

# **Ellis Island's history -- and ours; Immigrant experience fills 'American Passage'**

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## **Body**

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Over the years **Ellis Island** has grown to 27 acres from its original three, yet it still remains a mere dot in New York Harbor. Its small size, however, belies the huge role it has played in **American history**.

Some 12 million **immigrants** passed through its gates from 1892 to 1924, the greatest mass migration of people the world had ever seen. So, yes, more than a few stories lurk out there in the harbor mist.

**American Passage**: The **History** of **Ellis Island** is being billed as the first complete **history** of the famous **island**. At almost 500 pages -- 75 of them footnotes -- the claim should be taken seriously.

Historian Vincent Cannato appears to have overlooked nothing in telling the tale of the historic **island**, now a national monument, and 16 pages of black-and-white photos bring his research to life.

But he concedes in his acknowledgments that he wanted the book's subtitle to be "A" **history** of the **island** and not "The" **history**.

"No one story encapsulates the **Ellis Island experience**; there are literally millions," writes Cannato, a **history** professor at the University of Massachusetts-Boston. "For most **immigrants**, **Ellis Island** was a gateway to a new life in **America**. It was an integral part of their **American passage**."

Cannato's research takes us from the **island's** early days of hosting pirate hangings to its rebirth as a national park in 1986. The good news is that Cannato is not only a meticulous researcher and historian, he's also a lively storyteller. A rare combination.

The best thing about **American Passage** isn't so much the now-clichéd **history** lesson and timeline, albeit interesting, but the people who move the story along: the politicians, the WASP elite, the social reformers and the **immigrants** themselves, anarchist Emma Goldman being one of the most fascinating. She called **Ellis Island** "the worst dump I have ever stayed in."

There's even a morality play -- literally. Vera, the Countess of Cathcart, was detained at **Ellis Island** because she was divorced and an "adulteress." So she did what anyone who calls herself a playwright would do. She wrote a play about her situation. (She got in, by the way, but the play got panned.)

There are hundreds of stories like Vera's and Emma's here. Some of them uplifting. Some of them heart-wrenching. All of them quintessentially **American**.

**American Passage**:

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The ***History*** of ***Ellis Island***

By Vincent J. Cannato

Harper, 419 pp., \$27.99

## Graphic

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PHOTO, B/W, Library of Congress

PHOTO, B/W

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