1889-1947) together with his wife Ersilia Sturchio. Shortly after the death of her husband, Ersilia moved near the church of San Lorenzo, and the wing of the building remained uninhabited; the property passed to the brothers of Don Camillo, Donato and Alfonso;
- right wing: the teacher Don Giovanni Benincasa lived there, then his daughter Donna Rosa, occasionally in Summer;

Between the 50s and 60s the old generation of the Benincasa family, still linked to Caposele and the

Benincasa palace, passed away; the heirs sold the different wings of the building in the late 1970s (the last part just before the 1980 earthquake).

Before going into the recent history of the family to try to get an overview of the various recent branches, let's take a step back in the history of previous centuries.

The origins of the Benincasa family in Caposele are not certain, nor is the link with other exponents known by that surname (just mention Santa Caterina Benincasa da Siena (Siena, 1347 - Rome, 1380), and Sant'Orsola Benincasa (Cetara, 1547 - Naples, 1618).

I limit myself to reporting that in the family it is handed down that the origin of the Benincasas of Caposele would come from Montalto Uffugo, in Calabria, or from Pescara. Even the relationship with Saint Catherine of Siena was taken for granted in some branches, but questioned in others. Unfortunately, studies and research to establish these links are outside the hobby field and would require much more efforts and resources.

It is believed that the Benincasa family, together with other families (Ceres, Santorelli, etc.), came to Caposele in the early 1500's following the Spanish conquest, with the Aragonese, but I confess that I have no source in this regard.

The first Benincasa of which we have information

Let's move on to a more recent era, for which sources are more readily available. The first Benincasa of Caposele of which traces are found in the documents is Francesco Antonio Benincasa, mentioned in an act of the notary Donato Miano in 1636 (he was a notary in Caposele, his documents cover the years 1638-1673, and are kept in the State Archive of Avellino). This does not mean that Francesco Antonio is the first to have arrived in the village (most likely the Benincasas have been present for many generations), but that he is the first of which a trace has been found. In other documents of a little later three brothers appear: it is not clear who their parents are, nor what relationship there is between them and Francesco Antonio. Starting from these brothers, with the documents available it is possible to reconstruct the subsequent history of the Benincasa of Caposele. The three brothers were:

- Giovanni Battista Benincasa (~ 1630 - after 1656). His wife was Catarina Panico. No descendants are mentioned in his will;
- **Decio Benincasa** (~ 1635 - ~ 1698). His wife was Porzia Ricciardelli from Calabritto;
- Francesco Antonio Benincasa (~ 1638 - after 1656). He was a priest, as was often used for the younger brothers of wealthy families.

Since the two brothers Giovanni Battista and Francesco Antonio probably had no descendants, all the Benincasas of Caposele originate from Decio Benincasa. He had 5 children but of these only one boy: **Giovanni Battista** (he took the name of his uncle, who had no heirs). He married Catarina Cafullo, and for the children and their families we can finally have more sources (1754 tax census and parish registers), and therefore more information. The typical features of a wealthy family of the time are outlined:

- the spouses were often from other towns, also belonging to wealthy families (eg Panico, Ricciardelli);
- often one of the children was sent to religious life;
- the profession was one that guaranteed a certain tenor and social level: surgeon, barber (at the time the meaning was much broader than the current one: roughly it was a precursor to the dentist).

Even if Giovanni Battista had seven children (as evidenced by the various notarial deeds: wills and marriage contracts), the families of only four of them appear in the 1754 tax census:

1. Giovanna (~ 1700 - 1785), married to Innocenzio Petruccio (tailor);
2. **Donato** (~ 1706 - 1784), surgeon, married to Anna Maria Rugieri from Lioni; the Benincasa family in Caposele will continue with his descendants. His son Girolamo (1734 - 1796), surgeon, graduated in medicine at the University of Naples in 1757, as attested by the documents in the "College of Doctors" kept in the Naples State Archive). The history of the family then continues with Donato's grandson, **Nicola** (1774 - 1841): as we will see in detail in the following chapter, the Benincasa's present in Caposele at the beginning of the 19th century all descend from him;
3. Francesco (~ 1716 - 1785), barber, married to Giuliana Marano; of the various children, only the daughter Girolama is married to Francesco Cleffi, so the surname Benincasa is lost. From him descend: a Cleffi branch in Uruguay, a La Fera branch and the large family of Nunziata Sturchio and Giovanni Ceres;
4. Ippolita (~ 1717 - 1764), married to Giuseppe D'Elia;

