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**Ellis Island** is an [island](#) near [New York City](#). It was used for [immigrants](#) coming from other [countries](#) to the [United States](#). It is one of three islands in New York City. It is located in the Upper New York bay, north to Liberty Island and east to Liberty state park.

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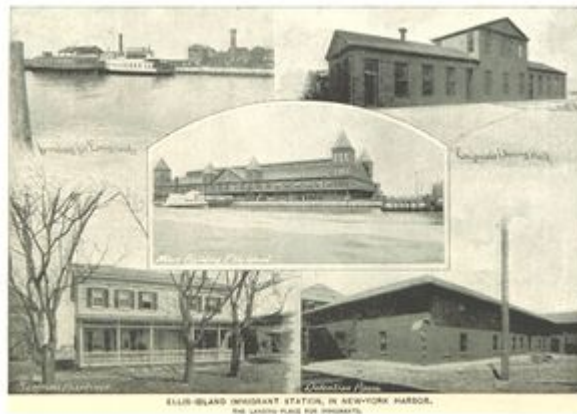
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## History

## Immigrant inspection station



Ellis Island buildings circa 1893



First Ellis Island Immigrant Station, opened on January 1, 1892. Built of wood, it was completely destroyed by fire on June 15, 1897.



Second Ellis Island Immigration Station, opened on December 17, 1900, as seen in 1905

In the 35 years before Ellis Island opened, more than eight million immigrants arriving in [New York City](#) had been processed by [New York State](#) officials at [Castle Garden Immigration Depot](#) in [Lower Manhattan](#), just across the bay. The federal government assumed control of immigration on April 18, 1890, and Congress appropriated \$75,000 to construct America's first federal immigration station on Ellis Island. Artesian wells were dug, and landfill was hauled in from incoming ships' ballast and from construction of [New York City's subway](#) tunnels, which doubled the size of Ellis Island to over six acres. While the building was under construction, the Barge Office nearby at the Battery was used for immigrant processing.

The first station was an enormous three-story-tall structure, with outbuildings, built of Georgia pine, containing all of the amenities that were thought to be necessary. It opened with celebration on January 1, 1892. Three large ships landed on the first day and 700 immigrants passed over the docks. Almost 450,000 immigrants were processed at the station during its first year. On June 15, 1897, a fire of unknown

origin, possibly caused by faulty wiring, turned the wooden structures on Ellis Island into ashes. No loss of life was reported, but most of the immigration records dating back to 1855 were destroyed. About 1.5 million immigrants had been processed at the first building during its five years of use. Plans were immediately made to build a new, fireproof immigration station on Ellis Island. During the construction period, passenger arrivals were again processed at the Barge Office.

Edward Lippincott Tilton and William A. Boring won the 1897 competition to design the first phase, including the Main Building (1897–1900), Kitchen and Laundry Building (1900–01), Main Powerhouse (1900–01), and the Main Hospital Building (1900–01).

The present main structure was designed in French Renaissance Revival style and built of red brick with limestone trim. After it opened on December 17, 1900, the facilities proved to be barely able to handle the flood of immigrants that arrived in the years before World War I. Writer Louis Adamic came to America from [Slovenia](#), then part of the [Austro-Hungarian Empire](#) in 1913 and described the night he and many other immigrants slept on bunk beds in a huge hall. Lacking a warm blanket, the young man "shivered, sleepless, all night, listening to snores" and dreams "in perhaps a dozen different languages". The facility was so large that the dining room could seat 1,000 people. It is reported that the island's first immigrant to be processed through was a teenager named Annie Moore from County Cork in Ireland.

After its opening, Ellis Island was again expanded with landfill and additional structures were built. By the time it closed on November 12, 1954, twelve million immigrants had been processed by the [U.S.](#)

[Bureau of Immigration](#). It is estimated that 10.5 million immigrants departed for points across the United States from the Central Railroad of New Jersey Terminal, located just across a narrow strait. Others would have used one of the other terminals along the North River (Hudson River) at that time. At first, the majority of immigrants arriving through the station were Northern and Western Europeans (Germany, Ireland, Britain and the Scandinavian countries). Eventually, these groups of peoples slowed in the rates that they were coming in, and immigrants came in from Southern and Eastern Europe, including Jews. Many reasons these immigrants came to the United States included escaping political and economic oppression, as well as persecution, destitution, and violence. Other groups of peoples being processed through the station were Poles, Hungarians, Czechs, Serbs, Slovaks, Greeks, Syrians, Turks, and Armenians.



