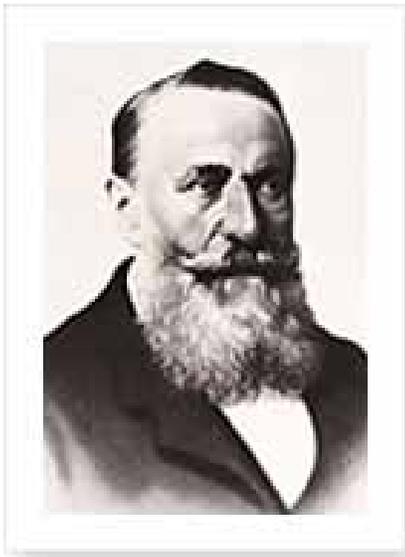


## ALLA CORRENTE

### Domenico “Domingo” Ghirardelli

*With the recent sale of Ghirardelli Square to Jamestown, an Atlanta-based real estate investment firm, I thought it would be interesting to look at the life of the man who started the signature San Francisco business which was located where the Square now stands. The huge Ghirardelli 15-foot sign that stands above one of the 12 buildings on the Square marks the place where chocolate was once made (1894-1964). Although Ghirardelli Chocolate is no longer owned by the Ghirardelli family and is no longer a product that is produced in San Francisco, the buildings and sign have become a landmark of San Francisco and a part of San Francisco history. According to Jamestown, 12.4 million visitors come to the shopping complex each year, making it a popular tourist destination.*

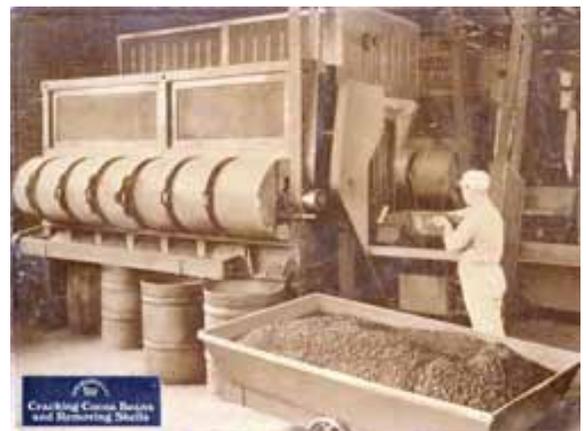


*Domenico “Domingo” Ghirardelli  
Feb. 21, 1817 - Jan. 17, 1894*

Domenico “Domingo” Ghirardelli was born on February 21, 1817 in Santa Ana, a small village near Rapallo, Italy (near Genoa) to an exotic foods importer and his young wife. Rapallo was the busiest and largest of several settlements south of Genoa along the Ligurian Riviera—an idyllic region for an only son of a modestly successful merchant to be raised and learn a trade, except for the political realities of the day. In 1815, two years before his birth, the Congress of Vienna, as part of its liquidation of Napoleon’s European Empire, had ceded the centuries-old Republic of Genoa to the neighboring Kingdom of Piedmont-Sardinia. The Genoese chafed at the loss of their independence and self-rule, and wanted nothing to do with rule by a corrupt monarchy. They reacted by staging uprisings in 1831 and again in 1834. This last one, a major city-wide revolt, was mercilessly crushed.

By the time of the revolts, Domenico was a teenager who was apprenticed at Romanengo’s, a fancy confectionery shop in Genoa, which is still in business today. As apprentice, he learned how to prepare and sell sugar loaves, candies, and sugar-sweetened chocolate paste that could be diluted in water in order to create a hot “comfort” beverage and stimulant. But as Ghirardelli readied himself for an independent life as artisan, the Genoese region remained politically volatile and unstable. So to escape the unrest and political commotion, like so many other Italians during the 19th and early 20th centuries, he set out for the New World to find prosperity and independence. In 1837, at age twenty and newly married to Elisabetta “Bettina” Corsini, he sailed to Montevideo, Uruguay. Ghirardelli found work in a coffee and spice shop there, but perhaps because of the instability created by Uruguay’s border disputes, Montevideo turned out to be only a temporary home for the two young immigrants. In 1838, Ghirardelli and his wife took a treacherous sea voyage around Cape Horn to Callao, Peru, and then headed nine miles inland to Lima.

Italian artisans and gold masters had lived in Lima since Spanish colonial days in the sixteenth century, helping to embellish the Baroque metropolis. When the Ghirardellis arrived, the city was economically prosperous from worldwide exports of guano, the profitable bird-dropping fertilizer that was gathered from islands off the coast. Hispanicizing his first name to Domingo



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## ALLA CORRENTE, *Continued*

### Domenico “Domingo” Ghirardelli

(so he could fit in better as a local merchant), Ghirardelli set up a confectionery shop on the block-long Calle de los Mercaderes (Street of the Merchants), which was the city’s main shopping center located just off the central plaza and the cathedral, near such attractions as an Italian Lyric Opera House. There he made and sold a range of goods following the Romanengo’s model, with chocolate his specialty. Ghirardelli’s personal life was jolted by the death of his Italian wife Bettina in 1846, but the next year he married a Spanish-Peruvian widow, Carmen Alvarado Martin, who had an infant.

