

ELLIS ISLAND

A Historical Perspective

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Americans All®

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The History of Ellis Island

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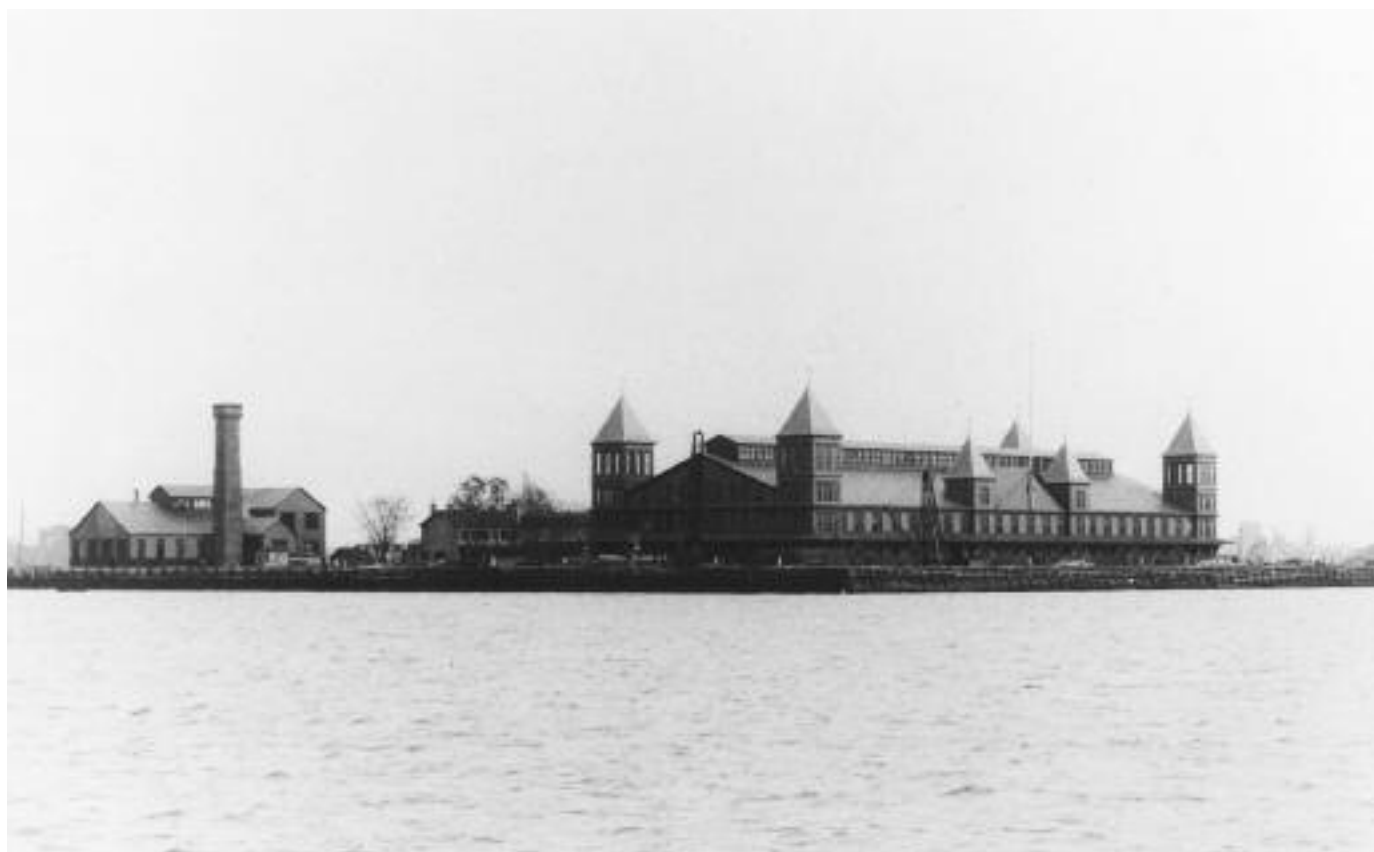
Before 1890 each state handled immigration according to its own rules. After that date the federal government assumed this responsibility. Ellis Island became the first immigration station, opening for business in 1892. Through the first quarter of the twentieth century, it handled nearly three-fourths of all immigrants to American shores. For these individuals, Ellis Island was the first American experience.

Originally Ellis Island was only about three acres and was barely above water at high tide. The Indians called it “Kioshk,” or Gull Island. Through the years many different names were attached to it. Finally, it became Ellis Island, named after its eighteenth-century owner, Samuel Ellis.

