

# Ellis Island—The “Golden Door” to America

*Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free . . .  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!*

— Poem by Emma Lazarus engraved on the Statue of Liberty near Ellis Island

**T**hey came from many different foreign ports: Liverpool, Bristol, Dublin, Bremen, Hamburg, Antwerp, Rotterdam, Le Havre, Copenhagen, Naples, Genoa, Constantinople, and others. But, most headed for only one place: Ellis Island, the “golden door” to America. From 1892 to 1954, it was here that most of the immigrants started their search for a new life.

## The Early Years

On New Years Day 1892, 15-year-old Annie Moore from County Cork, Ireland, left her steerage quarters on the steamship *Nevada* and stepped aboard a ferryboat. It would take her to Ellis Island—and a new home. The *New York Times* described the ferryboat as it neared Ellis Island: “The craft was gayly decorated with bunting and ranged alongside the wharf . . . amid a clang of bells and din of shrieking whistles.”

Annie skipped off the ferry’s gangplank onto Ellis Island. In doing so, she became the first immigrant to land at the newly built federal immigration station in New York Harbor. Over 12 million others followed in her footsteps over the next 60 years.

As a special treat, Annie was presented with a \$10 gold piece by the Commissioner of Ellis Island, Colonel John B. Weber. For Annie Moore, Ellis Island was truly the “golden door” to America.

Only a year earlier, Congress had passed a law that transferred the job of processing all immigrants from state officials to federal inspectors.

Since most immigrants were already arriving

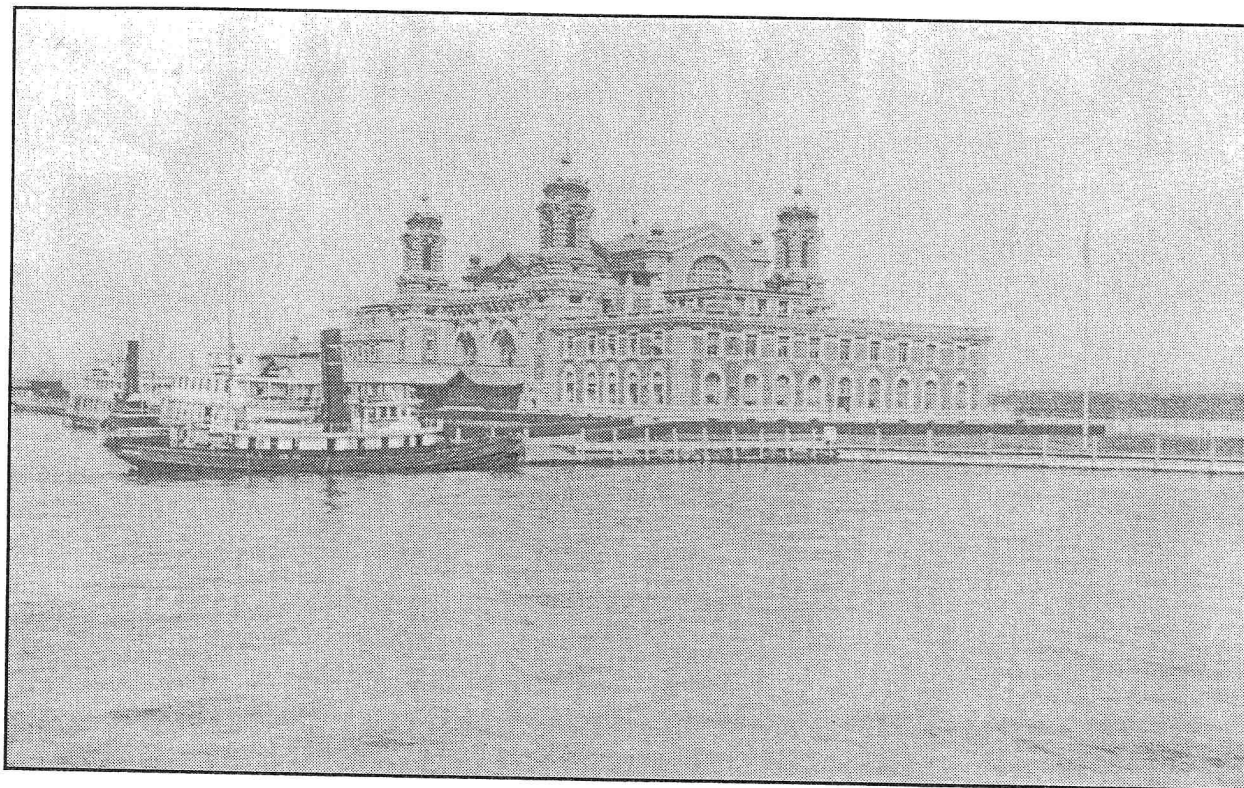
at New York Harbor, it was decided that a new federal immigration station would be built on Ellis Island.

