

Ghosts of freedom

ELLIS ISLAND'S LIVING LEGACY BY JOE BAKER WITH PHOTOGRAPHS BY STEPHEN WILKES

On the grey afternoon of November 28, 1911, four young men in their early 20s hoist their bags on their shoulders and step down the gangway from the dock onto the ferry *Ellis Island*, bound for Jersey City from the immigration center. They are all from a pair of tiny adjoining villages in the mountainous Abruzzo region of central Italy. They are smiling because the brutal week of seasickness crowded among the almost 2,000 third-class passengers aboard the *Santa Anna* is over. They are also happy because they've all made it through the screening process and been given permission to enter the country. A door has opened, and a new world lies beyond.

Right: "A doorway to a jungle," is how photographer Stephen Wilkes remembers this image along Corridor 9. "Of all the images I captured here on Ellis Island, none so epitomizes nature's triumph."

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THEIR HAPPINESS IS TEMPERED BY MORE THAN A LITTLE ANXIETY. NONE OF them speaks English. They each have the equivalent of less than 20 American dollars, a bag of clothing and personal items, and the clothes on their backs. All of them are recently married, and they are an ocean away from their loved ones and everything familiar. They have been told that if they can make their way to a place called Harrisburg, in the nearby state of Pennsylvania, they stand a good chance of finding work with the railroad. One of the four, Giuseppe DiRado, a quiet fellow remarkable for his stature (nearly six feet tall at a time when most of his countrymen were quite a bit shorter), and for his love of poetry and the outdoors, leans pensively on the railing of the ferry as it makes the short traverse to Jersey. He looks beyond the soaring statue with the torch toward the open Atlantic, through the narrows that bear the name of his countryman Giovanni da Verrazzano, and thinks of his young wife and infant daughter. He feels the weight of his decision to come here sitting on his shoulders like a sack of wet sand. So much is riding on this.

Today, on a grand October morning, I too leave the cramped confines of the ferry and walk up the gangway to the dock on Ellis Island. I move away from the throng of 600 or so fellow passengers heading to the Immigration Museum, and walk toward the old Ferry Building, toward a shape protruding from the water. The object caught my eye as we came into the slip, and since I had read most of a National Park Service report on the train to New York that morning, I knew what I was looking at. I stood by myself at the edge of the dock and gazed down at the mostly submerged hull of the ferry *Ellis Island*, which sank at her moorings in 1968. Despite the beautiful morning, and my buoyant mood at being in the bustle of the greatest city in the world, I was nearly overcome by emotion. The rotting hulk connects me directly to that young man lost in uncertain reflection upon her deck almost a century ago. He and I were very close when I was a kid, especially after the early death of my father. Giuseppe was my grandfather.

My connection in turn connects me with approximately 40 percent of my fellow citizens. In response to steadily increasing immigration through much of the 19th century, and to the discord of immigration being handled by the individual states, the federal government established the first national immigration center in New York in 1890. President Harrison's administration chose a small island near the New Jersey side of the harbor that had been by turns a Native American encampment, a haunt of colonial fishermen and pirates, and part of the harbor's defensive works. The island was enlarged with fill, and a complex of wood frame buildings was erected named for the 18th century owner Samuel Ellis. The immigration center opened in 1892, welcoming its first newcomer, a 15-year-old Irish girl named Annie Moore, with pomp, publicity, and a \$10 coin. For the approximately 12 million immigrants who followed her, the welcome could be dramatically less warm, but for more than six decades, Ellis Island was the gateway through which a great many American families arrived. It changed us profoundly.

