

Immigration to New York, 1780s–1924: A Historical Overview

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Understand important moments in the history of immigration to the United States between the 1780s and 1924.
2. Discuss the role of the Port of New York in immigration to the United States between the 1780s and 1924.
3. Explore the origins and trends of immigration to the United States between the 1780s and 1924.

IMPORTANT EVENTS

- 1789 *American Geography*, written by Jedidiah Morse, uses the term “immigrant” rather than “emigrant,” citing arrivals from Scotland, Ireland, Germany, and France.
- 1790 The *Naturalization Act of 1790* provides a pathway to citizenship for any “free white person” who has resided in the United States for two years and their children (provided their children live in the United States and are under the age of 21).
- 1795 The *Naturalization Act of 1795* increases the length of residency to five years.
- 1798 The *Naturalization Act* lengthens the term of residency in the United States to 14 years (it was repealed in 1802).

Primarily in response to Irish immigrants and French refugees critical of the Adams administration, the *Alien Act* allows the President to arrest an alien (it expired in 1800).
- 1812–1814 The War of 1812 stops immigration to the United States, as ocean passage becomes extremely dangerous during the conflict.
- 1815 Immigration resumes, with New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and Charleston becoming key ports of arrival.
- 1819 The *Steerage Act* requires ship captains to maintain passenger records and improve conditions aboard their vessels.
- 1820 Most immigrants arriving in New York include British, Irish, and German families.
- 1825 The completion of the Erie Canal provides a waterway from the Hudson River to the Great Lakes, enabling the movement of people and goods.

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- 1840–1850 Immigration to the United States expands as more than 1.7 million people journeyed to the United States within the decade. Key motivations include the Irish Famine (1846), conflicts within the Austro-Hungarian Empire (1848-1849), and other factors.
- 1854 The Know-Nothing Movement demonstrates anti-Catholic sentiment and attempts to add further restrictions toward the pathway to citizenship. By 1860 the movement’s influence has greatly diminished.
- 1855 The opening of Castle Garden on 1 August 1855 provides a receiving station for those arriving at the Port of New York. During its use as a center for arriving immigrants from 1855 through 1890, Castle Garden would welcome more than 8 million immigrants.
- 1861–1865 The U.S. Civil War diminishes immigration, whereas those from China are restricted from entering the country in 1862.
- 1862 The *Pacific Railway Acts* began the construction of the Transcontinental Railroad. Construction begins on the Union Pacific Railroad and Central Pacific Railroad in 1863, completed in 1869.
- The *Homestead Act* encourages settlement of the Western states and eventually provides 270 million acres to more than 1.6 million homesteaders.
- 1864 Immigration is “fostered and encouraged” by the Republican platform.
- The *Contract Labor Law* enables employers to cover passage for workers until it is repealed in 1868.
- 1870 The *Naturalization Act of 1870* limits citizenship to “white persons and persons of African descent.”
- 1875 *Henderson v. Mayor of New York* declares immigration to be a federal issue rather than one overseen by individual states.
- 1882 The *Chinese Exclusion Act* restricts arrivals from China and provides for the deportation of some alien residents. The law was renewed in 1902.
- 1885 *Our Country*, authored by Josiah Strong, portrays strong nativist leanings and targets immigrants from central and southern Europe.
- The Contract Labor Law of 1885 is passed.

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- 1886 The Statue of Liberty is dedicated on 28 October 1886 as a gift to the United States from France. It was later dedicated as a national landmark in 1924.
- 1886–1887 As a result of the Haymarket riots in Chicago in May 1886, anti-German sentiments circulate.
- 1890 The 1890 U.S. census reports that 15% of the population is born outside of the United States. This population is often described as either “new immigrants” (from southern and eastern Europe) or “old immigrants” from (northern and western Europe).
- 1891 The federal government established the Bureau of Immigration, giving it authority over alien residents and the naturalization process.
- Restrictions are placed upon immigrants who are likely to become a public charge, are suffering from disease, or have been convicted of a felony.
- 1892 Ellis Island opens on 1 January 1892, as a federal facility. Before its closing in November 1954, the facility would process more than 12 million immigrants.
- 1903 In reaction to the assassination of President William McKinley, the *Anarchist Exclusion Act* enables political viewpoints to be a consideration for incoming immigrants.
- 1905 More than 1 million immigrants arrive in the United States within a year.
- 1906 Requirements for naturalization change, with knowledge of the English language now an essential component.
- 1907 The United States Immigration Commission (also known as the Dillingham Commission) records “new immigrants” from central, eastern, and southeastern Europe (as well as Italy and Russia) before its end in 1911.
- 1908 Playwright Israel Zangwill opens *The Melting Pot* in New York City.
- 1909 The *Enlarged Homestead Act* offers 320 acres to farmers willing to settle in the Great Plains.
- 1910 The Mexican Revolution spurs immigration to the United States, as millions of immigrants from Mexico arrive during the next 20 years.
- 1914–1918 The outbreak of World War I prevents continuous migration and evokes strong opinions on all sides.

