

*Latino Philadelphia:  
Our Journeys, Our Communities*

*Filadelfia Latina:  
Nuestros Caminos, Nuestras Comunidades*

**A Community Profile**

The Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies of  
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## Introduction

By now, most people have heard the news that Latinos are the nation's largest minority group in the United States. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, there were an estimated 38.8 million Latinos/Hispanics living in the United States in 2000; this number accounted for 13% of the total estimated population. Mexicans constitute 66.9% of this national figure, while Puerto Ricans form 8.6%, Cubans form 3.7%, and South and Central Americans form 14.3%. Over the past 20 years, like many cities outside of California and the Southwest, Philadelphia has also seen a sharp rise in its Latin American immigrant population, and particularly its Mexican population. Although Pennsylvania has never been a primary receiving state for Latinos, the commonwealth is now home to nearly 400,000 Latinos; an estimated 128,928, or nearly a third of these, live in Philadelphia.<sup>1</sup> Latinos are the fastest growing ethnic group in the Greater Philadelphia area as well as the nation.

What does this growth mean for Pennsylvania and Philadelphia? Although Philadelphia historically has not been a city with a large Latino population (compared, for instance, with New York or Los Angeles) or a destination point for large numbers of Latin American immigrants, it has experienced a Latino presence for over three centuries, particularly from the Caribbean. Over two centuries ago, brisk trade flourished between Philadelphia and Cuba. More recently, Philadelphia was an important destination city for the migration of Puerto Ricans to the mainland. Since the 1950s, Philadelphia has maintained the third largest

*While Latinos have shaped the civic, economic, intellectual, and cultural life of Philadelphia, Philadelphia in turn has changed Latinos who make their home here.*

Puerto Rican population of any mainland U.S. city (following New York and Chicago). Now, this community surges with new growth and new cultural diversity.

History, culture, and commerce blend together to create a distinct experience that is Latino Philadelphia. While Latinos have shaped the civic, economic, intellectual, and cultural life of Philadelphia, Philadelphia in turn has changed Latinos who make their home here. This exchange between Latinos and Philadelphia occurs across the city in a variety of familiar and emerging spaces.

The voices and images in this essay are but fragments of a much larger and complex picture that is Latino Philadelphia. They emerged from conversations and interactions with members of various Latino communities during The Historical Society of Pennsylvania's Latinos Project, as well as from the mining of our own historical collections. This project, carried out over the last two years, is part of the Society's ongoing commitment to document the area's diverse communities.

## Who and What is "Latino?"

The term "Latino" is a versatile one that includes people from both these shores and abroad. It is used with relative acceptance and pervasiveness in Philadelphia, along the East Coast, and among scholars, and has political implications as a label of self-determination. However, the term is not without its critics or problems.

In the United States, people of Latin American backgrounds describe themselves in many ways. These identity categories each have their own origin and differing political, cultural, linguistic, and racial connotations. "Latino" is only one of many equally ambiguous terms used to refer to people of Spanish-speaking and Latin American heritage. Latino, Latino/a, Hispanic, *hispano*, Latin American, *latinoamericano*, "Spanish," "Latin," and *La Raza* are among the labels used to identify or self-identify people who share recent or historical origins in the Spanish-speaking, Latin American world.

*“Hispanic is a new word for me, you know? It doesn’t exist in Mexico or in Chile.”*

But even this range of terms does not capture the complexity of the terminology, its usage, or the diversity among the U.S. population that is commonly and most broadly labeled Latino or Hispanic. Nor does it address the ways these labels are imposed upon new arrivals who are themselves only just learning the significance of racial and ethnic terms in the United States. As one immigrant commented, *“Hispanic is a new word for me, you know? It doesn’t exist in Mexico or in Chile.”*<sup>2</sup> According to researchers Marcelo M. Suárez-Orozco and Mariela M. Páez, “The very term Latino has meaning only in reference to the U.S. experience. Outside of the United States, we don’t speak of Latinos; we speak of Mexicans, Cubans, Puerto Ricans, and so forth. Latinos are made in the USA.”<sup>3</sup>

These terms often lump people together based on factors such as language, race, or geographical origin, creating the assumption that they all see and experience the world in the same way. But they may not: *“Everybody has a different identity. The fact that we are from Latin countries doesn’t mean that we are not different.”* People falling under these broad categories may be born in the United States; may be immigrants; may speak Spanish, English or both; may be fair-skinned or dark-skinned; may be professionals or day laborers; may be Catholic, Pentecostal, Mormon, Jewish, or agnostic. They may share characteristics such as religion or class with non-Latinos and be strongly connected with non-Latinos by shared concerns and experiences. For example, suburban Latinos may have more in common with their neighbors than with Latinos who live in an urban environment.

Identity labels are not fixed designations, but are fluid, shifting, and context dependent. This fluidity is what makes “Latino,” “Hispanic,” and other labels confusing and often frustrating for those wanting to use the appropriate term to describe friends, address strangers, or refer to communities and populations. The way individuals and groups use such labels to describe themselves and others varies from one person to another depending on circumstances and situations. For instance, a Philadelphian of Venezuelan descent may consider himself to be “Venezuelan” among his family and during Venezuelan celebrations. On official paperwork, he may check the “Hispanic” box but refer to himself as “Latino” when interacting with a wider population of both Latinos and non-Latinos. When visiting Venezuela, however, he may refer to himself as “Venezuelan American” or just as an “American.”

Even within communities, these terms are not used with absolute consistency and certainty. Oftentimes people have their own preferences based on political perspectives or personal experience. Some people may self-identify very strongly with a particular label. For example, there are Puerto Ricans who identify themselves as “Boricua,” a term taken from “Borinquen,” the indigenous Taino name of the island. “Boricua” alludes to prequest, precolonial conditions and, by extension, may also symbolize the hope for an



*Juntos trip to the Art Museum. Photograph by Joseph Gonzales.*

independent Puerto Rico. Other Puerto Ricans may prefer to identify as “Puerto Rican” or “Latino.” Others may be ambivalent about the whole thing. People who have recently arrived from Latin America may not be familiar with the identity politics of the United States and may find it arbitrary or difficult to choose a label other than their national or regional identity that suits them. So someone from Colombia may choose to identify as “Colombian” or “South American” rather than “Latino.”

*Identity labels are not fixed designations, but are fluid, shifting, and context dependent.*

“Latino” and “Hispanic” are the most widely used categorical terms for labeling people of Latin American descent, and both carry the baggage of varied meanings for different people. “Latino” has certain political connotations. Academics, activists, artists, and community workers often prefer this term because it originated within Latin American communities in the United States and refers to the diverse racial and ethnic heritages of Latin America. “Latino” is widely used by individuals in Philadelphia to describe identity, “art and culture,” food, and other aspects related to Puerto Rican and Latin American peoples. Some individuals within and outside of the community do not like the term because they feel it sounds too “ethnic” or because of its association through the media with stereotypes of violence, poverty, crime, drugs, gangs and so forth. Others feel it most accurately represents their identity: *“Latino doesn’t deny the Spanish descent, but it includes being indigenous and African.”* “Hispanic” is used by some within the community and is roughly analogous to “Latino.” Its widespread acceptance by many U.S. government agencies in the 1970s and 1980s and connotation of Spanish heritage makes it preferred by some and rejected by others. One community member comments, *“I’d rather hear Latino or Latina than Hispanic.”* Both “Latino” and “Hispanic” carry political and ethnic suggestions that are appealing



*Puerto Rican children dressed for Halloween.  
Photograph by Tony Rocco.*

for different reasons. Though identity terms such as these may refer to the same population, their usage may reflect the philosophical attitudes of the speaker. In short, these terms can all be appropriate depending on the context and the position of the speaker.

Even though people do not agree on how to identify the at-large Latino community, Latinos often do communicate a strong sense of cultural unity. In Philadelphia, there seems to be broad-based solidarity among Latinos when talking about themselves as a population within the city. Some people cite cultural attachments, others political attachments, and others linguistic attachments. When reflecting on Latino unity, many people often comment, *“Creo que somos iguales,”* or “I think we are the same.” Though these individuals are aware of different cultural backgrounds, they perceive some sameness in conditions, history, culture, and language. These commonalities profoundly bind Latinos, particularly in the setting of distinct urban and suburban landscapes. People espousing this sense of solidarity use the terms Latino, *hispano*, Hispanic, *latinoamericano*, and “Spanish” to unite a larger group of people living in this city.

These broad and ambiguous pan-ethnic terms can mask distinctions that people are proud of and that play a role in their ethnic or national identity – just as “European” does not identify one as Italian, Irish, German, Russian, or Greek. As one community member observes, *“Latino is too general a concept because everybody’s a Latino.”*

## LATINO PHILADELPHIA AT A GLANCE

### **Puerto Ricans**

**Population:** 91,527 estimated by the U.S. Census, 2000

As of 2000, Philadelphia had the third largest Puerto Rican population outside of Puerto Rico. The Puerto Rican population continues to grow both from within and through continued migration from Puerto Rico.

**Where they are living:** Presently, the greatest concentration of Puerto Ricans live in North Philadelphia along the 5th and 2nd Street corridor running from Girard Avenue to Roosevelt Boulevard. There are also enclaves of Puerto Ricans in the Spring Garden and East Poplar neighborhoods, in South Philadelphia between Washington and Snyder Avenues and Front and 18th Streets, and in the lower Northeast Philadelphia neighborhoods of Frankford and Juniata Park. Other Puerto Ricans live throughout the city and suburbs. There is also a sizable Puerto Rican community in Camden, New Jersey.

**Philadelphia history:** Puerto Rico and Philadelphia were linked primarily through trade in the 18th and 19th centuries. Merchants, cigar makers, trades people, laborers, and students, as well as pro-independence exiles and organizers, were among the Puerto Ricans living in Philadelphia from the latter half of the 1800s through the first half of the 1900s. During World War II, a limited number of Puerto Ricans came as contracted war workers, mostly to food processing plants in southern New Jersey and to the Campbell Soup factory in Camden. After the war, these numbers began to increase. Between 1950 and 1970, the Puerto Rican community grew dramatically to over 60,000. Puerto Ricans worked in factories, as well as in other areas of employment, and created the neighborhoods, businesses, and organizations recognized today as the Puerto Rican/Latino community. Since 1970, Puerto Ricans have arrived in Philadelphia from Puerto Rico, New York, and other cities with Puerto Rican communities. Throughout their history in Philadelphia, many Puerto Ricans have practiced circular migration,

spending periods of time living in Philadelphia and on the island.

In 1917, the Jones Act made Puerto Ricans U.S. citizens. As citizens, Puerto Ricans do not experience the legal challenges facing Latin Americans who immigrate to the United States. However, the experience of migration is much the same as that of immigration. Though Puerto Ricans are “migrants” in a legal sense, they are “immigrants” culturally and emotionally.

