

PROJECT TITLE:	
The Experience of Ellis Island	
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SCHOLARSHIP & RESEARCH

Primary Investigative Question(s) – What was the experience like for an immigrant coming to the United States in the early 1900’s through Ellis Island?

To many immigrants Ellis Island was a very scary place. It was the last obstacle keeping them from their better life in America. They had made it through the long, horrid boat trip and now their fate was in the hands of the inspectors. The immigrants were in a place where the people around them did not speak their language and they were eating foods unfamiliar to them. The United States is composed of these diverse foods and cultures which began in Ellis Island. .

To many steerage class immigrants Ellis Island was a symbol of fear and rejection. It was the place where it was decided whether they were able to stay with their families or be deported back to their country of origin. First and second class immigrants did not fear the island. They were not taken to Ellis Island but, received a quick examination on board the ship and their cabins. The steerage class immigrants arrived to the United States with not much more than the clothes on their backs. They were taken by ferry to Ellis Island to receive a more detailed examination and interrogation.

In the 1840’s the need for an immigration station was discovered. Ireland was suffering from a severe potato famine. The starving Irish were migrating by the thousands to the United States. The state and federal governments began to regulate immigration. They wanted skilled immigrants that were able to work. People were immigrating to the United States for three main reasons: religious prosecution, political oppression and economic hardship.

In the 1890’s American immigration changed as the federal government took over control and created many new policies and procedures. The first Federal Immigration Law denied entrance to "any convict, lunatic, idiot, or any person unable to take care of himself or herself without becoming a public charge." In 1891, the law was rewritten to

include the expulsion of prostitutes, polygamists, or "persons suffering from a loath-some or a dangerous contagious disease." (Pelo, 23). Prior to the opening of Ellis Island, immigrants coming through New York would have gone through Castle Harbor.

The immigration station opened in 1892, although it was not Treasury Secretary William Windom's first choice of a site. (Tifft, 32). Windom's first choice was Bedloe's Island which was turned down because it was already the location of the Statue of Liberty. Another suggestion was Governor's Island, but this location was rejected by the army leaving Ellis Island as the only remaining choice.

January 1, 1892 was the first day the island was open and 700 immigrants passed through on three ships: Nevada, City of Paris and the Victoria. The first immigrant to pass through the island and sign the registration book was 15 year old Annie Moore of County Cork, Ireland. In the first year close to 450,000 immigrants passed through the immigration station and 1.5 million immigrants had passed through after five years. Aboard the ships arriving at Ellis Island in the early 20th century there were faces of many nations. There were Russian Jews, Irish farmers, Greeks in kilts, Italians with mustaches, English in knickers and Arabs in robes (Pelo, 32).

Early in the morning of June 15, 1897 the immigration station caught fire. The fire spread very quickly and fortunately 31 employees and 199 immigrants were able to escape and no lives were lost. One and a half million dollars went into building a new fire proof immigration station, which opened on December 17, 1900.

Between 1900 and 1914 close to 13 million people immigrated to the United States and seventy percent of those people traveled through Ellis Island. It was not built to hold that capacity. "I used to and look at this beautiful, fantastic building that, as we were arriving, looked like palace and inside looked like a bare jail...You had to wait in line to get food. You had to wait in line to get a blanket...They weren't unkind, but they had so many people to take care of." -Barbara Barondess, emigrated from Russia in 1921 (Tifft, 78).

Close to 80% of the immigrants that entered Ellis Island passed through without any problems. Due to the amount of people to be inspected the main form of evaluation was a line inspection. Only selected individuals were detained after the examination. The physicians were originally only required to identify contagious diseases and diseases that would make one unable to earn a living (Richardson). In 1907, new laws were passed that banned immigrants suffering from tuberculosis, epilepsy, and the physically disabled. The disease which resulted in the most deportations was trachoma. Trachoma is a highly contagious eye infection that can cause blindness and death. They checked for trachoma by turning the eyelid inside out with a button-hook to look for inflammation on the inner eyelid, this was an extremely painful experience (Pelo, 45).

"We were put on a barge, jammed in so tight that I couldn't turn 'round, there were so many of us, you see, and the stench was terrible. And when we got to Ellis Island, they put the gangplank down, and there was a man at the foot, and he was shouting, at the top of his voice, "Put your luggage here, drop your luggage here. Men this way. Women and

children this way." Dad looked at us and said, ", we'll meet you back here at this mound of luggage and hope we find it again and see you later.", said Eleanor Kenderdine Lenhart, an English immigrant in 1921 (Pelo). When entering Ellis Island the immigrants would first be guided to the baggage room. They had to leave all their possessions until they were through with the interrogation process. The immigrants would then go through a six second medical exam; health doctors would watch them climb The Great Hall Stairway. There was a doctor stationed at the top of the staircase watching to see if anyone coughed, wheezed or limped. Doctors only spent a few seconds examining each immigrant (Tifft, 85).