Fortifications to protect the harbor in case of war were built at Ellis Island beginning in the late 1700s. Not until

after the federal government purchased the island in 1808 were these completed. During the War of 1812, the island had a battery, a powder magazine and a barracks. It was called Fort Gibson in honor of a soldier who was killed in the war.

Fort Gibson served many purposes during the early 1800s, including the execution of pirates. New York State even tried to use it for convalescing immigrants in 1847 but without success. For a time both the Army and the Navy used the island as a military post, but after the Civil War it was used by the military solely for munitions storage. At this time *Harper's Weekly* and the *New York Sun* campaigned to have the munitions removed because they were a threat to surrounding communities. The powder magazine remained until 1890, however, when new uses were found for Ellis Island.



First immigration station at Ellis Island in 1892

During the 1880s there had been a gradual movement toward federal control of immigration. Beginning in 1882 a head tax of 50 cents per immigrant was collected to defray the cost of examination and to help those who needed funds or other services on arrival. Gradually during this decade, more and more people became concerned about the corruption at Castle Garden, the New York immigration reception center through which most immigrants passed, and about the threat posed to American labor by the new foreign workers. Finally Secretary of the Treasury William Windom notified New York State that as of April 16, 1890, Castle Garden must be closed because the federal government was going to assume control of immigration.

Windom wanted to build a separate, isolated immigration station. He decided that the best location for this New York station would be Bedloe's Island. Immediately a hue and cry arose. Just a few years before, the Statue of Liberty had been dedicated there. Many people, including Frédéric Bartholdi, who designed the Statue, thought it would be a sacrilege to turn this island into an immigration station. Windom was forced to accept the decision of a congressional committee on immigration to locate the new station on Ellis Island. This allowed Congress to rid itself of the perpetual problem of the powder magazine without irritating anyone.

Ellis Island was not without problems as a site for an immigration station. The water was too shallow for even most small boats. Out of the \$75,000 appropriated by Congress for the station, Windom first had to make a channel suitable for landing boats and to build necessary docks. A main building was constructed in addition to a hospital group, a boiler house, a laundry and an electric light plant. Wells were dug for a water supply and were supplemented by cisterns. Obviously, this construction took time. The new immigration station was not ready until 1892.

New York State was so miffed by the cancellation of its contract that it would not allow the use of Castle Garden while the new buildings were being constructed. Therefore, temporary facilities were set up at the Barge Office in Battery Park. Here everything was crowded together at a time when immigration was on the rise. As a result, corruption flourished. Approximately 75 percent of all immigrants to the United States were coming through New York City, and there simply were not enough officials to cope.

During the first years, immigration was handled directly by the federal government only at New York City. At other ports of entry it continued to be handled by local authorities under contract to the United States government. By 1892, however, all immigration fell into the hands of federal officials because people were becoming



New York ferry terminal

more and more concerned about the flow of immigrants into the country.

The first superintendent in New York, John B. Weber, headed a commission to examine the problems in Europe. In 1891 the commission looked at the difficulties with contract laborers (people brought in by industry on contract), other ways in which immigrants were assisted to come to the United States and why anyone came here at all. Some Americans thought that criminals and other undesirables rather than suitable new citizens were coming from Europe. Weber found that many of the supposed abuses were not true and did not recommend major changes in immigration procedures. He did discourage the examination of immigrants in their own countries as a system that would prove too costly.

When Ellis Island opened, the island's land area had been nearly doubled in size by adding landfill. The new Main Building had a baggage area capable of storing and handling the baggage of 12,000 people. In fact, the whole plant was designed to serve 10,000 immigrants each day. The station opened for business January 1, 1892. The first immigrant to go through was a young Irish girl who was presented with a \$10 gold piece by Commissioner Weber in honor of the occasion. At first immigration was heavy—mostly from the eastern and southern European countries. Toward the end of that first year, there was a decline, partially as a result of a cholera scare in Europe.

The first immigration station buildings were built of wood. Unfortunately, a great fire burned the place to the ground on June 14, 1897. Although the fire removed the old buildings that were considered by many to be firetraps, it also destroyed many irreplaceable records. This loss has been a continuing handicap ever since, because not only Ellis Island records but also Castle Garden records were destroyed.

