



HUDSON COUNTY, NEW JERSEY

# Peruvian Americans

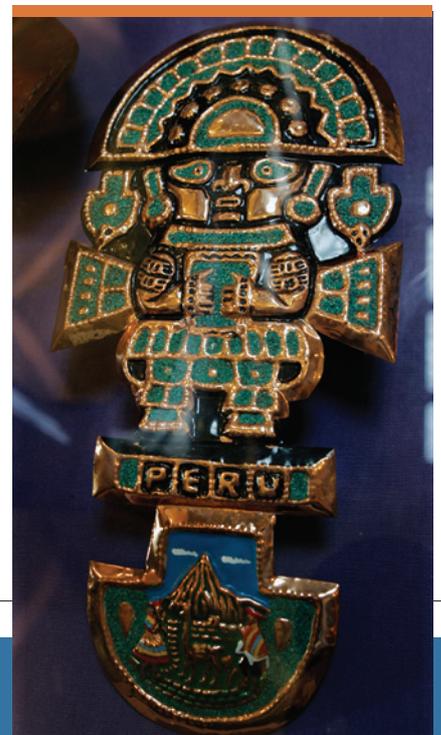


Above: Local ethnic businesses contribute to the flavor — and the economy — of Hudson County. *Amanda Brown*  
Below: The Newark Public Library displayed this icon in a 2009 Peruvian history exhibit. ©AP Images

**H**arrison, New Jersey, a 1-square-mile (2.6 square kilometers) industrial town directly across the Passaic River from Newark, is home to a vibrant community of Peruvian Americans. They came in large numbers at the end of the 20th century, having heard that factories in the area had provided good jobs for previous waves of European immigrants. They found jobs and worked hard and

along the way made efforts to preserve their Peruvian culture.

This budding Peruvian enclave spans Harrison and the adjoining Hudson County towns of East Newark and Kearny, and numbers about 14,000 people, according to the 2010 census. (New Jersey has another significant Peruvian presence in Paterson, 15 miles (24 kilometers) to the northwest, in Passaic County.)



## HERNOLDE ESTRADA PINEDO: A Pioneer Comes to Harrison

In 1978, after struggling to support a wife and nine children in Peru, Hernolde Estrada Pinedo decided to try his luck in Harrison, New Jersey. He had a brother-in-law who had emigrated earlier and who gave him advice on finding a factory job. Estrada readily found work.

Two years later, he decided to become a permanent U.S. resident, and he brought the rest of the family over, one by one. In the process he became one of the pioneers of the budding Peruvian enclave in Hudson County.

Estrada was a pioneer, ahead of his time; Peruvians did not arrive in Harrison in great numbers until the 1990s.

“I was one of the very few brown-skinned Peruvians in the neighborhood and stood out a lot,” said Estrada’s son Gustavo, who arrived in 1980 at the age of 11. “The predominant groups were Portuguese and the Italian and Irish.”

At first, Estrada rented a home for himself, Gustavo and the rest of the family in a six-family building on Harrison Avenue, Harrison’s main street, but, like many Americans, Estrada eventually bought his own home. His children went to college. Gustavo today owns an agency that supplies bilingual staff for clinicians serving troubled youth.

After years of factory work, Estrada decided to continue his education, earning a certificate in alternative medicine. Today, he spends six months a year in New Jersey and six in Peru, where he also has a home.

“The United States gave my whole family an incredible opportunity,” said his daughter Ana Maria Estrada, an actress.

## Faces of Change

Harrison’s Peruvian community swelled during the 1990s. Since then, fewer Peruvians have been drawn by the prospect of industrial work. Today, many are skilled workers, small business owners or budding entrepreneurs.

“It’s not the case anymore that they come and work in factories as general laborers,” said Jesus Huaranga, a real estate agent and small business owner who has lived in the town for nearly 30 years. “Most have a trade, own a business, or are coming for training in a particular field.” As one of two Peruvian Americans elected to the Harrison City Council, Huaranga exemplifies how Peruvians, like earlier arrivals to the United States, come to play important roles in their new communities.

Recent generations of New Jersey’s Peruvians have “inserted themselves pretty seamlessly into suburban life,” said Ulla Berg, a Rutgers University anthropologist who has lived and studied in Peru and is a specialist on Peruvian migration worldwide. “They have high rates of English proficiency, high rates of

Hernolde Estrada Pinedo (foreground), his wife, Celia (with eyeglasses), and seven of their children (Gustavo, standing; Ana, third from left) gather in 2011. Inset: Hernolde poses in the family’s Harrison apartment in the 1970s. Photos courtesy of Gustavo Estrada



## Peruvian Americans Hudson County, New Jersey

naturalization, and are better educated. The second and third generations of Peruvians are solidly positioned in the middle class.”

Within the gateway community of East Newark-Harrison-Kearny, Peruvians are not clustered in one neighborhood. Their homes are scattered throughout the area. To an outsider driving past the modest two- and three-story residences lining densely populated streets, the area’s Peruvian flavor is not obvious.

