

Immigration Facts

Pre-1880 Immigration

Before the 1880-1920 arrival of “the new immigrant,” most immigrants to the United States arrived from Western and Northern European nations. During the colonial period, the population was mainly English with large populations of Germans (6% of total population—150,000—by 1775) and Scotch-Irish (7% of population—175,000—by 1775). About 5% of the population were other European groups—French, Dutch, Welsh, Swedes, Jews, Irish, Swiss. 20% of the 1775 population were African slaves—forced immigrants.

Following the American Revolution, immigrants continued to be from Western and Northern European nations at a rate of approximately 60,000 people a year. In the 1840s, the immigration rate tripled and in the 1850s quadrupled in part because of the Irish immigrants fleeing the potato famine of the mid-1840s and Germans fleeing crop failures, as well as the 1848 collapse of the countries’ democratic revolutions. Between 1830 and 1860, approximately 2 million Irish immigrants and 1.5 million German immigrants arrived. The total number of immigrants for the same 30-year period was approximately 4.9 million, with the overwhelming majority coming from Europe. These immigrants generally were Protestant with some Catholics (particularly the Irish) and their cultures easily meshed into the American culture. Numbers of immigrants declined slightly during the 1860s due to the Civil War but rose in the 1870s and exploded in the 1880s.

Also in the early to mid-nineteenth century, unskilled workers from China migrated to California and the western states seeking work. Unlike European immigrants who came in family groups, this immigration was primarily by males seeking work with the ultimate goal of returning to China. Very few Chinese women immigrated during this period and the few who came to California were already or became prostitutes. Chinese immigration began in 1820 and exploded during the 1848 Gold Rush. These immigrants primarily labored in mines, worked on railroads, and transformed the dry landscape into farmland. As more Americans moved to the West Coast and the once booming economy waned, anti-Chinese riots occurred in the late 1870s and 1880s. In 1882, the Chinese

Exclusion Act prohibited the immigration of Chinese laborers into the United States for ten years, and further immigration legislation continued the ban until 1940 when the act was repealed and limits on Chinese immigration were lifted. Following the 1882 act, only certain Chinese merchants and their families were allowed to enter the country and these immigrants faced strict regulation and laws that deemed them ineligible for citizenship.

Immigration between 1880-1920 and the Age of the “New Immigrant”

Between 1880 and 1920, almost 24 million immigrants arrived in the United States. These “New Immigrants” were primarily from Southern and Eastern European nations — Italy, Croatia, Greece, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Russia. In 1882, immigration reached a new high with 788,992 persons arriving that year. During this forty-year period, the “New Immigrants” came to the United States for a variety of reasons. The population of Europe had doubled over the course of the 1800s, and the growing population (and the United States) faced the challenges associated with industrialization. During the second half of the 19th century, industrialization (the rise of cities and manufacturing) upset the fragile lifestyle and stability of the peasant classes. Millions moved to European cities seeking work and a decent life following the decline of agriculture and their way of life. Approximately 60 million people fled Europe during this period, with almost half that number coming to the United States.

Low wages, unemployment, disease, forced military conscription, and religious persecution (particularly Eastern European and Russian Jews forced from their homes by Pogroms) all inspired immigrants to flee their homelands and come to the United States. These immigrants were inspired to come to America by its reputation as the “Land Of Liberty” and also by the inspiring letters of friends and relatives already in the United States. These “New Immigrants” fleeing poverty and persecution faced difficulties in assimilating into American culture that immigrants in the 1840s did not. Most could not speak English, nor were they literate in their own language. They came from non-democratic governments and were often distrustful of government. Immigrants during this period crammed into cities in the Northeast (although many did migrate to the Midwestern city of Chicago), and created small ethnic communities where they preserved

the culture of their homelands. Immigrants maintained their culture by publishing newspapers in their native languages, opening specialty grocery stores and restaurants, and establishing churches, synagogues, and schools. But these communities could not protect immigrants from discrimination inflicted by native-born Americans.

The New Immigrants during the 1880-1920 period typically settled in the cities along the eastern seaboard and entered low-paying, wage-labor jobs. They filled the growing factories and also worked at other poorly-paid jobs such as construction work or sewing. These immigrants often arrived with little money and were forced into substandard housing in the worst sections of the overcrowded cities. With their populations rising exponentially, the infrastructure of the cities could not handle the effects of overcrowding. Many cities had problems with sanitation, leading to overflowing sewers, uncollected garbage, impure water, and a general stench in the air. Combined with soaring populations and overcrowding, crime rates rose. Many native-born Americans blamed the New Immigrants for the unsettling situation in the cities and for taking over “their” nation.

