



THIS DAY IN HISTORY

STUDY GUIDE



NOV. 12, 1954: ELLIS ISLAND CLOSES

Biographies, discussion questions, suggested activities and more



U.S. IMMIGRATION

Setting the Stage

When Ellis Island opened, a great change was taking place in U.S. immigration. Fewer arrivals were coming from northern and western Europe--Germany, Ireland, Britain and the Scandinavian countries--and more immigrants poured in from southern and eastern Europe. Among this new generation were Jews escaping from political and economic oppression in czarist Russia and eastern Europe (some 484,000 arrived in 1910 alone) and Italians escaping poverty in their country. Immigrants left their homes in the Old World for a variety of reasons that included war, drought, famine and religious persecution, and nearly all had hopes for greater opportunity in the New World.

After an arduous sea voyage, immigrants arriving at Ellis Island were tagged with information from their ship's registry and they waited in lines for medical and legal inspections to determine if they were fit for entry into the United States. From 1900 to 1914--the peak years of Ellis Island's operation--some 5,000 to 10,000 people passed through the immigration station every day. Approximately 80 percent successfully passed through in a matter of hours, but others could be detained for days or weeks.

From 1925 to 1954, only 2.3 million immigrants passed through Ellis Island, which was still more than half of all those entering the United States. Passage of the Immigrant Quota Act of 1921 and the National Origins Act of 1924 limited the number and nationality of immigrants allowed into the United States, effectively ending the era of mass immigration into New York and leading to the closure of Ellis Island in 1954.

Cover photo: The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Photography Collection, The New York Public Library. (1902 - 1913). The pens at Ellis Island, Registry Room (or Great Hall). These people have passed the first mental inspection. Retrieved from <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47da-d778-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>

NOV. 12, 1954

ELLIS ISLAND CLOSES

On this day in 1954, Ellis Island, the gateway to America, shuts its doors after processing more than 12 million immigrants since opening in 1892. Today, an estimated 40 percent of all Americans can trace their roots through Ellis Island, located in New York Harbor off the New Jersey coast and named for merchant Samuel Ellis, who owned the land in the 1770s.

On January 2, 1892, 15-year-old Annie Moore, from Ireland, became the first person to pass through the newly opened Ellis Island, which President Benjamin Harrison designated as America's first federal immigration center in 1890. Before that time, the processing of immigrants had been handled by individual states.

Not all immigrants who sailed into New York had to go through Ellis Island. First- and second-class passengers submitted to a brief ship-board inspection and then disembarked at the piers in New York or New Jersey, where they passed through customs. People in third class, though, were transported to Ellis Island, where they underwent medical and legal inspections to ensure they didn't have a contagious disease or some condition that would make them a burden to the government. Only two percent of all immigrants were denied entrance into the United States.

Immigration to Ellis Island peaked between 1892 and 1924, during which time the 3.3-acre island was enlarged with landfill (by the 1930s it reached its current 27.5-acre size) and additional buildings were constructed to handle the massive influx of immigrants. During the busiest year of operation, 1907, over 1 million people were processed at Ellis Island.

With America's entrance into World War I, immigration declined and Ellis Island was used as



Immigrant family in the Ellis Island baggage room. 1905.

a detention center for suspected enemies. Following the war, Congress passed quota laws and the Immigration Act of 1924, which sharply reduced the number of newcomers allowed into the country and also enabled immigrants to be processed at U.S. consulates abroad. After 1924, Ellis Island switched from a processing center to serving other purposes, such as a detention and deportation center for illegal immigrants, a hospital for wounded soldiers during World War II and a Coast Guard training center. In November 1954, the last detainee, a Norwegian merchant seaman, was released and Ellis Island officially closed.

