

The Voyage to America

In the 19th Century

This narrative is paraphrased from the documents noted below.

Port of Entry

The story of Ellis Island begins on the southern tip of Manhattan within Battery Park at Castle Clinton. Built originally as a fort in 1808, it eventually became a concert hall known as Castle Garden. From 1885 to 1890 Castle Garden served as the primary immigration processing station in the United States. During those years 8,000,000 immigrants were processed there. As the tide of immigration increased, it became apparent that the facilities at Castle Garden were inadequate to handle the many problems the immigrants presented. Overcrowding became intolerable, corruption was rampant. When the federal government took responsibility for the processing in 1890, officials looked for an alternate site.

Located in New York Harbor, between Battery Park and New Jersey, was a three-acre oyster bed called Ellis Island. It was named after Samuel Ellis, a New Jersey farmer. Prior to that it was named Kioshk (Gull) Island by the Native Americans who would frequently look there for oysters.

The new building made of Georgia pine opened on January 1, 1890. Five years later on June 14, 1897, a fire broke out destroying the entire complex. Two hundred immigrants on the island were all taken to safety, and the Barge Office was put into service until a new facility could be built. Ellis Island reopens on December 17, 1900.

At the time of construction officials believed the days of mass immigration were over. Built to receive 500,000 immigrants a year, it soon processed 5,000 a day.

The Ellis Island Immigrant Cookbook, Tom Bernadin, Wimmer Brothers, 1991; pages 9-23.

Steamship companies, eager to make a sale, placed posters throughout Europe to entice would-be immigrants. The rumor that there were no mattresses in America spread, and many immigrants came carrying feather beds in addition to their trunks.

I think most of this is from *Unto the Sons* by Gay Talese.

Ellis Island closed on November 29, 1954, and became part of the Statue of Liberty National Monument by proclamation of President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1965.

The Ellis Island Immigrant Cookbook, Tom Bernadin, Wimmer Brothers, 1991; pages 9-23.

The new Ellis Island Immigration Museum opened in 1990 and was built entirely with private subscriptions, not federal funds.

The Voyage

The steamship companies filled out the manifests before the ships departed from Europe. They were careful to list every person and tried to spell their names correctly. Contrary to general belief, names were not changed at Ellis Island. Italian women generally travelled under their maiden names.

In the late 19th century the average trans-Atlantic voyage lasted from eight to fourteen days and average steerage-class tickets cost approximately \$30. Steerage was on the lowest deck and the walls were lined with double and triple bunk beds. Facilities were minimal and the food was horrible.

The Ellis Island Immigrant Cookbook, Tom Bernadin, Wimmer Brothers, 1991; page 11

Steerage was one huge place. Being on the lowest deck, it was very hot, and lacked sanitation. The waves were high and everyone was seasick. Occasionally, steerage passengers were allowed to go on deck, and people from first- and second-class would look down on them and often would throw down an orange or an apple. The children would all stand by and try to catch the fruit.

Voices from The Past, An Ellis Island Journal, The Statue of Liberty-Elis Island Foundation, Inc., New York; excerpts from oral histories recorded by immigrants.

On the steamships passengers were provided with little to eat in steerage except lukewarm soup, black bread, boiled potatoes, herring or stringy beef.

The Ellis Island Immigrant Cookbook, Tom Bernadin, Wimmer Brothers, 1991; page 24.

On arrival in New York “box” lunches were available for purchase for fifty cents or one dollar. They contained a sandwich and a banana. Most immigrants had never seen a banana and the sailors would tell the children to eat the skins and throw away the inside. The children soon caught on.

When the ships arrived in New York Harbor, medical inspectors would board and give a cursory examination to first- and second-class passengers. Steerage class passengers were grouped, tagged and put on piers to await transportation to Ellis Island. When the tender docked, it was chaotic . . . the mass of humanity pushing and shoving and straining to get through the doors into one huge room.

The officials would holler at everybody and ask their names and ages and where they came from. Some had white chalk marks put on their lapels, and as the line progressed these people would be pulled out of the line without any explanation.

Voices from The Past, An Ellis Island Journal, The Statue of Liberty-Elis Island Foundation, Inc., New York; excerpts from oral histories recorded by immigrants.

The immigrants were directed up a flight of stairs which led to the Registry Room. As they climbed they were watched for any signs of breathlessness, limping , etc.

As the immigrants walked the passageway, they would encounter various inspectors. One would check limbs and fingers, another would check hair and scalp. The most feared was the eye man. At that time trachoma was a very

contagious eye disease. Incurable, it would require that the immigrant be returned to the port of departure. The inspector would place a buttonhook under the immigrant's eyelid and check for any signs of redness. If there were any indications of the disease, he would take his chalk, mark an 'E' to indicate an eye problem, an 'H' for a heart problem, and 'L' for lameness. The immigrant would be put aside for further examination. Most, however, did not have medical problems and within a few hours would find themselves at the other end of the hall waiting for transportation to Manhattan or other points.

The Ellis Island Immigrant Cookbook, Tom Bernadin, Wimmer Brothers, 1991; pages 12-14.

Second-class passengers were not subjected to this treatment, but were given a cursory examination on board ship and then tendered directly to the pier. If the family thought a member would not pass examination (which also included feeble mindedness) rather than take the chance that they would be denied entrance resulting in either one other member or the entire family being forced to return with the rejected one, they would often purchase a second-class ticket for the person in question.

Paraphrased from various books by Joan K. Rinaldi.

After answering such questions as "Why did you come here", "Do you have any money," "Are you an anarchist," "Do you have any relatives in America," "Do you have a job waiting for you," the immigrants were allowed to change their foreign currency into U.S. dollars, purchase railroad tickets to their final destination, and were directed to a staircase. At the top there were two doors: one for those traveling on to a further destination and the other for those staying in New York where relatives and friends waited.

Although families and men were allowed to enter the U.S. at this point, women traveling alone were not allowed entry unless there was a male relative or sponsor waiting for them.

With the passage of the 1924 quota laws most inspections were done prior to boarding the ship at the port of departure. During World War II the Coast Guard used the facilities as a hospital for wounded soldiers. By 1954 vandals had moved in, windows were broken, pipes burst, ceilings and floors crumbled. In 1965 the National Park Service took over and tours were conducted. In 1984 the island was closed again and restoration began, costing over 150 million dollars contributed by over 20 million private citizens. Today the steel and glass canopy, torn down in 1933, has been replaced. A wall of honor, the largest wall of names in the world, represents all immigrants, even those who did not come in through Ellis Island. A museum is located in the main building displaying artifacts and photos and includes interactive devices, computers and taped reminiscences.

From various pamphlets issued by Ellis Island Foundation.

Attached are copies of photographs taken October 13, 1992, by Joan Rinaldi, during the first tour made by her group of IBM friends shortly after their retirement.