Ellis Island

Coordinates: 40°41′58.4″N 74°2′22.5″W

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Ellis Island was the gateway for millions of immigrants to the United States as the site of the nation's busiest immigrant inspection *station* from 1892 to 1954. The island was greatly expanded with landfill between 1892 and 1934. Before that, the much smaller original island was the site of Fort Gibson and later a naval magazine. It became part of the Statue of Liberty National Monument in 1965, and since 1990, hosts a museum of immigration run by the National Park Service. A 1998 United States Supreme Court decision found most of the island to be part of New Jersey.

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Ellis Island	
Ellis Island Immigration Museum	
Location:	Jersey City and New York City
Coordinates:	40°41′58.4″N 74°2′22.5″W
Area:	27.5 acres (11.1 ha)
Elevation:	7 ft (2.1 m)[1]
Built:	1900 (Main Building)
Architect:	Edward Lippincott Tilton William Alciphron Boring
Architectural style(s):	Renaissance Revival
Governing body:	National Park Service
U.S. National Register of Historic Places	
Official name: Statue of Liberty National Monument, Ellis Island and Liberty Island	
Designated:	October 15, 1966[2]
Reference #:	66000058
U.S. National Monument	
Official name: Statue of Liberty National Monument	
Designated:	added October 15, 1965[3]
Port of New York and New Jersey	

Geography and access

Ellis Island is located in the Upper New York Bay in Jersey City, New Jersey, east of Liberty State Park and north of Liberty Island.[4] The island has a land area of 27.5 acres (11.1 ha), most of which was created through land reclamation. The original portion of the island is 3.3 acres (1.3 ha) and is part of New York City, while the landfilled and riparian areas are part of Jersey City. The entire island has been owned and administered by the U.S. federal government since 1808.

Public access is by ferry from either Communipaw Terminal in Liberty State Park or from Battery Park at the southern tip of Manhattan. The same ferry routes provide service to the nearby Statue of Liberty.[5] A bridge built for transporting materials and personnel during restoration projects connects Ellis Island with Liberty State Park, but is not open to the public. Proposals made in 1995 to use it or replace it with a new bridge for pedestrians were opposed by the city of New York and the private ferry operator at that time, Circle Line.[6] Since September 11, 2001, the island is guarded by patrols of the United States Park Police Marine Patrol Unit.

Ownership

Originally much of the west shore of Upper New York Bay consisted of large tidal flats which hosted vast oyster banks, a major source of food for the Lenape population who lived in the area prior to the arrival of Dutch settlers. There were several islands which were not completely submerged at high tide. Three of them (later to be known as Liberty, Black Tom and Ellis) were given the name Oyster Islands by the settlers of New Netherland, the first European colony in the Mid-Atlantic states. The oyster beds would remain a major source of food for nearly three centuries.[7][8] Landfilling to build the railyards of the Lehigh Valley Railroad and the Central Railroad of New Jersey would eventually obliterate the beds, engulf one island and bring the shoreline much closer to the others.[9] During the Colonial period Little Oyster Island was known as Dyre's, then Bucking. In the 1760s, after some pirates were hanged from one of the island's scrubby trees, it became known as Gibbet Island.[10] It was acquired by Samuel Ellis, a colonial New Yorker possibly from Wales, around the time of the American Revolution. In 1785 he unsuccessfully attempted to sell the island:[11]

> TO BE SOLD

> By Samuel Ellis, no. 1, Greenwich Street, at the north river near the Bear Market, That
> pleasant situated Island called Oyster Island, lying in New York Bay, near Powle's Hook,
> together with all its improvements which are considerable;...
> —Samuel Ellis advertising in *Loudon's New-York-Packet*, January 20, 1785

New York State leased the island in 1794 and started to fortify it in 1795. Ownership was in question and legislation was passed for acquisition by condemnation in 1807 and then ceded to the United States in 1808.[12] Shortly thereafter the War Department established a twenty-gun battery, magazine, and barracks.[13] From 1808 until 1814 it was a federal arsenal. At the end of the War of 1812, Fort Gibson was built and remained a military post for nearly 80 years[14] before the island was selected to be a federal immigration station.

Immigration station

See also: Immigration to the United States

In the 35 years before Ellis Island opened, over eight million immigrants arriving at New York Harbor had been processed by New York State officials at Castle Garden Immigration Depot in lower Manhattan, just across the bay.[14] The Federal Government assumed control of immigration on April 18, 1890 and Congress appropriated $75,000 to construct America's first Federal immigration station on Ellis Island. Artesian wells were dug, and landfill was hauled in from incoming ships' ballast and from construction of New York City's subway tunnels which doubled the size of Ellis Island to over six acres. While the building was under construction, the Barge Office nearby on the Battery was used for immigrant processing.

