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## TRUMP'S WALL AND PRESCOTT HALL

THE ANTI-IMMIGRATION PLAYBOOK WAS  
MADE IN MASSACHUSETTS A CENTURY AGO  
BY A BOSTON BRAHMIN ON A CRUSADE  
TO BAN "THE UNDESIRABLES."

BY NEIL SWIDEY

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**I**'VE FALLEN INTO A PATTERN LATELY. Time and again, I find myself looking up from the reading I've been immersed in and calling over to my wife, "You'll never believe what he said now."

The phrases have jumped out at me, one after another. The vow to "drain that great swamp." The prediction that "the race which has made our country great will pass away." The promise to beat back the "invading hostile army" of "criminal immigrants" that are the "mentally or physically defective" dregs of their homelands and "not the stuff of which patriots are made."

Maybe sentiments like these have also jumped out at you, in the news about immigration you've been consuming. The difference is that the writings on my reading list are more than a hundred years old.

These familiar themes about bans, borders, and walls—and especially about how the radical and dangerous new immigrants don't measure up to the "quality" ones we used to get—weren't crafted by Donald Trump or his Breitbart consigliere, Steve Bannon, sitting in Trump Tower channeling the grievances of the white working class. Instead, they are part of an immigration Ur-text painstakingly assembled,

brick by nativist brick, in Boston, by three Brahmin intellectuals, beginning in 1894. That's when the trio founded the Immigration Restriction League, the equivalent of a modern-day think tank, just five years after all three had graduated from Harvard.

Leading the group was Prescott Farnsworth Hall, a lawyer and Brookline homebody who was largely unknown, even in his day. But in the words of his contemporary Madison Grant, a prominent intellectual who hobnobbed with presidents and authored the influential book *The Passing of the Great Race*, Hall was the "guiding hand" who "saw with the vision of a prophet a full generation ahead of his countrymen."

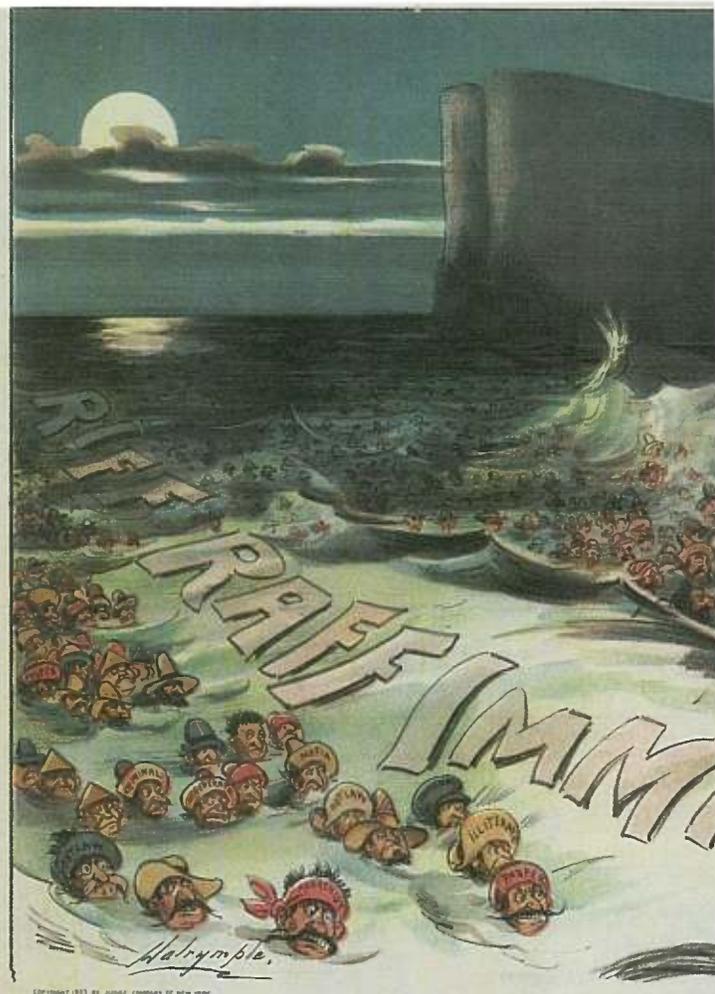
Pallid and gaunt, Hall didn't like to stray far from his beloved backyard garden, where he could identify by name every plant and insect in residence. Just the sight of a cat with a mouse in its jaws, his wife once said, "distressed him unbearably."

How this hypersensitive insomniac managed to create the underpinnings of a revolution in immigration policy is as surprising as it is remarkable. And now feels like the perfect time to understand his reasoning. After all, the argument he advanced in the horse-and-buggy age is being re-injected, sometimes practically word for word, into our Make America Great Again debate about immigration in the 21st century.

At the close of the 19th century, Hall and his colleagues began warning the nation about the consequences of unchecked immigration. Their chief ally in Washington was Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, owner of two of the most storied surnames in Massachusetts history. For all their connections and zeal, though, these men had little to show for their anti-immigration efforts after 20 years.

But they made a large leap exactly 100 years ago. On February 5, 1917, the restriction advocates scored their first big win with the passage of the federal Immigration Act of 1917. Getting the law approved required a congressional override of a presidential veto.

The sweeping law opened a new epoch in the nation's handling of immigration. While there had been earlier measures relatively limited in scope or specific to certain groups, the 1917 law asserted a federal framework for broadly restricting, rather than merely regulating, immigration. It imposed an \$8 head tax on each arriving immigrant and froze out everyone from a huge swath of the globe known as the "Asiatic Barred Zone." It also expanded the list of prohibited "undesirables"—which already included epileptics, "im-



**THE HIGH TIDE OF IMMIGRATION**  
Immigration statistics for the past year show that the influx of foreigners was the greatest in



Prescott Farnsworth Hall



Henry Cabot Lodge

**A CARTOON FROM 1903 SHOWS WAVES OF "OUTLAW," "PAUPER," "DEGENERATE," AND "ANARCHIST" IMMIGRANTS THREATENING AMERICAN SOCIETY.**

beciles," and prostitutes—to encompass vagrants, alcoholics, a wider class of alien radicals, and the opaque "persons of constitutional psychopathic inferiority." Most important, and reflecting the centerpiece of Hall's argument, the law imposed a new literacy test that shut out any foreigners who lacked basic reading ability in their native language.