The Benincasa of Caposele in the 1800s-1900s

Nicola Benincasa (1774 - 1841) followed the medical profession as per family tradition: he was a cerusic, that is a surgeon. It is not known in which house he was born (in the baptismal record kept in the parish of San Lorenzo it is not indicated), but in the death certificate (civil records) of 1841 it is indicated that he passed away in the house he owned in via Pietraquaresima. Even if the house number is not indicated, I think it refers to the Benincasa palace. From him the family home passed from hand to hand until it reached the descendants who lived in the 1900s. He held the office of mayor of Caposele for several years. He married Grazia Radice, and had 3 children:

- A. **Giovanbattista Girolamo Donato Benincasa** (1808 - 1870), doctor; he had numerous children, whose descendants still lived in Caposele until the early 1900s. Among these the grandson Don Giovanni Benincasa, primary school teacher, and his daughter **Donna Rosa**, both mentioned at the beginning of the article. Donna Rosa was in possession of a wing of the family home. He had two brothers: Decio, surgeon (I found a military document from 1942 in which he was promoted as an army medical officer) and Carlo, lawyer (I recovered two letters from him addressed to "La Sorgente", dated 1974 and 1977, from which his love and nostalgia for his town of origin, in which he was born and spent the first years of his youth, emerged). Unfortunately to date I have not been able to trace any of their descendants, so this branch is incomplete;
- B. Girolamo Donato Gabriele Benincasa (1810 - 1823); he died young, before he was 13 years old;
- C. **Donato Maria Vincenzo Benincasa** (1812 - 1897), pharmacist; three main branches originate from him:
 1. by his son **Girolamo Benincasa** (1854 - 1907) and his wife Alfonsina Caprio. It is a very numerous branch whose exponents no longer reside in Caposele: it was also briefly discussed in a previous article on Caprio ("La Sorgente" no. 99, page 26, "The Caprio families in Caposele"); among the numerous children I mention **Don Donato**, who was the pastor of Caposele from 1949 to 1953, Don Ciccio (Francesco) Benincasa, Alfredo (whose descendants manage the Orso Grigio hotel in San Candido (BZ)), Antonina (the teacher in the photo, wife of Giuseppe Corona "Pepp r lu nutaru" - Caposelese dialect for "Joseph (the son) of the notary", as his father was a notary), Linda and Aminta.
 2. by daughter **Adelia Benincasa** (1856 - 1942) and her husband Lorenzo Russomanno; her father's pharmacy passed to Adelia's cousin (son of his uncle Giovanbattista): Nicola

Benincasa. Unfortunately, he had no descendants in Caposele, and therefore the pharmacy returned to this branch with Raffaele Russomanno, son of Adelia and grandfather of the current pharmacist, his namesake; one of Adelia's stepdaughters (daughter of Lorenzo's first marriage), Adelina Russomando, emigrated to Newark and married Alfonso "King" Ilaria, one of the first Caposelesi to settle in Newark and of whom it is said that he began the numerous Caposelese colony in that place in the 1870s;

3. by **Giuseppe Benincasa** (1859-1904), married to Filomena Maffucci; their three children all took different paths:
 - Donato, he graduated in law, made a career as a public official, and went on to manage the tax office in Venice. His descendants live in Padua;
 - Camillo, he is the primary school teacher who was sent to confinement in 1939;
 - Alfonso: he emigrated to the USA and there he made his fortune as a travel agent and exchange changer. His daughter Edna, who lives in the USA, was among the last of the family to own part of the Benincasa palace; this share was sold shortly before the 1980 earthquake together with the adjoining garden, which belonged to her uncle Donato.

