

Ellis Island History -A Brief Look.

From 1892 to 1954, over twelve million immigrants entered the United States through the portal of Ellis Island, a small island in New York Harbor. Ellis Island is located in the upper bay just off the New Jersey coast, within the shadow of the Statue of Liberty. Through the years, this gateway to the new world was enlarged from its original 3.3 acres to 27.5 acres by landfill supposedly obtained from the ballast of ships, excess earth from the construction of the New York City subway system and elsewhere.

Before being designated as the site of one of the first Federal immigration station by President Benjamin Harrison in 1890, Ellis Island had a varied history. The local Indian tribes had called it "Kioshk" or Gull Island. Due to its rich and abundant oyster beds and plentiful and profitable shad runs, it was known as Oyster Island for many generations during the Dutch and English colonial periods. By the time Samuel Ellis became the island's private owner in the 1770's, the island had been called Kioshk, Oyster, Dyre, Bucking and Anderson's Island. In this way, Ellis Island developed from a sandy island that barely rose above the high tide mark, into a hanging site for pirates, a harbor fort, ammunition and ordinance depot named Fort Gibson, and finally into an immigration station.

From 1794 to 1890 (pre-immigration station period), Ellis Island played a mostly uneventful but still important military role in United States history. When the British occupied New York City during the duration of the Revolutionary War, its large and powerful naval fleet was able to sail unimpeded directly into New York Harbor. Therefore, it was deemed critical by the United States Government that a series of coastal fortifications in New York Harbor be constructed just prior to the War of 1812. After much legal haggling over ownership of the island, the Federal government purchased Ellis Island from New York State in 1808. Ellis Island was approved as a site for fortifications and on it was constructed a parapet for three tiers of circular guns, making the island part of the new harbor defense system that included Castle Clinton at the Battery, Castle Williams on Governor's Island, Fort Wood on Bedloe's Island and two earthworks forts at the entrance to New York Harbor at the Verrazano Narrows. The fort at Ellis Island was named Fort Gibson in honor of a brave officer killed during the War of 1812.

Prior to 1890, the individual states (rather than the Federal government) regulated immigration into the United States. Castle Garden in the Battery (originally known as Castle Clinton) served as the New York State immigration station from 1855 to 1890 and approximately eight million immigrants, mostly from Northern and Western Europe, passed through its doors. These early immigrants came from nations such as England, Ireland, Germany and the Scandinavian countries and constituted the first large wave of immigrants that settled and populated the United States. Throughout the 1800's and intensifying in the latter half of the 19th century, ensuing political instability, restrictive religious laws and deteriorating economic conditions in Europe began to fuel the largest mass human migration in the history of the world. It soon became apparent that Castle Garden was ill-equipped and unprepared to handle the growing numbers of immigrants arriving yearly. Unfortunately compounding the problems of the small facility were the corruption and incompetence found to be commonplace at Castle Garden.

The Federal government intervened and constructed a new Federally-operated immigration station on Ellis Island. While the new immigration station on Ellis Island was under construction, the Barge Office at the Battery was used for the processing of immigrants. The new structure on Ellis Island, built of "Georgia pine", opened on January 1, 1892; Annie Moore, a 15 year-old Irish girl, accompanied by her two brothers, entered history and a new country as she was the very first immigrant to be processed at Ellis Island. This day was also Annie's 15th birthday. Under the watchful eyes of Immigration officials, Sup't Col. John B. Weber pressed a \$10.00 gold Liberty coin in Annie's hand after Charles M. Handley of the Treasury Department registered her. Over the next 62 years, more than 12 million immigrants follow through this port of entry and although they received no such coin, pomp or circumstance, most were on their way to becoming Americans.

While there were many reasons to emigrate to America, no reason could be found for what would occur only five years after the Ellis Island Immigration Station opened. During the evening of June 14, 1897, a fire on Ellis Island burned the immigration station completely to the ground by the following day. Although no lives were lost, some Federal and State immigration records, dating back to 1855, burned along with the pine buildings that failed to protect them. The Treasury Department quickly ordered the immigration facility be replaced under one very important condition. All future structures built on Ellis Island had to be fireproof. On December 17, 1900, the new main building was opened and 2,251 immigrants were received that day.

While most immigrants entered the United States through New York Harbor (the most popular destination of steamship companies), others sailed into many ports such as Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore, San Francisco and Savannah, Miami, and New Orleans. The great steamship companies like White Star, Red Star, Cunard and Hamburg-America played a significant role in the history of Ellis Island and immigration in general. First and second class passengers who arrived in New York Harbor were not required to undergo the inspection process at Ellis Island. Instead, these passengers underwent a cursory inspection aboard ship; the theory being that if a person could afford to purchase a first or second class ticket, they were less likely to become a public charge in America due to medical or legal reasons. The Federal government felt that these more affluent passengers would not end up in institutions, hospitals or become a burden to the state. However, first and second class passengers were sent to Ellis Island for further inspection if they were sick or had legal problems.

This scenario was far different for "steerage" or third class passengers. These immigrants



traveled in crowded and often unsanitary conditions near the bottom of steamships with few amenities, often spending up to two weeks seasick in their bunks during rough Atlantic Ocean crossings. Upon arrival in New York City, ships would dock at the Hudson or East River piers. First and second class passengers would disembark, pass through Customs at the piers and were free to enter the United States. The steerage and third class passengers were transported from the pier by ferry or barge to Ellis Island where everyone would undergo a medical and legal inspection.