Arriving at Ellis, circa 1908 (Photo by Lewis Hine)

## Primary inspection

Between 1905 and 1914, an average of one million immigrants per year arrived in the United States. Immigration officials reviewed about 5,000 immigrants per day during peak times at Ellis Island. Two-thirds of those individuals emigrated from eastern, southern and central Europe. The peak year for immigration at Ellis Island was 1907, with 1,004,756 immigrants processed. The all-time daily high occurred on April 17, 1907, when 11,747 immigrants arrived. After the Immigration Act of 1924 was passed, which greatly restricted immigration and allowed processing at overseas embassies, the only immigrants to pass through the station were those who had problems with their immigration paperwork, displaced persons, and war [refugees](#). Today, over 100 million Americans—about one-third to forty percent of the population of the United States—can trace their ancestry to the immigrants who first arrived in America at Ellis Island before dispersing to points all over the country.

Generally, those immigrants who were approved spent from two to five hours at Ellis Island. Arrivals were asked 29 questions including name, occupation, and the amount of money carried. It was important to the American government that the new arrivals could support themselves and have money to get started. The average the government wanted the immigrants to have was between 18 and 25 dollars (\$600 in 2015 adjusted for inflation). Those with visible health problems or diseases were sent home or held in the island's hospital facilities for long periods of time. More than three thousand would-be

immigrants died on Ellis Island while being held in the hospital facilities. Some unskilled workers were rejected because they were considered "likely to become a public charge." About 2 percent were denied admission to the U.S. and sent back to their countries of origin for reasons such as having a chronic contagious disease, criminal background, or insanity. Ellis Island was sometimes known as "The Island of Tears" or "Heartbreak Island" because of those 2% who were not admitted after the long transatlantic voyage. The Kissing Post is a wooden column outside the Registry Room, where new arrivals were greeted by their relatives and friends, typically with tears, hugs and kisses.

During World War I, the German sabotage of the Black Tom Wharf ammunition depot damaged buildings on Ellis Island. The repairs included the current barrel-vaulted ceiling of the Main Hall.

## **Medical inspections**

To support the activities of the United States Bureau of Immigration, the United States Public Health Service operated an extensive medical service at the immigrant station, called U.S. Marine Hospital Number 43, more widely known as the Ellis Island Immigrant Hospital. It was the largest marine hospital in the nation. The medical division, which was active in the hospital wards, the Barge Office at the Battery and the Main Building, was staffed by uniformed military surgeons. They are best known for the role they played during the line inspection, in which they employed unusual techniques such as the use of the [buttonhook](#) to examine immigrants for signs of eye diseases (particularly, trachoma) and the use of a chalk mark code.

Symbols were **chalked** on the clothing of potentially sick immigrants following the six-second medical examination. The doctors would look at the immigrants as they climbed the stairs from the baggage area to the Great Hall. Immigrants' behavior would be studied for difficulties in getting up the staircase. Some immigrants supposedly entered the country only by surreptitiously wiping the chalk marks off, or by turning their clothes inside out.

The symbols used were:

- **B** – **Back**
- **C** – **Conjunctivitis**
- **TC** – Trachoma
- **E** – Eyes
- **F** – **Face**
- **FT** – **Feet**
- **G** – Goiter
- **H** – Heart
- **K** – **Hernia**
- **L** – Lameness
- **N** – **Neck**
- **P** – Physical and **Lungs**
- **PG** – **Pregnancy**
- **S** – Senility
- **SC** – **Scalp** (Favus)
- **X** – Suspected Mental defect



- (X) – Definite signs of Mental defect

Some other symbols or marks were used by U.S. Immigrant Inspectors when interrogating immigrants in the Registry Room to determine whether to admit or detain them, including:

- **SI** – Special Inquiry
- **IV** – Immigrant Visa
- **LPC** – Likely or Liable to become a Public Charge
- **Med. Cert.** – Medical certificate issued

## Eugenic influence



Dormitory room for detained immigrants

Many of the people immigrating to America hailed from [Europe](#), with [Eastern Europe](#) and [Southern European](#) immigrants being the primary groups. During this time period, [eugenic](#) ideals gained broad popularity and made heavy impact on immigration to the United States by way of exclusion of [disabled](#) and "morally defective" people.