I apologize if I have omitted a few people or entire branches: it is not always possible to trace all the descendants. I thank for helping me in writing the article: my friend John Rendfrey for his valuable research on notarial deeds; Italo Caprio and Ms Mariarosaria Molfese, Eng. Giovanni Caprio, Mrs. Franca Veralli, for the reconstruction of the branch of Girolamo Benincasa C1 and Alfonsina Caprio; Mrs Edna Benincasa and Marina Levante, for the reconstruction of the branch of Giuseppe Benincasa C3 and Maria Filomena Maffucci; Pasquale Russomanno son of Raffaele for the reconstruction of the branch of Adelia Benincasa C2 and Lorenzo Russomanno.

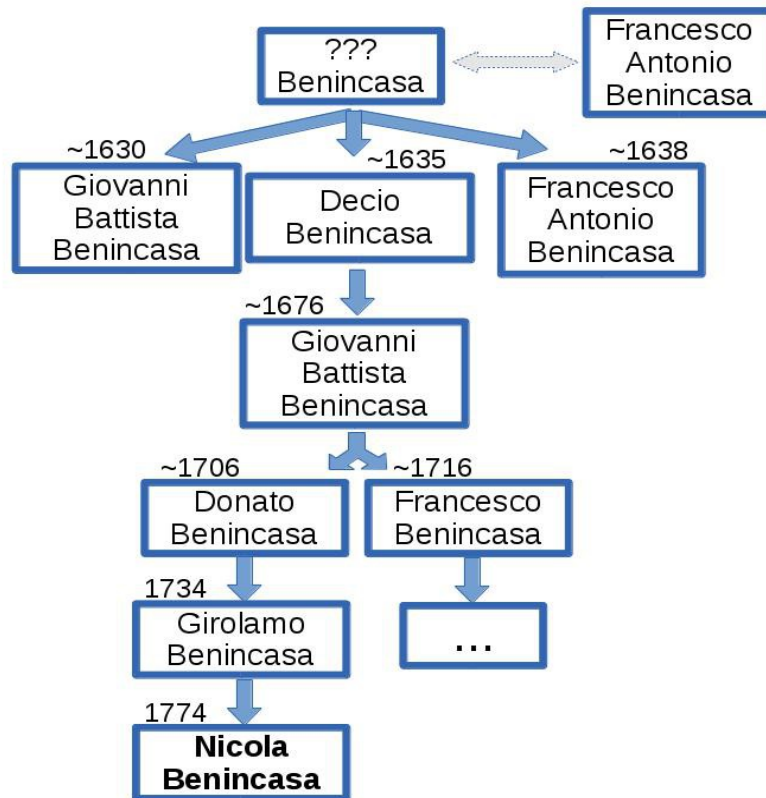
For those wishing to learn more, a more detailed reconstruction of the Benincasa tree of Caposele can be found by consulting the online tree in the site indicated below.

You can contribute to the growth of the Caposele family tree:

- by contacting me by email at pasquale_c@hotmail.com
- on the Facebook group "Genealogia caposelese"
- registering on the site containing the navigable online tree (<http://ars.altervista.org/PhpGedView/index.php>), and contributing directly to data entry

