Ellis Island: Island of Hope, Island of Tears

The Native American Indians are the earliest “immigrants” to have come to America. Thousands of years ago, they crossed a land bridge from Asia into America. After many centuries, people from other lands began settling in the United States. They came in three “waves” of immigration. The first wave took place from 1600 to 1776. Most of these settlers were English, French, and Scottish, and they formed colonies up and down the Atlantic Coast. The second wave was from 1776 to 1890, and was mostly German, Dutch, and Irish people. The third wave took place from 1890 to 1924, and included many European Jews. This last wave was processed through Ellis Island.

These immigrants came by choice. People uprooted themselves to come to America for many reasons. Some came for better wages, some came to flee persecution in their own country, some came to escape laws that they felt were unfair. All immigrants hoped that in their adopted country, their lives would be better. Some did not come by choice. Thousands of Africans were forced to travel to America in chains, and at the end of their journey were sold as slaves. At that time, America did not promise a better life for them.

Although most immigrants left hardships behind, it took a great deal of courage to say good-bye to their homes, loved ones, and friends. Most didn’t speak English and knew little about American life. The ocean voyage took courage, too. Today, planes can cross the Atlantic in a few hours. Before 1870, though, wooden sailing ships took more than two months to make the same trip. Shipping companies that were eager to make money took on more passengers than they had room for. The immigrants slept in large, crowded rooms, in row after row of bunk beds. Only one hatch, or opening, let in sunlight and fresh air. During storms the hatch was closed for safety, and the passengers had to stay down below. It was frightening and many people became seasick. For the duration of the journey, even the air passengers breathed foul smelling.

Worse than the odor were the diseases. Cholera, dysentery, and typhus could spread rapidly among passengers. Death from disease was common on immigrant ships. In 1868, 105 of the 544 passengers died during the seventy-day voyage of the Liebnitz, a German ship. Inspectors who went on board the ship determined that the deaths had come about from several causes, including a lack of fresh air, cleanliness, medical care, water, and food. The immigrants put up with the bad conditions, fearing that if they complained, they wouldn’t be allowed to come to America. And most didn’t speak the language of the ship’s crew, either.

For those who survived the journey, the day they had waited for finally came. In the distance was a little dot on the horizon. As the ship moved closer, it got bigger and bigger—it was the Statue of Liberty. Her torch gleamed golden in the morning sunlight. “Lady Liberty!” the people shouted. They started laughing and singing. Some wept tears of joy. The welcoming Statue of Liberty seemed to promise that all of the immigrants’ dreams would come true. But their trip was not yet over.
Just to the north of the Statue of Liberty was another well-known place—Ellis Island. As the passengers gazed out at this tiny island, they grew strangely quiet. Ellis Island was called the Gateway to America, but it was also called the Island of Tears. On this island, the United States government would decide whether the passengers would be allowed to stay in America or be sent back to their homelands.

More immigrants were processed on Ellis Island than anywhere else in America. Almost half of the citizens living in the United States...are descended from immigrants who passed through Ellis Island’s Registry Building.

Immigrants had to pass several inspections at Ellis Island. Many worried that if they answered an official’s question incorrectly, they would be deported. The main building was also very crowded. To help immigrants feel more comfortable, Americans from social organizations were on hand. They answered questions, gave toys to children and supported the bewildered immigrants through the inspection process.

The immigrants’ luggage was inspected on the main floor. Then, guards shouting in many different languages separated the people into groups, and each was given a number. As the immigrants filed upstairs to the Registry Hall, doctors quickly looked them over. If someone seemed to have a health problem, doctors pulled that person from the line. They marked the immigrant’s clothing with a big chalk letter. H stood for heart disease, L for lameness, F for facial rash, and X for mental illness.

Another doctor lifted the immigrants’ eyelids with a buttonhook, an old-fashioned tool for pulling buttons through buttonholes. In this frightening examination, the doctor looked for trachoma, an eye disease. The doctors held back anyone wearing a chalk letter for closer examination. One boy who had a facial rash because of an allergy to chocolate was held back. After five days, his rash cleared, so he was able to enter—on the promise not to eat chocolate any more.

Those who failed their inspections were often deported. It was very sad when one person from a family was declared not fit to enter the United States. The family then had to decide whether to stay together and go back home, or to separate. In all, about 2 percent were deported. For these people, Ellis Island was the Island of Tears. Ellis Island was the Island of Hope for the 98 percent of those who passed the inspections. They traded in their foreign money for American dollars and bought railway tickets if they were headed west. Many ended up making New York their home.

Many immigrants started their new lives in neighborhoods where friends or relatives from their homelands had settled. Whole sections of cities were often made up of people from a particular country. In Boston, New York, and other big cities, people could smell the cooking aromas coming from the houses and know what sort of neighborhood they were in. Some of these neighborhoods still bear names such as Little Italy or Chinatown, reminders of their immigrant past.
But there were many Americans who did not welcome foreigners. Workers who belonged to organizations called labor unions had struggled to secure better wages and working conditions. They feared that immigrants would work for less pay and take away their jobs. Some people said that immigrants, with their strange customs, would change the American way of life.

These fears led Congress to pass a “quota” law in 1921. This law limited the number of immigrants who could enter the United States each year from each country. The first year the law took effect, only 358,000 immigrants were allowed to come. This was a big drop from years past. In 1914 over twice that many had entered. And in 1907, the record year, 1.5 million people had emigrated. In 1929, Congress further dropped the total to 150,000.

Eventually, the United States government began conducting inspections overseas, and on November 29, 1954, the government closed Ellis Island. The great Registry Building remained abandoned and in disrepair for many years, until President Lyndon B. Johnson made Ellis Island part of the Statue of Liberty National Monument in 1965. Today, the Ellis Island Immigration Museum draws thousands of tourists, many of them the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of those hopeful immigrants whose first stop in America was Ellis Island.