NONE OF THOSE ORIGINAL WOODEN BUILDINGS IS VISIBLE NOW. IN JUNE OF 1897, a catastrophic fire erased them from the landscape, taking with it many of the immigration center's earliest paper records. Congress authorized funding later that year for several new, fireproof buildings. The New York firm of Boring and Tilton designed the imposing and graceful complex of Beaux-Arts structures that greets visitors today. The new immigration station's main building opened in 1900, with additional ones opening as late as 1915. The station operated at its peak for a little over two decades, as huge waves of immigrants from south-



ern and eastern Europe entered the United States. In 1924, with changes in immigration law, immigration processing became the responsibility of individual American consulates in the countries of origin, and only new arrivals who were ill, or arriving under unusual circumstances, or whose paperwork was not in order passed through the complex. After the legislation passed, Ellis Island saw some use as a Coast Guard training facility, a hospital for returning veterans from the Second World War, and an internment camp for enemy aliens, slowly declining until its eventual closing in 1954. President Johnson recognized the facility's role in our heritage by declaring Ellis Island a part of Statue of Liberty National Monument in 1965, placing it in the care of the National Park Service. By that time, the roughly 35 buildings were already badly weathered, with no funds for preservation.

Left: Abandoned room in the former psychiatric hospital on Island 2. Top: An anonymous immigrant with a B&O railroad tag at Ellis Island in 1900. Above: Quarantined patient reads a paper.

AS THE STATUE OF LIBERTY'S CENTENNIAL APPROACHED, A NONPROFIT, THE Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Foundation, was formed in 1982 to support the restoration of both units of the national monument. Through a partnership with the foundation, and the completion of a management plan (also in 1982), a vision for the island's future began to take shape. While it has undergone several iterations, that vision has always included the preservation, rehabilitation, and re-use of at least some of the facilities. During the centennial celebration in 1990, a part of the vision was realized in the re-opening of the main building as the Ellis Island Immigration Museum.

It's an impressive place. The ground floor, originally the baggage room, features objects and exhibits that explain the immigrant's story. It also contains the History Center, where I was able to view my grandfather's records in an electronic database. But for me, it was the second floor that was most evocative. At the top of the steps is a vast and open tiled room. Light spills in from enormous windows. While it is usually



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full of visitors, it is also quiet, like a church. This is the registry room. This is where new arrivals awaited their inspection and interview by immigration inspectors, where they answered the questions about their health, their families, their means, their places of origin, and their destinations. This is where their hopes and fears mingled, where their futures were decided by strangers. I walked the room's length, pausing to admire the soaring skyline of Manhattan across the harbor from one of the northeast windows, then I sat quietly on a wooden bench and felt my grandfather very close to me. While I felt his uncertainty, I

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felt something else as well, a thing he shared with the countless others who waited in this room. I felt his determination. Giuseppe, and the rest of them, had risked everything for a chance to make a new life, and they would not squander it. Their families depended on them. They would move heaven and earth if they had to.

When the ferry drops them in Jersey City, the four young Abruzzese find that train tickets will eat up much of their cash. They are also told, to their horror, that Harrisburg is roughly 150 miles away.

An exceptionally cold week later they present themselves to the hiring foreman at Harrisburg's handsome red brick Pennsylvania Railroad station. Speaking through an interpreter, he asks how they got themselves there since he didn't see any of them debark from a train. He discovers that they walked.

ELLIS ISLAND IS ACTUALLY NOT A SINGLE ISLAND, BUT THREE MOSTLY ARTIFICIAL landforms joined by causeways, created with rock and fill from the mainland and ship's ballast. The main building is on Island 1, surrounded by structures that supported the immediate needs of the arrivals. A couple of these have been rehabilitated, put into use as administrative buildings. Across the ferry slip to the south, on Islands 2 and 3, is the hospital complex—also known as the South Side—a vast array of buildings that has changed little since the facility closed. They contain within them one of the saddest and most compelling chapters of the immigrant's story.

Left: A Greek family just off the boat in 1925. Right: Curved to slow the spread of bacteria, a south side corridor leads from the island's hospital to the measles ward.





CONTAGION SOMETIMES FOUND A HOME IN THE CROWDED THIRD CLASS

sections of ocean liners, with new arrivals debarking on Ellis Island with measles, tuberculosis, influenza, ringworm, and a variety of other ailments. Others left their ports of departure with any number of health or medical conditions ranging from pregnancy to injuries to mental illness. Anyone identified by medical inspectors as unhealthy upon arrival would not be allowed to enter the country and would find themselves in the hospital complex. Here they were cared for in what was, in its day, a state-of-the-art complex. The care was good, but the patients awaited an unknown fate. The language barriers produced fearful uncertainty. Spouses could be disjoined, and terrified children could be separated from parents. Some recovered and were allowed to enter the United States. Some were deported back to their port of origin. Some died. More than a few were actually born there. In a place full of hope for a better life, the hospital buildings were islands of both sorrow and redemption.

