

United States Immigration History & Policy

500+

years ago

America is populated by millions of Native peoples speaking over 300 different languages.

1493-1530

Spanish colonize Caribbean islands

1534

French claim territory of present-day Canada as New France.

1565

Spanish establish the settlement of St. Augustine in present-day Florida.

1607

English establish settlement of Jamestown in present-day Virginia.

1619

First ship with enslaved Africans arrives

1619-1807

Approximately 500,000 Africans were forcibly imported into what is now the US to serve as slaves.

1682

French claim the Mississippi Valley Louisiana Territory as part of New France.

1776-1808

Rules regarding who is a citizen and who can gain citizenship via naturalization are created. Slaves are prohibited from being brought into the US.



1000

Vikings sailed to a place they call "Vinland," in what is now the Canadian province of Newfoundland. Later Vikings come on trading expeditions but do not settle in the Americas.

1497-1521

Portuguese explorers claim parts of what is today Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada

1598

The Spanish establish the capital of Spain at San Juan Pueblo, 25 miles north of present-day Santa Fe in New Mexico.

1609-1626

Dutch explore northeast part of what is today the US and Canada, claiming as New Netherlands. 1615 they establish a settlement near present-day Albany.

1626

Dutch "purchase" the island of Manhattan from the Lenape Indians.

1734-1867

Russians explore and colonize pacific areas of present-day northern US and Alaska. In 1867 Russia's sale of Alaska is protested as illegal by Alaskan indigenous nations because they were the original owners.

1776

United States becomes independent nation. Anyone born in US is considered a citizen. Constitution 1787. Bill of Rights 1789.

1789-1797

Under George Washington, citizenship gained by naturalization is limited to “free white citizens” leaving out American Indians, slaves and others, and subsequently adding residency requirements of five years and renunciation of “allegiance and fidelity” to any other country (1795).

1808

Slave Trade Act makes it illegal to import or buy a person of color from another country.

1840s-1850s

The Germans begin migrating for economic and religious reasons (German revolution 1848) and the Irish because of religious/political reasons and starvation from the Potato Famine (1845-52).

1848

Mexican American war (1846-1848) results in Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo through which the US gains half of Mexico’s territory including present-day Arizona and New Mexico and parts of Utah, Nevada, and Colorado. Mexicans are allowed to choose to stay in US or return to Mexico, and protected the property and civil rights of those who stayed, promising citizenship.

1854-1956

The Nativist political party the Know Nothing Party, also called the American Party, is formed in reaction to differences between Protestant and Catholics. In California the Know Nothings react against the Chinese.

1810s

1840s

1850s

1802

The 1802 Naturalization Act states that applicants must have good character, allegiance to the Constitution and a formal declaration of intention. This statute also requires immigrants to complete an application form with their name, birthplace, age, nation of allegiance, country of emigration, and place of intended settlement.

1830-1870

Immigration by German, Irish and Chinese due to factors in home countries and need for labor in US. Mexico cedes half its territory to the US and Mexicans in that area are guaranteed the right to their property and to naturalization. Gold is discovered in California prompting increased immigration and migration. Anti-immigrant sentiment is reflected in the establishment of the Know-Nothing political party. Agreement between US and China allows Chinese laborers to come to US to help build the Transcontinental Railroad, which is then used by immigrants coming in from Europe to get to the western US, a new part of US territory.

1848-1855

California Gold Rush attracts immigrants and migrants.

1850s

Chinese workers migrated to the United States, first to work in the gold mines, but also to take agricultural jobs, and factory work, especially in the garment industry.

1869

Transcontinental Railroad is completed. Promoted by railroad companies, new immigrants entering the US via its Eastern seaboard use railways to migrate West, creating new immigrant settlements across the country.

1880

1,630 Chinese live in Tucson. Came via Mexico or from the Railroad construction jobs.

1881

Pogroms (killing of Jews) in Russia and Eastern Europe lead thousands of Jews to immigrant to the US.

1882

Chinese Exclusionary Act ends immigration of “skilled and unskilled Chinese laborers” for 10 years, which is then extended by the Geary Act in 1892 and made permanent in 1902. This Act requires that all Chinese residents register and obtain a certificate of residence. Without the certificate, Chinese residents faced deportation, imprisonment and a year of hard labor.

1890

Congress passes the Indian Naturalization Act. This grants Native Americans the right to citizenship by applying for naturalization, the same process that non-US born residents take to obtain citizenship.

1892

Ellis Island Immigration Station opens. In the first year nearly 450,000 immigrants pass through this port of entry to the US.

