History of Ellis Island

From 1892 to 1954, over twelve million immigrants entered the United States through Ellis Island, a small island in New York Harbor. Ellis Island is located in the upper bay just off the New Jersey coast, within the shadow of the Statue of Liberty. Through the years, this gateway to the new world was enlarged from its original 3.3 acres to 27.5 acres by landfill supposedly obtained from the ballast of ships, excess earth from the construction of the New York City subway system and elsewhere.

Before being designated as the site of one of the first Federal immigration station by President Benjamin Harrison in 1890, Ellis Island had a varied history. The local Indian tribes had called it "Kioshk" or Gull Island. Due to its rich and abundant oyster beds and plentiful and profitable shad runs, it was known as Oyster Island for many generations during the Dutch and English colonial periods. By the time Samuel Ellis became the island's private owner in the 1770's, the island had been called Kioshk, Oyster, Dyre, Bucking and Anderson's Island. After much legal haggling over ownership of the island, the Federal government purchased Ellis Island from New York State in 1808. Ellis Island was approved as a site for fortifications and on it was constructed a parapet for three tiers of circular guns, making the island part of the new harbor defense system that included Castle Clinton at the Battery, Castle Williams on Governor's Island, Fort Wood on Bedloe's Island and two earthworks forts at the entrance to New York Harbor at the Verrazano Narrows. The fort at Ellis Island was named Fort Gibson in honor of a brave officer killed during the War of 1812.

Prior to 1890, the individual states (rather than the Federal government) regulated immigration into the United States. Castle Garden in the Battery (originally known as Castle Clinton) served as the New York State immigration station from 1855 to 1890 and approximately eight million immigrants, mostly from Northern and Western Europe, passed through its doors. Throughout the 1800's and intensifying in the latter half of the 19th century, ensuing political instability, restrictive religious laws and deteriorating economic conditions in Europe began to fuel the largest mass human migration in the history of the world. It soon became apparent that Castle Garden was ill-equipped and unprepared to handle the growing numbers of immigrants arriving yearly.

The Federal government intervened and constructed a new Federally-operated immigration station on Ellis Island. The new structure on Ellis Island, opened on January 1, 1892; Annie Moore, a 15 year-old Irish girl, accompanied by her two brothers, was the very first immigrant to be processed at Ellis Island. Unfortunately, after five years of operation, the Ellis Island Immigration Station burned down. The Treasury Department quickly ordered the immigration facility be replaced under one very important condition. All future structures built on Ellis Island had to be fireproof. On December 17, 1900, the new main building was opened and 2,251 immigrants were received that day.

First and second class passengers who arrived in New York Harbor were not required to undergo the inspection process at Ellis Island. Instead, these passengers underwent a cursory inspection aboard ship; the theory being that if a person could afford to purchase a first or second class ticket, they were less likely to become a public charge in America due to medical or legal reasons. However, first and second class passengers were sent to Ellis Island for further inspection if they were sick or had legal problems.

This scenario was far different for "steerage" or third class passengers. These immigrants traveled in crowded and often unsanitary conditions near the bottom of steamships with few amenities, often spending up to two weeks seasick in their bunks during rough Atlantic Ocean crossings. Upon arrival in New York City, ships would dock at the Hudson or East River piers. First and second class passengers would disembark, pass through Customs at the piers and were free to enter the United States. The steerage and third class passengers were transported from the pier by ferry or barge to Ellis Island where everyone would undergo a medical and legal inspection.

If the immigrant's papers were in order and they were in reasonably good health, the Ellis Island inspection process would last approximately three to five hours. The inspections took place in the Registry Room (or Great Hall), where doctors would briefly scan every immigrant for obvious physical ailments. Doctors at Ellis Island soon became very adept at conducting these "six second physicals." By 1916, it was said that a doctor could identify numerous medical conditions (ranging from anemia to goiters to varicose veins) just by glancing at an immigrant. The ship's manifest or
passenger list (filled out at the port of embarkation) contained the immigrant's name and his/her answers to numerous questions. This document was used by immigration inspectors at Ellis Island to cross examine the immigrant during the legal (or primary) inspection. The two agencies responsible for processing immigrants at Ellis Island were the United States Public Health Service and the Bureau of Immigration.

Despite the island's reputation as an "Island of Tears", the vast majority of immigrants were treated courteously and respectfully, and were free to begin their new lives in America after only a few short hours on Ellis Island. Only two percent of the arriving immigrants were excluded from entry. The two main reasons why an immigrant would be excluded were if a doctor diagnosed that the immigrant had a contagious disease that would endanger the public health or if a legal inspector thought the immigrant was likely to become a public charge or an illegal contract laborer.

