



The Whole Story

THE PEOPLING OF AMERICA® CENTER WILL TRANSFORM THE MUSEUM ON ELLIS ISLAND INTO A NATIONAL MUSEUM OF IMMIGRATION

By Craig Collins

Like many of the projects carried out by The Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Foundation and its partner, the National Park Service, the Peopling of America® Center wasn't a new idea when it was announced to the public in 2008. It had been conceived years earlier.

When the Ellis Island Immigration Museum opened its doors in 1990, it welcomed 2 million visitors annually. It quickly became clear that many visitors, representing a broad cross-section of American society, had descended from ancestors whose experiences were different than those of the mostly European immigrants who poured through the Ellis Island Immigration Center from 1892 to 1954. Many visitors had the impression that, while it is an interesting immigration museum, the Ellis Island facility did not speak to their own heritage.

This had always been a concern for the Park Service and the Foundation, says Dr. Alan Kraut, a history professor at American University who chairs the Foundation's History Advisory Committee. "The United States has always been a nation of nations," he says. "Even as the

History Committee was helping to plan the restoration and the museum, we worried about telling the fuller story of America's peopling, and especially about visitors whose heritage was not included in the Ellis story. We thought about the African-American child visiting Ellis Island with his or her class on a field trip. There wasn't anything there that addressed his ancestors' experience of enslavement and arrival in a slave ship. A Latino child might feel the same lack of attention to his past."

After they had completed work on the online and physical resources that comprised the American Family Immigration History Center® in 2001, the Foundation and the Park Service began to discuss ways to broaden the focus of the museum, not only to include the different immigrant stories from before and after the Ellis Island era (1892-1954), but also to include the other ways in which people found themselves in America. "Immigration was one means by which America was peopled, but there were others, including war, conquest, and annexation," says Kraut. "We wanted to acknowledge the significance of those events in the peopling of America."



Opposite: A worker brings part of an exhibit in the Peopling of America® Center, which is currently under construction. First exhibits will be in place by late 2011, and the Center is anticipated to be fully completed by early 2012. Left: An exhibit taking shape at the Center. The Center will add 20,000 square feet of exhibit space at the Ellis Island Immigration Museum. Right: A rendering of a ship-shaped exhibit planned for the Peopling of America Center. The Center aims to expand upon the story told by the Ellis Island Immigration Museum.

Together, the Foundation and the Park Service, with guidance from the History Advisory Committee, developed a vision for a more generous and distinct Peopling of America experience – an entire wing – within the Ellis Island Immigration Museum. In 2006, they engaged the services of ESI Design, the firm that had helped to create both the on-line and physical facilities of the museum's American Family Immigration History Center (AFIHC). On Sept. 24, 2008, Secretary of the Interior Dirk Kempthorne, with representatives from The Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Foundation and the National Park Service, announced plans for a significant expansion of the museum, funded in part with generous support from the Annenberg Foundation and the Bank of America Charitable Foundation.

"The Peopling of America Center will add another 20,000 square feet of exhibit space to the museum," says Stephen Braganit, president and chief executive officer of The Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Foundation. "It will essentially complement the story of America's Ellis Island years by telling all the rest of the story of the populating of America, beginning with the arrival of the Native Americans, through the colonial era, forced migration, and early European immigration, and then covering arrivals in the Post-Ellis era, right up to the present day."

OUR SHARED JOURNEY

The basic concept driving the Peopling of America Center, according to project manager Joe Mayer of ESI Design, is the idea of a journey – not only for the individual people who came to America before and after the Ellis Island years, but also for a nation energized and altered by the presence of these people in the American culture and economy. "We came up with the concept of discovering an individual journey," Mayer said, "from losing your home

to making the trip to arriving in a new place – the struggles people had to go through to establish their homes, and some of the conflict those struggles caused between different immigrant groups – and then how all those groups came together to create the country we were before Ellis Island opened, as well as the country we are today."