The immigrants would then move on to the Registry Room for a medical exam. The doctors would pay close attention to posture, eyes, and the way immigrants walked. The primary concerns were cholera, scalp and nail fungus, insanity and mental impairments. If an immigrant appeared sick or contagious they were marked with chalk and sent to the Ellis Island hospital for further inspection. If the problem was incurable the steamship company would have to pay to send the immigrant back to their country of origin. The eye examination was the most feared of all the exams. The medical examiner would insert a hook like instrument into the upper eyelid and then fold the lid over to expose the upper part of the eyeball. The doctors were looking for signs of trachoma, which was a very contagious eye disease that could result in blindness (Tifft, 86).

After the medical exam, immigrants would have to wait in the Great Hall for their turn to have an interview with a legal inspector. During the legal inspection, immigrants would have to prove they could legally come into the United States. They might be asked their country of origin and where they expected to live once they entered the United States. Any immigrant with a criminal record was rejected. By 1921, all immigrants sixteen years of age had to pass a literacy test and show a passport or visa. Immigrants had to read a 40 word passage in their native language. Most passages were biblical passages (Tifft 87).

If the immigrants passed through the legal inspection they were sent to the money exchange. They could exchange money from their homeland for United States currency. Immigrants could also purchase train tickets to reach their final destination. In 1909, a law was passed that required each immigrant to have twenty dollars to be permitted into the United States. The New York State Commissioner of Immigration, William Williams, wanted immigrants to be able to take care of themselves and not depend on the government once entering the United States.

As the United States entered World War I, immigration to the United States began to decrease. Many suspected enemy aliens were brought to Ellis Island and detained. In 1918, the detained aliens were transferred and Ellis Island was used by the United States Navy and Army Medical Department. During this time immigrants were inspected on dock or aboard their ship.

At the end of World War I, thousands of suspected alien radicals were detained at Ellis Island. They were detained due to association with organizations supporting a revolt against the federal government. Hundreds of these aliens were deported based on their association with radical groups.

Ellis Island reopened to the public in 1920 and received 225,206 immigrants that year. With the passage of Quota Laws and the National Origins Act Ellis Island began to see a decline in the amount of immigrants passing through. These regulations were based on a percentage system according to the number of ethnic groups already living in the United States. They were used as an effort to protect the ethnic flavor of the “old immigrants” (New York State Immigration Center). There was a perception that the newly arriving immigrants were inferior to the immigrants who were already established in the United States. By 1931, Ellis Island was no longer a busy, bustling place, but it was now empty and silent. After World War I, the deportation of immigrants through the island was much more common than the admittance. The Immigration and Naturalization Service closed Ellis Island in 1932 as a processing center. Although it remained open for many years it functioned mainly as a detention center during World War II. Approximately 7,000 German, Italian, and Japanese people were detained at Ellis Island during the war. The United States Coast Guard also used the island to train their servicemen. Ellis Island was officially closed in November of 1954 when the last prisoner was released, a Norwegian seaman (New York State Immigration Center).

Ellis Island was declared a national park in 1956 by President Lyndon Johnson. Twenty years later in 1976 it was open to the public for visits. Sixty minute guided tours were given throughout the main building. Over 50,000 people toured the island that year. Today, the museum receives almost two million visitors a year. The museum is a tribute to those early immigrants who sought out a better life in America. It is now a tribute to 100 million Americans whose parents, grandparents, or great-grandparents arrived here as immigrants.

Annotated Bibliography

Fisher, Leonard. *Ellis Island Gateway to the New World*, 1986. Through pictures and real life account Fisher presents the lives of many immigrants' experiences as passing through Ellis Island in the 1900's.

Handlin, Oscar. *A Pictorial History of Immigration*, 1972. Handlin shows the immigration process from the very beginning with the Native American up to present day.

Tifft, Wilton. *Ellis Island*, 1990. Tifft tells many firsthand accounts the process immigrants face while traveling through Ellis Island. He starts with the early history of how the island came to be and brings us up to the restoration process. The use of photographs in this story makes it easy to picture in your mind what it would be like to be an immigrant in the 1900's.

Richardson, John T.E., *Medical Inspection of Immigrants on Ellis Island 1891-1924*. Richardson discusses how immigrants were tested for mental retardation at Ellis Island.