

Ellis Island Infrequently Asked Questions

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Unanswered

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Answered (or partially answered)

- [What were the leading ports Ellis Island's immigrants came from?](#)

“In 1907, 1 285 000 of immigrants arrived to the United States, the 60% of passengers sailed from four main European ports. On the first place was Naples with 204 000 immigrants, mainly from South and Southeast Europe. The second place hold Bremen with 203 000 immigrants, mainly from East and Central Europe, and on the third place remained Liverpool with 177 000 immigrants, mainly from Great Britain and Jews from Russia. Hamburg took the fourth place with 142 000 immigrants, mainly from North and East Europe”

<http://www.pathways.cz/article.php?article=36224>

<http://www.aemi.dk/adr.php> has a list of European Migration institutions

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- [Which groups of immigrants tended to stay in America and which often returned to the homeland?](#)

“Who Left and Who Stayed?

Statistics by nationality are quite striking. According to a report in 1908 comparing the departures in 1908 with the arrivals of 1907, 61% of the Southern Italians returned home. Croatians and Slovenians (59.8%), Slovaks (56.1%) and Hungarians (48.7%) also had high return rates. The lowest rate, 5.1%, belonged to the Jews (categorized as "Hebrews"). This is understandable since they fled the pogroms to save their lives and had nowhere to return. Surprisingly, when you think of all the nostalgic songs about their homeland, the Irish rarely went back — only 6.3%. Others with a low return rate were Czechs (7.8%), English (10.4%) and Scandinavians (10.9%). In the middle range were Germans (15.5%), Serbs and Bulgarians (21.9%), Finns (23.3%), Poles (33.9%) and Northern Italians (37.8%). Interestingly enough, the Irish and the Swedish were also groups with a very high percentage of woman immigrants.

Women had less incentive to return because they usually enjoyed greater freedom in America than they did at home. For example, in most countries, an unmarried woman — even one independent enough to travel alone to America, get a job and send money back home — was expected to live in her father's house until she married. Also, many decided that the working conditions were more favorable in America than they were at home.

Swedish and Irish women, for instance, often went into domestic service (an occupation available only to single women). They often found that they were much more comfortable living as a servant in a wealthy home than they would be living on a family farm where they performed backbreaking work from dawn to dusk.”

http://www.genealogy.com/96_donna.html

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- Who is Ellis Island named after? How was the island used before the immigration station?

“Its present name comes from the last private owner, Samuel Ellis, who owned the island from 1778-1794 and set up a successful tavern and shad- and herring fishing business on the three acres exposed above the water.⁴ The U.S. government subsequently acquired the property and built earthen fortifications to protect New York from the threat of war with France in 1798; a small fort with a twenty-gun battery, Fort Gibson, was finished just in time for the War of 1812 and may have deterred the British from attacking New York. By the 1840s, the Army and Navy shared use of the fort and the circa 1835 gunpowder magazine and did so throughout the Civil War. Not until 1890 did New Jersey congressmen create legislation to remove the magazine, clearing the way for a project to dredge a channel to provide access to the island and build cribworks containing fill to enlarge it. This prepared Ellis Island for construction of the first immigration station, which opened in 1892.⁵”

cites as source:

John H. Pousson, Eastern Team, Denver Service Center, National Park Service, US Department of the Interior, *An Overview and Assessment of Archaeological Resources on Ellis Island, Statue of Liberty Monument, New York* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1986).

<http://www.janus.umd.edu/May2001/Ewing/02.html>

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- Were Holocaust survivors processed at Ellis Island?

“In 1947, my grandmother, grandfather, and Aunt Lucy traveled to the United States. They were detained at Ellis Island, New York, for three months, and then took a train to Bozeman, Mont. They had only \$2 with them for their journey--money that had to feed three hungry people during the three-day trip. Once there, my grandmother and grandfather worked on a farm for a sponsor--the person who paid the money to bring them to the United States--until they could pay her back.”

