

Just To Get Here: American Arrivals, Immigration, Exclusion, Disability, and Legislation

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Jews have lived on the land now known as the United States for 370 years, alongside an ever-evolving cohort of cohabitants with changing ideas about who “belongs” and who should be excluded. Over time, successive iterations of mainstream Americans have sought to shape their “ideal” societies by deciding what kinds of people they want to join them, under what conditions, and for what reasons.

This theme recurs throughout American Jewish history, and indeed throughout much of the history of worldwide migration. As population groups faced the prospect of including new members, they contended with how they felt about new people joining. In the American context, that looked like deciding which “desirable” traits they would like to see in those newcomers, and which “undesirable” traits they would prefer to keep out. As later generations of Jewish **immigrants** attempted to enter the United States (and the colonies that predated it) they encountered an American society that defined “insiders” and “outsiders” based on factors like wealth and self-sufficiency; physical, mental, and “moral” qualities; place of origin; and the skills they had. Other factors, like an immigrant’s gender, age, race, ethnicity, and even their job, also influenced these decisions.

NOTE TO EDUCATORS:

Students frequently worry about belonging: being included on a team, accepted by a social group, or even enrolled in a particular class. Immigration tells a story of belonging and power, and who gets to decide, as countries constantly change in size, character, and demographics. Students may not immediately connect with the concept of citizenship and immigration as the tools by which a country’s leaders craft their imagined “ideal” society, but significant and formative elements of our daily lives mirror the same phenomenon on a more relatable scale.

JEWISH ARRIVALS BEFORE MASS MIGRATION

The first Jews to settle on America’s eastern coast arrived in 1654 from Recife, Brazil. These women, men, and children—refugees from the recent Portuguese conquest of Brazil—fled because they feared that the Portuguese government would bring its Inquisition across the ocean, persecuting Jews by forcing them to choose between death and converting to Catholicism.¹

¹ “350th Celebration: Fact Sheet on 1654,” Jewish Women’s Archive, <https://jwa.org/350years/factsheet1654>.

When these immigrants landed in New Amsterdam (present-day Manhattan) and asked Governor Peter **Stuyvesant** for permission to settle, Stuyvesant initially refused. However, after they appealed to the directors of the Dutch West India Company that ran the colony, the Jews received permission to stay, but had to promise never to become burdens, or public charges, on society and government, and to rely instead on their fellow Jews if they ever needed assistance.²

Over the next two centuries, more Jewish immigrants arrived, primarily from central Europe. They settled in Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, Georgia, and South Carolina, colonies whose founders had generally envisioned a culture of religious tolerance. In their new colonies, they actively contributed both socially and economically to their broader communities.³ In August 1790, as the United States reflected on its new Constitutional principles and some states had yet to ratify the Bill of Rights, President George Washington declared the new country's commitment to religious freedom in a letter to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, Rhode Island. Washington's bold assertion that the United States "gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance" spoke to the government's commitment neither to establish a national religion, nor to prohibit any religious practice.⁴

SOCIAL MODEL OF DISABILITY

The concept of "disability" evolves with society. Bad eyesight is a minor health issue today, but without glasses, it presents a huge impediment to everyday life: a disability. Similarly, heart issues might impact an NBA player as a career-ending disability, but would likely have little impact on the routine of an author or artist. Why do we not call glasses-wearers disabled? Why does paralysis count as a disability, but not a pair of broken legs, when both require wheelchairs? Sometimes, society's norms depend solely on the life experiences of the majority.

Soon, America's demographic landscape began to change. Among other immigrant groups, Jews from German-speaking lands began migrating to the United States, eager to establish new lives there for themselves and their families.⁵ This migration proceeded steadily between the 1820s and the 1880s, and the new immigrants created community structures that drew on their memories from their lives in Europe but reinvented in a uniquely American idiom.⁶

RESPONSES TO MASS MIGRATION

The 1880s marked the beginning of a massive surge of immigration from southern and eastern Europe. These **migrants**, including many Jews, left Europe seeking economic opportunity and political freedom in the United States. As Jews in Europe faced tough economic, professional, and social restrictions, new inventions like railroads and steam engines made transportation within Europe and across the Atlantic Ocean much faster and cheaper than before.

² Jonathan D. Sarna, *American Judaism: A History* (Yale University Press, 2005).

