

Ellis Island building gets turned into a museum of immigration

Private foundation that renovated main building spearheaded the effort

BY [ERICA PEARSON](#) / NEW YORK DAILY NEWS

Nearly half of all Americans have a family tie to at least one immigrant who passed through Ellis Island, officials say.

Now, 120 years since a 15-year-old Irish girl became the first to go through its doors, the private foundation that renovated the red brick main building in the 1980s is turning it into a museum to teach visitors about immigration on a wider scale.

“We have brought new life to it,” said Stephen Briganti, president of the Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Foundation.

On Thursday, Briganti’s group honored two well-known Americans whose grandparents once waited on line in Ellis’ main building — former St. Louis Cardinals manager Tony La Russa and New York architect Richard Meier.

They also gave an achievement award to a beloved actress who immigrated to the U.S. herself — Angela Lansbury. At age 14, she took a ship from Liverpool to Montreal and then a train to New York City, spending her first night in the Algonquin Hotel.

“You’re looking at a bit of a puddle at this point,” said a teary Lansbury after a touching video presentation of her journey.

“So many memories... This really was the land of opportunity.”

The trio accepted their awards in the building’s second floor Great Hall, or registry room, where immigrants once lined up to answer questions like, “Do you have any money with you?” and “Are you an anarchist?” historians say.

The first part of the foundation’s \$20 million National Museum of Immigration project opened quietly last fall.

Called *Journeys: The Peopling of America 1550-1890*, it uses video screens and audio recordings to show how and why new Americans arrived before Ellis Island became an immigration center. It includes the stories of those who arrived in bondage on slave trading ships.

A second exhibit, slated to open next year, will focus on newcomers and the restrictions that barred or regulated them after Ellis closed in the 1950s.

“It really is an effort to be more inclusive and turn this into a museum for immigration,” said Rutgers University historian Ginny Yans, who has been a member of the group’s history committee since it was founded.

Before its restoration began a few decades ago, Ellis’ main building had crumbled to such a degree that visitors had to wear a hard hat to go inside, Yans said.

“It was a ruin,” she said.

epearson@nydailynews.com

<http://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/ellis-island-building-turned-a-museum-immigration-article-1.1064757>