A sense of both is evoked in the remarkable images by Stephen Wilkes—featured in this article—who photographed the complex for his book *Ellis Island: Ghosts of Freedom*. His haunting portraits, created in a series of visits between 1998 and 2003, are astonishing. A long, empty hallway draws the viewer with its beckoning glow. A room in the psychiatric hospital is filled with quiet anticipation. The massive steel door of a long silent autoclave in the tuberculosis ward comes to fiery life with an autumn sunset.

When I spoke with Wilkes, it was obvious that the images were a labor of love. “I wasn’t working with a grant or funding, and I certainly had no intention of doing a book,” he says. “But the place had such a broad and deep power.” Architectural photography often involves careful staging, the manipulation of artificial light, and many exposures. But Wilkes’s approach was anything but conventional, dictated for the most part by his subject. “I’d never done architectural photography before,” said Wilkes, “but these never really seemed like static subjects. You could feel an energy that was very much like street photography. When you’re photographing people on the street, you can look at them and know immediately whether it’s okay to photograph them or not. I felt that here.”

For his image of the administration office, Wilkes “walked into the room, and a shaft of sunlight was illuminating a single shoe left on a wooden table. It probably had been sitting there since the ’40s. I immediately took the shot. Later, after repeated visits, I discovered that the room only received direct sunlight for a brief instant every day, and I had just happened to walk in there at precisely the right moment!” According to Wilkes, “three or four shots was a big day.” The book, and a traveling exhibit, have had wide and popular exposure, and many people have reached out to Wilkes with personal stories. “The images always seem to make people want to talk, especially about their families and experiences. There’s something about the place that seems to connect.”



MILLIONS VISIT ELLIS ISLAND EACH YEAR, PILGRIMS TO A PLACE SIGNIFICANT TO ALL OF US. HERE THE CHILDREN OF ITALY AND IRELAND AND POLAND AND RUSSIA AND TURKEY AND BERMUDA AND HUNDREDS OF OTHER PLACES LEFT THEIR OLD SELVES BEHIND. THESE SELVES ARE STILL, IN SOME SENSE, PRESENT.

And indeed there is. Millions visit Ellis Island each year, pilgrims to a place significant to all of us. Here the children of Italy and Ireland and Poland and Russia and Turkey and Bermuda and hundreds of other places left their old selves behind. These selves are still, in some sense, present. “I certainly felt them whenever I was there,” Wilkes says. “Even though the complex was abandoned and overgrown, and I was often alone, there was always a palpable sense of humanity.”

Like a surprising number of immigrants, Giuseppe passed through the center more than once. When he came through the second time in 1920, he was 32, and a very different man.

HE HAD RETURNED HOME IN 1914 TO FINALIZE HIS FAMILY’S AFFAIRS, AND bring his wife Maria and daughter Nicoletta to the new world where he had found the hoped-for job with the railroad. But he arrived at the beginning of the Great War. When he landed in Naples the Italian government seized his passport. A few weeks later, at home in his village, the Carabinieri came and took him away. He was drafted into the army.

Left: Probably there for over half a century, a forlorn shoe sits on a table in the administration office on Island 3. Wilkes captured this image at exactly 3:15 pm, the only time of day when the room receives direct sunlight. Top: The author’s mother, Giulia Bianca DiRado, was eight years old when this c. 1927 passport photo was taken for her journey to America. Middle: The author’s Italian grandfather, Giuseppe Antonio DiRado. Bottom: Giuseppe in the 1930s as a trackman for the Pennsylvania Railroad.

ABOVE DIRADO FAMILY

He was assigned to an artillery battery, where this sensitive, literate, and unassuming man descended into a world of unimaginable violence amidst the jagged and bitterly cold mountains that separate what are now Italy, Slovenia, and Austria. He was unable to speak about it until he was an old man, and even then it sometimes shook him with tears.

