

# Four Centuries of New Americans

## Residents, Immigrants, and Heritage in Quincy

### An Overview



Photo by Robert G. Noble

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People have lived in what is now Quincy for thousands of years. The people who live here today and the community they form are the latest point in a long historical process.

### *Before 1820*

Members of the Massachusetts tribe of American Indians for centuries made the shore of Quincy Bay their warm season home. In 1617 an epidemic, probably a disease brought on a visiting European ship, ravaged the native population here and along the New England coastline. Estimates are that 80% of the people died. By the time of King Philip's War, 1675-77, little presence of the Massachusetts remained in the town. However, descendants of these original inhabitants still live in the general area today.

Most European settlers here in the colonial era came from England, but by no means all. Most significant were the skilled workers brought from Germany to labor in the glassworks in the 1750s. They created a new neighborhood name, "Germantown." And when the glassworks failed, a number of the workers remained and established families. Their descendants included some of the most prominent residents of the 1800s.

Although slavery was not prevalent in New England, there were African Americans here in the colonial years who were held as slaves. There is also evidence of free African Americans here.

### *1820-1920*

The century from 1820 to 1920 was the great period of diverse European immigration to America. In that 100 years, Quincy grew from a town of 1,600 residents to a city of nearly 50,000.

Immigrants changed Quincy into an ethnically and religiously diverse community, with several Protestant denominations, Roman Catholicism, Orthodox Christianity, Judaism, and Islam all represented.

The waves of immigrants who would change the composition of Quincy from 1820 to 1920 conformed to the larger national pattern of immigration. Irish immigrants were the first and largest group and their period of immigration, the longest. Other northern European groups soon followed. Immigrants from southern and eastern Europe arrived from the later 1800s through the early 1900s. Significant numbers of immigrants also began to arrive from Lebanon and Syria in the early 1900s.

In Quincy, the granite industry—which underwent a tremendous expansion after 1825—was the specific stimulus to urbanization and immigration. At first, the granite industry attracted American-born workers from elsewhere in New England, then increasingly, immigrants. For much of the 1800s, close to half of Quincy's working population labored in granite or a related industry.

While, as everywhere, immigrants had to toil here to support themselves and their families, there are few signs of the most desperate levels of poverty and suffering that many experienced in cities like Boston. Many immigrants coming to Quincy may have already spent time laboring in Boston or elsewhere.

However, the life of the immigrant was not in any sense easy. The first generations of Irish took the unskilled jobs that existed in the granite quarries. Later immigrants took similar jobs or worked in the factory-based industries that began to be established in Quincy by the 1890s. Others--denied other access to work--established one-person businesses.

Some immigrant groups did arrive here because they had become skilled workers at home in stone cutting. Among these were the Scots, who began arriving in the 1850s (some later Scots would similarly arrive with shipbuilding trades). Swedish immigrants began arriving in the early 1870s and Finns established themselves slightly later. Although the growth of Quincy's Italian community in many ways mirrored the large scale immigration of Italians to the United States, there were also a number of skilled stonecutters who came deliberately to Quincy.

Many immigrants were able to move from being granite workers to owners of small quarries or cutting yards. Immigrant groups over the course of a generation or two--sometimes quicker--gained economic

stability and began to play major roles in the community.

The growth and increasing diversity of Quincy in the 19th century can be seen in the Massachusetts State Census. In 1855, immigrants constitute 26% of the total population of 6,000. Of the immigrants, 80% are Irish and almost all the others are from elsewhere in the British Isles. In 1895 immigrants reach their peak percentage of the overall population: 34% of a total population of 21,000. By 1915, while the percentage of immigrants has dropped a point to 33%, the total population of the city has doubled in 20 years to 41,000. The 1915 census lists more than a dozen countries of origin for significant numbers of immigrants to Quincy. They include Italy, Ireland, England, Scotland, Sweden, Finland, Russia, Syria, Germany, Norway, Poland, and Greece.

### *1980 to Present*

In recent years Quincy has again become home to new Americans. The largest numbers of immigrants have come from East Asia. Although Chinese have lived and worked in Quincy since the turn of the 20th century, the rapid increase in the city's Asian population dates from around 1980, when the U.S. census counted 990 residents of Asian heritage. The 2000 census reported there were 13,500 Quincy residents of Asian heritage, more than 15% of the population.

As in the past, immigration is quite diverse. Quincy today is home to immigrants from

Africa, South America, the Indian subcontinent, the Middle East, and Europe.

There are both changes and constants in the immigrant experience. While immigrants a generation ago would have settled first in Boston, then moved out to Quincy, many now come to Quincy directly. In the absence of a single dominant industry like the granite industry and in the context of a 21st century economy, Quincy's new Americans pursue work and success in a wide variety of ways. And as did the immigrants of the 1800s, these new Americans bring traditions and cultural institutions with them that strengthen the life of the city.

At the same time, the earlier immigrant groups all retain a presence within the Quincy. In particular, the two largest earlier groups--Italians and Irish--still are a substantial part of the population. The *Patriot Ledger* recently reported that 31% of Quincy residents identify themselves as of Irish heritage--although not all are descendants of Quincy's original Irish immigrants.

The diversity of all the groups that have lived here and continue to come here and Quincy's strong sense of tradition have created for Quincy an exceptionally rich heritage and the prospect for a vibrant future.