These attributes of defect would become associated with certain racial/national normalities and give power to a movement of creating a racially "superior America" via the reproduction of "old stock" white Americans due to their membership to the "Nordic race" (a form of [white supremacy](#)).

Eugenicists of the late 19th and early 20th century held the belief that reproductive selection should be carried out by the state as a collective decision. For many eugenicists, this was considered a patriotic duty as they held an interest in creating a greater national race. [Henry Fairfield Osborn](#)'s opening words to the New York Evening Journal in 1911 were, "As a biologist as well as a patriot..." on the subject of advocating for tighter inspections of immigrants of the United States.

Eugenic selection occurred on two distinguishable levels:

- State/Local levels which handles institutionalization and sterilization of those considered defective as well as the education of the public, marriage laws, and social pressures such as fitter family and better baby contests.
- Immigration control, the screening of immigrants for defects, was notably supported by Harry Laughlin, superintendent of the Eugenics Record Office from 1910 to 1939, who stated that this was where the "federal government must cooperate."

At the time, it was a broadly popular idea that immigration policies had ought to be based off eugenics principles in order to help create a "superior race" in America. To do this, defective persons needed to be

screened by immigration officials and denied entry on the basis of their disability.

Types of Defects often screened for:

- Physical: people who had hereditary or acquired physical disability. These included sickness and disease, deformity, lack of limbs, being abnormally tall or short, "feminization", etc.
- Mental: people who showed signs or history of mental illness and [intellectual disability](#). These included "feeblemindedness", "imbecility", depression, and other illnesses that stemmed from the brain such as [epilepsy](#) and [cerebral palsy](#).
- Moral: people who had "moral defects" at the time were, but not limited to: [homosexuals](#), criminals, [impoverished](#), and other groups associated with degeneracy that deviated from the considered "norm" or American society at the time.

The people with moral or mental disability were of higher concern to officials and under the law, mandatorily excluded from immigrating to the United States. Persons with physical disability were under higher inspection and could be turned way on the basis of their disability. Much of this came in part of the eugenicist belief that defects were hereditary, especially those of the moral and mental nature those these were often outwardly signified by physical deformity as well.

Between 1891 and 1930, Ellis Island reviewed over 25 million attempted immigrations. Of this 25 million, 700,000 were given certificates of disability or disease and of these 79,000 were barred from entry. Approximately 4.4% of immigrants between 1909 and

1930 were classified as disabled or diseased per with 11% being deported when this number spiked to 8.0% in the years of 1918-1919. One percent of immigrants were deported yearly due to medical causes.

## **Detention and deportation station**



Radicals awaiting deportation, 1920



Immigrants being inspected, 1904

With the passing of the Immigrant Quota Act of 1921, the number of immigrants being allowed into the United States declined greatly. The passing of the bill ended the era of mass immigration. After 1924, Ellis Island became primarily a detention and deportation processing station.

During and immediately following World War II, Ellis Island was used to hold German merchant mariners and "enemy aliens"—[Axis](#) nationals detained for fear of spying, sabotage, and other fifth column activity. In December 1941, Ellis Island held 279 Japanese, 248 Germans, and 81 Italians removed from the East Coast. Unlike other wartime immigration detention stations, Ellis Island was designated as a permanent holding facility and was used to hold foreign nationals throughout the war. A total of 7,000 Germans, Italians and Japanese would be ultimately detained at Ellis Island. It was also a processing center for returning sick or wounded U.S. soldiers, and a Coast Guard

training base. Ellis Island still managed to process tens of thousands of immigrants a year during this time, but many fewer than the hundreds of thousands a year who arrived before the war. After the war, immigration rapidly returned to earlier levels.

The Internal Security Act of 1950 barred members of communist or fascist organizations from immigrating to the United States. Ellis Island saw detention peak at 1,500, but by 1952, after changes to immigration law and policies, only 30 detainees remained.

One of the last detainees was the Aceh separatist Hasan di Tiro who, while a student in New York in 1953, declared himself the "foreign minister" of the rebellious Darul Islam movement. Due to this action, he was immediately stripped of his Indonesian citizenship, causing him to be imprisoned for a few months on Ellis Island as "an illegal alien."

