

Immigration in Philadelphia, 1870-1930 (Extract)

By Barbara Klaczynska

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<http://philadelphiaencyclopedia.org/archive/immigration-1870-1930/>

During the national explosion of immigration that took place between 1870 and the 1920s, the Philadelphia region became more diverse and cosmopolitan as it was energized by immigrants who indelibly changed the character of the places where they settled. With its reputation as the “Workshop of the World,” Philadelphia attracted immigrants to jobs in industry, construction, and its vibrant port. Immigrants spread through the city and region, but they were more likely to organize in small clusters drawn to centers of employment, churches and synagogues, schools, shops, friends and families. The upsurge lasted until the United States government enacted unprecedented restrictions on immigration in 1924.

By the 1870s, Philadelphia’s diverse population included the descendants of earlier immigrants, including the English, Swedes, Germans, and Dutch. The city also had one of the largest African American populations of any northern city and overflowed with the first and second generation of Irish immigrants whose numbers had increased dramatically with the 1840s potato famine. Into this already-diverse region new waves of immigrants from eastern and southern Europe, China, Latin America, and the Caribbean arrived. Philadelphia neighborhoods changed in response to the increasing numbers of arriving immigrants as particular ethnic groups came to dominate areas that had once been mixed. Nevertheless, Philadelphia was marked by the scattering of ethnic groups throughout the city and the region; for example, the city had eight different Polish parishes in different neighborhoods. [...]

Immigrant communities placed their indelible marks on Philadelphia’s neighborhoods and the city as a whole. The immigrants established social clubs (such as the Venetian Club for Northern Italians in Chestnut Hill), fraternal organizations for men and women that provided insurance and social opportunities (such as the Union of Polish Women in America), and banks throughout the

city. They operated bakeries, groceries, restaurants, travel agencies, and shipping services originally designed to cater to their fellow immigrants but in some cases serving the entire communities where they were located. The Jesuit priest Father Felix Joseph Barbelin, S.J., established Saint Joseph's Hospital on Girard Avenue as a hospital to serve Irish immigrants while other ethnic groups established health services for their populations in the twentieth century. The Drueding family brought an order of German sisters to America to operate their North Philadelphia workers' infirmary, which developed into the Holy Redeemer Health System. [...]

Initially, many of the immigrants lived in the inner core of the city but by the early twentieth century many German, Irish, and other European immigrants moved along with native-born citizens to the suburbs. It is possible to trace the mass movements of ethnic groups to the near and, later, far suburbs of the city. For example, Germans and Jews from North Philadelphia moved to Elkins Park and Melrose Park north of the city; Italian, Polish, and Jewish residents of the river wards crossed the river into South Jersey; and Irish residents of West Philadelphia took a foothold in Delaware County suburbs. [...]

While many Italians came through an elaborate recruitment system of contract labor, immigrants generally were drawn to Philadelphia by their ties with friends and relatives already living in the region and work opportunities in manufacturing and construction. Stonemasons came from Friuli to help build the homes and estates of Chestnut Hill and established an ongoing presence in that area, where their descendants continued to live. Italians worked in the textile and clothing industry, building trades, and railroads. In the clothing industry Italian men and women worked in the shops, but the largest numbers of Italians were found in the contracted home work until the passage of the National Industrial Recovery Act in 1933 shut down this business. In the 1890s, Italians owned 110 contract clothing workshops out of a total of 600 citywide.

Italians often came as temporary workers with the intention of returning their wages and eventually themselves to Italy once money had been made. However, when they were not able to

save the money needed to make the return trip home or once home failed to establish themselves and their families they often chose to return to or remain in the United States. [...]

Philadelphia's Jewish population dated from the colonial era, but in the late nineteenth century Russian Jews became the largest foreign-born group in the city. Jewish immigrants from Russia, Poland, and other parts of Eastern Europe arrived at the Christian Street wharf and in many cases walked a few blocks to the homes of relatives and countrymen. The Jewish population of South Philadelphia grew from 55,000 in 1907 to 100,000 in 1920. Even though a Philadelphia Housing Association survey reported continuing decreases in South Philadelphia, it remained the most populous Jewish neighborhood in the city, numbering close to 50,000... North Philadelphia, with 50,000 Jewish residents in 1930, was the fifth-largest Jewish section in the city. [...]

Although the vast majority of immigrants came from Europe during this period, the Asian Exclusion Acts of 1882 resulted in violence and intimidation in the western United States that drove Chinese immigrants to eastern cities, including Philadelphia. The beginnings of the city's Chinatown date to this era, when laundries and later restaurants and stores clustered in the area of Ninth and Race Streets.

Newcomers also came from the Caribbean, although in fewer numbers than from Europe. In the 1890s immigrants from Cuba and Puerto Rico arrived on the same boats that carried sugar and tobacco grown in the islands, according to historian Victor Vasquez. These immigrants worked as cigar makers for firms including Bayuk Brothers, the largest manufacturer of cigars in the area. The Cubans who arrived in the 1890s brought with them experience and interest in the Cuba Libre movement that was working toward Cuban independence and set up political clubs to support the effort. Cigar making continued to offer employment opportunities in Philadelphia through the 1950s and drew additional newcomers as the industry declined in Florida, Cuba, and Puerto Rico.

Spanish speakers clustered in Northern Liberties, where they worked at the local small cigar factories and shopped at Marshall Street. The neighborhood resembled South Philadelphia

and New York's Lower East Side in its density, ethnic diversity, economy, and civil society. To serve Spanish-speakers, the Catholic Church established the Mission of the Miraculous Medal at Old Saint Mary's Church on Fourth Street as a place of worship and the home for weddings, baptisms, and holy communions. This and other community organizations would help receive the larger migration of Puerto Ricans and other Latino groups that followed after World War II.

Immigrants encountered increased hostility, prejudice, exploitation and violence in America in the early twentieth century. For example, Philadelphia newspapers once committed to praising the Italian immigrants increasingly criticized immigrants in the period leading to the restriction laws in 1924. Italians faced growing prejudice during the Prohibition years when they came to represent organized crime and various "families" came to control narcotics rings, prostitution, bootlegging, and numbers writing in South Philadelphia. The Ku Klux Klan in Philadelphia boasted the third-largest number of initiations in any American city in the interwar years (35,000) and targeted Italian immigrants because they were Catholic, foreign born, and former or current subjects of a totalitarian regime. While upper class Nativists such as Henry Cabot Lodge drew distinctions between Northern and Southern Italians, the Klan attacked all Italians without discernment.

The Immigration Restriction laws in 1924, which exempted migrants from the Western Hemisphere, created opportunities for increased migration from Cuba and Puerto Rico. Cubans and Puerto Ricans found jobs and housing in working-class neighborhoods of Southwark, Spring Garden, and Northern Liberties, mixing with other ethnic groups who had been in these communities for generations. Latin American and Caribbean migrants of the early and mid-twentieth century also settled temporarily in the region for seasonal agricultural work, often brought by labor recruiters. Some also left the city in the summer for Hammonton and other New Jersey farms to pick berries, tomatoes, and other crops.

Between 1870 and 1930, what had been a city and region of mainly Northern Europeans and African Americans became a far more diverse metropolis of residents from Eastern and Southern Europe, Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean. While anti-immigrant acts and sentiments persisted, immigrants and migrants including African Americans from the South and Puerto Ricans found ways to live and work together. Although statistically Philadelphia had a smaller percentage of immigrants than other cities, it is clear that the immigrant groups left an indelible imprint, which long continued to influence the region's people, places, and institutions.