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- 1917 The *Immigration Act of 1917* expands those excluded from immigration, adds a literacy test, creates the Asiatic Barred Zone, and places mental, moral, physical, and economic standards upon those wishing to settle in the United States.
- 1920 The 19th Amendment grants women the right to vote in the United States.
- 1921 The *Emergency Immigration Act of 1921* limits immigrants from Europe to 3% of the foreign-born population living in the United States as of the most recent U.S. census.
- 1924 The *National Origins Act* caps the number of annual immigrants at 300,000 and reduces the current cap from 3% to 2% of the foreign-born population living in the United States as of the 1890 U.S. census.

THE PORT OF NEW YORK, 1789–1924

Emergence as a Major Port

During the colonial era, Boston was seen as the primary port for the American colonies because of its location and role in various trade networks. Philadelphia and New York were active ports, though not as frequented as Boston. Following the American Revolution, the importance of the Port of New York grew, primarily as a result of its central location, deep waters, river accessibility, and the natural barrier created by Brooklyn (Long Island) and Staten Island.

The importance of the Port of New York was amplified by its role in the cotton trade. Manufactured goods were sent from New York to southern ports. In turn, southern ports sent cotton back to New York. The cotton was then sent to Europe. The ships would then return to New York with passengers and European goods. Following the completion of the Erie Canal in 1825, the Port of New York became a central link for the transportation of goods from the southern states, Europe, and elsewhere to the interior United States. Many immigrants arriving at the Port of New York found employment in the booming garment industry and made their homes in New York City's expanding neighborhoods, including Brooklyn and others.

Castle Garden

In 1847 the state of New York established the Commissioners of Emigration of the State of New York. The commission was charged with conducting medical inspections and regulating port vessels, boardinghouses, and railroad agents. In 1855 the commission acquired Castle Garden. As a center for arriving immigrants, Castle Garden provided numerous services, including information and advice, tickets westward (at controlled prices), washrooms, baggage storage, hot water, childcare, labor exchange, and other necessary provisions.

By 1890 the federal government took steps to secure its role in regulating immigration. The contract between the Commissioners of Emigration of the State of New York and the federal government was terminated on 18 April 1890, and Castle Garden was closed.

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Ellis Island

Ellis Island was given to the Secretary of the Treasury to build an immigration station in 1890. Following the closure of Castle Garden, the Old Barge Office was opened for processing incoming immigrants. The office processed an estimated 525,000 immigrants from April 1890 through December 1891. Ellis Island was officially opened on 1 January 1892 and began processing newly arrived immigrants.

In June 1897, a fire destroyed the buildings on Ellis Island, and immigrant processing returned to the Old Barge Office. Ellis Island reopened on 17 December 1900 and resumed its previous role. The facility operated continuously for the next several decades, with a few notable exceptions. From February 1918 to June 1919, the facility was occupied by the U.S. Navy and Army as a treatment facility. With the advent of air travel and other factors, Ellis Island was officially closed on 29 November 1954.

IMMIGRATION TRENDS, 1780s–1924

Millions of individuals and families settled in the United States. Some sought further economic opportunities, whereas others escaped local conflicts, instability, and persecution. Although some families arrived together, single individuals also immigrated to the United States, and some family units came at different times in a form of **chain migration**. Other individuals came to the United States through some form of **assisted migration**, either for employment, religious freedom, or other reasons. In some cases, immigrants, known as **birds of passage**, left the United States and returned to their place of origin.

Key immigrant groups included:

Irish

4.4 million immigrants arrived between 1820 and 1923 from Ireland, many between the late 1840s and early 1850s. The Irish represented 43% of those born outside of the United States in the 1850 U.S. census.

German

5 million immigrants arrived between 1820 and 1900 from the German states. New York State was home to the largest population of immigrants from Germany at the time of the 1850 U.S. census.

Italian

3.9 million immigrants arrived between 1880 and 1914 from Italy. Some immigrants, known as birds of passage, returned home to Italy.

Austro-Hungarian/Polish

4 million immigrants arrived from the Austro-Hungarian Empire between 1880 and 1918. Immigrants of Polish origins were often included in those arriving from Russia, Austria, and Germany between 1899 and 1919.

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Jewish

3.24 million immigrants (mainly from the Russian Empire) arrived between 1880 and 1918, many fleeing persecution and seeking new opportunities.

Puerto Rican: Less than 5,000 individuals arrived from Puerto Rico before 1940, mainly settling in New York City.

African-Caribbean: Nearly 144,000 immigrants arrived between 1899 and 1937 from the British West Indies and elsewhere in the Caribbean, many of whom settled in New York City.

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