

This installment is going to be a lot shorter than anticipated. In the last three months, it has remained more of a work in progress, requiring more incubation than I thought before there will be something of greater substance to say.

My History New Wave by Gordon Bond Too

GSL Explores the Intersection of Race, Gender, and Ethnicity with the New Jersey History Community.

Nevertheless, it is worth exploring our story thus far.

The genesis of the series was the realization that, in one broad sense, the New Jersey history community (though by no means exclusively) is akin to the Republican Party in the last presidential election—perceived as being comprised primarily of old white people and out of touch with an emergent Hispanic community.

Not that there is anything wrong with being an old white person. I hope to become one myself. And we have collectively improved when it comes to including so-called “minority history” such as African-American and women. Nevertheless, there seems to be a disconnect between the history community and the Hispanic community—and, it seems to me, if we remain behind the curve, it will have serious ramifications for the future.

Immigrants

With only some hyperbole, I can say that I am an immigrant myself of sorts. Yes, I was born in the U.S.—as were my parents and grandparents—and, yes, I am a native of the Garden State. But last October, my wife and I moved into a 1927 condo on the edge of Newark’s Forest Hill Historic District. Since this is my first time living in a more urban environment and on anything above a second floor, like any recent arrival, I am a newcomer trying to feel “at home.” There is even the occasional language-barrier. While the immediate neighbors in my building (at least those I have met) speak English, I am more-likely to hear Spanish while walking in some of the surrounding neighborhoods.

One of the things that have helped to alleviate that initial sense of alienation has been getting to know some of the history of the places I now see every day. I have a nice view of Mount Pleasant Cemetery, for example, and have been learning who some of my new “neighbors” there are . . . or, to be accurate, were. I learned that a corner I drive by twice on most weekdays was the site of a deadly factory fire just months before—and not very dissimilar to—the better-known Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in New York City (I even wrote an article about it for GSL). When I drop my wife off at the Broad Street train station, I sometimes pause at the traffic light to look at the House of Prayer Episcopal Church Rectory, in the attic of which the Rev. Hannibal Goodwin invented flexible roll-film (ahead of Kodak) revolutionizing photography and laying the foundations for modern cinema. I recently attended the book-release party for Catharine Longendycke and Kathleen Galop’s new Arcadia Images of America book about the Forest Hill neighborhood and walked away hungry to learn more.

Indeed, my sense of “pride of place” has often been derived from knowing the story of where I lived. When we were still living in Union Township, I felt a charm in being able to drive a short distance to the scene of the last military engagement of the American Revolution in the northern colonies. But I am a proud “history geek.” Wherever I go, I am always curious about the history—even if it is another country.

I began to wonder, however, what about “real” immigrants? What about people who are arriving in America for the first time, where the culture-shock and language barriers are far more pronounced than a white guy from the suburbs moving to Newark can understand? What role—if any—does or can local and American history play in inspiring a pride of place for the newcomer?

Obviously this is nothing new. The proverbial waves of

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immigrants have landed on our shores for generations, each trying to find their footing and gain some sense of “home.” Some have embraced their new history as part of their citizenship. But, as with the native-born, not everyone will ultimately care about history. Not everyone can be a proud history geek.

There is, however, something a little different about the present wave.

New Wave

When we talk about “white people,” we are actually evoking a long and also troubled history. Using skin color as an intuitive means of taxonomy is nothing new—the Ancient Egyptians, for example, identified four “races of men” based on a spectrum of skin tones. By the time “white people” or the “white race” entered the phrase lexicon of Europeans in the late 1600s, it reflected the physical differences they were seeing in the indigenous peoples of the lands they were exploring, exploiting, and colonizing. It became increasingly necessary to make a definitive distinction between “us” and “them” in the cultural rationalization of slavery. The term “white” in this context came to mean a pan-ethnic identity embracing most of Europe. Generalized color-coding based on skin pigment—“white” Europeans, “black” Africans, “yellow” Asians, “brown” East Indians, “red” Native Americans, etc.—undergirded a perceived racial hierarchy.

