

HISTORICAL INVESTIGATION

PROJECT TITLE: Angel Island, "Passing Through the Eye of the Immigration Station Needle"¹

AUTHOR: Dingani Mthethwa

SCHOOL: Jack Jouett Middle School

SCHOLARSHIP & RESEARCH

1. Primary Investigative Question(s)- What was the experience of immigrants in the Angel Island Immigration Station between 1910 to 1940?

Contextual Essay

As industrial growth hit its height at the end of the 19th century, people from other nations flocked to United States to start new life. The demographics in the United States began to shift from Northern Europe to Southern and Eastern Europe, as well as to Asia and other parts of world. The U.S. struggled to deal with the masses that were knocking at its gates. Immigration became a hot debate among politicians in states and in federal government as many Americans demanded strict rules against immigrants.² The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was a product of that pressure. On the other hand, the existing immigration processing centers became overwhelmed by huge number of immigrants. They became inefficient in handling the swelling numbers of immigrants. In the East Coast, for example, the Garden Castle, the office in charge of processing immigrants, was replaced by the new and better Ellis Island (1896), and it was Angel Island (1910) in the West Coast that replaced a "detention shed" in Pier 40 originally run by steamship companies.³ These changes also became a symbolic transfer of power from the states to federal government in handling immigration affairs.⁴ Just like the Garden Castle, Ellis Island continued to be the main gate of immigrants from Europe while Angel Island was the entrance in the Pacific Rim for Asian immigrants.⁵

¹ I got the phrase "Passing Through the Eye of the Immigration Station Needle" from Helen Zia, the author of *Asian American Dreams: The Emergence of an American People*, it was in one of her comments in her review of Erica Lee and Judy Jung's book *Angel Island: Immigrant Gateway*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010)

² To capture Americans' anti-immigrant feelings during this period, see the cartoon, "The Immigrant: The Stranger at Our Gate", originally published in 1896 by the Magazine *Our Day*. The cartoon shows a short, skinny, sickly immigrant labeled with disease and poverty asking Uncle Sam if he could come in, to which Uncle Sam replied, I suppose you can; there's no law to keep you out." Also see Francis Walker's article, "Restriction of Immigrants" published in June 1896 *Atlantic Magazine*. These primary sources are accessible online through Google.

³ For the history of these immigration stations see "No Lamps Were Lit for Them: Angel Island and the Historiography of Asian American Immigration", Roger Daniels, *Journal of American Ethnic History* Vol. 17, No. 1, Fall, 1997

⁴ Vincent J. Cannato, *American Passage: The History of Ellis Island*, (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2009). In this book, Cannato detail how the federal government replaced the states as the regulators of immigration after 1891. He believes that the construction of Ellis Island was partly about immigration, but it was also part of the story of the expansion of the federal government and the development of the progressive, bureaucratic state. Before 1891, immigration was handled by states in which immigration processing centers were located. Transferring power of immigration to the Federal government became a political issue because immigrant stations were providing revenues to states.

⁵ Erica Lee and Judy Jung's book *Angel Island: Immigrant Gateway*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010)

There has been a tendency to view Angel Island as being equivalent to Ellis Island, and in fact it has often been called the “Ellis Island of the West”. Such generalizations, however, tends to monopolize the “shining” image of Ellis Island over the narratives of Angel Island. Oral evidence and the narratives left behind by the newcomers who immigrated through the Angel Island immigration stations painted a clear, distinct identity. Unlike Ellis Island, which represented the United States with open doors to immigrants, Angel Island seemed to represent America as a country with two doors: one is open, the other is closed. One history is commonly known and the other has been suppressed.

One reason that so much attention has been focused on Elli Island is that there were more immigrants who entered through Ellis Island than through Angel Island. Another reason would be that Angel Island has “mixed” history, which some folks would rather shove under the carpet.

Today, Ellis Island remains the iconic symbol of United States immigration, and the Statue of Liberty appears on buildings and websites of U.S. Department of Homeland Security. This is an ultimate expression of America's image as a welcoming "nation of immigrants." The Statue of Liberty is paralleled by Emma Lazarus's poem, which she wrote in 1882 in celebration of the construction of the Statue of Liberty. Ironically, she wrote this poem in the same year that the exclusive policies against the Chinese immigrants were being debated, which resulted in the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and later the construction of Angel Island.⁶

If Ellis Island represents America's image as a welcoming "nation of immigrants," what does Angel Island represent of America? A Columbian University historian would say Angel Island represents a “history of America’s diverse origins and the government’s diverse policies that welcome some and excluded others.”⁷ The stories of immigrants who were processed through Angel Island paint a different picture of America from Lazarus's poem.⁸ While Lazarus's poem paints Ellis Island with images of freedom and redemption, the poems carved by immigrants in the walls of Angel Island tell the opposite. Consider this poem left by an unknown author: *"This place is called an island of immortals, but in fact the mountain wilderness is a prison. Once you see the open net, why throw yourself in? It is only because of empty pockets I can do nothing else."*⁹

remind us, that although Angel Island was built mainly to process Chinese and other Asian immigrants, immigrants who went through this station came from all over the world including Mexicans, Russians, Filipinos, Koreans and Indians.

⁶ Erika Lee and Judy Yung argued that the move from “detention shed” to the island was favored because it meant improving living conditions, but also it was a security issue. The “detention shed” was inland, making it risky, as immigrants have been escaping the shed entering the country illegally. Angel Island provided tight security. *Angel Island: American Getaway* reviewed by Mae Ngai, in *Special to The Chronicle*, August 29, 2010.