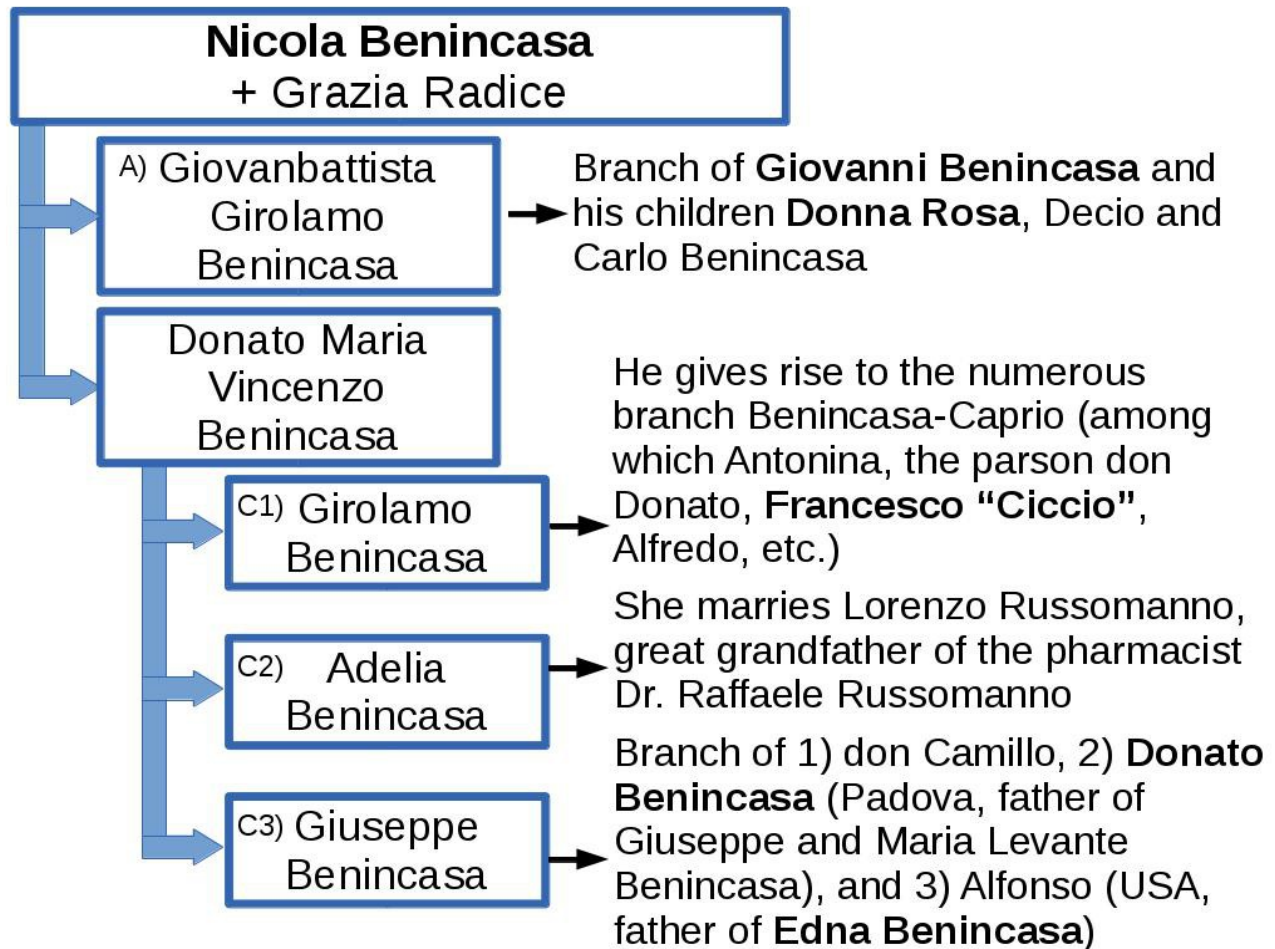
Images

1. file: OriginiBenincasa.jpg



Benincasa family from Caposele: from known origins to Nicola Benincasa (1774 - 1841)

2. file: DiscendentiNicolaBenincasa_EN.jpg



The descendants of Nicola Benincasa (1774 - 1841) and Grazia Radice: all of the Benincasa's who lived in Caposele in the 1900s descend from them. In bold the branches owning a part of the Benincasa palace in the 1900s

3. file: GirolamoBenincasa1.jpg



1st generation: Girolamo Benincasa C1 (1854-1907)

4. file: FilomenaMaffEFam.jpg



Filomena Maffucci (the wife of Giuseppe Vincenzo Benincasa C3) with (starting from left) her three sons Alfonso, Camillo and Donato Benincasa