### **Mexicans**

**Population:** 6,220 estimated by the U.S. Census, 2000

The Mexican population is experiencing rapid growth in Philadelphia and in 2003 was estimated to have surpassed 12,000.

**Where they are living:** The most visible and largest concentration of Mexicans in the city is in South Philadelphia between Washington and Oregon Avenues and Front and 18th Streets. Mexicans are also creating small enclaves in North Philadelphia (including Kensington and Olney), Northeast Philadelphia, West Philadelphia, and Southwest Philadelphia. Mexicans are also establishing communities in suburbs and neighboring towns.

**Philadelphia history:** A handful of Mexicans were among the Spanish-speaking people documented in Philadelphia during the 19th century. In the 1910s and 1920s, small numbers arrived in the area from Mexico and Texas to work in agriculture, construction, and on the railroads. The community that was formed joined the already existing Puerto Rican

and Spanish community. During World War II, Mexican men were recruited to the area through the “railroad *bracero* program”; most returned to Mexico at the end of the war, though a few remained. In the 1970s through the early 1990s, other small groups of Mexican men and women settled in Philadelphia, working in restaurants, hotels and private homes, opening small businesses, and starting North and South Philadelphia enclaves. After 1998, larger numbers of Mexican men and women arrived from



*Young Lords serving breakfast at the Lighthouse, 1971. Courtesy of Temple University Libraries, Urban Archives.*

## LATINO PHILADELPHIA AT A GLANCE

Mexico, as well as from New York City and the outlying areas of Philadelphia, rapidly expanding their communities.

### Dominicans

**Population:** 4,337 estimated by the U.S. Census 2000

As of 2000, Philadelphia had the 14th largest Dominican population in the United States. The Dominican population continues to grow as a result of migration from New York's Dominican community and the documented and undocumented immigration of many Dominican nationals.

**Where they are living:** Dominicans are settling largely in North Philadelphia among the Puerto Rican community. There are also small numbers of Dominicans settling in West Philadelphia and the Northeast.

**Philadelphia history:** Prior to 1990, there were very small numbers of Dominicans living in Philadelphia. After 1990, the Dominican community experienced rapid growth as large numbers of Dominicans moved to Philadelphia from New York seeking work, affordable housing, and safer neighborhoods. Dominicans created an enclave during the 1990s and opened *bodegas*, travel agencies, money houses, and other businesses in North Philadelphia and other parts of the city. The community continues to grow as relatives from the Dominican Republic move to reunite with family members in Philadelphia and others come seeking economic opportunities and higher education.

### Cubans

**Population:** 2,730 estimated by the U.S. Census 2000

The Cuban population is growing slowly in comparison to other Latino groups in Philadelphia. As of 2000, Philadelphia had the 50th largest Cuban population in the United States.

**Where they are living:** After 1959, many Cubans settled

in Olney and other adjacent areas. Though they have since dispersed throughout the city and neighboring suburbs, North and Northeast Philadelphia is still home to a portion of the Cuban population.

### Philadelphia history:

Cuba and Philadelphia were linked through extensive trade in the 18th and 19th centuries. Cuban pro-independence exiles and organizers, merchants, cigar makers, trades people, students, and others lived in Philadelphia between the late 1800s and early 1900s. Before 1959, small numbers of Cubans lived and studied in the Philadelphia area. Many Cuban exiles arrived in Philadelphia between the years of 1959 and 1965, as a result of the Cuban Revolution. Some connected with family and friends already in Philadelphia and others relocated from Florida. Many from this wave of Cubans have created social and cultural groups that are still active in promoting solidarity and Cuban culture. Small numbers of Cuban refugees have come into the city since the 1980s.

### Colombians

**Population:** 2,414 estimated by the U.S. Census 2000

This population is increasing as some Colombians look to Philadelphia as a destination where they can seek opportunities and flee increasing violence and terrorism.

**Where they are living:** The largest Colombian enclaves are in and around Olney and in the Northeast section of the in the city. There are also Colombian households dispersed throughout the city and surrounding suburbs.

### Philadelphia history:

Little is known about the Colombian presence in the city before the last century. However, Colombians have been coming to Philadelphia for studies since at least the 1920s. The first sizable number of Colombians to settle in Philadelphia arrived in the 1960s when many Colombian women and



*Dominicans organizing relief supplies for hurricane victims in the Dominican Republic. Courtesy of Felix Espino.*

## LATINO PHILADELPHIA AT A GLANCE

men came seeking work in Philadelphia as a result of changes in the 1965 Immigration Act. This early group established families and intermarried with other Philadelphians. A second wave of Colombians arrived in Philadelphia from New York and Colombia in the 1970s and 1980s and has since established enclaves in Olney and Feltonville. In the last ten years, Colombians have come to join family members in Philadelphia, seek educational and economic opportunities, and to escape the ongoing violence created through civil strife and narcoterrorism.

### Other Latino Populations in Brief

#### Central Americans

**Populations:** 518 Guatemalans; 501 Costa Ricans; 544 Nicaraguans; 466 Hondurans; 378 Panamanians; 337 Salvadorans estimated by the U.S. Census, 2000.

Guatemalans, Costa Ricans, Nicaraguans, Hondurans, Panamanians, and Salvadorans respectively make up the city's 7th, 8th, 9th, 11th, 14th, and 15th largest Latino populations.

**Where they are living:** People from Central American countries are living throughout the city and suburbs. In Philadelphia, many are living among existing Latino communities in North and South Philadelphia. For example, a number of recently arrived Salvadorans and Hondurans are settling among the Puerto Rican and Mexican community in the Spring Garden area. Olney, Feltonville, Logan, Spring Garden, the Northeast, and West and Southwest Philadelphia are also home to many. Some members of these communities may be difficult to identify because they are often assumed to be Mexicans by outside observers.

**Philadelphia History:** Central Americans were reported among Philadelphia's "Spanish American" colony in 1910. Small numbers of Guatemalans and other Central Americans are known to have come to Philadelphia after the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965. The number of Central American immigrants in the area remained relatively small until political conflicts, civil war, oppressive governments, and U.S. interventions in the countries of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua in the late 1970s and 1980s created unbearable circumstances. Many fled their countries, and some settled in Philadelphia. Small numbers of

immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers from these countries have continued to settle in the area. Since the 1990s, numbers of Guatemalans, Salvadorans, Nicaraguans, Costa Ricans, Hondurans, and Panamanians have come to Philadelphia as part of the current wave of immigration, seeking temporary and permanent opportunities and reunifying with families in Philadelphia.

#### South Americans

**Populations:** 531 Argentinians; 471 Peruvians; 420 Ecuadorians; 409 Venezuelans; 182 Chileans; 55 Bolivians; 86 Uruguayans; 38 Paraguayans estimated by the U.S. Census 2000.

Argentinians, Peruvians, Ecuadorians, Venezuelans, Chileans, Bolivians, Uruguayans, and Paraguayans respectively make up the city's 6th, 10th, 12th, 13th, 16th, 17th, 18th, and 19th largest Latino populations.

**Where they are living:** People from South American countries are living throughout the city and suburbs. In Philadelphia, numbers of South Americans are living in Center City, West Philadelphia, and among established Latino communities in North and South Philadelphia. For example, small numbers of recent Ecuadorian, Argentinian, and Uruguayan arrivals have moved near other Spanish speaking communities in South Philadelphia and Olney. Southwest Philadelphia and the Northeast are also home for many.

**Philadelphia History:** South American revolutionaries, merchants, and scholars are known to have visited Philadelphia in the 18th and 19th centuries. South Americans were also reported among Philadelphia's "Spanish American" colony in 1910. Small numbers of Argentinians, Colombians, Peruvians, Chileans, Bolivians, Venezuelans, Paraguayans, and Uruguayans are known to have come to Philadelphia after the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965. Small numbers of mainly Colombians, Argentinians, Peruvians, Ecuadorians, and Venezuelans settled in the area in the 1970s and 1980s. Since the 1990s, globalization, economic restructuring and crises, and political instability in South American countries have contributed to the increasing number of South Americans seeking various opportunities and reunifying with families in Philadelphia.

*I don't know exactly how or why they use that terminology because coming from Latin American countries, you are either Venezolano, Mexicano, Argentino, Cubano, etc., etc. I don't like the expression as much.*" But this generalization can have a useful aspect, allowing room for diverse personal histories and experiences and enabling larger advocacy efforts. Others use these terms more loosely or strategically, acknowledging their multiple Latino heritages: *"I'm Venezuelan, but I'm half Dominican, and I love Puerto Rico. I'm Latina."* Others acknowledge the hybrid nature of Latino culture historically: *"Being Latino means that you recognize all the cultures that live in you."*

Thus, the Latino community continually redefines both its diversity and its unity. As Suárez-Orozco and Páez observe: "Latinos are a work in progress; they are a people in the process of becoming as they settle, in unprecedented numbers, in the United States."<sup>74</sup>

## History

### Early Trade

For over two centuries Philadelphia has been intimately connected to the Spanish-speaking world through trade, diplomacy, and immigration. The history of Latinos in Philadelphia stretches back to the 18th century, when the thriving colonial port began regular trade with Puerto Rico and Cuba. Although Britain and Spain discouraged trade between their colonies, some mainland ships smuggled goods officially destined for neighboring islands into Cuba. Cuba's growing population and the wartime influx of 12,000 Spanish troops fed demand for Pennsylvania foodstuffs during the Revolutionary War. In addition to flour, the most important commodity, ships transported pork products, wood, tallow candles

and soap, rice, fish, beef and dairy products, other grains, legumes, apples, beer, nails, shoes, and farm tools.<sup>5</sup>

During the Revolutionary War and early republican period, American trade to Cuba was controlled and exploited by a tight circle of Spanish imperial bureaucrats and merchants in Philadelphia who shared financial, religious, and family ties. Commerce was more difficult for Quaker merchants such as Jeremiah Boone, who were not fluent in Spanish and uncomfortable with the slave society of Cuba.<sup>6</sup> Boone regularly shipped flour and other provisions to most ports in the Caribbean for several decades after the American Revolution.

Before the 1780s ended, Britain lost control of its mainland colonies and Spain once again began to loosen its restrictions, and the expansion of sugar cultivation on the island led to increased importation of foodstuffs, especially flour.



Bill of Lading for schooner Philadelphia, bound from Philadelphia to Havana. Jeremiah Boone Papers.



"A View of the Harbour & City of the Havana, taken from the Hill near the Road Between La Regla & Guanavacoa," in Scenographia Americana: or, A Collection of Views in North America and the West Indies (London, 1768).



A New Chart of the Seas Surrounding the Island of Cuba, with the Surrounding Currents, Ships Courses & c.(1762).

Throughout the 1790s, American connections to Cuba increased exponentially. By the end of the 1810s, Spain formally opened Cuba to free trade and well into the 1820s Havana often ranked as the leading Caribbean destination for ships departing from Philadelphia. By the 1820s, a Spanish consulate was established in Philadelphia to manage the sugar trade.

