

Volume 2

# Teaching With



# Documents

Using Primary Sources From the National Archives

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National Archives and Records Administration

and

National Council for the Social Studies

Washington, DC

# *Photographs of Ellis Island: The High Tide of Immigration*

For generations of immigrants the “island of tears,” or the Federal immigration station at Ellis Island, left an indelible first impression of life in the United States. In sight of the Statue of Liberty, excited voyagers anticipated their arrival in a new land. Fortunate passengers with first- or second-class tickets were processed by officers aboard ship and disembarked directly in New York. But the majority of incoming aliens traveled steerage and, therefore, were ferried to Ellis Island to undergo a series of immigration inspections. There they poured down gangplanks, trudging to the cast-iron canopy, lugging their most important possessions in bundles and suitcases. Most also carried a weighty anxiety. The imposing French Renaissance architecture of the buildings, the throngs of people, the cacophony of languages, and most of all, the remote but very real possibility of detainment or deportation must certainly have seemed threatening.

In 1907, the peak year for immigration at Ellis Island, more than a million aliens came to the United States. During the same year only 13,064 were refused entry. The horror stories of families torn apart, elderly and infirm persons deported for a 20-day return trip to their country of origin, and able-bodied young men refused entry because of contract labor violations grew out of the mere two percent of the “huddled masses” who were barred from entering. On the whole, considering the number of aliens sometimes exceeded 10,000 in a single day, the administration of the immigration station was successful and expeditious. The featured documents, photographs from the Records of the Public Health Service, 1912–1968, Record Group 90, detail the

immigration experiences endured by almost 12 million aliens upon their arrival at Ellis Island. Today a full 40 percent of the population of the United States can trace at least one ancestor to the golden door of the Ellis Island Immigration Station.

## **ELLIS ISLAND**

Prior to 1890 the Federal Government contracted with individual states' port authorities to administer an evolving immigration policy. Officially, the Treasury Department maintained control over immigration, including deportations, enforcement of contract labor laws, and regulation of steamship companies' treatment of passengers. Uneven enforcement and interpretation of existing regulations, exacerbated by increasing complaints regarding the treatment of immigrants, resulted in the establishment of a Federal Bureau of Immigration within the Treasury Department in 1891. The following year the Bureau opened Ellis Island Immigration Station in upper New York Bay. Over the next 30 years, Ellis Island would become the main gateway to American Society for millions of immigrants.

The initial wooden structure at Ellis Island burned to the ground only five years after it opened. The fire also destroyed ship manifests dating from 1855, taking with it a rich documentation of immigration history in the city of New York. The functions of the immigration station were temporarily relocated to a barge. Over the next several years, scandalous stories of immigration agents swindling new arrivals, proposition-

ing unaccompanied women, and extorting bribes from laborers reached Congress. When the majestic brick and limestone replacement building opened in 1900, reform was under way in the Bureau of Immigration. Treatment of immigrants greatly improved in the impressive new quarters now administered by immigration officials who had become civil servants.

The main building was designed to accommodate up to 5,000 people per day. Passengers disembarked from the ferries that took them from ships docked in Manhattan. They entered the turreted building under a cast-iron and glass canopy. On the ground floor, they entered a baggage room where they checked their precious belongings. They then ascended a long, steep stairwell. As the aliens climbed the stairs, immigration officials observed them. At the top of the stairs, they were directed either to detainment in a physical examination room or to the registry room for legal inspection. In the spacious registry room, throngs of people were channeled slowly toward inspectors. Aliens failing to answer questions properly were immediately sent to special inquiry rooms for further questioning, language interpretation, or tests of mental acuity. Most passengers spent an average of five hours at Ellis Island before they descended a staircase on the opposite end of the hall to retrieve baggage and purchase ferry and rail tickets to final destinations. Detainees, however, slept in cramped third-floor dormitories until their special cases were reviewed.

As the tide of immigrants rose, additional structures were built, including contagious disease wards, nurseries, and kitchens. With the passage of immigration restriction laws in the 1920s, the facilities were increasingly used to detain and deport "undesirables." In order to accommodate the necessary expansion of Ellis Island, architects enlarged the island with landfill from tunnels being dug to create New York's subway system. By 1934 the island had grown from its original 3.3 acres to 27.5 acres. A mere 20 years later, in 1954, the immigration station was abandoned. Its functions were assumed by New York's new port of entry for this nation of immigrants, Idlewild Airport, today called the John F. Kennedy International Airport.

## INSPECTIONS

Most of the immigrants detained at Ellis Island were kept for medical reasons. Public Health Service doctors estimated that they spent fewer than 10 seconds on each individual at the top of the first stairwell in their search for manifestations of more than 60 diseases. They looked for rashes, pox, lameness, pregnancy, and mental disorders. With a buttonhook, they peeled back eyelids, searching for signs of the highly contagious disease trachoma. Anyone exhibiting signs of illness received a blue chalk mark on the lapel and was detained.

