

Introduction

Fiorello H. La Guardia was born in New York City on December 11, 1882, to Italian immigrant parents. When his father, a musician by profession, joined the U.S. Army as a bandmaster in 1885, the family left New York and moved west. After moving several times to various army posts, the La Guardia family finally arrived at Whipple Barracks, Arizona Territory in 1892. Here, Fiorello spent the longest period of his childhood.

In 1898 when Fiorello's father was discharged from the army because of ill health, the family moved to Italy and settled in Trieste. However, in 1900 the young Fiorello left home for Budapest, Hungary, where he became employed as a clerk at the U.S. consulate. In 1904 he moved to Fiume to become the U.S. consular agent.

A young man with ambition, La Guardia resigned his post in Fiume in 1906 and returned to the United States. The next year he took a job as an Ellis Island interpreter, while he attended New York University Law School as an evening student. When he received his law degree in 1910, La Guardia resigned his position with the Immigration Service and became a practicing attorney.

La Guardia was appointed deputy attorney of the state of New York in 1915. The next year he ran for Congress and became the first Republican since the Civil War to be elected from the Lower East Side. In 1917, La Guardia took a leave of absence from the House of Representatives to serve as a pilot bombardier in World War I. Upon his return, he was reelected to Congress but resigned to run for president of the New York City Board of Alderman. In 1921 he returned to Congress to represent an East Harlem district that was to send him to Washington for five consecutive terms until 1932.

Although nominally a Republican, La Guardia was one of the nation's most progressive congressmen. He campaigned for a graduated income tax, enlisted in the crusade against monopoly, and was consistently pro-labor in outlook. Nevertheless, in 1932, Franklin D. Roosevelt's Democratic landslide swept La Guardia out of office.

Undaunted, in 1933, La Guardia ran for mayor of New York City and was elected on an anti-Tammany fusion slate. During the next twelve years of the Depression and war, La Guardia labored tirelessly to raise the quality of urban life. Although he was not a Democrat, he worked closely with President Roosevelt. He convinced Washington to finance many ambitious employment and public works programs in New York City. Under La Guardia's leadership, the New York City subway system was unified and brought under public ownership, and public housing programs were begun. During the depths of the Depression, with the city's treasury stretched to the breaking point, he managed to reform the welfare system and make it one of the nation's most progressive. In addition, La Guardia opened New York's first major airport in northern Queens (later named La Guardia Airport), and in 1942 ground was broken for Idlewild in southern Queens (later JFK International Airport).

In 1945, Fiorello La Guardia, sixty-two years old and exhausted, left City Hall. Still, he was unwilling to retire and became director of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation program. La Guardia died on September 20, 1947.

The microfilm of *The Fiorello H. La Guardia Papers* was prepared by The New York Public Library under the sponsorship of the National Historical Publications and Records Commission. La Guardia gave his papers to The New York Public Library during the period be-

tween 1939 and 1947. In addition, there are La Guardia papers housed in the Municipal Archives of New York City.

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