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Ellis Island: Gateway to the United States

Ellis Island, a 27.5-acre island in the shadow of the Statue of Liberty, is located in Upper New York Harbor. During its turbulent lifespan as a United States immigration station (1892–1954), approximately 12 million immigrants were processed through its doors. While a “Portal of Hope and Freedom” for many immigrants, it was also an “Island of Tears” for the 2 percent who were turned away when they failed to meet the requirements of the various United States immigration laws and regulations. ▶ Fig. 1

Prior to the Immigration Act of 1891 the United States administered federal immigration regulations through a system of state immigration centres in its port cities. This new legislation established total federal control of immigration through the creation of the Bureau of Immigration within the Treasury Department. A study of New York Harbor was done to determine the best location for a federal immigration station replacing Castle Garden, on the Battery at the southern tip of Manhattan. Ellis Island, the location of a federal naval powder magazine, was selected and the island was improved for a federal immigration station. On January 1, 1892 the new immigration station was formally opened to process steerage passengers; first and second cabin class passengers were processed on the ship and disembarked directly in Manhattan. By June 15, 1897 when most of the buildings on the island were destroyed by fire, some 1,500,000 immigrants had passed through Ellis Island to the United States. These immigrants represented a shift from northern and western Europeans to southern



Fig. 1 Aerial shot of Ellis Island with Immigration Museum

| DOI/NPS/Statue of Liberty NM and Ellis Island, New York

and eastern Europeans. Immigration was temporarily moved to the Barge Office in Manhattan while a new immigration station was constructed on the island. The new immigration station was designed by the New York firm of Boring and Tilton, the first important government building to be designed by private architects under competition. This immigration station opened on December 17, 1900 with 2,251 immigrants processed on that first day. It was estimated that 5,000 immigrants could be processed daily through the new building which featured the French Renaissance style brick laid in Flemish bond with limestone trim. It included a large registry room on the second floor along with offices and a special board of inquiry; dormitories to sleep 600 persons on the third floor and a baggage room and large railroad waiting area on the first floor. Adjoining the main building was a large kitchen and laundry building, a power house and the beginnings of a hospital complex on the second island, created by landfill.

When Theodore Roosevelt became President in 1901 he began to clean up the Ellis Island operation after the exposure of several scandals. He appointed William Williams as the new Commissioner of Immigration in 1902. Williams immediately instituted procedures to maintain efficient, honest, courteous and sanitary treatment of the immigrants. During his two terms and the one term of Robert Watchorn, the immigration station operated at peak capacity. Europeans migrated to the United States in record numbers during the years prior to the First World War. In 1903, 12,600 immigrants arrived on one day, requiring almost half of them to remain in steerage on the steamships for a few days because of congested facilities. By 1905, 821,169 immigrants had been processed at Ellis Island, creating logistical problems with many immigrants required to stay on the island for a few days or more. The peak year of immigration came in 1907 when 1,004,756 immigrants were received; the peak day that year was April 17 when 11,747 immigrants were processed in one day. ▶ Fig. 2

The First World War brought a sharp decline in immigration, decreasing to 28,867 people in 1918. In 1916, explosions by German saboteurs at a nearby wharf in New Jersey severely damaged some of the Ellis Island buildings. The most notable repairs were the installation of the new Gustavino arched tile ceiling over the registry room and the red tile floor in that room replacing the old worn asphalt surface. When the United States entered the war in 1917, some of the Ellis Island facilities were used to hold German merchant ship crews as well as other suspected enemy aliens throughout the United States that were rounded up and brought to Ellis Island for incarceration. Most of the buildings were taken over by the United States Army and Navy to treat returning sick and wounded American soldiers. The end of the war brought the “Red Scare” when anti-foreign fears were transferred from German-Americans to suspected communists, anarchists, socialists and radicals. Hundreds of suspected foreign radicals were held on Ellis Island and many of them were deported, the most famous was Emma Goldman on the SS Buford, known as the “Soviet Ark”, December 31, 1919. ▶ Fig. 3

Postwar immigration revived quickly in 1920 with 560,971 immigrants processed



Fig. 2 Aliens boarding transfer steamer for departure. | DOI/NPS/Statue of Liberty NM and Ellis Island, New York; photo: Augustus Sherman

in 1921. The first quota law was passed in 1921. The total number of immigrants admitted each year under the new system was set at approximately 358,000 with numerous classes exempt from the quota system. The Immigration Act of 1924 had more of a significant impact on the Ellis Island operation, reducing the annual quota to approximately 164,000 and moving the examination of immigrants to their country of origin with inspections being done by the United States consulate staffs. At that time, the principle function of Ellis Island changed from a primary immigration examination station to a centre for the assembly, detention and deportation of aliens who entered the United States illegally or violated the terms of their admittance. Few new immigrants were sent to Ellis Island, only those immigrants with legal questions about their entry documents or those who required medical treatment. After the stock market crash of 1929, immigration sharply reduced because of lack of economic opportunity. During this time, Edward Corsi, an Italian immigrant who passed through Ellis Island in 1907, became Commissioner of Immigration in 1931 and spent his administration humanising the conditions of the deportees on the island and softened the harsher aspects of the previous deportation policy.