³ Jacob Rader Marcus, *Early American Jewry: The Jews of New York, New England, and Canada, 1649-1794* (The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1951).

⁴ "George Washington Letter, 1790: Washington's Letter to the Jews of Newport," Touro Synagogue National Historic Site, <https://tourosynagogue.org/history/george-washington-letter/>.

⁵ Hasia R. Diner, *A Time for Gathering: The Second Migration, 1820-1880* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).

⁶ Sarna, *American Judaism*; to learn more about this, see the articles by Hasia Diner and Beth Wenger in this volume.

Many ultimately settled on New York City's Lower East Side, and others spread out across the country to peddle goods, start businesses, and seek new lives for themselves and their families.⁷

Around the time that Jewish immigration from eastern Europe began to ramp up, the United States Congress passed the first of several laws regulating entry into the country. In 1882, Congress passed the first national laws limiting immigration from Europe. This reflected the widespread public concern that a large number of immigrants might change the nation's identity and upset the existing balance of power. From there, the government began to set up an elaborate and discriminatory system to receive and evaluate immigrants attempting to enter the country.⁹ The Immigration Act of 1882 specifically prevented the entrance of "any convict, lunatic, idiot, or any person unable to take care of himself or herself without becoming a charge," along with anyone who needed help paying for their journey.¹⁰ This law purported to protect the "health" of the "American race," while also excluding anybody who might allegedly come to depend on the government for food, shelter, or medical care.¹¹

"EASTERN AND SOUTHERN EUROPE"

Political turmoil in Europe meant that borders changed constantly. Identifying the country in which an immigrant lived can therefore represent a challenge, even if the village and its location are known. Identifying the countries of origin for eastern and southern European immigrants presents a similar challenge. A humorous anecdote from one contested area "told of a man who was born in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, was christened in Czechoslovakia, married in Hungary, had his first child in the USSR, and died in Ukraine, without ever leaving his village."⁸

Most of these immigrants landed in New York Harbor, entering through the Castle Garden immigration station at the southern tip of Manhattan before Ellis Island opened its massive immigrant processing facilities in 1892. Meanwhile, Congress passed another law in 1891 that further restricted immigration, reflecting growing **nativist** fears about racial purity, alongside broader societal anxieties about economic competition, national security, and the changing demographic makeup of the country's population. This new law, the Immigration Act of 1891, expanded the categories of individuals deemed "undesirable" to include "all idiots, insane persons, paupers or persons likely to become a public charge, persons suffering from a loathsome or a dangerous contagious disease, persons who have been convicted of a felony or other infamous crime or misdemeanor involving moral turpitude, polygamists, and also any person whose ticket or passage is paid for with the money of another."¹²

⁷ Hasia R. Diner, *Roads Taken: The Great Jewish Migrations to the New World and the Peddlers Who Forged the Way* (Yale University Press, 2015).

⁸ Juliet Fall, *Drawing the Line: Nature, Hybridity and Politics in Transboundary Spaces* (Routledge, 2017), 270.

⁹ In the Page Act of 1875, the United States government first codified restrictions on Chinese immigrants, allegedly to "end the danger of cheap Chinese labor and immoral Chinese women," as described by the law's sponsor, Horace F. Page of California. The Immigration Act of 1882 stands out as the first American legislation to impact European immigrants.

¹⁰ "Immigration Act of 1882" (47 Statutes-at-Large 214); for classroom-ready information, summary, analysis, and discussion questions on the topic, see "Immigration Act of 1882," Immigration History, immigrationhistory.org/item/1882-immigration-act/.

¹¹ Douglas C. Baynton, *Defectives in the Land: Disability and Immigration in the Age of Eugenics* (University of Chicago Press, 2016).

¹² "Immigration Act of 1891" (16 Statutes-at-Large 1084); for classroom-ready information, summary, analysis, and discussion questions on the topic, see "Immigration Act of 1891," Immigration History, <https://immigrationhistory.org/item/immigration-act-of-1891/>.