Hall and his fellow Brahmin restrictionists celebrated the passage of the 1917 law with a quiet dinner at the Union Club on Boston's Beacon Hill. Far from being content, they were just getting started. Their efforts would have a more lasting payoff in subsequent years, culminating with a Draconian quota law signed by President Calvin Coolidge. A former governor of Massachusetts, Coolidge had lamented that the country was becoming a "dumping ground" and pledged that "America must



**NATIONAL MENACE.**

Hard-working peasants are now being supplanted by the criminals and outlaws of all Europe.

remain American.”

Heated rhetoric about Muslim bans, Mexican walls, and Mexican rapts has elicited harrumphs and horror in progressive Massachusetts, especially in the precincts around Harvard Yard, where Hillary Clinton trounced Trump. (He won just 4 percent of the vote there.) So it may turn more than a few faces crimson to learn that, like basketball, the microwave oven, and public education, the intellectual playbook for anti-immigration policy was made right here in Massachusetts.

**I**F YOU WANT TO UNDERSTAND just how divided the American mind has always been on immigration, a good place to start would be the immortal words from Emma Lazarus’s 1883 poem displayed inside the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty. “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore.”

Those 20 words perfectly capture the story we tell ourselves about how this “nation of immigrants” has historically welcomed foreigners with open arms. Yet they also highlight the ways in which we’ve often kept them out with a stiff arm.

Boston College Law School professor Daniel Kanstroom, a specialist in immigration law who wrote a book called *Deportation Nation*, likes to show our less welcoming past by annotating Lazarus’s poem for his students. “Give me your tired?” he says. “No, if you can’t work, you can’t get in. Your poor? No, if you’re poor, you’re likely to become a ‘public charge,’ so you can’t get in. Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free? No, you sound like an anarchist, so you’re not getting in. The wretched refuse of your teeming shore? No, you probably have a disease, so stay out!”

“It’s an eternal tension—always like this,” Kanstroom tells me, theatrically smashing his two fists together. “The struggle for the soul of the country has played out over immigration.”

The tension is older than the nation. In Colonial times, individual towns decided which outsiders got in, and they tended to be zealous in keeping out low-income transients, referred to as “the strolling poor.” New England towns were in the vanguard in establishing what Kanstroom calls a “proto-deportation” system known as “warning out.” Basically, all newcomers born elsewhere were on lengthy probation. If they got sick, committed a crime, got pregnant out of wedlock, or even just kept an annoying dog, a council made up of propertied residents could vote them out of town. Like a nitpicking condo association, these councils had wide latitude and enjoyed using it. In 1734, the village of Canton soured on a newcomer after discovering that “a glass of good liquor stands a very narrow chance when it lies in his way.”

For much of the country’s first century, the federal government left immigration controls to the states and cities. The primary exception was the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798, passed as the drumbeat for war with France intensified. Although President John Adams averted war (in part by hiding out in Quincy for five months), he signed legislation that lengthened the residency requirement for naturalization to 14 years and blocked the pathway to citizenship for immigrants from “enemy nations.”

It was an early indicator of what would become the nation’s MO. For long stretches when the economy is good, most of us don’t get very worked up about the immigrants landing here, especially if the numbers seem manageable. But when the going gets tough, history shows that it doesn’t take long for us to turn on them.

Most often, the pattern has followed Newton’s third law: For every action—in this case a huge spike in immigration flow—there is an equal and opposite reaction. In the mid-1800s, the potato famine in Ireland and unrest following a failed revolution in Germany sent an unprecedented flood of migrants from those countries to American shores. Enter the American, or Know-Nothing, Party.

That party got its name because, when pressed, members professed, *Hogan’s Heroes* style, to know nothing about their anti-Catholic, anti-immigrant agenda. The Know-Nothings got enough traction to put the word “nativism” on the map. They even recruited a former president—albeit one of the duds, Millard Fillmore—to make another White House run on their behalf. Ironically, the Massachusetts Know-Nothings were responsible for the desegregation of Boston public schools, which they pushed through partly to keep black voters in their coalition.

Inevitably, though, the Know-Nothings petered out. Their undoing was the Civil War, which unified the North at the same time it dramatically lowered new immigration: Desperate residents of war-torn countries tend not to migrate to other war-torn countries.

The next equal and opposite reaction was the Chinese Exclusion Act, approved in 1882, a few years after the US Supreme Court had ruled that immigration oversight rested with the federal government rather than the states. The 1849 Gold Rush and subsequent construction of the transcontinental railroad had brought waves of Chinese laborers to California and other Western states. They quickly became big business’s favorite form of cheap labor, largely in the West, but also in the post-slavery South.

The presence of all these foreigners stoked resentment among natives, especially when an economic panic dragged on through much of the 1870s, bringing hardship, wage cuts, and unemployment. Organized labor got into the nativist act, arguing with some justification that this large supply of cheap foreign labor was turning their bargaining power into so much weak tea. Workingmen’s Party leader Denis Kearney blended this practical economic argument with some high-test racism to gain serious political power. A native of Ireland, Kearney had been

an immigrant laborer himself. But he embraced the close-the-door-behind-me mentality that immigrants have been adopting probably since Siberians first crossed the Bering Land Bridge to get to Alaska. Kearney wrapped up all his speeches with this drop-the-mike line: "And whatever happens, the Chinese must go."

They went.

The Chinese Exclusion Act prohibited new immigration from China and blocked those already here from becoming naturalized citizens. The act applied only to one ethnic group, concentrated largely in the West, but a far bigger change to the national landscape occurred over the course of the 1880s, when a new flood of mostly European immigrants arrived here. Fleeing hardship at home, they came for jobs at American factories that were humming at the start of the Second Industrial Revolution. Thanks to technological advances, factories could get by with much lower-skilled (and cheaper) workers, and steamship lines could offer immigrants much quicker travel than in the past. Instead of carrying 200 passengers for a journey that took weeks, a high-speed ship would eventually be able to transport 2,000 from Europe to Boston or New York in just five days. It was a very profitable business, and steamship agents soon fanned out around the globe to drum up customers.

