

Immigration and Disease Student Article

By 1870, more than 90 percent of immigrants to America arrived by steamship, most to Ellis Island in New York. Ellis Island was opened January 1, 1892, and was the busiest immigrant inspection station for over 60 years from 1892 until 1954 in the United States.

Steamship companies relied on the immigrant trade as their main source of income into the 1920s. These companies had to inspect their passengers for diseases. Before leaving European ports, the companies had to vaccinate, disinfect, and determine the health of the ships occupants. But often these examinations were superficial.

A physician for the U.S. Marine Hospital Service inspected first and second-class passengers who arrived in New York in the privacy of their cabins. The government believed that these more affluent passengers would not end up in institutions, hospitals, or become a burden to the state because they were more affluent, better fed, and therefore generally healthier than the steerage passengers. On occasion, first and second class passengers had to go to Ellis Island for further inspection because of illness or legal problems.



View of steerage passengers from the First Class deck on the Kaiser Wilhelm Der Grosse, c. 1902.

The experience of arriving in America was far different for steerage or third-class passengers. On board, a superficial inspection to check for outbreaks of cholera, smallpox,



typhus, or yellow fever occurred. Immigrants in steerage traveled across the ocean below the waterline of the ships. It was crowded and could be unsanitary and unhealthy. Atlantic Ocean crossings, which could last up to two weeks, could be rough, and often left all passengers sea-sick. Arriving in New York City, ships would dock at the Hudson or East River piers.

First and second-class passengers would disembark, pass through Customs at the piers, and enter the U.S. But steerage passengers had to undergo a medical and legal inspection on Ellis Island.

Ships carrying passengers with contagious diseases were quarantined and flew a yellow flag at their masthead. Authorities then took those passengers to contagion hospitals on Hoffman and Swinburne islands.

The Inspection

Once they left Ellis Island, immigrants entered the main building where authorities inspected their bags. Then the new arrivals walked up a stairway to the first in a series of medical inspections. Public Health doctors watched as the immigrants climbed the stairs, looking for signs of wheezing, coughing, or limping, which might have indicated health problems.

In the Registry Hall, an inspector stamped the immigrant's health inspection card. As the immigrant read what was on the card, doctors looked to see if they revealed any eye problems. "Beware of the eye man." The second medical inspection was well known to many immigrants before they even left home. This painful exam checked for trachoma, a highly contagious disease that caused blindness. Officials immediately deported anyone found with trachoma.

Men and women were segregated for inspection, and female doctors and nurses examined the women. By 1924, the Public Health Service had four female physicians on duty. After completing the exams, immigrants waited until their names were called so that they might leave or be taken to another facility.

Ellis Island had its own hospital, contagious disease ward, mental health ward, autopsy theatre, morgue, and crematory. In 1911, physicians examined nearly 750,000 immigrants. Of these, almost 17,000 had physical or mental health problems, which included 1,363 with loathsome or dangerous contagious diseases and 1,167 who had trachoma. Loathsome contagious diseases included favus (scalp and nail fungus), syphilis, gonorrhoea, and leprosy. Dangerous contagious diseases included trachoma and pulmonary tuberculosis. During Ellis Island's history, more than 3,500 immigrants died on the Island, including 1,400 children and more than 350 babies were born.