

Immigration in the Early 1900s

The number of immigrants to America jumped from a low of 3.5 million in the 1890s to a high of 9 million from 1900-1910. During this time, immigrants increasingly came from Eastern and Southern European countries, as well as Canada and Latin America. By 1910, Eastern and Southern Europeans made up 70 percent of the immigrants entering the country.

The reasons these new immigrants made the journey to America differed little from those of who immigrated in earlier days. In general, immigrants left their homelands searching for their chance to make a better life for themselves.

- In the early 1900s, many countries had laws making it difficult for people to practice a religion of their own choosing. Many people came to America in hopes of being able to have religious freedom.
- Many immigrants were the victims of racial and political persecution in their homelands. By coming to America, people hoped to escape this discrimination.
- Some immigrants came to America, “The Land of Opportunity”, seeking relief from a lack of economic opportunity. Many people left their homeland to find a job that would provide money to improve their way of life.
- Famine pushed many immigrants out of their homelands. Many immigrants were counting on America, with all of its farmlands, to have an abundance of food.
- Many were pulled here by contract labor agreements offered by recruiting agents. People from Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and Italy flocked to the coal mines or steel mills. Many Greeks came to work in the textile mills.
- Railroad companies advertised the availability of free or cheap farmland. This brought some agricultural workers to western farmlands.



Medical examination
Ellis Island, 1910

Immigrants entering the United States who could not afford first or second-class passage came through the processing center at Ellis Island, New York. Built in 1892, the center handled some 12 million European immigrants, herding thousands of them a day through the barn-like structure during the peak years for screening. The immigrants who arrived at Ellis Island had not envisioned this type of treatment.

Government inspectors at Ellis Island asked the immigrants a list of twenty-nine probing questions, such as: Have you money? Do you have relatives or a job in the United States? After the questions, doctors and nurses poked and prodded them, looking for signs of disease or handicaps. Usually immigrants were only detained at Ellis Island for 3 or 4 hours, and then free to leave. If, however, they did not pass all of the tests, they were sent back to their place of origin.

For the newcomers who did pass the tests at Ellis Island, some comfort could be found in the ethnic neighborhoods filled with people from their own country. Here they could talk in their native language, practice their religion, and take part in cultural celebrations that helped ease the loneliness. Often, though, life for all was not easy. Most industries offered hazardous conditions and

very low wages. Housing in the cities was overcrowded and unsanitary. Many found it very difficult to accept. An old Italian saying summed up the disillusionment felt by many: "I came to America because I heard the streets were paved with gold. When I got here, I found out three things: First, the streets weren't paved with gold; second, they weren't paved at all; and third, I was expected to pave them." In spite of the difficulties, very few gave up and returned home.

<http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/immigrating.htm>