The Immigration Process

June F. Tyler

When Ellis Island opened in 1892, a rather simple process was envisioned. The steerage passengers would be brought to the island on ferries or barges.* They would go to the second floor for medical examinations and interrogations. Some of them would be kept for further physical examinations. The others would proceed down 10 lines to answer the questions the law required the “pedigree clerks” to ask. If the immigrants passed, they would be separated according to destination, those going to New York or New England in one area and those going elsewhere in another. Finally, they would use other services, such as the Money Exchange, before leaving the island for their new lives.

By the mid-1890s there were procedural changes as the United States sought to decrease the number of immigrants. Steamship lines had to query the immigrants in many ways and attest to the detailed information on their manifests. Then immigration inspectors at Ellis Island compared the information given in response to their questions with the information on the manifests and checked for accuracy. Any immigrant whose answers did not jibe was detained for a Board of Special Inquiry.

Boards of Special Inquiry tried to determine the truth. However, they were hardly ever conducted according to constitutional guarantees of civil liberties. The immigrants were not allowed attorneys, nor were they allowed to confer with American friends or relatives. If a decision went against the immigrant, he or she was allowed to appeal, and both counsel and conferences with friends or relatives were permitted.

Before William Williams became commissioner at Ellis Island, many abuses existed. The feeding and care of the immigrants were often provided by private contractors. Under these contracts, fraud and maltreatment occurred. For example, Williams found that the food contractor did not clean the dining room and fed the immigrants without furnishing utensils or washing the dishes between groups. Immigrants leaving the island often were forced to buy food at extortionate prices.

Some were made to work in the kitchens without pay. This was just one area in which Williams achieved immediate improvement by destroying old contracts and writing new ones.

As the immigrants shifted from being mostly northern Europeans to being mostly southern and eastern Europeans, more and more Americans felt that the “new immigrants” were of poorer quality. Although Williams insisted that every immigrant receive equal treatment, he also felt that the present immigrants were not as good as the earlier ones. Even the social services societies often tried to exclude those who were not of their own background.

The Boards of Special Inquiry, often the target of special criticism, were defended by Williams as being of high quality. Although the immigration inspectors rotating on these boards did not have legal training, they had to be fully cognizant of immigration laws. Final decisions on appeals from these boards rested with the commissioner.

In 1909 Williams tried to enforce the laws strictly. To reduce the flow of immigrants and prevent them from



Immigrants going to the second floor for medical examinations and interrogations

*A barge was a small boat bringing immigrants directly from the ships in the harbor; a ferry was a small boat bringing immigrants from the shore at Battery Park and returning them to New York or New Jersey.

becoming a drain on the public purse, the law required each immigrant to have a minimum of \$25 and a railroad ticket to enter. Unfortunately, this was such a large sum for most immigrants that it prevented not only steerage but other classes of passengers from entry. In one instance, 215 out of 301 second-class passengers off one ship did not meet this criterion. The protest was so violent that the rule was soon cancelled.

Observers of the immigration process during the peak years wrote that the process was stringent and an ordeal for those who participated, but that it was probably not any more difficult than was required. Most had more criticism for the steerage decks of the steamship companies than for the process. The procedures may have been dehumanizing, but they were not intentionally so.

Although the medical examinations may have seemed very brief, actually they were designed to be quite revealing. As passengers walked up the stairs to the Registry Room carrying their baggage, doctors could check to see if they showed evidence of breathing difficulties that might indicate heart disease, had abnormalities such as lameness or other physical handicaps inhibiting their progress, or had abnormal posture. At the top of the stairs, the immigrants' hands, eyes and throats were carefully checked. In addition, their identification cards were checked and their eyesight again examined as they looked at their cards. As the people took right-angle turns, they were observed from both sides. This helped distinguish people who had abnormal expressions. After these brief examinations, any immigrants who were marked with possible problems would receive thorough examinations on which there was no time limitation. There were three divisions of physicians at Ellis Island: a boarding division checked cabin passengers as their ships entered the harbor, a hospital division ran the wards on Ellis Island and a line division checked the immigrants as they came through the immigration procedures.

If the immigrant passed the medical inspection, he or she then would join one of the lines for the remaining questions. At one time there were as many as 22 of these lines in the Main Hall. The inspector usually had about two minutes to decide whether to admit the immigrant to the United States. In the rush period from early spring through late summer, the inspectors would work from nine in the morning to nine in the evening.

Although 80 percent made it through the first day, some were detained until a friend or relative provided sufficient money for them to leave. These people were mostly women and children, and they seldom waited more than five days. At the end of that time, if they had not been sent funds, the detainees were turned over to one of the societies or were deported.



