

19th and 20th Century Immigration to America

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Immigrants have been flocking to the shores of North America to what ultimately became the United States since the 1600s. Three major immigration waves took place in the 1800s and early 1900s. The countries from which immigrants arrived changed from predominantly those of northwest Europe to those of southeast Europe as the 19th century concluded. As the waves continued, there were often concerns about the numbers of immigrants arriving and how that would affect those already living in the United States, especially those who traced their lineages back to the earliest of arrivers in the 1600s. And with those concerns came changes to the immigration laws that ultimately in the 20th century affected who could travel to America and how many could travel to settle.

The 1800s

As the United States began to grow and expand its lands, the enticements for immigrants would increase. Newly created territories and states would help in advertising abroad and with the exception of the period of the United States Civil War, most of the years of this century would see an increase in the arrival of immigrants.

As those numbers grew and issues took place in America, concerns would escalate as well in regard to who should be allowed in the United States and just what the process should be, including waiting periods. It would be these waiting periods that would present the research problems we experience today in finding the naturalization records for an ancestor.

During these years, naturalization and the individual steps to citizenship could be done at any “court of record.” This includes:

- Municipal courts
- County courts
- State courts
- Federal courts

One of the issues with this period is that an immigrant could file his first and second papers in two different places and then receive his certificate of naturalization at year another.

Patterns of Immigration

Three major waves of immigrants:

- 1815-1860: 5 million immigrants, primarily from the British Isles, Germany, Holland, Scandinavia, and Switzerland
- 1860-1890: 10 million immigrants primarily from the same countries
- 1890-1914: 15 million immigrants, primarily from Austria-Hungary, Greece, Italy, Romania, Russia, and Turkey



Settlement Patterns

In 1907 the federal government felt they needed to know more about the immigrants who were entering the United States. By an act of Congress, 20 February 1907, a commission headed by William P. Dillingham—and often referred to as the “Dillingham Commission”—was created to examine the “immigrant question.” When the report was finished, they had made certain conclusions that were not supported by documentation in census and other records. Statistical records from the census revealed some interesting settlement patterns:

- Southern states had very few immigrants
- The bulk of the foreign-born settled primarily east of the Mississippi and north of the Ohio River and the Mason and Dixon’s Line
- Four states contained almost half the total foreign-born population: New York, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and Illinois

Distribution by ethnic groups was also determined from these statistical extractions from the census:

- **Germans:** Middle West (esp. Illinois, Wisconsin, Ohio, and Minnesota), New York, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey
- **Norwegians, Swedes and Danes:** Minnesota, Illinois, Wisconsin, The Dakotas, and Washington
- **Finns:** Michigan, Minnesota, and Massachusetts
- **Canadians:** Almost half in New England, New York, Michigan, and other states along the Great Lakes
- **Irish:** Middle Atlantic states (includes New York), New England, Illinois, and California
- **Italians:** Middle Atlantic states (includes New York), New England, Illinois, Illinois, and California
- **Russians and Austrian-Hungarians:** New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Illinois, and Massachusetts

Immigrant Restriction

The previously mentioned Dillingham Commission including not only William Paul Dillingham who was best known for his restriction of immigrants from certain countries, but also a number of other restrictionists. For instance, Henry Cabot Lodge was the public voice of the Immigration Restriction League. The Immigration Restriction League was founded in Boston, Massachusetts in 1894 by three Boston Brahmin Harvard alumni: Charles Warren, Robert DeCourcy Ward and Prescott F. Hall. They believed that immigrants from southern and eastern Europe were ethnically inferior to Anglo-Saxons. In 1906, Prescott F. Hall wrote a book entitled *Immigration and Its Effects Upon the United States* in which he compared the Northwestern Europeans to Southeastern Europeans, with records showing the deficiencies in those coming from southeastern Europe.

In addition to the biases being vocalized about the southeastern Europeans, there were also limitations being placed on Chinese immigration in part to protect them from labor abuse and in part because of the numbers of Asians who had already arrived.

