

Background Essay: A Nation of Immigrants – A History of Immigration to 1924

The United States has, since its founding, been a destination for immigrants. Immigrants are people who cross international borders to take up permanent residence. As a nation of the people, by the people, and for the people, America has always drawn people seeking freedom and self-government. Millions have flocked to her shores. They came to America because the United States represented hope, a chance at making a life for themselves that was not possible in most of the rest of the world. Some came to find greater economic opportunity, some for religious freedom, some to be freed from oppressive regimes, others for relief from famine or other economic hardships. However, they all chose the United States over every other country in the world, because the United States offered freedom and opportunity that precious few other nations did. Their experiences may have varied widely, but they all had hope in America because they had real opportunity to make something of themselves by their own will and effort.

The first large influx of modern peoples to what is now the United States were the British migrants who came as colonists in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. These initial settlements along the East Coast grew steadily, shaped primarily by British customs and laws. Some colonists arrived as part of proprietary expeditions, recruited by those who owned an interest in the colonies. For example, investors in the Virginia Company of London recruited and outfitted groups of settlers bound for the new world. Others, as in the Plymouth colony, sailed to

the new world together as a religious community, seeking the relative freedom a new settlement would represent. Still other early settlers were too poor to pay for the passage themselves and arrived in North America as indentured servants who bought passage with three to seven years of contracted labor.

By the end of the 1700s, the United States had declared itself independent and fought a revolution to establish itself as a constitutional republic. It was now a sovereign nation with its own distinct political principles, and began to develop its own institutions, customs, and traditions. With the Naturalization Act of 1790, Congress enacted the first specific laws governing immigration and citizenship in the United States.

Another significant source of early migration into North America in the 1600 and 1700s was the African slave trade. Approximately 500,000 persons were forcefully transported to British North America and the United States by 1810. By the end of the colonial period, nearly one out of every five inhabitants was of African descent. Slavery would come to have an immense impact on the political and cultural course of the nation. It created a crisis in the American conscience. How could a nation, born on the premise that all men are created equal, tolerate such an inherently unequal institution? This dilemma directed the course of American politics in the ensuing decades and it would take a long and bloody civil war to resolve it.

In the 1840s, the first significant wave of immigrants came to the United States from

Ireland. Ireland had experienced a massive increase in population but had only a small industrial sector with few job opportunities to accommodate the increase. The majority of this impoverished population lived in rural areas and engaged in farming the region's staple crop, potatoes. In the mid-1840s, a blight struck Ireland which devastated the potato crop, causing famine. Starvation quickly swept the country and with it disease and widespread death. The rural population were left with few options but to leave their farms. As a result, between 1845 and 1852, over one million desperate Irish migrants crammed into crowded ships with hopes for a fresh start in the United States.

The potato famine is an example of a push factor in immigration. A push factor is an occurrence that drives people from their homes to a foreign shore. The opposite of a push factor is a pull factor. A pull factor is an opportunity or occurrence that pulls or encourages a population to leave one nation for another. These factors can work in tandem with each other. One circumstance may motivate a people to look abroad for better opportunities, another draws them to a particular foreign shore. The Irish were pushed by the blight, and pulled by the political liberty and the promise of equal opportunity in the United States.

Another wave of immigrants was comprised of Germans who suffered a bleak economic outlook in Germany due to a surplus of labor that pushed them to look abroad for better opportunities for themselves and their families. Economic difficulties were compounded by the political and social change occurring in Europe throughout the 1800s. Germans were also pulled to the United States, with its promise of political and economic freedom. They had grown up in

the Europe of kings and empires, and sought a chance to make a life for themselves in a more democratic government. Over 3 million Germans came to the United States during the period from 1820 to 1880. They settled across the United States, taking advantage of cheap land and a growing economy.

Taking advantage of this opportunity was not easy for any of these immigrant groups. The Germans were the first significant group of people to immigrate to the United States who did not speak English as their first language and therefore had significant hurdles to overcome to adapt and thrive in America. Land was available for immigrants to homestead and farm but required clearing the land, tilling the fields, and harvesting crops, all by hand. Settling in cities came with its own difficulties. Immigrants struggled to carve out a market for their own business or toiled away for next to nothing for an employer, all while facing opposition as outsiders.

Another group of Europeans pulled to the United States in the latter half of the 1800s were from the Scandinavian countries of Sweden, Norway, and Denmark. These immigrants were tempted by the social mobility and religious freedom found in the United States as well as the abundance of available farmland. Like many immigrant groups, Scandinavian families tended to group together into communities of their own in the upper Midwest.

Technology, economic conditions, and social pressures around the world continued to grow, shift, and change with the century. Starting in the 1890s, a surge of immigration, identified by historians as the "new wave," began to arrive in the United States. Advances in steamship transportation and the changing economic and political situations in Europe meant increasing

numbers of immigrants came from Southern and Eastern Europe instead of northwest Europe as they had in previous decades. This difference in origin, language, and ethnicity meant they stood out more than the previous generation of immigrants. Industrial economic growth in the United States and the strong pull of freedom encouraged these immigrants to try their luck in the new world.

