



A Story of Immigration and Emigration

Emigrants leave their homeland and become immigrants in their new country of residence. The course of human history is the story of people on the move, escaping religious persecution, political upheaval, hardship and poverty to seek a better life of freedom, safety and prosperity in a new land. Think of Moses leading the Israelites out of Egypt on their 40-year exodus to the Promised Land, the 1.5 million who fled Ireland for the Americas during potato famines from 1845 to 1855, and the 6.6 million Syrians who have fled their homeland seeking shelter in Europe and other countries since 2011. Human history is also the story of immigrants from different places of origin, languages, religions, and races, finding their place together in a new homeland.

The United States has been a land of immigrants. So has Venezuela for much of its history. For both countries, immigration came in waves of greater or lesser intensity, reflecting both internal factors, primarily the availability of land and jobs, and external ones, the unfolding history of countries from which people emigrated.

The first wave of European immigration in the United States, from the colonization of Jamestown in 1607 until the American Revolution, primarily came from England. Following the revolution, British immigration declined as did that of African slaves, an enterprise controlled by the British and eventually outlawed in 1808. There was relatively little immigration from the Revolutionary War until the 1830s. Population growth came primarily from natural increase and U.S. expansion into territories previously governed by France (Louisiana Purchase 1803), Spain (Florida 1819), Mexico (SW states 1848 and 1854) and Russia (Alaska 1867). From 143,000 immigrants in the entire 1820s decade, numbers soared to 1,713,000 in the 1840s and kept going up from there. With an act of Congress in 1851, native Americans were consigned to reservations, forced to give up their lands to accommodate white settlement on the ever-expanding western frontier. Minnesota became a major destination for immigrants. From our entry into the union in 1858 until 1900, figures from each census identified between 32.5% and 36.5% of Minnesota's residents as foreign born, a figure consistently higher than any other state. German and Scandinavian farmers, French lumberjacks and traders, Eastern European miners, and Irish laborers found their place in our state. In the urban centers of our eastern states, immigrants soon made up the bulk of the U.S. industrial labor pool in textile mills, factories, and construction.

The colonization of Venezuela, as with the rest of Latin America, took on a very different character, being a tightly controlled extension of Spanish rule rather than the quest for freedom from European powers which motivated much of North American colonization. Spain discouraged non-Spaniard immigration to its colonies to prevent other European countries from asserting claims. Unaware of Venezuela's extensive gold reserves and mineral deposits, Spain's only commercial interests in the area at first were pearls and salt deposits. Obsessed with extracting precious metals, Spain initially showed little interest in Venezuela's agricultural and livestock potential. In the mid 1600's, however, the cacao bean (cocoa) changed all that. New to their palate, Europeans developed a taste for chocolate processed from cacao beans. The demand for cacao created Venezuela's first major wave of immigration. Wealthy Spanish entrepreneurs developed plantations. Waves of field workers came from the Canary Islands. Thousands of African slaves were traded for cacao at Venezuelan markets. To eliminate illegal trade with Dutch and British merchants and capture profits for itself, the Spanish crown granted exclusive trading rights in cacao to what became known as the Caracas Company. Prices for cacao were fixed at significantly lower prices than growers had previously been able to receive, eventually resulting in a rebellion led by growers and joined by Venezuela's lower classes in 1749. Although the revolt was quickly put down by Spanish troops, it had an influence in Venezuela similar to the Boston Tea Party in the states. The seeds of discontent with Spanish rule had put down roots that eventually grew into the independence movement led by Simon Bolivar, resulting in Venezuelan independence in 1821.

Although Venezuela's war for independence and that of the United States were fought for similar reasons, the eventual outcome as far as the common people were concerned was quite different, in many ways due to the make-up and interaction of each country's immigrant populations. I'll pick up the account next week.

Points to ponder

When and from where did your ancestors emigrate? What are some of their stories as immigrants in the U.S.?

The Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis has staffed and supported parishes in the diocese of Ciudad Guayana in Venezuela since 1970. These "Did you know?" papers are designed to give you a better understanding of life in Venezuela and to strengthen connections between the parishes of the Archdiocese and their archdiocesan mission during our 50th anniversary year. Please direct any comments or suggestions for future papers to Fr. Denny Dempsey at ddempsey@churchofstdominic.org or 651-368-7324.