



Ellis Island

ELLIS ISLAND GATEWAY TO AMERICA

From across Upper New York Bay, Ellis Island lies in the shadow of the Statue of Liberty. Today its handsome buildings may be unfamiliar to some onlookers from shore; however, Ellis Island occupies a permanent place in America's history. More than half of the immigrants entering the United States between 1892 and 1924 passed through its gates. While mass examination of immigrants at Ellis Island ended in 1924, it continued to be used as a detention center for immigrants whose status in this country was questioned. In 1954, the island was permanently closed as an active immigration station. In 1965, however, it was added by Presidential Proclamation to the Statue of Liberty National Monument and was opened for public tours in 1976. Following its closure in 1984 for a \$160,000,000 restoration, Ellis Island was reopened in 1990 with new exhibits, films, and visitor programs.

Suppose for the moment, that we could return to Ellis Island when it teemed with immigrants and share the experience of an immigrant's progress.

"When I first arrived in this country I was filled with so many hopes, dreams and fears. One of the greatest fears was of a place known as Ellis Island, but called by us the 'Island of Tears'.

"In my village I had heard of this place to be inspected and maybe, it was said, sent home if you did not pass. 'Sent home to what? To where?', I worried. I tried to convince myself that America would never send me home once I had reached her doors.

"I will never forget the joy I felt when I saw the tall buildings of New York and the Statue of Liberty after so many dark days on board that crowded ship. There was the symbol of all my dreams — freedom to start out in a new life. Then came Ellis Island.

"When I landed the noise and commotion were unbelievable. There were so many languages being spoken. The shouting and pushing guards calling out the big numbers on the tags attached to our coats created more noise and confusion. Surely, I felt, the noise surrounding the Tower of Babel could not have been worse.

"We were told 'keep moving' and 'Hurry up' as my groups was pushed along one of the dozens of metal railings that divided the room into several passageways. Immigrants walked along these passageways until they reached the first medical inspector who looked at face, hair, neck and hands. Interpreters asked, "What is your age?", "What work do you do?"

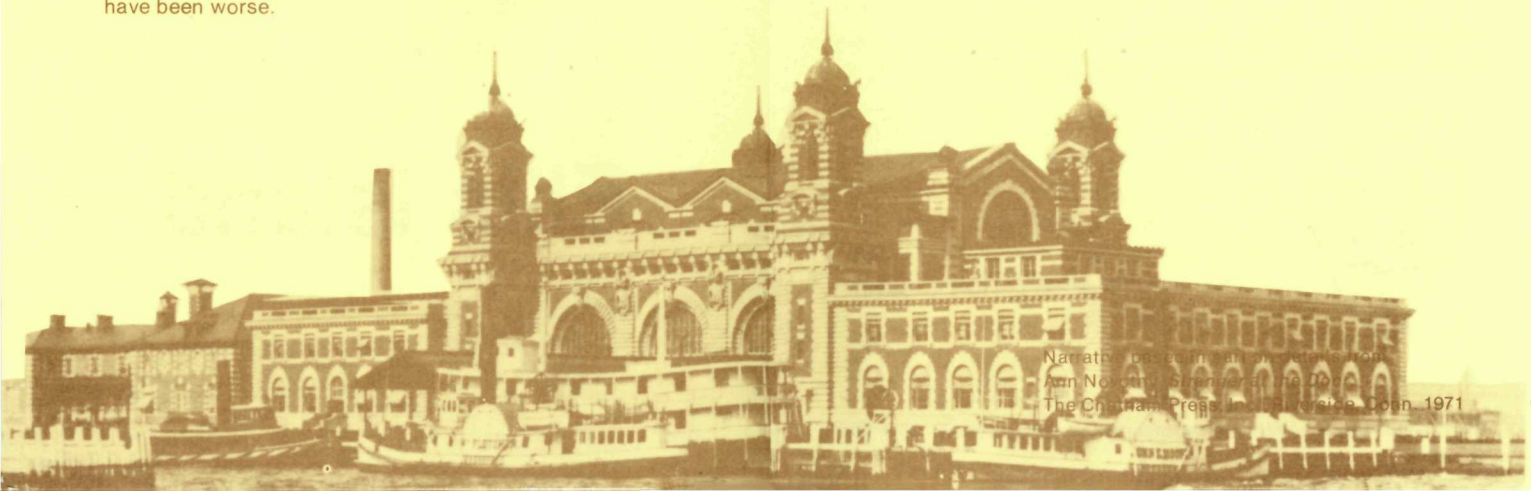
"I walked on to where a doctor inspected me for diseases. Again I moved to another doctor, the "eye man" I had heard so many terrible rumors about. I passed inspection but the man in front was marked with an "E" in chalk on his coat and sent to another area. I had heard that an "E" meant deportation.

"For a long time I sat on a bench in the main part of the great hall waiting for the final test. I talked anxiously with those around me and rehearsed the answers to questions I might be asked about jobs, money and relatives. Some people said it was best to answer as fully as possible; others said it was best to say just 'Yes- or 'No'.

"Finally, I went before a tired, stern looking official who checked my name against the ship's passenger list and quickly fired questions at me: 'Can you read and write?' 'Do you have a job waiting for you?' 'Who paid your passage?' 'Have you ever been in prison?' 'How much money do you have?' 'Let me see it now.'" On and on went the questions until I got more and more confused.

"Suddenly I was handed a landing card. It was hard to believe the ordeal was over in an afternoon. My fears were unfounded, the statue in the harbor had not turned her back on me. America had accepted me."

The Island is empty of immigrants now and it may be hard to imagine their laughter and tears echoing throughout the buildings. By listening hard, however, we may still hear the sound of the many languages they spoke decades ago on the "Island of Tears."



Narrative based on the story by Ann Novington, "Strangers in the Door," The Christian Post, New York, 1971

HISTORY OF ELLIS ISLAND

April 11, 1890	Designated an immigration station.
January 1, 1892	Opened as an immigration station.
June 14, 1897	Buildings destroyed by fire, but all persons safely evacuated.
December 17, 1900	Reopened as an immigration station, on a larger scale.
1917 — 1919	Served as a detention center for enemy aliens, a way station for navy personnel, and a hospital for the army.
1919 — 1954	Served as a deportation center as well as an immigration station.
1924	Mass immigration ended. Immigrants now were inspected in countries of origin.
1939 — 1946	Part of Ellis Island was used as a Coast Guard Station.
1941 — 1954	Part served as a detention center for enemy aliens.
November 29, 1954	Ellis Island closed.
May 11, 1965	Added by Presidential Proclamation to the Statue of Liberty National Monument.
1976	Opened to the public for limited seasonal visitation.
1984	Closed for \$160,000,000 restoration.
September 10, 1990	Re-opened with extensive new museum exhibits and facilities.

According to estimates a total of 16,000,000 or more immigrants entered the United States through Ellis Island.



Ellis Island is a unit of the U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, administered by the Superintendent, Statue of Liberty National Monument, Liberty Island, New York 10004