



## **Ellis Island**

### **Pre-visit Activity: Background Reading - The Immigration Process**

Between 1815 and 1915, approximately 30 million people came to America from Europe. These people are called immigrants. There were many reasons that made them decide to leave Europe during this period. There were social, political and economic reasons that are called push/pull factors. For most, leaving their home country and moving to America was difficult. They had to sell their possessions, leave behind family and friends, and travel great distances to an unfamiliar place.

Wars in Europe caused political (government) change in those countries. Different leaders came to power and made many changes that were not good for the common people of Europe. The working class did not trust and feared the government. Leaders took land away from landowners and denied personal freedoms to the people. Some European countries had social (people) problems because certain religious groups were persecuted. People who spoke out against the new governments were often jailed.

Economic (money) factors that pushed people from Europe to the United States was a lack of income from crops failing year after year. People lost money and could not pay rent. As Europe became industrialized, people left their farms to find work in the cities, which led to overcrowding and disease. To make matters worse, there were not enough jobs for all the people who moved into the cities. Many immigrants felt pulled to America by contract labor agreements. These agreements were offered by recruiting agents from large industries in America. The immigrant would agree to work for reduced wages in exchange for free passage on a steamship. As the economy changed in later years, laws were passed to address the anti-immigration feelings of many Americans who felt they were losing job opportunities to the newly arriving immigrants, especially those who had few skills. The Alien Contract Law was passed in 1885. The law prohibited "any





*company or individual from bringing unskilled foreigners into the United States under contract to work for them."*

The opportunity to own land pulled many immigrants to the America. They had seen pamphlets advertising the availability of free or cheap farmland in the western region of the U.S. Being able to farm their own land was a dream come true for many poor Europeans who had only been allowed to work on land owned by a landlord in their home country.

Whether it be the pull of a better job, the chance to own their own land, or the promise of religious freedom, the hope that life would be better in American was the main reason millions of Europeans decided to leave their homes in Europe. Before coming to America, the immigrants had to make certain they had enough money to make the journey. They needed money to travel to a port city, to buy a ticket on the steamship, and enter into America. This was difficult because most of the working-class people of Europe had very little money and very few possessions. Saving enough money for the journey required years of hard work, sacrifice, and possibly selling everything they owned. They also had to have documentation showing proof of identity to travel. To get such documentation usually meant going to a local government or church official to request a record showing their legal name and birth records.

After getting money and documentation, the immigrant then had to travel to a port city in order to buy a ticket to get on a steamship bound for America. Getting to a port city might mean days or weeks of travel on foot, a riverboat, or horse-drawn cart depending on where the immigrant's home was located. Once he arrived at the European port city, he had to pass a series of inspections from the steamship officials to decide whether or not he would be approved for immigration by the U.S. government. The immigrant had to give satisfactory answers to a list of 26 questions. Congress passed laws regulating immigration and barring some people from admission into the America. As a result, steamship lines were careful about whom they let board. Immigrants had to have their travel documents checked and health



inspected before departure. Sometimes they had to spend several days waiting before boarding a ship. If so, the steamship company provided food and lodging.

After traveling aboard the steamship for several weeks to America, the immigrant would reach Ellis Island. They would have to pass medical and legal inspections once again. The journey was long and difficult and people would often become ill during the voyage. America wanted to ensure that anyone entering the country was legal, law-abiding, healthy, and able to work so that the government would not have to support them. For most immigrants, the final inspection process at Ellis Island would only take a few hours. Only a small percentage were sent back to their home countries – at the expense of the steamship lines – after failing inspections.

Keep in mind that most immigrants traveled with their family. Women were not even allowed to enter America without a male family member. There were instances of young men going alone in order to make money in America, and then sending it back to family members in Europe, however, it was more common for families to immigrate together.

*Source: PBS, "Destination America"*



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Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

*Use the information from reading *The Immigration Process* to answer the following questions:*

1. List one political factor that caused people to leave Europe.
2. List two economic factors that caused people to leave Europe.
3. List two pull factors that caused people to move to America.
4. What did immigrants do to get enough money to make the journey to America?
5. Why did immigrants have to be inspected by the steamship company before being allowed to buy a ticket?
6. Why did America require immigrants to be inspected before leaving Ellis Island?



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#### **KEY**

1. List one political factor that caused people to leave Europe.  
The working class did not trust the government; new leaders came into power; government took land from landowners and rights away from people
2. List two economic factors that caused people to leave Europe.  
The Potato fungus – famine; lack of jobs; overcrowding in cities; they don't own their own land
3. List two pull factors that caused people to America.  
The opportunity to own their own land; there were jobs; freedom
4. What did immigrants do to get enough money to make the journey to America?  
Worked hard for several years, saved their money and sold all of their possessions
5. Why did immigrants have to be inspected by the steamship company before being allowed to buy a ticket?  
To make sure they were healthy enough to travel and meet the health and legal requirements of the U.S.
6. Why did America require immigrants to be inspected before leaving Ellis Island?  
America wanted to make sure that those who were coming to America were legal, law-abiding, healthy, and able to work. They did not want anyone who would become a burden to the state.