“I went through Ellis Island but I have very little memory of that. Space. Lines. Lots of luggage.” Bill Graham (fled Nazi occupied France)

http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0EPF/is_25_100/ai_74692678

[also](#)

http://www.enquirer.com/editions/2000/08/29/loc_holocaust_education.html

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bill_Graham_\(promoter\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bill_Graham_(promoter))

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- Who was the last immigrant to be processed at Ellis Island?

“THE LAST ARRIVAL. Then, on Nov. 13, 1954, in a small article on Page 20, The Times reported that "without ceremony, the career of Ellis island as an immigration station came to a virtual close yesterday." Its final customer was a Norwegian seaman named Arne Peterssen who had overstayed his shore leave. He left the island on the 10:15 a.m. Manhattan-bound ferry to return to his ship.”

“the last person detained on the island was Arne Peterssen, a Norwegian seaman who had jumped ship, released on parole to return to Norway (1955).”

<http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Ellis+Island:+the+end+of+an+era:+it+closed+50+years+ago+this+month,...-a0126239370>

[http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0094-3061\(197609\)5%3A5%3C600%3AKOTGAH%3E2.0.CO%3B2-R](http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0094-3061(197609)5%3A5%3C600%3AKOTGAH%3E2.0.CO%3B2-R)

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- Who sponsored the National Origins Act of 1924 limiting immigration to the United States, and why?

“Congressman Albert Johnson (R-WA), co-author of the Johnson-Reed Immigration Act of 1924 said that ‘Our capacity to maintain our cherished institutions stands diluted by a stream of alien blood, with all its inherited misconceptions respecting the relationships of the governing power to the governed.... The day of unalloyed welcome to all peoples, the day of indiscriminate acceptance of all races, has definitely ended.’”

<http://menendez.senate.gov/newsroom/record.cfm?id=274952&&>

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- Who installed the ceiling at Ellis Island?

“Having experienced Ellis Island as an incoming immigrant, in 1917 the younger Guastavino was commissioned to rebuild the ceiling of the Ellis Island Great Hall. The Guastavinos set 28,832 tiles into a self-supporting interlocking 56-foot-high ceiling grid so durable and strong that during the restoration project of the 1980’s, as many sources repeat the story, only 17 of those tiles needed replacing.”

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guastavino_tile

Rafael Guastavino Jr. (1872-1950),

www.rogershepherd.com/WIW/solution2/72nd3.html

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- Why was the symbol CT used to indicate trachoma?
Chlamydia trachomatis

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trachoma>

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- Why does the 48 star flag hang in the Great Hall?
The 48 star flag was used from July 4, 1912 until July 3, 1959 when Alaska became a state. The Great Hall is restored to its appearance around 1917. Ellis Island closed in 1954.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flag_of_the_United_States

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- What did the New York skyline look like for Ellis Island's immigrants?
15 Park Row was completed in 1899, the Woolworth Building in 1913
<http://www.greatgridlock.net/NYC/nyc1.html>

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- What were the most common contagious diseases among Ellis Island's immigrants?

Surg. George W. Stoner, chief medical officer, reports the following:
Nine hundred and twelve thousand and twenty-six aliens were examined upon arrival, including 170,436 cabin and 741,590 steerage passengers. In addition to the large number of aliens there were 170,208 passengers (139,683 cabin and 30,525 steerage) who, upon further examination by the immigrant inspectors, proved to be citizens of the United States.

Nineteen thousand five hundred and forty-five aliens were certified for physical or mental defects, as per tabulated statement herewith, including 1,735 classified as loathsome contagious or dangerous contagious, viz, trachoma 1,442, tinea tonsurans 94, favus 84, tuberculosis 32, syphilis 13, gonorrhoea 32, venereal ulcer 19, sycosis 7, blastomycosis 1, leprosy 1, and 279 mentally diseased, viz, insane 116, feeble-minded 100, imbecile 39, epilepsy 13, and idiot 11.

from Annual Report of the Surgeon-General, Public Health and Marine-Hospital Service, 1910.

http://www.archive.org/stream/annualreport39unituoft/annualreport39unituoft_djvu.txt

trachoma ,measles, tuberculosis, favus(not in order)

http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qn4158/is_20000708/ai_n14328152

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- What was the most common characteristics of Ellis Island immigrants (ie country of origin, gender, age, marital status, etc.)?