Beginning in 1984, Ellis Island underwent a \$160 million renovation, the largest historic restoration project in U.S. history. In September 1990, the Ellis Island Immigration Museum opened to the public and today is visited by almost 2 million people each year. □

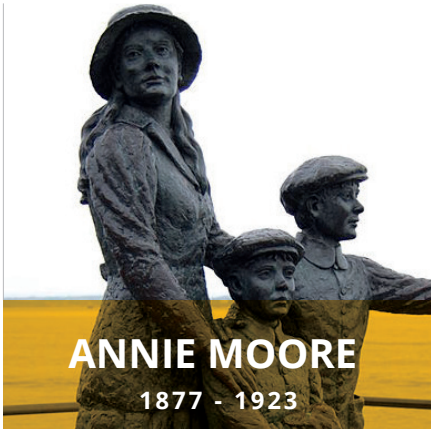
DID YOU KNOW?

For most of the early 19th century, Ellis Island was used to hang convicted pirates, criminals and mutinous sailors, and New Yorkers eventually took to calling it “Gibbet Island” after the wooden post, or gibbet, where the bodies of the deceased were displayed.

PEOPLE TO KNOW



New York merchant Samuel Ellis purchased the 3.3-acre island, originally named Dyre’s Island, situated in New York harbor during the Revolutionary War. Ellis used the real estate to build a tavern for locals where they could sit, dig up oysters and enjoy the view. After his death in 1794, New York State bought the island from the Ellis family for \$10,000. Realizing the island’s location made it strategically important to the protection of New York City, the U.S. War Department paid New York state for the right to use Ellis Island. The government built a military fortification--Fort Gibson--on the island in 1795 and, later, it was used to store ammunition during the War of 1812. During the Civil War, Ellis Island was used as a munitions arsenal for the Union army, and on January 1, 1892, the first Ellis Island immigration station was opened.



The first would-be immigrant to set foot on Ellis Island was 17-year-old Annie Moore from Queenstown in County Cork, Ireland. Along with her younger brothers--ages 11 and 7--the three boarded the steamship Nevada, departed Ireland on December 20, 1891 and arrived 12 days later at Ellis Island. The ship had arrived too late on New Year’s Eve to be processed, which meant its third-class passengers would be the first to pass through the newly built federal immigration station on Ellis Island. The trip reunited Annie and her younger siblings with her parents and older siblings after spending four years apart. Today, statues of Moore and her brothers stand at the Irish port of Cobh (the present-day name of Queenstown) and on Ellis Island, the beginning and end of their trans-Atlantic journey.

(18) PASSENGERS' LIST.
"The Passenger Act, 1892."

District of the City of New York, Port of New York.

I, John A. P. [Signature] Master of the S.S. Nevada do solemnly, sincerely and truly swear that the following List or Manifest, subscribed by me, and now delivered by me to the Collector of the Customs of the Collection District of the City of New York, is a full and perfect list of all the passengers taken on board the said vessel at Queenstown, Ireland from which port said vessel has now arrived; and that on said list is truly designated the age, the sex, and the calling of each of said passengers, the location of the compartment or space occupied by each during the passage, the country of citizenship of each, and also the destination or location intended by each; and that said List or Manifest truly sets forth the number of said passengers who have died on said voyage, and the dates and causes of death, and the names and ages of those who died; also of the pieces of baggage of each; also a true statement, so far as it can be ascertained, with reference to the intention of each alien passenger as to a protracted sojourn in this country. So help me God.

Subscribed to this 2 January 1892, at Queenstown, Ireland by John A. P. [Signature] Master of the S.S. Nevada whereof John A. P. [Signature] is Master, from Queenstown, Ireland burthen 235 tons

No.	NAMES.	AGE Years. Mths.	SEX.	CALLING.	The country of which they are citizens.	Intended destination or location.	Date and cause of death.	Location of compartment or space occupied.	Number of pieces of baggage.	Transient, or in transit, or intending protracted sojourn.
1	Ellis King	21	M	Farmer	Ireland	New York			1	Pro. Soj.
2	Annie Moore	13	F		Ireland	New York			1	Pro. Soj.

