



Written by [Warren Mass](#) on January 6, 2014

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## Our Fascinating Immigration Experience

*I came to America because I heard the streets were paved with gold. When I got here I found out three things: first, the streets were not paved with gold, second, they were not paved at all, and third, that I was expected to pave them.*

— An immigrant whose words are posted at the Ellis Island Museum

While it can be said that immigration started with the arrival of the first European settlers at St. Augustine, Jamestown, New Amsterdam, and Plymouth, it was not until the 19th century that immigration to the United States occurred on a scale large enough to provoke concern among our nation's earlier residents.



The story of the immigrants coming through Ellis Island (from 1892 until 1954) has become a much-cherished saga, especially for the 40 percent of all Americans (150 million) who have at least one ancestor who came through that station.

It can easily be demonstrated that the growth of the United States into a major world power during the 1800s depended on attaining a population sufficient to build its roads, railroads, and canals; operate its newly developed factories; and bring its armies up to world-class strength. However, by the early 20th century, just as today, great differences of opinion existed about just how many immigrants our nation could absorb without negatively impacting its job market and radically changing its existing culture. Consequently, not all Americans welcomed all immigrants.

While it is a nation's right (even obligation) to limit immigration to numerical levels that the nation can absorb, both economically and socially, there is little doubt that the Immigration Act of 1924 (the Johnson-Reed Act), like the Emergency Quota Act of 1921, was passed specifically to restrict the number of Eastern European Jews, Italians, Poles, Greeks, and other nationalities that the bill's authors regarded as "undesirable." Both limited the annual number of immigrants who could be admitted from any country to a percentage (three percent of the 1910 census in the 1921 act, two percent of the 1890 census in the 1924 act) of the number of people from that country who were already living in the United States. As such, these acts were not about limiting the *number* of immigrants so much as limiting the "wrong kind" of immigrants.

While Ellis Island would remain in operation until 1954, the new quotas imposed by Johnson-Reed for immigration were so restrictive that in 1924 more Italians, Poles, Czechs, Yugoslavs, Greeks, Lithuanians, Hungarians, Portuguese, Romanians, Spaniards, Chinese, and Japanese left the United States than arrived as immigrants.

One of the 1924 bill's authors, Rep. Albert Johnson, was the head of the Eugenics Research Association,



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which supported forced sterilization of the “unfit” members of the population. An unabashed anti-Semite, Johnson — when making a statement defending his earlier 1919 proposal to suspend immigration — included a quote from a State Department Official that referred to Jewish people as “filthy, un-American, and often dangerous in their habits.”

Fortunately, from the standpoint of making American culture the rich mosaic that it is today, sufficient numbers of people from Eastern and Southern Europe had already entered our country by 1924 to make a permanent, positive impact. Otherwise, we might have found ourselves in an America that was like a Baskin-Robbins store that served only one flavor — vanilla!

One important factor that distinguished the largely successful immigrant experience of the 19th and early 20th centuries from the out-of-control situation that exists today was that during the earlier periods our borders were largely controlled and nearly all immigrants admitted to our nation were here *legally*. Another factor that not only helped keep earlier immigration at manageable levels but also encouraged them to accomplish great things was that the extensive system of government benefits that presently entices immigrants to come to America illegally simply did not exist. The immigrants of yesteryear were expected to do what they could to pull themselves up by the bootstraps, and that is exactly what they did. If they needed to pave the streets on their way up the economic ladder, so be it. Of course, helping hands were provided where needed — through private efforts.

Many of the early 19th-century immigrants to America possessed skills that enabled them to immediately go to work as productive citizens, so they had little need for today’s government “safety nets” — had they existed back then. Those who had learned skills in England’s textile mills, for example, transported their knowledge to such Massachusetts mill towns as Fall River, New Bedford, Lawrence, and Lowell.

The same could be said of most German immigrants, who had thrived in America since Colonial times. The political turmoil in Europe, especially the revolutions of 1848, caused large numbers of Germans, Czechs, and Hungarians to emigrate. Such immigrants were given the nickname “Forty-Eighters.”

Unfortunately, many of these German Forty-Eighters had supported the socialist side in the revolutions and, upon arriving in America, helped spawn the socialist, “progressive” political movement. On a personal level, however, many hard-working German immigrants became prosperous farmers in Wisconsin and other Midwestern states. Their urban counterparts proved to be equally successful in industrial settings, establishing tool and machine shops and foundries in cities such as Milwaukee, Cincinnati, St. Louis, and New York.



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**Irish immigrants** in Kansas City, Missouri, around 1909 were well on their way to achieving the American dream.

The German immigrants made a significant contribution to the culture of America, including influencing how Christmas is celebrated. Germans introduced the Christmas tree (and glass-blown tree ornaments), gingerbread houses, and popular carols such as “Silent Night” (*Stille Nacht*) and “O Christmas Tree” (*O Tannenbaum*).

The second largest (numerically) ethnic group to emigrate to America were the Irish. Like the Germans, they had come in small numbers since Colonial times, but the 1845 potato blight in Ireland created famine conditions, impelling mass migration. During the 10-year period ending in 1854, nearly two million people — about a quarter of the Irish population — emigrated to the United States.

The outbreak of the Civil War resulted in many Irish immigrants serving on both sides, but they were represented more heavily in the Union army, with 170,000 serving there. However, more than 40,000 Irish fought for the South.

After the war, many Irish immigrants labored on the Eastern leg of the transcontinental railroad, the Union Pacific Railroad.

