

Volume 7

Number 055

Ellis Island – Part II

Lead: Of the 12 million immigrants processed through Ellis Island in New York Harbor between 1892-1924, 250,000 were rejected.

Intro.: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.

Content: Many immigrants arriving in New York Harbor were not aware that they would need to pass medical and legal examinations before they were granted permission to enter. The first test came even before the steamship docked. U.S. government doctors would board the ship and check for contagious

diseases: smallpox, yellow fever, measles. Infected passengers were removed (taken to hospitals) and the ship was quarantined until it was safe. After docking in Manhattan, ferryboats or barges would transport immigrants to Ellis Island. There they were tested to determine if fit to enter America.

In the main building there was a preliminary screening. Doctors observed the immigrants climbing stairs up to the second floor. If any physical or mental defect was detected, shortness of breath, lameness, blindness, or an obvious mental condition, a chalk mark was scratched on the shoulder of the immigrant. Next, the would-be

Americans were examined for trachoma, a serious and contagious eye disease. This test was the most feared and painful of all because a buttonhook was used to force the upper eyelid up to check for the disease.

As the day passed about one in five would get a chalk mark. They were suspect and were separated from the crowd for a more thorough examination. “L” stood for lameness, “K” for hernia, “H” for heart disease, “SC” for scalp disease, “E” for eye problem, and so on. If they passed the health tests they received legal processing by answering twenty-nine questions contained on the manifest. It usually took two to three hours and

most were issued a landing card or permit to enter, but for 250,000 the island of hope became the island of tears. They were not admitted, but were deported back to their homelands. The reasons for exclusion were numerous: contagious diseases, blindness, physical or mental handicaps, anything that might make the immigrant a burden to society. Ellis Island main work was complete by 1924 and was closed in 1954. It was re-opened in 1990 as the Ellis Island Museum of Immigration.

At the University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.

Resources

Chermayeff, Ivan, Mary J. Shapiro and Fred Wasserman. *Ellis Island*. New York: Maximillan Publishing Company, 1991.

Fisher, Leonard Everett. *Ellis Island*. New York: Holiday House, 1986.

Kennedy, John F. *A Nation of Immigrants*. New York: Harper and Row, 1964.

Taylor, Phillip. *The Distant Magnet*. New York: Harper and Row, 1971.

Wittke, Carl. *We Who Built America*. New York: Case Western Reserve University, 1967.

Copyright by Dan Roberts Enterprises, Inc.