Now with a family, Ghirardelli seemed ready to set down permanent roots in Peru, but fate intervened. The Pennsylvanian James Lick (1796-1876), (later of San Francisco hotel, observatory, and high school fame), operated a piano and cabinetmaking shop next door to Ghirardelli’s confectionery and the two Lima businessmen became fast friends. In 1846-47, Lick returned to the United States to participate in the western expansion. He sold his business and, carrying six hundred pounds of Ghirardelli’s chocolate to turn a profit (or so the legend goes), he set sail for San Francisco. With the news of the discovery of gold in January 1848, Lick immediately began buying up land. He sent word to Ghirardelli to come as soon as he could to reap the benefits of the resultant economic boom. The newspapers of Lima, meanwhile, had published the first reports of gold in California, so for Ghirardelli, the decision to sail north, despite the disruption to the life he had created in Lima for himself and his Italo-Peruvian family was irresistible.

On February 24, 1849 Ghirardelli sailed into San Francisco harbor on the Peruvian ship *Mazeppa*, a few days before the first American ship arrived from the East Coast. He found a growing population of Americans,

**GHIRARDELLI HERITAGE**

**1849**  
Domingo Ghirardelli learns of the gold strike and sails to California. He opens a store offering supplies and confections to fellow miners.

**1852**  
In San Francisco at the Veranda Building in Portsmouth Square, Ghirardelli forms Ghirardelli & Girard. This becomes the modern day Ghirardelli Chocolate Company.

**1856-1895**  
Company headquarters initially containing a family living space are on Jackson Street, San Francisco.

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**ALLA CORRENTE, *Continued***  
**Domenico “Domingo” Ghirardelli**

Canadians, Mexicans, South Americans from earlier ships, and Italians, one-third of whom, like himself, had also re-emigrated from South America. Soon to come were Europeans displaced by Ireland’s Potato Famine, Scotland’s Removals, the revolutions of 1848 (Germans and French, in particular), and Italy’s increasingly turbulent Risorgimento. In addition, Chinese laborers and seasoned American miners from the lead- and gold-rich regions of Wisconsin, Georgia, and North Carolina arrived. By the end of 1849, this hodge-podge cosmopolitan population, nearly all males, had swelled to 25,000.

Since he was an Hispanicized Italian who was not yet proficient in English, Ghirardelli gravitated to the Jamestown/Sonora area of the Mother Lode, where fellow Italians from Latin America clustered at the rivers and mining camps. But Ghirardelli soon saw that the way to go was not in mining for gold but in selling wares to miners who needed supplies. He took orders from them, like the biscuits he bought in Stockton, and returned to the camps to hand-deliver them. He then opened a general merchandise tent-store in Stockton and ran delta shipments to and from San Francisco to replenish this stock. Before long he owned grocery stores in both cities, and in addition, in San Francisco, he owned a soda fountain, coffee house, and partial interest in a twenty-room hotel. By 1851, Ghirardelli was listed as one of San Francisco’s “Moneyed Men,” worth \$25,000. However, massive fires that year destroyed his businesses, but the resourceful Domenico bounced back by refinancing his interests and by recruiting, then buying out, partners. On June 18, 1852, the chocolate company was officially launched as a manufactory and sales shop at the Verandah Building on Portsmouth Square. He and his family lived in the apartment above the shop.



In this shop, Ghirardelli sold chocolate, candy, liquor, ground coffee, and spices. He always operated under his family name, which was sometimes amusingly botched by Anglo typesetters and journalists (Glirardel, Girardello, Ghirardelli, Gni-radeili, Ghirardely, and even Gheardly). Over the next several years he opened branch grocery and liquor stores in Oakland, bought investment property in Fruitvale outside of Oakland that eventually evolved from an orchard to a tract for row houses, and ran several businesses in the Mother Lode country.

The Italian population in San Francisco at the time was less than a thousand people, mostly Ligurians, in a city whose population was leveling off to 50,000 by the mid-1850s. Ghirardelli was part of a larger collection of foreigners who regularly jumped across ethnic lines. Although he employed a small, all-Italian workforce and favored them with loans, his business partners were mostly non-Italians: Cox (Anglo), Petar (Swiss), and Danzel (French-Alsatian). He served in the “everyone-welcome” Vigilance Committee of 1856, and joined the community-conscious, mostly native English-speaking Society of California Pioneers in 1865. Since he had the ability to communicate in various languages, he helped forge ties between San Francisco’s Italians and the more populous, powerful French community, which controlled eighty or more of the city’s businesses as early as 1850. He was active in the French-speaking Masonic lodge and a Franco-Italian coalition of investors in the coal- and gold-seeking Buenaventura Mining Company.