1860s

1880s

1890

1868

The Burlingame Treaty established formal relations between the US and China. It is established in order to maintain a flow of cheap Chinese labor for the construction of the Transcontinental Railroad. It permitted free migration between China and the US and guaranteed the political and religious rights of Chinese immigrants.

1870- 1907

Immigration increases, anti-immigrant sentiment increases, additional restrictions added to who can qualify for citizenship via naturalization and taking away citizenship from American women married to foreigners, while at the same time granting the naturalization process to Native Americans and granting birthright citizenship. Chinese Exclusionary Act prevents further immigration by Chinese laborers. First immigration center established and tighter boarder control undertaken as Federal responsibility. Advertising for people to immigrant become illegal.

1886

Statue of Liberty is dedicated in New York harbor. It becomes symbol of welcome to immigrants to US shores.

1891

Immigration Act of 1891 further restricts immigration excluding those with contagious diseases, polygamists and contracted laborers. Regulation of immigration is switched from states to federal responsibility. Advertising to attract immigrants is made illegal.

1894

Treaty with Japan to allow for Japanese laborers to immigrant to US to work.

1894-1921

Establishment of Immigration Restriction League. Members were fearful that immigrants would not assimilate. They fought for a literacy requirement to be added for admission to the country, which would be adopted in 1917.

1906

To standardize naturalization procedures, Congress passes the Naturalization Act of 1906 making some knowledge of the English language a requirement for citizenship and establishes the Bureau of Immigration and Naturalization in the Commerce Department to oversee national immigration policy.

1910- 1930s

Anti-immigrant sentiment, primarily aimed at those who were not from Western Europe results in stricter immigration requirements and the establishment of quotas. As a result of the Mexican Revolution and US agricultural needs, many Mexicans enter the US to work.

1911

The United States Immigration Commission, known as the "Dillingham Commission," was formed in response to growing political concern about immigration in the United States. The commission concluded that immigration of southern and eastern Europeans posed a serious threat to American society and culture and recommended that the number of immigrants permitted entry to the US be restricted. The commission's findings provided the rationale for the politically and economically inspired immigration restriction acts of the next several decades. The commission's report is used as fodder for the establishment of immigration quotas in 1924.

1900

1910

1890

1899

US vs Wong Kim Ark defines Birthright Citizenship. US Supreme Court rules that all children born on American soil are automatically US citizens (including children of foreigners).

1901

The Anarchist Exclusion Act prohibits entry into the US by people judged to be anarchists and political extremists. This Act comes as a response to President William McKinley being fatally shot by a Polish anarchist.

1907

The Expatriation Act defines the citizenship of women married to foreigners. Under the law women assume the citizenship of their husbands and a woman with US citizenship forfeits it if she marries a foreigner, unless he becomes naturalized.

1910

Angel Island Immigration Station in the San Francisco Bay opens—it's nickname was Guardian of the Western Gate. The facility, primarily a detention center, was designed to control the flow of Chinese, and later other Asian immigrants, into the country.

1910

The Mexican Revolution against the 31-year dictatorship of Porfirio Diaz causes large-scale migration to the US where increased job opportunities were available because of increased irrigation, extension of transportation systems and demands of WWI. Most Mexicans intend to return to Mexico after the violence ends. Between 1900 and 1930, the Mexican population in the US went from 100,000 to 1.5 million.

1917

Literacy test added to requirements for entry to US. Those over the age of 16 must be able to read 40 words. Also those from certain Asian countries are barred entry.

1924

The Immigration Act of 1924 places more restrictive quotas on immigration, basing it on 2 percent of population levels of each nation already in the US in 1890. It also included a provision excluding from entry anyone who was ineligible for citizenship based on race or nationality. This in effect made people of Asian lineage ineligible to enter the US.

1924

Congress passes the Labor Appropriation Act that officially establishes the U.S. Border Patrol in order to secure the borders between inspection stations. Pervious to this, mounted Guards worked sporadically along the border primarily with the purpose of restricting the flow of illegal Chinese immigration.

1935

Jews deprived of German citizenship and migrate to US. Jewish refugees begin to arrive in the US, including some of the most prominent German academics.

1941-1964

Due to labor shortages during World War II, the US begins the Labor Importation program, also known as the Bracero Program, to supply inexpensive workers. Temporary work visas were given to laborers primarily from Mexico, and also from Jamaica, Honduras, and Barbados.

1920s**1930s****1940s****1921**

Emergency Quota Act establishes first quota to be enforced for all nationalities. The Act based the quota levels on the population of any given nationality living in the US in 1910, allowing only 3 percent or 350,000 to entry from countries outside Western Europe. This ensured that the cultural profile of the majority of people living the in US was northern European. Mexicans are excluded from the quota system because of the efforts of the agriculture lobby.

