Ellis Island Immigration Museum

Daniel J. Walkowitz

On May 1, 2012, the Organization of American Historians (OAH) report *Imperiled Promise: The State of History in the National Park Service* urged the National Park Service (NPS) "to recommit to history," bemoaning its inadequate treatment at park historical sites. Focusing on the Ellis Island National Museum of Immigration (part of the Statue of Liberty National Monument), this review essay considers how much has changed at one site in response to the report's call to action.

The Ellis Island immigration station opened in 1892. When it closed in 1954, the facility had processed nearly twelve million immigrants, the great majority of whom arrived during the peak immigration period between 1880 and 1924. In 1990, when the restored Main Building opened as a National Park Service immigration museum, it quickly became a major national and international tourist attraction. To access the island, visitors take a twenty-minute ferry ride from Battery Park in Lower Manhattan or a fifteen-minute ride from Liberty State Park in Jersey City, New Jersey. Entrance to the museum, as well as to both Ellis Island and Liberty Island, is free. Approximately 4.5 million people visited annually before the pandemic (and numbers are rising again), and although all get off at Liberty Island (the first stop), only about half go on to visit Ellis Island. Still, the nearly 2.2 million annual visitors to Ellis Island, about half of whom are foreign tourists, make it among the National Park Service's most widely attended history museums.

When I visited in the summer of 2021, COVID-19 restrictions had eased and tourists were returning to the island in large numbers; however, video kiosks were still not running, film programs in the two theaters were paused, and park ranger tours remained suspended. I had reviewed the museum nearly fifteen years earlier for an edited volume on how race and empire are implicated in public history sites, noting the absence of attention to how Black migration would frame the experience of immigrants to northern American cities.[1] Returning several times since then to participate in summer seminars on public health at Ellis Island's decayed hospital complex on the island's adjacent landfill, I was familiar with the museum's core

1 Daniel J. Walkowitz, "Ellis Island Redux: The Imperial Turn and the Race of Ethnicity," in *Contested Histories in Public Space: Memory, Race and Nation*, ed. Daniel J. Walkowitz and Lisa Maya Knauer (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009): 136–53.

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Front entrance, Ellis Island Immigration Museum. (National Park Service)

exhibit, Peak Immigration Years: 1880–1924. A return visit was an opportunity to see how the museum had changed ten years after *Imperiled Promise*.

As noted, park ranger tours were not offered, but I was able to book a ninety-minute Hard Hat Tour of the hospital ruins run by Save Ellis Island, Inc., a partner charity seeking to renovate the complex. I was also able to speak with three people responsible for historical interpretation at the site: Mark Amato, a park ranger and Chief of Interpretation; Diana Pardue, Chief of the Museum Service Division; and American University professor of history Alan M. Kraut, Chair of the Statue of Liberty–Ellis Island History Committee. Past president of the Immigration and Ethnic History Society, Kraut has been a member of the committee since its founding in 1985 and has chaired it since 2003. (The committee membership of about fourteen continues to be updated with pioneers in legal and immigration history and social science.) And finally, NPS and another partner organization, Scholastic Corporation, have developed robust interactive digital tours that I viewed online.

The immigration museum is the centerpiece of any Ellis Island visit. The building, which is thoroughly modernized and vast, covers three floors with extensive new exhibits that extend into its wings. Although massive and with an austere grand entrance hall, the site feels welcoming. The island's isolation off the mainland, however, makes it difficult for tourists—especially international visitors with full schedules—to commit to the two or three days needed to do it justice.

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Baggage room, Ellis Island Immigration Museum. (National Park Service)

Moreover, seating inside is limited, especially with the theaters closed and with social distancing, which allows the cafe to seat only about fifty at a time. Despite these limitations, the exhibitions, most notably two new ones installed within the last five years, are extraordinarily rich and nuanced.

The older core exhibit, "Peak Immigration Years," has a new one-room exhibit on the third floor called "Treasures from Home." The room is full of artifacts from families of immigrants, and Amato tells me it is very popular. Otherwise, I found the core exhibit little changed from how I remembered it. Located in the center of the building, the exhibit extends up two floors from the baggage room entrance on the first floor, to the vast Registry Room on the second floor, and finally to the dormitory rooms and smaller exhibit spaces on the third floor. In the historical sections, large handsome photographs and period artifacts adorn what is a rather dense history of the different immigrant groups, the inspection process, and something of the world they would enter leaving the island. I still saw no mention of the Great Migration that would frame the conflicted housing, labor markets, and social life immigrants would enter, nor did I feel that there was a sustained explanation of radicals imprisoned and detained on the island. When I raised these issues with Kraut and Pardue, both concurred and thought a revised exhibit (currently in the works) should and would address both issues. Kraut added that the treatment of LGBTQ+ immigrants was another glaring gap in need of attention.

