

More than 12 million immigrants landed at Ellis Island, the first stop in the New World, yet for 45 years, the island's south side has been neglected. Now, the Park Service has a \$6.6-million plan to stabilize the south side's buildings—the first step toward bringing the island's heritage back to life.

BY WENDY MITMAN CLARKE



ISLAND OF HOPE

IF THE SOUTH SIDE of Ellis Island were one of the thousands of immigrants cared for in its hospital wards, the diagnosis might go something like this: advanced decrepitude. And the prognosis? Terminal, if not treated immediately.

For 45 years, Ellis Island's "sad side" has been nearly entirely neglected. A huge hospital complex built between 1902 and 1908, where immigrants received free, state-of-the-art medical care, sits virtually abandoned. While the island's north side (with the exception of one major building) underwent a \$200-million restoration in the late 1980s and now sees nearly 2 million visitors a year, the south side remains fenced off, posted with danger signs, and left to its history and the ravages of the elements.

Roofs leak; windows are broken or altogether gone; plaster, asbestos, and decades of bird droppings mire every horizontal surface; acres of poison ivy and weeds creep through the buildings; steel framing rusts and buckles; and water drips down collapsing stairways

and crumbling stucco walls.

"Forty-five years is a circuitous route to decay," says Richard Wells, director of planning and development for the Statue of Liberty National Monument, of which Ellis Island is a part. "They're basically wide open to the elements."

It has been an ignominious and lonely fate for what many deem a fundamental part of our nation's cultural history, but it's also a fate that may, at last, be changing. A \$6.6-million plan to stabilize the south side's 29 buildings, which the National Park Service (NPS) estimates will give them another ten to 15 years on life support, began this spring. The New Ferry Building, built by the Works Progress Administration in 1934, has received a \$1.1-million preservation grant from the Save America's Treasures program.

The New Jersey Governor's Advisory Committee on the Preservation and Use of Ellis Island is raising matching money, and restoration should be under way next year. Meantime, the Park Service is working on a financial feasibility study to help find a long-term cure and

use for the buildings.

"The immediate challenge on Ellis Island is to construct a public-private partnership that honors the integrity of the park and upholds its purpose while being financially feasible," says Eileen Woodford, NPCA's Northeast regional director. Located just off the New Jersey coast within the Statue of Liberty's shadow, Ellis Island is really a combination of three islands created largely by fill in the late 1800s and early 1900s, connected by a thin strip of land on their western edge. The original island (last privately owned in the 1770s by one Samuel Ellis) was about 3.3 acres. After serving as a military fort and harbor defense in the 1800s, Ellis in 1892 became the country's main ingress for immigrants. Between 1890 and 1906, the original island (the north side) was expanded, and two islands (the south side) were added. Two ferry slips separated the three rectangular peninsulas, though in the 1920s the government filled the second slip between islands two and three to create "the great lawn," a broad grassy park for immi-



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grants staying in the south side's hospital wards. In 1934, more fill was added on the western edge, and the Recreation Hall, New Ferry Building, and Immigrant Building were built. In this final configuration, Ellis grew to 27.5 acres.

All immigrants arrived at Ellis' Main Building on the north side, where they underwent brief medical inspections. The U.S. Public Health and Marine Hospital Service was charged with screening to exclude "idiots, insane persons, paupers, or persons likely to become public charges, [and] persons suffering from loathsome or dangerous contagious diseases." If someone needed a more thorough check, the doctor would chalk the immigrant's chest or back with a letter signifying the suspected problem: a circled X for definite signs of mental disease; C for conjunctivitis; H for a heart ailment; L for lameness; PG for pregnant.

If deemed curable, the immigrants were treated at the south side's hospital complex. About 20 percent of the 12 million people who came to Ellis spent time in its hospitals. More than 355

babies were born there. An estimated 3,500 people died there, within sight of the New World they would never reach.