Nationality:

Country Number of Immigrants

Italy 2,502,310

Russia 1,893,542

Hungary (1905-1931) 859,557

Austria (1905-1931) 768,132

Austria-Hungary (1892-1904) 648,163

Germany 633,148

England 551,969

Ireland 520,904

Sweden 348,036

Greece 245,058

Norway 226,278

Ottoman Empire 212,825

Scotland 191,023

The West Indies 171,774

Poland (1892-1897 and 1920-1931) 153,444

Portugal 120,725

France (including Corsica) 109,687

Denmark 99,414

Romania (1894-1931) 79,092

The Netherlands 78,602

Spain 72,636

Belgium 63,141

Czechoslovakia (1920-1931) 48,140

Bulgaria (1901-1931) 42,085

Wales 27,113

Yugoslavia (1920-1931) 25,017

Finland (1920-1931) 7,833

Switzerland 1,103

<http://www.americanparknetwork.com/parkinfo/content.asp?catid=85&contenttypeid=34>

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- How does the number of immigrants coming through Ellis Island (12 million) compare to the population of some countries, states and cities today?

More than every state except CA, FL, IL(12.7), NY, PA (12.4), TX;

Larger than all but Mumbai, India (13)- 2nd is Karachi, Pakistan(11.6)

More than most countries- would be 72nd largest, more than Greece, Cuba, New Zealand

<http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0004986.html>

<http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0762524.html>

http://www.mongabay.com/igapo/world_statistics_by_pop.htm

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- Did babies born on Ellis Island automatically become citizens?
Yes(?) - "the State Department ... found that a child born on Ellis Island to a woman who had not yet cleared customs was a citizen of the United States under the theory that the mother was on US soil and thereby subject to US law."
<http://www.ilw.com/articles/2006,0502-endelman.shtm>
March 28, 1898 Resolving a lawsuit brought by Wong Kim Ark, a Chinese-American, the Supreme Court determines that children born in U.S. are citizens, regardless of parents' race or nationality.
http://www1.cuny.edu/portal_ur/content/nationofimmigrants/milestones.php

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- What is the bell at the seawall for?
Fire bell

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- Where was the gibbet tree used for hanging pirates located at Ellis Island?
Student lunchroom courtyard
Source: Historic structure report

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- Were Ellis Island immigrants actually divided by destination at the Stairs of separation?
Maybe not- See balcony display "Immigrants Detained for Special Inquiry" above 2nd floor door

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- How many employees worked at Ellis Island?
"The number of employees varied with the number of incoming immigrants; the average staff ranged between 500 and 850 people. Often, as immigration increased, the need was greater than the staff available. Most workers commuted to the island by ferryboat from Manhattan."

<http://www.americanparknetwork.com/parkinfo/content.asp?catid=85&contenttypeid=34>

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- Did immigrants get landing cards when they were approved at Ellis Island?
See *The Ellis Island Collection: Artifacts from the Immigrant Experience* book

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- What percentage of immigrants travelled first or second class?
Approx. 10 to 15%,
“1905, of 100,000 cabin passengers arriving in New York, only 3,000 had to pass through Ellis Island for additional medical checks. During the same year, 800,000 steerage passengers were examined at the island.”

<http://www.americanparknetwork.com/parkinfo/content.asp?catid=85&contenttypeid=34>

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- What were the hours of operation at Ellis Island? Did the process immigrants on weekends and holidays?
“Ships were examined from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. Vessels arriving after 5 p.m. had to anchor for the night.”

<http://www.americanparknetwork.com/parkinfo/content.asp?catid=85&contenttypeid=34>

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- Did US inspectors conduct the medical exam in home ports?
Maybe- See Through America’s Gate medical inspection exhibit

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- What was the importance of the case of Ignatz Mezei- Shaughnessy v. United States ex rel. Mezei (345 U.S. 206 (1953))?
That case involved an immigrant named Ignatz Mezei who was held for 21 months in an Ellis Island detention facility. Weisselberg said the Court ruled that the executive branch should be given deference in detention matters, a principle that allows for indefinite detention for those without permanent residence.