Annie Moore is listed (as 13 years old) on the passenger manifest reflecting her embarkment at Queenstown (present-day Cobh, Ireland). Some believe Moore may have lied about her age to pay a cheaper fee.

SEE IT



Ellis Island. By OpenStreetMap contributors (openstreetmap.org) [CC BY-SA 2.0 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/>)], via Wikimedia Commons



A Naturalization Ceremony is held on Ellis Island. 2016. By U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) (Ellis Island Naturalization Ceremony) [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons



Landing at Ellis Island. c. 1912

SEE IT



Immigrant children, Ellis Island, New York. 1908. Records of the Public Health Service. (90-G-125-29) / US GOV National Archives. By Brown Brothers [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons



Climbing into the Promised Land, Ellis Island. c. 1908. Lewis Hine [No restrictions or Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons



Uncle Sam, host. Immigrants being served a free meal at Ellis Island.. Levick, Edwin -- Photographer. 1902-1913. By New York Public Library (<https://www.flickr.com/photos/nypl/3109320685/>) [No restrictions], via Wikimedia Commons

CONCURRENT EVENTS



BROWN v. BOARD OF EDUCATION

In a major civil rights victory, the U.S. Supreme Court handed down a unanimous decision in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, ruling that racial segregation in public educational facilities is unconstitutional. The historic May 1954 decision, which brought an end to federal tolerance of racial segregation, specifically dealt with Linda Brown, a young African-American girl who had been denied admission to her local elementary school in Topeka, Kansas, because of the color of her skin. In 1896, the Supreme Court had ruled in *Plessy v. Ferguson* that “separate but equal” accommodations in railroad cars conformed to the 14th Amendment’s guarantee of equal protection. That ruling was used to justify segregating all public facilities, including elementary schools. However, in the case of Linda Brown, the white school she attempted to attend was miles closer to her home. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) took up Linda’s cause, and in 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* reached the Supreme Court, which ruled that separate facilities were inherently unequal. A year later, after hearing arguments on the implementation of their ruling, the Supreme Court published guidelines requiring public school systems to integrate “with all deliberate speed.” The *Brown v. Board of Education* decision was an important early victory in the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s and ultimately led to the abolishment of racial segregation in all public facilities and accommodations.



POLIO VACCINE TRIALS

On April 26, 1954, the Salk polio vaccine field trials, involving 1.8 million children, began at the Franklin Sherman Elementary School in McLean, Virginia. Children in the United States, Canada and Finland participated in the trials. Polio, known officially as poliomyelitis, is an infectious disease that has existed since ancient times and is caused by a virus. It occurs most commonly in children and can result in paralysis. The disease reached epidemic proportions throughout the first half of the 20th century. President Franklin Roosevelt was diagnosed with polio in 1921 at the age of 39 and was left paralyzed from the waist down and forced to use leg braces and a wheelchair for the rest of his life. On April 12, 1955, researchers announced the vaccine was safe and effective and it quickly became a standard childhood immunization in America. Today, polio has been eliminated throughout much of the world due to the vaccine; however, there is still no cure for the disease and it persists in a small number of countries in Africa and Asia.



DIEN BIEN PHU

On May 7, 1954, the French are defeated by Ho Chi Minh’s Viet Minh rebels in northwest Vietnam. The communist Viet Minh guerrillas had been fighting a long and bloody war with French colonial interests for control of Vietnam since 1946. Forty thousand Viet Minh surrounded 13,000 French at their stronghold at Dien Bien Phu and held it under siege for 57 days before the French positions finally collapsed. Although the defeat brought an end to French colonial influence in Indochina, the United States soon stepped up to fill the vacuum, increasing military aid to South Vietnam, sending the first U.S. military advisers to the country in 1959 and beginning their involvement in the long and controversial Vietnam War.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1

In 1931, historian and writer James Truslow Adams coined the phrase “American dream.” What does the “American dream” mean to you? What do you think it means to immigrants coming to the United States?

