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# HOME & AWAY

## The Big Picture: American Dream Team

**Lady Liberty held out an invitation while Ellis Island was the gatekeeper to the promise.**

By Rhonda Ostertag

Many families, wherever they took root in the United States, have a story—a connection to this gateway. An ancestor answered Lady Liberty's call and passed through the halls of Ellis Island to a better life. Whether that life began working in a Montana mine, a Midwest cornfield, a Connecticut tool factory or the New York garment district, there is a connection.

From its opening in 1892 until its close in 1954, the station processed 12 million immigrant steamship passengers. Most arrivals found opportunity; some found disappointment. Two percent were turned back. Red, sticky eyes could signal trachoma (potential blindness); a cough, tuberculosis. Other reasons to be sent home, too, were having a criminal record, insufficient funds or a suspected mental defect.

Ellis Island's Great Hall holds the vivid story of our nation's growth. Six decades of hope, dread, excitement and confusion played out in this room, an emotional torrent palpable today.



The Statue of Liberty has also been called Lady Liberty, but its official name is actually *Liberty Enlightening the World*.

George Ostertag

Affluent first- and second-class passengers typically were processed aboard ship. Many more—crowded into the heat and stench of steerage—came through Ellis Island. After weeks-long voyages, the arrivals faced hours in processing lines being tagged, examined, chalked, directed, redirected and interviewed, all without knowing if they'd be turned back and often without understanding. English for most was a second language, and the match-up of interpreters was not always precise. If accepted, what lay ahead? This grand drama



played out hourly, played out daily.

Ellis Island is not a museum where visitors breeze past artifacts, diaries and letters, but one where they enter the era and meet the people: the immigrants, the inspectors and the doctors. The voices carry across time.



New Jersey's Empty Sky, 9/11 Memorial is located at Liberty State Park.  
George Ostertag

### **The Modern Journey**

Together, the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island compose the Statue of Liberty National Monument. Access to the two separate islands is by Statue Cruises, operating out of Liberty State Park in Jersey City, N.J., and Battery Park in Manhattan; reservations are recommended.

Motorists find ample, economical parking at Liberty State Park. The

large park also welcomes with its harbor and Manhattan views, the moving Empty Sky, 9/11 Memorial, two-mile Liberty Walk promenade, flags, statues, lawns and picnic grounds.

Arriving at the monument by boat gives an authentic sense of coming to America. The golden flame of Lady Liberty still shines the way. When arriving from New York, the Statue of Liberty is the first stop. Morning ferries find the statue well lit. From New Jersey, the Statue of Liberty is the last stop, the final impression.

The basic cruise ticket provides for a grounds visit to the Statue of Liberty, but visitors can book special pedestal and crown tours, which are snatched up early. Touring the grounds, visitors sense the stature, presence and awe of liberty.

At Ellis Island, contemporaries walk the walk of the immigrants, visiting the baggage room and the imposing Great Hall registry room.

### **The People, the Stories**

Immigrants left their homeland with what precious goods they could carry to start their new lives and remember loved ones left behind. Satchels, trunks, bundles, boxes and baskets by the thousands were processed through the baggage office. Sadly, too many immigrants met the first scoundrels of the New World here. Price gouging and missing luggage plagued the process in its early years.

Old photographs of the Great Hall show its incarnations. Early visitors were herded through stiles—pens per the caption. In later years, rows and rows of seating served the tedious process.



Throughout the museum, large black-and-white portraits capture the faces of immigration. The eyes draw you in, as do the stories. Immigration detention and deportation tore apart families, separated war brides from their husbands and held lives in limbo for days, weeks and months at a time.



Historical photographs line the walls of the Ellis Island Immigrant Museum.  
George Ostertag

Miscommunication and broken promises left immigrants stranded between an old life abandoned and a new one not to be. But the process also brought together stowaways and newfound guardians and fulfilled boatloads of wishes for a better life dreamed on foreign lands.

The dynamic video display the American Flag of Faces encapsulates one nation of many from different origins, creating the Stars and Stripes as a tapestry of immigrant faces.

### Planning Your Trip

For park information, call the National Park Service at (212) 363-3200 or visit [www.nps.gov/elis](http://www.nps.gov/elis). For cruise information, contact Statue Cruises at (877) 523-9849 or [www.statuecruises.com](http://www.statuecruises.com).

For general New Jersey travel information, call (800) 847-4865 or go to [www.visitnj.org](http://www.visitnj.org). For New York, contact (800) 225-5697 or [www.iloveny.com](http://www.iloveny.com). For trip-planning assistance, contact a local AAA travel agent or [AAA.com/travel](http://AAA.com/travel).

### The Unwanted Immigrant

October 29, 2012, Hurricane Sandy and 8 feet of flood water visited the monument, closing its doors. Primary damage affected the basement-housed communication, electrical and plumbing operational systems. On the New Jersey shore, Sandy also closed the historic railroad station and its myriad tracks that carried the new arrivals into America's heart. Fortunately, fast-acting park staff crated and evacuated the historical artifacts from Ellis Island.

The Statue of Liberty reopened July 4, 2013, after its hurricane-sponsored hiatus. Ellis Island marked its reopening one year after the great disturbance, with the core of the story intact and more exhibits still to return.

Climate-control systems and such have yet to be brought online. Where historical exhibits remain absent from Ellis Island's third floor museum, chalked outlines and archival codes

hint at the hurried, but meticulous evacuation.

After Sandy's insertion into the station's story, new exhibits tell of the storm.

[See more sights](#) from the Statue of Liberty National Monument.

View the video [Ellis Island Throughout the Years](#).

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