

A Brief History of Immigration to the United States

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The United States is overwhelmingly a nation of immigrants and their descendants. While there are similarities in the experiences of each new group, there are also important differences. Every group experienced both a push and a pull - something that drove them to leave their original homeland and something that brought them to the United States. Sometimes the push and pull were economic. Sometimes people fled political or religious persecution.

Many immigrants saw their initial move to the new world as temporary. They hoped to find work, build a financial stake, and then return to their homeland. While many people did go back, most became Americans.

While every group experienced hardship when they arrived, the original African migration to the Americas was unique. People from Africa were forced migrants who were brought to the United States and the Caribbean against their will.

First Migration

Human life and culture originated in East Africa and spread across the entire planet. Between 50,000 and 20,000 years ago, nomadic Asian hunters became the first people to settle in the Americas. As they searched for food, they followed herds of game animals across a temporary land bridge that stretched from Siberia to Alaska. These people became the Native Americans or Indians.

Europeans and Africans, 1500-1840

After the arrival of Columbus in 1492, European people settled in and conquered the Americas. During this period they built new independent nations in North and South America and the Caribbean. The major European groups that settled in the future United States included people from the British Isles, Spain, France, and Holland.

Most of these immigrants were poor people who came looking for work and land. Many came as indentured servants or forced prison laborers. Some fled wars in Europe and hoped that in a new world they would find peace or be able to follow their own religious practices.

During this period, the Europeans forced millions of West Africans to come to the United States as slave labor to work on the sugar, cotton and tobacco plantations. In 1793, a successful African slave rebellion created the first independent Caribbean nation of Haiti.

New Arrivals

From 1840 until 1880, new European groups migrated to the United States. The Irish fled starvation and persecution by the British. In the United States they became factory workers and helped build the canals, railroads, and the labor movement. Scandinavians were farming people who largely settled in the midwest.

The Germans migrated in large numbers because of war and failed revolutions. Many Germans were skilled workers and they settled in new cities. During this period there were so many German immigrants that Chicago schools taught students in German. People of German descent remain the largest ethnic group in the United States today.

During this period large numbers of Chinese also migrated to the United States. They settled on the west coast where they helped to build the railroads.

When the economy was strong, these new people were generally accepted. However, economic hard times brought strong anti-immigrant feelings including the spread of racist ideas. Immigrant workers were attacked, their unions were broken, and laws were passed to keep out new immigrants. In 1882 the first exclusion laws banned immigrants from China and other "undesirables." In 1908, the United States also blocked immigration from Japan.

Ellis Island

Between 1880 and 1921 millions of new immigrants poured into the United States from Eastern and Southern Europe and from Mexico. They included Slavic people like Russians, Poles, and Ukrainians, Mediterranean groups like Italians, Sicilians, Greeks, Turks and Armenians, and religious groups like the Eastern European Jews. Most of these new immigrants arrived by boat in New York City through Ellis Island. They were poor people who traveled in "steerage," along with their luggage in the hold of large steamships.

Most of the new arrivals from Europe settled in Eastern coast and midwestern cities where they lived in overcrowded slums and unhealthy and unsafe tenement housing. Many did dangerous work in mines, mills, and factories. In New York City, immigrants dug the subway tunnels and water aqueducts, built the skyscrapers and bridges, and developed the garment industry. Conditions were so difficult that almost 50% of the Italians and Sicilians and over 30% of the Slavs who came to the United States eventually returned home.

Many immigrants were union leaders and political activists who tried to improve conditions for poor people and workers. Mother Jones and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn were Irish. Joe Hill was Swedish. Sacco and Vanzetti were Italian. Sam Gompers, Sidney Hillman, and David Dubinsky were Jews.

By 1919, anti-immigrant sentiment was growing in the United States again. Southern and Eastern European immigrants were branded as radicals and undesirables who could never become truly American. In 1921 and 1924 quota laws were passed to effectively stop immigration from these areas.

Internal Immigrants

Quotas on foreign immigration unleashed a wave of internal migration between 1920 and 1965. The largest groups to move were from the U.S. south. Rural Southern blacks and whites migrated to northern and western cities seeking work in expanding factories. Many African Americans hoped to find increased freedom away from the racially segregated south. This migration created new African American communities in New York City in Harlem and Bedford-Stuyvesant.

Spanish-speaking Puerto Ricans came to the mainland seeking work in record numbers during these years. Because Puerto Rico was a U.S. colony, Puerto Ricans were not restricted by immigration quotas.

Newest Immigrants

In 1965, the United States revised its immigration laws, making it possible for millions of new immigrants to enter the country. The newest immigrants to the United States, Brooklyn, and East New York, include tens of thousands of people from the Caribbean, South and Central America, West Africa, Eastern Europe, and Asia. These people seek work and economic, political, and religious freedom. Despite hostility that has often greeted them, many have decided to put down roots and become United States citizens.