In 1933 a nonpartisan committee of prominent citizens was set up by President Franklin Roosevelt's Secretary of Labor, Frances Perkins to undertake a complete



Fig.3 Immigrants buying railroad tickets, 1920's | DOI/NPS/Statue of Liberty NM and Ellis Island, New York; photo: Augustus Sherman

analysis of Ellis Island operations and to make recommendations for improvements. These recommendations resulted in the addition of recreation grounds by the main building, including new playgrounds and gardens. Other activities included building a new recreation hall and shelter to the hospital complex, adding sun porches to some of the contagious disease wards, improving quarters for the medical staff, building a new ferry building with waiting rooms and lunch counters, and building a new immigration building behind the new ferry building with recreation space on both sides (intended as a place for immigrants to be segregated from deportees) with new passageways connecting the various sections of the island.

When the Second World War broke out in Europe in 1939, the US Coast Guard occupied several of the Ellis Island buildings to house and train recruits to patrol the harbor. In 1940 the Immigration and Naturalization Service was transferred to the Department of Justice from the Department of Labor, symbolising the changing perception of immigrants to potential threats to national security. When the United States entered the war in 1941, Ellis Island once again was used as a detention centre for suspected enemy aliens (primarily Germans, Italians and Japanese noncitizens) and as a military hospital for returning wounded servicemen.

After the war the island continued to be used primarily as a detention centre for immigrants whose legal status was questioned. The passage of the Internal Security Act of 1950 caused a flurry of activity as it excluded immigrants who were members of Communist and Fascist organizations. At one point the detainees on the island numbered as many as 1500 people. In 1951 the US Public Health Service closed the hospital complex on the island. The Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1952 resulted in a liberalised detention policy and the number of deportees dropped to fewer than 30 immigrants. Finally, the Ellis Island facility that now included some forty structures closed down in November 1954 and was declared excess government property.

The physical and social history of Ellis Island reflects important transitions in attitudes toward immigration in the United States. Mass immigration peaked in 1907; it declined sharply during the First World War, revived after the war, and then altered dramatically with the passage of the quota laws in the 1920's. These quota laws, which placed a lower ceiling on the numbers of immigrants who were allowed in the United States annually and established a system that favoured primarily Northern and Western Europe, also changed the inspection of immigrants to United States consular officials in the immigrant's country of origin. Thereafter, only the immigrants whose papers were not in order or those who required medical treatment at the Public Health Service hospital facility were sent to Ellis Island. The facilities were increasingly used for the assembly and deportation of immigrants who had entered the United States illegally, or who had violated the terms of their admittance. While the early history of Ellis Island reflected the liberal attitudes of the United States toward immigration, the latter half of its life was shaped by a restrictionist policy that succeeded in narrowing the open door to the United States. These quota laws remained in effect until President Lyndon Johnson signed a new immigration law in 1965. This new immigration law was a radical break with the previous quota policy that had become intolerable. It opened the immigration system equally to all countries, giving each country the same number of visas to the United States each year, and established the family-based immigration system. This new system allowed significantly larger immigration from non-European countries and is believed to be one of the primary reasons that the United States population became so diverse and multicultural in the latter half of the 20th century.

Ellis Island was added to the Statue of Liberty National Monument, National Park Service in 1965 by President Lyndon Johnson, shortly after he signed this new immigration law at the foot of the symbolically powerful Statue of Liberty. Ellis Island symbolised then (as it does today) the story of United States immigration with its cultural richness and it commemorates the millions of people who passed through Ellis Island into the United States, whose contributions to American society made the United States the world leader it became in the 20th century and the ongoing debate about immigration policy. The intent was to preserve the original immigration and hospital buildings, and create the Ellis Island

Immigration Museum. The museum, opening in 1990, preserved much of the historic character of the main immigration building and through this physical preservation and the use of oral history interviews and historic photographs, captured the experiences and impressions of the profound human drama that unfolded there. In recent years the museum has expanded the immigration story beyond the Ellis Island years to present a more comprehensive story of people migrating to the United States during its entire history within the broader context of global migration. The purpose of the newer Peopling of America exhibits is to make the museum more welcoming and inclusive to all visitors, reaching out to families that did not migrate through Ellis Island, and clearly showing that migration is a continuing, worldwide process, not simply an isolated historic event. The museum, through its exhibits and programs, reveals the diverse reasons and ways that people became part of the United States during the process of peopling the North American continent. Exhibits and public programs explore the mass immigrant experience rather than highlighting successful individuals and the ongoing persistence of ethnic cultures despite the “pressures of Americanisation”. The museum challenges visitors to question their own assumptions of immigration, past and present, and explore complex issues from diverse perspectives. It actively encourages visitors to picture themselves as part of the worldwide migration movement.

