

Ellis Island

"The Golden Door"

By Dennis Hearn

We offer grateful thanks and appreciation to Mr. Hearn for sharing the following thoughts and information about Ellis Island. Although he is not a Freemason, Mr. Hearn has certainly brought us a vivid account of the influence of Freemasonry at Ellis Island. Mr. Hearn is an executive with the Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Project.

ELLIS ISLAND

It is not a name that one normally associates with the Ancient and Accepted Order of Freemasons. Yet in the last few months, after repeated visits to the island, I have come to see this historic immigration facility as one of the most "Masonic" structures on the planet.

It is not a feeling that can be easily explained. Free Masonry after all, was a respected institution in America long before Ellis was built-long before this country even was a country (The Free Masons have been in existence for longer than many of the world's nations for that matter). And while I'm sure there were Masons among those who passed through her halls, it's unlikely that there were more than a handful. The immigrants who were processed on Ellis came primarily from Central and Eastern Europe and were for the most part farmers and laborers too poor to afford any passage other than steerage. Most of them probably didn't even know who the Masons were, much less the part that the Ancient Order had played in erecting the magnificent Lady whose strong, benevolent gaze they passed beneath as they entered the harbor.

Yet the feeling persists – the sense that the very existence of this remarkable landmark is somehow related to the precepts of Masonry.

Little of the island's early history would suggest such a viewpoint. When the Dutch founded their settlement on Manhattan, Ellis was a three acre mud flat, barely breaking the surface of the water at high tide. Together with Bedloe's and several others in the harbor, it formed what the Dutch called the Oyster islands and though the colonists felt it important enough to buy from the Indians in 1630, they never found a use for it. The island went through a number of name

changes during the next century and a half, particularly after the British assumed control of the area, but it wasn't until a businessman named Samuel Ellis built a tavern there – around 1785 – that the island got the name it would keep. Nine years later, the State of New York secured the island as part of its harbor defenses against a war with Britain and France that fortunately didn't materialize. The appreciation of her strategic position became apparent again in 1808 however, and this time New York State employed condemnation procedures to purchase the island from the tavern owner's heirs. Immediately after, the state ceded the property to the federal government for \$10,000. She was fortified again, and while war did come – in 1812 – Ellis was once more only a spectator.

In 1834, an interstate agreement declared both Bedloes (now Liberty) and Ellis Islands to be part of New York State, even though both are on the New Jersey side of the shipping channel, and nearly three decades later, with the advent of the Civil War, the fortress on Ellis was replaced by a powder magazine.

Once again the little island seemed destined for a life of obscurity, often called, but never chosen. America, however, was about to undergo what would become known by immigration historians as "The Second Wave", and the participation of Ellis Island had already been ordained-inadvertently – by an argument almost a century earlier.

When the framers of the Constitution adjourned in 1787, most were not happy with the results. The majority had strongly opposed the continued existence of slavery in the new republic. But the proponents of slavery joined with the antifederalist forces who feared a strong central government and forced a compromise. Part of that compromise was a clause which stated that the federal government would not interfere with the immigration policies of the states until 1808. This served two purposes. For the anti-federalists, it was one more area in which states rights were preserved and to the pro-slavery group it meant that the "forced immigration" of black Africans would continue for another twenty years. The abolitionists regarded it as the lesser of evils-slavery was no longer as economically attractive as it had been and in fact was dying out in the colonies – and two decades, it was assumed would be sufficient for it to pass from the scene.

Just five years after the Constitution was ratified however, in 1793, Eli Whitney introduced his new cotton-gin, and the slave based economy of the southern states took off. There were other factors involved of course, but the upshot was that there would be no real federal immigration law until after the Civil War. Nor did there seem to be much need. In the half century between 1820 and 1875, barely 9 million immigrants had arrived and federal intervention simply hadn't seemed necessary.

These 9 million were the so-called "First Wave" which reached its peak during the Irish Famine (1845-1850) and consisted primarily of Northern and Western Europeans from the Scandinavian countries, England, Ireland, and Germany. There had been difficulties – most notably with the

Irish who were the targets of strong anti-Catholic sentiments – but it was a largely homogeneous group of nationalities. The only exceptions at the time were the roughly 300,000 Chinese, and when Congress finally got involved in 1882, it was simply to declare that unfortunate group ineligible for citizenship. Unbelievably, that piece of legislation remained law until 1943!

The period following the Civil War however, coincided with a dramatic shift in the immigration pattern. The new arrivals were from Southern and Eastern Europe, and their numbers were increasing rapidly. So rapidly in fact, that the state run facilities were proving unable to handle them. Thus, in 1891, the federal government assumed full responsibility for immigration matters by creating the Bureau of Immigration under the direction of the Department of the Treasury.

It was then that a remarkable thing happened. Faced with a new and culturally "different" group of immigrants, we might have been expected to close the door. These newcomers after all were Italian Catholics, Russian Orthodox, and Polish Jews. They were Greeks, Slovaks, Hungarians and Lithuanians. Their customs, their faiths and often their bloodlines were markedly different. We had already passed the Chinese Exclusion Act. The easiest route would have been to extend it. Yet that didn't happen. Instead, Congress appropriated \$75,000 for the construction of a federal immigration facility. The site they selected was Ellis Island.