2

With no cell phones, laptops or credit cards, what are some of the challenges immigrants might have faced as they passed through Ellis Island?

3

Imagine arriving in a new country during this time period. How do you think they got around? How did they make money? What do you think their priorities were?



Public Health Service physicians checking immigrants arriving to the United States for signs of illness. The immigration law of 1891 made it mandatory that all immigrants coming into the United States undergo health inspection by Public Health Service physicians. The largest inspection center was on Ellis Island in New York Harbor. In this 1910 photo, physicians are looking at the eyes for signs of trachoma. Credit: NIH. By NIAID (Ellis Island Public Health Service Physicians) [CC BY 2.0 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0>)], via Wikimedia Commons

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES



Immigrants leaving Ellis Island and headed to New York City. By Agence Rol. Agence photographique, (National Library of France (<http://gallica.bnf.fr>)) [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

THE JOURNEY

Pick a date on the calendar and imagine a possible route of Annie Moore's journey from Ireland to New York City. Divide the route into 12 sections and have the students follow the progress of a 12-day journey. What would they bring with them? Have them imagine a daily agenda. What would they do on the ship every day? How do they feel after 3 days? A week? Upon arrival? On the 12th day, randomly divide the class into three sections: Pass; detained for two weeks; send back home. Students who pass the medical exam are free to start their life in America. Have these students write a letter to the family back in their old country about the sights, sounds and how they feel about their new life. Those who are detained can write a letter to their family back home about their journey and what it's like to be detained at Ellis Island (see "[Detained at Ellis Island](#)" video). Those who are sent back home can share their experience in a letter to their family about their journey to and from America.

IMMIGRATION SHOW AND TELL

Have students interview someone who has immigrated to America from another country and present their story to the class. Ask the students to include a visual or audio component--an object, picture, map or song--to personalize the storytelling. Students should give context around the journey. When and why did the person(s) leave their country? How long did the journey take? Where did they go when they arrived? Were there things about America that surprised them or disappointed them? Where do they live now?

IMMIGRATION IN THE NEWS

Have students research immigration in the news. What are the current U.S. policies toward immigration? In small groups, have students present the pros and cons on the impact immigrants have on the U.S. economy. Topics may include jobs, taxes, deportation costs and health insurance. Groups should reference articles and interviews from major media sources to back up their discussion points.

RESOURCES

Ellis Island Interactive Virtual Tour

<https://www.nps.gov/elis/learn/photosmultimedia/virtual-tour.htm>

Ellis Island National Museum of Immigration

<https://www.libertyellisfoundation.org/immigration-museum>

Ellis Island Passenger Search

<https://www.libertyellisfoundation.org/passenger>

Video - Deconstructing History: Ellis Island

<http://www.history.com/topics/ellis-island/videos/u-s-immigration-before-1965>

Video - Ellis Island in Pictures

<http://www.history.com/topics/ellis-island/videos/ellis-island-in-pictures>

Video - Hurdles to Citizenship on Ellis Island

<http://www.history.com/topics/ellis-island/videos/hurdles-to-citizenship-on-ellis-island>

Video - Arrival at Ellis Island

<http://www.history.com/topics/ellis-island/videos/arrival-at-ellis-island>

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RESOURCES

(continued)

Video - The Ellis Island Medical Inspection

<http://www.history.com/topics/ellis-island/videos/the-ellis-island-medical-inspection>

Video - The Ellis Island Hospital

<http://www.history.com/topics/ellis-island/videos/the-ellis-island-hospital>

Video - The Light of Ellis Island

<http://www.history.com/topics/ellis-island/videos/the-light-of-ellis-island>

Video - The Dark Underbelly of Ellis Island

<http://www.history.com/topics/ellis-island/videos/the-dark-underbelly-of-ellis-island>

Video - Detained at Ellis Island

<http://www.history.com/topics/ellis-island/videos/detained-at-ellis-island>

Video - Faces of America

<http://www.history.com/topics/ellis-island/videos/faces-of-america>