Even by today's standards, the hospital complex was huge, with a staff of 700 and more than 750 beds. Connected by corridors, the buildings include about 234,000 square feet of space. Fully electrified, they boasted state-of-the-art medical features such as a giant autoclave for sterilizing mattresses, a morgue with amphitheater where doctors studied cadavers for clues and cures of rare diseases, and enormous win-

dows and porches to promote air circulation. The Contagious Diseases Hospital consisted of 16 buildings jutting off either side of a 1,000-foot-long, two-story hallway. The design permitted light and fresh air to enter the wards where people were treated for everything from measles to typhoid fever. Built in 1906 in the Mission style, that hospital has low, sloping, red-tiled roofs, stucco walls, and red brick trim. Across the great lawn and built between 1902 and 1908, the Main Hospital, Administration Building, and New Hospital Extension (all three stories and connected by huge, three-story corridors) are of French Renaissance style, with red brick, limestone trim, and red-tiled roofs.

During both of the world wars, the hospital buildings housed wounded soldiers and also detained some suspected "alien" enemies. In 1954, the immigration station was closed and Ellis Island declared surplus federal property. In 1965, the island was transferred to the National Park Service and became part of Statue of Liberty National Monument. With no funds to maintain



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Decay plagues the buildings on the south side of Ellis Island (top), which, after land modification in the 1920s, now appears as two islands separated by a ferry slip.

ELLIS ISLAND *Continued*

the island's buildings, the Park Service for years did little more than provide security. In the 1970s, Congress allowed the Park Service to take some leftover money from Bicentennial funds to do some repairs on the Main and Hospital Administration buildings.

In a 1982 general management plan, the Park Service decided that the Main Building on Ellis' north side would be big enough for park operations and visitors. In 1984, the agency joined forces with the Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Foundation and began a \$200-million, publicly funded restoration (the largest in the country) of the north side. All but the Oil Storage and Baggage and Dormitory buildings were restored, opening in 1990. (Built in 1908, the Baggage and Dormitory Building provided overnight accommodations for immigrants who couldn't be processed in one day. About 150,000 square feet and three stories tall, it's in horrible shape, largely due to its flat roof and water damage. The foundation, which wants to move its American Family Immigration History Center there, has estimated it will cost \$80 million to restore it, though no firm plan has been set.)

In the meantime, the south side's prognosis grew bleaker. In 1988, the secretary of the Interior signed off on a private developer's plan that would have demolished ten buildings and built a new hotel to create an international conference center.

"As you can well imagine, the historic preservation community went ballistic," says Wells. Plans to develop the island had been largely pushed by New Jersey, which now holds jurisdiction over 80 percent of the 27.5-acre island as a result of a 1998 ruling by the Supreme Court.

An 1834 compact gave New York rights to three original acres of the island, but New Jersey was given claim to the water-covered portions west of cen-

tral harbor. These submerged acres have been filled in during the last century, creating an unclaimed piece of property that New York officials assumed was theirs. Although the Supreme Court ruled in New Jersey's favor, the Park Service continues to manage the island and its interpretation as part of the Statue of Liberty.

"The Supreme Court case was putting a cloudy title on the property," says Michael Adlerstein, associate regional director for the NPS Northeast region and project director for the north side's restoration. State pension funds, a primary source of large-scale construction financing, were unwilling



Doctors inspected and chalk marked immigrants with health problems in mere seconds at the Main Building.

to invest in the project because it wasn't clear which state would end up with jurisdiction, he says.

Ellis Island's south side became a poster child for a chronic problem facing the National Park Service: lack of funding for maintenance or restoration of historic buildings.

"Sadly, the deplorable condition of many of Ellis Island's buildings represents the deteriorated state of thousands of historic resources within our underfunded National Park System," says Richard Moe, president of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, which in 1997 put Ellis at the top of its annual list of America's 11 Most Endangered Historic Places.

"It's a disgrace that the federal government, which should have cared, allowed it to get to this stage," says Finn Caspersen, chairman of the New Jersey Governor's Advisory Committee on the Preservation and Use of Ellis Island. "To let that history go by the wayside verges on criminal."

The Park Service has about 9,500 historic buildings among its 25,000 historic and prehistoric structures, says Randy Biallis, the Park Service's chief historical architect. Overall, the agency has a \$1-billion backlog of repairs and treatment to those structures. About 70 percent of that is for buildings alone. Every year, the Park Service submits about \$100 million for all construction, and about a third to half of that goes to historic structures.