*Nearly every Latin American leader who visited the country during this period came to Philadelphia at some point during his travels...*

### **The Revolutionary Era**

Political as well as economic concerns bound Philadelphia with the southern hemisphere in the 19th century. After the Haitian revolution in 1804, many Caribbean and Latin American nations began the struggle for their independence. In 1811, Venezuela and Paraguay declared their independence, followed by Chile in 1818 and Mexico, Peru, and the Central American states in 1821. Philadelphia, the capital of a new nation (until 1800) and a historic center of republican activity,

seemed an obvious choice for Latin and Central American revolutionaries living in exile.

One early arrival was Manuel de Trujillo y Torres (1762-1822). A student of Enlightenment philosophy, Torres took part in a conspiracy to overthrow Spanish colonial rule of New Granada (now Colombia) in 1794. Forced to flee the country, he left behind his family and sought asylum in the United States. He arrived in Philadelphia in 1796 and remained until his death, maintaining close ties to other Latin American patriots throughout

their revolutionary period. Upon arriving in Philadelphia, these activists made contacts with many of the city's important political, economic, and literary leaders, such as William Duane and Stephen Girard. These friendships aided Torres in disseminating information regarding the situation in Latin America.<sup>7</sup>

Nearly every Latin American leader who visited the country during this period came to Philadelphia at some point during his travels, including General Francisco de Miranda of Venezuela and Simón Bolívar. In 1822, an expedition to join other Puerto Rican revolutionaries to invade Puerto Rico was outfitted in Philadelphia and in 1823 Father Félix Varela, a Cuban exile, settled in Philadelphia where he championed Cuban independence through *El Habanero*, Philadelphia's first Spanish-language newspaper.

### **Early Enclaves**

*There are people who have been here for generations. Our labor has impacted the community and city.*

– Nancy Rivera,  
Puerto Rican community member

While revolutionaries, merchants, and diplomats from the Spanish-speaking world passed through colonial and early national Philadelphia, the formation of resident Spanish-speaking

communities in the city dates to the latter half of the 19th century, as Philadelphia became important in the manufacture of tobacco products and Cuban and Puerto Rican cigar makers settled in the area. In 1877, a Spanish-speaking local of the Cigar Makers International Union was formed. By the time of a 1923 survey on the “Spanish Colony of Philadelphia,” a significant portion of the city’s Spanish-speaking population worked in the tobacco industry, especially in the Cuban- and Spanish-owned shops of Southwark. Five cigar-making firms in the city were owned and operated by Spanish-speakers.<sup>8</sup>

*Many cigar makers were involved in the “Cuba Libre” movement based in the United States during the 1890s...*

Another enclave of Spanish-speakers was concentrated in Northern Liberties, home to cigar-making factories as well as to the offices of the Cigar Makers International Union Local #165 (at 13th and Spring Garden Streets) and the Marshall Street Market, a center of community life. Between 1920 and 1960, the stretch of Marshall Street running north from Spring Garden to Girard Avenue was a hub of commercial activity, attracting many Spanish-speaking workers to the nearby cigar and garment factories. Today’s North 5th Street barrio is still connected geographically to this historic Marshall Street hub.



Mexican railroad braceros reading Pennsylvania Railroad safety books written in Spanish at their quarters at 3210 Market Street, 1944. Philadelphia Record Photograph Collection.

These labor immigrants remained invested and involved in the political struggles of their homelands. As early as 1865, Cubans and Puerto Ricans in Philadelphia jointly organized a local chapter of the Republican Society of Cubans and Puerto Ricans. Many cigar makers were involved in the “Cuba Libre” movement based in the United States during the 1890s and were prominent in the

movement’s primary political organization, the *Partido Revolucionario Cubano/Cuban Revolutionary Party (PRC)*. By 1892, six clubs of the PRC had been formed and listed cigar makers among their members.<sup>9</sup> Jose Martí briefly published out of Philadelphia in 1893.



La Milagrosa at its Spring Garden location. Cover image of La Medalla Milagrosa: Boletín Mensual Publicado por los Padres Misioneros de S. Vicente de S. Paul... (Feb. 1915).

Spaniards and Cubans were the largest Spanish-speaking groups in Philadelphia at this time, followed by Puerto Ricans and Mexicans. Smaller numbers were from South and Central America, especially from Colombia and Honduras. A survey on Philadelphia’s “Spanish-American colony” conducted for the Catholic Archdiocese

in 1910 reported that there were roughly 2,000 Spanish-speakers dispersed throughout the city.<sup>10</sup> 64 of these residents were Puerto Rican-born.<sup>11</sup> By 1920, approximately 5,000 Spanish-speakers resided in Philadelphia; the majority of them lived and worked in the immigrant working-class neighborhoods of Southwark, Spring Garden, and Northern Liberties, among other Italian and Eastern European immigrants. In Spring Garden, 85 percent of the Spanish-speaking residents arrived in the United States between 1914 and 1919; 65 percent arrived between 1917 and 1919.

Two institutions supported these communities: “La Fraternal” and “La Milagrosa.” La Fraternal, or the Spanish-American Fraternal Benevolent Association, was established in 1908 and located at 4th and Pine Streets. It became one of the most important mutual aid societies for Spanish-speaking Philadelphia and lasted into the 1960s. In 1909, the Mission of the Miraculous Medal was created in the school building of Old St. Mary’s Catholic Church (at 4th and Spruce Streets, just one block away from La Fraternal), providing religious services in Spanish for the first time in Philadelphia. Marriage and baptism records for those early years indicate that cigar makers were among the early parishioners of La Milagrosa. Soon, the space at St. Mary’s was too small for the many parishioners, and representatives of the Spanish-speaking community asked the Archdiocese for assistance in securing permanent quarters. In 1912, a chapel was acquired in Spring Garden.<sup>12</sup>

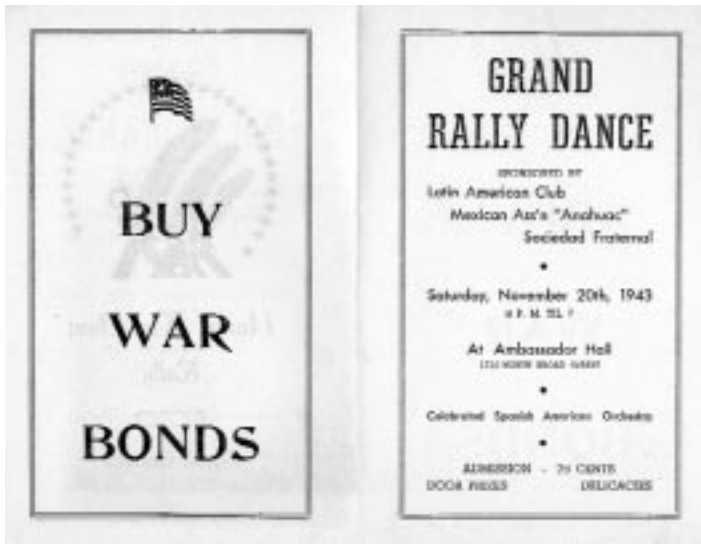
The presence of a Spanish-speaking parish drew more and more Latinos to the Spring Garden neighborhood. The 1920 census records a concentrated community and an expansion in the number of boardinghouses catering to Spanish-surnamed men, many of whom worked for cigar-making factories or in local industries such as the Baldwin Locomotive Works or the Pennsylvania Railroad. The

census data also show an increase in women working outside of the home and an increase in the establishment of lodgings for single women. Women worked as clerks and some ran the boardinghouses in the neighborhood. As the population grew, so did La Milagrosa, and by the end of the decade it had become both the religious and social center of the community. Weekly Spanish-language Mass is still held there today.

Despite the Depression, the Spanish-speaking population of Philadelphia continued to grow; industrialization in the Philadelphia cigar industry fueled the continued immigration of Cuban and Puerto Rican cigar makers. Mexicans and Puerto Ricans found work at the Baldwin Locomotive Works Company, the largest manufacturer of train



Directorio Comercial, February 15, 1953. This pan-Latino directory advertised businesses owned by a variety of Spanish speakers in the city. Temple University Libraries, Urban Archives.



"Buy War Bonds" dance flyer. Many Latinos joined the war effort during World War II. Courtesy of Temple University Libraries, Urban Archives.

engines in the United States at the time. Located in Spring Garden, the factory's Spanish-speaking employees most commonly worked as machinists. During World War II, the U.S. government contracted Mexican laborers to work on the railroads in Philadelphia; other Mexicans worked in agriculture in the surrounding area. A limited number of Puerto Ricans also came as contracted war workers, mostly to food processing plants in southern New Jersey.

This period also witnessed the formation of a Mexican club, Anahuac, and the inclusion of Latinos into the constituencies served by the International Institute (an immigration service center now known as the Nationalities Service Center). The three enclaves of Southwark, Spring

*Many of these early migrants came through contract work programs created during the "Operation Bootstrap" era, arriving to work as agricultural workers, factory workers, and domestics.*

Garden, and Northern Liberties continued to grow. By midcentury, Cubans and Puerto Ricans, rather than Spaniards, were the dominant groups among Spanish-speaking residents. Puerto Ricans overtook Cubans in population growth after 1945.

### **Post-WWII Migration**

Rapid industrialization and mechanization, shifts from traditional farming to large mono-crops like pineapple and sugar cane, and the hardships of the Great Depression created difficult economic and living conditions for many Puerto Ricans during the first half of the 20th century. Available work on the

mainland was a major draw for many Puerto Ricans in the years leading up to and following World War II, as were minimum wage laws, which meant higher wages than could be earned on the island. In 1946, the New Jersey Growers Association worked with the U.S. Employment Service to bring Puerto Rican workers to the area. The largest number arrived after 1950, and by 1952 the first direct flights between Philadelphia and San Juan began. Many of these early migrants came through contract work programs created during the "Operation Bootstrap" era, arriving to work as agricultural workers, factory workers, and domestics. Within 20 years, the Puerto Rican population in Philadelphia had grown to over 40,000.

These migrants found what historian Carmen Whalen has called "a plethora of limited opportunities"—employment in a secondary job market that offered low pay, poor working conditions, little security, and few avenues for advancement.<sup>13</sup> This job market consisted primarily of manufacturing jobs in upholstery, machinery and metal stamping, meat cutting and packing, and the cigarette, food products and garment industries, as well as service jobs in hotels and restaurants. During and after the war, for example, Latinos worked in Camden's Campbell Soup factory, at the Ritz Carlton Hotel, and at the Whitman's Candy factory.