Inspectors examining the eyes of immigrants

Boards of Special Inquiry were held for many reasons. Governments might notify the United States that the immigrant was a wanted criminal. The immigrants might be suspected of being contract laborers, in the country to take jobs as a result of excursions abroad by industrial representatives. The vast majority, however, were suspected simply of being too poor to support themselves without becoming public charges.

Quite often the information used during this process or obtained from the immigrants was false. For example, the information on the manifest usually stated that the immigrant had paid his or her own way; in fact, almost all were assisted in some way. The immigrants themselves might give false information as to where they would be staying in the United States. Sometimes the immigrants would claim skills they did not have, though they were often required to demonstrate claimed skills if the Board of Special Inquiry had reason to be suspicious.

Although many changes were made in the process over the years, most were minor, and the actual process remained the same. Immigrants were often at the mercy of the contractors who brought them to the island, removed them from it or fed them while there. Yet most of the commissioners tried to make the experience as humane as possible within the strictures of the ever-tightening immigration laws. After 1924 the procedures were mostly performed in the country of origin. Therefore, the process described here refers to the peak years of immigration from 1892 to 1924.

69. Visitors view the cavernous Registry Room from benches where immigrants once sat. Peeling plaster, chipping paint and a dangling ceiling fixture are just a few signs of neglect in this room.
70. (top) The Money Exchange stands empty. This cash register once rang with the transactions of immigrants wanting to trade their currency for American money. The federal government enacted reforms in 1902 based on complaints that the exchange agents were giving immigrants cigar wrappers and play money rather than American currency. (bottom) Before the restoration, office furniture was a reminder of the Immigration Service's large staff on Ellis Island. Many clerks, stenographers, interpreters and other office personnel were needed to keep the volumes of records generated by immigrants' applications. In 1907 immigration figures peaked at 1 million.

71. Reconstruction efforts under way on the Main Building in 1986. Extensive physical restoration of the plumbing, heating, electrical and communications systems brought new life to the immigration station.
72. The Special Inquiry Room was the last place immigrants could appeal the decision to return them to their homeland. Restored in 1990, its clean walls make it less imposing than it was to many who argued to remain in the land of freedom.
73. After the restoration visitors can examine the room where immigrants waited.
74. The restored front of the Main Building at Ellis Island stands ready to greet visitors.
75. After the massive reconstruction effort, Ellis Island is ready to greet the world. More than one-third of all Americans are descended from the people who came to the United States through Ellis Island.

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Aerial view of Ellis Island

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New building opening in 1900

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Major nations in peak wave

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Steamship and steerage passengers

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Steerage passengers on deck

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Waiting on the dock

The Augustus Sherman Photograph Collection

Andrea Temple

It is April 12, 1908, the peak of American immigration. The hour is late and a mother and her four daughters are weary. They arrived from Romania earlier in the day, boarded the barge that brought them to Ellis Island and were physically and mentally examined. They endured, waited and finally were given entrance cards. They now sit on a bench waiting for the husband and father (who had immigrated earlier to secure a job and housing) to come and take them to their “New World.”

As they wait, a little drowsy, a little nervous, a man approaches and introduces himself as Augustus Sherman. He tells them that he would like to take their picture, to photograph them—a concept they are not sure they understand. They follow him anyway. Perhaps if they refuse, it would not be a good idea. Perhaps it is yet another part of the entry process. He brings them into a room with a screen positioned in front of the window blocking the light. “Now, mother, stand here,” he suggests. He moves the children gently into place around her. “Do you have a special shawl that you would like to wear?” he asks. The woman’s eyes brighten as she says, “Yes.” Her most prized possession is a shawl given to her by her mother. She unfolds it and drapes it around her shoulders.

The man then sets up a strange-looking box on legs, with a cloth draped over the back. In his right hand is an even stranger-looking device that he holds aloft. “Look at the camera,” he intones, and it is rapidly translated into their native tongue. A flash, a blink of the eyes—something has happened for which the stranger is eternally grateful and the family, more than just a little puzzled, returns to the bench to wait for entry into a new life.

For Augustus Sherman, Chief Clerk at Ellis Island, this little scenario was played out daily. Sherman, an avid photographer, was fascinated by the faces and clothing that crossed his path every day. A microcosm of the world, these questioning eyes and dignified faces would soon melt into the community at large. Their clothing would change, their manners would change, and they, in turn, would change the face of the society they were about to enter.