In 1882, Congress began to pass legislation limiting immigration. This first immigration act levied a fifty-cent tax on each immigrant and prohibited people previously convicted of political offences, “lunatics,” and those likely to become public charges. In 1891, legislation established the Bureau of Immigration within the Treasury Department and made polygamists, those afflicted with a “loathsome” or “dangerous” disease, and those convicted of a crime involving “moral turpitude” disqualified for immigration. In 1917, Congress chose to override Woodrow Wilson’s presidential veto to enact legislation that required a literacy test for immigration — an adult immigrant had to be able to read forty words in any language. This legislation also barred immigration from Asia except Japan and the Philippines. Following American involvement in the First World War (1917-1918), anti-immigrant sentiment grew as thousands of people from war-torn Europe flooded the U.S. In 1920-1921, approximately 800,000 people came to the United States; about two-thirds of that number were from southern and eastern Europe. In 1921, Congress enacted the Emergency Quota Act, the first quantitative immigration law. This stopgap legislation restricted the number of immigrants by their country of origin. Only 3% of the number of persons from that

nation living in the U.S., according to the 1910 census, were allowed to immigrate. The Immigration Act of 1924 made the quota system permanent and reduced the percentage allowed into the U.S. from 3% based on the 1910 census to 2% based on the 1890 census numbers. This change from the 1910 to the 1890 census shifted the nationality totals to a time when relatively few southern and eastern European immigrants had arrived. The legislation was enacted in order to limit more “New Immigrants” from arriving and essentially the U.S. closed itself to mass immigration.

The Trip to America during the Age of the “New Immigrant”

With the development of steam-powered ships in the late 1800s, the average crossing time from Europe to North America was reduced from three months to two weeks. Huge steam ships carried as many as two thousand passengers in steerage — the lower decks of the ship. Passengers in steerage class were divided into separate compartments for single men, single women, and families, and each compartment contained metal bunks three beds high. Because of inadequate sanitation facilities and the realities of hundreds of bodies crammed into a small, enclosed space, a horrible odor overtook the area. To make things worse, lice was rampant among passengers. Travelers ate what food they brought or from a tin mess kit provided each day by the ship’s staff. By 1910, some ship lines had replaced the large steerage compartments with Third Class cabins with four or six beds each, and many vessels served meals in a dining room complete with long tables and benches. Immigrants embarking on their new life in America often came with very little baggage — many had sold many of their belongings in order to afford the trip, and in general the poor masses fleeing the Old World had few belongings in the first place.

Arrival

Many ships from Europe arrived in New York with the passengers clearing immigration through Ellis Island (in operation 1892-1924), but ships also arrived in cities such as New Orleans and Galveston. Although first and second class passengers were inspected and cleared by immigration officials on the ship and allowed to leave directly

from the Hudson River piers, steerage passengers were herded off of the ship and onto large barge-like ferries that transported them to Ellis Island. The trip from the ship to Ellis Island was not pleasant. Exposed to the elements on the uncovered ferries, immigrants faced sweltering heat in the summer and frigid temperatures in the winter. Upon reaching Ellis Island, they waited in long lines, for inspections. As many as 20,000 passengers cleared immigration at Ellis Island each day.

Upon arrival in the United States, officials attached numbered tags to the clothing of immigrants. Although only roughly 2% of immigrants were denied entry at Ellis Island, this total averaged over a thousand people a month. Doctors inspected immigrants for signs of sixty symptoms, such as wheezing, limping, or even varicose veins. Immigrants could be barred from entry if doctors detected cholera, tuberculosis, epilepsy, or trachoma. Mental impairments or insanity were also watched for. Those who appeared sick were taken to Ellis Island Hospital for observation and care. If the disease was determined to be incurable, the passenger was returned to their steamship line and transported back to their port of departure. Following medical inspection, immigrants were crowded into the Registry Room, where they would wait to be interrogated by legal inspectors. Assisted by interpreters, immigration officials verified the 29 pieces of personal information including name, age, and planned destination. After 1917, immigrants older than age 16 were required to pass a literacy test in their native language. After passing medical and legal inspection, immigrants left the Registry Room and officials directed them to railroad ticket offices or, for those intending to live in New York City, toward a ferry to the mainland. The entire process, on average, took five hours, although for those detained due to illness or awaiting further competency testing it might stretch into days or weeks. For immigrants who faced inspections that could lead to them being rejected from the United States, the process at Ellis Island inspired fear and anxiety.

