

We All Come From Someplace Else

From 1892 to 1954 Ellis Island was the headquarters of a U.S. immigration and naturalization district. In 1892, when Castle Garden, the immigration station at the Battery in lower Manhattan, could no longer handle the flow of immigrants, the reception headquarters was transferred to Ellis Island.

It is estimated that over 40 percent of all citizens in the U.S. can trace their ancestry to those who came through Ellis Island. Immigrant arrivals reached approximately one million each year during the peak immigration period 1900-1914.

Immigrants sailed to America in hopes of carving out new destinies for themselves. Most were fleeing religious persecution, political oppression and economic hardship. Thousands of people arrived daily in New York Harbor on steamships from mostly eastern and southern Europe. The first and second-class passengers were allowed to pass inspection aboard ship and go directly ashore. Only steerage passengers had to take the ferry to Ellis Island for inspection.

However, for all of them the trip meant months aboard overcrowded ships often traveling through hazardous weather. Substandard conditions only compounded the misery for many who had become sick aboard these ships. The barges, chartered by the steamship lines, lacked adequate toilets and lifesaving equipment; they were freezing cold in winter and unbearably hot in the summer. Nevertheless, the promise of freedom and opportunity made even the most arduous trip worth it.

The medical inspection began as soon as the immigrants ascended the stairs to the Registry Room. U.S. Public Health Service Doctors stationed at the top of the stairs watched carefully for shortness of breathe or signs of heart trouble as the immigrants climbed up the steps hefting their baggage. U.S. Public Health Service doctors sometimes had only six seconds to scan each immigrant during the line inspection. If a doctor found any indication of disease, he marked the shoulder or lapel of an immigrant's clothing with chalk: "L" for lameness, "E" for eyes, for example. Marked immigrants, some of whom had received several of these mystifying letters, were removed from the inspection line and led to special examination rooms. There a doctor would check them for the ailment indicated by the chalk mark and give them a quick overall physical. Many had to be sent to the hospital for observation and care. Patients who recovered were usually allowed to land. Others, whose ailments were incurable or disabling, were sent back to their ports of origin.

During the peak years of immigration, detention on Ellis Island ran as high as 20 percent for all immigrants inspected. A detainee's stay could last days or even weeks. Many were women and children who were waiting for a relative to come for them or for money to arrive. Others were waiting for a hearing in front of the board of special inquiry or for a final decision from Washington, D.C. Perhaps the most poignant of the detainees were the families waiting for a sick parent or child to be released from the Ellis Island hospital.

According to a 1917 U.S. Public Health Service manual, 9 out of 100 immigrants were marked with an "X" during the line inspection and were sent to mental examination rooms for further questioning. During this primary examination, doctors first asked the immigrants to answer a few questions about themselves and then to solve simple arithmetic problems or count backward from 20 to 1 or complete a puzzle. Out of the nine immigrants held for this "weeding out" session, perhaps one or two would be detained for a secondary session of more extensive testing.

Manifest Sheets: In 1893, the United States required steamship companies to record in manifests the vital statistics of all passengers. The manifest sheets listed the names of the passengers and their answers to a series of questions regarding nationality, marital status, destination, occupation and other personal information. When a ship arrived in New York, the manifests were turned over to Ellis Island inspectors and used as a basis for cross-examining each immigrant. Immigrants were tagged with the number of the manifest page on which their name appeared. By checking the tags, inspectors could group and identify the new arrivals.

What is Your Name?: Andrjuljawierjus, Grzyszczyszn, Koutsoghianopoulos and Zemiskicivicz were a few of the names that Ellis Island inspectors had to decipher from handwritten manifests. The inspector's prime task was to question new arrivals to verify information already recorded in the ships' manifests; however, scores of immigrants contend that in the process their names were changed or simplified. Though these changes have never been verified, stories of immigrants receiving new names as they stood behind an inspector's desk on Ellis Island are part of America's oral tradition.

Literacy Test: Anti-immigration forces had been trying to impose a literacy test since the 1880s as a means of restricting immigration. They finally succeeded with the Immigration Act of 1917, passed over President Woodrow Wilson's veto. This law required all immigrants 16 years or older to read a 40-word passage in their native language. These dual-language cards were used by inspectors to test immigrants' literacy.

After being inspected and receiving permission to leave the island, immigrants could make travel arrangements to their final destinations, get something to eat and exchange their money for American dollars. Relatives and friends who came to Ellis Island for joyous reunions often after years of separation could escort the immigrants to their new homes.

Only one third of the immigrants who came to the United States through Ellis Island stayed in New York City. The majority scattered to all points across the country via a railroad that crisscrossed the entire continent and offered easy access to all of America's major cities. After immigrants had arranged their travel plans they were given tags to pin to their hats or coats. The tags showed the railroad conductors what lines the immigrants were traveling and what connections to make to reach their destinations.