The museum includes a rich collection, including donated personal items from former immigrants who brought these items with them through Ellis Island from many different countries, an audio oral history collection and historic photograph collections relating to the operations of the Ellis Island immigration station.

Ellis Island Oral History Program

Since 1973, the Ellis Island Oral History Program has been dedicated to preserving the first-hand recollections of immigrants who passed through the Ellis Island immigration station between 1892 and 1954 as well as the people who worked on the island in various capacities. The audio interviews with immigrants include a description of everyday life in the country of origin, family history, reasons for emigration, journey to New York, arrival and processing at Ellis Island, and adjustment to life in the United States. Over the years, the collection has grown to approximately 2,000 interviews. These interviews represent immigrants from many countries, former Immigration and Public Health Service employees, military personnel stationed at Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty as well as people detained at Ellis Island during the Second World War until it closed in 1954. Some quotes from these interviews are included by topic:

Packing to leave home for the US

Emma and William Greiner, immigrated from Italy
in 1925 at age 11 and 12

EMMA: Yes, yes. It was very disrupting, you know, to pack and break up your home. Oh, we took, of course, our clothing and some pieces of like china that were very, very special. And maybe a blanket or two also that were real good wool, that we felt maybe we may not be able to get here in the United States.

WILLIAM: Of course, there was pressure to leave things there but they accommodated us kids. And I brought a lot of things that (he laughs) I now wonder why I was so attached, for instance, to greeting cards. They were very, very romantic in those days and they were through the years birthdays and so on. And a few toys. My tin soldiers. I don't remember whether I brought anything about my small railroad, um.

WILLIAM: Oh, yes, yes. And then I had, uh, what we called a "Magic Lantern." It was a ... Projector. Very, very primitive, (he laughs) compared to today's.

EMMA: And I was hoping he wouldn't bring those soldiers because when we played together at home, you see I was German and he was French, you know, and he would always decimate all my soldiers, kill them all off, so we had quite a different set in our lives (she laughs).

The steamship

Morris Abraham Schneider, immigrated
from Poland in 1920 at age 10

When we got on the "Rotterdam", we had a field day. One, I was never on ship before and it was absolutely, I was awed by it. It was overwhelming. All the people and boarding the ship, it was all a brand new experience. We left Rotterdam, we set sail and about a half hour after the ship started my sister got very sea sick. It took us fourteen days to cross the Atlantic and in the entire crossing, she was in steerage, and the only time she came up for a breath of fresh air was just about a half hour before we saw the Statue of Liberty. Now the experience of the ship, being young was an adventure in that particular situation, because we were on the lowest level of the ship. We couldn't go aboard. Some kids were more adventurous. My brother and I, we would sneak aboard, we were always chased. And we saw some people who traveled maybe in first or second class and we looked upon them as royalty, but we were confined primarily to steerage. Steerage was one huge place. It was the lowest deck. The stench, it was the summer, in August, the humidity, the heat, having no air conditioning, having cooling facilities, it was very hot, compounded by the fact that there must have been anywhere from two to three hundred people in that huge cavernous area. The body smells, the body odors, the lack of sanitation, the lack of any kind of

facilities, washing, there was no such thing as washing or bathing. The stench, the vermin, it was rat infested. But, being children, I guess, had its advantages, in this case because we always tried to get out of there. We tried to go, get out of the steerage, get out of the babble of voices, get out of the heat and the stench and get on the main deck. We all were permitted to stay there for a little while but we were constantly chased. But the crossing went for us, for me in particular, went very quickly.

Statue of Liberty

Angelo Vacca, immigrated from Italy
in 1909 at age 11

And then somebody came over, he says, “We’re going over to,” Oh, I think they used to call it The Battery, at that time, in New York. He said, “We’re going to The Battery.” He said, “We’ve got to go on a boat.” Oh, my mother was, started to get sick when she heard the name boat again, she started to get sick. And that was, well, what I know now was like a ferry boat, you know, and we were all over there. And it was a trip from New York to The Battery. It was a wonderful trip for me. I looked all over the place. And that’s when I saw the Statue of Liberty. Well, I had seen a picture of it, pictures of it in different books. I thought it was a beautiful, a beautiful monument, and it still is.

