

Immigrants Come to the United States

What is an Immigrant?

An immigrant is a person who leaves his/her country to move to a new country. We study the waves, or times, when immigrants came over.

Earliest Immigrants

The first explorers and settlers came to North America in the 1500s. Mostly from Spain, they came to Mexico, the Southwest region, and what is now Florida.

First Wave 1700-1775

In the 1600s, immigrants from England came to area that became the 13 colonies. At the same time, the area west of the 13 colonies was visited by French explorers. Some of them settled in that area.

Immigration to the 13 colonies increased after 1700. A wave of 450,000 immigrants came mostly from Germany, Ireland, and Scotland. A few others came from Italy, Poland, Portugal, Sweden, Wales, Denmark, Finland, and the Ukraine. Settlements in Spanish and French lands did not grow as quickly. The reason most people came to the 13 colonies from Europe was because they wanted farmland.

The chance to own land drew many people to America, but it was not the only reason. Others left their homes seeking religious freedom. Still others wanted adventure or riches in a new country. Some Europeans came as indentured servants. This meant that they needed to work for a master for a certain number of years before being set free.

Second Wave 1825 – 1880

Almost 7.5 million immigrants entered the United States during this second wave. The majority came from northern and western Europe. The largest groups came from Ireland and Germany. Ireland was struck by a potato crop failure in the mid-1800's. Potatoes were the main food in Ireland. Without potatoes, many people were very hungry and had nothing else to eat. Those who could escape Ireland left for America.

People in Germany were facing terrible times because of many conflicts and revolutions. Many Germans came to America seeking a safer place to live and work.

A smaller part of this wave included Chinese immigrants. Many Chinese made the trip to California after gold was discovered in 1848. Some hoped to strike it rich, then return home. Others stayed and send for their families to join them. Many also worked on the railroad.

Third Wave 1881 – 1920

The third wave of immigration brought people from almost every part of the world. From 1881 to 1920, more than 23 million people arrived at immigration ports, such as Ellis Island in New York. These immigrants included Norwegians and Swedes. For the first time, though, millions of people from eastern and southern European came to the United States, including Poles, Czechs, Hungarians, Greeks and some Italians. Some came to escape poverty and others to practice their religions freely. Some other immigrants came because their native countries were too crowded. Others were unemployed, which means they did not have jobs.

The fourth wave 1965 – present

The fourth wave of immigration to the United States started in the 1960's and continues today. This wave consists of people from Mexico, the Philippines, Haiti, China, and the Dominican Republic, India, Vietnam, Jamaica, Cuba, and South Korea. Many of these immigrants are people trying to escape war and poverty. These people come to the United States hoping to find jobs, get an education, and live in safer community.

