



Kathryn E. Wilson, PhD
Director of Education and Interpretation
The Historical Society of Pennsylvania, with The Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies
Philadelphia, PA

Statement before the U.S. House of Representatives
Subcommittee on Criminal Justice, Drug Policy, and Human Resources
“Historic Preservation of the Peopling of America”
May 20, 2004

Mr. Chairman and distinguished committee members, thank you for the invitation to address the subcommittee today on the subject of the historic preservation of America’s rich immigrant heritage. I am here to tell you a little bit about some of the efforts we have been making in Philadelphia to preserve and present our area’s ethnic and immigrant past, and some of the challenges of that work.

Background

Philadelphia is undeniably the history capital of the United States, and tourists flock there annually to drink in the sites and stories of our nation’s founding: Independence Hall, Carpenter’s Hall, Elfreth’s Alley, the Liberty Bell, and now the National Constitution Center, among other attractions. As such, the colonial era dominates much of the historic preservation and presentation activities in the region.

But other histories are also embodied in our city’s neighborhoods outside the famous historic mile, a fact that the historic interpretation and preservation community in Philadelphia has begun to recognize and address. Heritage Philadelphia, a program of the Pew Charitable Trusts, is exploring strategies for strengthening the infrastructure of historic interpretation in the five-county region, developing an interpretive frame focused on the “Four Foundings” from colonial beginnings, to revolution, to civil war, and finally civil rights. A newly-formed Civil War Consortium is exploring interpretations of Philadelphia during that period. The Preservation Alliance has turned its attention to preserving houses of worship (“sacred spaces”) and twentieth century structures. Multicultural tours sponsored by the Greater Philadelphia Tourism Marketing Corporation explore contemporary neighborhoods but do not, on the whole, delve into their histories. Ethnic museums large and small present the histories and cultures of their specific communities. All these efforts encourage visitors to move “beyond the Bell” to explore other parts of our city’s heritage. But all do not preserve or interpret our immigrant and ethnic history per se.

This history is a richly layered microcosm of American immigration: three centuries of diversity encompassed in the story of one region. While New York is considered the immigrant city par excellence, Philadelphia possesses a rich and representative immigrant history as well, perhaps more representative of the experience of many other American cities outside of the big immigrant destinations such as Los Angeles and New York. And Pennsylvania's early history is the most diverse in the nation. From its founding in 1682, Philadelphia has been both an immigrant port and a city of immigrants. Swedes, English were the first settlers in the 17th century, establishing settlements along the Delaware River and trading with the Native American Lenni Lenape. William Penn's "Holy Experiment" encouraged a wide range of immigrants from all over Europe, welcoming Quaker dissenters and German pietists fleeing religious persecution. Soon, Germans made up 1/3rd of the commonwealth's population. Germantown, the first German settlement in America, is part of a present-day northwest section of the city.

Philadelphia was the major American port throughout the 18th century and early 19th century and the city was characterized by a great degree of cosmopolitanism, with international residents from France, Spain, and Poland joining English, Welsh, and German settlers, African slaves, and Native American emissaries. Foreign merchants, immigrants, exiles, diplomats, and statesmen all passed through Philadelphia and participated in the political and literary culture of the city.

Even as Philadelphia declined as the primary port (ceding this distinction to New York) after the mid 19th century, it remained an economic center and an immigrant destination. Germans arrived and, as skilled craftsmen, worked in cottage industries in Northern Liberties and Kensington in the early 1900s. Irish immigrants came in large numbers after the 1830s and through the Famine years of 1846-7, to work building canals, railroads, and streets or to labor as domestic servants, handloom weavers, or other unskilled workers. While anti-Irish sentiment was a national phenomenon, it was concentrated in cities like Philadelphia where many Irish had settled. In 1844, nativist riots targeted Irish neighborhoods in Philadelphia and mobs attacked several Catholic churches in Irish neighborhoods, burning one, St. Augustine's, to the ground. A year later, the Native American Party was formed by the "Know-Nothings" in New York, and the group held their first convention in Philadelphia.