So when we talk about “white people” today, we are speaking of people broadly and vaguely-defined as being of European stock. Many of these folks—myself included—trace ancestry back to immigrants who arrived from Europe during the last great wave of immigration at the turn of the 20th century. Not that being considered “white” meant any egalitarian experience—as any turn-of-the-century tenement neighborhood attests with their history of various ethnic groups jostling for influence. Indeed, the iconic, if cliché, image that comes to mind for many when we hear the word “immigrant” is the European, clad in some ill-fitting traditional garb, laying eyes for the first time on the Statue of Liberty.

Consider how transformative that wave of immigration at the start of the 20th century would be on American history. The present wave is just about as huge. According to the Migration Policy Institute (<http://www.migrationpolicy.org/programs/data-hub/us-immigration-trends#history>), the peak number of foreign-born immigrants seeking permanent resident status in the first half of the 20th century occurred in 1907, totaling 1,285,349 people. The peak of the recent wave occurred in 1991, topping out at 1,826,595—over a half-million (541,246) more

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than in 1907. Such numbers, of course, only tell part of the story. In that time, the native-born populations have also grown as has the nation geographically. Yet even when expressed in terms of percentage of the total population, we are still in the midst of an immigration wave every bit as major as before. In 1910, the foreign-born represented 15% of Americans. The lowest point was in the 1970s, when it dropped to 5%. In 2012, that number had skyrocketed to 13%—just 2% shy of the peak a little more than a century before. And this does not take into account the number of undocumented immigrants.

A lot of attention has been paid to the growth of the Hispanic community in the U.S., but according to a Pew Research Center report from 2012 and updated in 2013, Asian-Americans are now the “fastest-growing racial group in the United States” as their numbers have grown at the same time Hispanic immigration has declined.

(<http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2012/06/19/the-rise-of-asian-americans/>)

Nevertheless, when we focus down more on New Jersey, the Hispanic population still dominates in terms of their percentage share of the state’s foreign-born residents. According to the Eagleton Program on Immigration and Democracy, in 2010, 45% of all foreign-born NJ residents are Hispanic (Latin American), followed closely by 30% Asian, 20% European, 4% African, and 1% North American.

(<http://epid.rutgers.edu/gallery/facts-about-immigrant-nj/>) Over 3 million come from Mexico. The American Immigration Council’s Immigration Policy Center claims that one in five Garden State residents is foreign-born and one in four are Hispanic or Asian. Between 1990 and 2011, they report that the Hispanic population of New Jersey has grown from 9.6% to 18.1%. In the same period, the Asian population went from 3.5% to 8.5%.

What really makes this current wave of immigration unlike anything experienced by the U.S. before, however, is the projected ethnic/racial shift. “The newest U.S. census data numbers show that Asians and Hispanics are on their way to becoming the new majority groups in the United States and will soon overtake white Americans in population growth, revealing a glimpse of what will become the ‘new normal,’ as minority groups become the majority,” reported NBC Latino on June 13, 2013 (<http://nbc-latino.com/2013/06/13/the-new-normal-asians-hispanics-will-soon-outnumber-current-white-majority/>).

Immigrants and History

Why is this important to New Jersey’s history community? If the trend does indeed continue as predicted, by 2050 it will be from this emergent Hispanic- and Asian-American community from which we

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will increasingly need to draw members to our organizations, visitors to our museums, and funders for our projects.

It is hard enough to get native-born Americans to care much about history—even when their own ancestors have been helping to make it sometimes for generations. Will this become a more acute issue with an America where a majority of personal roots naturally run shallower for a few generations?

A common perception is that what we consider to be the United States was, by and large, a European creation, based on colonization by whites of English, Dutch, French, and Spanish origins—that Hispanics and Asians were simply not major forces on American history until the mid-19th and early 20th centuries. As such, colonial history may seem far more abstract to a Hispanic-American or Asian-American—that it isn't really part of "their" history; that it's just a bunch of dead imperialist white guys.

