


The Golden Door

A Nation of Immigrants



"The first time I saw the Statue of Liberty all the people were rushing to the side of the boat. 'Look at her, look at her,' and in all kind of tongues. 'There she is, there she is,' like it was somebody who was greeting them."

—Elizabeth Phillips, an Irish immigrant in 1920

The New Colossus

Emma Lazarus

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,⁹
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glow world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!"¹⁰ cries she
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming¹¹ shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost¹² to me.
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

1. **giant of Greek fame:** The reference is to Colossus, a huge bronze (brazen) statue of the ancient Greek god Helios. It dominated the harbor of the Greek city of Rhodes from 280 to 224 B.C.

9. **pomp:** splendor; magnificence.

12. **teeming:** crowded.

13. **tempest-tost:** upset by storm. *Tempest* here refers to other hardships as well.

First Stop: Ellis Island

As they sailed into New York Harbor, immigrants spotted the Statue of Liberty in the distance and, nearby, Ellis Island. Ellis Island was their first stop in America. Here they were given medical examinations and officially permitted to enter the country. More than twelve million people arrived through this gateway between 1892 and 1954. The peak year was 1907—when more than one million newcomers entered through the “Golden Door.”



“Well, I came to America because I heard the streets were paved with gold. When I got here, I found out three things: first, the streets weren’t paved with gold; second, they weren’t paved at all; and third, I was expected to pave them.”

—Old Italian Story

(Inset) The faces of three immigrants.

(Top) View of Ellis Island in 1905.

(Bottom) Jewish war orphans arriving from eastern Europe in 1921.



"We naturally were in steerage. Everyone had smelly food, and the atmosphere was so thick and dense with smoke and bodily odors that your head itched, and when you went to scratch your head you got lice in your hands. We had six weeks of that!"

—Sophia Kreitzberg, a Russian Jewish immigrant in 1908



"I can remember only the hustle and bustle of those last weeks in Pinsk, the farewells from the family, the embraces and the tears. Going to America then was almost like going to the moon!"

—Golda Meir, a Russian Jewish immigrant in 1906



"Those who are loudest in their cry of 'America for Americans' do not have to look very far back to find an ancestor who was an immigrant."

—New Immigrants' Protective League, 1906



(Top) A Slovakian mother and daughter wait to be admitted to Ellis Island, about 1915.

(Center) Children's playground, Ellis Island roof garden.

(Left) Women from Guadeloupe, French West Indies, at Ellis Island on April 6, 1911.

After Ellis Island: A Triumph of the Human Spirit

How's this for an American dream:

It's 1874. You've just come off the boat from Poland. You speak no English. You're packed with your husband and four children in a tiny tenement apartment in New York's Lower East Side.

Then your husband disappears.

And your baby dies.

Nathalia Gumpertz survived all this, eking out a living for her three daughters by sewing dresses and trimming hats for eight dollars a week.

And now her life is a stunning history lesson featured in a most unusual museum, the Lower East Side Tenement Museum.

Everything here is real—a real tenement, restored with real objects owned by real people and animated with real stories of success and tragedy.

This building, 97 Orchard Street, was home to ten thousand people from twenty-five countries from 1863 until 1935, when it was closed and its residents evicted.

It was sealed up for fifty years—a time capsule awaiting the bulldozer.

But Ruth Abram and her partner found it first.

They had been searching the city for a tenement to house a museum that would, Abram says, “speak to the greatness of the human spirit.”

A tenement museum, Abram believed, would help Americans appreciate where we've come from—and therefore be more tolerant of the newcomers now in our land.

That was ten years ago.

This year, Congress is poised to make the museum part of the National Park Service. And seventy-five thousand visitors will meet Nathalia Gumpertz and see how she lived.

They'll also meet the Baldizzi family, Catholics from Sicily, who lived in the building in the 1930s. And the Confino family, who came to America from Turkey in 1913.

Their lives have been re-created but not sanitized.

Visitors gather at 90 Orchard Street for guided tours of the tenement across the street. The hour-long tour begins in the cramped hallway of the six-story tenement, then leads up the creaking stairway. It's dark and scary.

As many as eighteen people lived in each apartment at the turn of the century, when Orchard Street was the most populated place on earth. Nearly half of the babies born in this building died.



Outside view of the Lower East Side Tenement Museum at 97 Orchard Street in New York City. The abandoned six-story tenement was turned into a museum in 1988.

Nathalia was successful enough to eventually move to the Upper East Side, where she died in 1894 at age fifty-eight.

Her story still touches Abram, the museum's president, as do the others.

“For everybody who emigrates, there is this potential for greatness, for great courage,” she says. “These people are role models for all of us.”

Abram still guides one tour through the tenement each week—and each time she is struck by the immigrants' self-sacrifice.

“Our story is the story of adults sacrificing their own dreams for their children's and grandchildren's dreams.”

—from *The Palm Beach Post*, July 5, 1998

Tenement Life in New York

In 1900, New York City's Lower East Side was the most densely populated place on earth. Almost 75 percent of New Yorkers lived in crowded, dark, airless, and foul-smelling tenements like these. Disease was rampant.

Here is a door. Listen! That short hacking cough, that tiny, helpless wail—what do they mean? . . . The child is dying with measles. . . . That dark bedroom killed it.

—Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives*



(Center) A family poses in their tenement apartment in New York City, about 1910. This photograph, by Jessie Tarbox Beals, is from the Jacob Riis Collection. Riis was famous for his dramatic pictures of slum life.