The diversity of the cosmopolitan capital evolved into the diversity of the industrial city. What had been a mercantile city of about 30,000 during the Revolutionary War grew into a leading industrial metropolis of over 400,000 people by 1850, three out of ten of who were foreign-born. German and Irish immigrants accounted for more than three-quarters of that total.

By the mid 1870s Philadelphia's economy was firmly based on major enterprises in the textile, metal products, machine goods, printing and chemical industries. At the turn of the century Philadelphia led the nation in such diverse industries as the production of locomotives, streetcars, saws, hosiery, hats, leather goods, and cigars, while it ranked second in the manufacture of drugs and chemicals and in the refining of sugar and petroleum. The city was known as "the workshop of the world," and these industries were fueled by an influx of immigrant labor.

To accommodate the influx, The American Line, founded with support from the Pennsylvania Railroad, opened the city's first immigrant station at a railroad-owned pier at the foot of Washington Avenue in South Philadelphia in the 1880s. Between 1910 and 1914, at the height of

immigration from southern and eastern Europe, Philadelphia was the third most important immigrant port in the country. Italians, Poles, Greeks, Eastern European Jews, Slovaks, Russians, and others arrived to take up labor in factories and sweatshops. Many immigrants passed initially through Philadelphia's port, fanning out to work in the mining and steel industries in other parts of the state. Others – mostly Irish, Italian, and Eastern European – settled in the South Philadelphia neighborhoods adjacent to the docks, Philadelphia's "Lower East Side." Part of this area is now known colloquially as the Italian Market area, the site of the only remaining open air market in the city, and now also is home to Mexican, Cambodian, and Vietnamese businesses. Another historically immigrant neighborhood is Northern Liberties, north of Center City, which was home first to German and Irish workers, then Slovak, Russian, Jewish, and Polish communities, and now Latinos. Philadelphia's Chinatown got its start in the 1870s, when laborers were recruited from the west to work in laundries in Philadelphia and New Jersey. By 1930 immigrants and their children accounted for almost a million Philadelphians. Overall, the city's population had grown from 847,170 to 1,950,961 in the half century between 1880 and 1930, and much of this growth was due to immigration.

Immigration slowed after the 1924 legislation imposing quotas on new arrivals, but revived again in the post-World War II period. Puerto Rican migrants arrived on work programs and stayed to form a stable community. The Chinese population grew after the war, as Chinese-American servicemen, now U.S. citizens, married or brought wives from China, leading to the growth of family and community life in Chinatown. 1965 was a major turning point when immigration restrictions were removed and African, Asian, and Latin American immigrants came to the United States, and to Philadelphia, in large numbers for the first time. Koreans arrived throughout the 1970s and 80s, forming a visible enclave in Olney (a north Philadelphia neighborhood) and significantly expanding entrepreneurial and small business activity in the city. South Asians became a visible presence both in business and a variety of professions, most of them arriving since 1965. Southeast Asian refugees from Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos were resettled in the city during the 1970s. Many Africans have settled in the city since the 1980 Refugee Act, and the African immigrant population numbers now over 55,000. Latino immigration and migration continues, making Latinos the fastest growing ethnic group in the region, as they are in the nation at large. Since the 1980s, the region's Latino communities have incorporated new diversity with the settlement of Dominicans, Mexicans, Columbians, Peruvians, Venezuelans, Salvadorans, Guatemalans, and others.

Historical Society of Pennsylvania Activities

The Historical Society of Pennsylvania preserves and explores the origins, diversity, and development of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and the nation, as one of the great repositories of United States history. The Society serves as an important resource for educators, site interpreters, historic preservationists, and communities in the preservation and interpretation of history. Our historic preservation activities include the conserving of and providing access to a wide range of historic documents and graphics. We do not maintain a museum or historic sites, but seek to be, through our collections and research, an invaluable resource for the interpretation of such sites. We support the work of historians and other scholars who work to generate new and more inclusive histories of our region. An essay published in a recent issue of our journal, the

Pennsylvania Museum of History and Biography, for example, catalyzed community engagement and discussion with the National Park Service on the interpretation and the new Liberty Bell site and now, the historic President's House. Publications and programs also serve as a vital source for the creative teaching of history.

The Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies, now part of The Historical Society, had as its mission to document and interpret the immigrant and ethnic experience of the United States. Since its beginning in 1976, the Institute accumulated an archival collection which includes an unrivalled ethnic newspaper collection, documents and photographs from fraternal societies and other immigrant organizations, and other papers, photographs, and graphics representing over 80 ethnic groups. This collection is now integrated into the archival holdings of The Historical Society.

Since 1997, the Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies, now The Historical Society of Pennsylvania, has been actively involved in documenting the most recent histories of immigration to the Philadelphia area. To date, we have worked with South Asian, Arab, African, Latino, and Chinese communities, with plans to work with Korean and Southeast Asian communities in the coming few years. Our goal in these projects has been to build our institutional knowledge base, as well as our archival collections, through the documentation of immigrant community life. In each case, we spend 1-2 years doing ethnographic fieldwork in local communities, documenting community life through photography, field notes, oral histories, and the collection of ephemera. We take literally thousands of photographs, and interview community residents about their histories and experiences. Invariably, we uncover many more interesting stories than we have resources to document in detail. We also encourage community members to consider donating their family or organizational papers to the archives at some point in the future, and some do. All these materials will provide valuable resources to future historians and others seeking to understand the experiences of immigrants and the enormous changes in our society and culture in the late 20th century and beyond. The materials join our already rich archival collection documenting and representing earlier waves of immigration. They also form the basis of interpretive products such as exhibits, publications, educational resources, and programs that seek to educate the public about these communities.

Many times, the histories we uncover through both our ethnographic and archival work with recent immigrant communities reveal deeper, longer histories of global presences in our locality. Thus, in researching the recent history and diversity of Latinos, for example, we uncovered histories of Mexican *braceros* that worked on the Pennsylvania Railroad during World War II, Latin American revolutionaries who lived in exile in the early 19th century, and Cuban immigrants who fought for Cuban's independence while working in Philadelphia cigar factories at the turn of the nineteenth century. South Asians harken back to early trade between Philadelphia and India; Arabs note the presence of a Lebanese community here in the late 19th century. Philadelphia is thus even more diverse historically than we may have originally understood, and these histories are important and validating for more recent arrivals who wish to see themselves as part of the American story.

Although we do not maintain a museum program, we are devising creative strategies for presenting the material we collect and preserve. We create traveling exhibits, publications, and

curricular supplements for educators. Currently, we are embarking on a collaborative effort with the Philadelphia Mural Arts Program to document immigrant community histories through photography and oral history and then present these histories through the creation of neighborhood murals. All these activities likewise increase immigrant communities' cultural access to and participation in the city's cultural and historical activities.

Our experience suggests that it is absolutely critical to involve immigrant community organizations, businesses, and residents in the inclusive documentation and interpretation of a site or story. Particularly because the histories and identities of such communities often suffer from negative stereotyping or from the narrative fragmentation of an incomplete historical record, it is important to capture and interpret such histories from an ethnic/immigrant community perspective – in their own voices and from their point of view. In our projects, we work closely with a committee of community advisors who guide our research, help us decide what to document, and shape how what is documented is presented to the public. This process allows them to play an active role in shaping their own histories, and likewise stimulates interest in history within the community that may foster greater historic preservation down the road.

Challenges

Numerous challenges face the historic preservation of our immigrant and ethnic past. Currently, these immigrant histories languish largely unpreserved and uninterpreted -- or at the very least, underinterpreted. Many ethnic and immigrant communities remain outside the process of interpreting their own histories. In some cases, ethnic community organizations have undertaken oral history or other community documentation projects, but the results of these projects often are underexposed or improperly preserved after the project has ended. Some of the older historic structures, especially churches, have been restored, such as Old First Reformed Church, the remaining presence of the German Reformed community that thrived in Old City Philadelphia during the colonial and post-Revolutionary period. But later 19th and 20th century historic structures have not. In some cases they have disappeared entirely.

