

American Immigration in the Gilded Age

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The Gilded Age was an era of mass migration to the United States from other countries. During this time, many immigrants traveled for their own personal reasons, whether that be for a new start in life or to work for better pay. The American dream was what they saw when they chose to emigrate to America. In order to understand why people chose to immigrate to the United States between 1890 and 1920, this research paper will examine the context behind migrators: Irish, Italians, French, Swedish, Mexicans, Chinese, and Japanese, who arrived in New York, Texas, and California, as well as America's response to these new waves of immigrants.

When immigrants from either Europe or other countries connected by the Atlantic Ocean, they headed to New York. The United States utilized Ellis Island as an immigration facility. Until 1892, Ellis Island was uninhabited.¹ Then the island became the headquarters of the Federal Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) for New York. Between 1892 and 1924, Ellis Island was a popular immigration hub. To maintain pace with the growing number of immigrants arriving in the United States, the INS opened other immigrant check-in stations, such as Angel Island on the west coast in San Francisco, California. The San Francisco branch was primarily utilized to enforce California's Chinese exclusion laws.

To give some context, between 1856 and 1921, there were significant waves of Irish immigration to America. During this time, more Irishmen and women left Ireland than in the previous two centuries.² Irish Americans emerged from poverty and the Irish potato famine had great crippling prejudice.³ This was due to economic reasons like the Great Famine of 1845, that

¹ Peter M. Coan, *Ellis Island Interviews*, (New York City: Fall River Press, 2004): xiii.

² Kerby A. Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America*, (New York City: Oxford University Press, 1985): 348.

³ Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America*, 492.

had rippled effects that carried over into the early twentieth century. In 1845-55, Ireland's population fell from about 8.5 million to around six million due to starvation, disease, and emigration. Ireland's mid-century crisis was a cataclysm. Irish began to look for work outside of Ireland. This caused the population to decline from 5.8 million in 1861 to less than 4.3 million in 1926.⁴ This phenomenon was called the post-famine era. The New World offered new opportunities to Irish immigrants, which lead many Irish to eagerly emigrate from Ireland's current impoverished society. To join relatives abroad whose letters and remittances promised advantages inaccessible to Ireland. Similarly, between 1870 and 1921, Irish Americans emerged from poverty and the crippling prejudice of the Irish potato famine.⁵ By the early twentieth century, Irish Americans were a relatively mature and diverse society, with prosperity for this time. There was five million Irish Americans in 1900, about two-thirds had been born the in the U.S. Moreover, the Irish were forced to take advantage of opportunities in America.⁶

Author Peter Coan interviewed immigrants who went through Ellis Island. Through these interviews, we see why people immigrated, as well as their experience at Ellis Island. For immigrants arriving from Italy, life there is dependent on whether you were born rich or poor. Those who were poor like Peter Mossini lived in a small village called Santa Teresa di Riva in Southern Italy. He lived in a two-bedroom house with a family of ten, two parents, and eight children.⁷ According to Mossini's accounts of his earlier life in Southern Italy, he did not go to school but instead worked to support his family. Mossini's reason for wanting to emigrate to the United States was because of his father.⁸ His father arrived in Pennsylvania in 1901 to work in

⁴ Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America*, 346.

⁵ Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America*, 492.

⁶ Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America*, 493.

⁷ Coan, *Ellis Island Interviews*, 43.

⁸ Coan, *Ellis Island Interviews*, 45.

the coal mines. While in the U.S., his father would occasionally send a few U.S. dollars back home. In 1921, Mossini, his cousin, and his friend all traveled from Sicily to America where he eventually reached Ellis Island in New York. While on the island, the doctors examined all the immigrants' hair for lice. According to Mossini's perspective, anyone suspected of lice would be sent back to the line. Luckily, they were able to leave the island that night and arrive at a Pennsylvania train station.

