

Ellis Island wasn't the end of the road.

Immigrants had a final stop on their journey to America, one that could prove almost as perilous to their quest for freedom as the ship's voyage itself — Ellis Island. But before they could get to the island, they sometimes had to wait hours or even days while their ship waited its turn to let passengers off. Numbered tags were pinned to the immigrants' clothes indicating the ship's passenger list page and line on which their names appeared. They were now ready to be processed.



1. Approaching the Port

Weeks had passed on the ocean. Food was scarce. Quarters were cramped. But all hardships were forgotten when Lady Liberty came into view.



2. Baggage Drop-Off

Upon arrival, immigrants parted with their baggage — which typically contained only a few precious possessions. Their trunks, suitcases and baskets would remain here until their owners were processed. The immigrants then moved on to face the notorious medical and legal examinations.



3. The Six-Second Medical Exam

Until a building remodel in 1911, climbing the stairs to the Great Hall was the first test. Health inspectors stood at the top, looking for anyone wheezing, coughing or limping as they made their way upstairs. If inspectors suspected a disease, physical ailment or mental illness, they'd mark the person's clothing with chalk. Marks included Ft (problem with feet), K (hernia), Pg (pregnancy), X (suspected mental defect) and X circled (definite signs of mental defect). Marked immigrants were pulled aside for closer examination.

4. Eye Exam

Immigrants who passed the stair exam lined up for the eye exam, where another inspector looked for trachoma and other infectious eye diseases by turning up eyelids with a button hook. Infectious eye diseases could be grounds for deportation.



5. Medical Exam

Over time, the Ellis Island medical exams became more rigorous. By 1917, every immigrant endured a true medical exam. The government relied on these exams to identify individuals with contagious diseases or with physical or mental ailments that could make them unable to work. Those with a clean bill of health went to the Great Hall. Those without went to the island's hospital, assuming their problems were curable. If an ailment was incurable, the steamship company that brought them would have to pay to send them back.

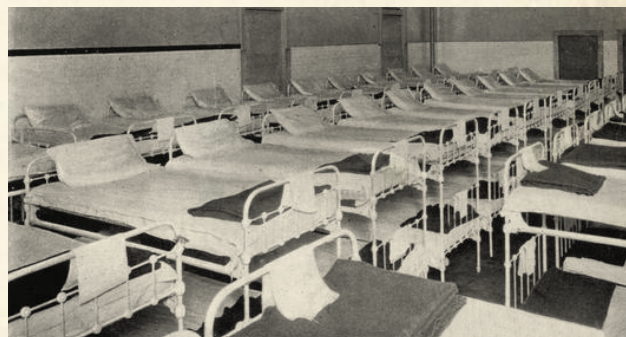
6. Ellis Island Hospital

In 1902, a hospital was added to Ellis Island and expanded upon as the tide of immigration continued. Eventually the hospital would contain operating rooms, a maternity ward, a contagious disease ward, even an autopsy room and morgue.



7. Cafeteria

Many immigrants got their first taste of America at Ellis Island's cafeteria. Exotic food like ham sandwiches, ice cream, oranges and bananas awaited the immigrants' taste buds.



8. Dormitories

Detainees were sheltered in the island's dormitories — crowded bunkrooms that must have reminded them of steerage they had just left. Space was scarce, but thankfully most detained immigrants remained on Ellis Island only a few days. Some, however, stayed for weeks.



9. The Great Hall

Immigrants who passed their medical exams moved on to wait in the Great Hall, a large room where immigrants stood in lines or sat on benches. The Great Hall was filled with thousands of immigrants, many of them steerage passengers who hadn't bathed in days or weeks. Numerous languages, crying children, body odors and food smells filled the room to its 56-foot ceilings.

10. Legal Inspection

Immigrants waited hours for interviews with legal inspectors — their last test before entering the United States. They produced their immigration papers and answered questions, with aid of an interpreter if needed, about age, origin and intentions in the country. By 1921, immigrants also had to pass a literacy test.





11. Literacy Test

An immigrant was handed a piece of paper that stated something like, “Scratch your right ear.” If the immigrant complied, he or she had proved literacy.

12. Money Exchange

Once through the legal inspection, immigrants exchanged their foreign currency for dollars. Beginning in 1919, each immigrant was required to have \$20 upon entering the United States. While exchanging their money, immigrants could also purchase train tickets and buy food for their train journey. A boxed lunch of sandwiches, fruit and pie sold for 50 cents — well over \$10 by today’s standards.



13. Reunions at the Kissing Post

People meeting relatives in New York proceeded to the Kissing Post, named for all the emotional reunions witnessed there.

14. Leaving Ellis Island Behind

Two-thirds of the new Americans boarded a ferry to New Jersey, where the next leg of their journey would begin. Most of the others who passed muster took the ferryboat to Manhattan, only a mile away.