<http://docket.medill.northwestern.edu/archives/002047.php>

see also

<http://www.abanet.org/irr/hr/winter01/weisselberg.html>

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- Where were immigrants arriving in New York processed before Castle Garden opened as an immigration station in 1955?

They was no processing facility until 1855 at Castle Garden-“Before then, immigrants coming to New York did not pass through a screening or examination process – they simply declared any required items to customs and headed into America”

<http://myfamily.mediaroom.com/file.php/178/Passenger+List+Media+Kit+Low-Res.pdf>

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- Did Ellis Island’s immigrants pay a head tax?
Yes, 50 cents later upped to \$8. Paid by ship’s captain.

<http://www.americanparknetwork.com/parkinfo/sl/history/nation.html>

<http://books.google.com/books?id=uPFLAAAAMAAJ&pg=PA174&lpg=PA174&dq=ellis+island+head+tax&source=web&ots=O7G-WKWCPw&sig=r6P56Yy1Y5PoB-Rqtfv1jxuB1JM#PPA175,M1> p 175

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- Could excluded immigrants go to other countries or did they have to return to their home ports?

Some immigrants came through Canadian ports, where restrictions were easier.

http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?_r=1&res=9406E2D6143EEF33A25753C2A96E9C94629ED7CF&oref=slogin

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- What ferries took immigrants to Jersey City and Hoboken? Did the railroad companies pay for and maintain these ferries?

“Hoboken Terminal was built in 1907 by the Delaware, Lackawanna, & Western Railroad, and is listed on the State and National Registers of Historic Places. Years ago, the terminal was a busy hub for Ellis Island immigrants traveling by train to western portions of the country, and by local residents traveling to and from New York City.”

http://www.hobokenterminal.com/hoboken_preservation.html

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- Where is the third Oyster Island- the other two are now known as Ellis and Liberty Islands?

“The same New York statutes for the establishment of Senate and Assembly districts covering Ellis Island also purport to include another of the so-called Oyster Islands that had been dredged out of existence by 1903”

<http://supct.law.cornell.edu/supct/html/120ORIG.ZO.html>

”Mr. CHASE. From the pilot's standpoint—that is, the State pilots of New Jersey and New York—they ask for it as a range up through the narrows, getting the range from Craven Shoals through the narrows for the proposed light at the mouth of the Greenville channel, which will keep them in the best water there is through the narrows and up the bay to that point [indicating on map]; and after making that point it also gives them a stern range through Buttermilk channel up the East River, in that direction [indicating]: also a stern range through the regular ship channel up the East River. Just at the upper side of the proposed light is Oyster Island, a shoal submerged island which sets out and on which different vessels have been stranded, and to my recollection three wrecks on it. This light and fog signal would be a preventive for vessels grounding on Oyster Island rocks or ledge. One of the great improvements of it will be the fog signal, to enable vessels coming up through the narrows and up the bay and navigating the opposite direction to avoid Robbins Reef and Oyster Island shoals.”

<http://books.google.com/books?id=H0YmAAAAMAAJ&pg=RA1-PA3-IA2&lpg=RA1-PA3-IA2&dq=%22oyster+island%22+new+york+harbor+three&source=web&ots=vLi95XtWnL&sig=L4hOyj-q8LFgzO4T49GqQkV4vMs#PRA1-PA4,M1>

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- What role did Hoffman and Swinburne Islands play in immigration processing?
Swinburne Island served mostly as a quarantine hospital for those clearly showing signs of airborne infectious diseases such as typhus, yellow fever, or smallpox. Hoffman Island served mostly as a quarantine station for those exposed to the people put into medical quarantine on Swinburne. Hoffman Island sojourners went through a predetermined observation period based on the assumed incubation period of whatever disease they were suspected of having.

