

ELLIS ISLAND

Located just off the Jersey shore in upper New York bay, this little island was known to the Indians as Gull Island and was only three or four acres in extent. Because of the luscious oysters found off its shores, it was later called Oyster Island; for reasons unknown it was sometimes referred to as Buching Island. After a notorious pirate was hanged there it became known as Gibbet Island. Toward the end of the colonial period, it came into the possession of Samuel Ellis and has carried his name ever since.

Earthworks were built on Ellis Island following the 1794 war scare. These works were part of a harbor fortification system which included Fort Wood on Bedloe's (now Liberty) Island, Castle Williams and Fort Columbus on Governor's Island and the West Battery (later Castle Clinton, and now Castle Clinton National Monument) at the point of Manhattan Island. All built under the direction of Colonel Jonathan Williams, these presented a formidable obstacle to naval attack. Perhaps as a result, the British fleet never attempted an assault on New York City, such as the one on Baltimore in 1814.

In 1808, when Colonel Williams planned Fort Gibson, the state of New York purchased Ellis Island from the heirs of Samuel Ellis by condemnation procedures and turned it over to the Federal Government. It has remained Federal property ever since. By interstate agreement in 1834, Ellis Island (and the somewhat larger Bedloe's Island) were declared to be a part of New York State, even though both are on the New Jersey side of the main ship channel. In 1861, at the beginning of the Civil War, Fort Gibson was dismantled and a naval magazine was established on the Island.

When, in 1890, the Federal Government assumed responsibility for the reception of immigrants, a study was made of New York harbor to determine the best location for an immigrant depot. Castle Garden at the tip of Manhattan had been operated as a reception station by the State of New York since 1855 but had long ceased to meet the needs of the multitudes seeking our shores. Governor's and Bedloe's Islands were considered, but strong objections were raised to both. The Army wanted to retain control of Governor's Island, which had long been an important headquarters, and the people of New York City objected to the station being built on Bedloe's Island where the Statue of Liberty had been dedicated only a few years before.

The decision was to build the new depot on Ellis Island. While it was under construction, the Barge Office on the Battery was used for immigrant reception. In 1892 the immigration Station on Ellis Island was opened. The original structures were built of pine. In 1897 the whole Island was swept by fire during which no lives were lost but valuable state and federal records were burned leaving an irreplaceable gap in the story of immigration.

New fireproof buildings were designed and the Island was enlarged by fill. The great "Main building" (whose towers still make it a familiar harbor landmark) was opened late in 1900. Over the ensuing years additional fill was placed for hospital buildings, which increased the Island's size to its present 27.5 acres. While the new buildings on Ellis Island were under construction, the Barge Office on the New York City Battery once more served as a temporary immigration station.

The next decade and a half saw Ellis Island at its peak of activity. The United States had recovered fully from the long depression of 1890, and was in a period of tremendous industrial expansion. The response in Europe was eager. Immigration rose to 1,000,000 and more annually, up to three-fourths of this clearing through Ellis Island.

Legal barriers were erected during these years, excluding various classes of "undesirables". Ellis Island became a place of trial as well as of hope to the immigrant, but increasing numbers came streaming in past the Statue of Liberty, surmounting the hurdles presented to them. Among these newcomers were some of our most distinguished citizens of the past and present generations.

