

US Immigration History

American Immigration History

This overview of US immigration history is basic, bare-bones information, but for those who want to know a little something about the history of the United States of America's ambivalent attitude towards new immigrants.

I say "ambivalent" because our great country has welcomed emigrants from around the world like no other modern nation, taking the unwanted from many different countries.

That doesn't mean that the native population has always liked immigrants and open immigration policies, and anti-immigrant sentiments have led to anti-immigrant laws, barring certain races and ethnicities from immigration, and the establishment of rigid quota systems. America is still the Great Melting Pot, but Americans have turned down the heat on that pot at times throughout our history. I wish I had time to go into greater detail about the successive waves of immigration to our nation, to get into the minds of the American people at different times in our past.

For now, here's the basic red-letter years in the history of immigration to the United States.

American Immigration Timeline

- **1790 – Naturalization Act** – Any foreigner, "being a free white person", may be admitted to become a U.S. citizen.
- **1798 – Alien and Sedition Acts** – Four acts passed during the undeclared war with Revolutionary France over maritime rights, as well as concerns about similar revolutionary sentiment in America, exacerbated by such incidents as the Citizen Genet Incident (1793), the Jay Treaty with England (1794), the XYZ Affair (1797-98), and French raids on American shipping in the Quasi-War (1798-99). The Democrats under Vice President Thomas Jefferson called these acts unconstitutional – and historians tend to agree – because it gave the Federal government to squelch dissent. The four acts were: **The Naturalization Act**, increasing time of resident required for aliens to become U.S. Citizens (25 years); **The Alien Friends Act**, allowing President Adams to deport any resident alien considered "dangerous to the peace and safety of the United States"; **The Alien Enemies Act**, allowing the President to apprehend and deport any resident alien if the U.S. was at war with their home country (still in effect); and **The Sedition Act**, making it a crime to publish "false, scandalous and malicious writing" against the government or government officials. Expired on March 3, 1801, the day before Adams left office, and the act that received the most criticism.
- **1845 to 1852** – The first great wave of Irish immigration, after the Irish Potato Famine left a million Irishmen dead and forced another million to leave Ireland. This led to anti-Irish sentiments among those Americans who lived here prior. These sentiments would occur with later immigration waves, such as with Italians and Latinos.
- **1875** – The U.S. Supreme Court rules that immigration to the US is the responsibility of the Federal government, not state governments.
- **1882 – Chinese Exclusion Act** – Prohibits certain Chinese laborers from entering the US. This came after Chinese came in large numbers to help build the transcontinental railroad.
- **1885 – 1887 – Alien Contract Labor Laws** once again prohibits certain laborers from becoming immigrant to the country.
- **1891** – Federal government takes over full control of processing all foreign immigrants into the country, including admittance, rejection, and inspection of emigrants.
- **1892 – Ellis Island** opens in New York Harbor.
- **1903** – A new law reinforces the U.S. Federal government's power over land borders, and specifically set aside powers to inspect aliens cross from Mexico to the U.S.
- **1907** – Reorganization of the southern border states, to stem the flow of illegal immigrants from Mexico into the United States.

- **1917-1924** – American enters a new xenophobic phase. Starting with the entry into World War I and evolving into a post-war distrust of foreigners and immigrants, new laws to limit further immigration to the U.S. are passed, including a quota system and more strenuous passport requirements. All Asians, besides Japanese, are excluded. Other excludable aliens are placed on the list.
- **1920 – Sacco and Vanzetti Case** – Two Italian immigrants, Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, are accused of murdering two men during a Massachusetts armed robbery. Because both are anarchists and Italian-Americans, this highly publicized case contributed to anti-immigrant fervor in the country, as well as the first Red Scare. (Though anarchism involves little or no state control and communism involved complete state control, many socialists and intellectuals supported Sacco & Vanzetti, leading people to conflate “exotic” political philosophies like socialism and anarchism with the recent innovation, communism, which had just come to power in Russia 3 years earlier.) Sacco and Vanzetti had two trials, two cases before the Supreme Court, and were eventually executed in 1927.
- **1924** – Reduction of number of emigration visas, allocated on a national origin basis.
- **1940 – Alien Registration Act** – All non-US citizens living in the States to register with the Federal government and receive the Alien Registration Receipt Card.
- **1950 – Internal Security Act** – The Alien Registration Receipt Card is replaced with the more useful “**Green Card**”.
- **1952** – The modern immigration system is created, with a quota system based per-country. A preference system was also established for aliens with special skills, as well as family members.
- **1968** – Eliminated of discrimination based on race, sex, residence, or place of birth. Specifically abolishes restrictions on Asian immigration.
- **1976** – Preference for Western Hemisphere immigrants is abolished.
- **1980** – Special policies are fashioned for the admission of refugees.
- **1986** – The “**Immigration Amnesty**” act give hundreds of thousands of illegal immigrants legal status. Laws created to impose fines on employees who hire illegal immigrants, while tougher laws are passed to prevent bogus marriages for citizenship purposes.
- **1990 – Immigrant Investor Program** – Annual limit on certain types of immigrants. Business class categories for favored persons who can make a professional, financial, or educational contribution to the U.S. Aimed at helping U.S. businesses attract skilled foreign workers.
- **2001 – US Patriot Act** – Provides tools to intercept and obstruct terrorist activities, which affects immigration policy.
- **2003** – Immigrant and Naturalization Service or **INS** becomes part of the Department of Homeland Security. Establishes the US Citizenship and US Immigration Services or **USCIS**, which now handles citizenship, permanent residence applications, political asylum, refugee services, non-immigrant applications, along with immigration services and immigration benefits. The Bureau of US Immigration and Customs Enforcement or “**ICE**” handles border security.