Historic marker programs often don't include sites of interest for immigration history, which can lead to a fragmented historical landscape and incomplete sense of the historical immigrant experience. In the Italian neighborhood of South Philadelphia, for example, Saint Mary Magdalene de Pazzi Church sports a state marker as the first Italian parish, formed in 1852. But other sites, such as Palumbo's, a popular neighborhood supper-club and immigrant way-station throughout much of the 20th century, is marked by a non-official plaque put up by a local resident, and the building is gone, destroyed by fire. Likewise, there is no central means of interpreting the history of Philadelphia's Italian community outside of a few independently-run individual tours. These efforts, while important, do not amount to an effective interface and infrastructure for visitors that would tell a unified and accessible story of Italians in Philadelphia and the life they made here. And they do not work to preserve the structures, stories, images, and documents of this community for future generations.

Historically immigrants often have inhabited urban worlds that are not thought worthy of or fit for preservation. The Lower East Side Tenement Museum in New York City is a major exception to this pattern. Immigrant neighborhoods often change, sometimes become blighted, or

are subsequently gentrified, pushing previous generations of residents out. The first Latino neighborhood in Philadelphia has largely evaporated in the face of gentrification, although a historic church still remains. Philadelphia's 19th century Jewish neighborhood gradually gave way to desertion and then gentrification, its vestiges seen in a corner deli, a handful of fabric shops (remnants of the old garment district), and a scattering of buildings with a Star of David carved into the stone above the door to remind us that they were once corner *shul*, and that Philadelphia once was home to one of the largest Jewish communities in the country. The Vine Street immigration station is now a "Dave and Busters," and the Washington Avenue station is gone entirely, replaced by a Coast Guard office. Yet these two sites are critical for understanding Philadelphia as an immigrant port historically, and for understanding how the two adjacent neighborhoods became home to successive waves of German, Irish, Slovak, Italian, Polish, and Jewish immigrants.

Often, the most important sites, documents, and images related to immigrant history have disappeared from lack of preservation. Many domestic structures in Philadelphia's Chinatown, for instance, were demolished as part of urban renewal efforts in the 1960s and 70s, and a now-historic church narrowly escaped destruction because of residents' activism. In communities where informal networks and orally exchanged information historically predominated and perhaps still predominate, many important aspects of everyday life historically survive only in personal memories.

Likewise, some immigrant and ethnic communities suffer from a current lack of resources and this lack impacts their ability to engage in historic preservation activities. Consider post-industrial North Philadelphia, once a workshop of world, its factories surrounded by streets lined with modest workers' rowhomes. The factories are now abandoned and the brick rowhouses, once a hallmark of Philadelphia life, are sinking, decaying, or being demolished in anti-blight initiatives. Services to this community are focused on economic revitalization, anti-drug activity, social services, and safe streets, not historic preservation. Thus, preservation is tied to other issues of economic and community development. Communities need the means to preserve their pasts, means that many immigrant communities don't have or can't spare because they are busy trying to survive and thrive in this new country. Many of these communities might welcome the restoration, renovation, and resources that historic preservation would bring to their neighborhoods, but in terms of heritage tourism, they are not yet visitor-ready.

In these contexts, rigorous interpretation, mediation, and an inclusion of community institutions are required for the effort to be successful, particularly for the histories of neighborhoods now considered "dangerous" or maginalized. Since many historically ethnic/immigrant neighborhoods are now home to new populations of immigrants, or others, who also leave their mark on the urban landscape, we do have to ask: What gets preserved, and for whom? And with what impact on existing residents? Community participation and buy-in to the historic project are critical to success.

These days, historians painstakingly search the historical record to reconstruct, through documents and other artifacts, the life of 18th and 19th century immigrants. We need to look at our existing world with a new eye toward the future of its history. The first laundry of 1870s Chinatown is long lost. Don't we wish we could have saved it somehow? Or a picture of it? Or

its business records? Or something? The corner *bodega* may not seem of historic significance now, but its décor and architecture, the products it offers for sale, and the social and economic interactions it fosters are and will be critical to understanding the culture, social life, and commercial exchanges of the Latino barrio in the late 20th century.

There are thousands of stories and sites out there waiting to be documented and preserved, all of which can help us understand the rich and vibrant history that is the “peopling of America.”