Ellis Island was a small muddy piece of land hardly above the high tide level near the New Jersey shore. The island was named after Samuel Ellis, a colonial merchant and farmer who once owned it. Used over the years as a fort and place for public hangings, Ellis Island had been most recently the site of an ammunition depot for the navy.

The federal government enlarged the area of the island with landfill and constructed several buildings, which made up the immigration station. The main building was two stories high, constructed of pine, and larger than the original island. In addition, hospital buildings, an electric power plant, a dining hall, detention quarters, and other service facilities were built. The total cost of the project was \$500,000 (this is about \$12 million in today’s dollars).

The Ellis Island immigration station was designed to handle 7,000 people a day. Two passenger vessels could be unloaded and processed at the same time. Within the main building stood examination rooms, a large waiting area called Registry Hall, and offices for immigrants to send telegraphs, buy railroad tickets, and get their foreign currency changed into dollars.

Despite its large and magnificent appearance in New York Harbor, the buildings were almost immediately criticized as being badly constructed of poor materials on a weak foundation. One architect said the facility should be condemned and predicted that it would



*Ellis Island in New York Harbor processed immigrants from 1892 until it closed in 1954. An estimated 100 million Americans have ancestors who passed through Ellis Island. (Library of Congress)*

not last 10 years. In fact, five years after it was opened, it burned to the ground. Two hundred were sleeping on the island at the time, but no lives were lost.

### **The Peak Years**

By 1900, a new facility made of brick with white limestone trim had replaced the burned buildings. The new buildings were similar in design to the original structures and cost \$1 million. It was fortunate that the Ellis Island station was rebuilt when it was. The busiest years of immigration were about to start.

At the turn of the century, the “new immigrants” from Southern and Eastern Europe—Italians, Greeks, Turks, Hungarians, Poles, Russians, and others—were flowing into America in large numbers. From 1881–1900, nearly 9 million arrived. During the next 20-year period, over 14 million came. Most entered through Ellis Island.

When the new buildings opened on Ellis Island in 1900, corruption reigned. Immigration officers were surly; they swore at the immigrants and pushed them around. Some immigration inspectors demanded bribes or sold the unsuspecting foreigners phony “certificates of American citizenship.” Fortunately, after his election in 1901, President Theodore Roosevelt appointed a new commissioner to clear up the corruption at Ellis Island. Within a year, the atmosphere had changed, and the immigrants were treated better.

### **The “Isle of Tears”**

Arriving in America did not mean that an immigrant would automatically get in. By 1907, immigration laws barred criminals, prostitutes, the insane, the feebleminded, those with certain contagious diseases, political radicals, laborers who had signed contracts to work in the United States, and people who

would likely end up being supported by public funds. Individuals who fit into any of these categories had to be weeded out by the immigration inspectors. Then they were detained and eventually deported. This was the main purpose of Ellis Island. As a result, some immigrants began calling Ellis Island, the "Isle of Tears."

There was a great difference in the way people were treated at Ellis Island. First- and second-class passengers were briefly examined and given landing cards aboard ship in the harbor. They never even saw Ellis Island. It was much different for steerage passengers.

Before arriving on Ellis Island, each steerage passenger was tagged with a number. Upon docking at Ellis Island, interpreters formed the immigrants into groups of 30 by yelling out numbers in various languages.

Then came the first test. As the tired, but excited immigrants walked into the main building, they had to climb a steep set of stairs. At the top were doctors watching for lame or ill people. This was known as the "six-second physical."

After reaching the top of the stairway, the immigrants entered a huge room, Registry Hall. It was usually filled with thousands of people speaking many languages. The newly arrived immigrants were herded through a maze of passageways separated by metal railings. In 1911, wooden benches replaced these railings.

After leaving their baggage in Registry Hall, immigrants faced a series of medical exams. First, doctors asked brisk questions, which nearby interpreters translated. Children were asked their names in order to check for deafness and dumbness. Then doctors inspected each immigrant's face, hair, neck and hands. Other doctors looked for tuberculosis, leprosy, cholera, and other diseases. The last doctor was the "eye man." He quickly snapped back the eyelids of each person with a buttonhook,

looking for trachoma, a highly infectious disease that causes blindness.

If a doctor suspected a person had some disease or condition that could lead to deportation, a letter was marked in chalk on the immigrant's clothing. An "H" meant suspected heart disease. An "F" meant facial rash. An "L" meant lameness or rickets. An "X" meant a mental defect. And an "E" meant eye disease. About 20 percent were detained for further examination. Those who passed the doctors' examinations were sent back to Registry Hall to be questioned further by federal immigration inspectors.