Many Puerto Ricans settled in the Spring Garden neighborhood near La Milagrosa. Although the



Puerto Rican workers deplaning in Philadelphia, 1947. These workers were headed for jobs as domestics and in canning plants. Courtesy of Temple University Libraries, Urban Archives.

church provided vital support, the rest of the neighborhood was not always welcoming. Finding housing was difficult when many landlords would not rent to Latinos, as one migrant who arrived in 1947 recalled: “I remember when I went there to look for apartments, they throw the door in my face. They don’t want no colored people, you know, my skin is dark.”<sup>14</sup> Another resident recalls having to live for an extended period in a North Philadelphia Puerto Rican “safe” house until she could find a place that would rent to Puerto Ricans. Many Latino residents curtailed their movements between work, church, and home, avoiding being out on the streets to avoid encountering discrimination, resentment, or harassment. On July 17, 1953, the simmering tensions erupted into violence in the Spring Garden neighborhood at 16th and Mount Vernon Streets, when fighting broke out in a bar, moved into the streets, and resulted in the invasion of the homes of two Puerto Rican families.<sup>15</sup>

The 1953 incident heightened the attention of social workers and city politicians to the recent influx of Latinos, and the tensions associated with them. Concerned about the growing numbers of Spanish-speaking newcomers living in poor conditions, agencies such as the Philadelphia Human Relations Commission examined what became known as “the Puerto Rican Problem,” and tried to address issues in the community such as

the lack of Spanish-language services, inadequate recreational facilities, crime, delinquency, and “anti-social behavior.” This attention, while well-intentioned, all too often was inflicted by dominant cultural misconceptions about the community that attributed many of the community’s problems to its “Latin mentality.”<sup>16</sup> A 1954 City of Philadelphia human relations report on Puerto Ricans found that their neighbors had “little factual knowledge about Puerto Ricans.” It found that “Less than half of the neighbors knew that Puerto Ricans are citizens of the United States” and that “Almost one-quarter said that Puerto Ricans are neither white nor colored, but are members of a ‘special race.’” The report concluded “All neighbors seemed to indicate some prejudice against Puerto Ricans.” A subsequent 1959 report



Work agreement, 1951. Courtesy of Temple University Libraries, Urban Archives.

## POSTWAR MIGRANTS

Families who arrived in Philadelphia from Puerto Rico in the late 1940s and early 1950s met a “Latino Philadelphia” that was much different from the “Latino Philadelphia” of today. With limited resources, they began to create distinct communities, and many are still active in these communities today.

Tomasita Romero moved to Philadelphia in 1948 immediately after finishing school. Her father had died a year earlier, leaving behind Tomasita’s mother and five children, and Tomasita migrated so that she could help support her family. After her first year in Philadelphia, she married, started a family, and eventually settled in the Norris Square neighborhood. Señora Romero spent 22 years working in a garment factory, sewing by hand, but eventually became a bilingual teacher’s aid. She is now a leader in the Norris Square Neighborhood Project’s women’s organization, Grupo Motivos. A pillar of Norris Square, she works to improve conditions in this challenged community.

*Tomasita Romero cooking at a Grupo Motivos fundraiser. Photograph by Tony Rocco.*



*Tomasita Romero in the Las Parcelas garden. Photograph by Tony Rocco.*



*(Left) Parranda at the Negrón Family home, c. 1963. Negrón Family Papers, Balch Collection.*

*(Right) May procession at St. Edward’s parochial school, 1965. Negrón Family Papers, Balch Collection.*



*(Left) Catalina Román Negrón with her children and grandchildren, 1966. Negrón Family Papers, Balch Collection.*



*(Left) Negrón family at Christmas, 1970. Negrón Family Papers, Balch Collection.*



*(Right) Domingo Negrón at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, 1966. Negrón Family Papers, Balch Collection.*

Flor Negrón and his oldest sons, Flor and Natividad, came from Maunabo, Puerto Rico, to work in the United States in the early 1950s. They labored in factories and on farms between Maine and Chicago before finding stable work in The Bucks Hotel in Bucks County. In 1959, Catalina Román Negrón arrived in Philadelphia with the rest of their children. They first settled in South Philadelphia, but eventually moved to 5th and Lehigh, where the family became active in community development over the next decades.

## POSTWAR MIGRANTS

Luis and Naomi Alvarez and their children arrived in Philadelphia from Santurce, Puerto Rico, in January of 1951. The family had been business owners in Puerto Rico, and by 1953 they had managed to open a *bodega*, or corner grocery store, on South 8th Street near Lombard. The presence of the Bodega Alvarez El Tropical reflected the substantial number of Puerto Ricans who lived in that neighborhood at the time. The Alvarez *bodega* remained in operation until 1984.



Luis Antonio Alvarez and his Aunt Melly, Bodega Alvarez El Tropical, 1959. Courtesy of the Alvarez Family.



Luis Alvarez with his nephew Eric, Bodega Alvarez El Tropical, 1959. Courtesy of the Alvarez Family.

community's "adjustment" and "assimilation." The Friends Neighborhood Guild hosted the Spanish American Circle, a social club, and the first Spanish-speaking Boy Scout troop in Pennsylvania. Casa del Carmen was founded in 1954 by the Archdiocese under the initiative of an Argentinean-born doctor who saw the great need for Spanish-speaking health care. Located in the Spring Garden area at 7th and Jefferson Streets, it strove to meet the needs of the Puerto Rican community, and offered health services, job referrals, recreation, and education. Churches such as the Spanish Baptist Church and La Milagrosa also played an important role in the lives of recent arrivals, offering clothing and food assistance.

### Community Development

Meanwhile, the community began forming its own organizations in order to address its problems as it defined them. At first, these organizations were often part of the larger pan-Latino Spanish-speaking community and consisted primarily of fraternal associations and social clubs offering mutual assistance. Some of these early groups included: Comité de Mujeres Puertorriqueñas de Filadelfia (2056 North Franklin Street), Unión Cívica Puertorriqueña (540 West Oxford Street),

Logia Hispana Fidelidad, (7th and Pine Streets), Club Caribe (1229 North

republished these findings and added to misconceptions and generalizations with language such as: "Like all other people of Latin America, Puerto Ricans are noisy and express themselves freely, in an unrestricted manner when they are in the presence of other Puerto Ricans or Spanish-speaking people."<sup>17</sup>

At first, problems were addressed by agencies outside the community. Organizations like the Friends Neighborhood Guild, the International Institute (now the Nationalities Service Center), Hahnemann Hospital, and the YWCA aimed to promote the



The first Concilio newsletter, 1966. Concilio Papers. Balch Collection.



Banners along 5th Street, 1979. These banners were created as part of a Spanish Merchants Association project to improve the Latino business district. Spanish Merchants Association Papers. Balch Collection.



(Below) Poor People's Campaign March flyer, 1968. Courtesy of Temple University Libraries, Urban Archives.



(Left) Castor Ayala tribute memorial, 1980. This mural was one of the first in the city to celebrate Puerto Rican cultural heritage. Spanish Merchants Association Papers. Balch Collection.

Rican cultural heritage. Spanish Merchants Association Papers. Balch Collection.

6th Street), and the American Legion Spanish American Post #840, formed by Puerto Rican veterans.

The first organization founded specifically to address the issues faced by the growing Latino community was the Council of Spanish Speaking Organizations (Concilio), founded on October 1, 1962, by a group of Latino leaders. A confederation of various fraternal and social organizations, Concilio was formed to serve as a liaison between the Spanish-speaking community and the rest of the city, to strengthen local Latino organizations, and to create programs and activities to benefit the community. Early concerns included housing, bilingual education, discrimination, violence, and inadequate city services, such as trash collection. Concilio established a committee to investigate complaints by residents of a lack of housing, advocated for Latino representation in city and agencies, and challenged the school administration to provide bilingual education programs. Concilio was also concerned with public relations and



Opening of Pupo's Thriftway, 1977. Pupo's was the first Latino-owned supermarket in the city. Spanish Merchants Association Papers. Balch Collection.

sought to present a positive and unified image of Latinos to the larger Philadelphia community. To this end, they began what has now become the annual Puerto Rican Day

Parade in 1963. The Puerto Rican Day Parade grew into Puerto Rican Week, which features not only the parade, but also cultural programs, a beauty pageant, a mini-Olympics, a multi-service conference, and a banquet.<sup>18</sup>

By 1968, the organization was funded by the Philadelphia Anti-Poverty Action Commission to expand its community development program, becoming the first Latino-led service agency in the city. Efforts to improve police/community relations,



Golden Block Mall groundbreaking ceremony, 2921 N. 5th Street, April 18, 1977. Spanish Merchants Association Papers, Balch Collections.

“displaced labor migrants,” according to Carmen Whalen.<sup>19</sup>

The strategies generated by the community in response to these conditions led to a florescence of Latino organizations, and many of the community’s contemporary institutions had their genesis during this era. Community economic development was promoted by the Spanish Merchants Association, founded in 1969 by Candelario Lamboy, the owner of a furniture store. The SMA provided technical assistance in areas such as banking, taxes, accounting, inventory controls, and financing to small Latino businesses. Other organizations also blossomed during this time. Asociación De Puertorriqueños En Marcha was formed in 1970 to provide social services. 1972 saw the birth of the Norris Square Senior Center. Taller Puertorriqueño, a gallery and arts workshop, began in 1974, and Congreso de Latino Unidos, a health service and social service provider, was founded in 1977. These organizations represented a shift from the ethnic fraternal model of a previous generation, and emphasized community empowerment.

drug and alcohol programs, English as a Second Language classes, employment and housing aid, and other social services followed over the years. Today, Concilio continues to work with city and community groups.

### Rise of the Barrio

At the same time the Latino community began mobilizing, its circumstances were in flux, reshaped by larger structural changes in the city. From 1968 until 1985, “urban renewal” efforts Spring Garden negatively impacted Latino residents. Displaced by gentrification, Latinos moved east and north, and small existing enclaves on 7th and 2nd Streets expanded and coalesced around the 5th Street corridor. Again, Latinos encountered resistance and sometimes violence from predominately white residents.

A younger generation of Philadelphia Latinos became involved in these efforts. They opened a Philadelphia branch of the Young Lords (a national organization with chapters in New York City and Chicago) in 1970, promoting a new, more radical approach to Latino community activism. The Young Lords adopted a grassroots community-based service approach, which fostered ethnic pride and also advocated the independence of Puerto Rico.

Factory work had been abundant in this area, but by the time African Americans and Latinos began moving into this neighborhood in large numbers, industry was on the decline. By the 1970s, abandoned factories dotted the landscape and the manufacturing jobs they had provided were gone for good. The erosion of the neighborhood’s economic base engendered blight, exacerbated by the movement of long-time residents and business owners into the suburbs and the Northeast. At the same time, the discriminatory “redlining” practices of lenders prevented Latino residents from relocating to better areas, and made them



Community mural at 17th and Mt. Vernon Streets. Photograph by Joseph Gonzales. This mural protests the gentrification of the Spring Garden/Art Museum neighborhood and declares that Latinos are “here to stay.”



Puerto Rican Day Parade, 1970s. José and Ramonita Rivera Papers, Balch Collection.

