

Angel & Ellis Island Reading

Many different factors can cause a person to leave one country in pursuit of a better life in another country. For centuries, political instability and famine have encouraged people to seek new lives in foreign lands. In the days before World War I, the U.S. immigration policy permitted large numbers of immigrants, especially from European countries. In the 1880s, nearly 10 percent of Norway's population left for the United States. By the early 1900s, many of the immigrants to the United States from Europe entered the country through Ellis Island, an immigration center in New York. On the West Coast, hundreds of thousands of immigrants, mostly from Asia, entered through another immigration center, Angel Island.



Ellis Island

Ellis Island is just off the tip of Manhattan Island in New York City. Although the island itself has served other uses, it is most noted for its role as an immigration reception center. Between 1892 and 1924, Ellis Island was the busiest immigration center in the United States. For the immigrants who arrived here, Ellis Island was the first place they set foot on American soil, and it represented an island of hope. If they were admitted through Ellis Island, immigrants were free to build their lives in the United States. For others, however, the immigration station brought disappointment. Not every immigrant was allowed to enter the United States, and many families were separated or forced to return to their homelands. Immigrants were often denied entry if authorities detected a medical issue or suspected they would require financial assistance from the government. In some cases, children were sent to one place with one parent, and the other parent was forced to return to their home country.

In his book *In the Shadow of Liberty: The Chronicle of Ellis Island*, Edward Corsi reflects on his experience of passing through Ellis Island as a 10-year-old boy. He writes of his family seeing the Statue of Liberty for the first time:

I looked at that statue with a sense of bewilderment, half doubting its reality. . . . This symbol of America—this enormous expression of what we had all been taught was the inner meaning of this new country we were coming to—inspired awe in the hopeful immigrants.

Corsi's joy and wonder soon turned to anxiety when the family realized they had very little money and might not be allowed to enter the United States:

Mother patted my little sister's curly head. For the first time during the voyage I saw tears in mother's eyes. What sort of world was this, where people were judged by the amount of money they had? I felt resentment toward this Ellis Island ahead of us, where we could already see many people crowded into a small enclosure.

Corsi's family was permitted to enter the United States, and the process took only hours. Upon reaching the docks and Ellis Island, passengers were processed through the station, and the vast majority were allowed to legally enter the United States in three to five hours. Still, about 20 percent of immigrants had cases that required more time. These immigrants were forced to stay overnight in sparse dormitories. Compared to the cramped sleeping quarters on most ships, these dormitories were fairly comfortable. Because thousands of immigrants were arriving each day, the process had to be quick and efficient. In the 32-year span that Ellis Island operated as an immigration center, roughly 17 million people passed through the island.

After World War I, attitudes about immigration began to change, and the number of immigrants began to decrease. Without a huge influx of immigrants, there was less need for a large immigration center, and the island became a detention center for people who were ordered to leave the country. In 1965, Ellis Island became a national monument, and today the island is managed by the National Park Service. Millions of people visit Ellis Island every year, many interested in retracing their ancestors' footsteps. It has been estimated that about half of the current population of the United States have ancestors who entered through Ellis Island.

Angel Island

Ellis Island was not the only immigration center that welcomed large numbers of foreigners. On the West Coast of the United States, near the city of San Francisco, Angel Island served as an important immigration center from 1910 to 1940. Most of the people who entered through Angel Island were from Asian countries such as China and Japan. Unlike the immigration process at Ellis Island, the immigrants who entered through Angel Island were often detained for weeks, and the conditions were not always pleasant.

During the gold rush of the mid-1800s, hundreds of thousands of Chinese immigrants came to America in search of gold and jobs. In their search to find work, many of the Chinese immigrants took low-paying jobs that other citizens did not want. Over time, other workers began to resent the Chinese, and the U.S. government took steps to limit their immigration to the United States. In 1882, Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act. After this act was passed, Chinese immigrants had to prove they had a family member who was already a U.S. citizen. All other Chinese immigrants were deported back to China.



In this image, Chinese immigrants study English. Teachers, like the one in black on the right side of the photo, often helped immigrants learn to read and write English during the weeks or months they were detained at Angel Island.

The process of proving a link to a U.S. citizen could take weeks, so immigrants were detained at Angel Island while they awaited news on whether or not they would be allowed to enter the country. Immigrants were held in sparse barracks, with the men separated from the women and children. Many of the detainees looked for ways to stay busy during their time on Angel Island. One popular activity was writing poetry. The immigrants engraved poems in Chinese characters into the walls, leaving a lasting impression of the hardships of the immigrant experience.

After Angel Island closed as an immigration station around 1940, it was used to detain Japanese Americans during World War II. At that time, Japanese Americans were distrusted because Japan was considered an enemy during the war. After World War II, the island served other military purposes, including a station for American soldiers and a missile site, but it was largely forgotten. In the 1970s, visitors rediscovered the inscribed poetry, and an effort was made to preserve and protect the immigration center. Today, Angel Island is a California State Park. Visitors to the park can ride a ferry from San Francisco to Angel Island, where they are able to step back in time and imagine the harsh realities of starting over in a new country.

1. Why did the writer Edward Corsi experience fear at Ellis Island?
 - a. He was separated from his parents.
 - b. His entire family was detained at Ellis Island for weeks.
 - c. He was afraid they would not be let in because they did not have much money.
 - d. The sight of the Statue of Liberty was overwhelming and frightening.

2. What is one reason Ellis Island stopped being used as an immigration center?
 - a. Immigration rates slowed after World War I.
 - b. The facilities were no longer considered safe.
 - c. A new immigration center was built on nearby Liberty Island.
 - d. All immigrants were soon required to pass through Angel Island instead.
3. Why did many Chinese immigrants spend weeks at Angel Island?
 - a. Angel Island was the only place they could learn to read.
 - b. It could take a long time to prove they had a relative in the United States.
 - c. There were very few boats available to take them to the mainland.
 - d. They had to stay on the island until they were offered a job elsewhere.
4. Describe similarities and differences between Ellis Island and Angel Island. Use details from the reading passage to support your answer.