

Ellis Island Will Tell More Immigrant Stories

By Daniel Keefe

At some point in 2011, the Ellis Island Immigration Museum will become Ellis Island: The National Museum of Immigration. By expanding its function and taking on a new name, the institution is rewriting history.

"It's very important that we tell in the fullest way possible the story of the peopling of America, and that's much larger than the Ellis Island experience," said Professor Alan Kraut of American University, Chairman of The Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Foundation's History Advisory Committee.

"We're talking about slaves who were part of a forced migration; Mexicans who were literally engulfed by the United States; the earliest arrivals, of course, Native Americans. Then in the later period, especially since 1945, we're looking at waves of Southeast Asians (and) Latinos."

The country's gateway then

Ellis Island served as America's principal immigration station during the peak years of 1892 to 1924, processing more than 12 million immigrant steamship passengers in New York Harbor — an estimated 60 percent of all immigrant arrivals.

Upwards of 40 percent of all Americans today can trace part of their family history to Ellis Island, according to the National Park Service.

After decades of abandonment following its ultimate closure in 1954, this national historic landmark was transformed into a 100,000 square-foot museum and the revived anchor of the 27½-acre site. At a cost of \$161 million, the Ellis Island Immigration Museum opened in 1990. Celebrating the largest recorded migration in human history, it has welcomed more than 35 million visitors since opening.

The nation's marker now

There are many more journeys to recount in this melting pot of a nation. And The Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Foundation began a project in 2006 that will transform the current Ellis Island Immigration Museum from a place that focuses on stories of the Ellis years to one that encompasses overlooked sagas, many voluntary, others involuntary, over the eras as well as modern arrivals, too — the full arc of immigration in the American experience.

The new 20,000 square-foot expansion will be called The Peopling of America® Center. It will debut in 2011 when the Ellis Island Immigration Museum becomes Ellis Island: The National Museum of Immigration at a total cost of \$20 million.

The Peopling of America® Center will explore the broad themes of the immigrant experience, extending further into how immigration eventually moves to assimilation, citizenship and the building of a nation. The time frame incorporates every



To set the story of migration to America within its larger, global context, a dynamic, radiant globe illustrates migration patterns throughout human history in The Peopling of America® Center. (Photo courtesy of The Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Foundation, Inc.)

generation: past, present and future.

"The Peopling of America® and Ellis Island: The National Museum of Immigration will become the recognized destination to explore the essential character and experience of its subject matter; a clearinghouse and facilitator for education and celebration; and a newly established institutional landmark that has for too long been missing from the national stage," said my colleague Peg Zitko, Vice President of Public Affairs, The Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Foundation, Inc.

The impact of citizenship

Central to The Peopling of America® Center will be an exploration of the interwoven themes of immigration and patriotism in the new Citizenship Gallery. Visitors will experience the very act of "becoming American" and what it means to them, their communities and society at large.

The exhibit encourages visitors to embrace key national values — democracy, capitalism and personal freedom — and to renew their fundamental understanding of what a healthy civil society requires to function appropriately, beginning with the individual's role in the civic fabric.

Exhibit highlights will be videos of the Citizenship Oath and personal narratives describing the experience and meaning of citizenship, as well as an interactive Citizenship Test and Population Map.

Other components will capture the grand scale of the epic history of immigration to America, starting with the very earliest arrivals in the pre-Ellis era. Immigration in both the pre- and post-Ellis Island eras will be explored through the shared experiences of categories called Leaving, Making the Trip, Arrival, Struggle and Survival, and Building a Nation.

The importance of Ellis Island

"This expansion will significantly broaden not only the scope of this wonderful museum's content, but also its relevancy to the more diverse audiences who visit America's national parks today," said former Secretary of the Interior Dirk Kempthorne. ■

About the Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Foundation, Inc.:

The Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Foundation, Inc. is a nonprofit organization founded in 1982 to raise funds for and oversee the historic restorations of the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island, working in partnership with the National Park Service/U.S. Department of the Interior. Its endowment has funded more than 200 projects at the islands. For further information on its current project, the Peopling of America® Center, visit www.peoplingofamerica.org.



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