BY JIM MURPHY

Washington Avenue Immigration Station

Here's where almost one million immigrants entered the United States.

International Navigation Company Emigrant Station at Washington Avenue and the Delaware River, circa 1890.
Image Courtesy of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania

While walking south on Columbus Boulevard one Sunday afternoon, I suddenly noticed a blue and gold Pennsylvania historical marker identifying the site of the Washington Avenue Immigration Station. The marker — at the foot of Washington Avenue — says, "Since the 1870's, the station was an entry point and processing center for immigrants, primarily from Southern and Eastern Europe. From here, newcomers moved into the city or other parts of the state. It was demolished in 1915."

Even though I've lived my entire life within 10 miles of this spot, I never realized Philadelphia had an immigration station. I assumed, incorrectly, that our ancestors all came through Ellis Island.

I was equally surprised to learn that almost one million immigrants first set foot on U.S. soil at Washington Avenue.

Philadelphia is actually one of seven cities that at different times were runners-up to New York as an entry point for immigrants. The others were: Boston, Baltimore, Miami, New Orleans, Los Angeles, San Francisco and, later, Honolulu.

The Washington Avenue Immigration Center "was like a big warehouse," says Bob Skiba, President of the Association of Philadelphia Tour Guides. Bob, who is co-writing a book called *Lost Philadelphia* with fellow guide Ed Mauger (pronounced major), plans to include the immigration station in the book.

Built by the Pennsylvania Railroad near the docks of the American Line (which it also owned), the two-story station included a restaurant, ticket office, money exchange and comfort areas on the ground floor, plus a large lobby. Passengers disembarked onto the second floor, where they were examined and questioned by customs inspectors.

After a $10,000 expansion in 1896, which also included electric lights and steam heating, eight inspectors were able to handle 300 English-speaking or 150 non-English speaking immigrants per hour, or up to 1,500 per day. Before the improvements, the maximum was 300 per day.

The Washington Avenue wharves were a busy, bustling place, says Frederic R. Miller in *Philadelphia: Immigrant City*, a Balch online resource. Factories, warehouses, sugar refineries and grain elevators were nearby, "all connected to the vast yards of the Pennsylvania Railroad."

Outside the station, a crowd of entrepreneurs usually gathered, ready and willing to charge newcomers exorbitant rates for their many services.

On-the-spot weddings
Inside, "The station naturally became one of the most colorful places in Philadelphia," Miller says. For example, a part of the examination room was called the "Altar." Why? "Since under some conditions single women were prevented from landing, many hurried unions were celebrated on the spot."

The American Line, the only one offering weekly sailings, brought 17,342 passengers to Philadelphia from Liverpool in 1882 alone. Even after it began serving New York in the 1890's, the line added "ships with such local names as the Kensington, Southwark, Haverford and Merion to the Philadelphia run around the turn of the century."

In 1898, the Hamburg-American Line began service to Philadelphia, bringing many Polish and Jewish immigrants here. In all, trans-Atlantic steamers brought over 60,000 immigrants to the city in 1913 — the peak. From 1910 to 1914, at the height of immigration from southern and

FAST FACTS

Name:
Washington Avenue Immigration Station

Location: Pier 53, Washington Avenue and Columbus Blvd.

Years in Service: 1873 to 1915

Immigrants Processed Here: Almost 1 million

Original Name: International Navigation Company Immigration Station

Built By: The Pennsylvania Railroad, which wanted to expand its freight and passenger service into the trans-Atlantic market and bypass New York.

EXPLORING THE CITY

eastern Europe, Philadelphia was the third largest immigrant portal in the country.

World War I and restrictive immigration quotas quickly changed that. The annual average of arrivals in Philadelphia plummeted from 49,644 between 1910 and 1914 to 5,598 between 1915 and 1924 and just 408 from 1925 to 1930.

Even though the city is no longer a major immigration portal, its Washington Avenue corridor still attracts foreign-born residents.

A cursory glance at the Southeast Asian temples, shops and restaurants along Washington Avenue — plus the Mexican taquerias, cantinas and stores that have sprung up nearby — shows that this area is again an immigrant gateway, with all the energy and excitement that comes with it.

Next Issue: Learn about Lazarreto, the now-closed quarantine station on the Delaware River, where all ships had to dock for inspection.

Interior of the Washington Avenue Immigrant Station (Pennsylvania Railroad Emigrant Depot), circa 1885.
Image courtesy of Independence Seaport Museum (Philadelphia, PA), 1965.217.

Why Most Immigrants Landed in New York

With its great harbor, New York was much easier to get to from Europe than some of its East Coast rivals. In part, that's why some 12 million immigrants entered the U.S. there. In addition, from its earliest days, Philadelphia had three major disadvantages, according to Frederic R. Miller:
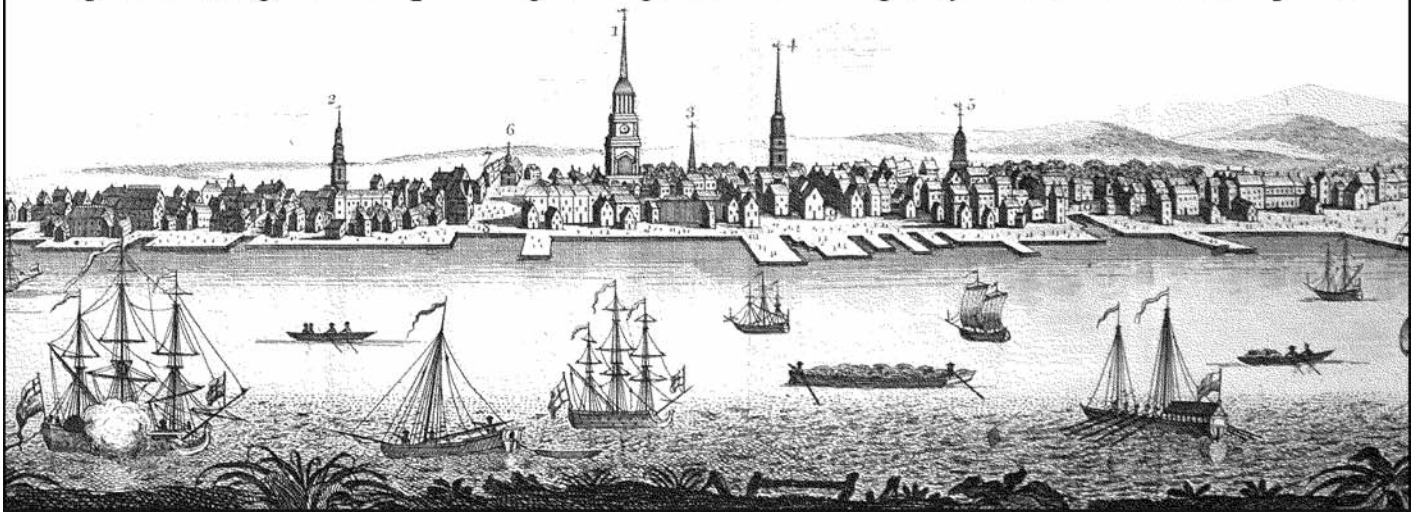
Ice: Even after the city bought an iceboat in 1838, shippers were concerned it would not prevail against five-foot thick ridges of ice in the river.

Longer distance: An ocean voyage to Philadelphia was 200 miles longer than to New York. It also involved traveling 110 miles up a shallow bay and up what used to be a winding river channel.

Torturous travel: Not only was the two-week voyage around Cape May boring, it was frustrating to the weary travelers, too, because land was in sight the whole time.