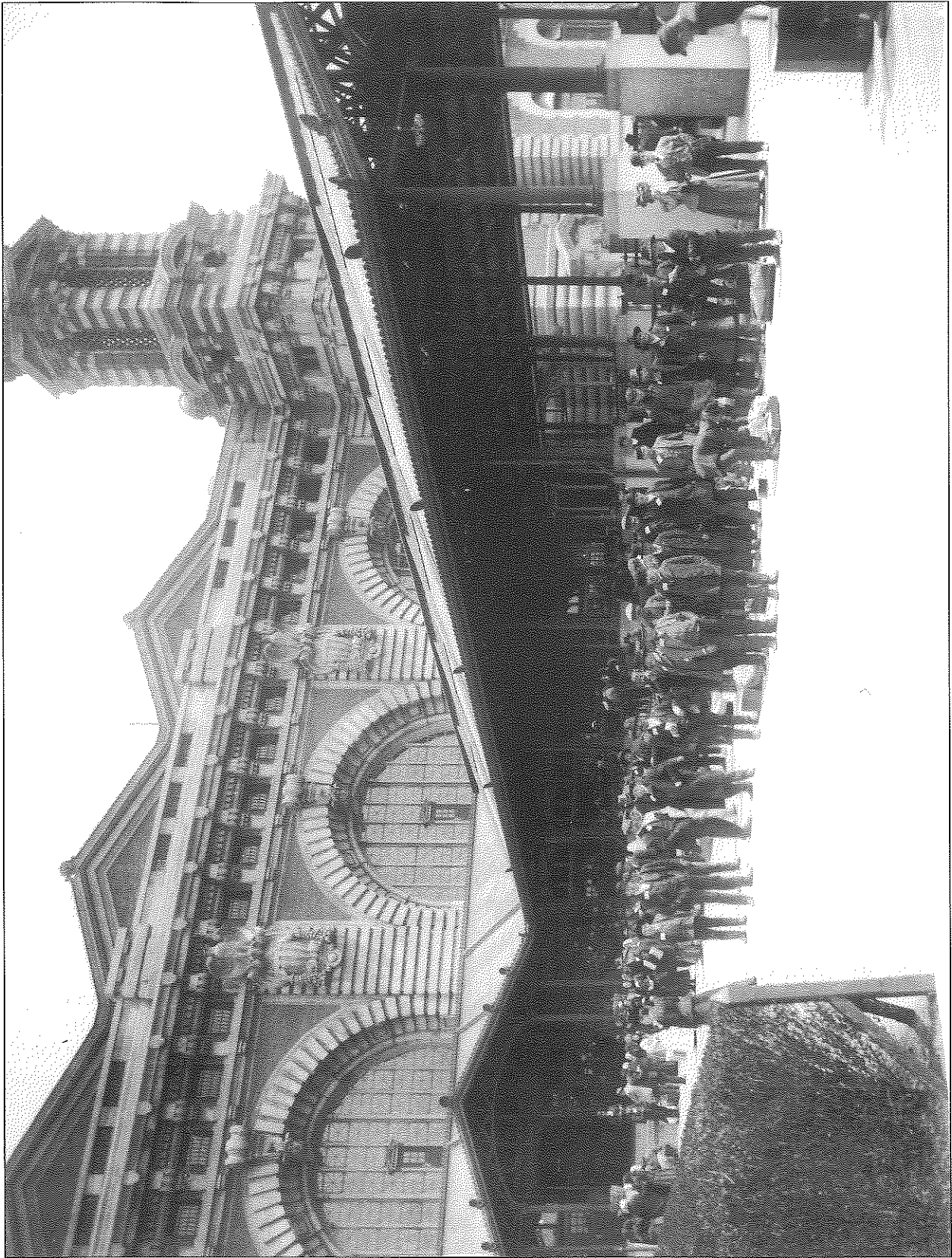
Those who passed the scrutiny of the Public Health Service faced another hurdle at the legal inspection station. With ship manifests in hand, inspectors questioned each potential entrant with the aid of translators. After "Name?" and "Place of Birth?," the inspectors' questions became more complex as they searched for responses that might give reason for exclusion. Inspectors asked aliens if they had criminal records or if they were anarchists. Unaccompanied women were denied entry if there was no father or husband to claim them; they were labeled "of questionable character." Men who answered that they had a job could be barred for violating the ban on contract labor. Ironically, if men claimed to have no job awaiting them, they could be denied entry as "likely to become a public charge."

Those individuals passing all inspections, immediately or after weeks of detainment, collected their baggage, exchanged their lire or kopeks, purchased their rail tickets, and carefully passed through the "golden door." For most people, the nerve-wracking inquisitions at Ellis Island were eclipsed by their reunions with loved ones and their potentially bright futures in the United States.

