

# THE HISTORY OF IMMIGRATION

History always provides us with important perspective as we seek to understand current public policy debates. This is especially true for immigration. While it may be tempting to judge the actions of undocumented immigrants today against the actions of our immigrant ancestors, the legal landscape has changed so dramatically over time that it is difficult to make direct and accurate comparisons. Immigration is also part of our history as Catholics in America. In fact, the first U.S. citizen to become a saint – Frances Xavier Cabrini – was a naturalized immigrant from Italy and is now the patroness of immigrants.

Immigration laws as we know them today did not exist until the 1920s, after waves of European immigration had subsided.

Generous immigration policies brought 33 million European immigrants to America between 1821 and 1924. The only European immigrants barred from entering the United States before 1921 were criminals, the mentally ill, anarchists, communists and those employed in vice industries. Only two percent of arrivals at Ellis Island were denied entry, usually for public health reasons or concerns that the person would become a public charge.<sup>1</sup> All other European immigrants could enter unrestricted and visas did not exist. Canadian and Mexican immigrants enjoyed similarly generous policies, while Asians' immigration opportunities were severely restricted and hundreds of thousands of Africans were forced to come to America through the slave trade. What is now the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services was not created until 1891 and the Border Patrol not until 1924.



Only two percent of arrivals at Ellis Island were denied entry, usually for public health reasons or concerns that the person would become a public charge.<sup>1</sup> All other European immigrants could enter unrestricted and visas did not exist. Canadian and Mexican immigrants enjoyed similarly generous policies, while Asians' immigration opportunities were severely restricted and hundreds of thousands of Africans were forced to come to America through the slave trade. What is now the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services was not created until 1891 and the Border Patrol not until 1924.

Quota laws slashed the number of new immigrants allowed into the United States.

Between 1900 and 1910, an average of nearly one million immigrants came to America each year. The first major restriction on European immigration was put in place in 1921, when the total number of new immigrants was limited to 360,000 annually and a quota was established for new arrivals from each nation. In 1924, the quota was reduced to 165,000 new arrivals annually and adjusted to favor immigrants from northwest Europe over those from southern and eastern European nations like Italy and Poland.

Anti-Catholicism and anti-immigration sentiments have always been closely linked.



Noted historian John Higham wrote that 19th century anti-Catholicism was, “By far the oldest and – in early America – the most powerful of the anti-foreign traditions”<sup>2</sup> and “No other xenophobia functioned in so

highly organized a way as anti-Romanism.”<sup>3</sup> Fear and hatred of Catholics was so fevered that it spawned at least two major political movements – the Know Nothings and the American Protective Association. Some Americans believed that Catholic immigrants from places like Ireland and Germany were sent to the United States by the pope to destroy the American way of life, and they sought to curb immigration as a result.

The impact of immigration on the United States in the early 20th century was the same as – if not greater than – its impact today.

The largest numerical increase in the U.S. population occurred in the 1990s, but the largest *percentage* increase in the U.S. population occurred between 1900 and 1910 and was a result of immigration.<sup>4</sup> About 12 percent of the U.S. population today is foreign born; in the early 20th century, that figure was nearly 15 percent.<sup>5</sup>

Today's immigrants come to the United States for the same reasons immigrants came in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Immigrants today – like those of the past – come to America to build better lives for their families and to escape economic, political and religious injustice, even if only temporarily. Millions left Ireland in the 1840s and 1850s because of the threat of starvation from the potato famine and the threat of persecution from British penal codes. Most Italian immigrants were young, single men who migrated along kinship networks and planned to stay in America only temporarily to save money to support their families back home. Between 1880 and 1920, more than 50 percent of Italian immigrants returned to Italy.<sup>6</sup> Some of those immigrating today will also return to their homelands, but others, because of family ties, work, and love for our country, will stay and add to the rich human mosaic that is the United States of America.



1. The Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Foundation, “Ellis Island: History,” [http://www.ellisland.org/genealogy/ellis\\_island\\_history.asp](http://www.ellisland.org/genealogy/ellis_island_history.asp)
2. John Higham, *Strangers in the Land* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1963), 5.
3. *Ibid*, 79.
4. U.S. Census Bureau, “Demographic Trends in the 20th Century,” (2002), 12.
5. U.S. Census Bureau, “Special Edition: 300 Million,” [http://www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/releases/archives/facts\\_for\\_features\\_special\\_editions/007276.html](http://www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/releases/archives/facts_for_features_special_editions/007276.html)
6. Herbert S. Klein, “The Integration of Italian Immigrants into the United States and Argentina: A Comparative Analysis,” *The American History Review* 88 (1983), 319.