Although short lived, the Young Lords nurtured the development of a second-generation political leadership in the Latino community. Several members went on to found the Puerto Rican Alliance in 1979.<sup>21</sup>

Active from 1979-1983, the Alliance addressed a broad range of issues facing the community. It protested police brutality and discrimination, fought for housing reforms, supported labor strikes, and organized for bilingual education. During its period of

The young activists organized clothing drives, worked as interpreters at health clinics, offered free breakfast programs at the Lighthouse and St. Edward's parochial school, and pursued anti-drug activities. They drew attention to police brutality and critiqued "the system" while retaining close ties to their families, culture, and the Catholic Church. Their radical ideology, with its collective approach to leadership, changed Puerto Rican politics in the city, breaking ranks with established agencies like Concilio, which supported the Democratic Party (and thus Mayor Frank Rizzo) and sought to work within the city system. Puerto Rican social worker Nereida Rodriguez described the Young Lords as "part of a community, maybe the most genuine part of that community,"

*knowing its holes, cold winters, rat infested grounds, practically living in the streets, the only recreation hall available to them...Their method in dealing with social problems is a down to earth approach. They, as Puerto Rican residents, brought up through a long painful process of social, economic and cultural denial, can read and sense through neighbors all kinds of feelings and understand why neighbors feel that way or behave that way, without going through the complex process of the professional social worker. They also can address that neighbor in their own language and in their own terms, but no hostility or rejection is perceived through the leveled interchange and the message can get through.*<sup>20</sup>

activity and in the years after, many members of the Alliance assumed leadership positions both within the Latino community and in the wider world of politics. The work of the Alliance was instrumental in electing several Latinos to public office: in 1981, Juan Ramos ran for the Pennsylvania state legislature with Alliance support, and in 1984 and 1985, respectively, Angel Ortiz was elected to City Council and Ralph Acosta to the state House of Representatives. Also during this time, Nelson Diaz, an advocate for bilingual services and voting rights, became the first Latino in Philadelphia to be elected a common pleas court judge.<sup>22</sup> Latino visibility continued to be enhanced during the 1980s and 1990s by the development and expansion of the local Spanish-language press and other media.

Though the Latino community made significant gains during this time, enduring and emerging challenges remained. Racially motivated violence continued to target Latinos moving into predominately white neighborhoods, as with one Feltonville family whose home was firebombed by whites in the late 1970s.<sup>23</sup> Drugs and related gang activity was an acute problem during the 1980s, as was escalating urban blight. Certain North Philadelphia neighborhoods where Latinos lived were increasingly viewed with a negative eye by the public, and referred to as "The Badlands." HIV/AIDS treatment and prevention also emerged as a new issue for Latinos during this time.

*Currently, two in five or 40% (15 million) of U.S. Latinos are foreign born, and Mexico, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and El Salvador are currently the leading countries for foreign birth in the United States. Most of these immigrants have arrived in the last two decades.*

A community focus on providing services, however, was increasingly joined by a focus on economic development. HACE (Hispanic Association of Contractors and Enterprises) was started in 1982 to respond to the need for economic empowerment in the Latino community. HACE was organized, in part, to save a crucial neighborhood mall in the heart of the North 5th Street business community known as the Golden Block or *el bloque de oro*. It has since undertaken a variety of commercial and residential real estate development projects. The creation of the American Street Empowerment Zone in the 1990s has also fueled a focus on business.

### **New Immigration/Latino Diversity**

At the same time that the predominately Puerto Rican community was facing these challenges and building community infrastructure, the population of Latinos in the area began to grow and diversify, mirroring national trends. Currently, two in five or 40% (15 million) of U.S. Latinos are foreign born, and Mexico, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and El Salvador are currently the leading countries for foreign birth in the United States. Most of these immigrants have arrived in the last two decades.<sup>24</sup> While historically the Puerto Rican population has been the largest Latino group in Philadelphia, smaller populations have begun to grow exponentially since the 1980s. Mexicans, Dominicans, Colombians, Ecuadorians, Salvadorans, and Hondurans make up the area's fastest growing groups.

The arrival of Cuban refugees after the Cuban Revolution of 1959 began this diversification. Though Cubans had lived in the Philadelphia area since the late 19th century, the community grew quickly as Philadelphia became home to families who had been forced to flee, some of whom arrived through the "Freedom Flights," a national resettlement program.

With the Immigration Act of 1965, which eliminated strict quotas and effectively opened up immigration from Asia, Africa, and Latin America, the diversity of the Latino population in Philadelphia increased dramatically. Some of these immigrants came as contracted domestic workers or as professionals on special H1-B visas. Many of these were immigrants from South America. Women like Ricardina Iwanyshyn from Peru and Ramona Aida Capdavila Stetson from Argentina entered the country under these new provisions and began work as nannies and domestics for area families. Many stayed and created their own families, attained education and training, and moved into jobs in factories, offices, and schools.

Prior to 1975, the number of Central American immigrants in the United States was very low. But during the 1980s and 1990s, thousands from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua fled persecution, violence, and oppressive regimes. Many settled in cities such as Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, New Orleans, and Washington D.C.; Philadelphia has received a modest number of these immigrants. Nicaraguans were able to seek refugee and political asylee status, but due to the U.S. State Department's support of the regimes in El Salvador and Guatemala, Salvadorans and Guatemalans were not. As a result, many came to live in the United States undocumented; some eventually received legal status through amnesties granted to illegal immigrants, such as the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986. The current flow of Guatemalans, Salvadorans, Hondurans, Costa Ricans and Nicaraguans is comprised of asylum seekers, people desiring family reunification, and many others searching for economic, educational, and professional opportunities outside of their countries' stalled economies. Like other groups, Central Americans

send back important remittances that help sustain their families and communities. For instance, in 1997, El Salvador received \$1.3 billion in remittances from Salvadorans in the United States.<sup>25</sup> Laborers, service workers, activists, artists, students, business owners, and professionals make up the city's Central American population.

Two groups that have reached a critical mass in the last 15 years are Dominicans and, more recently, Mexicans. The Dominican population now numbers over 5,000. After 1990, the Dominican community experienced rapid growth as many moved to Philadelphia from New York seeking work, affordable housing, and safer neighborhoods. Dominicans created an enclave during the 1990s and many opened bodegas, travel agencies, money houses, and other businesses in North Philadelphia, as well as in other parts of the city. One community member stated that the existence of affordable flights between Philadelphia and Santo Domingo is also a factor in the settlement and growth of the area's Dominican community. This community continues to grow as relatives from the Dominican Republic move to reunite with family members in Philadelphia and others come seeking economic opportunities and higher education.

Mexicans are now the second largest Latino group in Philadelphia, numbering almost 12,000. Although the most visible Mexican communities in the region can be found in outlying areas such as South Jersey and Kennett Square, the city is home to increasing numbers of Mexicans, many of whom live in South Philadelphia. The bulk of the community arrived in the mid- to late 1990s, opening small businesses or working in agricultural labor just outside of the city. Some of these new residents immigrated directly from Mexico, while others migrated from New York, New

Jersey, and other states. Out-of-state migrants come seeking work and business opportunities, as well as relief from the stresses of life in New York City or difficult work conditions. They often bring with them business know-how and capital, and see Philadelphia as a "pretty" or "nice" place. Undoubtedly, Philadelphia's growing economy, available housing, affordable cost of living, and rapidly increasing Mexican community are providing opportunities not just for Mexicans, but also for newer groups of Dominicans, Colombians, and Central Americans.

### Immigration Experience

*Late night at the kitchen table  
tomando café con leche  
charting out strategies of survival  
a job, a bed and food the first concerns  
and then on to bigger dreams.*

– from "The Trip Home"  
by Catalina Ríos<sup>26</sup>

### Reasons for Coming to the United States

The reasons Latin Americans come to the United States are as varied as their countries of origin. Some come for education, better economic opportunities, or improved health care. Others wish

to join family members or escape oppressive political regimes. All bring aspirations for a better life here, mixed with a profound sense of connection to their original home.

People leave for economic opportunities or personal growth. For Panamanian singer and music teacher Giovana Guevara, the move was instigated by a dream. She recalls:



Giovana Guevara performing. Photograph by Tony Rocco.

*I was about to graduate...and I had a dream. My dream was telling me to come here, and I felt it. I felt that that was the next step for me, and I just had to follow that gut, you know. I can't really explain, but also one of the reasons, of course, was to pursue a music career, which is a lot harder in Latin countries.*



*Mexican construction worker. Photograph by Tony Rocco.*

*Well, because we lived so close to the beach, and the hurricane seasons were getting closer – every year, it was different – my father and my mother decided, because they had a family to rear still and small children. And so we just decided the United States is a better place to live – education-wise, work, and, like, you could do just about anything in America. It's just a wonderful thought – to be able to do whatever you need to do in America. And if you have dreams, this is the place to come to make them come true.*



*Rosa Goldstein. Photograph by Joseph Gonzales.*

Jorge López, a professionally trained folk dancer and teacher from Uruguay, lives in Philadelphia with his immediate family and father-in-law, seeking a better life for his children. He states simply that he has come to the United States for economic opportunities – to find decent paying work and to live with dignity. In Uruguay, his wages were too low to sustain his household and he talks of the government and businesses not being able to pay employees for months, while bill collectors harassed people regularly. “There were so many recessions,” he says.

In 1999, she literally followed this dream to come to the United States and pursue her aspirations. She now teaches music to children, works with at-risk youth, performs professionally, and has recorded on several albums.

Olga Vega, a self-employed Puerto Rican domestic worker, says her parents moved from Puerto Rico due to the precariousness of agricultural life, especially for a family with twelve children. In particular, her father's anxieties about hurricanes brought the family to Vineland, New Jersey. She captures these sentiments about the uncertainty of life on the island and the hope that coming to the United States can offer:

*How immigrants arrive here, how long they stay, and what opportunities are open to them are structured in part by their immigration status.*

Other immigrants leave for political reasons, to flee persecution and intimidation, or to escape violence. For Rosa Goldstein and her family, leaving Cuba in 1964 was politically motivated. After her husband, an Air Force physician, was accused of opposing Castro, the couple decided to flee. She remembers: “We realized we’re going to say good-bye. You close the door to your home, you give the keys to the landlady, and say good-bye.” Though her family had hoped that the revolution would bring about a better Cuba, political intimidation, the nationalization of industry, the confiscation of private businesses, and the closing of churches and synagogues left them no option except immigration. Her brother was the first to move to Philadelphia, where he had existing ties; other family members followed. Señora Goldstein summarizes her complicated feelings and political

perspective when she says her family left because of a “change of political views, lack of freedom of expression, and we felt like we cannot really develop ourselves, only for the country. She’s [Cuba’s] oppressed, and still oppressed.”