First Ellis Island Immigration Station, opened on January 1, 1892. Built of wood, it was completely destroyed by fire on June 15, 1897.

The first federal immigration station was enormous three-story tall structure with out buildings built of Georgia pine containing all of the amenities that were thought to be necessary. It opened with celebration on January 1, 1892.[15] Three large ships landed on the first day and 700 immigrants passed over the docks. Almost 450,000 immigrants were processed at the station during its first year. On June 15, 1897, a fire of unknown origin, possibly caused by faulty wiring, turned the wooden structures on Ellis Island into ashes. No losses of life were reported, however most of the immigration records dating back to 1855 were destroyed. About 1.5 million immigrants had been processed at the first building during its five years in use. Plans were immediately made to build a new, fireproof immigration station on Ellis Island. During the construction period, passenger arrivals were again processed at the Barge Office.[16]

Film by Edison Studios showing immigrants disembarking from the steam ferryboat *William Myers*, July 9, 1903.

The present main structure was designed in French Renaissance Revival style and built of red brick with limestone trim. When it opened on 17 Dec 1900, officials estimated 5,000 immigrants per day would be processed. However, the facilities proved to barely handle the flood of immigrants that arrived in the years just before World War I. Writer Louis Adamic came to America from Slovenia in southeastern

Second Ellis Island Immigration Station, opened on December 17, 1900 (photo 1905)

Europe in 1913 and described the night he and many other immigrants slept on bunk beds in a huge hall. Lacking a warm blanket, the young man "shivered, sleepless, all night, listening to snores" and dreams "in perhaps a dozen different languages". The facility was so large that the dining room could seat 1,000 people.

After its opening, Ellis Island was expanded with landfill and additional structures were built. By the time it closed in 1954, twelve million immigrants had been processed by the US Bureau of Immigration.[17] It is estimated that 10.5 million immigrants departed for points across the United States from the Central Railroad of New Jersey Terminal across a narrow strait.[18][19] Others would have used one of the other terminals along the North River (Hudson River) at that time.[20] The peak year for immigration at Ellis Island was 1907, with 1,004,756 immigrants processed. The all-time daily high occurred on April 17, 1907, when 11,747 immigrants arrived.[21] After the Immigration Act of 1924 was passed, which greatly restricted immigration and allowed processing at overseas embassies, the only immigrants to pass through the station were displaced persons or war refugees.[22] Today, over 100 million Americans - one third of the population - can trace their ancestry to the immigrants who first arrived in America at Ellis Island before dispersing to points all over the country.

Generally, those immigrants who were approved spent from two to five hours at Ellis Island. Arrivals were asked 29 questions including name, occupation, and the amount of money carried. It was important to the American government that the new arrivals could support themselves and have money to get started. The

average the government wanted the immigrants to have was between 18 and 25 dollars. Those with visible health problems or diseases were sent home or held in the island's hospital facilities for long periods of time. More than three thousand would-be immigrants died on Ellis Island while being held in the hospital facilities. Some unskilled workers were rejected because they were considered "likely to become a public charge." About 2 percent were denied admission to the U.S. and sent back to their countries of origin for reasons such as having a chronic contagious disease, criminal background, or insanity.[23] Ellis Island was sometimes known as "The Island of Tears" or "Heartbreak Island"[24] because of those 2% who were not admitted after the long transatlantic voyage. The Kissing Post is a wooden column outside the Registry Room, where new arrivals were greeted by their relatives and friends, typically with tears, hugs and kisses.[25][26]

During World War I, the German sabotage of the Black Tom Wharf ammunition depot damaged buildings on Ellis Island. The repairs included the current barrel-vaulted ceiling of the Main Hall.

Detention and deportation center

After 1924, Ellis Island became primarily a detention and deportation processing center.[21][27]

Radicals awaiting deportation, 1920

During and immediately following World War II Ellis Island was used to intern German merchant mariners and enemy aliens - American civilians or immigrants detained for fear of spying, sabotage, etc. Some 7,000 Germans, Italians and Japanese would be detained at Ellis Island.[21] It was also a processing center for returning sick or wounded U.S. soldiers, and a Coast Guard training base. Ellis Island still managed to process tens of thousands of immigrants a year during this time, but many fewer than the hundreds of thousands a year who arrived before the war. After the war immigration rapidly returned to earlier levels.[21] Noted entertainers who performed for detained aliens and for U.S. and allied servicemen at the island included Rudy Vallee, Jimmy Durante, Bob Hope, and Lionel Hampton and his orchestra.

