

ELLIS AND ANGEL ISLANDS: GATEWAY TO USA

(Adapted from Discovery Education: Social Studies textbook)



European immigrants in Ellis Island 1

Many different factors can cause a person to leave one country looking for a better life in another country. For centuries, political **instability** and famine have encouraged people to seek new lives in foreign lands. In the days before World War I, the U.S. immigration **policy** permitted large numbers of immigrants, especially from European countries. By the early 1900s, many of the immigrants to the United States from Europe entered the country through Ellis Island, an immigration center in New York. On the West Coast, hundreds of thousands of immigrants, mostly from Asia, entered through another immigration center, Angel Island.

Ellis Island

Ellis Island is just off the tip of Manhattan Island in New York City. Between 1892 and 1924, Ellis Island was the busiest immigration center. For the immigrants who arrived here, Ellis Island was the first place they set foot on American soil, and it represented an island of hope. If they were admitted through Ellis Island, immigrants were free to build their lives in the United States. For others, however, the immigration station brought disappointment. Not every immigrant was allowed to enter the United States, and many families were separated or forced to return to their homelands. Immigrants were often denied entry if authorities detected a medical issue or suspected they would require financial assistance from the government



When they arrived at Ellis Island, immigrants were examined and questioned, as shown in the above photograph.

In his book *In the Shadow of Liberty: The Chronicle of Ellis Island*, Edward Corsi reflects on his experience of passing through Ellis Island as a 10-year-old boy. He writes of his family seeing the Statue of Liberty for the first time:



Children at Ellis Island

*“I looked at that statue with a sense of **bewilderment**, half doubting its reality. . . . This symbol of America—this enormous expression of what we had all been taught was the inner meaning of this new country we were coming to—inspired awe in the hopeful immigrants. “*

Corsi’s joy and wonder soon turned to anxiety when the family realized they had very little money and might not be allowed to enter the United States:

*“Mother patted my little sister’s curly head. For the first time during the voyage I saw tears in mother’s eyes. What sort of world was this, where people were judged by the amount of money they had? I felt **resentment** toward this Ellis Island ahead of us, where we could already see many people crowded into a small **enclosure**.”*



For many immigrants, the Statue of Liberty was a symbol of hope.

Corsi's family was permitted to enter the United States, and the process took only hours. Upon reaching Ellis Island, passengers were processed through the station, and the vast majority was allowed to legally enter the United States in three to five hours. Still, about 20 percent of immigrants had cases that required more time. These immigrants were forced to stay overnight in terrible dormitories. In the 32-year span that Ellis Island operated as an immigration center, about 17 million people passed through the island.

After World War I, attitudes about immigration began to change, and the number of immigrants began to decrease. Without a huge **influx** of immigrants, there was less need for a large immigration center, and the island became a detention center. In 1965, Ellis Island became a national monument. It has been estimated that about half of the current population of the United States have **ancestors** who entered through Ellis Island.

Angel Island

Ellis Island was not the only immigration center that welcomed large numbers of foreigners. On the West Coast of the United States, near the city of San Francisco, Angel Island served as an important immigration center from 1910 to 1940. Most of the people who entered through Angel Island were from Asian countries such as China and Japan. Unlike Ellis Island, the immigrants who entered through Angel Island were often detained for weeks, and the conditions were not pleasant.



Chinese worked hard during the Gold Rush in California

During the gold rush of the mid-1800s, hundreds of thousands of Chinese immigrants came to America in search of gold and jobs. In their search to find work, many of the Chinese immigrants took low-paying jobs. Over time, other workers began to **resent** the Chinese, and the U.S. government took steps to limit their immigration to the United States. In 1882, Congress passed the *Chinese Exclusion Act*. After this act was passed, Chinese immigrants had to prove they had a family member who was already a U.S. citizen. All other Chinese immigrants were deported back to China.

The process could take weeks, so immigrants were detained at Angel Island while they awaited news on whether or not they would be allowed to enter the country. Immigrants were held in **sparse barracks**, with the men separated from the women and children. Many of the **detainees** looked for ways to stay busy during their time on Angel Island. One popular activity was writing poetry. The immigrants engraved poems in Chinese characters into the walls, leaving a lasting impression of their suffering.

After Angel Island closed as an immigration station around 1940, it was used to detain Japanese Americans during World War II. At that time, Japanese Americans were distrusted because Japan was considered an enemy during the war. In the 1970s, visitors rediscovered the inscribed poetry, and an effort was made to preserve and protect the immigration center. Today, Angel Island is a California State Park.



Asian immigrants in Angel Island



In this image, Chinese immigrants study English. Teachers, like the one in black on the right side of the photo, often helped immigrants learn to read and write English during the weeks or months they were detained at Angel Island.