Philadelphia: Immigrant City
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From the time of its founding in 1682, Philadelphia has been both an immigrant port and a city of immigrants. In fact, in 1683 when Dutch and German religious groups founded Germantown now part of Philadelphia they established the first settlement of non-British Europeans in any English colony. But that event proved exceptional, for the Germantown settlers not only landed in Philadelphia, but also stayed in the area. Historically, by contrast, most people who arrived in the city soon made their way elsewhere while most immigrants who settled locally had arrived through another port, usually New York, just ninety miles to the northeast. Because the latter group has predominated since the 1800s, the number of immigrants living in Philadelphia has been much larger than the volume of direct migration might indicate. Philadelphia as a port of entry has been very different from, and less important than, Philadelphia as an immigrant city.

Nevertheless, the history of Philadelphia as an immigrant port is a rich and complex story of peaks and valleys, false starts, and perseverance against natural disadvantages. The city is 110 miles from the ocean, up a shallow bay and what used to a winding river channel. The Delaware River froze often, unlike New York’s harbor, and the ocean voyage from Europe to Philadelphia is 200 miles longer than the journey to New York. Even so, between 1815 and 1985 more than 1,300,000 immigrants entered America through Philadelphia about a quarter of a million before 1873, followed by a flood of just over a million during the next 50 years. And despite quotas and limits, yet another hundred thousand immigrants arrived in Philadelphia since the mid-1920's. From the settlement of Germantown in the seventeenth century to the arrival of the Koreans in the 1980s, then, William Penn's "City of Brotherly Love" has played a role in every significant migration to this century.

In national terms, Philadelphia was certainly most important as an immigrant port in the eighteenth century. Beginning about 1717, when the Provincial Assembly ordered ship captains to submit passenger lists to officials, there were true mass migrations of Germans and of Scotch-Irish directly to Philadelphia. In 1749, for example, 22 ships with a total of 7000 immigrants from the Rhineland made the seven-week voyage to the city. In all, about 70,000 Germans landed there before the Revolution and Philadelphia also received the largest share of the over 150,000 Scotch-Irish who migrated from Ulster to the colonies. In both groups, the majority
were so poor that they had come as indentured servants or as "redemptioners" who had to work off the borrowed price of their passage. Many were thus forced to stay in the city, helping to make it the largest in the colonies by the time of the Revolution.

Large scale European immigration to the new United States did not begin until the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815. By then, New York was becoming the nation's chief port and city while the Philadelphia business community was turning its interest inland. There were still Philadelphia merchants active in overseas trade, however, and many ships were bringing immigrants to the city. In order to prevent them from also bringing in contagious diseases such as yellow fever, by 1798 a quarantine hospital, the Lazaretto, had been built a few miles below Philadelphia. After 1815 it was busy. In the 1820s alone nearly 20,000 immigrants, almost ten percent of the national total, came to the city as two lines of Philadelphia sailing ships ran regularly to Liverpool, the main center for Irish as well as English emigration. Steerage tickets cost between five and seven pounds while a good factory wage in the United Kingdom was one pound per week. Of the two lines, Thomas Cope's was easily the more important. Cope began his Liverpool service in 1821, and his ships the Tonawanda, Tuscarora, and Wyoming carried thousands to Philadelphia over the next four decades.

Immigration continued steadily in the 1830s and early 1840s, with the Cope ships joined occasionally by other sailings from British and continental ports. Between 1830 and the great famine migration of 1847, about 60,000 immigrants landed in Philadelphia. But many more people were by this time coming to the city via New York, for Philadelphia's share of all immigrant arrivals had fallen to about five percent, where it would stay until the Civil War. One reason was simply ice in the river. The city finally bought an iceboat in 1838, but shippers were not confident it would prevail against the five-foot thick ridges of ice. That same year, moreover, transatlantic steam navigation was proved practicable, but because local businessmen failed to raise funds for a Philadelphia-based line, the city faced the massive Irish and German migrations of the late 1840s with only its one line of sailing ships to Europe.

In any case, demand quickly brought forth an increased supply. Two new lines of sailing ships were established between Liverpool and Philadelphia; another line plied between Philadelphia and Londonderry and individual ships sailed from other ports. All told in the eight years from 1847 through 1854, over 120,000 immigrants arrived in
Philadelphia, now the nation's fourth largest immigrant port. The total for 1853 alone 19,211 exceeded the total for the entire decade of the 1820s.

The city's first steamship line, known officially as the Liverpool and Philadelphia Steam Ship Company, was owned by William Inman and his partners the Richardson Brothers, who were Liverpool Quakers. In 1850 Inman convinced the Richardsons to buy a new steamship named the City of Glasgow, which left Liverpool on December 17 with 400 passengers and arrived only ten days later in Philadelphia. Within a few years it had been joined by more “City” ships, named after Manchester, Baltimore, and Philadelphia. A steerage ticket cost eight pounds eight shillings several months' wages for a laborer and business was brisk. In 1854 the City of Manchester made five trips to Philadelphia, with as many as 532 passengers each time. But that year saw disaster as well. The City of Glasgow disappeared in March on its way to Philadelphia with 430 passengers. In September, the City of Philadelphia, went aground on Cape Race, Newfoundland. The passengers were saved but the ship was lost. The next year, the Richardsons withdrew from the business when Inman leased their ships to France for use in war, and early in 1857 Inman dropped service to Philadelphia in favor of New York.

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