So he came back to Ellis Island, to Pennsylvania and the railroad. Economic considerations forced him to leave behind a family that had grown to three children. He would send for them when he had money for passage. He brought with him a silent fury at the injustice visited by



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the government of his native land. This time, he did not lean on the railing of the ferry. There was instead the ramrod straight bearing of a soldier. The uncertain young man of 1911 was gone. He promised himself he would never live where law-abiding men could be torn from their families without appeal or redress. He was very sure of his future; he was his own man now. While it would be six years before he took an oath of citizenship, Giuseppe was already an American.

THE FUTURE OF THE YET-TO-BE RESTORED structures on Ellis Island can be glimpsed in a proposed plan that is breathtaking in scope. The plan provides for the restoration of the 30 remaining structures, and the establishment of a home for the Ellis

Island Institute, the educational arm of Save Ellis Island, a nonprofit partner formed in 2000 to support the rehabilitation of the remaining buildings. According to Save Ellis Island, the institute is envisioned as “an active learning center with a mission to use the evocative power of place on Ellis Island to promote public understanding of the issues surrounding the global migration of peoples . . .” The restored buildings will offer conference space, overnight accommodations, and educational facilities for researchers, teachers, students, community leaders, and elected officials to share and learn from others.

For years, Save Ellis Island has raised funds and support for Ellis Island’s South Side, recently spearheading a national awareness campaign to make the rehabilitation a reality. This includes “We Are Ellis Island,” a web-based collection of personal vignettes by the descendants of immigrants and public service announcements by Olympic swimmer Michael Phelps during the 2008 games in Beijing, among other things. The Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Foundation has raised funds for a \$20 million project, “The Peopling of America,” to encompass the stories of immigration and citizenship.

Left: An Italian immigrant and her three children in 1905. Right: The hospital morgue, on Island 3. In addition to serving as a storage area for deceased patients, the room was also used for autopsies and as an observation area for doctors and medical students studying contagious diseases.

It is a future bright with promise. “Right now, most of the structures are stabilized and environmental issues like lead paint and asbestos are largely abated,” says John Hnedak, the national monument’s deputy superintendent. “With the buildings sealed up and with good roofs on them, they’ll be stable while we continue the planning.” John knows that much heavy lifting is still ahead, however. “We’re now studying the economic feasibility of the project, and we’ll soon have a much better sense of what the ultimate costs will be and how long the implementation will take. Save Ellis Island is doing a feasibility study to determine the likelihood of securing enough private-sector funds for the project. Final implementation is certainly years away.”

There have already been some successes, however. The park and Save Ellis Island have restored the Ferry Building with a combination of government and private funds, and work continues on the rehabilitation of an important hospital outbuilding. The ferry itself is about to be removed, its significant components salvaged and conserved.

ANYONE IDENTIFIED BY MEDICAL INSPECTORS AS UNHEALTHY WOULD NOT BE ALLOWED TO ENTER THE COUNTRY . . . SOME RECOVERED AND WERE ALLOWED TO ENTER THE UNITED STATES. SOME WERE DEPORTED BACK TO THEIR PORT OF ORIGIN. SOME DIED . . . IN A PLACE FULL OF HOPE FOR A BETTER LIFE, THE HOSPITAL BUILDINGS WERE ISLANDS OF BOTH SORROW AND REDEMPTION.

The double-ended, two-deck vessel is deeply connected to the story of the immigration station. When the facility closed, she remained floating at her mooring before finally succumbing to the elements. The sunken vessel was the subject of an intensive archeological investigation by the National Park Service Submerged Resources Center. Dave Conlin, the center’s deputy chief, helped direct the investigations, and proudly notes that the project went so well that “she’s now one of the best documented wrecks on the East Coast!”

For Dave, the ferry holds an important place in the story. “That ride on the ferry was the last touch of the bureaucratic process the immigrants felt before arriving in their new home. If you can imagine what they must have felt aboard her, you can understand that the history and archeology can help convey the essential emotional experience.”

When the conceptual plan is finally implemented, and the institute begins its mission of education, a new era will begin on Ellis Island.





THE ITALIANS HAVE A WORD WITH NO DIRECT ENGLISH CORRELATE: GENTILE.