## Records



Immigrants arriving at Ellis Island, 1902

A myth persists that government officials on Ellis Island compelled immigrants to take new names against their wishes. In fact, no historical records bear this out. Immigration inspectors used the passenger lists given to them by the [steamship](#) companies to process each foreigner. These were the sole immigration records for entering the country and were prepared not by the U.S. Bureau of Immigration but by steamship companies such as the [Cunard Line](#), the White Star Line, the North German Lloyd Line, the Hamburg-Amerika Line, the Italian Steam Navigation Company, the Red Star Line, the Holland America Line, and the Austro-American Line. The Americanization of many immigrant families' surnames was for the most part adopted by the family after the immigration process, or by the second or third generation of the family after some assimilation into American culture. However, many last names were altered slightly due to the disparity between English and other languages in the pronunciation of certain letters of the alphabet.

## **Notable immigrants**

The first immigrant to pass through Ellis Island was Annie Moore, a 17-year-old girl from [Cork](#), Ireland, who arrived on the ship *Nevada* on January 1, 1892. She and her two brothers were coming to America to meet their parents, who had moved to New York two years prior. She received a greeting from officials and a \$10 gold coin. It was the largest sum of money she had ever owned.

The last person to pass through Ellis Island was a Norwegian merchant seaman by the name of Arne Peterssen in 1954.

# Immigration museum



Approach to the museum building.



Ceiling of the Great Hall.





East side of the main building.



Main Building, which now houses the Immigration Museum



Great Hall, where immigrants were processed

The wooden structure built in 1892 to house the immigration station burned down after five years. The station's new Main Building, which now houses the Immigration Museum, was opened in 1900. Architects Edward Lippincott Tilton and William Alciphron Boring received a gold medal at the 1900 Paris Exposition for the building's design and constructed the building at a cost of \$1.5 million. The architecture competition was the second under the Tarsney Act, which had permitted private architects rather than government architects in

the Treasury Department's Office of the Supervising Architect to design federal buildings.

After the immigration station closed in November 1954, the buildings fell into disrepair and were abandoned. Attempts at redeveloping the site were unsuccessful until its landmark status was established. On October 15, 1965, Ellis Island was proclaimed a part of [Statue of Liberty National Monument](#). It was listed on the [National Register of Historic Places](#) on October 15, 1966.

[Boston](#)-based architecture firm Finegold Alexander + Associates Inc, together with the New York architectural firm Beyer Blinder Belle, designed the restoration and adaptive use of the Beaux-Arts Main Building, one of the most symbolically important structures in American history. A construction budget of \$150 million was required for this significant restoration. This money was raised by a campaign organized by the political fundraiser Wyatt A. Stewart. The building reopened on September 10, 1990. Exhibits include *Hearing Room*, *Peak Immigration Years*, the *Peopling of America*, *Restoring a Landmark*, *Silent Voices*, *Treasures from Home*, and *Ellis Island Chronicles*. There are also three theaters used for film and live performances.

On May 20, 2015 the Ellis Island Immigration Museum was officially renamed the Ellis Island National Museum of Immigration, coinciding with the opening of the new Peopling of America galleries. The expansion tells the entire story of American immigration, including before and after the Ellis Island era. The Peopling of America Center was designed by ESI Design and fabricated by Hadley Exhibits, Inc.

The architectural design was done by Highland Associates, with construction executed by Phelps Construction Group.

The Wall of Honor outside of the main building contains a partial list of immigrants processed on the island. Inclusion on the list is made possible by a donation to support the facility. In 2008 the museum's library was officially named the Bob Hope Memorial Library in honor of one of the station's most famous immigrants.

The Ellis Island Medal of Honor is awarded annually at ceremonies on the island.

## **South side of the island**



Ellis Island Hospital



The New Ferry Building was built in 1936 in Art Deco style and is located in the so-called "hyphen" at the foot of the ferry basin, connecting the north and south sides of the island.

The south side of the island, home to the Ellis Island Immigrant Hospital, is closed to the general public and the object of restoration efforts spearheaded by Save Ellis Island.

Many of the facilities at Ellis Island were abandoned and remain unrenovated. The entire south side, called by some the "sad side" of the island, is off limits to the general public. The Ellis Island Immigrant Hospital operated here from early 1902 to 1930. The foundation Save Ellis Island is spearheading preservation efforts. The New Ferry Building, built in the Art Deco style to replace an earlier one, was

renovated in 2008, but remains only partially accessible to the general public.

As part of the National Park Service's Centennial Initiative, the south side of the island was to be the target of a project to restore the 28 buildings that have not yet been rehabilitated.

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