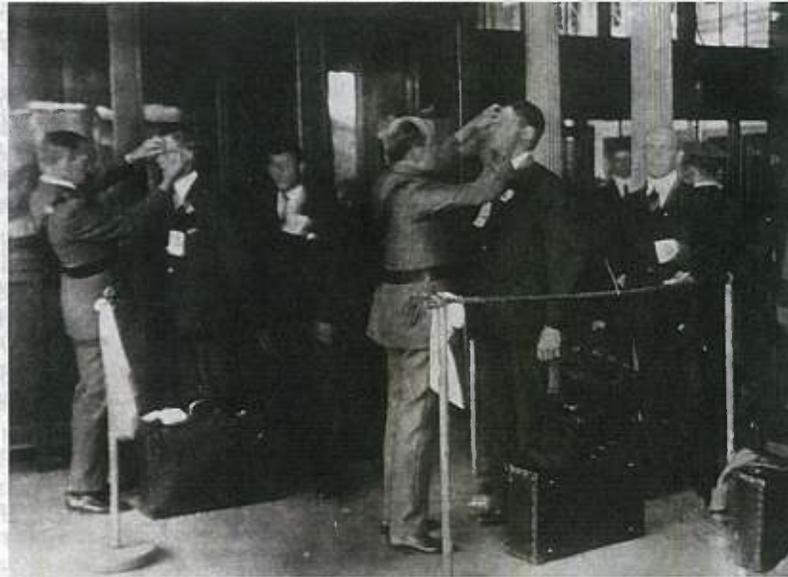
Although most of these immigrants were European, as the 1880s turned into the '90s, the tide shifted on which parts of Europe they hailed from. In the 1880s, close to 4 million immigrants came from England, Germany, and other parts of northern and western Europe, compared with fewer than 1 million from eastern and southern Europe. By the 1890s, that ratio had completely flipped. Now the weary faces of the arrivals belonged to southern Italians, Poles, Hungarians, Russians, and lots of Eastern European Jews, as well as Greeks and Syrians. (By 1910, the eastern and southern Europeans would outnumber their northern/western counterparts 3 to 1.)

Most of the newcomers were poor and congregated where the jobs were, in the big industrial cities, taking over swaths of blocks, filling the air with the foreign sounds and scents of their homelands. By the end of the 19th century, immigrants and their children would account for a stunning three-quarters of the populations in Boston, New York, Buffalo, Cleveland, Detroit, Chicago, and San Francisco.

Among the leaders who found themselves profoundly unsettled by this new wave of immigrants was Henry Cabot Lodge, who had moved from the US House to the Senate in 1893. With his deep Brahmin lineage and his Harvard PhD in history (under the tutelage of Henry Adams, no less), Lodge channeled the pride of his white Anglo-Saxon Protestant forebears.

He was a complicated guy. In 1890, he coauthored a bill guaranteeing federal voting protection for African-Americans. A year later, following an incident in which 11 Italian immigrants were lynched in New Orleans, Lodge penned a blame-the-victim essay.

He pushed for restrictions on these "new" immigrants, who tended to be so



ARRIVALS TO ELLIS ISLAND WERE SUBJECT TO MEDICAL EXAMS, INCLUDING CHECKS UNDER THE EYELIDS FOR A DISEASE CALLED TRACHOMA.

much more alien and less savory than the nice, upstanding one America used to get from England, Germany, and Belgium. The earlier arrivals, he wrote, came from the kind of "races which had thus far built up the United States, and which are related to each other either by blood or language or both." These new Italians, he suggested, were probably criminal types, tied in somehow with the Mafia.

Lodge, joined by other notable New Englanders of Brahmin stock, pushed repeatedly for immigration restrictions. MIT president Francis Walker called the newcomers from the less desirable ports of Europe "beaten men from beaten races; representing the worst failures in the struggle

for existence." Yet in the nation's capital few others were getting as worked up about immigration.

Things started to change when a severe depression hit in 1893, followed by violent strikes and economic skies that grew only darker. That shrunk the flow of new immigrants while tipping the scales even more in the direction of those from eastern and southern Europe. In 1894, voters responded to the depression by tossing the Democrats out of Congress and turning over control to the Republicans. That same year, Prescott Hall and his fellow young Harvard grads founded their restriction club, which would help give the nativist movement the lift it needed to take flight.

**D**ISAFFECTED RUST BELT voters were the stars of the 20th-century election narrative, members of the working class feeling left behind by the bracing changes of globalization and pining for the security of their grandfathers' economy.

More than a century earlier, Prescott Farnsworth Hall could have felt their pain.

The late 1800s was a period of reckoning for the Brahmin class, having lost its dominance in politics, in commerce, even in culture. Rates of divorce and suicide among native-born Protestants jumped when their birth rates plummeted, says University of Massachusetts Boston historian Vincent Cannato, noting the spike in those being diagnosed with a depression-type ailment called neurasthenia.

Irish pol James Michael Curley once cracked that the future was preordained because a good Irish family had seven or eight kids and a good Brahmin family had dogs. Catholics represented more than three-quarters of the births in New England by the late 1870s. (The dog population presumably remained flat.)

Some WASPs adapted to the new world, moving into emerging areas like investment banking. Others whiled away their fading days through liquor lunches at the Somerset Club. Hall chose a third way. He undertook a research cause analysis of the Brahmins' downfall, then set about trying to reverse it. He was warning the nation not to make the same mistake with new immigrants that the WASPs had made in failing to block the Irish ascendancy.

Hall, whose ancestors arrived in America from England in the 1600s, grew up in a family marked by sadness. His father lost his first wife shortly after

**By age 25, Hall was sure he knew why the nation was losing its Anglo-Saxon soul: the enormous waves of “undesirable” immigrants crashing onto American shores.**

delivered their first child. His second wife, Prescott’s mother, had lost her only other child when that boy was 2, then lost her first husband to suicide. A 45-year-old invalid by the time she delivered Prescott, she took no chances with him. “He grew up a frail little hothouse plant,” Hall’s wife once wrote, “for he was never allowed to romp, to climb, and to be reckless, as other boys were.”