## CLOSING THE DOOR

At the turn of the century, nativist sentiments flared in reaction to the changing ethnicity of the "second wave" of immigration. Eastern Europeans escaping ethnic persecution and southern Europeans fleeing rural poverty arrived





in unprecedented numbers. The unfamiliar languages and differing religious practices of these new immigrants ignited latent fears in many American citizens. Increasing restrictions were placed on incoming aliens. By 1917 there were 33 categories for exclusion. All immigrants were required to pass a literacy test and undergo a complete physical exam. Unaccompanied children under the age of 16, potential workers in burgeoning coal mines and textile mills, were also excluded after 1917. Congress passed a quota act in 1921 limiting the number of aliens admitted in proportion to numbers of citizens from ethnic backgrounds detailed in the 1910 census. In 1924 a second act further restricted immigration by establishing percentages based on numbers taken from the 1890 census. In this way, preferential immigration status was reestablished for northern Europeans. Ellis Island was used increasingly to process and detain deportees.

The tide of immigration slowed during the Depression. The military used many of the facilities on Ellis Island during World War II. After the war, numbers of immigrants entering at Ellis Island continued to dwindle. The immigration station was closed in 1954 and abandoned to the elements. In 1965 Ellis Island became part of Liberty National Park, but the building itself was not refurbished and reopened to the public until 1991. Today, the main building houses a museum dedicated to the millions of Americans who entered the United States through that golden door.

### TEACHING ACTIVITIES

1. Distribute a copy of each photograph to your students. Ask the students to study each photograph for 2 minutes. Then ask them to create a chart listing the people, objects, and actions in each photograph. Direct the following questions to your students:
  - a. What can you infer about the kinds of immigrants from these photographs? In what country or region did they originate? What socioeconomic background do you think they represent? Support your answers with details from the photographs.
  - b. What is your impression of the physical examination? How do you think the immigrants in line feel about the procedure?
2. Share the background information about Ellis Island with your students. Call their attention to what is known today about contagious disease and sterilization. In light of modern medical knowledge, ask the students to identify problems with the methods of screening and detainment used at Ellis Island. List contagious diseases prevalent today. How are these diseases combated in various communities?
3. Divide your students into groups to develop and perform 5-minute skits on different aspects of the Ellis Island experience. Possible subjects for skits include arrival by ship in New York Harbor, the point of physical examination, the point of legal inquiry, or a conversation among deportees. Require each member to play an active part in the skit.
4. As a writing assignment, ask students to imagine they are recent immigrants to this country at the beginning of the century. Each student should compose a detailed letter to relatives or friends in the home country explaining what they can expect to encounter upon arrival at Ellis Island and suggesting strategies for their speedy admission to the United States.
5. Assign students to read Emma Lazarus's poem "The New Colossus" and Adrienne Rich's poem "Prospective Immigrants Please Note." Lazarus published her poem commemorating the gift of the Statue of Liberty by France to the United States in 1884. In it, "tempest-tossed" immigrants will pass through the romanticized "golden door," a metaphor for ports of entry to the United States. Rich, who published her poem in 1962, uses immigration as a metaphor to explore not the literal change of nationality, but the spiritual and emotional passage from a known position to one that is uncertain and risky. Compare her cautionary tone with that evoked in Lazarus's poem. Ask students to write poems of their own using the metaphor of a door. Students might think about whether the door before them is open

or closed, an entrance, an exit, or an escape route? What kinds of experiences, ideal or difficult, might be waiting for them on the other side?

6. Invite a first generation American to visit your classroom to discuss contemporary immigration experiences with your students. Ask

### **THE NEW COLOSSUS**

*Emma Lazarus*

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,  
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;  
Here at our sea-washed sunset gates shall stand  
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame  
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name  
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand  
Glowes world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command  
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.  
"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she  
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

This poem can be found, with an accompanying interpretation and teaching suggestions, in Sari Grossman and Joan Brodsky Schur, eds., *In A New Land: An Anthology of Immigrant Literature* (Lincolnwood, IL: National Textbook Company, 1994).

students to draft questions ahead of time regarding your guest's preparation for emigrating from his or her home country, learning a new language, procedures for obtaining a work permit, difficulties encountered in adjusting to a new society, and procedures followed for acquiring citizenship.

### **PROSPECTIVE IMMIGRANTS PLEASE NOTE**

*Adrienne Rich*

Either you will  
go through this door  
or you will not go through.

If you go through  
there is always the risk  
of remembering your name.

Things look at you doubly  
and you must look back  
and let them happen.

If you do not go through  
it is possible  
to live worthily

to maintain your attitudes  
to hold your position  
to die bravely

but much will blind you,  
much will evade you,  
at what cost who knows?

The door itself  
makes no promises.  
It is only a door.

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