If the immigrant's papers were in order and they were in reasonably good health, the Ellis Island inspection process would last approximately three to five hours. The inspections took place in the Registry Room (or Great Hall), where doctors would briefly scan every immigrant for obvious physical ailments. Doctors at Ellis Island soon became very adept at conducting these "six second physicals." By 1916, it was said that a doctor could identify numerous medical conditions (ranging from anemia to goiters to varicose veins) just by glancing at an immigrant. The ship's manifest or passenger list (filled out at the port of embarkation) contained the immigrant's name and his/her answers to numerous questions. This document was used by immigration inspectors at Ellis Island to cross examine the immigrant during the legal (or primary) inspection. The two agencies responsible for processing immigrants at Ellis Island were the **United States Public Health Service and the Bureau of Immigration (later known as the Immigration and Naturalization Service - INS)**.

Despite the island's reputation as an "Island of Tears", the vast majority of immigrants were treated courteously and respectfully, and were free to begin their new lives in America after only a few short hours on Ellis Island. Only two percent of the arriving immigrants were excluded from entry. The two main reasons why an immigrant would be excluded were if a doctor diagnosed that the immigrant had a contagious disease that would endanger the public health or if a legal inspector thought the immigrant was likely to become a public charge or an illegal contract laborer.

During the early 1900's, immigration officials mistakenly thought that the peak wave of immigration had already passed. Actually, immigration was on the rise and in 1907, more people immigrated to the United States than any other year; approximately 1.25 million immigrants were processed at Ellis Island in that one year. Consequently, masons and carpenters were constantly struggling to enlarge and build new facilities to accommodate this greater than anticipated influx of new immigrants. Hospital buildings, dormitories, contagious disease wards and kitchens were all feverishly constructed between 1900 and 1915.

As the United States entered World War I, immigration to the United States decreased.

Form 1308
United States Immigration Service
 Ellis Island, New York Harbor

DETENTION CARD

1	Name	16
2		17
3	Vessel	18
4		19
5	Date	20
6		21
7	Cause of Detention	22
8		23
9		24
10		25
11		26
12		27
13		28
14		29
15	Expiration Date	30
		31

JAN. FEB. MARCH APRIL MAY JUNE JULY AUG. SEPT. OCT. NOV. DEC.

Numerous suspected enemy aliens throughout the United States were brought to Ellis Island under custody. Between 1918 and 1919, detained suspected enemy aliens were transferred from Ellis Island to other locations in order for the United States Navy with the Army Medical Department to take over the island complex for the duration of the war. During this time, regular inspection of arriving immigrants was conducted on board ship or at the docks. At the end of World War I, a big "Red Scare" spread across America and thousands of suspected alien radicals were interred at Ellis Island. Hundreds were later deported based upon the principal of guilt by association with any organizations advocating revolution against the Federal government. In 1920, Ellis Island reopened as an immigration receiving station and 225,206 immigrants were processed that year.

From the very beginning of the mass migration that spanned the years (roughly) 1880 to 1924, an increasingly vociferous group of politicians and nativists demanded increased restrictions on

immigration. Laws and regulations such as the Chinese Exclusion Act, the Alien Contract Labor Law and the institution of a literacy test barely stemmed this flood tide of new immigrants. Actually, the death knell for Ellis Island, as a major entry point for new immigrants, began to toll in 1921. It reached a crescendo between 1921 with the passage of the Quota Laws and 1924 with the passage of the National Origins Act. These restrictions were based upon a percentage system according to the number of ethnic groups already living in the United States as per the 1890 and 1910 Census. It was an attempt to preserve the ethnic flavor of the "old immigrants", those earlier settlers primarily from Northern and Western Europe. The perception existed that the newly arriving immigrants mostly from southern and eastern Europe were somehow inferior to those who arrived earlier.

After World War I, the United States began to emerge as a potential world power. United States embassies were established in countries all over the world, and prospective immigrants now applied for their visas at American consulates in their countries of origin. The necessary paperwork was completed at the consulate and a medical inspection was also conducted there. After 1924, Ellis Island was no longer primarily an inspection station but rather a detention facility, whereby many persons were brought and detained for various periods of time

Although Ellis Island still remained open for many years and served a multitude of purposes, it served *primarily* as a detention center during World War II, for alien enemies, those considered to be inadmissible and others. By 1946, approximately 7000 German, Italian, and Japanese people (aliens and citizens) were detained at Ellis Island during the War, comprising the largest groups. The United States Coast Guard also trained about 60,000 servicemen there. In November of 1954 the last detainee, a Norwegian merchant seaman named Arne Peterssen was released, and Ellis Island officially closed. Changes in immigration laws and modes of transportation as well as cost effectiveness of operating the island all played a role in its closure.

In 1965, President Lyndon Johnson declared Ellis Island part of the Statue of Liberty National Monument. Ellis Island was opened to the public on a limited basis between 1976 and 1984. Starting in 1984, Ellis Island underwent a major restoration, the largest historic restoration in U.S. history. The \$160 million dollar project was funded by donations made to the [Statue of Liberty - Ellis Island Foundation, Inc.](#) in partnership with the National Park Service. The Main Building was reopened to the public on September 10, 1990 as the Ellis Island Immigration Museum. Today, the museum receives almost 2 million visitors annually.

Today in Immigration:

On March 1, 2003, the Immigration and Naturalization Service was re-structured and its functions separated into 3 bureaus as part of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. For more information on these three bureaus and their missions, visit their websites at the following:

U.S. Citizenship & Immigration Services - www.uscis.gov This agency is responsible for the administrative processing of visas, naturalizations, asylum and refugee applications.

U.S. Immigrations & Customs Enforcement - www.ice.gov This agency administers the law enforcement branches of the prior Immigration and Naturalization Service and U.S. Customs agencies which includes the detention and deportation responsibilities of the former INS.

U.S. Customs & Border Protection - www.cbp.gov This agency administers the inspection duties of immigrants and cargo of the former INS, Customs, and Agriculture. The functions of the U.S. Border Patrol are included in this agency.