Workers at Ellis Island knew that Battery Park, at the tip of Manhattan, New York City, where many immigrants began their journey into the “New World,” was often “a sea of clothing.” The old clothes were discarded by the arriving immigrants and exchanged for “New World” garments. This was at the insistence of their newly assimilated relatives who felt that looking foreign by wearing strange clothing was not a good way to begin life in a new country.

“Gus” Sherman knew this and wished to capture the immigrants before the changes began, before they left Ellis Island. His was a simple request to the staff who worked in the Main Building where the immigrants were processed: “If you see an interesting face, an arresting costume, contact Gus Sherman immediately!” There could never be too many to photograph or anything too strange or exotic to capture on plate.



Augustus Sherman

The William Williams and Lewis W. Hine Photograph Collections

Although Augustus Sherman's photographs form one of the largest published collections that directly deal with the Ellis Island experience, other collections recorded the people and events of that era. Two of them were the William Williams and Lewis W. Hine collections.

William Williams

William Williams was Commissioner of Immigration at Ellis Island from 1902 to 1905 and 1909 to 1913. In 1947 The New York Public Library received as a gift from his estate a collection of bound books, pamphlets, scrapbooks, manuscripts, posters and photographs. Forty-nine of those photographs have been made available to the public in the United States History, Local History and Genealogy Division of The New York Public Library in New York City.

The photographs are divided into two categories: portraits of immigrants at Ellis Island and interior and exterior views of various Ellis Island structures and surroundings. The photographs were numbered arbitrarily from 1 through 49. Edwin Levick, a commercial photographer working in New York City, took the first 32. The remaining photographs appear to have been taken by the same photographer, but they are unsigned.

Lewis W. Hine

Lewis W. Hine was one of the nation's first photojournalists. He not only captured the immigrants in his camera as they arrived at Ellis Island but also as they established new lives and careers in America.

Hine began his career as a freelance photographer for the National Child Labor Committee in 1906 and supplied many of his early photographs to a journal, *The Survey*. In 1918 he became a staff photographer for the American Red Cross in Europe to help document the devastation and need for relief work.

Although widely appreciated today, Hine's photographs did not receive acclaim when they were first published. One reason was that relatively few people saw them. Printing of photographs in journals was costly, and his work appeared in journals with relatively limited public circulation. Also, at the turn of the century, the American

public had not accepted photography as a medium of good taste. To some, it was a violation of privacy.

Hine's works are now available in various collections, three of which—The New York Public Library, the Albin O. Kuhn Library & Gallery, and the Library of Congress—made prints available to the Americans All® Photograph Collection.

Information on the William Williams and Lewis W. Hine Photograph Collections

131. This Lithuanian immigrant carried all of her possessions in a wicker basket. She arrived at Ellis Island in 1926 wearing a colorful shawl. Shawls of this type were frequently passed from one generation to another.
132. Jewish immigrants to the United States did not come from a single country. Because sanitary and dietary practices prescribed by their religion helped protect them against some diseases, their population increased in Europe, putting at least as much pressure on them as on their neighbors. In addition, Jews were outsiders in Christian Europe, and they came under pressure to renounce their religion. The heavy exodus from Russia occurred when *pogroms*, organized attacks on Jews, broke out in the early 1900s.
133. Some immigrants passing through Ellis Island were apparently from well-to-do families. Although he carried all his possessions in a suitcase and bundle, this elderly man appears to be quite dignified and from an established base in his home country.
134. This Albanian woman arrived at Ellis Island in 1905. She is wearing native clothing, as did many of the arrivals at that time. The Registry Room often looked like a costume ball because of the multicolored, many-styled national clothing worn by those waiting for their turn to enter the United States.
135. Slavs were the largest ethnic group that passed through Ellis Island and stayed in the United States. Between 1899 and 1924, approximately

2.3 million Slavs immigrated to the United States. They left Europe for essentially the same economic and political reasons as the Italians and Jews. This woman, carrying all her possessions in a bundle on her back, is a typical traveler of that era.

136. This Syrian woman was detained on Ellis Island in 1925. Hine's notes indicated she had tattoo marks on her face and hands (a sign of marriage) that did not show in the photographs. She may have had a medical problem, for only 1 percent of those arriving in New York after 1924 were detained at the island for further examination.

137. This group of immigrants surrounds a large vessel that is decorated with the star-and-crescent symbol of the Muslim religion and the Ottoman Turks. They are wearing tags that identify their mode of transportation, so they are ready to leave the island.

