

[Im]migration Policy in America – A Timeline

1790 - Congress adopts uniform rules so that any free white person could apply for citizenship after two years of residency.

1798 - Alien and Sedition Acts required 14 years of residency before citizenship and provided for the deportation of "dangerous" aliens. Changed to five-year residency in 1800.

1819 - First significant federal legislation on immigration. Includes reporting of immigration and rules for passengers from US ports bound for Europe

1846 - Irish of all classes emigrate to the United States as a result of the potato famine.

1857 - Dred Scott decision declared free Africans non-citizens.

1864 - Contract Labor Law allowed recruiting of foreign labor.

1868 - African Americans gained citizenship with 13th Amendment.

1875 - Henderson v. Mayor of New York decision declared all state laws governing immigration unconstitutional; Congress must regulate "foreign commerce." Charity workers, burdened with helping immigrants, petition Congress to exercise authority and regulate immigration. Congress prohibits convicts and prostitutes from entering the country.

1880 - The U.S. population is 50,155,783. More than 5.2 million immigrants enter the country between 1880 and 1890.

1882 - Chinese Exclusion Act. First federal immigration law suspended Chinese immigration for 10 years and barred Chinese in U.S. from citizenship. Also barred convicts, lunatics, and others unable to care for themselves from entering. Head tax placed on immigrants.

1885 - Contract Labor Law. Unlawful to import unskilled aliens from overseas as laborers. Regulations did not pertain to those crossing land borders.

1888 - For the first time since 1798, provisions are adopted for expulsion of aliens.

1889 - Jane Addams founds Hull-House on Chicago's Near West Side.

1890 - Foreign-born in US were 15% of population (14% in Vermont); more arriving from southern and eastern Europe ("new immigrants") than northern and western ("old immigrants"). Jacob Riis publishes "How the Other Half Lives."

1891 - Bureau of Immigration established under the Treasury Department. More classes of aliens restricted including those who were monetarily assisted by others for their passage. Steamship companies were ordered to return ineligible immigrants to countries of origin.

1892 - Ellis Island opened to screen immigrants entering on east coast. (Angel Island screened those on west coast.) Ellis Island officials reported that women traveling alone must be met by a man, or they were immediately deported.

1902 - Chinese Exclusion Act renewed indefinitely.

1903 - Anarchists, epileptics, polygamists, and beggars ruled inadmissible.

1905 - Construction of Angel Island Immigration Station began in the area known as China Cove. Surrounded by public controversy from its inception, the station was finally put into operation in 1910. Although it was billed as the "Ellis Island of the West", within the Immigration Service it was known as "The Guardian of the Western Gate" and was designed control the flow of Chinese into the country, who were officially not welcome with the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882.

1906 - Procedural safeguards enacted for naturalization. Knowledge of English becomes a basic requirement.

1907 - Head tax is raised. People with physical or mental defects, tuberculosis, and children unaccompanied by a parent are added to the exclusion list. Japan agreed to limit emigrants to US in return for elimination of segregating Japanese students in San Francisco schools.

1910 - Dillingham Report from Congress assumed inferiority of "new immigrants" from southern and eastern Europe and suggested a literacy test to restrict their entry. (William P. Dillingham was a Senator from Vermont.)

1917 - Immigration Act provided for literacy tests for those over 16 and established an "Asiatic Barred Zone," which barred all immigrants from Asia.

1921 - Quota Act of 1921 limited immigrants to 3% of each nationality present in the US in 1910. This cut southern and eastern European immigrants to less than 1/4 of those in US before WW I. Asians still barred; no limits on western hemisphere. Non-quota category established: wives, children of citizens, learned professionals, and domestic servants not counted in quotas.

1922 - Japanese made ineligible for citizenship.

1924 - Quotas changed to 2% of each nationality based on numbers in US in 1890. Based on surnames (many anglicized at Ellis Island) and not the census figures, 82% of all immigrants allowed in the country came from western and northern Europe, 16% from southern and eastern Europe, 2% from the rest of the world. As no distinctions were made between refugees and immigrants, this limited Jewish emigres during 1930s and 40s. Despite protests from many native people, Native Americans made citizens of the United States. Border Patrol established.

1929 - The annual quotas of the 1924 Act are made permanent.

1940 - Provided for finger printing and registering of all aliens.

1943 - In the name of unity among the Allies, the Chinese Exclusion Laws were repealed, and China's quota was set at a token 105 immigrants annually. Basis of the Bracero Program established with importation of agricultural workers from North, South, and Central America.

1946 - Procedures adopted to facilitate immigration of foreign-born wives, fiancé(e)s, husbands, and children of US armed forces personnel.

1948 - Displaced Persons Act allowed 205,000 refugees over two years; gave priority to Baltic States refugees; admitted as quota immigrants. Technical provisions discriminated against Catholics and Jews; those were dropped in 1953, and 205,000 refugees were accepted as non-quota immigrants.

1950 - The grounds for exclusion and deportation are expanded. All aliens required to report their addresses annually.

1952 - Immigration and Nationality Act eliminated race as a bar to immigration or citizenship. Japan's quota was set at 185 annually. China's stayed at 105; other Asian countries were given 100 a piece. Northern and western Europe's quota was placed at 85% of all immigrants. Tighter restrictions were placed on immigrants coming from British colonies in order to stem the tide of black West Indians entering under Britain's generous quota. Non-quota class enlarged to include husbands of American women.

1953 - The 1948 refugee law expanded to admit 200,000 above the existing limit

1965 - Hart-Celler Act abolished national origins quotas, establishing separate ceilings for the eastern (170,000) and western (120,000) hemispheres (combined in 1978). Categories of preference based on family ties, critical skills, artistic excellence, and refugee status.

1978 - Separate ceilings for Western and Eastern hemispheric immigration combined into a worldwide limit of 290,000.

1980 - The Refugee Act removes refugees as a preference category; reduces worldwide ceiling for immigration to 270,000.

1986 - Immigration Reform and Control Act provided for amnesty for many illegal aliens and sanctions for employers hiring illegals.

1989 - A bill gives permanent status to non-immigrant registered nurses who have lived in US for at least three years and met established certification standards.

1990 - Immigration Act of 1990 limited unskilled workers to 10,000/year; skilled labor requirements and immediate family reunification major goals. Continued to promote nuclear family model. Foreign-born in US was 7%.

1996 - Immigration Act. In an effort to curb illegal immigration, Congress votes to double the U.S. Border Patrol to 10,000 agents over five years and mandates the construction of fences at the most heavily trafficked areas of the U.S.- Mexico border. Congress also approves a pilot program to check the immigration status of job applicants.

2001 - USA Patriot Act amended the Immigration and Nationality Act to broaden the scope of aliens ineligible for admission or deportable due to terrorist activities to include an alien who: (1) is a representative of a political, social, or similar group whose political endorsement of terrorist acts undermines U.S. antiterrorist efforts; (2) has used a position of prominence to endorse terrorist activity, or to persuade others to support such activity in a way that undermines U.S. antiterrorist efforts (or the child or spouse of such an alien under specified circumstances); or (3) has been associated with a terrorist organization and intends to engage in threatening activities while in the United States. The act is currently set to expire May 29, 2011 (after a 90 day extension from February 28, 2011 from Congress).