By Víctor Vázquez

The migration of Spanish-speakers to Philadelphia dates at least to the 19th century, a result of the commercial ties between the city and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean and Latin America. At the start of the 20th century, Spaniards and Cubans were the largest Hispanic groups in Philadelphia. Puerto Ricans and Mexicans followed, with smaller numbers from South and Central America, especially from Colombia and Honduras.

The years between World War I and World War II were pivotal ones for Philadelphia's Latino community, as immigrants settled into distinct Spanish-speaking enclaves. By the 1920s, immigration from southern and eastern Europe came to a standstill, first due to war restrictions and then to changes in immigration laws. This decline opened the way for more Spanish-speakers to migrate in the 1920s since the immigration restriction did not apply to Latin America. Spanish-speakers found jobs and housing in the centrally located working-class neighborhoods of Southwark, Spring Garden, and Northern Liberties. In these neighborhoods they mixed with older ethnic groups. In Southwark they lived and worked among Italian immigrants. In Spring Garden they mingled with the Irish. And in Northern Liberties, Spanish-speakers lived and worked alongside Polish and Eastern European Jewish immigrants. As skilled workers moved into other areas of the city, residential segregation increased. The majority of the approximately 5,000 Spanish-speakers that lived in Philadelphia in 1920 lived in the enclaves of Southwark, Spring Garden, and Northern Liberties.

As for other ethnic communities, such as the Poles, Italians, and African Americans, the growth of...
industries and the availability of particular employment possibilities influenced Spanish-speakers’ respective occupational and residential choices. In the 19th century, the growth of the sugar and tobacco trade between Philadelphia and the Caribbean encouraged arriving immigrants, hence its ethnic diversity. African Americans settled the western portion of Southwark, which was the basis for W. E. B. Du Bois’s study The Philadelphia Negro. In essence, Southwark was a densely populated area of Philadelphia characterized by its overwhelmingly tobacco industry, especially in the Cuban- and Spanish-owned shops in Southwark. The survey indicated that of the five cigar-making firms in the city owned and operated by Hispanics, two were located in Southwark.

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By the middle of the 19th century, Philadelphia had become important in the manufacture of tobacco products and prominent among these early migrants to Philadelphia were Cuban and Puerto Rican cigar makers. Many cigar makers were involved in the “Cuba Libre” movement based in the United States in the 1890s and were prominent in the movement’s primary political organization, the Partido Revolucionario Cubano/Cuban Revolutionary Party (PRC). The PRC’s weekly newspaper, Patria, published in New York City, attests to the role of cigar makers in the movement. In Philadelphia, the half-dozen PRC clubs in the city list many cigar makers among their members. A fair number of the cigar makers, members of the PRC, resided in Southwark.

Southwark was one of the oldest communities in Philadelphia. The area’s proximity to the ports on the Delaware River made it a natural haven for poor and working-class population. Bearing some resemblance to the Lower East Side in New York City, Southwark was full of many types of open-air markets. Southwark was also noted for the many cigar-making industries located in the area. The Bayuk Brothers Tobacco Company, the largest producer of cigars in Philadelphia in the early 20th century, was located in the heart of Southwark. According to a 1923 survey on the “Spanish Colony of Philadelphia,” a notable portion of the city’s Hispanic population worked in the cigar industry.

Vehicles lined up for parade to announce new lower price for Bayuk cigars, 1933. Philadelphia Record Photography Collection.

In Philadelphia, religious services in Spanish. Marriage and baptism records for those first years reflect that cigar makers were among the early parishioners of La Milagrosa. It was evident early on, however, that the allotted space was insufficient for the many parishioners who traveled from various parts of the city.
of the city to marry and baptize their children in the church. Representatives of the Spanish-speaking community asked the Philadelphia Archdiocese for assistance in securing permanent quarters for the mission. In 1912, permanent quarters were acquired in Spring Garden.

Over the next half century Spring Garden and the surrounding neighborhood became the most important enclave for Spanish-speakers, particularly for Puerto Ricans. This area lies northwest of Southwark and was also highly industrialized in the last quarter of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Many Spanish-speaking immigrants, especially Mexicans and later Puerto Ricans, came to the Philadelphia area as contract laborers for the steel industry, the railroads, and agriculture. In Spring Garden they found work at the Baldwin Locomotive Works Company, the centerpiece of the industrial area. Baldwin was the largest manufacturer of train engines in the United States at the time. Spanish-speaking residents of Spring Garden worked at the Baldwin Locomotive Works most commonly as machinists.