Essentially, the United States used these rules to declare that it wanted only certain types of people to join the country, and that it could not allow in anybody who did not fit the narrow description that they set forth. No language in any U.S. law explicitly regulated Jewish immigration, but the law and its enforcement mechanisms included plenty of restrictions, like “insanity” and “poor physique,” which in practice often applied to Jews.¹³

The 1891 law consolidated control under the Treasury Department and created a Superintendent of Immigration to establish more rigorous screening processes and oversee a new group of federal immigration inspectors at each port of entry. Before this, starting in 1882, the Treasury Department had overseen a complicated mix of state boards and commissions. However, the new federal apparatus could more easily centralize screening procedures and, at least in theory, enforce the law consistently across the different ports.¹⁴

The Dillingham Commission, established in 1907 under the leadership of Vermont Senator William P. Dillingham, played a crucial role in shaping public and legislative opinion about immigration.¹⁵ The commission’s report starkly illustrated their biases about immigration, contrasting the “old” immigrants from northern and western Europe with the “new” immigrants from southern and eastern Europe.



On temperate days at Ellis Island, debarred immigrants waiting to be deported could breathe some fresh air in the “detention pen,” located atop the main building, 1902. Library of Congress (96506924).

WHY THE TREASURY DEPARTMENT?

Immigration control, with its discriminatory emphases on poverty and “defectiveness” as “moral failings,” shows one reason behind the restrictions in federal immigration laws. By viewing poverty as a “disease” and treating health as a commodity, the laws depicted immigrants as economic assets or burdens, rather than as human beings. Immigration fell under the purview of the Treasury Department (1882), the Department of Commerce and Labor (1903), the Department of Labor (1913), the Department of Justice (1940), and the Department of Homeland Security (2003), reflecting the country’s changing priorities.

¹³ Diner, *Time for Gathering*; Baynton, *Defectives in the Land*.

¹⁴ Baynton, *Defectives in the Land*; “Early American Immigration Policies/Origins of the Federal Immigration Service,” U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, updated July 30, 2020, accessed May 5, 2025. <https://www.uscis.gov/about-us/our-history/explore-agency-history/overview-of-agency-history/early-american-immigration-policies>.

¹⁵ Leonard Schlup, “William Paul Dillingham: A Vermont Republican in National Politics,” *Vermont History: The Proceedings of the Vermont Historical Society* 54, no. 1 (winter 1986): 20–36.

Dillingham declared these new immigrants less “desirable,” due to what the report presented as inferior cultural and biological traits.

These findings reinforced the popular eugenic ideas of the time, promoted by the government, that Congress should limit immigration to protect the American gene pool from “degeneration.” The commission’s recommendations, released in 1911 as a 41-volume report, laid the groundwork for increasingly restrictive immigration laws.¹⁶ The commission also invented the idea of immigration as a problem, making Americans worry about its potential for negative impacts. Building on the report’s findings, Congress passed the Immigration Act of 1917, which established literacy tests for immigrants and further expanded the list of “defective” illnesses and conditions that would exclude immigrants, setting a precedent for future immigration restrictions.¹⁷

Dictionary of Races or Peoples.

5

COMPARATIVE CLASSIFICATION OF IMMIGRANT RACES OR PEOPLES.

Based on Brinton (cf. Keane).			People.	Ripley's races, with other corresponding terms.
Race.	Stock.	Group.		
Caucasian..	Aryan.....	Teutonic....	Scandinavian:	I. TEUTONIC.
			Danish.....	
			Norwegian.....	
			Swedish.....	
			German (N. part).....	
		Lettic.....	Dutch.....	H. Europæus (Lapouge).
			English (part).....	Nordic (Deniker).
			Flemish.....	Dolicho-leptorhine (Kohlmann).
			Lithuanian.....	Germanic (English writers).
		Celtic.....	Scotch (part).....	Reihengräber (German writers).
			Irish (part).....	Kymric (French writers).
			Welsh.....	Part Alpine.
			Russian.....	
			Polish.....	
			Czech:	
		Slavonic....	Bohemian.....	II. ALPINE (OR CELTIC).
			Moravian.....	
			Servian.....	
			Croatian.....	
			Montenegrin.....	
			Slovak.....	
			Slovenian.....	
			Ruthenian.....	
			Dalmatian.....	
			Herzegovinian.....	
			Bosnian.....	
			Illyric.....	
			Albanian.....	
			Armenian.....	
			French.....	
			Italian (part).....	
			Roumanian.....	
		Italic.....	Spanish.....	III. MEDITERRANEAN.
			Spanish-American.....	
			Mexican, etc.....	
			Portuguese.....	
			Hellenic.....	
		Iranic.....	Greek.....	H. Meridionalis (Lapouge).
			Hindu.....	Atlanto-Mediterranean and Ibero-Insular (Deniker).
			Gypsy.....	Iberian (English writers).
		Arabic.....	Arabian.....	Ligurian (Italian writers).
			Hebrew.....	Part Mediterranean.
			Syrian.....	Part Teutonic.
	Semitic...	Chaldaic....	Caucasus peoples.....	Part Mediterranean.
			Basque.....	
			Basque.....	
Caucasic ..			Caucasus peoples.....	Doubtful.
Euskarie..			Basque.....	

