

Ellis Island

“What was Ellis Island like? It was hell and it was good. For one who passed by, everything was all right. For one who was detained or sent back, oh, that was awful.”

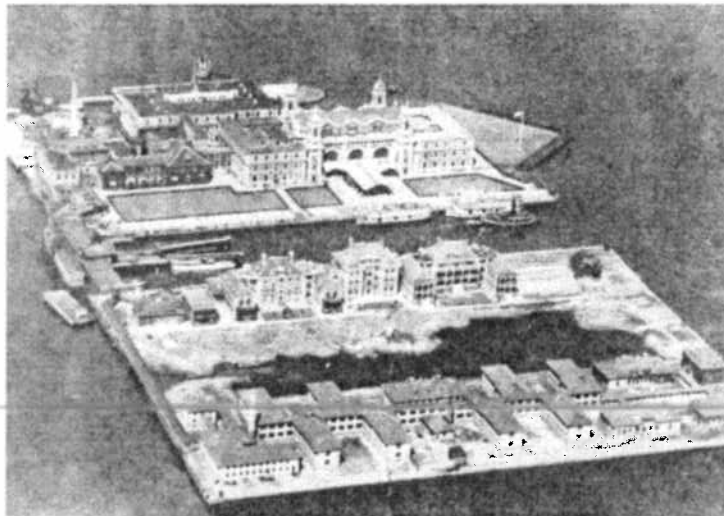
Theodore Lubik, Ukrainian, from Austro-Hungary, arrived 1913, worked on the island 1914-1917

By the 1890s the old immigration center called Castle Garden was unable to handle the increasing influx of immigrants. Plans were made for a new center on a small island in New York harbor called Ellis Island. It was originally one small island but the plans were that two islands would be added from landfills which were to house dormitories and a hospital. The entire installation would be capable of handling 10,000 immigrants a day, which was more than adequate for the number of people arriving on America's shores during this time period.

Work began on the new, Ellis Island in 1892 and as the buildings were being erected, immigrants were processed through these new buildings. All during the immigration of the mid-1890s, the work on the buildings continued. The immigration center was finally completed on June 13, 1897. On the following day, June 14th, just before midnight, fire broke out in the complex. In under an hour, every wooden building on site was burned to the ground. Fortunately no one was seriously injured by the fire. Not so fortunate was the old ammunition vault that housed the old records from Castle Garden. Due to the intensity of the heat, the building buckled and all of the old records dating back to 1855 were destroyed.

The immigration station buildings were totally destroyed so processing of immigrants was moved to the Barge Office at the Battery terminal. New arrivals were processed here for the following three years.

The new, fireproof Federal Immigration Station on Ellis Island opened in December 1900. The main building was similar in size to the old one, nearly 400 feet long, 165 feet wide and over 60 feet high. It boasts four corner towers that are 100 feet high.



The original Ellis Island was smaller than this picture from 1921. It was the upper island where the Great Hall stands (top right). The buildings at the rear and side are dormitories and special purpose rooms. The two islands, middle and bottom contain the hospitals.

The first floor of the Great Hall was the home for baggage handling facilities, railroad ticket sales, food centers and a waiting room for those who were traveling beyond New York and New Jersey. The second floor housed a room that was 200 feet by 100 feet and 56 feet high which was the main immigrant registration and examination hall. Also on the second floor were the detention areas, administrative offices, waiting areas and the special inspection rooms.



Entering Ellis Island on the second floor

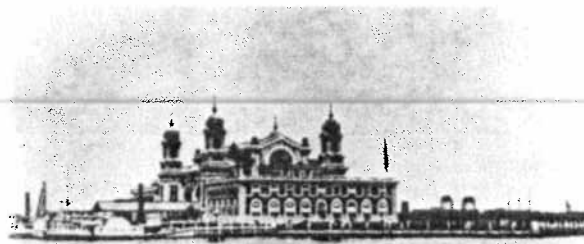
There was a mezzanine floor in the early years which served as an observation area and administrative offices. The building also housed a restaurant, bathhouse and laundry room.