Immigration of Today

Since the 1920s, the United States has maintained a limited immigration policy. Changes in the quota numbers were made by Congress over the years, and certain groups

were allowed non-quota status, allowing them to immigrate regardless of the number of other immigrants. In the post-World War II period, the U.S. allowed Europeans displaced by the war to immigrate outside of quota limitations. Other groups allowed access following war or political uprising include Vietnamese, Cubans, Nigerians, and Haitians. The Immigration Act of 1990 caps the total number of immigrants allowed into the United States per year at 700,000, but, as in the past, exceptions are allowed for certain groups such as immediate relatives of U.S. Citizens. In the year 2000, 849,807 persons were granted legal permanent residence in the United States.

According to the Immigration and Naturalization Service, in 2000 the five leading countries of origin for legal immigrants were Mexico (173,919), China (45,652) the Philippines (42,474), India (42,046), and Vietnam (26,747). In the second half of the twentieth century, immigration from Europe declined, while that from Asia, Mexico, and Central and South American nations expanded, particularly since 1970. These late-20th-century immigrants faced many of the same hurdles of the “New Immigrant” of the early 20th century, including language difficulties, low-paying jobs, poverty, and discriminatory stereotypes. One difference is that while the majority of “New Immigrants” crowded into the cities of the eastern seaboard, for the past thirty years, the primary destinations for legal immigrants have been California, New York, Florida, Texas, New Jersey, and Illinois. In 2000, these five states accounted for 66% of all immigration. This shift in settlement patterns can largely be explained by the change in country of origin for the recent immigrants.

For interesting statistical analysis and charts related to recent immigration refer to <http://www.ins.usdoj.gov/graphics/aboutins/statistics/> — a section of the helpful Immigration and Naturalization Service web site.

Famous Immigrants:

Alexander Graham Bell, inventor of telephone (Scotland)

Albert Einstein, scientist (Germany)

Andre Carnegie, steel entrepreneur of the late 19th/early 20th centuries (Scotland)

Sammy Sosa, baseball player (Dominican Republic)

Henry Kissinger, former Secretary of State (Germany)

Madeline Albright, former Secretary of State and US ambassador to the UN
(Czechoslovakia)

Arnold Schwarzenegger, actor (Austria)

Bob Hope, entertainer (United Kingdom)

Gloria Estefan, singer (Cuba)

Carlos Santana, guitarist (Mexico)

Eddie Van Halen, guitarist (The Netherlands)

Mikhail Baryshnikov, ballet dancer (Soviet Union)

Hakeem Olajuwon, basketball player – Univ of Houston and Houston Rockets (Nigeria)

Zubin Mehta – conductor and musician (India)

Elie Wiesel – Nobel Prize-winning author and Holocaust survivor (Romania)

Enrico Fermi – Nobel Prize winner for Physics in 1938 (Italy)

Thomas Mann – author; won the Nobel Prize (Germany)

Other Immigration Resources:

<http://www.pbs.org/kcet/newamericans/>

PBS's The New Americans Website to complement the PBS documentary.

<http://www.ellisland.org/>

The American Family Immigration History Center, located in the Ellis Island Immigration Museum. This site produced by The Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Foundation provides information about genealogical research, the passenger records housed at the center on Ellis Island, and an interesting online reference/activity for students called The Immigrant Experience.

<http://www.ellisland.com/>

Ellis Island Immigration Museum. This site is produced by ARAMARK, the National Park Service's authorized concessioner (they run the gift shops, snack bars, ferries, and hotels at the National Parks). This site informs tourists about what to expect from a visit to Ellis Island and also provides an informative history of the Island and immigration history.

For older high school students a good book to read on the experiences of a “New Immigrant” is Hilda Satt Polacheck’s *I Came a Stranger: The Story of a Hull-House Girl*, edited by Dena J. Polacheck Epstein (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, c1989).

An interesting collection of interviews of immigrants on their experiences at Ellis Island and also interviews of former Ellis Island employees is Peter Morton Coan’s *Ellis Island Interviews: In Their Own Words* (New York: Facts on File, 1997).