Certainly there were considerations other than pure altruism involved in that decision. The explosive growth of the industrial revolution had reached full flower in the United States, and the country needed labor. Or perhaps we simply never expected the numbers that the next two decades would bring. Whatever the combination of factors, the result has proven to be one of the most remarkable chapters in human history. And part of it would be made possible by the construction of New York's mass transit system.

The process of enlarging and stabilizing the island's surface area was accomplished by hauling rock, earth, and rubble from the excavation of New York's subways out to the site and combining it with the ballast from incoming ships. By the time the station opened in 1892, the island had been doubled in size.

Over a million and a half immigrants were processed in that first facility before it was destroyed by fire in 1897. Congress immediately approved funds for a new station, and the first major government architectural contract ever let to a private company was awarded to the Broadway firm of Boring & Tilton. The result was an enormous, 1.5 million dollar complex which included a second island (created with more landfill) and the massive French renaissance-style structure which stands today. Constructed of brick laid in Flemish bond with limestone trim, the new fireproof facility was designed to handle up to 5000 immigrants a day. It opened on December 17, 1900. Within months of its opening, the new station was bulging at the seams, and work was immediately begun to expand the facility. That work would continue almost

uninterrupted for the next twenty years. Not only was America widening the door, she was trying to assure that all who entered gained a seat at the table.

Theodore Roosevelt would throw the weight of the Presidency behind ending corruption and graft on the island, Fiorello LaGuardia (who began his career of public service as an interpreter at the facility) would spend years railing against inconsistencies in immigration policy, and Commissioners like William Williams, Robert Watchorn, and Edward Corsi would dedicate their administrations to creating a more humane atmosphere for the immigrant.

Over forty immigrant aid societies would labor at Ellis, providing everything from Christmas and Passover celebrations to new clothing and occupational therapy. Concern for the immigrant would prompt additional hospital facilities, enlarged dormitories, improved lighting and ventilation, landscaped playgrounds and large openair porches.

Armies of men and women would labor on the island translating, providing medical care and treatment, lodging, food, counseling, religious services, and even entertainment. Staggering quantities of milk, meat, and produce would be consumed as the island's bakery, power house, and laundry struggled to feed a thousand people at a sitting, and shower 8000 a day. All of it was free and all of it awaited anyone with the courage to make the journey. Such courage was abundant: On one day – April 17, 1907 – the staff on Ellis processed 11,747 immigrants. The total that year; a staggering 1,004,756 new Americans.

In all, more than 17 million people would come through the immigration facilities in New York's harbor in just three decades. Most arrived with literally nothing more than what they carried on their backs. The majority could not speak English and nearly all were – in the eyes of those already here – "different". Yet they would become the ancestors of nearly half of the Americans alive today.

This is not to say that there were not anti-immigration forces at work. There were, and by the 1920's, they had gained enough strength to seal the island's fate. A series of quota restrictions were enacted, followed by legislation mandating inspection at U.S. Consuls in the Country of Origin. By 1924 it was essentially over. But these battles were fought in the context of economic protectionism and the political fears that followed the First World War and the rise of Bolshevism. The knowledge that our actions are so often determined by such fears is the most triumphant reality of Ellis Island. Our own Civil War demonstrates how easily we might have succumbed to division along ethnic, economic, or religious lines.

Now, as thousands from Cuba, Central America and Southeast Asia flee the tyranny of their homelands, we are opening our door to the "third wave". It is in this convergence of historical streams that the real message of Ellis Island lies, and it is here that the Masonic nature of this monument reveals itself.

The Freemasons among our Founding Fathers brought to their work the ancient Masonic Landmarks of Truth and Brotherly love, and they fashioned a constitution which, by the depth

and strength of its conviction, imbedded those principles in the conscience of a nation. While we as a people have not always lived up to them, neither have we been able to ignore them.

Time and again, when challenged by the events of history, we have returned to the "self evident" truths of our inception. Time and again we have re-examined – sometimes painfully – our direction. It would be wrong to regard those reassessments as signs of failure. They are proof rather, that we seek to build our world upon the highest principles, and that we will not accept anything short of our goal.

That which was once no more than a sandbar was built up stone by stone to become an island. Upon it, we constructed a great edifice to welcome all who sought shelter. The building itself required brick, but the purpose behind its construction demanded building blocks of a different sort. Had she been made of brick alone, Ellis might have remained the powder magazine she once was. But by cementing those bricks with compassion and tolerance, we have laid the cornerstone of an even greater structure.

By forcing us to examine our underlying beliefs, by compelling us to confront our own fears and weaknesses, and by bringing their own strengths to our cause, those who came through Ellis have enabled us to build the strongest, most diverse, and most democratic republic in the history of the world.

The old building is being restored now – as a monument. Many of us are inscribing the name of an ancestor there – not unlike the marks of a Master Mason. For us, those names will say that the work done here was good. And they will say something else. To others, yet unborn, they will say: "To you who stand before the names of your fathers, we bequeath the task of completing the world they sought to build. There is much work yet to be done, but here, on this spot, we have examined the foundation. We have tested our beliefs, and they were not found wanting".

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