How immigrants arrive here, how long they stay, and what opportunities are open to them are structured in part by their immigration status. The Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services (formerly the INS), or *La Migración*, have the power to define the status of immigrants, and thus their identity and levels of access. Documentation opens doors: to employment, mobility, basic services, education, even marriage. All immigrants face the challenge of getting, maintaining, or living without status. They must negotiate a complex system in another language while keeping up with changes in immigration law, risking possible removal at any turn. These circumstances effect documented professionals working or studying with temporary visas as well as undocumented day laborers. Some have better resources to deal with these uncertainties, and possibly to prolong their stay. All, however, possess a sense of anxiety about their immigration status.

### Crossing

*I came with a little fear, because when I came from over there, I came very young, really, but I made myself brave, and now I’m here. And, well, I suffered a lot to come over here.*

– Arturo, on making the journey from Honduras, through El Salvador, Guatemala, and Mexico, to the United States



A Honduran immigrant in Chinatown.  
Photograph by Joseph Gonzales.

For the undocumented, the journey to the United States can be fraught with difficulties and even physical danger. “Arturo”<sup>27</sup> left his rural home along the Honduran-Salvadoran border to join his father who was working in a Chinatown fish market. He was motivated to leave for economic reasons: in his region in Honduras, one can expect to make five dollars a day, if one can find work. Even in rural Honduras, five dollars is a meager wage and offers little security. So Arturo, his father, cousins, and friends came to Philadelphia seeking the steady employment that allows them to pay their bills and send remittances home.

In 2001, at the age of 18, Arturo came to the United States, using channels he had learned about through friends and family who had made the journey before him. After traveling through Guatemala to Mexico, he contracted a *coyote* to smuggle him into the

United States and crossed in a group into Arizona. Although he trusted his *coyote* to be reputable, he was afraid of known dangers like thieves and *La Migración*. From Arizona, the *coyote* got him to Los Angeles, where he was able to get a flight to Philadelphia and join his father. The services of the *coyote* cost \$700. Arturo paid a deposit in Mexico and the remainder was paid by his father upon his safe arrival in Los Angeles.

Once here, Arturo’s most pressing concern was finding and securing work. His first job was in a fish market and his second was as a dishwasher in a Chinese restaurant. He now has a job in a Vietnamese restaurant, where he works 12 or more hours a day, six days a week. He buses tables, runs food and beverages, and takes care of other kitchen and dining room duties. He says work is hard, but that his employers generally treat him well. Though he would prefer a better paying job, his employment is steady and he gets paid in cash – handling checks is more complicated.

There are many difficulties and challenges for undocumented residents like Arturo. He cannot easily travel home for holidays or family events, due to the cost, the dangers, and the illegality of the



Arturo and friends playing soccer. Photograph by Tony Rocco.

journey between Honduras and the United States. Living in Philadelphia without documentation means that he cannot get a Social Security card, a driver's license, or open a bank account, and has trouble accessing health care.

However, life is not without joy for Arturo. He socializes with a group of Honduran and Salvadoran friends, many of whom come from the same area along the Honduran and Salvadoran border. For fun, they play soccer, go cruising in their cars, shop in Center City, visit the Washington Avenue area where Mexican food and Spanish-language stores are located, and take trips to Maryland to visit other family members. He also likes going "down the shore" and attending local Mexican dances.

### Staying Connected

*Sometimes the place where you live is not important – it's who you have around you. We can bring our homes with us.*

– Rica Iwanyshyn

Creative strategies of survival, success, and social connection help immigrants build and sustain lives and communities here. Managing documentation and paperwork, learning laws, confronting culture shock, combating isolation and loneliness, facing discrimination, and getting access to information are common issues experienced by documented and undocumented Latino immigrants.

Culture shock is a real phenomenon for new arrivals. Adjusting to life in Philadelphia means adopting new ways of living and thinking. Every immigrant reminisces about special things they miss about their homeland. For some, it is the climate and the natural beauty of their country:

*Everything is so, so healthy. It's healthy. And the other thing I miss is the pureness of the air. Because you breathe the ocean, you know. Especially from where I'm from, it was really close to the beach, the ocean, to Atlantic side, and that weather which I love. I am a warm-weather person.*

For almost all, food is one of the first things mentioned:

*I miss – first, I miss the food. I miss the food, like the freshness of everything...if I want a lemonade, it's fresh from limes, you know? It's right there.*

*So we listen to a lot of Spanish music, we still eat our rice and beans. We still stay in touch with those things, and we still eat Spanish food. People love our yellow rice and especially when I cook it – like for parties and birthdays. The first thing they ask is if I'm going to be having the yellow rice and the pig.*



ESL class given by Juntos, an agency recently formed to aid new Mexican immigrants and migrants. Photograph by Tony Rocco.



Playing dominos at the Cuban Community Center in Olney.  
Photograph by Tony Rocco.

Smells, sounds, music, and other sensations are also missed:

*I miss music so much because here you don't hear music from South America. You may hear [it] from Caribbean, or even Mexico, but you don't hear music from Chile, Argentina, or what that's really like.*

For others, the comfort of familiar cultural norms is missed and the challenges are even more intangible, as in the case of adjusting to new ideas about time. For example:

*...the huge, huge, huge one would be the clock, the fast living, right? I'm still struggling with that. I'm still struggling with when it's 1:58 - to be somewhere at 1:58? Or 2:05...here, it's a little of a struggle, and people - as far as getting things done and everything - they just want you to be in that pace, too. I think that's what I have to live with right now.*



*I'm not happy totally about it, but I have to accommodate to that. It's just my biggest problem.*

Language is a major issue for many Latinos and plays a critical, if complex, role in their transition here.

*The only change that I think was very traumatic was that they had to use bilingual people to try to communicate with us, and it felt strange for at least six to seven years. I - it felt very strange. You're in this country, you can't speak the language...it's scary...besides of learning how to speak English and how to express myself and how to use proper words for certain things and certain sentences, and it's very challenging, very difficult. I'm learning that one word can have many meanings, so we have to be careful.*

Many find learning a new language as an adult difficult:

*I moved to this country without the English, without friends, without knowing the community, and it was scary, deeply scary, and I felt so low in my own esteem. I took the*



Jairo, Daniel, and Marta Salazar in the family shop. Photograph by Tony Rocco. Jairo Salazar originally immigrated from Colombia to New York in 1976 to work as a sewing machine technician in the garment industry. His wife, Marta, and daughter, Ana, joined him a year later. Today, the family owns a sewing machine shop in the Logan section of the city.

(Left) The Salazar Family and relatives on Christmas Eve. Photograph by Tony Rocco.

*fact that I couldn't communicate with people as my defect, you know – lack of intelligence more than lack of knowledge or something. Starting for learning the language, getting familiar with the surroundings, and creating your support system – educating yourself sometimes to do the very same thing that you were doing in your place – it takes a lot of work...*

Many Latino immigrants miss the freedom of expression they enjoy in their native Spanish. As one woman commented: “I miss my language. The sense of freedom of speaking without thinking twice what you're going to say. Not translating, but straight speaking my language.”

*For many, retention of language is also retention of culture. This need to preserve culture and heritage becomes more acute across the generations...*

Even while new immigrants desire and struggle to learn English, keeping their Spanish language alive is also a priority. For many, retention of language is also retention of culture. This need to preserve culture and heritage becomes more acute across the generations:

*When my children were growing up, they didn't want no part of my Spanish. I used to speak in Spanish around the house, and they did not honor that, so I stopped because they told me, “Mom, we live in America. That means it's all English. We don't need Spanish.”...But now that they are older... they're kind of, like, getting into the – the need, that they need to speak Spanish now. So that makes me feel better. I thought that I – in the long run – I was going to lose my whole heritage. I thought I was just going to be an American, and... that being Spanish, that didn't matter anymore. That almost died. That*

*almost, almost died inside of me, and with my family. But, well, you know what? I was wrong. It's there, and now they want to learn Spanish. They want to learn how to speak and write. They understand it. They can understand where you're coming from, but they want to go forward and learn more, which makes me proud.*

### **Staying Connected to Home**

*On the sea's floor between my two homes  
lies a cord joining us  
it is made of love letters,  
photographs,  
telephone wires,  
money-orders, hope and  
white handkerchiefs.*

– from “The Trip Home” by  
Catalina Ríos<sup>28</sup>

Staying connected to home is an important concern for immigrants. In addition to staying in touch with their families, many immigrants remain involved in the concerns of their homeland, drawing upon their resources in the United States to help their native countries.

Casas de envíos, or “money houses” provide currency exchange services for Spanish-speaking customers, as well as other critical services specific to the needs of Latin American immigrants. New immigrants often buy long distance telephone cards at the *casa de envíos* and use them at pay phones to call home. Serving the documented and undocumented, they also provide money transfers, money orders, check cashing, telegrams, and notarizing, all in Spanish. They also help people negotiate transactions that native-born Americans take for granted, like securing utility services, or bill paying.

Sending money home impacts those in Philadelphia as well as those in the country of origin, as these remittances are much needed by family and friends back home. Arturo and his father send much of their salaries to Honduras in order to help support their family. They also occasionally send gifts such as stereos and clothing. Some immigrants use country-specific shipping companies to transport packages such as these.

*In addition to staying in touch with their families, many immigrants remain involved in the concerns of their homeland, drawing upon their resources in the United States to help their native countries.*

Others marshal local resources to support home countries during times of crisis or disaster, such as providing hurricane relief supplies.

Immigrants correspond with their loved ones through a variety of media and means. Telephone calls and e-mail have become common ways to stay in touch. Giovana Guevara, who has been here for three years now, calls and emails her large family regularly.

*We usually e-mail once or twice a week, and I try to call...I try not to let them to call me because it's more expensive for them. So I try my best to call them, you know, twice over – or at least once – a month. So we try to keep it really close as much as we can.*

Luisa Cabello Hansel, like Giovana, uses phone calls and e-mails to carry on a “long conversation” with her Chilean family. She sees their correspondence is an extended

conversation spanning great distances and intervals of time. She says:

*Well, my entire family – biological family – is in Chile. My parents, both of them, and I have three sisters married with children, and I have basically my entire family there. And I keep in contact with them. We call. Now we e-mail all the time. And in spite of we are so far physically, we are very close. We continue just a long conversation.*

Jorge Lopéz enjoys learning what his fellow performers are doing and tries to stay informed about the politics in Paraguay. He uses the Internet to stay in touch and keep track of what’s happening back home. He says:

*Yeah, you miss a lot, a lot of people...And because of the Internet, you are going to find out exactly how the situations are there, and then*

*you can open a page and then find out, one or two of the newspapers, the state of life over there. Find out the situation and then how the situation goes on a political level, on a people level, you know, so people are still doing things, still living.*

Life events like marriages, births, christenings, deaths, and holidays are important reasons for returning

home. Latinos who are legal residents or U.S. citizens can generally visit their homelands freely. Olga Vega travels regularly to Puerto Rico in order to visit relatives. These trips seem to feed her soul and sustain her aspirations to improve her job situation and retire to her native island. She says about visiting the island:



*Casa de envíos in Feltonville.  
Photograph by Joseph Gonzales.*



*Mexican couple calling home. Photograph by Joseph Gonzales..*

## RICARDINA "RICA" IWANYSHYN

In 1966, 17-year-old Ricardina "Rica" Iwanyshyn came on her own from Peru in order to find work and get an education. She came to Philadelphia with support from an aunt who was already living in the city. Working at first as a live-in housekeeper and nanny, she eventually married, attended college, and raised a family. She now works as an office manager at a University of Pennsylvania research center. Over the years, other members of her family have immigrated and she is now a member of one of Philadelphia's largest Peruvian families.