Hall went directly from Harvard to Harvard Law School, then set about building his practice. He also found time to play Wagner on the piano, make a failed run for state representative, and, despite his dour demeanor, become a member of the Brookline Comedy Club.

Studying immigration patterns, however, became his passion—and the cause of his mounting alarm. By age 25, he was sure he knew why the nation was losing its Anglo-Saxon soul: the enormous waves of “undesirable” immigrants crashing onto American shores.

In May 1894, in a law office on State Street in Boston, Hall and two classmates from his undergrad years at Harvard founded the Immigration Restriction League, or IRL. His cofounders, lawyer Charles Warren and climatologist Robert DeCourcy Ward (whose mother was a Saltonstall), came from purebred *Mayflower* families.

Hall took the lead, pushing for a new literacy test and other regulations to keep “low-stock” immigrants from getting past the border. He combed statistics and employed social-science techniques to give his writings the weighty feel of academic papers. At times, he made insightful observations about the excesses of a porous, overtaxed immigration system. Just as often, he presented as fact musings built on lazy stereotypes. He explained that northern Europeans were distinguished for “energy, initiative, and self-reliance” in contrast to “emotional, fiery” southern Italians, who were “partly African, owing to the negroid migration from Carthage to Italy.”

Despite the decline of the Brahmin class, Hall never surrendered his sense of entitlement. A year after founding the IRL and shortly before he married, Hall contacted the superintendent of the three-year-old federal immigration operation at Ellis Island and invited himself in to inspect it.

During several visits in 1895 and ’96, he, Warren, and Ward were granted remarkable access, allowed to interview staff, test the literacy of arriving immigrants, and observe all aspects of the operation. After his first visit, Hall told the *Boston Herald*, “In the case of the Italians whom I saw at Ellis Island, there was in general a close connection between illiteracy and general under-ability.” Warren reported that 10 percent of the immigrants who claimed to be literate were lying.

Vincent Cannato’s book about the history of Ellis Island, called *American Passage*, is a page turner that captures the controlled chaos of the place. He describes inspectors conducting rapid-fire but sometimes wildly invasive medical inspections of immigrants, turning away people for everything from an ulcer of the vulva to masturbation habits. For some reason, the biggest concern for the Ellis Island medical team was a mildly contagious eye disease called trachoma. In their search for symptoms, inspectors wielded a button-book device to peel back immigrants’ eyelids, inflicting pain on the person being searched and dread in everyone else in line. (Contrary to the widely held belief, there’s no evidence that a single immigrant surname was changed by Ellis Island staff. Name changes typically happened years later.)

With such human drama on display at Ellis Island, it’s telling that Hall and his colleagues focused almost exclusively on immigrants’ reading abilities. He viewed the literacy test as the most feasible way of keeping out all those unedu-

## LEAGUE LEGACY

AT HARVARD, NATIVIST CHARLES WARREN’S NAME LIVES ON IN A PRESTIGIOUS SCHOLARSHIP.

HARVARD’S CHARLES WARREN CENTER is home to one of the most prestigious fellowships for scholars of American history. The center and fellowship are named after Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Charles Warren, whose widow donated \$7 million to Harvard a half century ago. But Warren was also an unapologetic nativist who drafted the 1917 Espionage Act and cofounded the Immi-



gration Restriction League. The league pushed eugenics and used inflammatory language to try to block the arrival of Italians, Jews, and other “undesirable” immigrants.

Contradictions like this one—between history and mission—have been fueling protests at elite college campuses. Last year, activist pressure led Harvard Law School to change its seal because of its association with slavery. Pressure also forced Princeton

University to contemplate renaming its Woodrow Wilson public-policy school because of that president’s segregationist views.

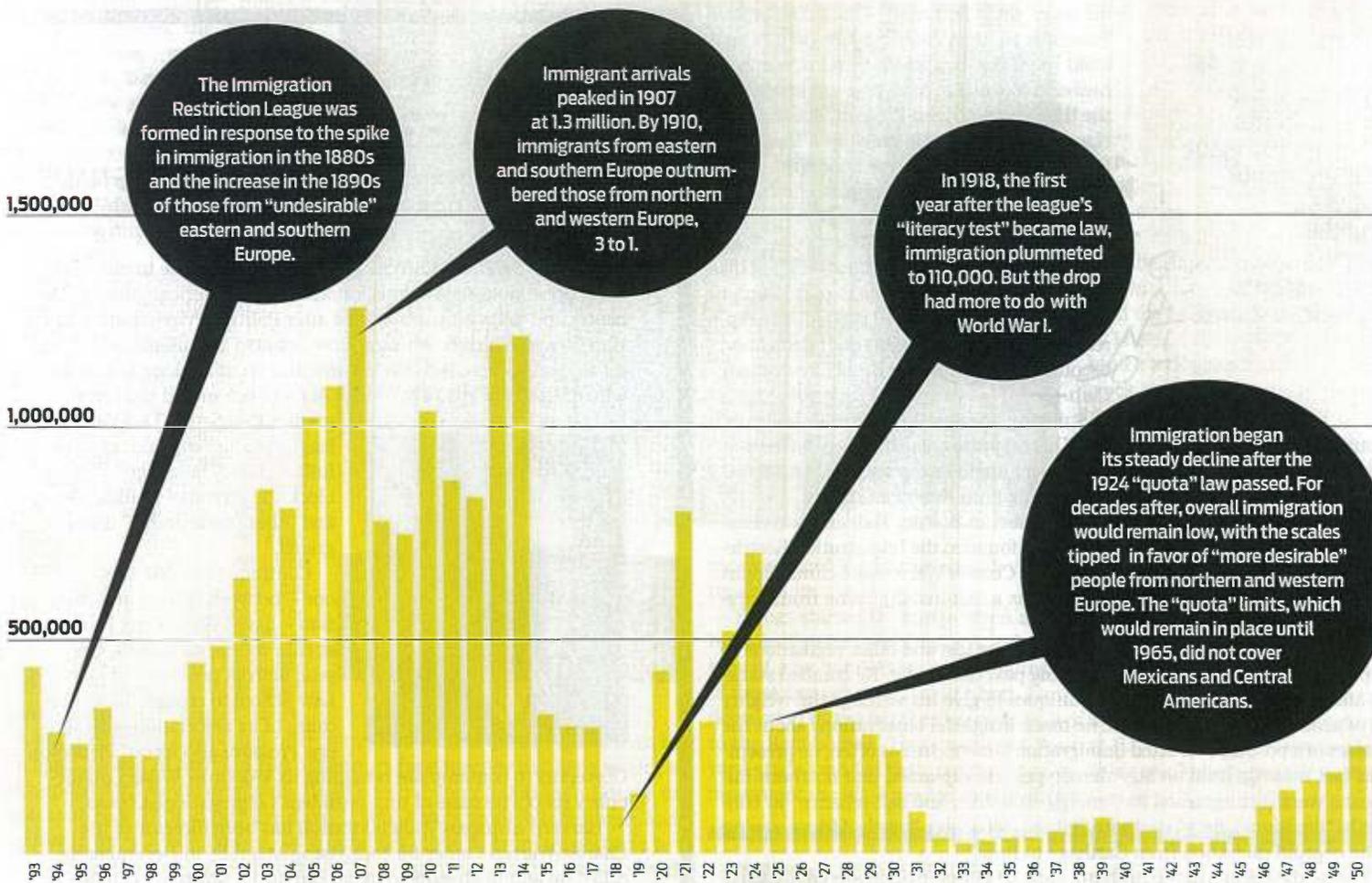
Harvard historian Walter Johnson has been director of the Charles Warren Center for four years. At a rally in December, he called on administrators to make Harvard a sanctuary campus for undocumented immigrants. He acknowledges some disgust at being associated with Warren’s views on immigration. His aim with the benefactor’s money, he says, is “to re-purpose it for good.”