"That varies depending upon management's interests in any one year and what the administration will accept," he says. "So we're not getting very much a year in relation to our total need."

Biallis says restorations are relatively rare (one a year system-wide is a lot, he says) mainly because they are extremely expensive, and help from public-private partnerships, like that for Ellis' north side, is unusual. Park administrators, always trying to stretch dollars, will instead choose less

intensive treatments like stabilization. Another part of the equation is whether a building has an actual use.

"Management isn't just looking at what's culturally significant," Biallis says. "If they need a visitor center and they have a historic building, then they will restore that building to be used as a visitor center. Management tends to put money where there is a real need for a use.... For the south buildings [at Ellis], if you don't have a use, it's hard to justify putting that money into them, and there would be ongoing maintenance costs. What are you going to do, heat an empty building?"

Wells says plenty of uses have been suggested for the south side over the

years, among them an artists' colony, ethnic culture museums, and a public health and medical history museum. What eventually happens there will depend in part on the results of a \$330,000 financial feasibility study being funded by the foundation and the New Jersey Governor's Advisory Committee that's to be finished this fall. The study is using three criteria to help define what uses are acceptable: one, to preserve the resource; two, to be compatible with other historic and interpretive activities at Ellis; and three, to be financially self-sustaining.

"That's really the challenge, to find uses that fit all three," Wells says. "The financial feasibility study will look at the full range of alternatives, and if any of them makes it through the sieves but can't be self-sustaining, then the study will look for other means of subsidizing those activities, whether that's museum membership, fundraising, congressional subsidy, or another foundation."

Based on restoration costs of the north side, Wells has estimated that a complete restoration of the south side would cost up to \$300 million. Knowing that kind of money will not just fall out of congressional or public pockets, the Park Service and the New York Landmarks Conservancy teamed up in 1997 to conduct a demonstration project on the Office and Laboratory Building. Using low-tech, inexpensive fixes, such as clearing moisture-trapping vegetation, covering windows and doors with louvered plywood to keep water out but let light and air in, installing temporary asphalt shingles where tile roofs had failed, and using a paint-on filler to plug the hundreds of holes in the copper gutters, they stabilized the building for \$39,000 (not including some pro bono materials and labor).

"It was a last-ditch effort to convince Congress to do what it had failed to do for half a century, which is provide adequate funds to maintain them," says

Roger Lang, the conservancy's director of community programs.

The demonstration program succeeded. Congress in 1998 approved \$2 million to start the program this year. One million dollars are in the fiscal 2000 budget, though New York and New Jersey's congressional delegations are pushing for another \$1 million, and New Jersey has pledged to match any additional funding from Congress to meet the \$2-million goal for fiscal 2000. The final money should come in fiscal 2001.



Incoming immigrants marked with a circled X at the arrival inspection were sent to the Psychopathic Ward to be further screened or treated if deemed curable.

The plan has five main elements: removing hazardous materials inside the buildings; repairing and enclosing windows and doors; repairing roofs; removing weeds, ivy, and all vegetation not historic to the site; and stabilizing the structures. New Jersey corrections inmates cleared vegetation this summer and fall, and by the end of the year, work will be well under way on the three buildings in the worst shape: the Main Hospital, Administration Building, and New Hospital Extension.

During a recent visit to Ellis Island,

NPCA's Woodford described for the association's Board of Trustees the complexity of the problems facing the Park Service as it prepares to tackle what could be one of the largest restoration plans. The complexity comes not only from the sheer magnitude of the work involved in restoring the historic buildings, but from the partnership required to finance the work.

"It's a new frontier," says NPCA's President Thomas C. Kiernan. "What a partnership should do or how it should be organized still is not defined. How

much control should the National Park Service surrender, and how we can ensure that the public still has its say? There are many questions to ask as we move forward."

Whatever the answers may prove to be, it is hoped that the Park Service will have enough time to cure Ellis Island's south side of its terminal status, once and for all.

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