United States Immigration Timeline

Pre - 1790

Most scientists believe that human beings first came to America over the Bering Straits about 20,000 years ago. These were the ancestors of the many Native American cultures, which would people the landscape for thousands of years.

Around the year 1000, a small number of Vikings would arrive. Five hundred years later, the great European migration would begin.

Crossing the Atlantic meant two to three months of seasickness, overcrowding, limited food rations, and disease. But the lure of available land and the hope for political and religious freedoms kept the Europeans coming.

In some places, the meeting of Europeans and Native Americans was peaceful. In others, the cultures clashed, leading to violence and disease. Whole tribes were decimated by such newly introduced diseases as small pox, measles, and the plague.

By the end of the 16th century, the Spanish were established in St. Augustine, and by the early 17th century thriving communities dotted the landscape: the British in New England and Virginia, the Dutch in New York and New Jersey, and the Swedish in Delaware.

But the Europeans weren't the only immigrants in these communities. As a freed slave from the 19th Century would recall:

"...I looked around the ship...and saw...a multitude of black people of every description chained together, every one of their countenances expressing dejection and sorrow, I no longer doubted my fate..."

Slaves from Africa and the Caribbean were brought forcibly into the New World as early as 1619.

Among the early British settlers were indentured servants willing to trade four to seven years of unpaid labor for a one-way ticket to the colonies and the promise of land. There were also convicts among the newcomers - up to 50,000 transported to the colonies from English jails.

By the mid-18th century, the British colonies had become the most prosperous in North America. But the exodus of skilled laborers from the Old World to the New was becoming a matter of concern for the British Parliament. Some called for a total ban on immigration to the colonies.

But history was moving in quite a different direction.

1790 - 1820

In the six years since the United States won the War of Independence, America was becoming, in Thomas Paine's words, "the asylum for the persecuted lovers of civil and religious liberty from every part of Europe."

The first Census was underway, and of the 3.9 million people counted, the English were the largest ethnic group. Nearly 20% were of African heritage. German, Scottish and Irish residents were also well represented. Census takers didn't count Native Americans.
The early Congresses could do little to affect immigration - the Constitution gave that power to the states. However, Congress was given the authority to ban the slave trade after 1808 - which it did - and the authority to establish rules for naturalization.

In 1790, it passed the first Naturalization Act, which stipulated that "...any alien, being a free white person, may be admitted to become a citizen of the United States..."

In the early years of the republic, immigration was light - 6000 people a year on average, including French refugees from the revolt in Haiti. By 1806, the flow of immigration was reduced to a trickle as hostilities between England and Napoleon's France disrupted Atlantic shipping lanes.

The War of 1812 between the United States and Britain slowed immigration even further.

With peace re-established in 1814, immigration from Great Britain, Ireland and Western Europe resumed at a record pace. Major port cities of this era - New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and Charleston - were overwhelmed with newcomers, many of them sick or dying from the long journey.

Congress responded with the Steerage Act of 1819, requiring ship captains to keep detailed passenger records and provide more humane conditions for those on board.

1820 - 1880

The Industrial Revolution had begun, the slave trade was nearing its end, and America was pushing westward. Thousands of immigrants found work on the trans-continental railroad, settling in towns along the way. Word of the California Gold Rush had spread around the world, drawing immigrants from both Asia and Europe.

Although many new immigrants came in pursuit of a dream, nearly all the Irish immigrants from the 1840's and 1850's came to escape a nightmare - a devastating famine back home. As one immigrant recalled, "I saw the crop. I smelt the fearful stench...the death sign of each field of potatoes...the luxuriant stalks soon withered, the leaves decayed..." The Great Hunger would leave 1.5 million dead, and just as many would flee to America.

The Irish weren't the only newcomers. Rapid population growth, changes in land distribution, and industrialization had stripped many European peasants and artisans of their livelihoods. Departing from Liverpool and Hamburg, they came in through the major Eastern ports, and New Orleans. Chinese immigrants began to arrive in the 1850's, entering through San Francisco.

As in the past, the immigrants of this period were welcome neighbors while the economy was strong. During the Civil War, both the Union and Confederate armies relied on their strength. But during hard times, the immigrants were cast out and accused of stealing jobs from American workers. Some of the loudest protests came from the Know-Nothings, a political party of the 1850's famous for its anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic leanings.

But it was the pro-immigrant voices of this era that would be most influential. The Republican platform of 1864 stated, "Foreign immigration which in the past has added so much to the wealth, resources, and increase of power to the nation...should be fostered and encouraged."

1880 - 1930

By the 1880's, steam power had shortened the journey to America dramatically. Immigrants poured in from around the world: from the Middle East, the Mediterranean, Southern and Eastern Europe, and down from Canada.
The door was wide open for Europeans. In the 1880s alone, 9% of the total population of Norway emigrated to America. After 1892, nearly all immigrants came in through the newly opened Ellis Island.

