The words from the poem "The New Colossus" by Emma Lazarus have become famous as the inscription on the Statue of Liberty, which has welcomed countless people to the United States. Throughout the last half of the 19th century, immigrants flooded into New York harbor. From New York, they traveled west by boat through the Erie Canal to the ports of Milwaukee, Chicago, and Duluth. Others rode the new transcontinental railroad or traveled in wagon trains.

### Pull Factors

The repressive conditions in many European countries made America appear to be a land of unlimited opportunity. Some saw an opportunity to earn money that they could take back home to improve their lives in their own country. America, then, was a destination for some, and for others it was a stopover on the way to a greater destination. The promise of jobs drew many immigrants to U.S. cities. Once there, they found themselves in crowded tenements and working from sunup to sundown in clattering factories. Husbands, wives, and children all worked and saved every spare penny. They saved to send money home to those they left behind. They saved to start businesses of their own. They saved to send a son through school for an education that would mean more opportunities. They saved to send for family members left behind in the old country.

The Homestead Act of 1862 promised land to those who would work for it. Family farms in Europe had been divided among heirs for generations. The farms were now too small to support families, and the promise of new land was a powerful incentive to immigrate.

### Gilded Age Nativism

Despite the fact that for much of the 19th century, many Americans were open to immigration, gradually a nativist movement began. Nativists believed, for a variety of reasons, that immigrants were undesirable. Signs advertising jobs said "No Irish Need Apply." Jews, Italians, Germans, Swedes, and Norwegians all faced prejudice. In 1914, social scientist Edward Alsworth Ross showed those prejudices in his description of immigrants as "hirsute, low-browed, big-faced persons of obviously low mentality." One nativist group, the Order of the Star Spangled Banner, wanted to eliminate immigration to America completely. Later known as the Know Nothing Party, this group sponsored former president Millard Fillmore as their candidate for the office in 1856.

On the West coast, Chinese immigrants faced particularly vicious prejudice. By law, only white immigrants could become citizens. Therefore, Chinese immigrants could not gain citizenship, vote, hold political office, own land, or file mining claims. In California, laws kept Chinese American children out of public schools. In 1882, Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act. The law forbade Chinese laborers from entering the United States. In addition, Chinese laborers were forbidden to bring their wives to join them in the United States. The Chinese Exclusion Law remained in effect until 1943.

### Ellis Island and Naturalization

By the late 19th century, the U.S. government passed a series of immigration laws that prevented many Europeans from entering the country. On the East coast, as a way to enforce these acts, the government opened Ellis Island in 1892. Immigrants were processed there and examined for diseases or mental deficiencies. Those found to be undesirable would be sent back on the very ship that brought them to America. Those that passed this first round of examinations would end up at a final inspection, where they would be interrogated to determine if they were a secret polygamist, had criminal records, were a prostitute, or had extremist political beliefs that might bring anarchy to America.

On the West coast, near San Francisco, was Angel Island, where Asian immigrants were processed. If they passed an initial physical, they were moved on to an interrogation process intended to determine if they could be admitted. Despite the Chinese Exclusion Act, which barred Chinese immigrants, exceptions were made for any Asian who could prove that he was a direct relative of a Chinese merchant living and doing business in San Francisco. As a result, those Chinese trying to enter the country used documents forged in China and memorized detailed histories of the merchant they were claiming they were related to. The interrogation was an attempt to trip them up in their story and therefore trick them into admitting that they were not a legitimate entrant.
Despite prejudice and problems, immigrants still found in the United States a promised land of opportunity. Those sailing into New York were awed by the Statue of Liberty. One Polish immigrant reported being "overcome" by "the bigness of Mrs. Liberty." "No one spoke a word," he said, "for she was like a goddess and we knew she represented the big, powerful country which was to be our future home."

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