

Coming to America: Ellis Island and New York City

by Vincent J. Cannato

New York City is a kind of archipelago, a Philippines on the Hudson River. Only one borough—the Bronx—is actually attached to the American mainland. There are some forty islands in the city beyond Manhattan, Staten Island, and Long Island. These minor islands are nestled in the bays, rivers, harbor, and other waterways that encase the city.



*Landing at Ellis Island, ca. 1902
(Library of Congress Prints and
Photographs Division)*

Many of the city's islands once served important social functions and some still do. As the city grew in population northward up the island of Manhattan, along with it came the pesky social problems that tend to afflict any budding metropolis. Under such circumstances, these islands became "cordon sanitaires" in the words of writer Phillip Lopate, "where the criminal, the insane, the syphilitic, the tubercular, the orphaned, the destitute . . . were quarantined." [1]

The most famous of these small islands is Ellis Island, originally little more than a three-acre bank of sand and mud that barely kept its head above high tide. By 1891, it would become the site of the federal government's new immigration inspection station. Immigration inspection had become federalized, taking the power away from state governments.

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Americans had recently become concerned with the "quality" of immigrants arriving in the country. This coincided with a dramatic shift in immigration away from northern and western Europeans toward southern and eastern Europeans. "Lunatics and Idiots Shipped from Europe" and "The World's Dumping Ground," screamed newspaper headlines. Alabama congressman William C. Oates summed up the growing belief in the undesirability of new immigrants:

A house to house visit to Mulberry street [the city's burgeoning Little Italy], in New York, will satisfy any one that there are thousands of people in this country who should never have been allowed to land here. . . . Many of the Russian Jews who inhabit other streets in New York, and other cities, are of no better class than the Italians just referred to. [2]

The 1891 Immigration Act would set the course of American immigration policy for the next thirty years. It expanded the types of "undesirable" immigrants, so that Ellis Island officials would be on the lookout for "idiots, insane persons, paupers or persons likely to become public charges, persons suffering from a loathsome or a dangerous disease, persons who have been convicted of a felony or other infamous crime or misdemeanor involving moral turpitude, polygamists." In the coming decades, the list would grow longer.

The system of immigration inspection and regulation at Ellis Island was designed to provide the nation with a "proper sieve" that would separate "desirable" from "undesirable" immigrants. This was a bit of a

compromise, a middle-ground position between those who upheld the laissez-faire notion that the country should be open to all immigrants (at least white European ones) and those who argued for tighter restrictions.

The sifting process at Ellis Island, improved throughout the years, meant strict scrutiny of new arrivals. Inspectors and doctors were looking for physical problems such as poor eyesight, bad backs, trachoma, or other potentially contagious diseases. Inspectors kept an eye open for suspected prostitutes, anarchists, and those “likely to become a public charge.” To enforce the nation’s expanding immigration laws, a fairly sophisticated bureaucratic system was created at Ellis Island to interpret and execute those laws.

Roughly 20 percent of immigrants passing through Ellis Island were set aside for further inspection, while the rest passed through Ellis Island without incident. Overall, only about 2 percent of immigrants were excluded from entering the country and sent back to Europe. Part of the reason for such a low figure was that steamship companies had an economic incentive not to bring immigrants who might run afoul of immigration laws, since the companies were forced to pay the costs of returning these rejected migrants back to Europe. In 1905 alone, it was estimated that steamship companies at Bremen had refused to sell tickets to some 8,000 potential Americans.

Ellis Island’s connection with New York City was natural. Some three-quarters of all immigrants to America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries came through the port of New York, and many of them ended up staying in the city’s crowded tenement districts. Such conditions provided fodder for immigration restrictionists such as Ellis Island commissioner William Williams. Immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, Williams wrote in one of his annual reports, “have very low standards of living, possess filthy habits, and are of an ignorance which passes belief. Types of the classes referred to representing various alien races and nationalities may be observed in some of the tenement districts of Elizabeth, Orchard, Rivington, and East Houston Streets.”[3]

Yet those same New York neighborhoods also produced numerous immigrant aid associations designed to help immigrants with their transition into their new homeland. In addition, these organizations provided help in challenging restrictive interpretations of the law at Ellis Island as well as decisions to exclude individual immigrants.