### A Culture to Celebrate

Rafael N. Rojas, president of the Peruvian Civic Association of New Jersey, relates how local Peruvians began to raise the community’s cultural profile. Ana Placencia, owner of the popular Peruvian restaurant Oh! Calamares in Kearny, had noticed that her town offered no civic celebration of its Peruvian Americans. In 2004, she got a few friends and family members together for a Peruvian flag raising at Kearny’s town hall. Placencia aimed both to commemorate Peru’s Independence Day and to salute local Peruvian emigrants for their independent spirit, their efforts and their sacrifices.

Placencia helped start the Peruvian Civic Association of New Jersey the following year to promote Peruvian and Latin American culture, art, music, literature and food. The organization sponsors an annual Peruvian Independence Day Parade in July (Peru gained its freedom from Spanish colonial rule in 1824). Every other year, it also holds a Peruvian family festival. These celebrations, along with the growing New York–area popularity of

Inset: Organizers lead the annual parade celebrating Peru’s independence from Spain. *Courtesy of the Peruvian Civic Association of New Jersey*  
Rafael Rojas is the civic association’s president. *Amanda Brown*



## RAFAEL N. ROJAS: From Transplanted to Transformed

Rafael Rojas cried when his parents told him they were leaving Lima and moving to New Jersey. He was 13 years old.

He begged to stay behind with relatives. He promised he’d come when he finished secondary school. It didn’t do any good. On June 1, 1984, he arrived in Newark, New Jersey, with his family.

Today Rojas, 39, is a successful risk manager at Deutsche Bank and resident of Livingston, an affluent New Jersey suburb. He recalls working hard to get ahead. By working weekends and nights in high school, he bought a car at 17. “My parents gave me a roof, a lot of love and food, but there was no money,” he says.

Rojas took remedial courses at community college to improve his academic skills. He joined the Army Reserve, earned bachelor’s and master’s degrees in mathematics from New Jersey Institute of Technology, and a master of business administration degree from New York University. In his first job, at Moody’s Investors Service, he rated mortgage-backed securities.

For awhile, Rojas — who is married and has four children — had little to do with the local Peruvian community, but in time he felt a growing desire to reconnect. In 2007, Ana Placencia, owner of the Peruvian restaurant in Kearny, recruited Rojas for the Peruvian Civic Association. Today, Rojas is the group’s president. He enjoys promoting Peruvian culture, even to his family members. “I try to get my son, who’s 11, involved in speaking Spanish as much as he can. Sometimes I take him to our meetings,” he said.

### Peruvian Civic Association of New Jersey, Founded 2005

Activities to Support the Community:

- Miss Peru Pageant, for Ages 6–22
- Peruvian Flag Raising
- Independence Parade and Festival
- Blood Drives
- Health Awareness Events
- Appeals for Peru’s Disaster Victims

Peruvian cuisine, has made more Americans appreciative of their Peruvian-American neighbors.

### Religious Tradition Preserved

Each year, every significant Peruvian emigrant community in the United States observes the procession of the Lord of Miracles, a painted mural of Jesus Christ venerated by devout Peruvians. Each year in Lima, Peru, hundreds of thousands line the streets for an annual celebration.

In Hudson County, the Hermandad del Señor de los Milagros, or Brotherhood of the Lord of Miracles, stages the annual procession with the help of three participating churches: St. Cecilia's Roman Catholic Church in Kearny, St. Anthony's in East Newark and Holy Cross Church in Harrison. The brotherhood was founded by Arturo Cordova, who emigrated to Kearny nearly 30 years ago. He was inspired by a local priest who despaired that parishioners had only a picture of the icon to pass



New Jersey's Peruvian community is the largest outside Peru. The Newark library's 2009 exhibit explored its history. ©AP Images

around while attending Mass. A former factory worker, Cordova runs a residential and commercial cleaning business. He commissioned an artist, Wilder Otayza, also a member of the Brotherhood of the Lord of Miracles, to paint a large depiction of Christ's crucifixion, which is kept in storage during the year, and borne on a table along a 20-block route within the three towns. "To carry it, you need

32 men," Cordova said. As the men pass, clad in purple tunics, Peruvian women sing prayers.

"I believe God works in mysterious ways," Cordova said. "The priest said, 'What a shame on your faith.' I felt we needed to do something to honor God." Since the first procession, the event — held on the first Sunday in October — has grown substantially.

*Mary Jo Patterson is a freelance writer in New Jersey.*

Jonathan Placencia helps run the popular Oh! Calameres restaurant, owned by his mother, Ana Placencia, in Kearny.  
*Amanda Brown*



Christian Pinto (in red), a Peruvian immigrant, plays soccer during a Sunday morning pickup game. Local men originally from Peru, Ecuador, Brazil, Great Britain and other countries enjoy soccer in Harrison. *Amanda Brown*