5. file: AlfredoFlora11mag1926.jpg



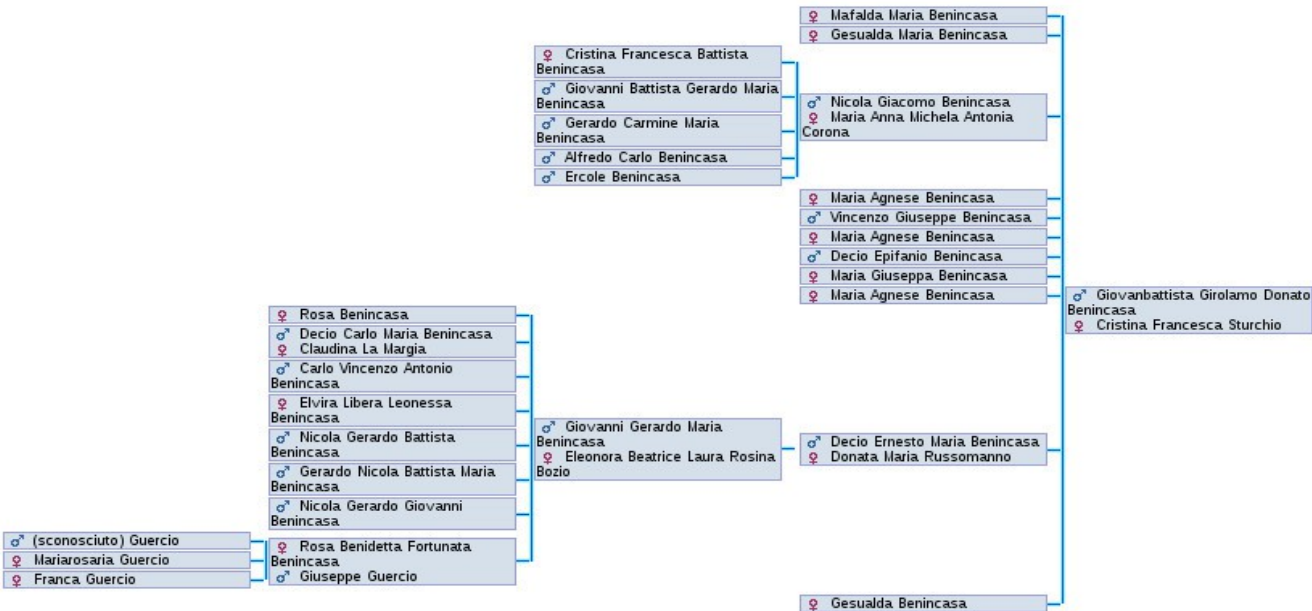
2nd generation: Alfredo Benincasa (the son of Girolamo C1) and Flora Hellensteiner their wedding day (May 11th, 1926)

