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ELLIS ISLAND

We've all heard of the famous Ellis Island, but what is it? Where is it? Why is it significant when learning about America's history? Did you know it was originally a large, vast oyster bank and a major food source for the Lenape population before the arrival of Dutch settlers? We'll learn about that and more as we steer our ships toward Ellis Island and embark on this amazing journey.

Ellis Island is best known for being an immigrant inspection station between 1892-1954. Most of the island is located in New Jersey but New Jersey and New York share jurisdiction of the island yet it remains a federal property. It is in the upper New York Bay, east of Liberty State Park. It encompasses a total of 27.5 acres today, but originally it was a small island that went by the names of Oyster Island, Black Tom's Island and then Ellis Island.

New York leased the island in 1794. From 1808-1814 it was a federal arsenal. At the end of the War of 1812, Fort Gibson was built and it remained a military post for about 80 years.

For the thirty-five years before Ellis Island opened, over 8 million immigrants came through Castle Garden Immigration Depot. On April 18, 1890, the federal government assumed control of immigration. The government then moved a bunch of land (mostly landfill) to build up the island's acreage. The adding of landfill continued for several years so the island could hold more structures.

The first immigration station opened on January 1, 1892 and the first person through was a fifteen year old girl named Annie Moore who came from Cork, Ireland with her two younger brothers. Their parents had been here in America for two previous years without them. Seven hundred immigrants passed through the station made of wood that first day and almost 450, 000 immigrants came through during the first year. Unfortunately, a fire in 1897 destroyed all records dated back to 1855, that's forty-two years of records, gone.

The government estimated they could process 5,000 immigrants per day but there was a flood of newcomers right before WWI. Writer Louis Adamic came to America from Slovenia in Southeastern Europe in 1913 and described the night he and many other immigrants slept on bunk beds in a huge hall. Lacking a warm blanket, the young man "shivered, sleepless, all night, listening to snores and dreams in perhaps a dozen different languages".

When the hopeful foreigners arrived at Ellis Island, they spent 2-5 hours there. They were asked 29 questions including their name, occupation, and the amount of money they were carrying. The United States wanted them to have about \$18-25 to get them started. As they would climb the long stairway, doctors would observe them, and those having obvious difficulties would get a chalk mark on their clothing (on the back) with a different letter meaning one suspected ailment or another. Some would wipe the chalk mark off or turn their clothes inside out. Those with visible health problems or diseases were sent home or to the hospital there on the island. More than 3,000 aliens died there in that hospital. You weren't guaranteed a spot here in America once you departed the ship from your long journey. Some were rejected because they lacked skills. About 2% were sent back because of disease, criminal backgrounds or insanity. Because of this, Ellis Island earned the nicknames, "The Island of Tears" or "Heartbreak Island".

A famous spot inside Ellis Island is known as the Kissing Post. It is a wooden column where many tears, hugs and kisses were exchanged between family and friends who were being reunited after being apart for months and sometimes years. Entertainers like Jimmy Durante and Bob Hope entertained the non-natives as they arrived at the island.

There is no historical record that indicates that officials told people to change their names, that is a myth. Inspectors were too busy for something like that; they got lists from the steamship companies. Names were changed by the families after immigration or by the 2nd or 3rd generation after assimilation into American culture. Some names were changed due to the difference in letters and pronunciation of certain letters in the alphabet.

After 1924, the famous island became a detention and deportation station. During WWII, 7,000 Germans, Italians, and Japanese were detained there. It later became a processing center for returning sick or wounded soldiers followed by being a Coast Guard training base. Ellis Island still processed immigrants but not as many, yet after WWII, numbers went up again. The security act of 1950 barred members of the Communist or Fascist organizations from entering the United States.

Since 9-11, the island has been guarded by patrols of the U.S. State Parks Police. It was closed for about a year after the devastation of Hurricane Sandy in 2012 and was partially reopened in Oct. of 2013. The museum reopened in the spring of 2014.

When Ellis Island closed in 1954, 12 million immigrants had been processed with the final patron being a Norwegian merchant seaman named Arne Peterssen. The station's peak year was 1907 with 1, 004, 756 and the all time daily high was April 17, 1907 when 11,747 hopeful people passed through. Where would these people go when they left the island? It's estimated that 10.5 million departed for locations across America from the Central Railroad of New Jersey Terminal. After the immigration act of 1924, immigration was processed at overseas embassies and the only souls who could come through Ellis Island were displaced persons or war refugees. Nearly one-third of our population can trace their ancestry to Ellis Island.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5rredHTyKaQ>