Johnson notes the irony that Warren’s funds have supported many progressive thinkers. The center’s first director was historian Oscar Handlin, son of immigrant Russian Jews and author of *The Uprooted*, a Pulitzer Prize-winning classic on immigration. Handlin helped persuade Congress in the 1960s to remove the quota system that Warren’s Immigration Restriction League had championed in the 1920s. Noam Maggor, who used his own recent Warren fellowship to research his new book, *Brahmin Capitalism*, feels conflicted. “These people shouldn’t be celebrated unambiguously as heroes of American history,” he says. Yet these names “accurately capture who governed society at the time.”

“If you walk around any of these elite campuses and dig into the names on the buildings,” Maggor says, “it’s ultimately going to lead you to slavery and labor exploitation and all those dark corners of American history.” People must remember that racism and xenophobia weren’t just prevalent in the South, he says. “To really get the story right, we have to trace it to places like Boston.”

—Neil Swidey

## NEWTON'S THIRD LAW OF IMMIGRATION: ACTIONS AND REACTIONS THROUGH THE YEARS



\*INCLUDES THE 15 MONTHS FROM JULY 1, 1975, TO SEPTEMBER 30, 1976, BECAUSE THE END DATE OF FISCAL YEARS WAS CHANGED FROM JUNE 30 TO SEPTEMBER 30.  
SOURCE: US DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY

cated souls from “undesirable” precincts of Europe.

On that point, there was no disagreement between him and Henry Cabot Lodge, who introduced the IRL’s literacy test bill in the Senate in 1895. In a letter to Hall the following year, Lodge wrote of the test, “I consider it one of the most vitally important measures which has been before Congress in my time.”

As chairman of the Senate Immigration Committee, Lodge courted the support of Hall, at one point writing, “I shall be glad to have any improvements which you may suggest.” Another time, he sent Hall this urgent telegram: “German steamship Companies making great effort against bill. Anything you can do should be done at once.”

Why was the distinguished senator from Massachusetts so solicitous of a young, largely unknown lawyer?

The IRL never came close to attracting a mass following, but Hall was extremely effective at using the organization, and its output, to influence the influencers. Some notables were members of his group, like publisher Henry Holt and the presidents of Harvard, Bowdoin, and Stanford. Many more were leading politicians, business leaders, and newspapermen, who were on the receiving end of Immigration Restriction League policy papers, stats-dense

talking points, and survey results. The IRL also directly lobbied Congress: supplied ghostwritten editorials to newspapers around the country.

Hall effectively weaponized statistics—even those of dubious precision—to sow fear. “The concentration of these large bodies of ignorant eigners in the slums of our Eastern cities is a serious matter,” he once wrote. “Foreigners furnish 1½ times as many criminals, 2½ times as many insane, and 3 times as many paupers as natives.”

