

Tracing Filipino Philadelphia in the Pedro Supelana Papers

In April 1975, members of the Filipino Executive Council of Greater Philadelphia (FECGP) sent a petition to Mayor Frank Rizzo, expressing dismay that “Americans in Greater Philadelphia are not even aware that there are about 5,000 Filipinos who live among them.”¹ Rizzo acted quickly to accommodate another group of potential voters, but, four decades later, historians have yet to catch up; Filipino migrants remain largely absent from Pennsylvania’s ethnic history. Anyone looking to redress that absence—or to learn more about Philadelphia’s ethnic politics between the 1960s and 1990s—would do well to consult the papers of Pedro Supelana at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania (HSP). This small but rich collection documents the public life of a Filipino American community leader, along with more than a dozen ethnic organizations.

Filipinos first settled in Pennsylvania soon after the United States conquered the Philippines and acquired the colony from Spain through the Treaty of Paris in 1898. Most Filipinos who moved to the United States took agricultural jobs in Hawaii and California, but in Philadelphia—as in other East Coast cities—Filipino migrants pursued other occupations. In the early twentieth century, the US Navy recruited Filipinos as messmen and stewards, and their status as US nationals allowed them to migrate to the continental United States. Naval service explains why Philadelphia’s first Filipino immigrants settled in South Philadelphia near the city’s Navy Yard. Some later found work in the US Postal Service or as Pullman porters. After World War II, the Exchange Visitor Program—an employment program for Philippine health professionals—brought the first Filipino nurses to the region, and the provisions of post-1965 immigration laws that favored skilled migrants amplified the middle-class presence of Philadelphia’s Filipino Americans.

Among them was Pedro “Pete” Supelana, known to many as the “godfather of the Filipino community” in the 1970s and 1980s. Born in Albay province in the Philippines in 1929, Supelana planned a career in law but abandoned it in 1954 to join the US Navy. After ten years of service in the bottom-rung positions to which Filipino sailors were restricted,

¹ Filipino Executive Council of Greater Philadelphia to Frank Rizzo, Apr. 5, 1975, box 1, folder 14, Pedro Supelana Papers (Collection 147), Historical Society of Pennsylvania (HSP), Philadelphia, PA.

Supelana obtained US citizenship and relocated to Philadelphia, where he worked for the Colonial Penn insurance company and led several area organizations, notably FECGP and the Filipino American Association of Philadelphia, founded in 1917 and likely the oldest Filipino organization in the United States.²

The four boxes of Supelana's materials, donated to the Balch Institute in 1992 and now on deposit at the HSP, consist mostly of organizational records, correspondence, speeches, and news clippings. Most notably, they convey the vibrant institutional life of Filipino Americans in the Delaware Valley. Whether working in ethnically Filipino organizations or in pan-Asian coalitions with other Pennsylvanians of Asian heritage, Supelana sought to increase Filipino Americans' visibility in an already diverse city. Filipinos participated in the 1970s ethnic revival and helped mark the bicentennial. Records of meetings with Mayor Wilson Goode and of service on multiracial city commissions show Supelana bending the city's ethnic politics to include Asian immigrants. By contrast, the papers are relatively quiet about Supelana's warm relations with Philippine president Ferdinand Marcos, who visited Philadelphia in 1977 and whose regime actively cultivated Filipino American community leaders—including Supelana himself—during the martial law era.

"Manong Pete" (or "Uncle Pete") was a tireless advocate for Filipino World War II veterans, and his papers document the important role of veterans' groups in the long battle for equity. Largely excluded from naturalization and individual benefit claims by the Rescission Act of 1946, veterans of the Philippine Army and guerrilla forces pressed courtroom challenges and pursued legislation in Washington. Records from the city's predominantly Filipino posts—Bataan Post no. 717 of the American Legion and Tomas Claudio Post no. 1063 of the Veterans of Foreign Wars—challenge accounts that present the push for equity as a California-based movement. Reading the records of Supelana's advocacy in the 1980s and 1990s for veterans, we see that the ethnic politics and coalition-building that occupied him in the 1970s generated connections he leveraged later. Supelana celebrated the passage of the Naturalization Act of 1990, which made Filipino World War II veterans eligible for US citizenship, but he died in 2000, nearly a decade before Congress awarded benefit payments in early 2009.

²"Biographical Notes," box 4, folder 4, Pedro Supelana Papers, HSP.

In recent years, community historians have begun to document the history of Filipino American Philadelphia.³ But this detailed history has not yet been incorporated into the work of scholars; Asian American historians have largely bypassed Philadelphia, and historians of Pennsylvania's ethnic heritage have paid little attention to its Asian American communities. A fuller history of Philadelphia's Asian American community helps retell stories of migration, citizenship, and urban life in the twentieth century. The Pedro Supelana Papers can be a key foundation for all of these undertakings.

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³ Works on Filipino Americans in Philadelphia include Glenda Tibe Bonifacio and Vivienne S. M. Angeles, "Building Communities through Faith: Filipino Catholics in Philadelphia and Alberta," in *Gender, Religion, and Migration: Pathways of Integration*, ed. Bonifacio and Angeles (Lanham, MD, 2010), 257–73; Ray L. Burdeos, *Flips in Philadelphia in the Fifties* (Bloomington, IN, 2006); and Eliseo Art Arambulo Silva, *Filipinos of Greater Philadelphia* (Charleston, SC, 2012). Other valuable studies on mainland Southeast Asian migrants include Scott Kurashige, "Pan-Ethnicity and Community Organizing: Asian Americans United's Campaign against Anti-Asian Violence," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 3 (2000): 163–90; Jae-Hyup Lee, *Dynamics of Ethnic Identity: Three Asian American Communities in Philadelphia* (New York, 1998); Samien Nol, "Cambodians in Philadelphia," in *Not Just Victims: Conversations with Cambodian Leaders in the United States*, ed. Sucheng Chan (Urbana, IL, 2003), 172–85; and Ellen Somekawa, "On the Edge: Southeast Asians in Philadelphia and the Struggle for Space," in *ReViewing Asian America: Locating Diversity*, ed. Wendy L. Ng, Gary Y. Okihiro, and James S. Moy (Pullman, WA, 1995), 33–47.