*I was born in Lima, Peru, but my family comes from Cuzco. That's where I stayed in my high school years, the best years of my life.*

Her original intention was to work, go to college, save money, and move back to Peru. When she arrived, her aunt got her a job immediately. It was hard because no one there spoke Spanish. Rica remembers being very lonely and homesick.



*Rica in Peru. Courtesy of Rica Iwanyshyn.*

*My aunt helped me. I came Saturday, she picked me up from the airport, and she already had a job for me to start on Monday.*

*The first year, I was working with just English-speaking people. When I met my aunt on the weekend, oh my God, I would talk. "Calm down, calm down," my aunt*

*would say. It looked like I hold it too much, and I have to get it out.*

Adjusting was hard. Culture shock, not knowing the language, not being around Spanish-speakers, and missing home made life difficult in the beginning.

*Rica arrives in the United States, 1966. Courtesy of Rica Iwanyshyn.*

She cried a lot in the early days, but drew great support from her aunt. Dedicated to her goals, Rica worked for several different families as a nanny and for a vending machine company making and wrapping sandwiches. She supported herself, took English classes, and sent

money home to her mother. Eager to meet other Spanish-speakers, she connected with fellow Latin Americans through activities at the Nationalities Services Center.

In 1969, through a Peruvian girlfriend, she met her husband-to-be, Steve Iwanyshyn,

himself a Ukrainian immigrant. They married soon after. Today, they live in Bensalem and have two grown children who take pride in both their Peruvian and Ukrainian heritage.



*Rica and Steve, 1969. Courtesy of Rica Iwanyshyn.*



*Rica in Philadelphia. Courtesy of Rica Iwanyshyn.*



*Rica and Steve visiting Peru, 1970s. Courtesy of Rica Iwanyshyn.*

## RICARDINA "RICA" IWANYSHYN

*Steve and I thought, "Oh, we can get married, plan with time, and my mother will be here." But my mother's visa extension was denied. I didn't know if my mother was ever going to come back again, so we arranged the wedding for June 14, 1969.*

Rica is proud of her rich Peruvian heritage. She is an active member and current Treasurer of Asociación Nacional Peruano-Americana, a recently formed Peruvian cultural organization. She wants the organization to promote Peruvian culture and help Peruvians network and obtain resources and services. She is "very proud to be Peruvian" and works at passing her culture along to her children. Although she loves her homeland, she also loves the United States for all it has allowed her to accomplish. On her life in America, Rica explains:



*I am a Peruvian. I feel I have adopted this country. I'm very proud to be part of these two cultures. I always tell my children you have to take the best of both and create your own little culture.*



*Rica's mother with her children, Wendy and Steve, 1980s. Courtesy of Rica Iwanyshyn.*

*Rica and her family at her godson's baptism, St. Thomas Aquinas Church, 2003. Photograph by Tony Rocco.*

*In the second year, I sort of started feeling, "I'm here. I might as well make a life here." I met my husband, got married. I went back to school, I had my children, and you don't have time for feeling sorry for yourself or be lonely. It's a long process. I don't think it happened in one year or one event, but now I feel that this is home.*

*Well, I travel every five years. I go visit my island. It makes me feel strong, and I wished that by now I would have my career, because I could really retire in Puerto Rico. I mean, someone with an education – you can live very nicely in Puerto Rico.*

However, undocumented Latin American immigrants must miss such events or return home knowing that they will have to risk another illegal journey back to the United States. Martina, a young Mexican woman who does assorted domestic work and child care, misses home. She lives with her older sister's family in South Philadelphia. Though she gets satisfaction in knowing that she is helping her family and pursuing her own ambitions, she yearns to be able visit her parents and sibling. The

Christmas holidays are particularly important for her and she is saddened not to be with her family in her native village for special celebrations. She and her sister's family work to create a sense of home in Philadelphia by making special meals, attending Spanish-language church services, and being around other Mexicans from Puebla. Arturo, whose mother and younger siblings remain in Honduras, also misses his family and his home. He particularly misses his 15-year-old brother, who is thinking about coming over to work. Arturo dreams of going back home and building a house, finding a wife, having a family, and buying a car and farm animals. If the money runs out, he will make the trip back to the United States and work until he once again can afford to return home.

## Struggle/La Lucha

*We have problems in the barrio with roots so deep, it is difficult to explain and to change. But we have to create opportunities.*

– Reverend Luisa Cabello Hansel,  
Centro Nueva Creación

*La lucha*, or “the struggle,” is a continual reality for many in the Latino community. Many challenges face the community from within as well as from without. All have complicated sources, some with long histories. Struggles may be shaped by circumstances inherited from a home left behind, or changing political, social, and economic conditions in Philadelphia.



Vigil in honor of teenager Veronica Rios.  
Photograph by Anabelle Rodríguez.

Lack of information can create hurdles and anxiety for newcomers. As one immigrant commented, “When you come here, you don’t know how things work. I had a lot of trouble understanding people.” Documentation, immigration, and citizenship status can greatly impact the lives of Latinos. Undocumented workers often meet abuse



Protest march for bilingual education, 1981. Courtesy of Temple University Libraries, Urban Archives.

*Language and education, in particular, are enduring concerns for a community that has struggled with bilingual issues for half a century.*

and exploitation in the workplace, laboring under hazardous conditions and working 12-hour days with no breaks. Access to good quality and culturally informed health care can be extremely difficult for undocumented and documented Latino immigrants, as well as for Latino citizens. As one health-care professional points out, “There is a great crisis in access to health care for Latinos and a even bigger one for mental health services.”

Alcohol and drug dependency are problems in many low-income Philadelphia neighborhoods, where beer distributors are easier to find than



RIP memorial mural. Courtesy of Norris Square Civic Association.

supermarkets. Limited educational and employment opportunities, peer pressure, and environmental stresses can make individuals susceptible to abuse and addiction, and make remedies for these problems harder to come by. For other community members, drugs are not only a community hazard but also negatively shape the community’s larger relationships. As one high school student notes, “People selling on the corners, like dealers, that’s giving us a bad reputation. People selling coke and crack and weed.”

Language and education, in particular, are enduring concerns for a community that has struggled with bilingual issues for half a century. Language barriers can create great anxiety, limit opportunities, and elicit prejudice, so language acquisition becomes a priority for new arrivals. One Chilean woman comments, *“Learning the language is a challenge, and that’s a big, big thing.”* Others frequently complain about harassment they receive about their accents and the way they say things. Even with demanding and erratic work schedules, many immigrants attend community-sponsored English as a Second Language classes. At the same time, pressures to assimilate can make it difficult to maintain culture and traditions: *“Challenges are when you try to raise your child into your traditions, and it’s difficult because you live in a society that doesn’t respect all your rules.”* For many Latinos, preserving their Spanish language is both a way of preserving their culture and expressing a bicultural ethnic reality. For this reason, bilingual Spanish/English education continues to be important both to new immigrants and long-time residents.

*In challenged neighborhoods, community organizations find ways to incorporate service into celebration, meeting basic needs at holidays and other cultural events.*



*Think Twice: An AIDS Story. Courtesy of Taller Puertorriqueño.*

Despite the educational achievements of many Latinos, the Latino population struggles with disproportionately high dropout and suspension rates on a national and local level. Poverty, inferior resources, lack of a culturally relevant curriculum, peer pressure, and pressures to help support the family are among the many complicated factors that contribute to this problem. Access to stable and good paying jobs is difficult for those with limited formal education or training; cultural isolation and a lack of exposure to the wider community also lead to limited opportunities for Latino youth. As one mother explains, *“I want my children to be able to experience how to deal with people, how to get jobs, go to college and fulfill those dreams that they have.”* To address

poverty, isolation, and discrimination, individuals and organizations in the community engage a variety of strategies to nurture youth and counteract negative influences. By creating activities that encourage pride, the Latino community strives to improve the future of its children.



*Senior citizen social event at Taller Puertorriqueño. Photograph by Tony Rocco.*

### **Community**

*Yes, we have dreams. Our dreams take a little longer, but we have them.*

*– Iris Brown, Grupo Motivos*

Latinos has developed strategies for coping and problem solving in the face of such challenges. Family remains an enduring source of support, and community members have created many



*2nd Street and Dauphin, 1993. This blighted site was reclaimed for the community garden, Las Parcelas. Courtesy of the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society.*

organizations that foster change. Many have 50-, 40-, 30-, and 20-year histories, while others are more recent efforts. Each strives to cultivate the Latino community, address pain, and offer hope.

In challenged neighborhoods, community organizations find ways to incorporate service into celebration, meeting basic needs at holidays and other cultural events. Sponsored events such as these help maintain traditions and make the day special for families who may not be able to afford extravagant celebrations during the holidays. Community organizations also provide social events and field trips, exposing new immigrants to services and sites around the city, mitigating their sense of isolation, and improving their quality of life.

Latinos work to reclaim the city's blighted spaces for productive community use. Vacant lots and abandoned factories have been transformed into

community gardens, schools, and affordable housing, changing the landscape of Philadelphia. An abandoned carpet mill at 7th and Lehigh is now Dorado Village, a low income housing project. The burned-out Quaker Lace Factory down the street was razed and replaced with a brand-new school, the Julia de Burgos Bilingual Elementary School. 2241 N. 2nd Street was an empty lot used for business by drug



*Las Parcelas community garden. Photograph by Tony Rocco.*



*(Above) Ribbon cutting at Julia de Burgos Bilingual Elementary School. Photograph by Tony Rocco.*



*(Far Left) Quaker Lace Factory burning, 1994. The factory was demolished to become Julia de Burgos Bilingual Elementary School. Photograph by Tony Rocco.*

*(Left) Julia de Burgos Bilingual Elementary School. Photograph by Tony Rocco.*

dealers and prostitutes. It was dangerous, particularly after dark, and littered with trash, including used syringes, vials, and condoms. The activism and hard work of Grupo Motivos of the Norris Square Neighborhood Project, in partnership with other organizations, have reclaimed and transformed this space into a beautiful community garden, Las Parcelas. Neighbors tend to their *parcelas* or “parcels,” where they grow herbs, flowers, vegetables and fruit. Neighboring seniors, adults, and children, as well as visitors, can now enjoy a safe and beautiful public space. A *casita*, or “little house,” is situated in one part of the garden. A recreation of the simple rural homes of the Puerto Rican countryside, where many Puerto Ricans have their roots, it brings to mind simpler times, independence, old values, family, and folk roots and traditions. The *casita* serves both as an icon of a romantic past and as a method of maintaining a rural Puerto Rican identity in the midst of a U.S. city.