Ghirardelli, a short, vigorous, hard-working man whom a later chronicler described as “companionable, generous...and an exemplary citizen,” was a visibly successful Italian in San Francisco, but not the only one. Nicola Larco, also a founding partner of Buenaventura, was another. Born near Rapallo, Larco had also

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**ALLA CORRENTE, *Continued***  
**Domenico “Domingo” Ghirardelli**

lived in Lima and also had sailed in 1849 to San Francisco. Wealthy and civic-minded, he ran an extensive import-export business from 420 Jackson, across the street from Ghirardelli’s operation, and had founded and guided, with Ghirardelli’s support, the Italian Mutual Benefit Society to help indigent Italians. The two men became San Francisco’s pro-forma Italian VIPs, and in 1855 served as delegates to a local celebration of a Crimean War victory that their compatriots in Piedmont-Sardinia had helped win against Russia with the armies of France, England and Turkey.

San Francisco’s Italians kept a close watch on Italy’s unification movement and the struggle of Risorgimento. *La Parola*, one of the earliest Italian-language newspapers in the United States, was published in Larco’s building; he and Ghirardelli were major donors to the Garibaldi Guard, helping the charismatic guerrilla patriot Giuseppe Garibaldi lead his “Red Shirt” army to win unification in 1861 and continue his efforts at consolidation. Ghirardelli also applauded Count Camillo Cavour’s diplomatic moves on behalf of the movement. [See my earlier *Alla Correntes* for descriptions of Garibaldi and Cavour. -JJB] Deeply occupied in business matters, however, he generally kept a low profile in politics. His employee Angelo Mangini, however, was another matter.

Mangini was a member of Giuseppe Mazzini’s “Young Italy” movement and had been sentenced to death for his role in plotting the anti-monarchist Genoa uprising of 1854. He fled Italy via London and arrived in San Francisco in 1859, where he landed a job as Ghirardelli’s bookkeeper. In 1860 Mangini started the city’s second Italian paper, *La Cronica*, and seven years later, *La Voce del Popolo*, both dedicated to furthering republican ideals. In 1868 he became a full partner at the Ghirardelli firm, and no wonder. He had become part



of the family, marrying Ghirardelli’s fifteen-year-old daughter Virginia in 1862 and presenting the Ghirardellis with their first grandchild, Aurelia, in 1863.

As other relatives arrived from South America and moved in with the Ghirardellis on Portsmouth Square in the crowded family living space above the store, the business and “home” moved to Jackson Street. However, quieter and sunnier Oakland drew Ghirardelli’s interest. In 1859, he built one of that town’s first big houses with a garden that took up a square block. There the family grew to eight in an ambiance tinged with cosmopolitan influences. His wife Carmen, a Spanish Peruvian living where Spanish speakers were much in evidence, although California was now part of the United States, spoke no English and had mostly Hispanic, Italian, and French friends.

Italy remained a core reference point for the Ghirardellis. Outside the Oakland house was a large garden with marble fountains and statuary from Italy, including likenesses of Cavour and--on either side of a front-door staircase--figures of Christopher Columbus and George Washington, thus proclaiming transatlantic ideals of independence and self-determination. Ghirardelli sent three of his five sons at age ten to be educated at a boarding school in Genoa. Cesare, the youngest, died there, but Domingo, Jr., and Joseph returned at age seventeen to attain undergraduate degrees from the Jesuit Santa Clara College and work at the firm. Both men were bilingual throughout their lives, with educations grounded in business, economics, and mercantile strategies. Ghirardelli, obviously, wanted his sons to continue what he had started.

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**ALLA CORRENTE, *Continued***  
**Domenico “Domingo” Ghirardelli**

During the post-Civil War years, San Francisco emerged as the commercial center for a broad geographic region, with strong local industries a necessity because of the city’s isolation. Manufacturing firms thrived making paper, sugar, furniture, woolens, upholstery, bricks, beer, and plumbing fixtures, to name a few. Coffee and spices were offered by a number of companies, including Ghirardelli’s, but the market for chocolate was his alone.

In 1867, Ghirardelli hit paydirt with Broma, the firm’s name for soluble ground chocolate (from theobroma, “god-food” in Greek, the technical designation for the cacao plant). It was invented accidentally a year or two before, after unattended bags of chocolate paste in a hot room dripped butterfat onto the floor, leaving a greaseless residue that could be ground and easily sweetened. Anticipating the trans-continental railroad’s completion in 1869, the company seized on the mercantile possibilities and started producing the easy-to-ship, non-perishable “miracle” powder that made hot cocoa and enabled baking with remarkable ease.