138. The heads of these German immigrant families are farmers, scholars, professionals and possibly a butcher. Their modern clothing and sturdy luggage show they are all fairly prosperous. They have passed inspection and wear tags that indicate their mode of transportation, so they are ready to leave the island.

131



Lithuanian woman with shawl

132



Russian Jew

133



Unidentified man, 1900

134



Albanian woman

135



Slavic woman

136



Syrian woman

137



Immigrants wearing fezzes

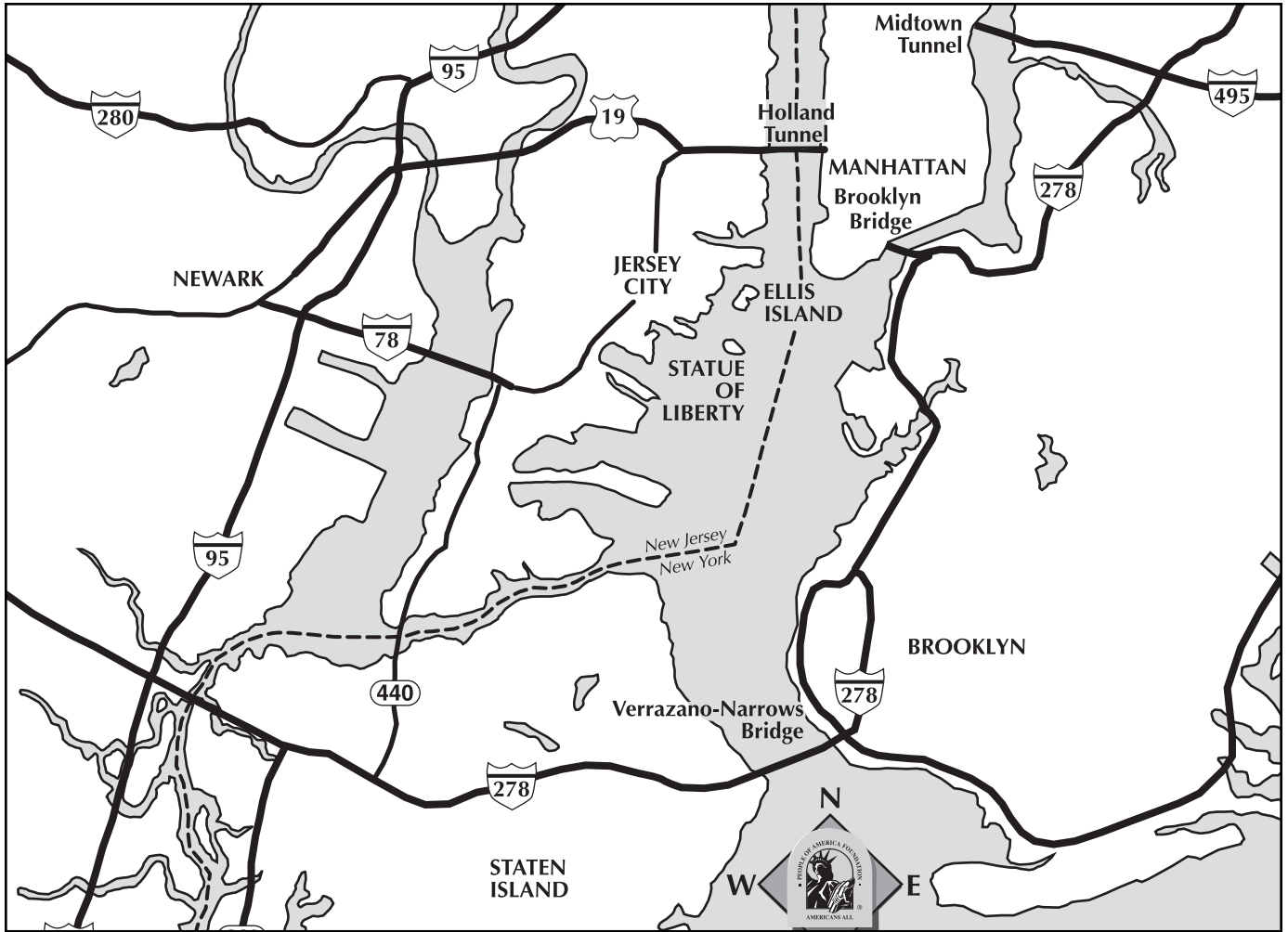
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German immigrants

The William Williams and Lewis W. Hine Photograph Collections

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Aerial view showing Ellis Island (top right) and the Statue of Liberty (bottom).