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Welcome to Ellis Island! More than 12 million immigrants made their first stop in America at the Ellis Island Immigration Station between 1892 and 1954. In fact, more than 40 percent of Americans can trace their family history back to Ellis Island.

Follow in the immigrants' footsteps by taking this tour. You'll hear first-hand stories told by people who came through Ellis Island; see historical photographs and films; read

fascinating facts; and discover the central role this station played in the story of American immigration.

THE PASSAGE

Did You Know?

Emigrant and immigrant are related words

The invention of steamships transformed immigration

Most of the immigrants who came to America through Ellis Island were from eastern and southern Europe. In many cases, they came to escape the poverty and religious intolerance that existed in small towns in countries such as Italy, Poland, and Russia. They began their journey to America on foot, horseback, or train. Many trekked hundreds of miles across Europe to get to a seaport. When they arrived at the coast, they boarded a steamship.

The trip across the Atlantic Ocean lasted one to two weeks. The ships divided passengers by wealth and class. First- and second-class passengers stayed in staterooms and cabins. But most people were in third class, called "steerage." Steerage was a large, open space at the bottom of the ship.

As many as 3,000 people crowded the ships. They often came from different countries, spoke different languages, and belonged to different religions.

THE ARRIVAL

Did You Know?

A 15-year-old girl was the first Ellis Island immigrant

Only 75% of a ship's passengers went to Ellis Island

The trip across the Atlantic Ocean was rough. The ships were crowded and dirty. So most passengers were very tired when they arrived in New York Harbor. One of the first things they saw was the Statue of Liberty, which has stood on its own island in the harbor since 1886. People would cheer when they spotted this famous symbol of America. Some would weep with joy as the ship passed by it.

Health officers would board the ship in the harbor and look for signs of diseases. If the ship passed their inspection, doctors then would check the health of first- and second-class passengers on the ship. These lucky few were processed quickly and could leave the ship when it docked at New York City.

But third-class passengers often would wait for hours or days until a smaller ferryboat took them to Ellis Island for immigration processing.

THE ELLIS ISLAND BAGGAGE ROOM

Did You Know?

Steerage passengers traveled with bundles

Ellis Island had a concession stand

Officers wearing uniforms greeted the ferryboat as it docked at Ellis Island. They shouted and motioned to the passengers to walk down the gangplank to the main building. The officers passed out numbered identity tags. The people who did not speak English were often unsure what the officers were saying. The commotion was overwhelming. Men, women, and children struggled off the boat carrying trunks, cloth sacks, and suitcases. They followed one another along a path and entered the imposing red brick building.

Wearing their numbered tags, the immigrants entered the Baggage Room on the building's ground floor. They left their precious belongings here until their inspection was done. Next, the immigrants went up stairs to the Registry Room. That is where the medical and legal inspections took place.

THE STAIRS TO THE REGISTRY ROOM

Did You Know?

The number of immigrants exceeded expectations

The immigration process usually took just hours

The immigration process began on the winding stairs that led to the Registry Room. Doctors stood on the second floor and watched each person. They looked for people who had trouble walking or breathing or showed signs of other health problems. During 1903-1914, the busiest years at Ellis Island, immigrants were checked on the stairs for trachoma, a very contagious eye disease. Doctors used a tool called a buttonhook to lift a person's eyelid to look for any hint of the disease. The buttonhook was a well-known and feared part of the immigration process. People with the disease were often sent back to their home countries.

THE REGISTRY ROOM

Did You Know?

Many women were detained at Ellis Island

Children could be sent back to their home countries

The Registry Room was nicknamed the Great Hall because it is so big. The large rectangular room is 200 feet long and 102 feet wide. Many immigrants had never seen such a large indoor space.

The waiting area in the Great Hall had long metal rails that helped maintain an orderly line as people went through the medical and legal inspections. Wooden benches were added in 1903. The noise in this room could be intense. The sounds of thousands of voices bounced off the vaulted ceilings.

Officials in the Great Hall decided whether each person could enter the country right away or whether that person's case required further review.

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THE MEDICAL EXAM

Medical detainees were sent to the Ellis Island hospital

120,000 people with diseases or disabilities were sent back

The doctors at Ellis Island developed a system to identify immigrants who needed medical attention. The first test was a "six-second physical." A uniformed doctor looked for any signs of illness or contagious diseases. The doctor noted whether the immigrants limped or were short of breath, if their eyes were red, if they acted disturbed or seemed otherwise abnormal.

If someone was considered a risk to the public health, his or her clothes were marked by a piece of chalk with an identifying letter. An "X" denoted insanity. A "P" denoted

pulmonary (lung) problems. Immigrants who were marked were taken out of the line and kept for further examination. Immigrants who passed the six-second exam continued through the maze of metal rails toward the far end of the hall for the legal inspection.

THE LEGAL INSPECTION

Did You Know?

Immigration policies changed after World War I

For 30 years, Ellis Island was a detention center only

Each arriving steamship's crew gave officials at Ellis Island a list of names of the passengers onboard. The manifest, as this list was called, had the name and a description of each passenger. One by one, the passengers were called forward to speak with a uniformed inspector seated on a tall stool behind a high desk. Interpreters helped the immigrants communicate.

Twenty-nine questions were asked of every immigrant. They included: *Where were you born? Are you married? What is your occupation? Have you ever been convicted of a crime? How much money do you have? What is your destination?* An immigrant could be detained for further inquiry if his or her answers differed from the answers listed on the manifest.

DETAINEES

Did You Know?

355 babies were born on Ellis Island

Those who were turned away travelled home for free

For most people, Ellis Island was the "Isle of Hope." But for the unfortunate few who failed the health or legal inspections, it was the "Isle of Tears."

Legal detainees lived in a dormitory room on the third floor. They might wait a few days or even a month. Then their case would be reviewed in the Hearing Room.

People who were detained for medical reasons were cared for at the island's hospital or kept in quarantine. Some were treated for weeks, or even months. Eventually, a Board of Special Inquiry would review an individual's medical report and decide whether to allow him into the United States or to send him back.

THE STAIRS OF SEPARATION

Did You Know?

More than 30 languages were spoken at Ellis Island

Until World War I, passports and visas weren't required

After the medical and legal inspections, the immigrants arrived at the top of another staircase at the other end of the Great Hall. This staircase had three aisles. Immigrants who were being detained were often brought down the center aisle. People who were traveling west or south walked down the right side of the staircase. Those going to New York City or to the north walked down the left side.

At the bottom of the stairs was a post office, a ticketing office for the railways, and social workers to help the immigrants who needed assistance. There was also an office to exchange money from their home country for U.S. dollars. No matter where they were going after Ellis Island, immigrants needed money. Exchange rates for currencies around the world were posted each day on the blackboard.

THE KISSING POST

Did You Know?

Hundreds of people worked at Ellis Island

Letters and newspapers informed family of arrival dates

An area on the first floor of the building became known as "the kissing post." It got that nickname because it is where family and friends waited for their loved ones. After months or years apart, they kissed and hugged and shouted with joy and relief. For the immigrants, the long journey was finally over. They were in America