Similarly, another immigrant from Italy was Amelia Giacomo. She was from Lucca near Florence, Italy.⁹ She had six sisters and two brothers. Three years before Amelia was born, her father and one of her brothers left for America in 1912 to get a job with an Italian Swiss company in San Francisco, where they farmed and sold produce. At the age of five, she and her family (mother, seven sisters, and her other brother) attempted to board the *Caserta*.¹⁰ While on board, Amelia met a gentleman that was familiar with Ellis Island and its inner workings. He warned her of the examinations the doctors at the island performed on the immigrants. He stated that if they attempted to examine your eyes using hooks, it could damage your eyesight. At the end of her oral interview, it stated that she managed to pass the examinations on the island and make it to San Francisco.

In 1891, Congress replied to some of the anti-immigrant sentiments. In response to anti-immigrant attitudes in Congress, a group of Harvard graduates created the Immigration Protection League in 1894. The League's leaders pushed tirelessly for an immigration policy based on ethnocultural discrimination (discrimination based on ethnicity). Its founder, Prescott F. Hall (1862-1921), argued that if Americans desired to be ruled by the British, Germans, and

⁹ Coan, *Ellis Island Interviews*, 64.

¹⁰ Coan, *Ellis Island Interviews*, 65.

Scandinavians.¹¹ The League's political leader, *Henry Cabot Lodge*, who was a major politician that represented Massachusetts in Congress from 1887 to 1929, voted on a literacy test for the United States to have desirable immigrants over undesirable ones. One of the ways Cabot did this was with the literacy bill, which was passed five separate times in 1885, 1897, 1913, 1915, and 1917 and was joined by the Senate, except for in 1885. Each bill was also vetoed by three different presidents: Grover Cleveland, William Howard Taft, and Woodrow Wilson.¹² Former President Cleveland vetoed the bill because he believed the literacy test was radical, narrow-minded, and un-American. He went on to say that some of our finest immigrants were at one point, formerly seen as undesirable. He also mentioned that many immigrants could not speak, read, or write English yet came to America seeking a better future. They came to seek better work possibilities that would boost the American economy. With the exception of young children, immigrants arrived in the United States with a pre-existing linguistic repertoire. Within individual nations, immigrants' English knowledge differs depending on their willingness and ability to learn English, as well as their expectations of obstacles connected with coming to English-speaking countries such as the United States.¹³

Xenophobia (fear of foreigners) arose at the start of 1920 as a result of World War I. As a result, nativism, which resulted in many anti-immigrant movements, emerged.¹⁴ To begin with, at the start of 1920, membership for the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) exploded across the country.

¹¹ Roger Daniels, *The Gilded Age: The Immigrant Experience of the Gilded Age*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1995, 17.

¹² Daniels, *The Gilded Age: The Immigrant Experience of the Gilded Age*, 18.

¹³ Barry Edmonston, and Jerry S. Passel, *Immigration and Ethnicity: The Integration of America's Newest Arrivals*, Washington D.C.: The Urban Institute Press, 1994, 164.

¹⁴ Joel, S. Fetzer, *Public Attitudes towards Immigration in the United States, France, and Germany*. New York City: Cambridge University Press, 2000, 33.

Likewise, in California, a campaign to "Keep California White" appeared which resulted in the State passing the anti-Japanese Alien Land Law. A law that limited the ability of Japanese immigrants from owning land. There were also anti-Semitic diatribes and the three days of rioting against Italians in West Frankfurt, Illinois. Also, a case where miners lynched a German American in Southern Illinois.¹⁵ Overall, World War 1 brought about new difficulties for immigrants in America.

On September 16, 1903, President Theodore Roosevelt appointed a commission to investigate the conditions of the facility at Ellis Island. The commission's job was not only to inquire criticisms or changes to the administration, but also conduct a general inquiry in existing laws regarding immigration, and ways to improve them for both the country and for the new incoming immigrants.¹⁶ In order to do this, the commission held public hearings. The commission needed testimonies from either immigrants or the staff on the island to support their statements. After taking about seven hundred pages of testimonies, the commission decided to focus on "The charges of neglect or the ill treatment of the immigrants" and "The deportation or exclusions of immigrants."¹⁷

The commission first asserted the neglect or ill-treatment of immigrants on Ellis Island. According to testimonies from immigrants, the island was infested with vermin. This was notably true in immigration detention facilities and women's quarters. Likewise, the commission held testimonies to find out that neither the main building nor the hospital building on the island

¹⁵ Fetzer, *Public Attitudes*, 32.

