Ellis Island: New York Harbor

**History**

Ellis Island goes back a long way. It was originally called Oyster Island by the early Dutch colonists, and later known as Gibbet Island, because criminal were executed by hanging from a "gibbet," or gallows tree, during the 1700s. In the 18th century, a merchant from New York City named Samuel Ellis bought the island and gave it his name. Ellis still owned the island when he died in 1794.

In 1890, it was chosen by the House Committee of Immigration as the site of the new immigrant station for the Port of New York. Castle Garden, the original immigration station at the Battery, in lower Manhattan, could no longer handle the flow of immigrants, so the reception headquarters was transferred to Ellis Island. The Immigration Service officially opened on January 1, 1892. In 1947 it was estimated that almost 20 million immigrants had entered the country through Ellis Island. Because of declining immigration, the Immigration Service closed the station in 1954.

Fleeing hardships such as poverty, religious persecution, or political unrest in their homelands, the immigrants came to America in search of freedom and opportunity. Most came by steamship and landed in at the Port of New York. Immigrants to Ellis Island mostly came from Europe. Steamship lines were held accountable for medical examinations and vaccinations of the immigrants, and disinfection of both immigrants and baggage before leaving home port. First and second class passengers were quickly and courteously inspected on board ship before being transferred to New York. Only steerage passengers were processed at Ellis Island. Each passenger had to answer a series of 29 questions recorded on manifest lists. These questions included: name, age, sex, marital status, occupation, nationality, ability to read or write, race, physical and mental health, money in possession, prison record, if any, and whether they were polygamists or anarchists.

At the entrance to the Lower Bay of New York Harbor, the first quarantine examinations took place aboard ship. Passengers were inspected for contagious diseases such as smallpox, yellow fever, scarlet fever, and measles. Once finished, the ship arrived in Manhattan. First and second class passengers were released, and steerage passengers boarded ferries bound for Ellis Island. Once there, they were led to the main building's reception area.

There were three floors to the main building. The first floor was a luggage check and a railroad ticket office. Little did the immigrants realize was that the stair climb to the second floor registry room was being monitored by medical officers, who stood at the top of the stairs watching for signs of lameness, shortness of breath, heart conditions, and “mental” conditions. This preliminary examination was essential in the processing of the immigrants. The medical inspections continued. One of the most feared exams was the eyelid lift. Doctors, at a station, would use a buttonhook to lift the eyelids of immigrants, looking for symptoms of trachoma, which causes blindness and death. As people progressed through other examinations, about one in every five would receive chalk marks on their clothing, indicating further medical inspection. Some of the marks given out were: Sc for scalp disease, G for goiter, K for hernia, L for lameness, or S for senility.

Immigrants who passed the medical exams were now ready to take the final test. An inspector, along with an interpreter, began a questioning process designed to verify the 29 items of information contained on the manifest. Ninety-eight percent passed this test. From there, immigrants exchanged gold, silver, and paper money for American dollars, and then bought railroad tickets for their final destinations in America. The wait for an average immigrant to get processed was about 2-5 hours long. Some immigrants could bypass this process to enter the United States, if they were willing to pay. Inspectors would demand bribes from the immigrants who appeared to have money. Railroad agents would sell tickets at increased prices. Employees at the Money Exchange would lie about the exchange rates, and then pocket the difference. In 1901, this corruption was brought to the attention of President Theodore Roosevelt, and the cleanup of Ellis Island began within a month.

**Deportation and Detention**

The immigrants were briefly scanned for evidence of mental or physical defects. Medical information was gathered to determine the alien's right of entry. Upstairs in the Registry Room, the immigration inspector used a variety of evidence to determine the admissibility of the alien. Starting in 1917, the immigrants were also expected to pass a literacy test in his native language. All people over the age of sixteen were given this test, and only political refugees were allowed to skip this test. If an immigrant was found to have failed significantly in any of these areas, he or she would be excluded from the United States and returned to the ship for departure from U.S. shores.

The immigrant inspector was required to detain an immigrant if there was any doubt about his right to land. This was a normal procedure if the immigrant was awaiting the arrival of a relative or a friend to see him safely into the city. Immigrants were detained for medical and other reasons: children traveling alone, stowaways, and illiterates.

"Ellis Island: New York Harbor." *Schenectady City Schools*. Schenectady City School District, n.d. Web. 23 Feb. 2014. <http://www.schenectady.k12.ny.us/users/title3/Future%20Grant%20Projects/Projects/immigrationhom/hilary/hlsimmigration/Hilary%20page/ellisGOOD.htm>.