



ELLIS ISLAND

Gateway to America

Ellis Island..... I've taken that tour boat trip around New York Harbor a few times... each time as the boat passed Ellis Island, I looked at those buildings, trying to visualize first, my grandfather coming to this country alone from Hungary. He came ahead of grandmother and children, to find a job and provide a home for them to come to, then sent for grandmother, my aunt and my father, both under the age of six. Grandmother was booked to sail on the Titanic. She and the children arrived too late and the ship left without them aboard. They were on a sister ship that picked up some survivors of the Titanic.

I can't imagine having the courage or stamina to travel the ocean in the steerage section of the ship, to a strange country with 2 small children in tow, not knowing the language, not having much money with no idea of what the future holds for you. The driving force for all immigrants that came to America's shores was taking that risk to better their lives in the LAND OF THE FREE!

Were your ancestors processed at the immigrant station on Ellis Island? If they landed in New York, they were processed at one of three locations, depending on when they arrived.

At Castle Garden, the dates documented are from Aug. 1 1855 to April 18 1890. At the Barge Office, the dates span from April 19 1890 to Dec 31 1891. The Ellis Island dates are entered as being Jan 1 1892 to June 13 1897.

On June 14, 1897 the building on Ellis Island was destroyed in a fire so the Barge Office was again used for immigrant processing.

June 14 1897 to Dec 16 1900... the Barge Office.

**A new building on Ellis Island opened on Dec 17 1900.
From Dec 17 1900 to Dec 31 1942 the new building was used.**

Castle Garden was located on the southwest tip of Manhattan in Battery Park while the Barge Office was located on the southeast tip. Before the Castle Garden Center opened in 1855 the passengers simply got off the ship onto whatever wharf they had landed on in Manhattan. There was no central processing center. They were recorded on passenger arrival lists beginning in 1820. Ships never actually landed at Ellis Island, they landed at Manhattan and the passengers were ferried over to the island for processing. Usually only the steerage passengers went to Ellis Island for inspection. MOST ALL of first and second class passengers were allowed to leave the ship soon after docking. All passengers however, were listed on the ship's passenger list.

After 1924 prospective immigrants were pre-inspected at US embassies overseas. They were inspected again at the port of arrival before leaving the ship.

From 1882 until 1924, more than 22 million people entered the country through this small processing center located in the shadow of the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor. It is a symbol of freedom and of opportunities in America to many as well as a symbol of the hardships caused by the journey to this land.

Ellis Island occupies a permanent place in America's history. More than half of the immigrants entering the United States between 1892 and 1924 passed through its gates. While mass examination of immigrants at Ellis Island ended in 1924, it continued to be used as a detention center for immigrants whose status in this country was questioned. In 1954, the island was permanently closed as an active immigration station. In 1965 it was added by Presidential Proclamation to the Statue of Liberty National Monument and was opened for public tours in 1976. Following its closure in 1984 for restoration, Ellis Island was reopened in 1990 with new exhibits, films and visitor programs.

Today, anyone with an Internet connection can search through old passenger manifests from the ships that ferried 17million immigrants into New York Harbor and the "New World" in the late 19th and 20th centuries.

To find these records, one can go to www.ellislandrecords.org. Viewed on the computers screen, the ship manifests are dull documents, pages of common information, some typed, others filled with flowery type handwriting popular of the time but hardly readable today.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day-Saints which has put about 600 million records from all over the world on its own genealogy web site (www.familysearch.org) also provided the labor for the Ellis Island project. About 12,000 volunteers spent much of the past nine years extracting data from microfilms.

The 60 year old microfilm was of varied quality and the original manifest, sold for paper pulp by the government decades ago, weren't available for double checking. People's names were spelled different ways. Names of towns and villages too, due in part to the ship's personnel who wrote names phonetically.

Because of these discrepancies, people who come to the center will have to come with substantial information. Finding relatives will not be a matter of pushing a button and information printing out. Visitors to Ellis Island who want to use the American Family Immigration History Center will need to reserve their time at the computer by calling the foundation at : 212-883-1986 or reserving online at: www.ellislandrecords.org.

Anyone lucky enough to trace their relatives will also be able to see the name of the ship they sailed on, its departure and arrival dates, others traveling with that relative and the contact name in the United States for that relative.

Ellis Island was named for Samuel Ellis, who owned the island in the 1770's.