⁷ Mae Ngai teaches history at Columbia University and is the author of “The Lucky Ones: One Family and the Extraordinary Invention of Chinese America”, cited from internet. <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2010/08/27/RVCQ1F1T65.DTL>

⁸ The stories of immigrants who came through Angel Island are the subject of Erica Lee and Judy Jung's book *Angel Island: Immigrant Gateway*. The Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation has posted many Angel Island stories and a few short films on their web site, www.aiisf.org, under “Immigrant Voices.”

⁹ Eddie Wong, the executive director of the Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation between 1900 and 1940, read immigrants' poems when he spoke to Michel Martin on *Tell Me More* from NPR News in February 16, 2009.

The immigration station on Angel Island cannot claim comparable attention to Ellis Island, but it does offer an opportunity to see a different perspective how the United States has always struggled with the regulation of immigration, a challenge that the country is still wrestling with in the 21st century. So what was the experience of immigrants in Angel Island Immigration Station during the time of its existence from 1910 to 1940? The answer will depend on who the immigrants were, where they came from, whether they were male or female, and whether they were wealthy or poor. Federal law required the officials to sift through immigrants to separate the desirable from undesirable, but the enforcement of those statutes was left to officials at the immigration processing stations. This was true for both Angel and Ellis Islands.¹⁰ But Angel Island had one more clearly defined task that Ellis Island did not have: to enforce the complex collection of statutes and regulations emanating from the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act. In short, officials were to prevent Chinese from entering the United States. This is one area where immigrants in Angel Island had different experiences from those immigrants coming through Ellis Island.

A Canadian woman, Ivy Gitlow, was detained in Angel Island in 1916.¹¹ It would be assumed that as a white woman she would have gone through easily, but she did not as she was detained on Angel Island for a month. The officials were suspicious that she was of a lesbian poet and of poor moral character. However, the interrogations and living conditions were better for her as a white woman compared to women of other suspicious nationalities. Soto Shee, a Chinese woman had a seven year old son when she was detained. Her son died while in detention, and he was buried outside the island without his mother because the officials did not allow Soto Shee to observe her son's burial. Historian Robert Eric Barde chronicled a story of another Chinese woman immigrant Quok Shee who spent nearly two years of detention from 1916 to 1918. She was repeatedly interrogated, denied access to a lawyer, and isolated from her husband, the only person she knew in America.¹² Although the Angel Island officials were always suspicious of women being prostitutes regardless of nationality or race, it was worse for Chinese women because of the Chinese Exclusion Act. As a result Chinese women served longer periods in Angel Island as detainees than many other immigrants.¹³ The daily enforcement of immigration policies were driven by race and gender.

Wong said many immigrants did not leave their names as the authors of the poems because it was a shame to be known that one was so poor they had to go through Angel Island.

¹⁰ Vincent Cannato, *American Passage: The History of Ellis Island*, (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2009). Cannato's book summarizes the U.S. immigration policies between 1892 and 1954.

¹¹ This point came from my conversation with Judy Yung on email. Judy is the co-author of *Angel Island: American Getaway*. Judy send me a copy of a letter written by Ivy Gitlow to her sister Elsa about living conditions at the Angel Island and she said it was clean, with white room, the colorful people she encountered in the dining halls, and comforts of immigration station.

¹² Robert Eric Barde, *Immigration at the Golden Gate: Passenger Ships, Exclusion, and Angel Island*, (Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 2008). Barde spends half of the book looking at primary source documents that brings the story of Quoke Shee alive. He analyzed transcripts of lengthy interrogations of Quoke Shee who was detained at Angel Island for 20 months. He share a different perspective of Asian immigration history.

¹³ See Robert Eric Barde, *Immigration at the Golden Gate: Passenger Ships, Exclusion, and Angel Island*, (Connecticut: Praeger, 2008). And Erica Lee and Judy Jung, *Angel Island: Immigrant Gateway*. (New York: Oxford Press, 2010). Erika Lee and Judy Yung collected stories of immigrants who went through Angel Island. The book examines the

In another example, a Mexican woman, Catarino Lopez and her family were detained in Angel Island and later deported because they were deemed “likely to become public charges”. While in detention she gave birth to twins.¹⁴ One would think that she deserved special treatment, but she didn’t. The report said she and her family members looked very thin, and presented “very poor appearances”. They were sent back to Mexico. In another example, Korean students, who came at the same time as Catarino Lopez, were diagnosed with hookworm, a medical condition that for many immigrants was an automatic denial. Even though the students had hookworm and in addition did not possess passports, they were sent to hospital for treatment. The students were later admitted because they had a special letter from the American consul in China describing their family wealth and their strong opposition to Japan, a U.S. enemy at the time. Here again, the immigration policies and its hierarchical treatment of immigrants according to class played out in daily practices in Angel Island. Not only gender and race, but class and global politics influenced the daily decision making process of the Angel Island officials.

The stories of immigrants also show that American domestic policy has been in many ways shaped by international politics. The study of Angel Island’s history is not only about who was coming in and who was denied, but it provides a lens through which one can view America’s role in the global politics. This is not to say that Angel Island should claim comparable attention to Ellis Island, but it means that the story of Angel Island can reveal the history of United States on many issues including how the United States was dealing with foreign countries during times of war and times of peace. The immigrants who came through Angel Island in the years between 1910 through 1940 were caught-up in the web of political struggles when the United States was searching for its identity at home, and seeking both political and economic global power abroad. In fact, the history of Angel Island is profoundly pertinent to present-day immigration gridlock: how do we preserve the high character of American citizenship.

great diversity of United States immigration policy in Angel Island. There are stories not only of the Chinese, but Japanese, Russians, Jews, Koreans, Filipino and Mexican families. More especially, the book covers women’s experience in detail.

¹⁴ The stories of Catarino Lopez and Korean students are chronicled in Erica Lee and Judy Jung, *Angel Island: Immigrant Gateway*. (New York: Oxford Press, 2010).