The role of the Bureau of Immigration (later called the INS) was simple. They were on the island to weed out undesirable immigrants and enforce the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the Contract Labor Law of 1885, and the Immigration Act of 1891. In addition, Anarchists were placed on the “do not enter” list in 1903 and anyone who was illiterate faced deportation beginning in 1917.

The processing of immigrants began when their ships entered New York harbor. Each vessel was boarded by Ellis Island inspectors and doctors who inspected all of the first and second class passengers. Due to their wealth and social status, 99% were released on arrival. Very few of these passengers were detained.

The main part of the work for the Bureau of Immigration was to deal with the third-class or steerage passengers. They were “targeted” because they were poor, illiterate and often in poor health so they did not meet the national standard for new immigrants.

When the vessels docked on the West Side of Manhattan, the steerage passengers were taken by ferry directly to Ellis Island. They were tagged with their name and ship’s name which was necessary because more than one vessel arrived every day.



For many immigrants this is what Ellis Island looked like as they were shuttled by ferry for processing

Once the immigrants arrived in the Great Hall the first step was to separate the men from the women and children. They then had to line up for a medical examination by physicians who worked for the United States Public Health Service. Here is what a typical examination was like:

The first inspection was done by the “eye-men” who were trained to look for vision disorders such as cataracts, conjunctivitis or trachoma. If any immigrant had any of the above they would immediately be sent back on the next vessel at the expense of the steamship line.

The next inspection was of a more general nature. All immigrants were observed and, if needed, taken for further examination. The inspectors were looking for signs of mental retardation, neurosis, or insanity. All women and teenage girls were examined for signs of pregnancy, physical deformities, favus which is a contagious scalp disease.

Any immigrant thought to have one of the above symptoms had a chalk letter written on their chest. Each ailment or condition had a letter from the alphabet used. *H* was for the heart, *K* for a hernia, *Pg* for pregnancy and *X* for mental illness.



Women being examined for trachoma



Jewish men being examined for heart conditions

The next step was to wait on a long line for interrogation. The inspector was assisted by a clerk and an interpreter as many new arrivals could not speak any English. Every alien was asked thirty-two questions which included his/her name, age, country of origin, occupation, how much money they had on them, and whether he/she was literate in either their own native language or if they understood any English. Based on their own intuitions of the subject, an inspector could ask additional questions about their political affiliations or their sexual preferences. If the inspector deemed the person inadmissible or if further paperwork and questioning was required, the immigrant was immediately placed into detention for further examinations.

Detention was a scary time for many of the new arrivals. It could last a few hours or, at the very worst, weeks, even months and during this time their fates were unknown. Women and young children traveling alone were always detained until a male relative came for them. Those immigrants who had no money were held until someone brought them money or vouched for them by posting a bond with the Bureau of Immigration. Those who were ill or women who were pregnant were always detained. If they recovered then they were processed but if they remained ill or had medical conditions, they were returned to their country of origin. Criminals or other undesirables were detained for immediate exclusion and deportation.

The immigrant Quota Laws of 1924 restricted the number of immigrants. The Census of 1890 was used as the basis of foreign quotas. Each nation was given a 2 percent quota based on this census. This tended to favor Northern Europeans over the new waves of Italians, Jews, and eastern Europeans.

The changes on the immigration laws meant that processing for future immigrants could now be handled overseas and the role of Ellis Island began to diminish greatly. By 1931, the system of consulate examinations was in full force. From 1931 to 1954, Ellis Island was only used for law enforcement. It was more of a jail than a processing center. It now housed suspect aliens, and those with outstanding arrest warrants facing deportation.

In 1939 the United States Coastguard used Ellis Island as a training base. In 1941, several of the administration buildings were used by the FBI. Ellis Island remained the New York headquarters of the INS until 1943, when they moved to Lower Manhattan. After World War II, Ellis Island became the temporary home for thousands of refugees and the holding cells for German, Japanese, and Italian war criminals.

In 1951, the U.S. Public Health Service closed down the immigrant hospital. Ellis Island was officially closed on November 12, 1954 and the island became totally abandoned by March 1955.

Today, Ellis Island is a national monument that serves as a historic center for American immigrants and family ancestry.



Ellis Island today

Sources: The Island of Hope and Tears and Ellis Island Interviews