America's welcome center is a well worth a visit

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Body

For 32 years, it was the most ***welcome*** sight in the lives of more than 14-million people.

Even the Statue of Liberty, gleaming nearby, took second place to the brick buildings of Ellis Island, where immigrants from Europe would take their first steps on U.S. soil.

Ellis Island today is a national park and immigration museum, one of the must-see sights on any tour of New York.

For more than 100-million Americans, it's a sentimental journey, a ***visit*** with the memories of their grandparents, great-grandparents or great-great grandparents, a chance to relive the first hours or days that their forebears spent in this country.

Ellis Island was opened in 1892, after the federal government took regulation of immigration from the states during the 1880s and enacted the Immigration Act of 1891, which established the Bureau of Immigration.
St. Louis Post Dispatch; Providence JournalELLISISLAND(

The flood of Eastern Europeans had caused some critics to seek tighter standards; a few were introduced, but the Open Door remained open.

Before the ***center*** was built on Ellis Island, replacing a naval gunpowder storage depot, New York-bound Europeans landed at Castle Garden, now the site of the ferry departure point.

Nothing in history matches the tide of immigration that flowed to the United States.

In 1790, the first national census determined a non-Indian population of 3.9-million people, about 80 percent from England and northern Europe, the remainder of African origin.

After the Napoleonic Wars, crossing the Atlantic became more common. About 600,000 people came from 1820 to 1840, mainly from England and Ireland. But in the next 20 years, five times that many arrived, mostly Germans, Austrians, Hungarians and Irish.

Following a decade-long lull for the Civil War and the start of Reconstruction, immigration picked up again with heavy concentrations of French-Canadians, Scandinavians and the first Asians, who landed primarily in San Francisco.

The largest influx of eastern Europeans came between 1880 and 1920 - about 23-million Italians, Russians, Poles and Slavs mainly.

At that time, Ellis Island handled 71 percent of all immigrants; the rest came through such ports as Boston, San Francisco, Norfolk, Va., and Key West.

During the '30s and throughout World War II, the island was used as a detention site for undocumented workers, criminals (such as Lucky Luciano) awaiting deportation and others. It processed its last immigrant in November 1954.

Ellis Island itself covered only three acres in early surveys by the Dutch, and it had several names before it was bought by Samuel Ellis, who built a tavern for picnickers and fishermen there after the Revolution.

After Ellis' death, New York State acquired it in 1808 and sold it to the U.S. government for $ 10,000. With the building of the Immigration Depot, more land was needed, and arriving ships dumped ballast as fill. New York garbage did the rest, and today, the island covers 27.5 acres.

The brick and limestone buildings, with high, arched windows and copper domes, are three stories tall. From the dock, with the eagerness of their ancestors but without the trepidation, today's visitors stream toward the Main Hall, duplicating the path taken by millions.

Though, as it turned out, only 2 percent of all those newcomers were denied entry to ***America's*** "golden shores," Ellis Island was a fearsome place: the place where the past - in a Russian village, or a Polish ghetto or the cluttered alleyways of Genoa - was to be left behind forever, and a new life, one hoped, embarked on.

The weary travelers, in kerchiefs and fur hats and wilted clothes, had just spent two weeks in steerage or in third-class cabins deep in the bowels of transatlantic liners.

The wealthier immigrants, able to pay $ 60 to $ 80 for a cabin, never had to suffer the ignominy of being herded into the barrel-vaulted baggage room of the Ellis Island facility, and climbing the stairs under the eagle-eye of medical men searching for defects that might send them back.

First-class and second-class passengers were given their physical exams on shipboard as soon as their vessel entered New York Harbor, and then - if all was ***well*** - were taken directly to the shore.

But the steerage passengers, once they had been ferried to Ellis Island, were asked to leave their luggage in the luggage room and proceed with processing. Fearful of losing their only possessions, many refused, and dragged their bundles with them during the clearance process.

Up the wide main staircase they would be ordered. At its top, doctors watched to see if they were breathing heavily from the exertion. If so, they were likely to be marked in chalk with "H" for heart disease.

If they limped climbing the stairs, the chalk mark was "FT" for foot. For pregnant women, "PG" was used. Eyelids were lifted with buttonhooks to see if there was redness underneath, an indication that the immigrant might have trachoma, a contagious and sometimes fatal eye disease then rampant in southern and central Europe.

The terrified, mystified new arrivals - if they passed physical and mental tests - then entered the labyrinth of the Registry Room. Winding their way from desk to desk, they were asked their place of origin, their skills, if they had children, a sponsor. Where did they wish to settle?

If they were admitted to America, a railway office on the premises could provide them with tickets to anywhere in the country. At a money exchange, their few shekels or lira or crowns would become dollars.

