

## A Nation of Immigrants

### America: The Land of Opportunity

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From the first Spanish colonists who founded St. Augustine, Florida, in 1565, to the latest immigrants to arrive at John F. Kennedy Airport in New York City, Los Angeles International, and Houston Intercontinental Airport, America has been a land of immigrants. The first permanent English settlement was established at Jamestown, Virginia, in 1607. By the time of the American Revolution, the eastern seaboard from Maine to Georgia had a population of two million—almost all of them immigrants from England, Ireland, and Germany.

#### The Land of Opportunity, Then

Economic opportunity was the initial draw for immigrants coming to America. European countries were looking for every possible way to expand to gain power and wealth. America was an expansive land of untapped resources, in a strategic location to gain access to the Pacific Ocean. Tradesmen in Europe found it especially enticing because for them it held the promise of cheap land and profit through trade. They could continue their trade, or start a new business, with unlimited natural resources. They had fellow citizens and indigenous people to trade with, and the prospect of a strong economy. America also offered a sanctuary of religious freedom. Those who faced religious persecution looked to America as an opportunity to worship freely. Initially, the religious sects that moved to America and formed religious settlements were able to practice, preserve, and preach their religion without restraint. These capitalist and religious immigrants became the colonists who founded the original thirteen colonies; they went on to fight the British during the American Revolution to establish and defend their new “homeland.”

Between 1790 and 1815, another 250,000 Europeans immigrated to the United States, and between 1820 and 1860, some 4.6 million more arrived, most of them after 1840 and many of them from Ireland. The first half of the 1800s saw two million Irish emigrate, pushed out of Ireland by the potato famine and oppressive British rule. These newcomers joined earlier immigrants, such as the English, Germans, Dutch, French, and Swedish, in building the United States. And until the slave trade was suppressed in 1808, tens of thousands of Africans entered the country in chains.

The greatest period of immigration to America occurred between 1880 and 1920, when approximately 23 million immigrants arrived. Immigration records were not kept well during that time, and it is impossible to know the exact number of immigrants who entered the country. By 1914 and the onset of World War I in Europe, one-third of all Americans were either immigrants themselves or had at least one parent who was an immigrant. However, these later immigrants came from different parts of Europe than the earlier immigrants. The “Old Immigrants,” as historians call those who moved to the United States from about 1820 to 1860, came mainly from northern and western Europe, from countries like England, Scotland, Ireland, and Germany. And, of course, prior to this, thousands of Africans were brought to the United States against their will and enslaved. The “New Immigrants,” who came from about 1870 to 1920, were primarily from southern and eastern Europe, including Russia, Italy, Poland, and Austria-Hungary. Between 1890 and 1917, about 75 percent of immigrants to the United States came from these countries. A very limited number of immigrants were allowed into the United States from Asia at this time because of racial prejudice against Asians on the part of native-born Americans.

Why did (and do) immigrants come to the United States? Historians have identified a number of “push and pull factors” at work in immigration. The push factors are those that drive people to leave their native countries. The exact factors depend on an immigrant’s country of origin. The pull factors are conditions in the United States that attract people to settle here, such as economic opportunity, political freedom, and religious freedom.

In the period after the Civil War, economic problems, political oppression, and religious persecution caused people to emigrate. In Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania, and Poland, large landholdings were broken up and leased to tenant farmers, who, in many cases, found it nearly impossible to earn a living by farming such small parcels of land. In Italy, farmers were faced with declining prices for their fruit and wine. In the wars of the 1800s, Poland had been carved up by victors and no longer existed. Polish people, especially Polish Catholics, were persecuted as the new rulers tried to eradicate all traces of Polish customs and traditions. Russian Jews were also persecuted on account of their religion.

To these people, the United States offered a place of refuge, the promise of religious freedom and political freedom, and an opportunity for a better life. Earlier immigrants wrote home, urging their families and friends to come to America. One immigrant wrote the following:

I am getting along well, very well. I have worked in a factory and I am now working in a hotel. I receive 18 (in our money 32) dollars a month, and that is very good. . . . We eat here every day what we get only for Easter in our country.

Midwestern states and steamship companies published pamphlets extolling the possibilities for a prosperous life in the United States. Minnesota published the following advertisement:

To Laboring Men, who earn a livelihood by honest toil; to Landless Men, who aspire to the dignity and independence which comes from possession in God’s free earth; to All Men of moderate means, and men of wealth. . . . It is well to exchange the tyrannies and thankless toil of the old world for the freedom and independence of the new.

The letters and advertisements turned out to be far from truthful for most immigrants. Those who settled in cities had a hard time making a living in the factories and sweatshops. Farm families found life on the plains, far from the nearest neighbor, lonely and at times dangerous, when blizzards, floods, illness, or serious accidents struck. Still, for many of these immigrants, their new life seemed better than life back home, where they had tried to scratch out a living on a poor, tiny plot of land, or had lived in fear because of their political or religious views.

## **The Land of Opportunity, Now**

The various push and pull factors may have ebbed and flowed in prominence throughout the 1900s and early 2000s, but there continue to be reasons why people wish to move to the United States today.

Since the mid-1900s, globalization, the process by which businesses and other organizations develop international influence or start operating on an international scale, has had a huge impact on the world. With globalization, both international travel and banking are simpler and more readily available to many people. Advances in transportation, communication, media, and technology have made the world a smaller—and more accessible—place. The “land of opportunity” that the United States offers is visible, and enticing.

Globalization has also created a more disparate difference between developed and developing nations. Many developing nations struggle with the ability to provide a stable economy that enables families to work and care for each other. Their resources are often depleted, and they lack the technology and capital to sustain job opportunities. The people suffering in these developing nations look to developed countries for work—and the work is often there. With the ease of being able to transfer money internationally, people emigrate, and face any hardships associated with the immigration process, in order to work and earn money to send back home to their families.

Economic hardship isn't the only reason immigrants continue to flock to the United States. Many immigrants today are refugees from countries facing internal conflicts that have dramatically increased since the end of the Cold War. In many countries throughout the world, government oppression and brutality are common, often resulting in civil rights abuses, such as the arrest, torture, and killing of civilians. Thousands of asylum seekers and millions of refugees are seeking safety in developed countries like the United States. Civilians are being displaced in countries that continue to practice genocide. In addition, many refugees from the Middle East are seeking shelter from the wars in that region by immigrating to the United States.

These push factors have a strong influence on the actions of people throughout the world, but the pull factors in America are strong influencers as well. The United States has come to rely on immigrant labor to round out its workforce. America's reliance on immigrant workers will most likely continue to increase, since an aging population usually results in a shortage of native-born workers. The projected mass retirement of baby boomers will have a huge impact on our labor force. One of the pull factors is that immigrant workers can make livable wages and can begin to create a better life for themselves and their families. For any country, the number of incoming immigrants is an important discussion and one that many people have different opinions about.

Immigration is a frequent topic in contemporary news. Americans have different opinions about those moving to America and the reasons why they come. The prospect of more people moving to the United States, as well as the moral dilemma of how to help would-be immigrants, remain ongoing topics of conversation.