One New Yorker best embodied the conflicting attitudes toward immigrants: the patrician Theodore Roosevelt. Early in his public career, Roosevelt complained about the “evil effects of unrestricted immigration” and supported a literacy test for newcomers. One of his closest friends, Massachusetts senator Henry Cabot Lodge, was the nation’s leading restrictionist. Yet because of his New York City roots, Roosevelt kept in steady contact with the city’s ethnic and religious leaders, always solicitous of their opinions. As president, Roosevelt’s motto on the subject was: “We can not have too much immigration of the right kind, and we should have none at all of the wrong kind.”[4]

Eventually, the regulation of immigration at stations like Ellis Island gave way to stricter measures. The quotas of the 1920s not only severely restricted immigration in numbers, especially for those from southern and eastern Europe, but also moved the primary responsibility for immigration inspection to American consulates abroad. Ellis Island found its role in processing immigrants gradually lessened. It served more as a detention center, housing suspected Nazi and fascist sympathizers during World War II and suspected Communists and other radicals awaiting deportation in the early Cold War years. By 1954, an increasingly irrelevant Ellis Island closed its doors.

The decline and abandonment of Ellis Island paralleled the postwar prosperity that led many second- and

third-generation Americans to shed much of their ethnic baggage as they assimilated into society, rose into the middle class, and moved to the suburbs. Thanks to quota restrictions, immigration was at historic lows. By 1960, only 5.4 percent of Americans were foreign-born. The deterioration and neglect of Ellis Island in the 1960s and 1970s also mirrored the declining fortunes of New York City and other urban centers as the process of suburbanization continued to drain the city of people and resources.

Immigration is once again a hot-button issue and New York City has re-emerged as a major immigrant center. Nearly 40 percent of city residents are foreign-born. Today's immigrants do not have an Ellis Island experience, but instead enter the country through airports and across the nation's land borders. Yet Americans are still confronting issues such as how many immigrants we should receive and what kinds of restrictions, if any, there should be.

Ellis Island still looms in the American imagination. The once-dreary bureaucratic outpost has been transformed into a popular tourist attraction and replaced Plymouth Rock in the American iconography as the site of the nation's mythic founding. It has been estimated that some 40 percent of Americans have at least one ancestor who passed through Ellis Island.

But even the rehabilitation of Ellis Island has not been without controversy. Some worry that the idea of America as a "nation of immigrants," embodied by the rebirth of Ellis Island and its newfound role as a national shrine, leaves out Americans who did not come to America voluntarily or who were already here before European settlement. Other critics of the "shrinification" of Ellis Island worry that the celebration of Ellis Island and those immigrants who passed through it can end up glorifying older immigrants and unfairly comparing them to newer immigrants.

Take the case of eighty-three-year-old Sophie Wolf, who came to America from Germany in 1923. On a 1980 visit to Ellis Island, she told a reporter: "We should not let anyone in. When we came, the rules were you could not be a burden to the state. There were no schools where you could learn the language." Clearly for Wolf and others, the new immigrants of the 1980s and beyond were inferior to those of her day. They believed that modern immigrants were treated more leniently and received more help from the government.

At first glance, Wolf seems to validate some of the concerns with the shrinification of Ellis Island. Yet when she continued with her thoughts about Mexican, Vietnamese, and Cuban immigrants, she seemed to shift her views. "But you've got to give people a chance," she said. "You can't send them back."^[5] Her dual response nicely captures a nuanced version of Ellis Island memory.

As America deals with the challenges of our latest wave of mass immigration, it will do so without Ellis Island, the immigrant processing center. But Ellis Island as myth, as a memory place, still has an important hold on the American imagination, and future generations will grapple with both its historical meaning and its relevance to contemporary, multicultural America.

[1] Phillip Lopate, *Waterfront: A Walk around Manhattan* (New York: Anchor Books, 2005), p. 374.

[2] House Committee on the Judiciary, *Regulation of Immigration and to Amend the Naturalization Laws*, 51st Cong., 2d sess., 1891, H Rep. 3808, 1.

[3] United States Department of Commerce and Labor, *Report of the Secretary of Commerce and Labor, 1911* (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1912), 306.

[4] United States Department of State, *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States*

with the Annual Message of the President Transmitted to the Congress, December 7, 1903 (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1904), xii.

[5] Anastasia Toufexis, "In New York: Ellis Island Revisited," *Time*, December 15, 1980.

Vincent J. Cannato, an associate professor of history at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, is the author of *American Passage: The History of Ellis Island (2009)* and *The Ungovernable City: John Lindsay and His Struggle to Save New York (2001)*.