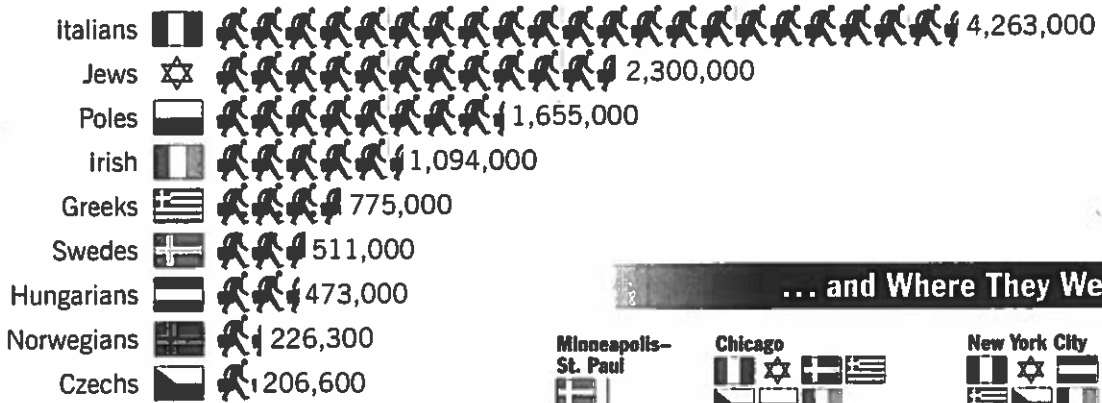
(Top right and bottom left) Restored apartments in the Lower East Side Tenement Museum. **(Top right)** Apartment of the Confino family, immigrants from Turkey. **(Bottom left)** Apartment of the Baldizzi family, immigrants from Italy.

Where Did They Settle?

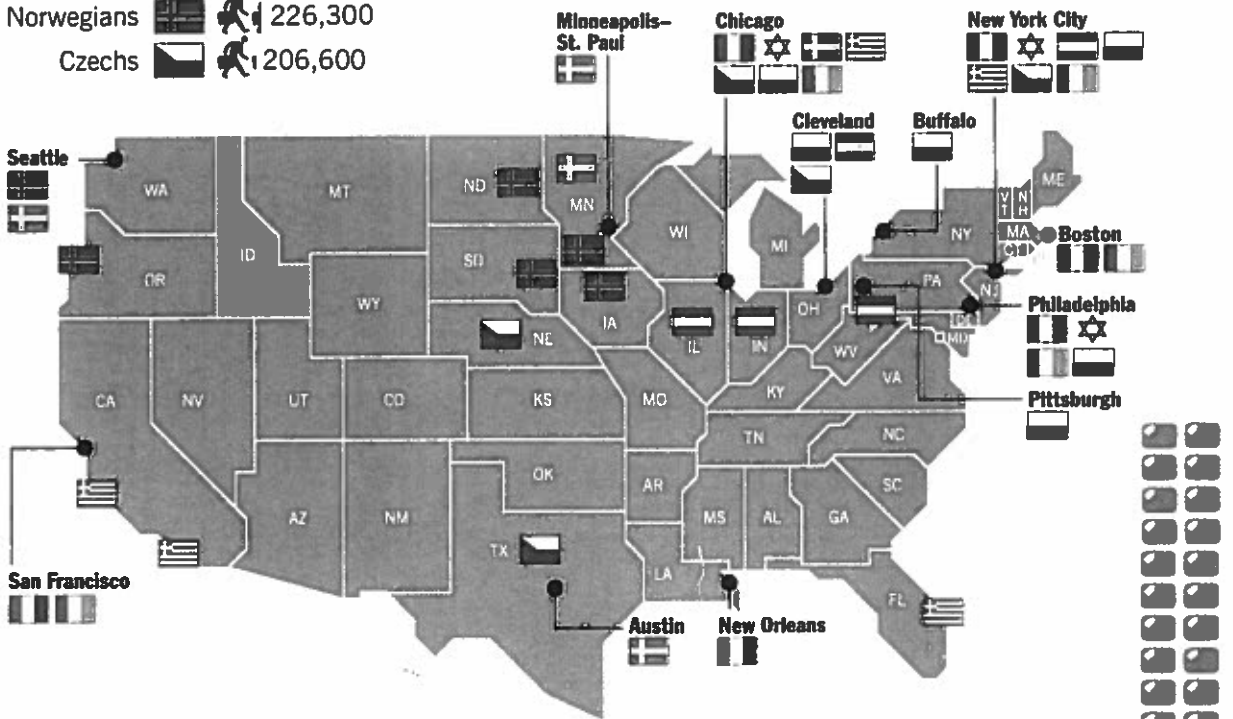
This map shows the major areas where some of the largest immigrant groups settled.

Approximate Numbers of Immigrants Arriving in the United States

1892-1931  Each figure equals 200,000 immigrants.



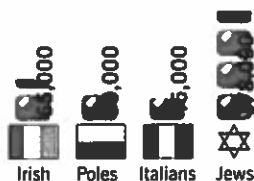
... and Where They Went



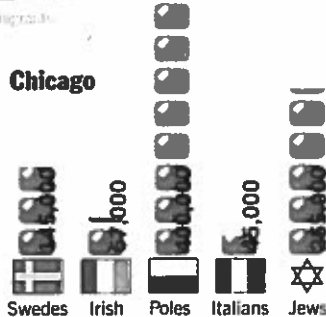
Breakdown of Major Cities

1900-1920  Each figure equals 50,000 immigrants.
All numbers are approximate.

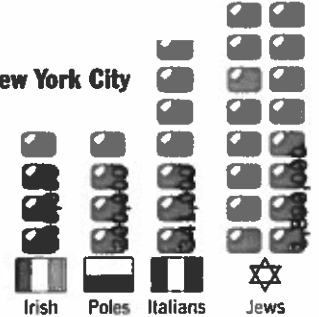
Philadelphia



Chicago



New York City



Statistics based on data from Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups, 1980.

Infographic by Nigel Holmes.