The next few years were roller coaster ones for the firm, however. In 1870 a nationwide recession took hold, and Ghirardelli, with partner and son-in-law Mangini, declared bankruptcy. Mangini, now three years a widower, was already fidgety, and fled to parts unknown when an accusation of embezzlement for more than \$10,000 came in from a business associate. Ghirardelli turned to the situation at hand and scaled back. First to go, in 1872, was the general merchandise store in Hornitos, a Mother Lode town, wiping out the livelihoods of his stepdaughter, Dominga, and her husband, Frank Barbagelata. In 1874 practically everything else-- except the Ghirardelli plant in San Francisco--was auctioned, including the family house and contents, investment properties in Oakland, and at least four of Ghirardelli’s branch stores. The sale yielded \$111,450.

Ghirardelli, now 56, used hard work and the counsel of three talented sons to get the business growing again, which was especially important because a French competitor, Etienne Guittard, had started a chocolate company in 1868 that would focus, and excel, not so much on over-the-counter products but on top-grade chocolate for wholesale customers. The family team, eventually switching to a partnership under the name Ghirardelli and Sons, got aggressive. It bought new machinery and added an adjacent building on Jackson Street for a workforce of thirty, expanded markets to China, Japan, and Mexico, and solidified its reputation in British Columbia, Arizona, Texas, and Utah. With Broma always at the forefront of its identity, the company briefly marketed its own products under the designation “Eagle” and introduced streetcar and sidewalk ads on tin and wood to tout hot cocoa to children and families. By 1885, the term Broma had been dropped and Ghirardelli’s Ground Chocolate, as it was now known, was the star seller. To make it, some 450,000 pounds of cacao beans were imported annually. Soon, sales amounted to one million pounds a year.

In 1889, Domenico Ghirardelli retired as head of the company, turning the management over to his three sons. Needing additional space, the company purchased the Pioneer Woolen Mill building, and moved its

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**ALLA CORRENTE, *Continued***  
**Domenico “Domingo” Ghirardelli**

manufacturing to that location, which was located on San Francisco’s northern waterfront. This is the present site of Ghirardelli Square. Ghirardelli, a widower, returned on holiday to his native Rapallo and after a long stay, died there at 76 of influenza on January 17, 1894. He had specified that he be laid to rest in the land of self-made men, the United States, where fellow Italians had made spectacular successes of themselves. (For example, Larco, bankers and vintners such as Andrea Sbarboro and Carlo Pietro Rossi, and various entrepreneurs in truck farming, fishing industries, and produce markets).

Although today Ghirardelli’s mausoleum is located on “Millionaires Row” in Oakland’s Mountain View Memorial, that was not always the case. It seems that the family originally had a mausoleum at the adjacent St. Mary’s Catholic Cemetery. As the story goes, Ghirardelli had been a supporter of Garibaldi for the unification of Italy (as mentioned above). Garibaldi was exiled to South America in 1836 and this may have shaken Ghirardelli’s faith in Catholicism since the Church had been in opposition to Garibaldi and the Risorgimento. Thirty years later that faith would be destroyed when Ghirardelli’s niece, Aurelia, became gravely ill. A priest was called to give her last rites. Family members have conflicting stories about whether there was a bad rain storm or if the priest felt Ghirardelli hadn’t given the church enough financial support. Whatever the reason, Aurelia died without being given her last rites, which infuriated Domenico and devastated Ghirardelli’s deeply religious wife Carmen. Ghirardelli then forbade any of his family members to ever enter a Catholic church again. With this act still weighing on him Domenico had a mausoleum built at Mountain View complete with a Masonic emblem above the door which was considered inappropriate by Catholics. Once it was ready, Domenico and his two sons went to St. Mary’s during the night and took the 4 bodies that were still at St. Mary’s and laid them to rest in the newly built mausoleum. Following his own death in 1894, his body was shipped back to the US and he was laid to rest in the mausoleum.



Few could rival Ghirardelli’s quiet triumph at giving the West its primary Italian brand name, as normal to California consumers of chocolate products as Spreckels was to sugar or Folger’s to coffee. And the Ghirardelli business had muscled its way into being one of the state’s big manufactures, holding its specialty as solidly as the big iron works, lumber companies, flour mills, and bottlers, and keeping Californians supplied and employed at the turn of the century.

*Adapted from The San Francisco Appeal (<http://sfappeal.com/2013/09/ghirardelli-square-sold-to-out-of-town-investors/>); <http://www.thefreelibrary.com/The+Ghirardelli+story.-a0104669393>; <http://cemeteryexplorers.blogspot.com/2009/09/domingo-ghirardelli-feb-21-1817-jan-17.html> by James J. Boitano, PhD.*