



Ellis Island



From 1892 to 1954, over twelve million immigrants entered the United States through the portal of Ellis Island, a small island in New York Harbor. Ellis Island is located in the upper bay just off the New Jersey coast, within the shadow of the Statue of Liberty. Through the years, this gateway to the new world was enlarged from its original 3.3 acres to 27.5 acres by landfill supposedly obtained from the ballast of ships, excess earth from the construction of the New York City subway system and elsewhere.

Before being designated as the site of one of the first Federal immigration station by President Benjamin Harrison in 1890, Ellis Island had a varied history. The local Indian tribes had called it “Kioshk” or Gull Island. Due to its rich and abundant oyster beds and plentiful and profitable shad runs

that included Castle Clinton at the Battery, Castle Williams on Governor’s Island, Fort Wood on Bedloe’s Island and two earthworks forts at the entrance to New York Harbor at the Verrazano Narrows. The fort at Ellis Island was named Fort Gibson in honor of a brave officer killed during the War of 1812.

Prior to 1890, the individual states (rather than the Federal government) regulated immigration into the United States. Castle Garden in the Battery (originally known as Castle Clinton) served as the New York State immigration station from 1855 to 1890 and approximately eight million immigrants, mostly from Northern and Western Europe, passed through its doors. These early immigrants came from nations such as England, Ireland, Germany and the Scandinavian countries and constituted the first large wave of immigrants

Ellis Island

it was known as Oyster Island for many generations during the Dutch and English colonial periods.

By the time Samuel Ellis became the island’s private owner in the 1770’s, the island had been called Kioshk, Oyster, Dyre, Bucking and Anderson’s Island. In this way, Ellis Island developed from a sandy island that barely rose above the high tide mark, into a hanging site for pirates, a harbor fort, ammunition and ordinance depot named Fort Gibson, and immigration station.

From 1794 to 1890 (pre-immigration station period), Ellis Island played a mostly uneventful but still important role in United States history. When the British occupied New York City during the duration of the Revolutionary War, its large and powerful naval fleet was able to sail unimpeded directly into New York Harbor.

Therefore, it was deemed critical by the United States Government that a series of coastal fortifications in New York Harbor be constructed just prior to the War of 1812. After much legal haggling over ownership of the island, the Federal government purchased Ellis Island from New York State in 1808. Ellis Island was approved as a site for fortifications and on it was constructed a parapet for three tiers of circular guns, making the island part of the new harbor defense system

that settled and populated the United States. Throughout the 1800’s and intensifying in the latter half of the 19th century, ensuing political instability, restrictive religious laws and deteriorating economic conditions in Europe began to fuel the largest mass human migration in the history of the world.

It soon became apparent that Castle Garden was ill-equipped and unprepared to handle the growing numbers of immigrants arriving yearly. Unfortunately compounding the problems of the small facility were the corruption and incompetence found to be commonplace at Castle Garden.

The Federal government intervened and constructed a new Federally-operated immigration station on Ellis Island. While the new immigration station on Ellis Island was under construction, the Barge Office at the Battery was used for the processing of immigrants. The new structure on Ellis Island, built of “Georgia pine”, opened on January 1, 1892; Annie Moore, a 15 year-old Irish girl, accompanied by her two brothers, entered history and a new country as she was the very first immigrant to be processed at Ellis Island as recorded by common belief to fit the of the American dream. This island became a bridge across time and cultures.





“The Annie who died instantly when struck by a streetcar near Fort Worth in 1923 was not an immigrant at all but was apparently born in Illinois.”



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Annie Moore is memorialized by bronze statues in New York Harbor and Ireland and cited in story and song as the first of 12 million immigrants to arrive at Ellis Island. Her story, as it has been recounted for decades, is that she went west with her family to fulfill the American dream — eventually reaching Texas, where she married a descendant of the Irish liberator Daniel O’Connell and then died under the wheels of a streetcar at the age of 46.

Annie Moore

Hustled ahead of a burly German by her two younger brothers and by an Irish longshoreman who shouted “Ladies first,” one Annie Moore from County Cork set foot on Ellis Island ahead of the other passengers from the steamship Nevada on Jan. 1, 1892, her 15th birthday. She was officially registered by the former private secretary to the secretary of the treasury and was presented with a \$10 gold piece by the superintendent of immigration.

“She says she will never part with it, but will always keep it as a pleasant memento of the occasion,” The New York Times reported in describing the ceremonies inaugurating Ellis Island. as an immigration center.

As for what happened next, though, history appears to have embraced the wrong Annie Moore.

“It’s a classic go-West-young-woman tale riddled with tragedy,” said Megan Smolenyak Smolenyak, a professional genealogist,

“If only it were true.”

In fact, according to Mrs. Smolenyak Smolenyak’s research, the Annie Moore of Ellis Island fame settled on the Lower

East Side, married a bakery clerk and had 11 children.

She lived a poor immigrant’s life, but her descendants multiplied and many prospered.

The story of the immigrant girl who went west, however, became so commonly accepted that even descendants of the Annie Moore who died in Texas came to believe it.



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“But government lawyers said the Supreme Court lacked authority to adjust the border, adding that any adjustment should be left up to the states.”



In a defeat for New York, the Supreme Court ruled Tuesday that New Jersey may claim that Ellis Island, the nation's historic gateway for 16 million immigrants, falls within its borders.

The high court, by a 6-3 vote, declared that Ellis Island, the site of the landmark U.S. immigration processing center from the 1890s until 1954, belongs largely to New Jersey in a case that mainly involved symbolic bragging rights.

As a result, most of the island in New York Harbor from now on must be considered Ellis Island, New Jersey.

“The lands surrounding the original island remained the sovereign property of New Jersey when the United States added landfill to them,” Justice David H. Souter wrote for the court.

At stake was more pride than money. The federal government actually owns Ellis Island, which was the first American soil walked upon by 17 million immigrants between 1892 and 1954. The immigration center has been restored as a museum visited each year by thousands

of tourists who travel to the island by ferry.

New York City officials had taken steps to have the whole island declared a city landmark. States also have regulatory authority over land within their borders,

including zoning and environmental protection.

Tuesday's ruling largely upholds a court-appointed fact-finder's recommendation to divide the island between the two states, with New York getting about five acres including the main building and New Jersey getting the rest.

New Jersey sued New York in 1993, basing its claim on an 1834 border agreement between the two states that was signed when the island was only about three acres. The rest of the island was created later by landfill and was non-existent during the 1834 agreement.