¹⁶ Arthur Von Briesen, *Report of the Commission appointed by the President on September 16, 1903, to investigate the condition of the immigration station at Ellis Island*. (Washington: U.S. G.P.O, 1904): 7.

¹⁷ Briesen, *Report of the Commission*, 8.

were large enough to house the number of immigrants who arrived on Ellis Island.¹⁸ Testimony showed that one day about 13,000 immigrants arrived in New York and the commissioner ordered the captain to require the six thousand immigrants to remain on the boat overnight, but the unnamed captain was not able to accommodate such a large amount of people on his ship, which supported the commission's claim of the main building not being up to the task to handle immigration operations.¹⁹

Furthermore, according to the commission's inquiry, the hospital facility on Ellis Island was investigated, and it was discovered through both the investigation and testimony that the building was not designed to resist high tides. High tides would flood the basement, requiring regular maintenance. As for the rest of the building, the hospital at best only had 125 beds available. The doctor in charge of the hospital stated that they needed 250 beds to accommodate the sick. The lack of beds resulted in many immigrants being attended to in other medical facilities located on both Long Island and Manhattan Island. This resulted in greater expenses for immigrants treated in hospitals other than the one on Ellis Island.

Similar to the hospital building, the main building consisted of 1,665 wire mattresses for beds.²⁰ Each immigrant was given a blanket but no pillow, sheets, or regular mattresses. Although they were given blankets, the blankets were not disinfected and were not warm enough to protect them from the cold. Many immigrants were lucky of only staying the night or a day on the island, but there were some who stayed for weeks or even months in these inhumane living conditions. This led to the argument that longer-stay bedding would have needed to be supplied to the main building on the island, similar to the bedding the hospital would receive. As for the

¹⁸ Briesen, *Report of the Commission*, 15.

¹⁹ Briesen, *Report of the Commission*, 15.

²⁰ Briesen, *Report of the Commission*, 16.

detention rooms, they were frequently overcrowded, and there were not enough seats for the immigrants. There were many different immigrants that were sent to the detention room. Immigrants that were marked with the sign "T.D." were sent to the detention room. One instance was a Slovak family that was comprised of Mrs. Bulens and her two daughters, Margit and Erzebet.²¹ Although they arrived in America with only six dollars, none of them could speak, read, or write in English. Likewise, another instance of an immigrant who experienced the detention room was a French girl named Adrine Sawin from Marseilles. Adrine arrived at Ellis Island with seven dollars. Her goal was to move to Worcester, Massachusetts. She was sent to the Detention Room where she stayed until her sister and her sister's husband arrived.²² Because government facilities were not equipped to accommodate the influx of immigrants on a daily basis, as time went on, they were forced to rebuild with improved accommodations.

It did not take long for those who made it off Ellis Island and onto Battery Park to realize that the typical idea they had of America was not what they expected. When immigrants reach the mainland, they came with an understand that the land belongs to everyone, but the land has already been claimed by those who have previously arrived. The remainder was managed by newly arrived immigrants. The areas are known as the slums that no one wants. Also known as the location of the tenement houses would end up.²³

Tenement houses were unsanitary buildings built specifically for immigrants to live in. Immigrants would dwell in slums in big cities. Tenement housing was usually all that immigrants could afford. Tenement houses were known as unsanitized homes that were

²¹ Harriet E Clark, *Our Immigrants at Ellis Island*. Boston, Chicago: United Society of Christian Endeavor, 1912, 4.

²² Clark, *Our Immigrants at Ellis Island*, 5.