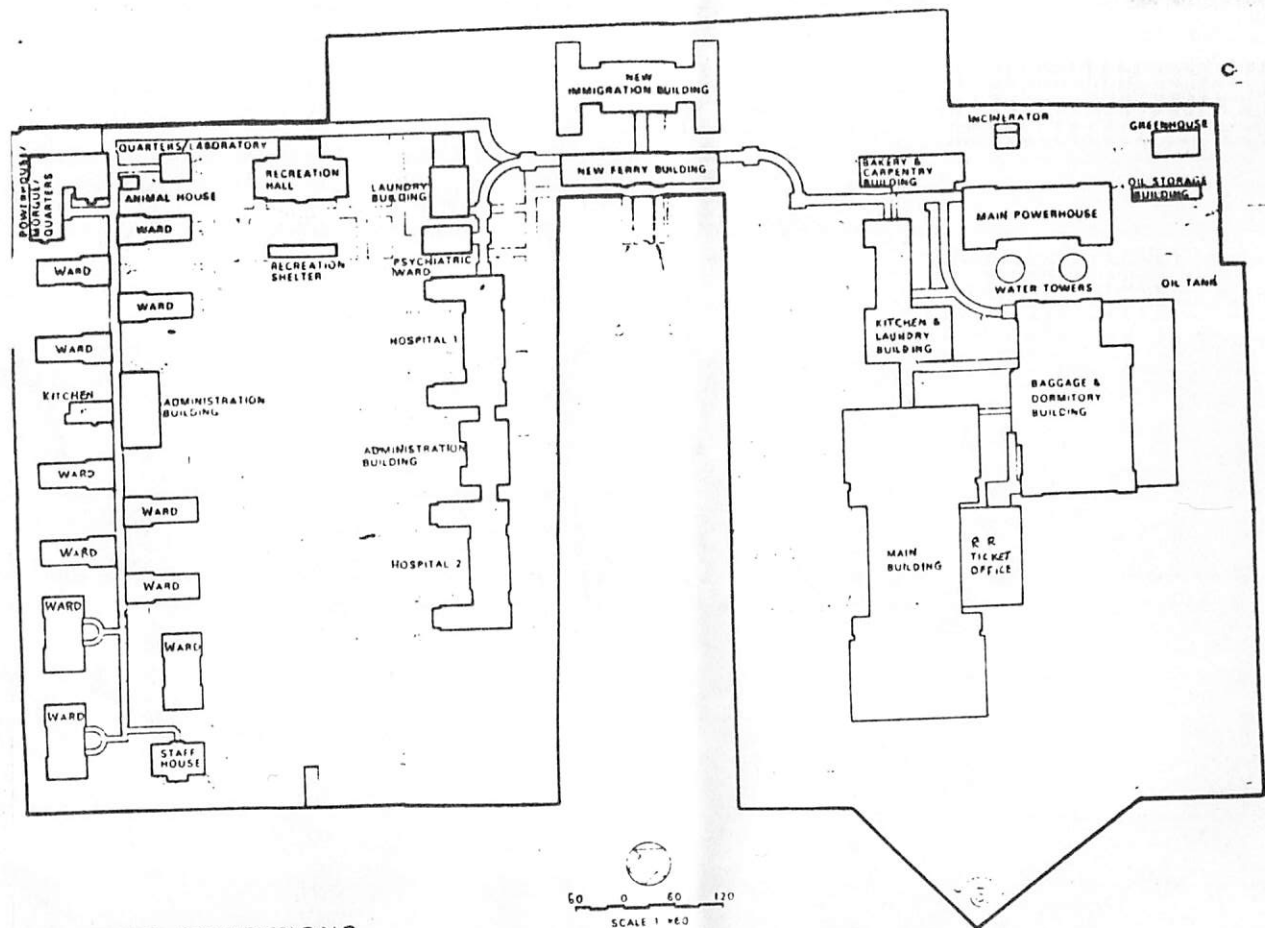
Immigration slacked off following the bank panic of 1907 but rose again with the swift revival of prosperity. In the years immediately preceding World War I the number of immigrants again pressed beyond 1,000,000 a year.

War in Europe, breaking out in August 1914, cut immigration sharply. Ellis Island, which had played host to 5,000 and more newcomers a day, had far fewer immigrants to handle and was able to assume its share of war time activities. Some 2,200 German sailors, from ships confiscated in our harbors after the United States entered the war, were interned at Ellis Island for the duration. Later on in the war, a large hospital for American wounded was set up on the Island. Soon after the armistice this was discontinued and the Immigrant Depot reverted to its original function.

Immigration revived quickly after World War I and threatened to reach the high numbers of the pre-war years. But restrictive legislation, long a subject of agitation, went into effect in 1921. An absolute limit was placed on the number of immigrants and divided these up on the basis of nationality quotas. Under this system, Ellis Island found its importance greatly diminished. Not only were there fewer immigrants received but their clearance was increasingly handled by the U. S. Consulates in their homelands.

Ellis Island, once a place of hope to new arrivals - up to 16,000,000 between 1892 and 1954 - came under a shadow as the place of detention for departees. This function, too, diminished and in 1954 the station was closed. Ellis Island became surplus Government Property and awaited a purchaser.

Touring Ellis Island on October 21, 1964, Secretary of the Interior, Stewart L. Udall proposed its addition to the Statue of Liberty National Monument and its development in conjunction with a future Liberty State Park proposed for development along the Jersey City Waterfront. The Secretary's proposal quickly "caught on". On May 11, 1965, in Rose Garden Ceremonies at the White House, President Johnson signed a proclamation making Ellis Island a part of Statue of Liberty National Monument in New York Harbor. Planning is now in progress for its appropriate development.



EXISTING CONDITIONS
 ELLIS ISLAND
 STATUE OF LIBERTY NATIONAL MONUMENT