After the 2008 announcement, the team – again with representatives from ESI, the Park Service, the Foundation, and its History Advisory Committee – began to hone its design of the Center's exhibit spaces. When the Peopling of America Center officially opens its doors to the public – the Pre-Ellis exhibits are scheduled to be in place in late 2011 and it should be fully completed by early 2012 – it will include the following:

Global Migration Patterns. The Center's introductory exhibit, which sets the story of American immigration within its global context, will take the form of a large sphere of the Earth, lit from within, that tracks global migration patterns from 200,000 years ago to the present. The dynamic globe, situated in the center of the main entry hall, will be a perfect tool, Mayer says, to place America's experience in the context of world migration patterns. "This exhibit shows that people have been moving and changing and going to new places throughout human history," Mayer says. "The globe is a fairly dramatic piece of exhibitry." An accompanying exhibit will graphically trace the history of U.S. immigration patterns, in order to give visitors a chronological context for understanding the entire museum.

Immigration Before Ellis Island. From the colonial era to the opening of the Ellis Island Immigration Station in 1892, this exhibit examines American immigration on both the individual and national scales, emphasizing the concept of the journey. To experience individual journeys to America, the exhibit relies on sight and sound.



"As you move between each of the journey segments," Mayer explains, "you pass through a series of portals that help you to understand what it was like to leave an area and begin a trip – for example, you'll hear the voices of people on a dock in Hamburg, Germany, in the 1850s, sailors and immigrants and the sounds of ships and water in the background."

Other audio stations feature recordings from actual letters chronicling the individual experiences, while recordings from documents or historical accounts of particular periods or events will provide a broader context. Accompanying graphics help to illustrate and interpret, and additional audio stations and "story windows" guide visitors through the other stages of these people's journeys, from arriving in America to their life in a new land.

New Era of Immigration. The complex post-Ellis Island era in American immigration is narrated in a similar way, with visitors following the journeys of individual immigrants. For this era, however, the exhibit makes use of video. "We're interviewing a series of people in each of the different segments of the journey," says Mayer, "and in each film they're talking directly to you, telling their stories." Accompanying graphics provide timelines, maps, overviews, and other contextual cues.

Top: A rendering of the dynamic globe that will be located in the main entry area of the museum. The globe will display global migration patterns from 200,000 years ago to the present. Bottom: The Citizenship Gallery, slated as part of the New Era of Immigration portion of the Center, will educate visitors on how one becomes a citizen and what U.S. citizenship means.

An interactive component of the New Era of Immigration, called Threads of Migration, will allow visitors, via a simple computer keyboard, to add their own families' journeys to a large composite map of migration created by other visitors.

The Citizenship Gallery. In a separate area near the New Eras exhibits, the Citizenship Gallery examines the process of becoming an American citizen, and what citizenship means – its rights, privileges, and responsibilities – to recently naturalized immigrants. The exhibit also includes videos – of groups taking the citizenship oath and of individuals narrating their own experiences – and includes maps and other interpretive graphics. Visitors can also test whether they would pass the written citizenship test taken by all naturalized citizens.

The Flag of Faces. The American Flag of FacesSM, which will also be located in the main entry hall, uses video and computer technology to illustrate the vibrancy and diversity of today's United States. It is a dynamic video portrait, composed of thousands of American faces, that echoes the design and purpose of The American Immigrant Wall of HonorSM. It includes anyone who wants his or her face, or the face of a friend or family member, to appear on the flag, and it doubles as a fundraising tool. "The way it works right now," says Mayer, "is that you can participate through a website [www.flagoffaces.org]. At home you can register, make a donation, and then upload a photo to appear on the flag." The exhibit will eventually consist of the flag and the opportunity for visitors to take their own photos on-site and see their faces displayed on the flag in the museum and on the website.

It was this spirit of inclusiveness that brought the Peopling of America Center – a major museum expansion that broadens both historic scope and the personal relevancy for visitors to the Ellis Island Immigration Museum – into being. In recognition of this spirit, when he revealed the museum's plans for the Center in September 2008, Komthorne made an additional announcement: "To reflect this expanded mission, I am delighted to announce that upon completion of the Center, this museum will be re-named Ellis Island, The National Museum of Immigration." With their most recent gift, The Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Foundation, the Park Service, and their supporters have created an interactive experience that celebrates everyone who was, is, or will be an American.