²³ Georges Perec and Robert Bober, *Ellis Island*. New York City: The New Press, 1996, 71.

specifically built for immigrants to live in. Located in slums, immigrants would usually live here in large cities. In most cases, tenement houses were all immigrants could afford.²⁴ Although tenement houses existed, some organizations would work to improve immigrant living conditions. Female progressive and reformer Jane Addams was one of many activists during the Gilded Age that helped improve immigrant housing. Jane Addams was born in 1860 in Cedarville, Illinois. While growing up, her father taught her the value of hard work and achievement with protestant ideals. She attended Rochford Female Seminary (Rockford University), and between 1883 and 1888, she had two lengthy excursions abroad in Europe. One advantage of her journeys was that she visited England, where she became interested in the Christian Social Reform movement. During her second trip to England, she gathered notes from The Toynbee Settlement, a group of young men who chose to live with the poor. This event prompted Addams to create a home in Chicago with the assistance of a friend called Ellen Gates Starr. Together, they founded the Addams-Starr Settlement.²⁵

Similarly, other settlements were created during this time. A young Amherst graduate (University of Massachusetts) named Stanton Coit visited the Toynbee Hall in 1886. When he returned to the U.S. later that year, he founded the Neighborhood Guild in New York City. Also, Vida Scudder, an American educator, writer, and activist, along with other young women from Smith College. Vida Scudder also traveled to England to see the Toynbee Hall and would come back to the United States to organize the College Settlement Association in 1887. This organization would end up opening a settlement in New York City.²⁶

²⁴Steven L. Piott, *American Reformers 1870-1920*. Lanham, Maryland: The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc, 2006, 92.

²⁵ Piott, *American Reformers*, 94.

²⁶ Piott, *American Reformers*, 96.

As for immigrants in southwest Texas, a large number of Mexicans crossed the border to the United States between 1897 and 1910.²⁷ The reason for Mexicans crossing the border was to escape the reign of Porfirio Diaz in Mexico who was the President of Mexico and known as a Dictator. An example of Mexican immigration is the image “*Mexican immigrants circa 1910*” which shows us how Mexicans arrived in the United States for job opportunity.²⁸ With the arrival of Mexican immigrants in the United States, some begin to settle and raise families, which might lead to child mortality. Child mortality was significantly lower in the German-origin populations of south and central Texas, whereas it was larger in the Mexican-origin population.²⁹ Mexican-origin children's mortality rate decreased slightly between 1900 and 1910, but it remained 50% higher than the general population. In Texas, some Mexicans were employed as grubbers to clean the brush from land and cactus so that it could be irrigated. These Mexicans were known as braceros, meaning Mexican laborers who would specifically work in agriculture.³⁰ Likewise, working for the railroads was also another job Mexicans could take. Railway centers in both San Antonio and El Paso, Texas attracted thousands of Mexican workers.³¹ Railway camps provided braceros not just for immediate employers, but also for a greater surrounding landscape.³²

²⁷ Lawrence A. Cardoso, *Mexican Emigration of the United States 1897-1931*, 18.

²⁸ Unknown Photographer, “*Immigration: Mexican men, who have arrived by train. They await processing at a crowded depot.*” 1910.

²⁹ Myron P. Gutmann, Michael R. Haines, W. Parker Frisbie, and K. Stephen Blanchard. “Intra-Ethnic Diversity in Hispanic Child Mortality, 1890-1910.” *Demography*. Volume 37, Number 4, (November 2000): 467.

³⁰ Cardoso, *Mexican Emigration of the United States 1897-1931*, 24.

³¹ Cardoso, *Mexican Emigration of the United States 1897-1931*, 27.

³² Cardoso, *Mexican Emigration of the United States 1897-1931*, 27.