One immigrant recalled arriving at Ellis Island: "The boat anchored at mid-bay and then they tendered us on the ship to Ellis Island…We got off the boat…you got your bag in your hand and went right into the building. Ah, that day must have been about five to six thousand people. Jammed, I remember it was August. Hot as a pistol, and I'm wearing my long johns, and my heavy Irish tweed suit."

Families often immigrated together during this era, although young men frequently came first to find work. Some of these then sent for their wives, children, and siblings; others returned to their families in Europe with their saved wages.

The experience for Asian immigrants in this period was quite different. In 1882, Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, severely restricting immigration from China. Since earlier laws made it difficult for those Chinese immigrants who were already here to bring over their wives and families, most Chinese communities remained "bachelor societies."

The 1907 "Gentlemen's Agreement" with Japan extended the government's hostility towards Asian workers and families. For thousands, the Angel Island Immigration Station in San Francisco Bay would be as close as they would ever get to the American mainland.

For Mexicans victimized by the Revolution, Jews fleeing the pogroms in Eastern Europe and Russia, and Armenians escaping the massacres in Turkey, America provided refuge.

And for millions of immigrants, New York provided opportunity. In Lower New York, one could find the whole world in a single neighborhood.

Between 1880 and 1930, over 27 million people entered the United States - about 12 million through Ellis Island. But after the outbreak of World War I in 1914, American attitudes toward immigration began to shift. Nationalism and suspicion of foreigners were on the rise, and immigrants' loyalties were often called into question. Through the early 1920s, a series of laws were passed to limit the flow of immigrants.

1930 - 1965

The Great Depression had begun, leaving few with the means or incentive to come to the United States. Many recent immigrants returned to their native lands, including hundreds of thousands of Mexicans, many against their will. The restrictive immigration policies of the 1920s persisted.

In the late 1930s, with World War II accelerating in Europe, a new kind of immigrant began to challenge the quota system and the American conscience. A small number of refugees fleeing Nazi persecution arrived under the quota system, but most were turned away.
Once the US declared war against the Axis Powers, German and Italian resident aliens were detained; but for the Japanese, the policies were more extreme: both resident aliens and American-born citizens of Japanese descent were interned. Congress would officially apologize for the Japanese Internment in 1988.

After the war, the refugee crisis continued. President Truman responded: "I urge the Congress to turn its attention to this world problem in an effort to find ways whereby we can fulfill our responsibilities to these thousands of homeless and suffering refugees of all faiths."

Congress answered with the Displaced Persons Act of 1948, offering hundreds of thousands entry into the United States. But millions more were left to seek refuge elsewhere.

Between 1956 and 1957, the US admitted 38,000 Hungarians, refugees from a failed uprising against the Soviets. These were among the first of the Cold War refugees.

In this era, for the first time in US history, more women than men entered the country. They were reuniting with their families, joining their GI husbands, taking part in the post war economic boom.

By the early 1960s, calls for immigration reform were growing louder. In 1965, Lyndon Johnson signed the Hart-Cellar Act into law. Gone was the quota system favoring Western Europe, replaced by one offering hope to immigrants from all the continents. The face of America was truly about to change.

1965 - 2016

The effects of the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965 were immediate and significant. Within five years, Asian immigration would more than quadruple. This trend was magnified even further by the surge in refugees from the war in Southeast Asia.

On the other side of the world, Cuban refugees told a similar story: "…we got a telegram in the middle of the night saying that we were authorized to go…I remember I kept on looking back at my home and feeling very bad, very sad, and then going to Havana and going to the plane. My father was in a nervous state."

But escaping the Cold War conflicts of the 60s and 70s was not the only draw for the country's newest immigrants. Throughout this period, in a policy that continues to this day, the government has given preferences to professionals like doctors, nurses, scientists, and hi-tech specialists, creating what is often called the "Brain Drain." Many of these skilled workers are women, who are often the first link in a chain of migration, working and saving enough money to bring family members to the US.

The west coast now stands at the crossroads of America's newest cultures, receiving most of the immigrants from the Asian mainland and the Philippines, Mexico, and Central America. Immigrants can enter the country by air, by sea, and by land routes through Canada and Mexico.

Still, immigration rates through the 1990s soared, leaving today's generation with lingering questions: Does America have a duty to keep its doors open to the world? Can immigrants keep their own culture and language, and still be called Americans? Is continued economic growth in America dependent upon a liberal immigration policy? The debates will certainly continue, as new immigrants arrive on our shores daily, bringing with them their own histories, traditions, and ideas, all of which broaden and enrich our sense of what it means to be an American.