Philadelphia and the Immigrant Experience  
*Led by Walter Licht*

**Preface**

With immigration once again a prominent and fractious issue in the public mind, this TIP workshop on “Philadelphia and the Immigrant Experience” aimed at a timely examination of the role of immigration and the nature of the immigrant experience in the America past. Philadelphia provides a vital case study. The city has received repeated waves of newcomers and its neighborhoods, economy, politics, and culture have been shaped and continue to be influenced by the arrivals of tens of thousands of people from different countries. Questions addressed in this workshop included: How has the immigrant experience changed over time? What have been the contributions of various immigrant groups and individuals? How have newcomers been received and what burdens and obstacles have they faced in their attempts to achieve footholds in Philadelphia? What does the recent surge of immigration portend for Philadelphia, and American society at large, in the globalized world of the 21st Century?

The curriculum units produced by the teachers in this workshop reflect the diverse issues raised by the topic of immigration. Two units centered on the very early history of immigration. Barbara Dowdall treats the historical neighborhood of Germantown in Philadelphia as an on-going place of arrival of newcomers to our shores. Although her unit speaks to the latest of arrivals, it concentrates on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and is particularly attentive to the relationship of West European immigrants to both slave and free African Americans in their midst. Sandy O’Keefe more directly addresses the issue of slavery; her unit looks at the great number of newcomers to Philadelphia in the eighteenth century who arrived and lived as bonded laborers, that is as indentured servants and slaves. She reminds us of the non-voluntary aspects of immigration.

Two units concentrate on the immigration of European migrants to Philadelphia in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The units of Mona Kolsky and Jonathan Williams, although different in approach, both concentrate on the processes of immigration, not just push and pull factors, but also enabling ones, particularly the role of shippers, key agents in the immigration process. Both units speak to the entry experience, particularly the role of the “Lazaretto”, Philadelphia’s Ellis Island, and the quarantining of immigrants. Kolsky also attends to the response of established groups to the new arrivals as evident in the cartoon images of newcomers.

Anatol Kondili and Chadd Johnson look at immigration in the twentieth century, but in unique ways. Kondili, a math teacher, has assembled data on immigration across the twentieth century and has devised a series of exercises for his students that will not only introduce them to new math concepts (and hone old ones), but will place current debates on immigration in historical perspective. Johnson also has a math component to his unit—he has assembled worldwide data to better understand the economic
circumstances that place people in motion—but through a study of textiles, he intends to have his students understand immigration as both a movement of people and goods (or cultural artifacts as he emphasizes).

Alison McCartney and Michael Steele-Eytle also treat contemporary immigration by looking at the recent arrival into Philadelphia of large numbers of Spanish-speaking immigrants. Both place this development historically, since Latinos have been coming to Philadelphia, without great notice, for two centuries. McCartney is especially interested in raising questions with her students on what “Latino” means since new Spanish-speaking immigrants come from very different places. Steele-Eytle has fashioned his curriculum unit around “lecturas” he has developed, histories of Latinos in Philadelphia written in Spanish. His students will simultaneously improve their Spanish writing and communication skills while learning more about Philadelphia’s history and the evolving place of Spanish-speaking peoples in the city.

Finally, Cheryl Fox and Stacia Parker developed units that treat the African American experience in Philadelphia, considering black Philadelphians as immigrants to these shores and in-migrants from the South to the city. Both units aim at fostering better understanding about Africa among African American students who have had, in some instance, troubled responses to the recent arrival of sizable numbers of Ethiopians, Eritreans, Liberians, Sierra Leonians, and Senegalese to West Philadelphia.

--Walter Licht, Professor of History