Detail of a chart from the *Dictionary of Races*, published in 1911 as part of the Dillingham Commission report. The chart illustrates ideas by three prominent “ethnologists” regarding prospective “taxonomies” of the world’s races (as theorized at the time in the context of since-discredited eugenic beliefs). Report of the Dillingham Commission, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services History Library.

¹⁶ Jay Dolmage, *Disabled Upon Arrival: Eugenics, Immigration, and the Construction of Race and Disability* (The Ohio State University Press, 2018).

¹⁷ “Immigration Act of 1917” (64 Statutes-at-Large 875-876); Katherine Benton-Cohen, *Inventing the Immigration Problem* (Harvard University Press, 2018); for classroom-ready information, summary, analysis, and discussion questions on the topic, see “Immigration Act of 1917 (Barred Zone Act),” Immigration History, immigrationhistory.org/item/1917-barred-zone-act/.

The National Origins Act of 1924, also known as the Johnson-Reed Act, reshaped American immigration by imposing strict **quotas** based on country of birth.¹⁸ These limits, based on the number of residents from each country at the time of the 1890 census, just before large waves of new immigrants settled, decidedly favored northern and western Europeans while severely limiting entry slots for southern and eastern Europeans, and excluding Asians and Africans nearly entirely. The Johnson-Reed Act formalized the racial, ethnic, and ableist hierarchies promoted by the Dillingham Commission, grounded in eugenic arguments that classified certain groups as inherently less capable of contributing positively to American society, thereby posing a threat to its cultural and genetic integrity. At the same time, the government strengthened immigration enforcement by creating the U.S. Border Patrol in 1924 to prevent illegal entry and expanding deportation efforts to remove people accused of breaking immigration rules. Scholars like Hasia Diner have noted that these policies fit into a broader nativist and xenophobic movement that sought to preserve a specific white, male, Anglo-Saxon vision of American identity.¹⁹

The increasingly restrictive immigration policies of this era applied not only at the point of entry but also extended to immigrants abroad as they sought **visas** to enter the United States. The National Origins Act codified this new requirement, which used the quota system to determine the number of visas available for each country.²⁰ People who wanted to immigrate first had to visit their local U.S. embassy or consulate, where a diplomat would conduct an extensive physical, cognitive, and “moral” evaluation.

In 1930, President Herbert Hoover issued an executive order directing U.S. consulates in Europe to enforce the immigration laws as strongly as possible. These local diplomats conducted their examinations with such rigor that often, intending immigrants literally could not succeed.²¹ Stories abound regarding consuls who humiliated visa-seekers by asking insulting and nonsensical questions, such as *How many feathers does a goose have? or How many drops of water are in the ocean?* Since questions like these could not have a clear, correct answer, an immigrant would automatically fail the test either by answering incorrectly or by choosing not to answer. Either response could result in them being labeled “feeble-minded,” which would prevent their entry into the United States.²²

IMMIGRATION ADVOCACY AND JEWISH MIGRANTS

During the 1930s, as German Jewish refugees tried to flee from Nazi persecution, Labor Secretary Frances Perkins, the first woman to serve in the U.S. cabinet, played an important role in issuing special visas for children. Perkins collaborated with organizations such as the U.S. Committee for the Care of European Children, which was founded by Eleanor Roosevelt and others, to help young Jewish refugees enter the United States. This effort included the 1938 Wagner-Rogers Bill, which aimed to allow the admission of 20,000 German Jewish children outside of the existing immigration quotas.

¹⁸ “The Immigration Act of 1924 (The Johnson-Reed Act),” Milestones in the History of U.S. Foreign Relations - Office of the Historian of the U.S. Department of State, updated 2017, accessed May 5, 2025, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1921-1936/immigration-act>; for classroom-ready information, summary, analysis, and discussion questions on the topic, see “Immigration Act of 1924 (Johnson-Reed Act),” Immigration History, immigrationhistory.org/item/1924-immigration-act-johnson-reed-act/.