It conveys a sense of decency, kindness, grace and, yes, gentility, but not the kind acquired with money. In the spring I'd been to the place Giuseppe left behind, along with much of my extended family. It's still a tiny village that doesn't see many tourists. The people there, and the place itself, are *molto gentile*. We met distant relatives and were made welcome. We were regaled with family stories, shown the sites, and ate very well. We left photographs of Giuseppe and his family behind at the "new church," built in 1908, where my mother Giulia was baptized in 1918. She once told me that her most vivid childhood memory of the village was of a landscape of great beauty where the eye could flow from snowcapped mountains down to the sea. In a quiet moment away from my family I found myself behind the "old church" where Giuseppe and Maria were married. Built in the mid-16th century, it perches on the crest of a hill at the edge of the village, affording a magnificent view. From this vantage I saw the world through my mother's eyes. To my left was the soft green Adriatic, and my gaze followed a small river up from the sea westward to the great snowy massif of the central Apennines. Soft hillsides of olives and grapes flanked the river, and the air was filled with bird song. Like almost every other family that passed through Ellis Island, Giuseppe's came to America propelled by grinding poverty and political inequity. I knew that. As I drank in the sweet beauty of the Abruzzo, I learned something about my family I didn't know. I knew to a certainty that leaving this place had broken their hearts.

We are a people in the throes of a debate about immigration, a people who mostly came here from somewhere else. Immigration is at the heart of our saga. As a place of learning and intellectual exchange, Ellis Island may again become a place that changes us, a beacon against the darkness of ignorance, bigotry, and anger. It may help point the way as we wrestle with our response to new waves of strangers. It will continue to remind us where we came from, and tell us who we are.

ON THE MORNING AFTER MEMORIAL DAY, 1927, GIUSEPPE, NOW JOE TO HIS coworkers, waits anxiously in a crowd on a Jersey City wharf as the ferry extends her gangway. This arrival is not as he planned. Aboard the ferry are his three children, but not his wife.

With the passage of the Quota Law in 1921 and the National Origins Act in 1924, limitations were placed on immigrants as Americans reacted with fear to the waves of strangers whose voices and looks differed from those of the northern Europeans who came earlier. Giuseppe suffered for this prejudice. Despite a frantic trip back to Italy in 1924, and a meeting with the American consulate in Rome, only three members of his family received permission to emigrate. So Maria took her children to Naples, entrusted them to the wife of a friend who was also sailing to America (and who would break her promise to watch them onboard) and kissed them goodbye. She would not see them again for a decade, when she was finally granted a visa.

RIGHT TOP FPG/GETTY IMAGES, RIGHT BOTTOM BETTMANN/CORBIS

Left: A mirror in the tuberculosis ward reflects a lonely view of the Statue of Liberty. As photographer Wilkes notes in his book, for some patients that reflection was the closest taste of freedom they ever got. Below: An immigrant family looks across the New York Harbor at Lady Liberty. Bottom: Immigrant children on a window ledge in a circa 1920 photograph.

Giuseppe watches the passengers stream down the gangway as he strains to glimpse the faces he has not seen in three years. After long moments he spies a tall and lovely 16-year-old girl with his wife's beautiful eyes, just as she sees him. They make their way to each other through the throng, and he finds Nicoletta holding hands with Antonio, now a boy of 11 bouncing along with the joy and mischief he would display throughout his life, and with a small and very quiet 8-



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year-old girl who looks like she's been crying. He has not seen Giulia since she was five, and she doesn't remember him very well, holding back behind her sister's skirts. Giuseppe can be reserved and even awkward around children, but he squats down and extends his arms, and she slowly comes forward, still sniffing. As he embraces her, she tentatively puts her arms around his neck, then

squeezes tight, and through his own tears he whispers in her ear "Benvenuto in America."

Per Giuseppe, Maria, Nicoletta, Tonino, e especially per Giulia.

For information on the Ellis Island Institute and the management plan, contact John Hnedak at john_hnedak@nps.gov. For information on Stephen Wilkes' images, go to www.ellislandghosts.com. Joe Baker, an archeologist and writer in Pennsylvania, can be reached at joebear81@comcast.net.