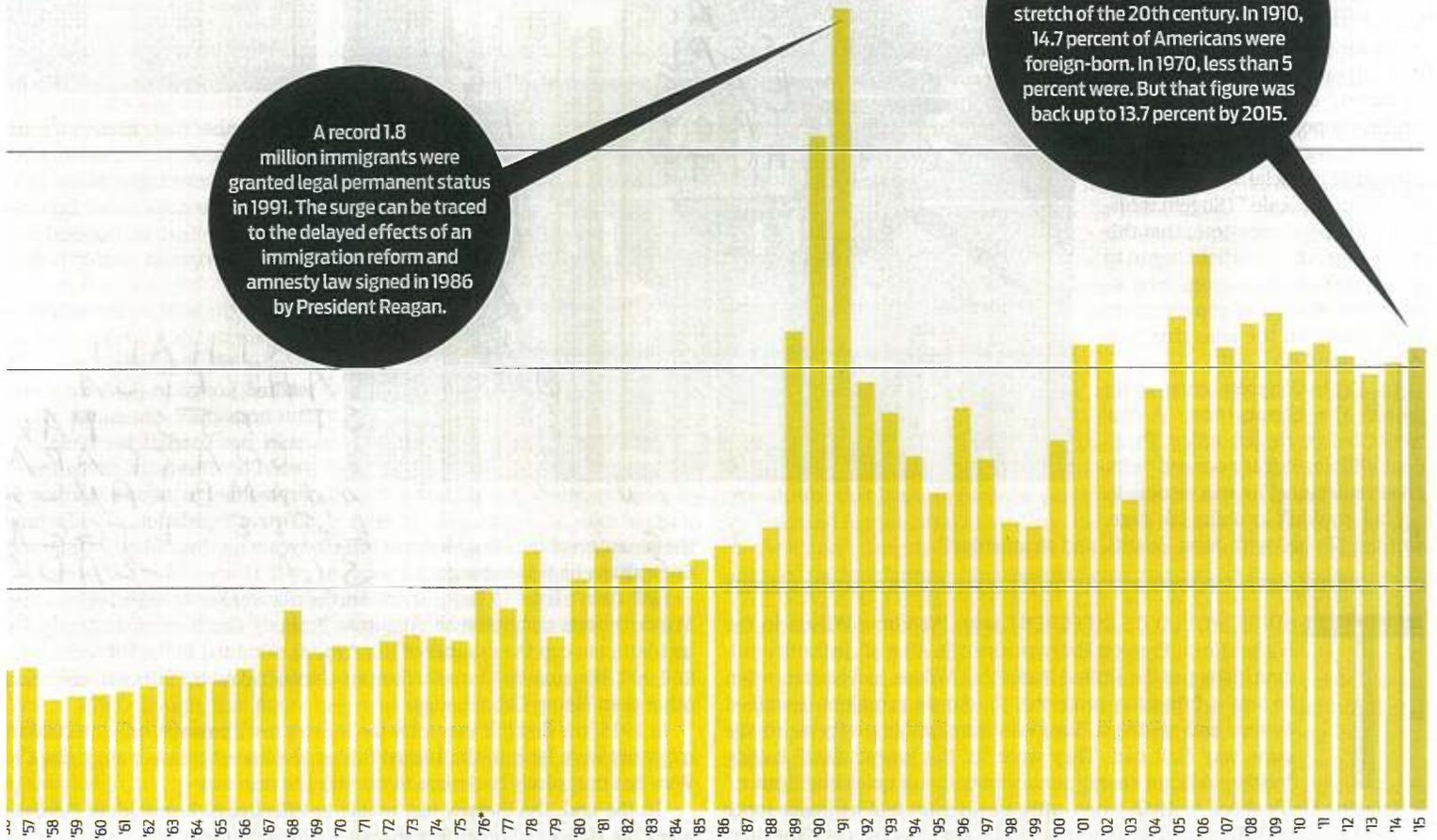
In yet another move that would be reprised in the 2016 campaign, Hall raised the specter of thousands of immigrants with “fraudulent naturalization papers”—a purported 50,000 in New York City alone—turning fraudulent voters.

In January 1897, both houses of Congress approved the literacy bill, which would bar all immigrants over the age of 16 who were unable to read a word passage of the US Constitution that had been translated into their native language. Hall cheered the breakthrough.

However, President Grover Cleveland vetoed the bill on his way out of the White House. He told nativists it wasn’t long ago that “the same thing said of immigrants who, with their descendants, are now numbered among our best citizens.”

A record 1.8 million immigrants were granted legal permanent status in 1991. The surge can be traced to the delayed effects of an immigration reform and amnesty law signed in 1986 by President Reagan.

Thanks to the work of restrictionists, immigration levels remained low for a long stretch of the 20th century. In 1910, 14.7 percent of Americans were foreign-born. In 1970, less than 5 percent were. But that figure was back up to 13.7 percent by 2015.



Lodge and Hall went back at it. The booming economy at the end of the 1890s, though, created stronger headwinds for them. The steamship companies got a powerful boost from the manufacturing lobby, which more than ever needed cheap foreign labor to keep all those factories humming. In 1907 alone, 1.3 million immigrants arrived, the vast majority at Ellis Island. *The Wall Street Journal* and other pro-business newspapers dropped their earlier restrictionist stances to join the let-'em-in crowd.

The literacy test remained stalled. Angry at being repeatedly thwarted, Hall intensified his anti-immigration argument with rhetoric far more inflammatory than anything seen in the election of 1916.

Although his father had been one of 12 children, Hall, who had divorced and remarried, remained childless. He began blaming high immigrant birth rates for the depressed fertility of WASPs. His argument boiled down to this: When new immigrant parents have lots of children, despite being unable to provide for them, that dims the prospects for everyone in the next generation. Responsible native-born parents opt to have only one or two children, rather than risk seeing them grow up to work alongside immigrant offspring in low-paying jobs. "The main point," Hall wrote, "is that the native children

are murdered by never being allowed to come into existence, as surely as if put to death in some older invasion of the Huns and Vandals."

He compared immigrant Jews to "germs of infectious disease" who should be dealt with in the same way one would handle "noxious weeds" or "insect pests."

The IRL's rhetoric grew only nastier beginning in 1909, when Madison Grant joined the group as a vice president. Grant was a noted conservationist who helped save the American bison and create the Bronx Zoo. He was also a full-bore racist who thundered about "half Asiatic mongrels" and the "great mass of worthless Jews and Syrians who are flooding our cities." Grant likely did more than any other American to popularize the junk science of eugenics, which would lead to the sterilization of tens of thousands of "inferior" Americans. (Hitler once sent him a mash note, calling Grant's 1916 book, *The Passing of the Great Race*, "my Bible.")

