Ellis Island Immigration Station

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Summary

The Ellis Island Immigration Station, located in New York Harbor, opened in 1892 and closed in 1954. During peak years from the 1890s until the 1920s, the station processed an estimated twelve million immigrants. Roughly 75 percent of all immigrants arriving in America during this period passed through Ellis Island. The station was run by the federal Immigration Service and represented a new era of federal control over immigration. Officials at Ellis Island were tasked with regulating the flow of immigration by enforcing a growing body of federal laws that barred various categories of “undesirable” immigrants. As the number of immigrants coming to America increased, so did the size of the inspection facility. In 1907, Ellis Island processed more than one million immigrants. The quota laws of the 1920s slowed immigration considerably and the rise of the visa system meant that Ellis Island no longer served as the primary immigrant inspection facility. For the next three decades, Ellis Island mostly served as a detention center for those ordered deported from the country.

After Ellis Island closed in 1954, the facility fell into disrepair. During a period of low immigration and a national emphasis on assimilation, the immigrant inspection station was forgotten by most Americans. With a revival of interest in ethnicity in the 1970s, Ellis Island attracted more attention, especially from the descendants of immigrants who entered the country through its doors. In the 1980s, large-scale fundraising for the restoration of the neighboring Statue of Liberty led to a similar effort to restore part of Ellis Island. In 1990, the Main Building was reopened to the public as an immigration museum under the National Park Service. Ellis Island has evolved into an iconic national monument with deep meaning for the descendants of the immigrants who arrived there, as well as a contested symbol to other Americans grappling with the realities of contemporary immigration.

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