Although many immigrants in Texas were of Mexican descent, there were cases of immigrants from Europe who chose to live in Southern states like Texas. An example would be the story of Anna Charlotta, or Anna Young and who left the Swedish highlands in 1889.³³ She was an immigrant who chose to live in Northeast Texas. Anna Charlotta, Mildred Bloom, and Carolita Carlson wanted to emigrate to America was during this time in when Sweden, emigrating to America was a common occurrence. Most people in Sweden would usually settle in a northern State in America, but Freda's ancestors decided to emigrate to Texas. On February 16, 1889, these women arrived at Ellis Island in New York City.³⁴ Anna Charlotta recounted being herded as cattle while on Ellis Island. Carolina recalled that emigrants were frequently stripped naked, then forced to shower and given new clean clothes. A physician would also examine the emigrants to see if any were healthy, while also looking for headlice. After passing through Ellis Island, they continued their journey through the sea to reach Texas. The trio had family in Travis County. It was a settlement in Texas where aunt and uncle Mr. and Mrs. John A. Lindblom were waiting for their arrival. Mr. Lindblom was a farmer, and his wife, Mrs. Lindblom, was the sister of Anna. All three of them arrived in Travis, Texas, where they immediately began to work to pay off their passage to Texas. During this time, immigrant labor on the cost of living is often overlooked when it comes to immigration Between 1890 to 1914, the rate of growth of money wages decreased, while the cost of living increased. This would have made it difficult for immigrants like Anna to pay off her trip.³⁵ Two years later in 1891,

³³ Charlotte V Dunn, Lund. *Freda: The Story of a Family of immigrants Who Left Smaland, Sweden and Settled in Texas Around the End of the Nineteenth Century*. New Braunfels, Texas: Charlotte's Precious Memories. 1999, V.

³⁴ Lund. *Freda: The Story of a Family of immigrants*, 14.

³⁵ Cheryl Lynne Shanks, *Immigration and the Politics American Sovereignty, 1890-1990*. Ann Arbor. University of Michigan Press, 2001, 211.

Anna married a young immigrant man named August Young.³⁶ He was a farmer in Texas who also arrived in 1889. All three of them arrived in Travis, Texas, where they immediately began to work to pay off their debt for the safe passage to Texas. Anna would later go on to have two children.

In 1882, 132,300 Chinese immigrants lived on the Pacific Coast, in California.³⁷ They were employed in mining, agriculture, and other minuscule jobs during this time.³⁸ Chinese immigration brought about public resistance that led into law creating the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. This act caused Chinese immigrants in the United States to halt for ten years. The Chinese Act also caused many Chinese Americans to lose their jobs, which resorted employers to look at the Japanese to replace the labor. This act began to be renewed every ten years until 1943.³⁹ Chinese prejudice only grew, and white Anglo Americans began to create cry out “Yellow Peril,” a racial metaphor that insinuated the dangers that East Asians posed to the Western world. In 1907, the Gentlemen's Agreement occurred where the Japanese government chose to deny any Japanese citizen to emigrate to the United States.

In 1905, President Theodore Roosevelt wrote a letter to the explorer George Keenan seven months before his annual message.⁴⁰ During the letter, President Roosevelt did not distinguish the difference between Japanese and Chinese immigrants. Later that year, on December 5, 1905, President Theodore Roosevelt addressed his Fifth Annual Message to the nation. In this message, one of the brought-up topics was immigration and how immigration

³⁶ Lund, *Freda: The Story of a Family of immigrants*, 18.

³⁷ Cardoso, *Mexican Emigration of the United States 1897-1931*, 19.

³⁸ Cardoso, *Mexican Emigration of the United States 1897-1931*, 20.

³⁹ Daniels, *The Gilded Age: The Immigrant Experience of the Gilded Age*, 16.

⁴⁰ Vanessa B. Beasley. *Who Belongs in America?* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2006): 20.

should be better managed and limited in some areas of the country.⁴¹ The President noted that "while much of this enormous immigration is undoubtedly healthy and natural, a considerable proportion is undesirable from one reason or another; moreover, a considerable proportion of it, probably a very large proportion, including most of the undesirable class."⁴² To perform this task, the President considered limiting the amount of immigrants permitted to enter New York and other Northern cities in any given year, while allowing an unrestricted number to enter the South.⁴³ Laws on ships that carried immigrants to shore would also be imposed. Companies that lure foreigners to America with the promise of certainty of job would face harsh penalties under these laws.