1923

Immigrants from Indian are forbidden citizenship via naturalization.

1924

The Citizen Act grants citizenship to Native Americans, but many states enact voting restrictions and violence to keep Native Americans from voting.

1935- 1950

With War World II see influx of Jewish immigrants and adaptation of the Bracero program to allow inexpensive workers from Mexico to fill gaps in the US labor needs. Chinese Exclusionary Act is lifted, but strict immigration quotas remain.

1943

China becomes an official allied nation and Congress passes the Magnuson Act, repealing the previous Chinese Exclusion Acts. Chinese American are now able to apply for citizenship via naturalization, but are banned from owning property. Strict immigration quota numbers are also still in effect.

1950- 1980

National origins quotas continue to be used to regulate numbers of immigrants at the beginning of this era and are eliminated by the end, with a ceiling of 300,000 immigrants allowed each year. Operation Wetback, an unofficial campaign to deport undocumented Mexican immigrants expels 3.8 million people.

1953-1958

Due to pressure from border states the Immigration Nationalization Service begins "Operation Wetback," an unofficial campaign to deport undocumented Mexican immigrants. While officials claimed that they wished only to expel those who have immigrated to the US illegally, they often focused on Mexicans, deporting those who immigrated legally and their US-born children. While looking for people to deport officials adopted the practice of stopping "Mexican-looking" citizens and asking for identification. Over 3.8 million people are deported.

1953

The Refugee Relief Act grants refugee status to non-European migrants displaced by war. In total 200,000 refugees are admitted into the United States.

1964

The Civil Rights Act makes it unlawful for an employer to "fail or refuse to hire or to discharge any individual, or otherwise to discriminate against any individual with respect to his compensation, terms, conditions or privileges or employment, because of such individual's race, color, religion, sex, or national origin."

1950s

1960s

1948

205,000 European refugees enter the US under the Displaced Persons Act of 1948, which aimed to help individuals who were victims of Nazi persecution.

1952

Immigration and Nationality Act upholds national origins quotas to be enforced by the new Immigration and Naturalization Service. It still allows unlimited immigration from Western Hemisphere countries, permits limited immigration from the Eastern Hemisphere countries, establishes preference for skilled workers, and tightens security and screening standards. The law abolishes racial restrictions on nationalization, thus opening citizenship to non-white immigrants. Grants citizenship to people living in Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, and Guam. It allows the US government to deport immigrants and naturalized citizens engaged in subversive activities.

1959

As a result of the Cuban Revolution, over 200,000 anti-Communist Cubans and Western business owners flee to the US to avoid prosecution by revolutionary courts and are welcomed as political refugees. A year later the Castro regime nationalizes all foreign-owned property, and in response, the US froze all Cuban assets, severed diplomatic ties, and issued an embargo on Cuba. In 1966, Congress passes the Cuban American Adjustment Act allowing Cubans who have been in the US for over a year to receive permanent residency. No other immigrant group has had this privilege before, or since.

1965

Immigration and Nationalization Act eliminates national origins quotas. The law sets a maximum annual level of immigration at 300,000 and allows for no more than 20,000 immigrants per country in the Eastern Hemisphere. Preference is given to uniting immigrant families and skilled workers. Nevertheless, new immigrant populations from the Middle East, Africa, and India migrate to the US in unprecedented numbers. No per-country quotas are placed on Western Hemisphere countries.

1986

Congress passes the Immigration Reform and Control Act, giving legal status to about three million undocumented immigrants who entered the United States before 1982. Additionally the law makes it illegal to knowingly hire or recruit undocumented immigrants and requires employers to report their employee's immigration status with the introduction of the I-9 employment form. This law also increases the Border Patrol by fifty percent and denies undocumented workers federal welfare benefits.

1990

The Immigration Act of 1990 increases the limits on legal immigration to the United States to 700,000, revises all grounds for exclusion and deportation, authorizes temporary protected status to aliens of designated countries, revises and establishes new non-immigrant admission categories (ie: student and temporary workers), revises and extends the non-immigrant Visa Waiver Pilot Program, and revises naturalization authority and requirements. The law removes homosexuality as grounds for exclusion from immigration and creates the Diversity Immigrant Visa program, establishing a lottery system to admit immigrants from countries under-represented in the United States.

1980s

1980

The Refugee Act created The Federal Refugee Resettlement Program to provide for the effective resettlement of refugees and to assist them to achieve economic self-sufficiency as quickly as possible after arrival in the United States. The law raises the limitation from 17,400 to 50,000 refugees admitted each year.