In the early 1900s, immigration inspectors on Ellis Island worked from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m., seven days a week, with only a few days off. These inspectors questioned 400-500 immigrants apiece each day. They had about two minutes to decide whether an immigrant was "clearly and beyond a doubt entitled to land."

Each inspector spoke several languages, and when necessary, interpreters were available. The inspectors recorded information on each immigrant in large ledgers. A myth has grown that inspectors changed people's names. There is no evidence of this. The immigrants' names were recorded from passenger lists created abroad. It was against immigration rules to change a person's name unless the immigrant could show that it was recorded incorrectly on the passenger list. Most name changes probably occurred after immigrants entered America.

The inspectors put the same questions to every immigrant: "Who paid for your passage?" "How many dependents?" "Ever been in prison?" "Can you read and write?" "What work do you do?" "Do you have a job waiting for you?" ("Yes" would mean a violation of the Contract Labor Law, and certain deportation) "Is anyone meeting you?" "Where are you going?" "How much money do you have?" The immigrants spent their long days



*Before being admitted to the United States, immigrants had to pass a medical examination and answer questions from immigration inspectors. (Library of Congress)*

aboard ship practicing their answers to these questions. They knew that if they slipped, they couldn't get in.

An immigrant who successfully answered the immigration inspector's questions would be handed a landing card, the ticket to a new life in America. The immigrant was then free to collect his or her baggage, exchange foreign currency for dollars, buy a railroad ticket, and even purchase a box lunch. In a short while, the immigrant would be off Ellis Island.

Those immigrants planning to stay in New York City took a ferry, called the *Ellis Island*, to Manhattan. This ferryboat ran up to 18 hours a day. The immigrants were often met by joyous relatives in Battery Park. Relatives would frequently bring a change of clothing for the newly arrived immigrants, who usually wore clothing native to their homeland. At the end of the day, Battery Park was sometimes littered with the cast-off clothing of those who already were trying to get into the [American scene](#).

Immigrants who wanted to go to other parts of the United States took ferries to Manhattan or Hoboken, New Jersey, where they made railroad connections. Very often, railroad clerks had to figure out the destinations, because some immigrants had difficulty pronouncing the names of American cities. It took a while for one Italian who wanted to go to "Pringviliamas" to get on the right train—to Springfield, Mass.

Those who failed the immigration inspection were detained on Ellis Island. In a few days they were brought before a special hearing board consisting of three immigration inspectors who reviewed their cases. Although detained immigrants were not allowed to have a lawyer present at this hearing, they could request friends and relatives to testify on their behalf. Being turned down by the special hearing board usually meant a two-to-three week wait on Ellis Island and then deportation. About 2 percent of all immigrants were turned away. For them, Ellis Island was truly an "Isle of Tears."

## A National Monument

After it was abandoned in 1954, Ellis Island began to decay rapidly. Neglect, the weather, and vandalism took their toll. This trend was not reversed even though President Johnson declared Ellis Island part of the Statue of Liberty National Monument in 1965.

Finally, as the nation's bicentennial approached, Congress provided \$1 million to clean up and repair the main building on Ellis Island. On May 29, 1976, this part of Ellis Island was reopened to the public. Tourists today may take a ferryboat from Liberty Island (Statue of Liberty) and go on a one-hour guided tour retracing the steps of the immigrants. It has been estimated that in the United States today at least 100 million people have ancestors who came through this "golden door" to America.

### For Writing and Discussion

1. What was the main purpose of the Ellis Island immigration station?
2. When was the peak period of immigration for Ellis Island? From what countries did most of the immigrants come?
3. Why was Ellis Island called by some the "golden door" to America? Why did others call it the "Isle of Tears"? Which do you think is the better description? Why?
4. Do you think that the examinations given to immigrants on Ellis Island were necessary and fair? Why or why not?
5. Review the types of people who could be denied entry into the U.S. at Ellis Island. Do you think some of these people should still have been allowed to immigrate into this country? Do you think other types of people should have been kept out? Explain.

## ACTIVITY

### Ellis Island Stories

Imagine that it is a day in 1907. Immigrants are passing through Ellis Island. Write one of these stories:

- A. You are an immigrant from Europe going through Ellis Island. Tell your story. Tell where you came from, why you came to America, your experiences aboard ship, how you first saw the American shore, what it was like going through Ellis Island, and what you hope for in the United States.
- B. You are an immigration inspector working on Ellis Island. Your hours are 9:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. seven days a week. You must question about 500 immigrants during each day. Write a diary description of your work experiences on one day. Tell what you do, how hard it is to do it, your good experiences of the day, and your bad experiences.

Use the information in the article to help you. Make your story realistic, but use your imagination. If you need more ideas, go on the Internet to [www.crf-usa.org](http://www.crf-usa.org) and click on Links, Immigration Debate Links, and Ellis Island. Scroll down to Ellis Island stories. Use the stories as a springboard for one that you make up.