Chinese Exclusion Acts

The first act to exclude Chinese immigration was in 1882, but subsequent acts in 1884, 1888, 1892 and 1902 expanded the exclusions. Ultimately in the Immigration Act of 1917, there was identified an Asiatic Barred Zone that included much more than just China. These acts forced many immigrants from China before 1917 to create fictitious relationships to those already in the United States. These were known as “paper sons.” Because these immigrants knew they would be heavily interrogated upon their arrival they spent their ship crossing studying complete family trees with information about hometowns and more.

Literacy Tests

While included in Congressional bills beginning in 1891, a literacy test was not actually approved until 1917. The Immigration Act of 1917, despite being vetoed by President Woodrow Wilson, it was overridden by Congress and became a law February 5, 1917. In addition to the previously mentioned Asiatic Barred Zone, which was also part of this act, it required all immigrants over the age of 16 to prove they were literate. One of the tests included reading a passage from the Bible in their native language.

Quotas

The Immigration Act of 1921, passed on May 19, set an annual quota for each nationality group at three percent of the number of foreign-born persons of that national origin as enumerated in the 1910 census. Certain classes of alien were exempted from this quota. It still acknowledged the Asiatic Barred Zone, denying those immigrants entry.

The National Quota Act of 1924 was heavily weighted to limit the southern and eastern Europeans from gaining entry. The “national origins” system became fully operational in 1929. It capped the total immigration outside of the Western Hemisphere to 150,000 immigrants, which averaged out to five northwestern Europeans to one southeastern European. Great Britain and Northern Ireland were allotted 65,721 immigration slots. Germany had 25,957. Meanwhile Greece had 307 slots per annum and Portugal had 440.

It was while under these quotas in the 1930s that immigration saw struggles. Those in the United States didn’t want any new arrivals as those in America were already struggling to find ways to make ends meet. Meanwhile, in Germany the Nazi Party was taking control and many immigrants were seeking refuge out of that country—especially Jews. Some refugees were required to wait two or more years to get a visa to immigrate to the United States.

World War II and After

Once World War II began things slowed considerably. Many Europeans had been conscripted into their own country’s military. Ships that had previously carried passengers to the United States were painted grey and carried troops to Europe and crossing the Atlantic was not a safe passage with the German U-boats in wait.

While World War II continued for America, and the dislike of the Japanese was rampant, the Immigration Act of 1943, passed December 17, repeated all prior Chinese Exclusion Acts. It also allowed the Chinese to become naturalized citizens.

After the war, the United States realized they had to address the issue of service men who had married while overseas. The War Brides Act was passed December 28, 1945. Though there was still a quota system in place for immigrants, it established that brides and children of veterans carried non-quota status as immigrants and established that World War II began December 7, 1941 and ceased “upon the termination of hostilities as declared by the President or by a joint resolution of Congress.” In addition, race could not bar an alien spouse from entry.

An additional act was passed June 25, 1948, known as the Displaced Persons Act, in which was created a non-quota status for certain displaced persons as a result of World War II. Some 400,000 people were admitted to the United States over four years under this act.

The Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1952, passed June 27, is the act from which all present-day immigration and naturalization laws stem. Like the Act of 1917, this one was vetoed by the then President, Harry S. Truman, but it was overridden. It had 407 sections under four titles addressing all things related to immigration and naturalization. Truman’s issues with the 1952 Act had to do with the inequality of immigrants – where once again those of Northwestern countries were deemed to be better citizens than those from southeastern Europe. Likewise, he did not approve of the power given to the Attorney General in determining what immigrants could come into the country.

Also known as the Walter-McCarran Act, it established a preference system that determined which ethnic groups were desirable, placing great importance on labor qualifications. It defined three types of immigrants:

- Immigrants with special skills or relatives who were U.S. Citizens
- Average immigrants (number not to exceed 270,000)
- Refugees

The Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965, also known as the Hart-Cellar Act, was passed October 4, 1965. It eliminated the national-origins quotas that began in 1924. It established a new immigration policy based on reuniting immigrant families as well as attracting skilled labor to the U.S.

The policies put into effect under the Hart-Cellar Act would dramatically change the demographic makeup of the American population. In the three decades that followed its passage, more than 18 million legal immigrants entered America. That was more than three times the number admitted during the previous 30 years.

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