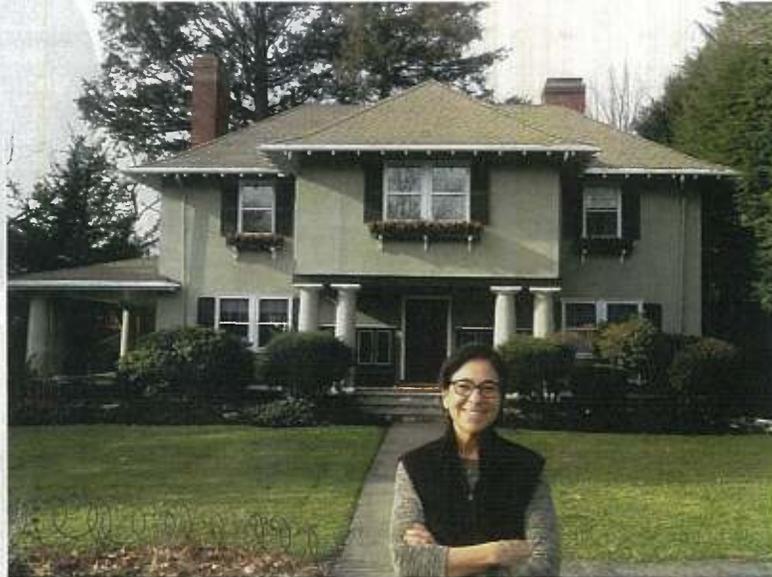
Hall had always been interested in medicine and science (as well as the occult, once writing that "prunes make the blood able to attract spiritual power"). Grant's eugenic principles gave scientific justification to Hall's long-held theories about European immigrants. Grant referred to Hall's preferred northern Europeans as the Nordic race, superior in every way to the "Alpine"

and Mediterranean varieties.

Hall and IRL cofounder Robert DeCourcy Ward began pumping out journal articles that added a eugenic overlay to their immigration argument. "Here in the United States," Hall wrote, "we have a unique opportunity, through our power to regulate immigration, of exercising artificial selection upon an enormous scale." (Eugenics historian Daniel Kevles notes that this was a time when the field began to enjoy wide support from educated progressives and conservatives alike, based on the emerging "science" behind it.)

In 1913, Congress once again passed the literacy test. A few weeks before he left office, President William Taft announced "with great reluctance" he was vetoing it.

Hall couldn't contain his rage, writing, "To hell with Jews, Jesuits, and steamships!"



**THE DIVERSITY THAT DREW JANET BAER TO HER BROOKLINE NEIGHBORHOOD WAS THE VERY THING THAT HER HOME'S FIRST OWNER FEARED.**

to remember their immigrant heritage and resist the "close-the-door behind-us" mentality. Now, on the cusp of America's entry into war they found themselves under attack. That opened a wide lane for nativists.

After the win, Hall reached out to Henry Cabot Lodge, but not to offer his gratitude. Instead, he wanted Lodge to push for deeper anti-immigrant measures. Lodge could not conceal his fatigue. "It would be extremely difficult if not impossible to secure further restrictive legislation at this time

the senator replied. He added that after 24 years serving on the Immigration Committee, he was leaving it.

Hall didn't have to look far for another lawmaker to take up his cause. Massachusetts congressman Augustus Peabody Gardner immediately filed legislation to cap the number of immigrants admitted to the US each year at 200,000. His aunt was Isabella Stewart Gardner. And his father-in-law? Not other than Henry Cabot Lodge.

In 1918, the first full year after the literacy test's passage, only 110,000 immigrants were let into the United States, the lowest number since the Civil War. But that surely had more to do with the new war.

In the end, the literacy test wasn't as effective at keeping out "undesirables" as Hall had hoped. For example, although there was a clear correlation between being poor and being illiterate, many European countries had improved basic education in the decades Hall was working to get the bill passed. And most Eastern European Jewish males, even impoverished ones, had no trouble passing the test because they had learned to read the Torah. The literacy test also entirely missed Mexicans, since the law didn't apply to immigrants from the Western Hemisphere.

Still, the Immigration Act of 1917 opened a new age for how this nation—wary from a bloody, seemingly fruitless war in Europe—would treat foreigners. Many news outlets have traced Trump's "America First" slogan back to the isolationist group of the same name that was founded in 1940. In fact, the slogan's nativist roots can be traced to 1917, when James Murphy Ward published his book, *The Immigration Problem, or America First*. Anti-immigrant sentiment grew in response to fears of Bolshevik radicals and the deadly bombings by anarchists—the Islamic terrorists of their day. It reached a fever pitch in 1919 and 1920 with the Palmer Raids, the mass arrests and deportations of thousands of Eastern European immigrants. A key tool in those rounds had been the Espionage Act of 1917, which Hall's IRL founder Charles Warren had drafted during a stint in government.

In 1921, with Hall ailing, Madison Grant took the lead

**T**HINGS WOULD BE DIFFERENT with Woodrow Wilson in the White House. Prescott Hall was sure of it. After all, in the five-volume history of the United States that Wilson had written when he was a Princeton professor, the future president described eastern and southern European immigrants pretty much the same way Hall had. They were "of the lowest class," having "neither skill nor energy nor any initiative of quick intelligence."

Imagine Hall's shock in 1915 when, after the literacy test had once more passed Congress, Wilson struck it down with the stroke of his pen. The literacy requirement, Wilson explained, would serve as a test not of an alien's character but rather of his opportunity.

Madison Grant's fury took the form of a Birther cry. "Wilson himself did not come from native American stock," he fumed, "and consequently had little pride in American antecedents or traditions." (Wilson was born in the segregated South, but his mother had emigrated from England, and his grandparents were from Ireland and Scotland.)

Two years after the Wilson setback, Hall finally got his way. This time when Wilson vetoed the Immigration Act of 1917, Congress had the votes to override him. Twenty-three years after Hall began his crusade, the literacy test finally became law.

What put the issue over the edge this time? In a word, Germany.

In the one momentous week between Wilson's veto on January 29 and Congress's override on February 5, Germany announced its U-boats would be prepared to attack passenger ships in the Atlantic. When Germany sank the American liner *Housatonic*, Wilson broke off diplomatic relations.

Heading down the path to war, the nation erupted in jingoism. For decades, German-Americans had been perhaps the strongest political force blocking immigration restrictions. More than any other hyphenated group, they tended

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ushing for the passage of a strict new immigration law. This one imposed, if temporary, ceilings on the number of immigrants allowed in from each country. Hall lived to see that 1921 “quota” law pass—but nine days after it was signed into law, he died at the age of 52.