As for Chinese Immigration, the United States classified them as "undesirable immigrants to this country."⁴⁴ This reasoning was due to their numbers, the low wages, and the low standard of living. At the time of this message, Chinese immigration was heavily prohibited. But in order to bring justice to the hard-working Chinese immigrants, Chinese students, business, and professional men of all types, including bankers, doctors, manufacturers, professors, and tourists were encouraged to arrive in America. The reason for this decision according to President Roosevelt, the United States government has the friendliest sensation for China and desires China's well-being. An example of this strict enforcement would be the brief film "*Arrest in Chinatown, San Francisco, Cal.*"⁴⁵ This film was published by *Thomas A. Edison, Inc.*, in 1897. It shows a crowd of people who witnessed the arrest of a Chinese guy in Chinatown. The

⁴¹ Theodore, Roosevelt, *Fifth Annual Message: 26th President of the United States: 1901 -1909 Fifth Annual Message*. Washington D.C.: The Whitehouse, 1905.

⁴² Theodore, Roosevelt, *Fifth Annual Message*: 1905.

⁴³ Theodore, Roosevelt, *Fifth Annual Message*: 1905.

⁴⁴ Theodore, Roosevelt, *Fifth Annual Message*: 1905.

⁴⁵ Thomas A. Edison, Inc. *Arrest in Chinatown, San Francisco, Cal.* San Francisco, California: Thomas A. Edison, Inc., 1897.

exact date of this picture, as well as the arrest charge, are unknown. It is conceivable that the arrest was related to the smuggling of illegal Chinese immigrants. An interesting fact during this time period was when San Francisco newspaper published a newspaper in 1905. It stated that San Francisco's labor mayor, the Hon. Eugene E. Schmitz preferred that the exclusion act should be applied to the Japanese over the Chinese.⁴⁶ The main argument of the newspaper was to claim that Japanese immigration would cause discomfort to our economy due to the Japanese's cheapness of their labor.

During the Chinese Exclusion Act, Angel Island served as an immigration center for America's West coast. Being the equivalent to the East coast Ellis Island, Angel Island was a hub for immigrants coming in from Asia, specifically from China, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, Pacific Island, and other countries that were on the Pacific Ocean. Similar to Ellis Island, immigrants at Angel Island were treated with horrible living conditions as seen in the image "*Chinese Women and Children at the Immigration Station*".⁴⁷ This photograph depicts the conditions of a waiting station that the Chinese were forced to endure. We saw these Chinese mothers' situation, in which they were required to sit in a narrow fenced-off area with sturdy benches on the outside while holding their infants. This image is one of the many examples of the conditions of Angel Island.

The Gilded Age was a period in which America witnessed a migration of diverse religions and traditions at a mass scale. Immigrants who arrived from Europe at Ellis Island were already faced with immediate obstacles in the immigration process, where they were forced to live in poor living conditions while waiting to be admitted to the country. Those who managed to

⁴⁶ C. E. Leffingwell, *San Francisco's Mayor wants Exclusion Act to Bar the Japs*. 1905, 3.

⁴⁷ Unknown Photographer, "*Chinese Women and Children at the Immigration Station*." Angel Island, San Francisco, 1910.

make it to the mainland United States faced new challenges in making a living for themselves. This was evident for those who emigrated to the Southern States of Texas and California. In Texas, immigrants were charged for safe passage to their locations. In California, many Chinese and Japanese immigrants who traveled across the Pacific Ocean faced both local and state challenges, some of them being the racial metaphor "Yellow Peril" and immigration laws, one being only accepting high valued Chinese immigrants who strive to be doctors, bankers, manufactures, etc.

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