<http://www.ancestry.com/learn/library/article.aspx?article=847>

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- What is the difference between citizenship and naturalization?

“Naturalization refers to an act whereby a person acquires a citizenship different from that person's citizenship at birth. Naturalization is most commonly associated with economic migrants or refugees who have immigrated to a country and resided there as aliens, and who have voluntarily and actively chosen to become citizens of that country after meeting specific requirements.”

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Naturalization>

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- Were immigrants allowed to bring pets?

At least birds were apparently allowed

http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?_r=1&res=9501E1DB103EE033A25754C0A9669D946697D6CF&oref=slogin

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- How do the numbers of immigrants in the U.S. compare with the population in the home countries?

Approximately 700,000 Italians living in NYC in 1908, compared to about 500,000 in Rome

http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?_r=1&res=9E07E0D7143EE233A25757C0A9609C946997D6CF&oref=slogin

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- Could rejected immigrants try another country (eg Canada, Cuba, etc.) rather than returning home?

Yes, but perhaps only indirectly, going back to Europe first.

Some of the Germans who ended up in South America did so because they were rejected by U.S. officials at Ellis Island in New York. They had no means of returning to Russia or Germany so they traveled to Argentina and Brazil where the entrance requirements were less strict, Schaal said.

http://www.nathankramer.com/settle/article/Herbert_SchaalArtical.htm

http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?_r=1&res=9901E5DB1E3DEE32A25753C3A9669D946397D6CF&oref=slogin

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- Were employers who brought contact laborers over held responsible?
Yes- “The Foran Act specified fines of up to \$1000 on individuals or companies caught importing laborers under contract.”

http://books.google.com/books?id=yrUUNc3QthkC&pg=PA84&lpg=PA84&dq=contract+labor+law+1885+fine&source=web&ots=PcFTvIAntv&sig=bg5rB93REkhkxmqU1IcuT28pg&hl=en&sa=X&oi=book_result&resnum=4&ct=result#PPA85,M1

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- What is that picture in the hearing room?
The Arch of Titus- in Rome

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arch_of_Titus

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- Where were most immigrants coming from before Ellis Island?
From 1840s to 1880s, Ireland and Germany were the two largest source countries.

<http://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0029/tab04.html>

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- What were the leading medical causes of rejection at Ellis Island?
Among contagious diseases, trachoma was by far the most common. “In fiscal 1911, a fairly typical year during the peak period of immigration, ...16,910 aliens, or 2.3 percent were certified for physical or mental defects. Of these, 1,363 had loathsome or dangerous contagious diseases and 1,167 (85.6 percent) of these had thrachoma.”

1899: amongst contagious diseases: 86% trachoma, 10% favus, 4% other

http://books.google.com/books?id=ElqwDj9umzYC&pg=PA66&lpg=PA66&dq=tuberculosis+ellis+island+most+common+disease+reject&source=web&ots=Ev875Ntpkm&sig=IJ_YZsKRXkH4BC2BqLtiDJHpU&hl=en&sa=X&oi=book_result&resnum=2&ct=result#PPA67,M1

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- Were the immigration records destroyed in the 1897 fire?

The Ellis Island fire of the night of June 14, 1897 also destroyed some Ellis Island administrative records and the New York immigration passenger lists. However, separate New York customs passenger lists were kept elsewhere (at the Customs House), and they have survived. So ship passenger lists for the early Ellis Island period (1892-June 1897) are available for research along with the rest of the New York passenger lists, beginning with 1820.

<http://genrootsblog.blogspot.com/2006/07/ellis-island-castle-garden-which-one.html>

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- Were many potential immigrants rejected in European port cities when they went to buy tickets?

In 1907 approximately 35,000 were rejected in Italy.

Science at the Borders book

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- Are any other old immigration stations preserved today?