During the early 1900's, immigration officials mistakenly thought that the peak wave of immigration had already passed. Actually, immigration was on the rise and in 1907, more people immigrated to the United States than any other year; approximately 1.25 million immigrants were processed at Ellis Island in that one year. Consequently, masons and carpenters were constantly struggling to enlarge and build new facilities to accommodate this greater than anticipated influx of new immigrants. Hospital buildings, dormitories, contagious disease wards and kitchens were all were feverishly constructed between 1900 and 1915.

As the United States entered World War I, immigration to the United States decreased. Numerous suspected enemy aliens throughout the United States were brought to Ellis Island under custody. Between 1918 and 1919, detained suspected enemy aliens were transferred from Ellis Island to other locations in order for the United States Navy with the Army Medical Department to take over the island complex for the duration of the war. During this time, regular inspection of arriving immigrants was conducted on board ship or at the docks. At the end of World War I, a big "Red Scare" spread across America and thousands of suspected alien radicals were interned at Ellis Island. Hundreds were later deported based upon the principal of guilt by association with any organizations advocating revolution against the Federal government. In 1920, Ellis Island reopened as an immigration receiving station and 225,206 immigrants were processed that year.

From the very beginning of the mass migration that spanned the years (roughly) 1880 to 1924, an increasingly vociferous group of politicians and nativists demanded increased restrictions on immigration. Laws and regulations such as the Chinese Exclusion Act, the Alien Contract Labor Law and the institution of a literacy test barely stemmed this flood tide of new immigrants. Actually, the death knell for Ellis Island, as a major entry point for new immigrants, began to toll in 1921. It reached a crescendo between 1921 with the passage of the Quota Laws and 1924 with the passage of the National Origins Act. These restrictions were based upon a percentage system according to the number of ethnic groups already living in the United States as per the 1890 and 1910 Census. It was an attempt to preserve the ethnic flavor of the "old immigrants", those earlier settlers primarily from Northern and Western Europe. The perception existed that the newly arriving immigrants mostly from southern and eastern Europe were somehow inferior to those who arrived earlier.

After World War I, the United States began to emerge as a potential world power. United States embassies were established in countries all over the world, and prospective immigrants now applied for their visas at American consulates in their countries of origin. The necessary paperwork was completed at the consulate and a medical inspection was also conducted there. After 1924, Ellis Island was no longer primarily an inspection station but rather a detention facility, whereby many persons were brought and detained for various periods of time.

Although Ellis Island still remained open for many years and served a multitude of purposes, it served primarily as a detention center during World War II, for alien enemies, those considered to be in admissible and others. By 1946, approximately 7000 German, Italian, and Japanese people (aliens and citizens) were detained at Ellis Island during the War, comprising the largest groups. The United States Coast Guard also trained about 60,000 servicemen there. In November of 1954 the last detainee, a Norwegian merchant seaman named Arne Peterssen was released, and Ellis Island officially closed. Changes in immigration
laws and modes of transportation as well as cost effectiveness of operating the island all played a role in its closure.

In 1965, President Lyndon Johnson declared Ellis Island part of the Statue of Liberty National Monument. Ellis Island was opened to the public on a limited basis between 1976 and 1984. Starting in 1984, Ellis Island underwent a major restoration, the largest historic restoration in U.S. history. The $160 million dollar project was funded by donations made to the Statue of Liberty - Ellis Island Foundation, Inc. in partnership with the National Park Service. The Main Building was reopened to the public on September 10, 1990 as the Ellis Island Immigration Museum. Today, the museum receives almost 2 million visitors annually.

1. What served as the immigration post in New York State prior to Ellis Island?

2. Who was the first person to go through Ellis Island once it opened in 1892?

3. Why did first and Second class passengers not required to undergo the inspection process on Ellis Island?

4. What is “Steerage”?

5. How long did the inspection process last?

6. What percentages of immigrants were excluded from entry to the United States?

7. How many immigrants came through Ellis Island in 1907?

8. What was the perception of the new immigrant coming to America?

9. Why did the role of Ellis Island change after 1924?

10. When was Ellis Island closed?
Case: Francesco Capra

Francesco Capra was born May 18, 1897 in Bisacquino, Sicily, the son of peasant farmers. An older brother Benedetto disappeared one day and was not heard from again until many months later, when the family received a letter stating that he was in Los Angeles, California. The family departed May 10, 1903 on the SS Germania, from Naples, Italy to New York, en route to join Benedetto. They travelled in steerage, on a 16 day long boat trip. Francesco later described the journey:

“That’s how I came to celebrate my 6th birthday, May 18, 1903, in a howling Atlantic storm; in the Germania’s black steerage hold, crammed with retching, praying, terrorized immigrants. Only strong Mama had the courage to brave the wind and spray—hanging on to the deck storm ropes, as she carried trays of food across the heaving deck and down the steep iron stairs to Papa and four seasick children.”