Christmas Eve dinner at Centro Nueva Creación. Photograph by Tony Rocco.



Medal winners at Roberto Clemente Field Day. Photograph by Tony Rocco.



Traveling by trolley at a community organized parranda. Photograph by Tony Rocco.

Puerto Rican tradition that carries celebration around the neighborhood, as musicians travel from house to house, visiting friends and sharing food and drink. In Central America and Mexico, *posadas* reenact Mary and Joseph’s search for shelter in a house-to-house procession, and this tradition is carried on in immigrant communities here.

Latino Catholics commonly observe Good

Friday by reenacting Christ’s persecution and crucifixion. Rich pageantry like this affirms parishioners’ faith and brings religious communities together during the Easter season. Another

### Expressions of Celebration, Faith, Pride

Diverse cultural traditions play an important role in the lives of Philadelphia’s Latino communities. Some of these traditions have a long history, providing a sense of continuity and self amidst the dislocation of the immigration or migration experience. Others are more recent, emerging or taking on new meanings here. All help to cement the community and articulate ethnic identity in the context of a larger Philadelphia cultural scene.

Holidays are important times for reaffirming cultural practices and traditional identities. *Parrandas* and *posadas*, similar to Christmas caroling, are important Christmas traditions. The *parranda* is a

## LA CULTURA

*Stepping out of my rest  
Onto the streets of North Philly  
Where I  
You  
We resemble the beautiful images of our  
ancestors  
Taino, Africa, y España  
Hear the congas, bongo y tambor  
Con todo lo que es mio  
Is yours  
For my house  
Es tu casa  
From Africa to the Caribe  
From English  
To Spanglish  
We survived*

– from “La Cultura” by Lucas Rivera

religious tradition is that of the *alfombra*, an intricate sawdust carpet created by hand. Though traditionally Guatemalan, the *alfombra*



Three Kings Day gift giving program at Taller Puertorriqueño. Photograph by Tony Rocco.

has now become an important part of the Easter and Christmas celebrations for pan-Latino congregants at Incarnation Church, a Spanish-speaking parish in Olney.



New Creation Lutheran Church in North Philadelphia after a *posada*. Photograph by Tony Rocco.

As the patron saint of both Mexico and the Americas, the Virgin of

Guadalupe holds great importance for many Latinos. On the Feast of the Virgin of Guadalupe, or the *Día de la Virgen*, a special Mass is held in Spanish-speaking churches. Participants bring roses and images of the Virgin to lay at the base of her shrine, and children are often dressed as Juan Diego, the Mexican Indian to whom the Virgin appeared.

Feelings of national and cultural pride, which take on added importance in the immigrant/migrant context, are expressed in a variety of ways in Latino communities. Independence celebrations are among the many kinds of special events where Latinos honor their national and cultural heritages. Parades, beauty contests, cultural performances, and the display of national symbols are part of the range of expressions at these celebrations.

Some Latino community traditions have grown over the years into major cultural events. The annual Puerto Rican Day Parade began in 1963 and is now a week-long celebration that features many different cultural and social programs in addition to the parade. *Feria del Barrio*, begun by Taller Puertorriqueño in 1973, is now the largest



Child receiving gift for Three Kings Day. Photograph by Tony Rocco.

Latino festival in the area. It involves a number of organizations and draws Latinos of all origins into a celebration of their culture and heritage. Since 1986, Taller Puertorriqueño's

*Feria de Libros y Artesanías* has served the community as an extension of its bookstore's efforts to promote Latino literature and crafts.

From folkloric dance to hip-hop, from school auditoriums to the Kimmel Center, Latinos explore and expand upon their artistic traditions. The diversity and skill of professional companies, community-based organizations, and individual artists combine to create a vibrant Latino arts community in Philadelphia. Organizations in the community such as Casa Dominicana,



Good Friday Procession at Incarnation Church. Photograph by Jeremy Sparg.

Raíces Culturales and Asociación de Músicos Latino Americanos (AMLA) use workshops and performances to educate and involve both Latinos and non-Latinos in a greater appreciation of a variety of art forms. Professional companies such

as the flamenco troupe *Pasión y Arte* have gained citywide recognition at events such as the Philadelphia Fringe Festival and venues such as the *Painted Bride*. A thriving Latino visual arts and spoken word community has grown, supported by programs such as *Noches de Arte en El Barrio*, a monthly exhibition and performance event. And as more Latinos open restaurants and nightclubs in downtown Philadelphia, the landscape of Center City is shifting, creating cultural visibility and increasing awareness of the community.



*DJ Pedro Rivera spinning at Aces social club. Photograph by Tony Rocco.*



*Casa Dominicana dance rehearsal. Photograph by Tony Rocco.*



*Mexican Independence Day on Penn's Landing. Photograph by Sohnya Castorena.*

Boriquen identity, solidarity, heritage, folk traditions, aspirations, and cultural pride are regular themes. Murals have been instrumental in visualizing ethnicity and have imprinted Latin American aesthetics on Philadelphia in a unique and powerful way.

Latino culture has also left a physical imprint on the city and neighborhoods Latinos call home. Philadelphia has become the most muralled city in the United States and Latino artists and communities have contributed much to this success. Mural making began in the barrio in the late 1970s with a confluence of creative individuals, activists, and local business and community developers. Today, both formal and informal murals are a major visual element in the North Philadelphia Latino community, and have proved to be a unifying force in the community. Their large size enables them to depict complex ideas or stories and requires collaborative execution; their public nature communicates in an accessible way while beautifying the urban landscape. Latino and



*Feast of the Virgin of Guadalupe at Incarnation Church. Photograph by Tony Rocco.*

The Golden Block is one of several Latino centered business and shopping districts around Philadelphia. It is known as the center of the barrio and has been home to Puerto Rican/Latino businesses for over 30 years. Individual merchants, as well as organizations such as the Spanish Merchants Association and HACE, have striven to make this corridor a successful business district. Colombian, Dominican, Cuban, and Mexican-run businesses, among other nationalities, are also represented both in the Golden Block and in other Latino business zones. Latino businesses must compete

with other popular shopping areas like Center City, South Street, South Delaware Avenue, and the malls of the Northeast.

*Bodegas* and *tiendas*, or neighborhood corner stores, are familiar fixtures in many Latino neighborhoods. *Bodegas* and *tiendas* are not only markets but also manifestations of culture and identity, where native tastes blend with distinctly Philadelphia staples. At these stores, people congregate, share daily news and gossip, and have access to items that are popular in their homelands, as well as to



Day of the Dead altar by artist Marta Sanchez. Photograph by Tony Rocco.

\* \* \*

For decades, Latinos have worked for greater representation and presence in the city at large. Increasingly, they work in a variety of fields, leverage political influence in local government, gain visibility at citywide events, and impact mainstream cultural organizations. Multiple generations of Latinos and new Latin American arrivals will continue to make a home in Philadelphia, expanding upon and creating new relationships throughout the city.



C.U.N.A.D. bomba dancers at the Philadelphia Flower Show. Photograph by Tony Rocco.

American food and drinks. Puerto Rican and Dominican *bodegas* are islands away from home where patrons can pick up essentials such as beans, cheese, onions, ham, and plantains, as well as *merengue* cookies, sodas such as champagne cola and *malta*, *galletas* (crackers), and seasonings such as *culantro* (cilantro), *sofrito*, and *sazon*. Also available are goods like phone cards, bleach, soap, aspirin, cigars, and cigarettes. In Mexican *tiendas*, one can count on finding avocados, limes, chiles, *tortillas*, Mexican cheese, hot chocolate, vanilla, *fideo* (pasta), *norteño* music, and other Mexican specialty items. In many ways, *bodegas* and *tiendas* represent the blending of ideas, identities, and material culture that come together in Latino Philadelphia.



Students at the Guadalupe Torch Run, Northern Liberties. Photograph by Joseph Gonzales.

## Endnotes

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- <sup>2</sup>All italicized comments are taken from formal and informal interviews with Latinos from the Philadelphia area unless otherwise indicated.
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- <sup>5</sup>Linda Salvucci, "Merchants and Diplomats: Philadelphia's Early Trade with Cuba," *Pennsylvania Legacies* 3 (November 2003): 6-10.
- <sup>6</sup>Salvucci, "Merchants and Diplomats."
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- <sup>9</sup>Vázquez, "Tobacco, Trains, and Textiles," 13.
- <sup>10</sup>Antonio Casulleras C.M., First Annual Report of the Spanish-American Colony, Philadelphia Archdiocesan Historical Research Center
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- <sup>12</sup>Vázquez, "Tobacco, Trains, and Textiles," 13-14.
- <sup>13</sup>Carmen Whalen, *From Puerto Rico to Philadelphia: Puerto Rican Workers and Post War Economics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001).
- <sup>14</sup>Quoted in Whalen 2001.
- <sup>15</sup>*Bulletin* archive, Temple University Urban Archives.
- <sup>16</sup>Whalen 2001, 201.
- <sup>17</sup>Friends Neighborhood Guild Papers, Temple University Urban Archives.
- <sup>18</sup>Concilio Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania/Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies.
- <sup>19</sup>Whalen 2001, 218-27
- <sup>20</sup>Nationalities Service Center Papers, Temple University Urban Archives.
- <sup>21</sup>Carmen Whalen, "Bridging Homeland and Barrio Politics: The Young Lords in Philadelphia," in *The Puerto Rican Movement: Voices from the Diaspora*, ed. by Andres Torres, Jose Velazquez, and Emilio Pantjoas-Garcia (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 107-23.
- <sup>22</sup>Juan González, "The Turbulent Progress of Puerto Ricans in Philadelphia," <http://centrop.org/journal/jrnal02.htm>
- <sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*
- <sup>24</sup>Amongst foreign-born Latinos, 52.1% entered the United States between 1990 and 2002, another 25.6 % came in the 1980s, and the remainder of 22.3% entered before 1980. 73.3% of those who entered before 1970 had obtained citizenship by 2002, compared with 29.9% who entered in the 1980s and 7.3% of those entering between 1990 and 2002. Many of the statistics used in this section are taken from U.S. Census Bureau. These statistics are national and suggest larger trends and conditions. Be aware that conditions vary across the country, between cities, neighborhoods, and national origin groups.
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- <sup>26</sup>Frances Negrón-Muntaner, ed. *Shouting in a Whisper/Los Limites del Silencio: Latino Poetry in Philadelphia* (Santiago: Asterion Press and Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, 1994).
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