Ellis Island

Jack Giacomo Mario Lorenzo Ubaldi, immigrated
from the port of Genoa, Italy in 1918 at age 7

Well, they expected my father to be here, to claim us. And he wasn’t. Nobody came to claim us. So we were all brought here on this island. And my mother was frightened because he wasn’t here. My sisters it was the same way. I couldn’t figure it out, anything anyway. So the communication between friends here in New York and my father seemed, or from here, I don’t know how it worked, it didn’t work out until almost six days later that he was able to come here. He was waiting for us in Scranton, we were waiting here. So the communication was, you know, really snafued there.

Well, we went through physicals. Doctor checked us all over. Here was the first day that I came here when they fed us that I got big glasses of milk and white bread, which to me, I never felt bread, that soft bread. It was, you know, like manna from Heaven. And I was treated very nicely here. And, (he pauses) but, you live on rumors. People are being sent back. People for one reason or for another. And you never know what is happening, what is going on. And so my mother was crying her heart out, and my sisters were worried also, and they cried. Because the

trip coming over wasn't a cruise. And to go back and go through the same thing, or being blown up, you know, it was a horrible thought for that. So, those are the six days that came by, they went by like that.

Reunion with family members

Anna Klarich, immigrated from Yugoslavia
in 1920 at age 18

Oh. It was so beautiful to see her. Ten years I didn't see her. I mean, she looked different, and I was so grown up. I was only eight years old when she left and then I was eighteen. I was a young lady. Well, I came and she was hugging me. We both cry. We all cry, you know. Then we said, we went to the dining room and they served us. I don't know what they serve us, the main meal, but the French bread and butter was so delicious because we didn't have much on the boat, you know. It was so good. And my aunt say, "You want some more," and I was ashamed to take another slice, but I said, "I like it." She said, "Just eat because," she said, "I know you didn't have that on the boat", so we did. So it was nice.

And then I came in my mother's apartment and she had lace curtains. We didn't have that in Europe. And I was just admiring these lace curtains. They were so beautiful, you know. And my mother said, "There are cookies in the kitchen. When you want, you just go and help yourself, you know." And then I said, "Oh, tomorrow morning when I'm going to get up I'm going to get those cookies." I got up six o'clock in the morning and she gave me her night gown, big night gown. I put it on, and then I went in the kitchen and I got myself four big cookies and I put them on my lap and I'm admiring the pictures on my mother's wall and those curtains just, they just fascinate me. And I'm eating my cookies and admiring, and my mother peeked in my bedroom and she said, "Oh, my God!" And I was so embarrassed that I had these cookies in my lap and eating that she told me to do it. She said, "Don't be embarrassed. Just eat it and eat all you want."

Changing names in the US

Gertrude (Gudrun) Hildebrandt Moller, immigrated
from Germany in 1929 at age 9

I was born Gudrun Hildebrandt and married Moller, Mr. Moller, who was from Denmark. He immigrated here many years later and we met in New York. However when I started school in Chicago, where I grew up, needless to say, first of all, I couldn't speak a word of English, and I was the only child in the school that couldn't speak English. And (she laughs) it wasn't too happy the first couple of years but my mama said "Take heart because some day you're going to be able to speak two languages and all the ones that were teasing you will speak only

III Institutional remembrance



Fig. 4 From Bavaria, Germany

Fig. 5 From Finland

Fig. 6 From southeastern Europe

Fig. 7 From the Netherlands

| DOI/NPS/ Statue of Liberty NM and Ellis Island, New York;
photos: Augustus Sherman



Fig. 8 From Italy Fig. 9 From Hungary Fig. 10 From Albania Fig. 11 From Russia

| DOI/NPS/Statue of Liberty NM and Ellis Island, New York; photos: Augustus Sherman



one". And it was true. She was always right. So, my teacher suggested, since none of the children could pronounce Gudrun, which is an old Germanic-Scandinavian name, and a very beautiful name (I hear), she gave me a list of girls' names to choose from. So that all the kids could converse, you know, know what to call me. So I picked the name starting with a g, as with my name, and it was Gertrude. I'm not very happy with it, but it has stuck with me all of these years.

Augustus Sherman Photograph Collection

One of the more significant groups of photographs in the collection belonged to Augustus Sherman, former clerk at the Ellis Island immigration station. His status as clerk gave him access to the immigrants that a regular inspector would not have had and resulted in an incredible collection of immigrant portraits, documenting that period of mass immigration. ▶ Fig. 4–11

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