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The core exhibition would benefit from the facelift that Kraut said was in the works, but two new exhibitions, "Journeys: The Peopling of America, 1550–1890" and "Journeys: New Eras of Immigration, 1945–Present," were transformative. Once a museum limited to the years in which the immigration service operated on the island, the museum now provides a history of immigration with a broad geographic and temporal scope. The new exhibitions expand the interpretative brief to the entire country and all of its ports. The history of immigration now moves back to sixteenth-century explorers and seventeenth-century settlers, colonialists, slaves, and indentured servants and then extends forward to twenty-first century struggles of Border Control and Homeland Security with "illegal immigration." Handsomely illustrated with graphics, images, and salient text, the interpretation insightfully includes the diverse push-and-pull factors driving immigrants (poverty, war, persecution, state repression, opportunity, etc.) as well as the changing transportation infrastructure and environmental pressures, such as drought and resultant famine that facilitated and stimulated immigration. The expanded scope was further enriched by some significant interpretative moves. For example, the pre-Ellis Island history also included the forced migration of the Cherokee people. The inclusion of this story was, I thought, a wonderful expansion of the immigrant narrative that could serve as a model for integration of other groups whose displacement and relocation in immigrant neighborhoods has been excluded as the experience of "migrants": postwar Puerto Ricans, the Black migration, and the migration of "Okies" in the 1930s to farmlands populated by braceros, migrant Mexican farm laborers. However, Kraut pointed out that the Cherokee story was included for quite a different reason: they were an independent nation, not a migrant group. Still, the example allows for a further expansion of the immigration story.

Nuanced discussions of thorny, contested political hot button moments in the immigration history of the last half century further distinguish the new exhibits. One example illustrates how class and politics shaped immigration. The hostile reception of poor Haitian immigrants fleeing a harsh dictator in the 1970s is contrasted with the warmer treatment of Haitian elites and Cuban "boat people" leaving a communist regime. A second example from the concluding section on twenty-first century immigration impressively navigates polarizing political issues with the effective use of oral histories as well as audio and visual content donated by another partner organization, The History Channel. "Illegal immigrants," the concluding section notes, have realized opportunities, becoming "integrated into the economic fabric of the workforce." Other panels acknowledge how Muslim immigrants have been detained as possible terrorists, and that Mexican and Central American immigrants find themselves "put in jails, treated as criminals and sometimes subjected to abysmal living conditions for long periods." A conclusion explains that "Nativism has brought hardship and violence to immigrant communities . . . for over 200 years."

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Photo of the "Journeys: New Eras of Immigration, 1945–Present" exhibition. (National Park Service)

However transformative the exhibits, it is important to acknowledge that many visitors receive them through the interpretative lens of guides. Indeed, the role of guides, docents, and park rangers is critical to such NPS history museums. (In the pandemic era, the interpretive and personal skills of park rangers could not be evaluated, and while a free audio guide that walks visitors through the exhibits is available to rent at the museum or download from home, it is impersonal and largely replicates exhibit texts.) Kraut remembered doing some formal training of park rangers in the mid–1980s and agreed that another set of sessions was probably overdue. Amato noted that the roughly thirty park rangers on staff—the number fluctuates with the seasons—have various levels of skill and knowledge, but most have had some history training as an undergraduate and all have weekly time to do research on site at the Bob Hope Memorial Library or the American Family Immigration History Center. My guide on the Hard Hat Tour was a volunteer with Save Ellis Island, Inc. Self-taught, he engaged the ten of us throughout the tour, mixing illustrative anecdotes with a history of the hospital's many treatment centers. When asked about the treatment of detainees, he supplemented the museum's limited information with details of the injured solders recuperating there during the First World War and the Germans incarcerated during the Second World War; of the imprisoned Red Scare anarchists, he was silent.

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My guide's silence about what some would see as a problematic moment in the Immigration Service's history hinted at Whigism that my own research has found bedeviling many historical sites, especially sites curated by those devoted to its significance.[2] Something of the problem can be heard in the digital tours hosted by another Ellis Island partner organization, Scholastic Corporation. The center of a thirty-minute "Virtual Field Trip to Ellis Island" is a remote roundtable with three park rangers who answer questions raised by elementary school children from several classes around the country. Hosted by a cheery Scholastic representative, the park rangers regale viewers with upbeat anecdotes that acknowledge the strangeness of the experience for immigrants but emphasize the wonderful medical attention and opportunities that awaited them. The upbeat "Field Trip" tone contrasts, however, with Scholastic's more sober second digital offering, an "Interactive Tour of Ellis Island." The ten pages of the "Interactive Tour" take viewers through the immigration process via links to silent period video of the crowded, alienating experience immigrants navigated. In seven links to oral histories, viewers hear complex and, at times, harrowing stories of the travails of young children who passed through Ellis Island in the opening decades of the twentieth century. Neither romantic nor heroic, these accounts are personal stories of survival and passage, which befit an immigration service.

A final characterization of the museum by my respondents reflects an abiding and indeterminate problem for all museums—one that challenges historians concerned with how history is narrated at sites: many visitors come on package tours with companies that provide their own guides. My informants estimate that half of the island's visitors come on such tours. Some companies, like New York's Big Onion Tours, hire graduate students in history and train their guides; others, and I fear too many, do not. Some guides are clever, self-taught enthusiasts, but commercial concerns to please customers (and win positive TripAdvisor reviews) can mean sacrificing historical detail, complexity, and contradiction in favor of melodrama.[3] Alas, in this regard, historians concerned with the imperiled promise at National Park Service sites such as Ellis Island, may need to look beyond the NPS.

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2 Daniel J. Walkowitz, *The Remembered and Forgotten Jewish World: Jewish Heritage in Europe and the United States* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2018).

3 Jonathan R. Wynn, *Walking and Talking New York* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

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