They would descend the Staircase of Separation and say their farewells to the friends they had made on the arduous voyage. Then, at the Kissing Post, those with relatives or acquaintances already in America would be met, and representatives of ethnic groups would be on hand to offer a tardy ***welcome*** to others who knew no one.

Neither single women nor children were allowed to leave until there was assurance, in the form of a prepaid ticket to somewhere, or a telegram saying they were expected. Women were not allowed, either, to depart in the company of a man who was not a relative - prompting some who were awaited by fiances to marry them then and there.

For those who were detained, there were two white-tiled dormitory rooms, empty today of the three-tier bunk beds that once filled them. Each held 300 people, and though 80 percent of Ellis Island arrivals left on the day they landed, that other 20 percent might be kept for this reason or that for several weeks.

There were also, of course, those who were ill - too ill to be sent back. For them, a 125-bed hospital was opened in 1902 and expanded time and time again. By 1911, there were 15 medical buildings on the little island.

The main floor is huge and the National Park Service has wisely left it as open as it was in its busiest times. A giant pile of antique luggage serves as a centerpiece and as a moment of history strong enough to cause a sudden intake of breath, an equally sudden stop.

Bags and boxes, satchels, suitcases and steamer trunks in all sizes and shapes, in carefully placed disarray, are reminders of the days when the immigrants were told to leave their baggage on the ground floor.

While the museum was in the building process, a call went out for people who wanted to share, either actually or in conversation, their histories, their memories. Thousands volunteered. Now, around the low glass wall that protects the baggage, telephone receivers allow today's visitors to hear yesterday's immigrants in recordings talk about their experiences on their arrival in the Promised Land.

Also, souvenirs and mementos were collected for the museum. While an old railroad timetable or a worn-out passport would seem to have no value, they symbolize precious memories, saved and protected for generations.

Photo murals hang above the exhibit, showing various scenes from Ellis Island in all the moods it created - fear, anticipation, joy, panic, dismay. Behind it, in another giant room, is a series of three-dimensional graphs and charts that show the history of immigration. Brightly colored and easy to follow, they illustrate the patterns and the backgrounds of those who came here to find the promise of the Declaration of Independence - life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

In showcase after showcase, the drama of the immigrant experience is recounted in words and pictures and artifacts. Excerpts from diaries recount "I thought I was in Heaven. I'd never seen a building like the Immigration Building. I had to cry," and "It's over. It's a miracle. I am in a free land. It means more to me than my native land."

A note from a Swedish immigrant recalls that "most dear to my family are the shoes my mother wore when she first set foot on the soil of America. You must see them to appreciate the courage my parents had and the sacrifices they made."

Two giant displays dominate the first-floor room. One is an American flag. Looked at from one angle, it's a flag; seen from another, it's a mosaic of some 750 portraits, faces of Americans from every ethnic background. The other is a globe covered with streams of lights that mark immigration patterns through the centuries as people moved to new lands, embraced new countries.

The stairs to the second floor and the Registry Room, or Great Hall, are new, as is much of the lighting, but everything else has been restored, and still looks as it did in the early 1920s, dominated by its two-story-high ceiling.

Even the long benches are the same as the ones on which the immigrants sat. The ground floor may be more dramatic in terms of sweep and scope, but the second and third floors are the spaces of intimate memory.

Again, photo murals are used to great effect, showing immigrants in their own countries, at embarkation stops, aboard ship and in their early days in America, both here and in other cities. Newspaper ads show available jobs or the lures of an American destination. An 1885 clipping, for instance, points out that California has almost 44-million acres and "a climate for health and wealth without cyclones or blizzards."

Another area, one of the most touching, includes displays of family histories - Bibles and rosaries carried across the ocean, diaries of the journey, a shawl, a menorah, a tablecloth, a handmade quilt. All of it was donated by descendants, in a beautiful display of gratitude.

There isn't much mention of the thousands of Ellis Island workers who soothed the frightened or nursed the ill, nor of the others who herded newcomers along like so much cattle, or who changed foreign-sounding names to something more "American." One of the few remembrances is a mention that Fiorello H. LaGuardia, later mayor of the city from 1934-46, worked here from 1907 to 1910 as an interpreter in German, Italian and Croatian, using his salary of $ 1,200 a year to help finance his law studies.

IF YOU GO

The Statue of Liberty/Ellis Island ferry leaves about every 30 minutes daily from 9:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. from Battery Park in lower Manhattan. The round-trip boat ticket, which includes admission to both sites, costs $ 6 for adults; $ 3 for children. Call (212) 269-5755.

N.Y. Convention and Visitors Bureau

SIGN UP: New arrivals passed through the Registry Room, where they were asked their place of origin and where they wished to settle.

Graphic

COLOR PHOTO, N.Y. Convention and Visitors Bureau, (2); Ellis Island; The Registry Room at the Ellis Island ***Welcome Center***

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