6. file: Alfonsina1.jpg



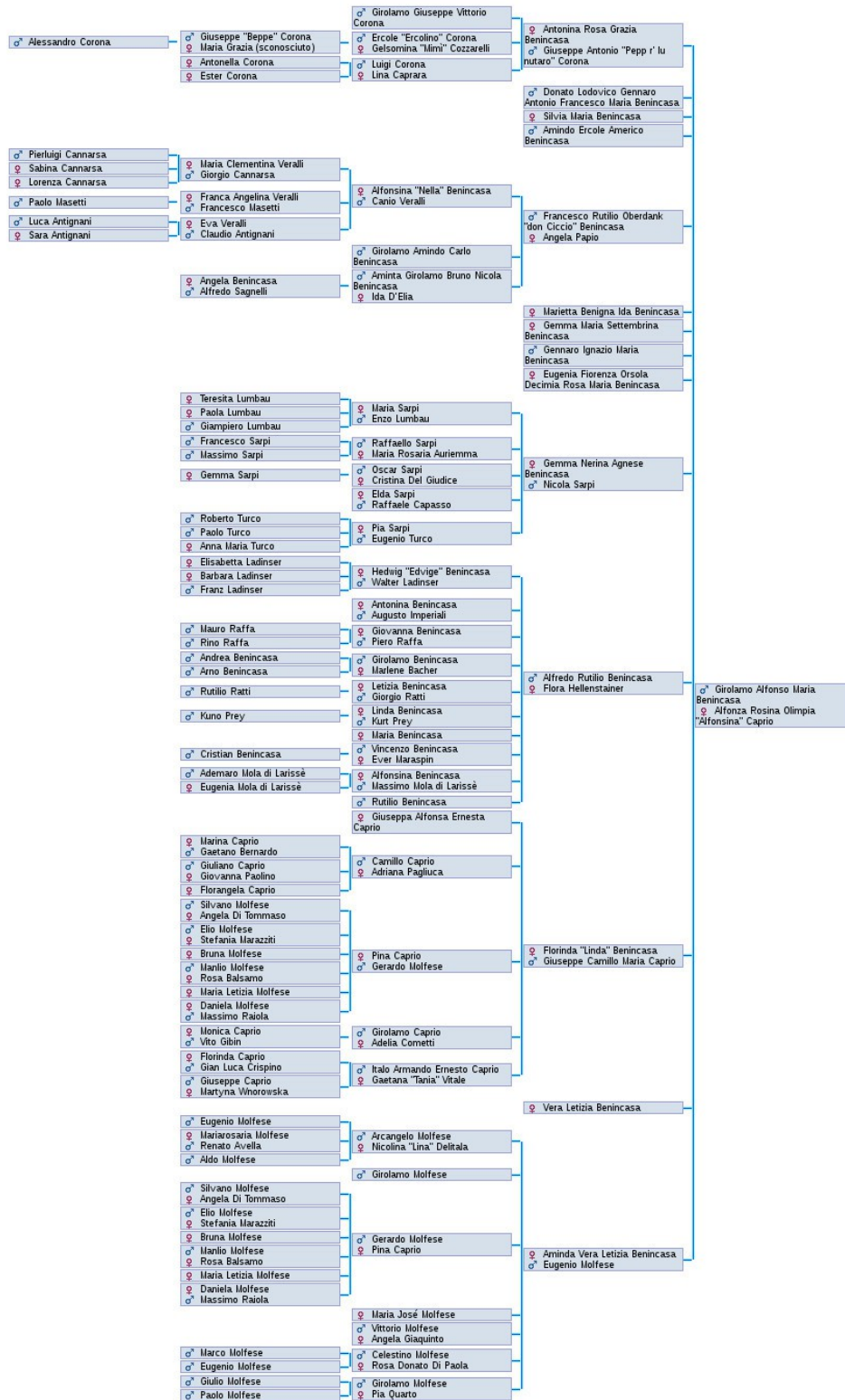
3rd generation: Alfonsina Benincasa daughter of Alfredo, a granddaughter of Girolamo Benincasa C1 and Alfonsina Caprio, takes her name from her paternal grandmother