The Internal Security Act of 1950 barred members of communist or fascist organizations from immigrating to the United States. Ellis Island saw detention peak at 1,500, but by 1952, after changes to immigration law and policies, only 30 detainees remained.[21]

Staff

The station's commissioners were:

1. 1890–1893 Colonel John B. Weber (Republican)
2. 1893–1897 Dr. Joseph H. Senner (Democrat)
3. 1897–1902 Thomas Fitchie (Republican)
4. 1902–1905 William Williams (Republican)
5. 1905–1909 Robert Watchorn (Republican)
6. 1909–1913 William Williams (Republican), 2nd term
7. 1914–1919 Dr. Frederic C. Howe (Democrat)
8. 1920–1921 Frederick A. Wallis (Democrat)
9. 1921–1923 Robert E. Tod (Republican)
10. 1923–1926 Henry C. Curran (Republican)
11. 1926–1931 Benjamin M. Day (Republican)
12. 1931–1934 Edward Corsi (Republican)
13. 1934–1940 Rudolph Reimer (Democrat)
14. 1940–1942 Byron H. Uhl
15. 1942–1949 W. Frank Watkins
16. 1949–1954 Edward J. Shaughnessy

Ellis island air view, Photo taken before the development of Liberty State Park, which opened in 1976

Other notable officials at Ellis Island included Edward F. McSweeney (assistant commissioner), Joseph E. Murray (assistant commissioner), Dr. George W. Stoner (chief surgeon), Augustus Frederick Sherman (chief clerk), Dr. Victor Safford (surgeon), Dr. Victor Heiser (surgeon), Dr. Thomas W. Salmon (surgeon), Dr. Howard Knox (surgeon), Antonio Frabasilis (interpreter), Peter Mikolainis (interpreter), Maud Mosher (matron), Fiorello H. La Guardia (interpreter), and Philip Cowen (immigrant inspector).

Immigrants being processed, 1904

Prominent amongst the missionaries and immigrant aid workers were Rev. Michael J. Henry and Rev. Anthony J. Grogan (Irish Catholic), Rev. Gaspare Moretto (Italian Catholic), Alma E. Mathews (Methodist), Rev. Georg Doring (German Lutheran), Rev. Joseph L'Etauche (Polish Catholic), Rev. Reuben Breed (Episcopal), Michael Lodsin (Baptist), Brigadier Thomas Johnson (Salvation Army), Ludmila K. Foxlee (YWCA), Athena Marmaroff (Woman's Christian Temperance Union), Alexander Harkavy (HIAS), Cecilia Greenstone and Cecilia Razovsky (National Council of Jewish Women).

Records

A myth persists that government officials on Ellis

Scenes at the Immigration Depot and a nearby dock on Ellis Island.

Island compelled immigrants to take new names against their wishes.[28] In fact, no historical records bear this out. Federal immigration inspectors were under strict supervision and were more interested in preventing inadmissible aliens from entering the country (which

Immigrants arriving at Ellis Island, 1902

they were held accountable for) than in assisting them in trivial personal matters such as altering their names. The inspectors used the passenger lists given to them by the steamship companies to process each foreigner. These were the sole immigration records for entering the country and were prepared not by the U.S. Bureau of Immigration but by steamship companies such as the Cunard Line, the White Star Line, the North German Lloyd Line, the Hamburg-Amerika Line, the Italian Steam Navigation Company, the Red Star Line, the Holland America Line, and the Austro-American Line.[29][30] The Americanization of many immigrant families' surnames was for the most part adopted by the family after the immigration process, or by the second or third generation of the family after some assimilation into American culture. However, many last names were altered slightly due to the disparity between English and other languages in the pronunciation of certain letters of the alphabet.[31]

Medical inspections

To support the activities of the United States Bureau of Immigration, the United States Public Health Service operated an extensive medical service at the immigrant station, called U.S. Marine Hospital Number 43, more widely known as the Ellis Island Immigrant Hospital. It was the largest marine hospital in the nation. The medical division (which was active both in the hospital and the Great Hall, was staffed by uniformed military surgeons. They are best known for the role they played during the line inspection, in which they employed unusual techniques such as the use of the buttonhook to examine aliens for signs of eye diseases (particularly, trachoma) and the use of a chalk mark code. Symbols were chalked on the clothing of potentially sick immigrants following the six-second medical examination. The doctors would look at the immigrants as they climbed the stairs from the baggage area to the Great Hall. Immigrants' behavior would be studied for difficulties in getting up the staircase. Some immigrants entered the country only by surreptitiously wiping the chalk marks off, or by turning their clothes inside out.[32]