Nativists continued to ride the anti-immigrant wave, and in 1924, Congress approved a tougher, permanent quota law. It capably capped the number of immigrants allowed in each year from any particular nation to 2 percent of the total number of foreign-born people of that nationality who’d been here in 1890, before the big flood of immigrants from eastern and southern Europe.

Nativists were literally able to turn back the clock. Overnight, immigrants from northern and western Europe were effectively given free passes to come to the United States. Meanwhile, the total number of Syrians allowed into the country in 1925 was 100. That imbalance remained in place, more or less, for the next four decades.

Yet because nativists hadn’t been thinking about immigrants from this hemisphere, the quota laws had an unintended consequence: They opened the spigot on immigration across the nation’s southern border. In the first decade of the 20th century, about 30,000 Mexican immigrants came here. In the 1920s, the number shot up to nearly half a million.

“Oftentimes you’re fighting the last war,” says Marian Smith, longtime historian of what used to be called the Immigration and Naturalization Service, and keeper of its institutional memory. She notes that big employers, troubled by the “radical” unionizing of many Eastern European immigrants, were happy to welcome Mexicans as the new cheap labor, perceiving them to be “more docile.”

Even so, the movement Hall and company had set in motion managed not only to rebalance immigration in favor of “desirable” European nationalities, but also to slash this country’s percentage of foreign-born residents. In 1850, 1.7 percent of the US population was foreign-born, according to the Pew Research Center. By 1890, it had jumped to 14.8 percent, spurring Hall into action. In 1920, though, that figure began its steady drop, and by 1970 it had plummeted to 4.7 percent.

By 2015, fueled largely by surging immigration from Latin America, it had rebounded to 13.7 percent, nearly the same level that Hall had found so intolerable at the start of his crusade.

“We always look back at the immigrants from the distant past much more fondly,” Smith says. That explains the warm feelings many second- and third-generation Americans have for Ellis Island, where their poor-but-scrappy ancestors arrived to make a new life. Someday, she suspects, Americans will view Mexican immigrants in the same light.

Americans are more likely to look favorably on immigration if they sense there’s a logical system guiding it. Back in 1955, historian John Higham wrote what is considered the seminal book on nativism, *Strangers in the Land*. He penned a new epilogue for the book when it was reissued in 2002. In it, Higham said he wished he hadn’t painted nativists with such a broad brush. While many had clearly been motivated by xenophobia and racism, others had been making valid points about the system’s need for reasonable controls. Even a nation of immigrants shouldn’t let in more arrivals than it has the capacity to assimilate.

In the years prior to his death in 2003, Higham warned lawmakers that their inability to tackle sensible and fair immigration reform would likely enable the return of the “acrid odor” from the 1920s, when “the forces of ethnic self-interest and national hysteria took over.”

Session after session, Congress failed to pass comprehensive immigration reform, and illegal immigration continued to rise. Then Trump came along with his vows to turn back time, building a wall to keep out Mexicans and imposing a ban to keep out Muslims. He undoubtedly got more traction than he would have if there had not been a national consensus, among liberals and conservatives alike, that the current immigration system is broken.

A close reading of history reminds us that there are no new ideas in immi-

gration, just new people espousing them. Also, the pendulum always swings back—though sometimes it sure takes its time.

**D** RIVE THROUGH AN OPEN wrought-iron gate and up a sloped driveway to get to the house. It’s a handsome hip-roofed place of gray stucco, with white columns and black window boxes.

“The gate’s a bit ostentatious, isn’t it?” Janet Baer says, welcoming me into the foyer.

As she gives me a tour of her Brookline home, it’s clear Baer knows a lot about its history. It was built in 1908, and the absence of an enclosure between the front door and the foyer suggests the Brookline house had been used as a summer place by Brahmins who “wintered” in Boston. The house sits high up in a neighborhood where so many doctors used to live that it was called “Pill Hill.” The Irish help tended to live in congested housing at the base of the hill, known as “Whiskey Point.”

Baer takes me up an elegant staircase, through a fireplaced second-floor study, past the former maid’s quarters, and then down a back staircase that the help would have used to get to the kitchen. The three-basin sink in the basement, she tells me, suggests that the family had three maids.

As we stroll the garden on a cold winter day, she points out the rose of Sharon shrubs that have rimmed the perimeter for more than a century.

Baer and her husband moved into the place in 1989. Given her knowledge of the home, it surprises me that she had not heard of its first occupant. I’d requested the tour because the house had once belonged to Prescott Farnsworth Hall. I wondered if standing in the study where he wrote with such fervor might somehow help me better understand him. What explained his single-minded crusade for what he called “segregation on a large scale, by which inferior stocks can be prevented from diluting and supplanting good stocks.”

As Baer makes us coffee in her kitchen, I ask her about the world map resting on the windowsill. It’s covered with pushpins. “Have you been to all those places?” I ask.

“Those are just the ones my husband and I have visited together,” she replies. “He’s been to a lot more places for his work.”

One of the reasons they chose this neighborhood was its diversity, she tells me. When their now-adult children were in kindergarten, 17 languages had been spoken at the school.

It’s hard to miss the contrast between Baer and the homebody Hall, who viewed diversity as a dirty word. When he wasn’t railing against immigrants, Hall found time to write a Brookline ordinance that prohibited wooden three-decker apartment houses because he feared they would attract more of the wrong type of people to town. It remained on the books for years.

When I tell Baer the line of Prescott’s that I can’t get out of my head—“To hell with Jews, Jesuits, and steamships!”—she looks momentarily stunned, before letting out a chuckle. She is Jewish and her husband is Irish Catholic, she explains.

I knew it wouldn’t be hard to find evidence disproving Prescott’s predictions that “low-quality” immigrants would dilute the superior stock that made America great. And here it is, in his own house. Baer, whose family had fled Germany and Eastern Europe, is a noted radiologist. Her husband, Peter Waters, whose family had fled County Mayo, is a world-renowned pediatric hand surgeon as well as the chief of orthopedic surgery at Boston Children’s Hospital.

As Baer walks me to my car, I ask if I can take a photo of her. She agrees, but instead of saying “Cheese,” she improvises a substitute. Smiling for the camera, she says, “You lose, Mr. Hall.” ■

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