By the mid-1920s La Milagrosa had developed into a hub of activity for the community. By the end of the decade the chapel had become an important institutional center. The 1920 census records a concentrated community of Latinos in Spring Garden. There was an expansion in the number of boardinghouses catering to Spanish-surnamed men, many of whom worked for cigar-making factories in the immediate vicinity 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 boardinghouses in the neighborhood where many of the single men lived.

These developments reflected wartime changes. As men went to war or found work in industry, women moved into low-paying white-collar work as clerks and secretaries. The peak year of arrival of Spanish-speaking migrants suggests that labor shortages also influenced migration. Eighty-five percent of the Spanish-speaking residents of Spring Garden in 1920 had arrived in the U.S. between 1914 and 1919, with 65 percent having arrived between 1917 and 1919.

The third enclave of Spanish-speakers in Philadelphia was in Northern Liberties. This area lies just north of Southwark and also shares part of the Delaware River shore. In the early 20th century, the southeastern portion of this area was known as the “tenderloin” because it had so many meatpacking establishments. The northern and eastern sections of Northern Liberties were more industrial, with a concentration of textile factories. Together with Kensington and Port Richmond, Northern Liberties comprised one of the most industrialized sections of the city. The predominant immigrant groups in Northern Liberties were Poles and Eastern European Jews. For Spanish-speakers, the area cigar-making factories, the Cigar Makers International Union Local #165, with offices at 13th and Spring Garden Streets, and the Marshall Street market were the 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, which attracted many Spanish-speaking workers.

Peddler's carts on Marshall Street near Girard, 1940. Philadelphia Record Photograph Collection.

Peddler's carts on Marshall Street near Girard, 1940. Philadelphia Record Photograph Collection.
Between 1919 and 1927, Philadelphia’s manufacturing employment declined at twice the national rate. A survey by the Bureau of Labor Statistics on the eve of the stock market crash in 1929 found a 10 percent unemployment rate in the city. The Great Depression put further stress on the city and had a significant impact on immigration, though the impact on the migration of Spanish-speakers to Philadelphia was mixed. The number of Spaniards in the city decreased as some left and immigration laws prevented others from moving in. For Cubans, Puerto Ricans, and others, however, the marriages during the Depression fell to an all-time low.

Despite the dire conditions, however, the Spanish-speaking population of Philadelphia continued to grow during the Depression. As the cigar industry in Tampa, Florida, declined during the 1920s, Cuban and Puerto Rican cigar makers migrated to Philadelphia and New York. In spite of national declines in the industry, Philadelphia still offered employment opportunities to cigar makers until the early 1950s. Migration of Puerto Ricans from New York and directly from the island also increased in the middle of the 1930s. The Great Depression hit migrants would follow. These enclaves set the stage for the creation of a Puerto Rican community in Philadelphia. Explorations of the connections between these pioneer migrants and those Puerto Ricans who came during the post–World War II “Great Migration” have been largely ignored. There is still much research to be done with respect to the history of Spanish-speakers in Philadelphia, particularly the pioneer immigrants who paved the way for the mid-century diasporas. It was these pioneers who arrived in northern cities before the Second World War who were in large measure responsible for the establishment, in their initial form, of the housing patterns and support institutions that later migrants found upon their arrival. A review of government documents and archival collections produced during the late 1940s and early 1950s, as well as information extracted from oral history projects conducted in the 1970s and 1980s, suggests that the study of the early formation of Spanish-speaking enclaves in Philadelphia will produce an even more diverse picture of the city’s rich ethnic history.

By the time the United States entered World War II, the Spanish-speaking residents of Southwark, Spring Garden, and Northern Liberties had established labor and residential patterns that postwar migrants would follow.

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1914: Panama Canal opens
1917: Jones Act “awards” U.S. citizenship to Puerto Ricans
1915–1934: U.S. occupies Haiti
1933: FDR announces “Good Neighbor Policy”

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