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As you can see, the history of US immigration policy has not always been smooth and not always been wise, but amount of public dialogue about who we admit into our country and whether our immigration policies are fair has led to an ever-changing set of immigration standards, and has kept this nation vital throughout its 2 centuries-plus history.

Key Dates and Landmarks in United States Immigration History

1789	The Constitution of the United States of America takes effect, succeeding the Articles of Confederation that had governed the union of states since the conclusion of the Revolutionary War (March 4, 1789).
1790	The Naturalization Act of 1790 establishes a uniform rule of naturalization and a two-year residency requirement for aliens who are “free white persons” of “good moral character” (March 26, 1790).
1798	Considered one of the Alien and Sedition Acts, the Naturalization Act of 1798 permits Federalist President John

- Adams to deport foreigners deemed to be dangerous and increases the residency requirements to 14 years to prevent immigrants, who predominantly voted for the Republican Party, from becoming citizens (June 25, 1798).
- 1802 The Jefferson Administration revises the Naturalization Act of 1798 by reducing the residency requirement from 14 to five years.
- 1808 Importation of slaves into the United States is officially banned, though it continues illegally long after the ban.
- 1819 Congress passes an act requiring shipmasters to deliver a manifest enumerating all aliens transported for immigration. The Secretary of State is required to report annually to Congress the number of immigrants admitted.
- 1821-1830 *143,439 immigrants arrive*
- 1831-1840 *599,125 immigrants arrive*
- 1840s Crop failures in Germany, social turbulence triggered by the rapid industrialization of European society, political unrest in Europe, and the Irish Potato Famine (1845-1851) lead to a new period of mass immigration to the United States.
- 1841-1850 *1,713,251 immigrants arrive*
- 1848 The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ends the Mexican-American War and extends citizenship to the approximately 80,000 Mexicans living in Texas, California, and the American Southwest.
- 1848 Gold is discovered in the American River, near Sacramento, California.
- 1849 The California gold rush spurs immigration from China and extensive internal migration.
- 1850 For the first time, the United States Census surveys the "nativity" of citizens (born inside or outside the US).
- 1851-1860 *2,598,214 immigrants arrive*
- 1854 The Know-Nothings, a nativist political party seeking to increase restrictions on immigration, win significant victories in Congress, a sign of popular dissatisfaction with growing immigration from Catholic Ireland. Protestant Americans feared that growing Catholic immigration would place American society under control of the Pope.
- 1855 Castle Garden is established as New York's principal point of entry.
- 1861-1870 *2,314,825 immigrants arrive*
- 1861 Outbreak of the American Civil War (April 12, 1861).
- 1862 The Homestead Act provides free plots of up to 160 acres of western land to settlers who agree to develop and live on it for at least five years, thereby spurring an influx of immigrants from overpopulated countries in Europe seeking land of their own.
- 1862 The "Anti-Coolie" Act discourages Chinese immigration to California and institutes special taxes on employers who hire Chinese workers.
- 1863 Riots against the draft in New York City involve many immigrants opposed to compulsory military service (July 13-16, 1863).
- 1863 The Central Pacific hires Chinese laborers and the Union Pacific hires Irish laborers to construct the first transcontinental railroad, which would stretch from San Francisco to Omaha, allowing continuous travel by rail from coast to coast.
- 1869 The First Transcontinental Railroad is completed when the Central Pacific and Union Pacific lines meet at Promontory Summit, Utah (May 10, 1869).
- 1870 The Naturalization Act of 1870 expands citizenship to both whites and African-Americans, though Asians are still excluded.
- 1870 The Fifteenth Amendment is ratified, granting voting rights to citizens, regardless of "race, color, or previous condition of servitude."
- 1870 Jacob Riis, who later pioneered photojournalism and authored *How the Other Half Lives*, emigrates from Denmark to the United States.
- 1871-1880 *2,812,191 immigrants arrive*
- 1881-1890 *5,246,613 immigrants arrive*
- 1881-1885 *1 million Germans arrive in the peak of German immigration*