Dormitory room for detained immigrants

The symbols used were:

- **B** – Back
- **C** - Conjunctivitis
- **CT** – Trachoma
- **E** – Eyes
- **F** – Face
- **FT** – Feet
- **G** – Goiter
- **H** – Heart
- **K** – Hernia
- **L** – Lameness
- **N** – Neck
- **P** – Physical and Lungs
- **PG** – Pregnancy
- **S** – Senility
- **SC** – Scalp (Favus)
- **SI** – Special Inquiry
- **X** – Suspected Mental defect
- **X (circled)** – Definite signs of Mental defect

Notable immigrants

Further information: List of notable Ellis Island immigrants

The first immigrant to pass through Ellis Island was Annie Moore, a 14-year-old girl from Cork, Ireland, who arrived on the ship *Nevada* on January 2, 1892.[33] She and her two brothers were coming to America to meet their parents, who had moved to New York two years prior. She received a greeting from officials and a $10 gold piece. It was the largest sum of money she had ever owned.[34] The last person to pass through Ellis Island was a Norwegian merchant seaman by the name of Arne Peterssen in 1954.

Statue of Annie Moore on Ellis Island

Immigration museum

The wooden structure built in 1892 to house the immigration station burned down after five years. The

station's new Main Building, which now houses the Immigration Museum, was opened in 1900.[35] Architects Edward Lippincott Tilton and William Alciphron Boring received a gold medal at the 1900 Paris Exposition for the building's design. The architecture competition was the second under the Tarsney Act, which had permitted private architects rather than government architects in the Office of the Supervising Architect to design federal buildings.[36]

Main Building, which now houses the Immigration Museum

After the immigration station closed in November 1954, the buildings fell into disrepair and were all but abandoned. Attempts at redeveloping the site were unsuccessful until its landmark status was established. On October 15, 1965, Ellis Island was proclaimed a part of Statue of Liberty National Monument. It was listed on the National Register of Historic Places on October 15, 1966.

Great Hall, where immigrants were processed

Boston based architecture firm Finegold Alexander + Associates Inc, together with the New York architectural firm Beyer Blinder Belle, designed the restoration and adaptive use of the Beaux-Arts Main Building, one of the most symbolically important structures in American history. A construction budget of $150 million was required for this significant restoration. This money was raised by a campaign organized by the political fundraiser Wyatt A. Stewart.[37] The building reopened on September 10, 1990.[38] Exhibitions include *Hearing Room*, *Peak Immigration Years*, the *Peopling of America*, *Restoring a Landmark*, *Silent Voices*, *Treasures from Home*, and *Ellis Island Chronicles*. There are also three theaters used for film and live performances.

As part of the National Park Service's Centennial Initiative, the south side of the island will be the target of a project to restore the 28 buildings that have not yet been rehabilitated.[39]

The "Wall of Honor" outside of the main building contains a partial list of immigrants processed on the island.[40] Inclusion on the list is made possible by a donation to support the facility. In 2008, the museum's library was officially named the Bob Hope Memorial Library in honor of one the station's most famous immigrants.

The Ellis Island Medal of Honor is awarded annually at ceremonies on the island.

State sovereignty dispute

The island, largely artificially created through landfill, is situated on the New Jersey side of the Upper New York Bay. The natural portion of the island, part of New York City, is surrounded by rest of the island in Jersey City.

The circumstances which led to an exclave of New York being located within New Jersey began in the colonial era after the British takeover of New Netherland in 1664. An unusual clause colonial land grant outlined the territory the proprietors of New Jersey would receive as "*westward of Long Island, and Manhitas Island and bounded on the east part by the main sea, and part by Hudson's river*",[41] rather than at the river's midpoint, as was common in other colonial charters.[42]

When the Province of New Jersey was separated from the Province of New York in 1674 it was argued that Staten Island belonged to the former. Then governor Edmund Andros directed that all islands in the bay that could be circumnavigated within 24 hours were part of New York. Soon thereafter, Captain Christopher Billopp sailed around it within the allotted time.[43][44] The border came to be understood as being along the shore of the of Hudson River, the Upper New York Bay, the Kill van Kull, and Arthur Kill.

Liberty Island and Ellis Island's location on the New Jersey side of the state line in New York Harbor led to several disputes

Attempts were made as early 1804 to resolve the status of the state line.[45] The corporation of City of New York claimed the right to regulate trade on the all the waters. This was contested in Gibbons v. Ogden (22 U.S. 1) (1824),[46] which decided that interstate commerce be regulated to the federal government, which influenced competition in the newly developing steam ferry service in New York Harbor.