1986- 2001

While there is some movement to create a way for illegal immigrants to obtain legal status, overall the sentiment is anti-immigrant and becoming more focused on Mexican illegal immigrants. Illegal immigrants cannot be hired and efforts are in place to start tightening US borders with a concentrated effort placed on deporting Mexicans. A lottery system is put in place for those wanting to migrate from countries under-represented in the US.

1990s

1993

"Operation Blockade" begins. The El Paso Border Patrol places 400 agents directly on the Rio Grande river to deter undocumented immigrants trying to migrate to the United States. During the next 10 years nearly 3,000 people are killed attempting to illegally cross the border.

1996

Congress passes the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act and AEDPA to create more stringent immigration laws pertaining to admission and deportation. The laws broaden the types of crimes that could lead to deportation, making many misdemeanors including shoplifting and simple drug possession grounds for deportation, and made becoming legal after entering the country illegally almost impossible. Applying for asylum becomes more difficult under this law, which bars refugees from working while their cases were under review. Mass incarceration of immigrants begins and in 4 years 363,000 people are detained.

9/11/2001

Men affiliated with Al-Qaeda, a global militant Islamist organization, hijack four passenger airliners, fly two into the World Trade Center complex and one into the Pentagon. The fourth plane targeted the US Capitol, but crashed into a field in Pennsylvania when its passengers attacked the hijackers. The Arab American and Muslim community experiences bigotry and violence as many Americans associate all Muslims with the September 11th terrorists. US government officials focus their attention on "securing the American borders" by having stricter requirements for entry into the US.

2004- present

Anti-Mexican/Hispanic sentiments are high in the US with vigilante groups, increased deportation, and racist laws being passed at state levels. Children of illegal immigrants who grow up in the US start organizing to fight for civil rights including the ability to become citizens.

2001

The Texas State Legislature passes the Texas DREAM Act providing that all students, regardless of their immigrant status, may qualify for in-state tuition at Texas colleges and universities. This law also gives children brought to the United States illegally a pathway to citizenship. [Currently there are twelve states with their own version of the DREAM Act and a similar law has been introduced in the US Congress every year since 2009.]

2001

Just over a month after the terrorist attacks President George W. Bush signs into law the USA Patriot Act. The law lifted restrictions on law enforcement's gathering of domestic intelligence; expanded the Secretary of Treasury's authority over international financial transactions; broadened the law surrounding detainment and deportment of immigrants suspected of terrorism-related acts by authorizing the indefinite detentions of some immigrants and reporting/supervision requirements for certain nationalities (NSEERS program); and added domestic terrorism to the federal definition of terrorism. Although the law is directed at fighting terrorism, it has been used against undocumented workers with no terrorist affiliation. Also, Bush reconfigures the immigration bureaucracy: what was one agency, the INS, becomes three: Border Patrol, ICE, and CIS.

2004

The Minuteman Project begins as an anti-immigrant vigilante group and citizen's border patrol working along the US southern border.

2006

Mass demonstrations of immigrants, Hispanic Americans, and their allies launch in cities across the US in support of immigrant rights and to protest discrimination against undocumented immigrants.

2010

Arizona enacts SB 1070 and HB 2162. Arizona SB 1070 requires all persons over the age of 14 who remain in the US for more than 30 days to register with the government and to have registration documents in their possession at all times. This law also requires law enforcement to determine a person's immigrant status during "lawful contact" with a person who law enforcement "suspects" is an undocumented immigrant. Arizona HB 2162 is the final version of Arizona SB 1070, and adds text stating, "prosecutors would not investigate complaints based on race, color or national origin." The US Department of Justice filed a lawsuit against the state of Arizona asking that the law be declared invalid because it interferes with federal immigration regulations.

Text

2010s

2005

"Operation Streamline" allows federal district courts in certain border districts to hear and decide cases of dozens of immigrants at the same time, often pushing them through in a hour. Big increase in the criminal prosecution of immigration violations – whereas illegal entry/reentry were previously hardly ever charged as crimes but simply pursued as civil violations, now they can lead to significant criminal penalties (ie jail time and fines) before deportation.

2012

The US Supreme Court strikes down three of the four provisions in Arizona SB 1070 as unconstitutional. The court upholds the provision that allows Arizona police to investigate the immigration status of stopped, detained, or arrested people.

2012

President Obama announces that his administration will stop deporting young undocumented immigrants who entered the US as children if they meet certain requirements. While Obama provides amnesty for some nearly 2 million people have been deported during term and a half in office, the same amount that was deported under President Bush's two terms of office.

*Timeline based on one on the National Dialogues on Immigration website <http://www.dialoguesonimmigration.org>, and expanded to augment the film U.S. Immigration: Linking Past to Present <https://vimeo.com/160534172>.