THE IMMIGRANT STRUGGLE

By Karen Lesiak, Digitizing Partner, Hartford, Connecticut

Some of the first Pilgrims came to our distant shores as separatists who had fled to the Netherlands from England, fleeing religious persecution. Having left their homeland, they feared their English culture would be lost, and decided that the only thing to do was to set out for the New World. They journeyed on the Mayflower, setting foot on hallowed ground, and founded Plymouth Colony in 1620, one of the first of the original thirteen colonies. I remember from my grammar school history, a portrait of men with black hats, boots, and buckles, and women in their aprons and linen caps, dining together in thanksgiving with the Native Americans, finding common ground and bartering their goods. In the early founding, a peace treaty was signed between the two alliances. In reality, many violent conflicts ensued, and there was an unjust system of slavery in the settlements.

With the establishment of the colonies, millions of immigrants followed to build upon a foundation that continues to emerge today with an abundance of cultures and religions, but it has not come without formidable adversity and struggle. With the growth of the nation, we learn about the mass displacement of the indigenous inhabitants from their homes, forcing them to relocate, and accounts of genocide. Still today, Native Americans are socially and economically disadvantaged.

It was a daunting passage for Roman Catholics. Puritans regarded Catholics as inferior, with no religious rights, and the pope was considered the Anti-Christ, prompted by a declaration given by Ussher, the Reformation archbishop of England, that “to give toleration to papists was grievous sin” (quoted in “Readers Speak to Readers” by Harold Hamilton, Our Sunday Visitor, Nov. 24, 1918). When Irish Catholics began to immigrate in large numbers in 1762, they were met with overwhelming intolerance because of their Catholic faith. Their personal and religious rights were disregarded for fear of a growing allegiance to the papacy. In Massachusetts, all religions were generiously accepted and permitted, except for the Roman Catholic. (James O'Donnell, The Diocese of Hartford, Rev. Boston: Hurd, 1900).

Today, we witness violence and hate crimes against Muslims and Jews. The ethnic onslaught of discrimination based simply on the color of one's skin or country of origin portrays an overt cultural blindness. African Americans have indelibly suffered from the evils of slavery and discrimination and the fight for racial justice is engrained in those who must live it and those who want to change it. During the Depression, in the midst of food shortages and job insecurity, the most excessive restrictions were placed on Mexican immigrants. In 1931, only 3,333 entered the United States while 14,442 departed, as it appeared in the Catholic Transcript, Aug. 20, 1931, under the headline “Immigration Figures Show Large Decline...” The threat of deportation has continued in Latin, Mexican, and other communities in our current political climate.

Though the immigration struggle continues, millions who have immigrated to the United States have enjoyed freedoms, and have prospered educationally and economically in our country. I recount the story of a friend and member of my Catholic parish who came here alone, with little, from Cuba in the 1960s upon the establishment of the Cuban refugee program for those seeking asylum from a communist government and religious persecution. She made her way to American shores, joining her father in Florida, who had arrived months earlier at the home of a relative who was his sponsor. Her mother had to remain behind and not until four years later, in an effort to join her family, journeyed in a small vessel with other passengers that nearly took their lives in turbulent waters.

Later, settling in Connecticut, although she did experience some discrimination among peer groups, my friend went on to get her citizenship, pursued a college education, and became a guidance counselor, among other career pursuits in the educational field, and has enjoyed political and religious freedoms in the United States. Others have not been so fortunate, having had to face deportation, loss of businesses, and separation from family.

The Naturalization Act and Subsequent Legislation

The enactment of law and legislation has governed immigration and citizenship in a continual reevaluation and revision throughout the years. The Naturalization Act, enacted by Congress in 1790, excluded Native Americans, indentured servants, slaves, and the freed Black population, and later Asians, and a ruling determined that a woman's citizenship was largely dependent upon her marital status. In 1819, the first legislation on immigration in the United States, known as the Steerage Act, was established in an attempt to improve conditions of cross-Atlantic travel, adding a requirement that a record of immigrants should be kept by the ship's captain and include names of those who died during the voyage.

Between 1892 and 1924, more restrictions emerged as an influx of European immigrants, many from South, Central, and Eastern Europe, came through Ellis Island and other American ports. Acting on national prejudices, the Johnson-Reed Immigration Act of 1924 was based on a national origins quota, allowing only 2 percent of each nationality into the United States, and continuing to exclude Asian immigrants. In 1952, President Truman signed the McCarran-Walter Immigration and Nationality Act. The act abolished some restrictions of the Naturalization Act of 1790, but the establishment of the amendments were based largely on fears about communist infiltration stemming from Cold War apprehension between the United States and the Soviet Union. It also extended discrimination against other nationalities with...
"They Find a Haven in America," The Catholic World in Pictures, 9 January 1948.