Yes, Angel Island in San Francisco, Galveston Immigration Station, and the Locust Point Immigration Station in Baltimore still stand today. Others are no longer standing like the Washington Avenue Station in Philadelphia which was demolished in 1915

<http://www.angelisland.org/immigr02.html>

<http://www.waymarking.com/waymarks/WM1KYQ>

http://www.immigrationbaltimore.org/historical_timeline.htm

<http://www.phillyhistory.org/blog/archive/2009/01/21/entering-america-the-washington-avenue-immigration-station.aspx>

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- Are any other immigration stations in other countries preserved today?

Yes, in Buenos Aires, Argentina; Halifax, Nova Scotia; Melbourne, Australia(?)

<http://www.pier21.ca/>

<http://museumvictoria.com.au/immigrationmuseum/>

<http://www.welcomeargentina.com/ciudadbuenosaires/immigration-museum.html>

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- Where are Ruthenians from?

Western Ukraine, especially Carpathian Ruthenia, and in Ukrainian ethnic territories outside of Ukraine

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ruthenians>

- What countries experienced a large percentage of population loss during Ellis Island's era?

A fifth of Iceland's population had left for North America by 1914

http://www.linktoyourroots.com/index_e.php?cont=press/press_05_01_05_e.php&mx=7

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- When was refugee status, regardless of quotas, established?

1948- The Displaced Persons Act permits Europeans displaced by the war to enter the United States outside of immigration quotas. 1953- Refugee Relief Act extends refugee status to non-Europeans.

http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/historyonline/immigration_chron.cfm

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- What happened to immigrants who died on the steamships?

“The dead would be consigned to the sea in perfunctory burials.”

Source: *Ellis Island* By John T. Cunningham p. 107

http://books.google.com/books?id=OyL6JatN5KwC&pg=PA107&lpg=PA107&dq=burial+at+sea+ellis+island&source=bl&ots=HTNxPkwtk8&sig=KQ3HAaw_QDyxxDPA1f7nC5kFcDc&hl=en&ei=_69wSurtGcOkIAe1taneCg&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=4

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- What role did the wall of honor play in the restoration of Ellis Island?

Raised \$20 million before the museum opened in 1990

Destination culture: tourism, museums, and heritage By Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett

http://books.google.com/books?id=xf69WulMtMAC&pg=PA181&lpg=PA181&dq=The+American+Immigrant+Wall+of+Honor&source=bl&ots=yhDNurQRx4&sig=gqUKBH4b7RhWOJHGGA9MwaABQvk&hl=en&ei=fBaPSr-RLcO01AeYko2oDA&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=4#v=onepage&q=&f=false

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- Did detained immigrants ever try to swim to freedom? Did they ever make it?

Yes, Yes.

“ESCAPE FROM ELLIS ISLAND.; Five Aliens Swim to Land, but Four Are Recaptured.”

http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?_r=1&res=990CEED9143AE03ABC4E53DFB1668382609EDE

“Floodlights would illuminate the grounds at night. This plan was spurred by the successful escape of three men to New Jersey, swimming under the cover of night, several weeks earlier.”

Historic Resource Study p. 939

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- How much would an immigrant’s \$25 be worth in today’s money?

“What cost \$25 in 1907 would cost \$549.68 in 2007.”

<http://www.westegg.com/inflation/infl.cgi>

“hotel quarters...at an average rate of less than \$2.50 per day for room with bath.”

NY Times article April 2, 1916

http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?_r=1&res=9806E1DD113CE733A25751C0A9629C946796D6CF

“In May (2008) the average cost of a hotel room in New York climbed to \$350 a night”

<http://www.nysun.com/new-york/hotel-occupancy-rate-rising-data-show/83685/>

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- How do you change the lightbulbs in the Great Hall?

Access is via towers to a hatch, to climb on top of the Guastavino tile ceiling. Chandeliers are lowered via winch to allow staff in Great Hall to change bulbs.

As told by NPS maintenance employee Jerry

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- Did immigrants entering through Canadian ports before entering the U.S. have to pass U.S. inspection?

“For its part, the U.S. Immigration Service stationed immigrant inspectors at Canadian seaports of entry to collect the manifests and inspect U.S.-bound immigrants.”

<http://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2000/fall/us-canada-immigration-records-1.html>

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