Irish immigrants formed significant communities in the cities of New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Chicago. They established many Catholic parishes in these cities, and built churches, hospitals, and schools. By 1900, an estimated 3,500 parish schools existed in the United States. Unlike today’s immigrants, instead of relying on government to educate their children and provide social services, the Irish (and, eventually, Catholic immigrants from other nations) actually created a positive impact on the economy and social structure of these cities, by relieving city governments from having to provide these services.

It was among the largely Irish immigrant community of New Haven, Connecticut, that a Catholic priest, Father Michael J. McGivney, the son of Irish immigrants himself, developed a private fraternal organization that would tend to the needs of the widows and orphans of his parish.

On March 29, 1882, while an assistant pastor at St. Mary’s Church, Father McGivney founded the Knights of Columbus. His goal was to help strengthen the faith of the men of his parish and to provide financial assistance in the event of their death to the widows and orphans they left behind. Since that



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time, the Knights have grown to over 1.8 million member families and through their insurance programs have provided a true financial safety net for their families, without the help of government.

After Germany and Ireland, the country that contributed the largest number of immigrants to the United States was Italy.

The vast majority of Italian immigrants did not come to America until the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Most came from rural southern Italy, but upon arrival in the United States migrated to our nation's large cities, where employment opportunities were more plentiful. With few skills and little formal education, most Italian men worked as construction laborers (along with the Irish), and Italian women joined Jewish immigrant women in the "sweatshops" of New York's garment industry. By the mid-1900s, many construction companies, barber shops, shoe repair shops, grocery stores, and restaurants in the New York area were Italian-owned.

Another immigrant group that came to America in large numbers were the Poles. These included both ethnic Poles, who were overwhelmingly Catholic, and Polish Jews, who retained their own religion and culture while living in Poland. More than one million Poles immigrated to the United States, primarily during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, most settling in either the Chicago or New York-New Jersey metropolitan areas.

There were Jews in America from Colonial times (including the Philadelphia merchant, Haym Solomon, who helped finance Washington's Continental Army during the War of Independence), but most of the migration of European Jews to America came in two principal waves, a smaller migration from Germany starting in the 1850s and a much larger one from Russia, Poland, and the rest of Eastern Europe from the 1880s onward.

It was the anti-Jewish pogroms that began in Russia in the 1880s that launched the large migration of Russian Jews to America, an event depicted in *Fiddler on the Roof* and other popular works. An estimated two million Jews would leave Russia from 1880 to 1920. Most of these Russian Jewish immigrants settled in the largest cities in the Northeast, with the Lower East Side of Manhattan and neighboring Brooklyn becoming especially popular destinations. Since many European Jews had become skilled in the "needle trades," many opened small garment shops, employing young Jewish and Italian girls to operate the sewing machines. Jewish tailors quickly established a reputation for offering well-made clothing for very reasonable prices.

Among Jewish immigrants was a man who would endear himself to all Americans for producing wonderful musical compositions that have become part of our collective American culture: Irving Berlin. Born in present-day Belarus (then part of the Russian Empire) in 1888, Berlin's family moved to New York's Lower East Side in 1893. After experiencing all of the youthful tribulations of the struggling musician, Berlin went on to compose hundreds of songs, including "Alexander's Ragtime Band," "Easter Parade," "White Christmas," and "There's No Business Like Show Business." But the song that brought him the most admiration of all, and demonstrated that America is a land that inspires patriotism in people from many lands, is "God Bless America."

Berlin originally wrote "God Bless America" for a patriotic-themed musical revue while he served in the Army during World War I, but he chose not to include the song when the musical moved to Broadway. In 1938, singer Kate Smith's manager asked him to write a patriotic song to commemorate the 20th anniversary of Armistice Day, and Berlin dusted off the song and made it available. The song's





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popularity skyrocketed during World War II, when it became a most beloved patriotic anthem.

Composer George Gershwin called Berlin “the greatest songwriter that has ever lived,” and famous songwriter Jerome Kern once commented that “Irving Berlin has no *place* in American music — he *is* American music.”

Recognizing all of the immigrant success stories that have occurred during our nation’s history would require a book, but a more contemporary story tells us that the “immigrant experience” is not dead.



**Immigrant Irving Berlin**, shown in this 1906 photo, went on to compose some of America’s most-loved songs, including “God Bless America.”

Lopez Lomong was taken from his parents by rebel soldiers while attending Mass at a Catholic chapel in South Sudan, Africa, when he was six years old. He escaped one night and ran non-stop for three days straight until he reached safety in Kenya. He spent the next 10 years living in a refugee camp run by Catholic missionaries near Nairobi.

Lomong managed to emigrate to the United States. Offered a scholarship to Northern Arizona University, Lomong became the NCAA 3,000-meter indoor champion and the outdoor 1,500-meter champion. He qualified for the U.S. Olympic Team in 2008, one year after gaining his U.S. citizenship. The team captains chose Lomong to carry the flag at the opening ceremonies in Beijing, and he made the semifinals in the 1,500-meter race. In 2012, he qualified for the London Olympics in the 5,000-meter event.

“I love the United States,” Lomong said in an interview. “This is my gift, to give back to this country that has given me a second chance. I owe this country so much. I owe the fans. I love it so much. I wear the uniform with pride. I hold my head high and say, ‘I am an American.’ ”

Those words indicate the true measure of what it means to complete an immigrant success story. It matters not so much where someone was born, their race or creed, or the occupation they excelled in. The immigrant who comes to our nation legally and is ready to serve God, family, and country — and who is willing to achieve the American dream through his own hard work and ingenuity, as opposed to relying on government handouts — will always be considered a success.



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