¹⁹ Hasia R. Diner, *The Jews of the United States, 1654 to 2000* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004).

²⁰ Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton University Press, 2014).

²¹ Baynton, *Defectives in the Land*.

²² Dolmage, *Disabled Upon Arrival*.

Cecilia Razovsky, an important Jewish immigration advocate, worked with Perkins as the executive secretary of the German-Jewish Children's Aid.²³ Although the Wagner-Rogers bill ultimately did not pass and become law, Perkins' efforts underscored the need for humane immigration policies.²⁴ Many Jewish children remained trapped in Europe during the Nazi era, hampered by restrictive U.S. immigration policies in their ability to find refuge.²⁵

One of the most harrowing episodes of this period entailed the voyage of the SS *Saint Louis* in 1939. Carrying over 900 Jewish refugees, government officials turned the ship away from the United States after Cuba had refused to accept its own previously issued visas. Despite pleas from passengers and American Jewish organizations, President Franklin Roosevelt adhered to strict immigration quotas, and, under pressure from nativist and anti-Jewish factions, refused to admit the refugees. These decisions forced most of the passengers to return to Europe, where many later perished in the **Holocaust**.²⁶ The *Saint Louis* tragedy highlighted the deadly consequences of rigid immigration policies and the failure to provide asylum to those fleeing genocide.

In the aftermath of World War II, the United States sought to address the plight of millions of displaced persons (DPs), many of whom were Holocaust survivors. The Displaced Persons Act of 1948 stands out as the first major U.S. legislation to admit refugees outside of the standard immigration quotas. Although initially limited in scope and favorable toward certain nationalities and religious groups, subsequent amendments broadened the scope of the act to include more Jewish refugees.²⁷ This legislation marked a significant shift in U.S. immigration policy, recognizing the specific needs of refugees and paving the way for future asylum policies.



This poster, created by artist Ray Morgan in 1940, featured two children wearing ID tags disembarking from a ship. Any parents are conspicuously absent. Hoover Institution Library and Archives (XX343.26475).

²³ Bat-Ami Zucker, "Frances Perkins and the German-Jewish Refugees, 1933–1940," *American Jewish History* 89, no. 1 (2001).

²⁴ Diner, *Jews of the United States*.

²⁵ "Wagner-Rogers Bill," Holocaust Encyclopedia, updated September 30, 2024, accessed May 5, 2025, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/wagner-rogers-bill>.

²⁶ Sarah A. Ogilvie and Scott Miller, *Refuge Denied: The St. Louis Passengers and the Holocaust* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2006).

²⁷ Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*.

U.S. refugee policy laid important groundwork for later efforts to assist persecuted individuals and communities abroad, such as Jews from the Soviet Union. The Soviet Jewry movement, which gained momentum in the 1960s and 1970s, represented a global campaign advocating for the right of Jews in the Soviet Union to emigrate, primarily to Israel and the United States. American Jewish communities played a significant role in this movement, organizing protests, lobbying U.S. politicians, and raising awareness about the plight of Soviet Jews. Many Jews in the Soviet Union faced severe restrictions on religious practices and discrimination in employment and education. They often received the label of “refuseniks” when they applied for exit visas, which the government routinely denied. The American Jewish community’s advocacy crucially contributed to pressuring the U.S. government to implement policies like the Jackson-Vanik Amendment of 1974, which linked trade benefits with the Soviet Union to its emigration policies.

Successive generations of immigrants, originating across the globe, have sought to become part of American society—to belong. Some groups succeeded with greater ease, while others, hampered by complicating factors like religion, race or ethnicity, gender, or simply the appearance of difference, faced greater barriers. All, however, approached the country with wishes, intentions, and aspirations, ultimately pitting them against the pillars of American immigration policy. Through the formalization of these social, political, and legal requirements, the United States reveals in precise detail the country that it believes itself to be, the country that it truly is, and the country that it desires to become.²⁸

²⁸ “Timelines of the American Soviet Jewry Movement,” *American Jewish Historical Society*, accessed May 5, 2025, <https://ajhs.org/holdings/timelines-of-the-american-soviet-jewry-movement/>.