In 1830 New Jersey planned to bring suit to clarify the border, but the case was never heard.[47] The matter was resolved with a compact between the states ratified by US Congress in 1834 which set the boundary line between them as the middle of the Hudson River and New York Harbor.[48] This was later confirmed by the US Supreme Court in other cases which also expounded on the compact.[9][49]

The federal government, which had bought the island in 1808, began expanding the island by landfill, to

accommodate the immigration station opened in 1892. Landfilling continued until 1934.[50]

Nine-tenths of the current area is artificial island that did not exist at the time of the interstate compact. New Jersey contended that the new extensions were part of New Jersey, since they were not part of the original island. In 1956, after the 1954 closing of the US immigration station, then Mayor of Jersey City, Bernard J. Berry commandeered a US Coast Guard cutter and led a contingent of New Jersey officials on an expedition to claim the island.[51] In 1997, the state filed suit to establish its jurisdiction, leading New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani to remark dramatically that his father, an Italian who immigrated through Ellis Island, never intended to go to New Jersey.[52]

The dispute eventually reached the Supreme Court of the United States, which ruled in 1998 that New Jersey had jurisdiction over all portions of the island created after the original compact was approved (effectively, more than 80% of the island's present land). This caused several immediate confusions: some buildings, for instance, fell into the territory of both states. New Jersey and New York soon agreed to share jurisdiction to the island. It remains wholly a Federal property, however, and these legal decisions do not result in either state taking any fiscal or physical responsibility for the maintenance, preservation, or improvement of any of the historic properties.[47][53][54]

For New York State tax purposes it is assessed as Manhattan Block 1, Lot 201. Since 1998, it also has a tax number assigned by the state of New Jersey.

In the arts

Ellis island has been a source of inspiration or subject for the arts including film, literature and music.

Among early films, including those from the silent era, which featured the station include *Traffic in Souls* (1913), which starred Matt Moore; *The Yellow Passport* (1916), starring Clara Kimball Young; *My Boy* (1921), starring Jackie Coogan; Frank Capra's *The Strong Man* (1926), starring Harry Langdon; *We Americans* (1928), starring John Boles; *The Mating Call* (film) (1928), co-starring Thomas Meighan and Renee Adoree; *Ellis Island* (1936), starring Donald Cook; *Paddy O'Day* (1936), starring Jane Withers; *Gateway* (1938), starring Don Ameche; *Exile Express* (1939), which starred Anna Sten; and *Gambling House* (1951), starring Victor Mature

Some films have focused on the immigrant experience, such as the 1984 TV miniseries "*Ellis Island*" (http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0086705/) . The IMAX 3D movie *Across the Sea of Time Across the Sea of Time* (http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0112286/) incorporates both modern footage and historical photographs of Ellis Island. The 2006 Italian movie *The Golden Door*, (directed by Emanuele Crialese) takes place largely at Ellis Island.

The island has also been used as a film location. In the film *X-Men*, a UN summit held on the island is targeted by Magneto, a former immigrant who attempts to artificially mutate all the delegates present. In the 2005 feature film romantic comedy, *Hitch*, starring Will Smith, his and Eva Mendes' characters take a jet ski to the island and explore the building. The opening scene of *The Brother From Another Planet* takes place on Ellis Island.

Photographer Stephen Wilkes' series Ellis Island: Ghosts of Freedom (2006) captured the abandoned south side of Ellis Island and helped raise $6 million in funding from the United States Congress towards restoration of Ellis Island's abandoned south side.[55]

Ellis Island as a port of entry is described in detail in *Mottel the Cantor's Son* by Sholom Aleichem. It is also the place where Don Corleone was held as an immigrant boy in *The Godfather Part II*, where he was marked with an encircled X.

Ellis Island: The Dream of America is a work for actors and orchestra with projected images by Peter Boyer, composed in 2001-02. Also a documentary on the hospital at Ellis Island was created by Lorie Conway.

"Scenes from Ellis Island" (for guitar ensemble, piano, double bass, two violins and percussion) was composed by US classical guitarist Benjamin Verdery and was inspired by a visit to Ellis Island.

The song "The New Ground - Isle of Hope, Isle of Tears," on the 2010 album *Songs from the Heart* by the group Celtic Woman, is about Annie Moore and Ellis Island.

See also

- Angel Island, California
- Enclave and exclave
- Geography of New York-New Jersey Harbor Estuary
- Hoffman Island
- Immigration to the United States
- National Register of Historic Places listings in Hudson County, New Jersey
- National Register of Historic Places listings in New York County, New York
- Philadelphia Lazaretto
- Pier 21
- Port of New York and New Jersey
- Save Ellis Island
- Swinburne Island

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