Upon arrival the Capra family was transported to Ellis Island for processing, an experience Francesco described as “two more days of panic and pandemonium.” After passing inspection the family boarded a train for Los Angeles, an experience Francesco later described as:

“eight more days of cramped, itchy, hardship in an overcrowded chair car: crying to sleep in each other’s laps, eating only bread and fruit Papa bought at train stops. And finally, finally after twenty-three days without a bath or change of clothes, our dirty, hollow-eyed immigrant family embraced the waiting Ben at the S.P. station in Los Angeles. Papa and Mama kissed the ground and wept with joy. I cried too. But not with joy. I cried because we were poor and ignorant and tired and dirty.”

Case: Francesco Capra SS Germania

1. Why did this immigrant come to America?

2. What were some challenges this immigrant faced during their migration experience?

3. Should this immigrant have been allowed into the U.S.? Explain why or why not?

4. Take an educated guess: Do you think this immigrant would become a good American? Explain why or why not?
Case: Emma Goldman

Emma Goldman was born in Kovno in the Russian Empire June 27, 1869. Goldman immigrated to the US in 1885 and worked in a clothing factory in Rochester before moving to New York City in 1889.

Influenced by the libertarian writings of Johann Most, Goldman became an anarchist. Working closely with Alexander Berkman, Goldman became active in the trade union movement. During one industrial dispute, Berkman shot Henry Frick of the Carnegie Steel Company. Berkman was imprisoned and so was Goldman the following year when she was accused of urging the unemployed to steal the food they needed.

After she was released from prison Goldman became involved in the campaign for women's suffrage and birth control information. She was in the news again in 1901 when Leon Czolgosz, who assassinated President William McKinley, claimed he had been influenced by the speeches of Goldman.

Goldman and Berkman edited and published the journal, Mother Earth, between 1906–1917. Goldman also wrote Anarchism and Other Essays (1910) and The Social Significance of the Modern Drama (1914). An opponent of America’s involvement in the First World War, Goldman was imprisoned for two years for obstructing conscription.

In 1919 Alexander M. Palmer, the attorney general and his special assistant, John Edgar Hoover, organized a plan to deport a large number of left-wing figures. On 7th November, 1919, the second anniversary of the Russian Revolution, over 10,000 suspected communists and anarchists were arrested in twenty-three different cities.

Hoover decided he needed a high profile case to help his campaign against subversives. He selected Goldman as he had been particularly upset by her views on birth control, free love and religion. In court Hoover argued that Goldman's speeches had inspired anarchists to commit acts of violence in the United States. Hoover won his case and Goldman, her lover, Alexander Berkman, along with 246 other people, were deported to Russia.
The SS Buford in New York harbor in 1919. The ship would carry 249 deported immigrants to Soviet Russia.

The SS Buford was nicknamed the "Soviet Ark," since it carried hundreds of Communists to Soviet Russia. This political cartoon celebrates giving the immigrants back to Russia. Case: Emma Goldman

Emma Goldman described her deportation experience:

"Ludicrously secretive were the authorities about our deportation. To the very last moment we were kept in ignorance as to the time. Then, unexpectedly, in the wee small hours of December 21st we were spirited away. The scene set for this performance was most thrilling. It was six o'clock Sunday morning, December 21, 1919, when under heavy military convoy we stepped aboard the Buford. For twenty-eight days we were prisoners. Sentries at our cabin doors day and night, sentries on deck during the hour we were daily permitted to breathe the fresh air. Our men comrades were cooped up in dark, damp quarters, wretchedly fed, all of us in complete ignorance of the direction we were to take. Yet our spirits were high—Russia, free, new Russia was before us."

1. Why did this immigrant come to America?

2. What were some challenges this immigrant faced during their migration experience?

3. Should this immigrant have been allowed into the U.S.? Explain why or why not?

4. Take an educated guess: Do you think this immigrant would become a good American? Explain why or why not?