7. file: I11689_desc.jpg



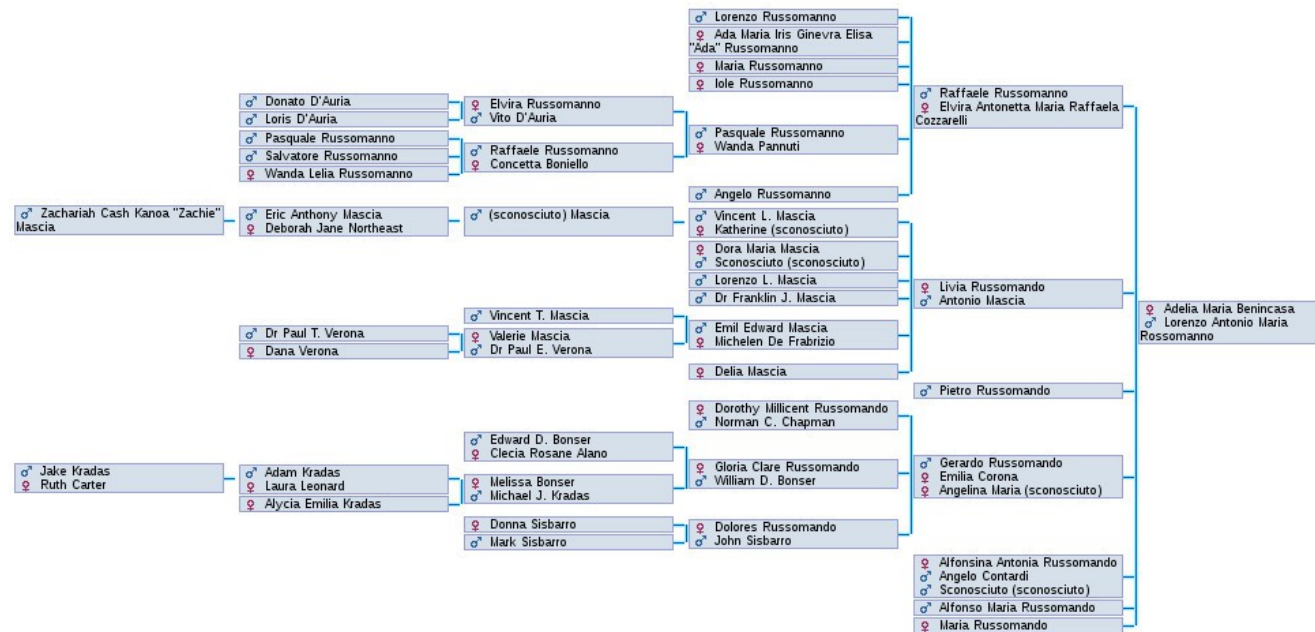
A) partial tree of the descendants of Giovanbattista Benincasa and Cristina Sturchio

8. file: I10756_desc.jpg



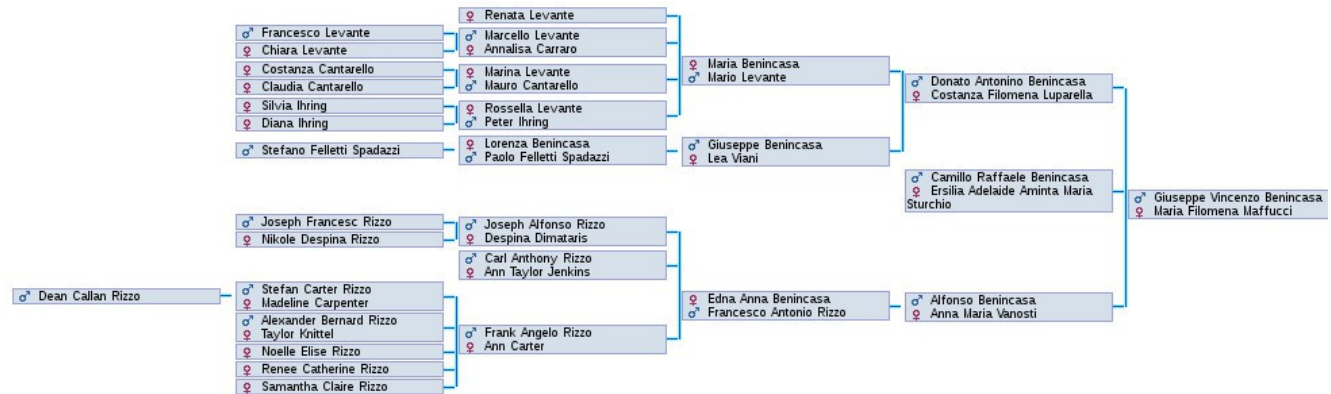
C1) descendants of Girolamo Benincasa and Alfonsina Caprio

9. file: I9063_desc.jpg



C2) partial tree of the descendants of Adelia Benincasa and Lorenzo Rossomanno

10. file: I15636_desc.jpg



C3) descendants of Giuseppe Benincasa and Maria Filomena Maffucci



School group near Piazza XXIII Novembre, in the fascist era. In the foreground on the left is the teacher Donna Antonina Benincasa (the daughter of Girolamo C1). At the center of the group, on the right, the teacher Don Giovanni Benincasa (a grandson of Giovanbattista A) should be in black with a hat on his head. (the image for a strange printing effect is doubled)