- 1881–1920 *2 million Eastern European Jews immigrate to the United States*
- 1882 The Chinese Exclusion Act restricts all Chinese immigration to the United States for a period of ten years.
- 1882 The Immigration Act of 1882 levies a tax of 50 cents on all immigrants landing at US ports and makes several categories of immigrants ineligible for citizenship, including "lunatics" and people likely to become public charges.
- 1885 The Alien Contract Labor Law prohibits any company or individual from bringing foreigners into the United States under contract to perform labor. The only exceptions are those immigrants brought to perform domestic service and skilled workmen needed to help establish a new trade or industry in the US.
- 1886 The Statue of Liberty is dedicated in New York Harbor.
- 1886 Emma Goldman, Lithuanian-born feminist, immigrates to the United States, where over the next 30 years she will become a prominent American anarchist. During the First World War, in 1917, she is deported to Russia for conspiring to obstruct the draft.
- 1889 Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr found Hull-House in Chicago.
- 1890 The demographic trends in immigration to the United States shift as immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe substantially increases, while the relative proportion of immigration from Northern and Western Europe begins to decrease.
- 1891–1900 *3,687,564 immigrants arrive.*
- 1891 Congress makes "persons suffering from a loathsome or a dangerous contagious disease," those convicted of a "misdemeanor involving moral turpitude," and polygamists ineligible for immigration. Congress also establishes the Office of the Superintendent of Immigration within the Treasury Department.
- 1892 The Geary Act extends the Chinese Exclusion Act for ten more years, and adds the requirement that all Chinese residents carry permits, as well as excluding them from serving as witnesses in court and from bail in habeas corpus proceedings.
- 1892 Ellis Island, the location at which more than 16 million immigrants would be processed, opens in New York City.
- 1901–1910 *8,795,386 immigrants arrive*
- 1901 After President William McKinley is shot by a Polish anarchist (September 6, 1901) and dies a week later (September 14, 1901), Congress enacts the Anarchist Exclusion Act, which prohibits the entry into the US of people judged to be anarchists and political extremists.
- 1902 The Chinese Exclusion Act is again renewed, with no ending date.
- 1906 The Naturalization Act of 1906 standardized naturalization procedures, makes some knowledge of the English language a requirement for citizenship, and establishes the Bureau of Immigration and Naturalization in the Commerce Department to oversee national immigration policy.
- 1907 The Expatriation Act declares that an American woman who marries a foreign national loses her citizenship.
- 1907 Under an informal "Gentlemen's Agreement," the United States agrees not to restrict Japanese immigration in exchange for Japan's promise to voluntarily restrict Japanese emigration to the United States by not issuing passports to Japanese laborers. In return, the US promises to crack down on discrimination against Japanese-Americans, most of whom live in California.
- 1907 The Dillingham Commission is established by Congress to investigate the effects of immigration on the United States.
- 1911–1920 *2 million Italians arrive in the peak of Italian immigration*
- 1911–1920 *5,735,811 immigrants arrive*
- 1911 The Dillingham Commission, established in 1907, publishes a 42-volume report warning that the "new" immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe threatens to subvert American society. The Dillingham Commission's recommendations lay the foundation for the Quota Acts of the 1920s.
- 1913 California's Alien Land Law prohibits "aliens ineligible for citizenship" (Chinese and Japanese) from owning property in the state, providing a model for similar anti-Asian laws in other states.
- 1917 Congress enacts a literacy requirement for immigrants by overriding President Woodrow Wilson's veto. The law requires immigrants to be able to read 40 words in some language and bans immigration from Asia, except for Japan and the Philippines.
- 1917 The US enters the First World War.
- 1917 The Immigration Act of 1917 restricts immigration from Asia by creating an "Asiatic Barred Zone."

1917	The Jones-Shafroth Act grants US citizenship to Puerto Ricans, provided that they can be recruited by the US military.
1919	The First Red Scare leads to an outbreak of fear and violence against people deemed to be political radicals and foreigners considered to be susceptible to communist propaganda and more likely to be involved in the Bolshevik Revolution.
1921-1930	4,107,209 immigrants arrive.
1921	The Emergency Quota Act restricts immigration from a given country to 3% of the number of people from that country living in the US in 1910.
1922	The Cable Act partially repeals the Expatriation Act, but declares that an American woman who marries an Asian still loses her citizenship.
1923	In the landmark case of <i>United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind</i> , the Supreme Court rules that Indians from the Asian subcontinent cannot become US citizens.
1924	The Immigration Act of 1924 limits annual European immigration to 2% of the number of people from that country living in the United States in 1890. The Act greatly reduces immigration from Southern and Eastern European nationalities that had only small populations in the US in 1890.
1924	The Oriental Exclusion Act prohibits most immigration from Asia, including foreign-born wives and the children of American citizens of Chinese ancestry.
1924	The Border Patrol is created to combat smuggling and illegal immigration.
1929	The National Origins Formula institutes a quota that caps national immigration at 150,000 and completely bars Asian immigration, though immigration from the Western Hemisphere is still permitted.
1931-1940	532,431 immigrants arrive.
1933	To escape persecution by the Nazis, Albert Einstein, the greatest theoretical physicist of the century, immigrates to the United States from Germany.
1934	The Tydings-McDuffe Act grants the Philippines independence from the United States on July 4, 1946, but strips Filipinos of US citizenship and severely restricts Filipino immigration to the United States.
1940	The Alien Registration Act requires the registration and fingerprinting of all aliens in the United States over the age of 14.

Sources

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