

## **An Historical Overview**

"The United States grew through the work of immigrants. They built America. But at all times, in different ways, immigrants have faced opposition, prejudice, and nativism." CU history professor Julia Greene thus summarized the issues in her address at our Annual Meeting in May. According to one of American history's "grand narratives," she continued, immigrants find opportunity, work, and success. At the same time, in another grand narrative, they meet hostility. Native Americans resisted the arrival of Europeans, who, once settled, in turn resisted newer arrivals. In 1790, Benjamin Franklin wanted to keep out the "dark, swarthy" people. Who were these people? Germans! Their failing? Not being English!

Today's border fences and "Minutemen" continue the narrative of hostility. But, Greene noted, there is a difference. Now new arrivals face not only discrimination for cultural and linguistic differences, but also high hurdles to achieve legal status. The phrase "illegal aliens" is a recent construct. Although the proportion of immigrants to total population is smaller now than it was a century ago, anxiety about immigrants is higher than ever. A vocal and influential segment of the population favors expulsion and punishment. Anxiety levels among the increasing numbers of undocumented newcomers are of course immeasurably higher. Our employers need 500,000 new workers a year, but under our laws nowhere near that many can be issued the required documents.

In a lively discussion, League members asked Dr. Greene to suggest reforms. She urged adjusting the "ridiculous" national quotas to reflect economic realities. Immigrant quotas for Mexico and Bulgaria are the same, even though few Bulgarians want to come here. She also advocated recognizing the effects of economic globalization. Under NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement), the U.S. required Mexico to change its constitution to allow foreign ownership of land. Mexican workers lose their jobs at home and come here to survive.

Greene stressed the importance of education to raise awareness of how immigrants suffer while employers benefit. Undocumented immigrants pay taxes. Further, audience members pointed out, undocumented workers' contributions have rescued the Social Security system. While local governments and school districts are stretched, the federal government enjoys tax revenues from immigrants without papers, in an amount far greater than what it spends in direct services to them.

Funds for processing "green card," permanent resident, and other applications have been cut resulting in unconscionable delays. At the same time, Greene noted, funding for border control and law enforcement has increased. And private prison owners profit considerably from housing undocumented people. Consider the times in our history when lawbreakers have forced needed reforms. "Rosa Parks broke the law, too," Greene observed.