And yet they *were* there, albeit on the periphery. As early as 1587, for example, Filipinos were among the crew of a Spanish ship that landed in what is now California. An "East Indian" was listed among the settlers in Jamestown, Virginia in 1635. Filipinos established a small settlement in the bayous of Louisiana, after fleeing mistreatment aboard Spanish ships. Latin American natives joined many of the expeditions of Spanish explorers and conquistadors throughout North America. And, according to Elizabeth Parker's article about Hilda A. Hidalgo in this same issue of GSL, "it has recently been determined that the first non-Native settler of the island of Manhattan was a man named Juan Rodriguez from what is now the Dominican Republic." (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Juan_%28Jan%29_Rodriguez)

Filipino sailors in California or even a Dominican in nearby Manhattan, of course, don't really help New Jersey historians seeking to connect our strong colonial heritage with our Asian and Hispanic neighbors. At the same time, however, there is much more to New Jersey history than the Battle of Trenton or Monmouth. As we get into the 19th and early 20th centuries, when Hispanic and Asian communities became well-established features of the state, how much of their history is being told by our history organizations?

Disconnect

On a snowy day January 2014, I paid a visit to the NJ Hispanic Research & Information Center at The Newark Public Library, where I met with Yesenia López, Project Archivist of the center's Puerto Rican Community Archives. "Hispanic history *is* American history," she had underlined in her notes from the questions I had emailed her. I realized that I was approaching this from what was perhaps the

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wrong direction. Inherent in my questioning of how the rise of a Hispanic demographic would impact New Jersey history was an assumption of “otherness”—that this group was a late-comer to the party that felt no connection to the American past because they were absent.

Not that this assumption is completely wrong—Ms. López confirmed that a Hispanic community large enough to have a major influence on New Jersey history didn’t emerge until around the 1930s. But to assume that they had no appreciable presence before then wasn’t really correct either.

Thanks to Ms. López, Elizabeth Parker’s article about Hilda A. Hidalgo appears in issue 23 of *GSL*—a figure that encompasses Hispanic, women’s, and even LGBT history in New Jersey. Parker summed things up nicely when she wrote, “perhaps the question that should be posed to the New Jersey history community should not be how to address how the Latino community will affect it, but rather why this group has been so thoroughly excised from the historic narrative and how alienating that has been to the Latino communities of New Jersey.”

Ms. López also confirmed my suspicions that the Hispanic communities in general do not necessarily feel “welcome” by the history world. Most groups think they are doing well if they have a membership application in Spanish too. When I posted a question on the H-Net New Jersey history listserve about how groups engage the Hispanic community, it received only a couple replies. I am not sure they understand there is this disconnect nor how increasingly problematic that may become. It goes the other way too. An effort to get local Hispanic cultural groups here in Newark to weigh in was met with equal silence.

Inclusion is a matter of historical accuracy. What failure to be inclusive looks like can be seen in how long it took for both professional and amateur historians to account for the role of African-Americans, both slave and free, or to understand the contributions of women beyond the traditional places of mother and homemaker. We’ve come a long way—though we still have work to do (and that will be a subject for future installments of “My History Too”). But it has become commonplace to see African-Americans and women at history conferences or as the subject of books and museum displays. Grant funders actively encourage inclusion of these groups and, tacitly, others.

But it is also a matter of survival in a sense. Just as we struggle to make history relevant to the native-born, we must now meet the challenges of making it relevant to a growing number of new-arrivals

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and families who have only been part of things for a generation or two. As I said, these are increasingly the people history will need to rely on for support.

But beyond even this, regardless of where one came from or how long they've been here, if this is now home, this is now their history too. Just as I have used history to gain some feeling that a new city is "home," history can be a way to welcome someone to a new country. You really can't point to any specific race, ethnicity, or religion and say "this" is an American. Instead, what defines us as a nation is our history, warts and all. To understand who we are, we must know who we were.

I began by saying this is a work in progress. This is a dialog that we need to be having sooner rather than later. And I hope GSL can be the forum for these discussions. Please weigh in by emailing me at gordon@gardenstatelegacy.com