One of the largest of these groups were Italian immigrants. Italy was a country of divided kingdoms and geography. Northern and central Italy had advanced economically at a fairly rapid rate. The southern part of the country, however, lagged behind. This meant young southern Italians had limited means and opportunities to make a living. The majority of Italian immigrants settled in urban centers along the east coast, taking industrial jobs.

Another immigrant group entering the country during the period from 1880 to 1924 were eastern Europeans. Predominately from Austria-Hungary, Poland, and Russia, they shared a common geography, but their experiences of immigrating differed widely. Many of these immigrants were Jewish and driven out of their home countries due to increasing religious persecution. The majority entered the United States through the famous port of entry, Ellis Island, and settled in communal groups in the lower east side of New York.

By the late 1800s, the United States government had set up efficient systems for processing and evaluating immigrants as they arrived in the United States. Ellis Island, which opened in 1892, was a part of this system. After surviving the long and arduous journey to the United States, they were ferried off the ship that had brought them, put through a physical examination and had their papers checked.

They went through a brief questioning (though many did not speak English), collected their baggage, and if they passed all of these steps, they could enter America proper. They brought their traditional skills, foods, and customs, all of which added to the rich social fabric of the United States. However, many native-born Americans were concerned about their different languages, religions, and philosophies of government, causing tensions with the newcomers.

Americans at the time rightly believed that for a republic based on consent to survive, a population must value certain fundamental republican principles. The ideas of a constitutionally limited government, the rule of law, private property, individual liberty, only exist to the extent they are understood and guarded by a society. However, this desire to protect these fundamental principles wrongly became entangled with racial and religious prejudices of the time. Some feared that the health of the entire social contract was endangered because some of the immigrants arrived with differing notions of government, religion, and society. This led to harmful and immoral discrimination.

Many immigrants were discriminated against for their religious beliefs. The United States was primarily a Protestant nation. Many believed that Catholics were loyal to the Pope above the American government, which interfered with their patriotic allegiance to America. Starting with the increased number of Catholic immigrants from Ireland in the 1840s, tensions led to harsh treatment and unfair laws against the Irish and German Catholics, and later against Poles and other eastern Europeans.

One political group that was a particularly Anti-Catholic organization was the American

Party, which began in the 1840s. Also called the “Know-nothing” party, this nativist group was dedicated to halting what they believed was a corrupting influence on the American republican form of government by immigrants. They blamed the outsiders for taking jobs and opportunities away from native-born Americans whom they believed to be more deserving of the opportunities.

Another group of immigrants, the Chinese and Japanese, also suffered intolerance. Immigrants of Asian descent began arriving in the United States in the middle of the 1800s. It was not until after the end of the Civil War in 1865 that their numbers became significant. These immigrants were at first concentrated primarily in west coast cities and worked as laborers (especially on the railroad), farmers and merchants. They predominately moved into their own culturally distinct neighborhoods within these cities. Asian immigrants were exploited as cheap labor, feeding the insatiable need for workers in the ever expanding west. The Chinese Exclusionary Act of 1882, passed at the behest of organized labor, restricted Chinese immigration for ten years and prevented existing immigrants from enjoying the right to vote or becoming citizens. In 1906, President Theodore Roosevelt made a “gentlemen’s agreement” with Japan that he would prevent segregation of Japanese students in west coast schools if Japan would restrict Japanese immigration to America.

As the twentieth century dawned, nativists continued their efforts to legally exclude

immigrant groups. During World War I, nativists in the American Protective League attacked “hyphenated Americans.” German-Americans suffered discrimination and violence as all signs of German culture were excluded from public life. In addition, Congress passed a literacy test for immigrants (over President Woodrow Wilson’s veto) aimed at excluding the mostly illiterate “new immigrants” from southeastern Europe. In 1924, Congress passed the seminal Immigration Act of 1924, marking a major shift in immigration in the United States. It adjusted quotas, making them stricter, restricting the number of immigrants coming to America, particularly the new immigrants.

The United States is often referred to as a “Nation of Immigrants”. But in reality, the United States is a nation of Americans. Waves of immigrants who embraced the ideals of the nation as outlined in the Declaration of Independence, became Americans and helped to build the country and shape its institutions. Unified by a belief in these eternal principles, they helped settle the frontier and molded it into the fertile land it is today. They built cities, canals, and railroads, the infrastructure on which the nation still relies. Though many held on to their own cultural identities, they largely adopted American republican principles. Though their experience would be different after 1924, the millions hoping to settle in the United States and their importance to the nation, remained unchanged.

CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS

1. Who is an immigrant?
2. What was the first major ethnic group to immigrate to the United States?
3. What were three major factors drawing immigrants to the United States in the 1800s?
4. How did the pattern of immigration change throughout the 1800s?
5. What fears motivated the nativists' actions against immigrants?
6. What motivations do you believe caused immigrant families to group together upon relocating to the United States?