

Immigration in America in the 19th and 20th Century

Life on board

Life on board to Ellis Island, especially during the peak years of immigration in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, was often crowded, uncomfortable, and filled with uncertainty.

Ellis Island, January 15, 1905

Dear friends,
 Hope you're doing well. I just wanted to share my recent trip to Ellis Island as an immigrant and the feeling that came with it. The boat ride was thrilling, despite the crowd on board and the lack of comfort, seeing the Statue of Liberty in the distance brought a mix of excitement and hope. Stepping onto the island, the immigration building looked massive, but it also felt like a gateway to new possibilities. This place is full of rich happy and sad stories. We were taken to different areas where tests had to be passed. It was not difficult since I had prepared for these tests! I was as sure to succeed as I was eager to be American. It felt so good to be there, even if I miss my Italian family so much! I know life here will be difficult because work will not be easy to find. Anyway, I feel confident and I want my family to be proud of me and join me soon. In a nutshell, my trip to Ellis Island was a profound experience filled with hope, emotions, and gratitude for this journey. See you soon, Roberto

APPROVED

immigrants could only re-enter the US after a 2-year stay in America on their ship approved by the island.

Ellis Island Gateway to America

Ellis Island was the busiest immigrant inspection station in the United States, located in New York Harbor. After a long journey by ship across the Atlantic Ocean, immigrants from all over the world passed through Ellis Island hoping for a new life in America. As soon as they set foot on this promised land, immigrants were tested through a series of inspections to ensure they were healthy and able to support themselves. Families were sometimes separated as they went through different parts of the inspection process. Once cleared by officials, immigrants were given a stamp or mark on their paperwork, indicating they were allowed to enter the United States. They boarded ferries to Manhattan, where many started their new lives in America's cities or headed westward to settle in other parts of the country.

Ellis Island Stamp

Eva Vom Hoeyel

IMMIGRATION IN THE 19th AND 20th CENTURIES

At the beginning of the 20th century, immigrants were primarily Europeans: from the United Kingdom, Ireland and Germany, but also from Italy, Poland and Russia.

FIRST PART: Life on board

Most of the people who took the boat at that time wanted to flee their home countries because of poverty, persecution war, or to be able to live the American dream. The journey to America lasted 4 weeks. The boat trip was very complicated for those who didn't have a lot of money. Rich people travelled in 1st or 2nd class whereas poor people stayed in steerage, which was overcrowded and unsanitary. Life on board the ship was very difficult depending on the means of the passengers. For the 1st and 2nd class everything was very luxurious, they had expensive food, and plenty of crew to serve them. Unlike them, the poor had very poor quality food and had no privacy, they lived in places that were never cleaned so there was an unbearable smell. The living conditions of the poor who made journey were inhumane, that's why many of them died.

SECOND PART: Ellis Island

At the arrival 1st and 2nd class healthy passengers were allowed to enter America without going to Ellis Island. The poorest people had to stay at Ellis Island to undergo a medical exam and a legal inspection. The migrants had to go to "The great hall": a place where doctors marked with chalk people who seemed to be ill for further examination. The doctors would write a letter in chalk on the person's clothing. This letter referred to a disease, for example the E (eyes) which meant disease of the eyes, the H (heart) a disease of the heart, the S (sanitary) for the very old, and the X for the mentally retarded. When the disease was severe and contagious, migrants were sent back to their home country. Passengers were asked to answer 29 identical questions. If the identification was satisfying they were allowed to enter America. For those who had to stay in Ellis Island longer, "Ellis Island" was considered to be the door of America.

PART THREE: Letter from an immigrant

Dear Family,
 As you know, I emigrated to America to escape the poverty and famine caused by the potato famine in Ireland. It's been a long time since my last letter, and I am sorry about it, but the two trips I had made were very tiring and I had to save all the money I could. This was the great part of Dublin to be able to take the boat, which brought me to America. For the trip I didn't have a lot of money so I had to travel in the steerage. We had to live in a very bad conditions and because of that a lot of passengers died. We stayed in steerage which was overcrowded and unsanitary. I had no privacy, they lived in a great hall where doctors looked at me for signs of diseases. As soon as I had my bag checked, they let me go. Fortunately, I wasn't ill and I answered all the questions well. If I had been ill, I would have gone home. Finally after 2 days I was allowed to enter America. When I discovered America, I was disappointed because I thought it was a better life than Ireland. I miss you, I miss Ireland, see you soon in a letter.

COLLÈGE SAINTE ANNE LA PROVIDENCE, VALENCE

SEMAINE DES LANGUES

10^e édition
 17 - 22 mars 2025

Week
 tydzień

ELLIS ISLAND

Immigration History

LIFE ON BOARD

The immigrants who left for Ellis Island were English, French, German, Irish, Italian, Hungarian, but also North African and Asian. The crossing took between 40 to 90 days, depending on the wind and weather. Between decks, the boats were crowded (each passenger had about 0.2 square meters) and dirty (lice and rats were numerous), and the passengers had very little food. Around 10 to 20% of people leaving Europe died on board. Some patients could be quarantined or temporarily hospitalized at Ellis Island, but those suffering from tuberculosis, leprosy or typhoid, serious and contagious illnesses, were sent back to where they came from, at the expense of the shipping company that sent them, transported.

DESCRIPTION OF THE ISLAND

Ellis Island is an island located at the mouth of the Hudson River in New York, less than a kilometer north of Liberty Island which is home to the Statue of Liberty. In the first part of the 20th century, it was the main entrance for immigrants arriving in the United States. Immigration services operated there from January 1, 1892 until November 12, 1954. The island is now managed by the federal government and is part of the Statue of Liberty National Monument and is part of the authority of the Park Service. Nationals of the United States and houses a museum. Territorially, it is shared between the city of Jersey City in New Jersey and the city of New York in the State of New York, 83% of the island is owned by the city of Jersey City.

LETTER FROM AN IMMIGRANT

Dear Family,
 I arrived at Ellis Island a few days ago. The trip went well, it was tiring and long, but it was worth it. What happiness I felt when I saw the great Statue of Liberty! It was a relief to see her from across the water. She was magnificently tall and she was holding a large torch that looked real. New York City is a big welcoming city but everything is fine because in America all dreams are possible!
 See you soon. I love you.

LIFE ON BOARD

The boat journey to Ellis Island from Europe was often a challenging experience for many migrants. On board conditions were frequently poor, with overcrowded ships, cramped cabins, and limited sanitation facilities. Passengers were at the mercy of the sea's whims, with potential storms and diseases able to spread quickly in confined spaces. Moreover, the journey could last for several weeks, increasing stress and discomfort for already vulnerable migrants. Despite these challenges, many endured the crossing in hopes of a better life in the United States.

THE GREAT HALL

LETTER FROM AN IMMIGRANT

ELLIS ISLAND

Ellis Island is a historic location as a symbol of immigration to the United States. Located in New York Harbor, it was the nation's busiest immigrant inspection station from 1892 to 1954. Millions of immigrants passed through its halls in pursuit of the American dream during this time. Opened on January 1, 1892, Ellis Island was the gateway for immigrants arriving from Europe, particularly Eastern and Southern Europe. Upon arrival, immigrants were subject to medical and legal inspections to determine their eligibility for entry into the United States. Those who were deemed healthy and fit to enter were processed and allowed to continue their journey into the country. However, those who were ill or considered likely to become a burden on society were often detained or deported. Today, Ellis Island is a national immigration museum, preserving the stories and experiences of the millions of people who passed through its doors.