Ellis Island

When Ellis Island opened, a great change was taking place in [immigration to the United States](http://www.history.com/topics/immigration). As arrivals from northern and western Europe--Germany, Ireland, Britain and the Scandinavian countries--slowed, more and more immigrants poured in from southern and eastern Europe. Among this new generation were Jews escaping from political and economic oppression in czarist Russia and eastern Europe (some 484,000 arrived in 1910 alone) and Italians escaping poverty in their country. There were also Poles, Hungarians, Czechs, Serbs, Slovaks and Greeks, along with non-Europeans from Syria, Turkey and Armenia. The reasons they left their homes in the Old World included war, drought, famine and religious persecution, and all had hopes for greater opportunity in the New World.

After an arduous sea voyage, many passengers described their first glimpse of [New Jersey](http://www.history.com/topics/new-jersey), while third-class or steerage passengers lugged their possessions onto barges that would take them to Ellis Island. Immigrants were tagged with information from the ship's registry and passed through long lines for medical and legal inspections to determine if they were fit for entry into the [United States](http://www.history.com/topics/states). From 1900 to 1914--the peak years of Ellis Island's operation--some 5,000 to 10,000 people passed through the immigration station every day. Approximately 80 percent successfully passed through in a matter of hours, but others could be detained for days or weeks. Many immigrants remained in [New York](http://www.history.com/topics/new-york), while others traveled by barge to railroad stations in Hoboken or Jersey City, New Jersey, on their way to destinations across the country.

Passage of the Immigrant Quota Act of 1921 and the National Origins Act of 1924, which limited the number and nationality of immigrants allowed into the United States, effectively ended the era of mass immigration into New York. From 1925 to its closing in 1954, only 2.3 million immigrants passed through Ellis Island--which was still more than half of all those entering the United States.

http://www.history.com/topics/ellis-island

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From 1910 to 1940, hundreds of thousands of immigrants (most of them Asian) came through the Immigration Station. On arrival at San Francisco, passengers would be separated by nationality. Europeans or travelers holding first or second class tickets would have their papers processed on board the ship and allowed to disembark. Asians and other immigrants, including Russians, Mexicans, New Zealanders, Canadians, Central and South Americans and others, as well as those who needed to be quarantined for health reasons, would be ferried to Angel Island for processing. Angel Island is located in the middle of San Francisco Bay.

Enticed by promises of gold and a better life, Chinese began immigrating to the United States in 1848. Soon after, however, discriminatory legislation prevented the Chinese from mining for gold. In addition, the Chinese Exclusion Act was passed in 1882 and essentially froze Chinese immigration. However, this legislation could not keep sons and daughters of U.S. citizens out of the country. People attempting to emigrate from China often became "Paper Sons" and "Paper Daughters" by purchasing documentation claiming that they were children of U.S. citizens, and therefore citizens themselves.

Proving the validity of these claims was difficult, and an interrogation process was developed. The Department of Immigration needed a place to detain immigrants until the interrogation could be complete. In 1905, construction of the U.S. Immigration Station began. It became a detention facility, where Asian (primarily Chinese) immigrants were detained until they could prove they were joining relatives already in the country.

The average detention lasted two to three weeks, but many lasted several months. Some people were forced to stay for nearly two years. Detainees found ways to pass the time, attempting to lead as normal a life as possible. Many coped with their stay by writing poetry on the walls of the detention center.

These now-famous poems serve as beautiful testaments to many facets of the immigrants’ experiences, such as the reasons they came and how they felt once they arrived. Their stories are vivid, emotional reminders of disappointment and struggle in a search for a new life in a new land. These poems covered the walls of the barracks, no doubt providing inspiration and comfort to the detainees that followed.