More than any other country, the United States is a nation of immigrants. In search of land, jobs, political refuge, and religious freedom, millions of people from all over the world have looked to America to provide the opportunity for a better life. Immigrants have, in turn, helped to settle and build the United States, weaving together a rich diversity of cultures and people. But the path for all immigrants was not the same.

Initially, there was plenty of room and opportunity for new settlers to the United States. By the late 1800s, however, difficult circumstances in other parts of the world led to larger waves of immigrants trying to enter the country. Competition grew between “native-born” Americans and newcomers for jobs and land. The open-door policy toward immigrants began to change, and local and state governments passed laws that discriminated against “undesirable” groups of immigrants. Some U.S. leaders began to view immigration policy as a tool to define who could come to America and...
what it meant to be an “American.” Congress began to enact laws that restricted immigrants instead of welcoming them.

Passed by Congress in 1875, the Page Law forbade the entry of convicts and Chinese and Japanese people brought to the United States involuntarily as forced laborers.

The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 barred Chinese laborers for a period of 10 years. It was renewed in 1892 and made permanent in 1904. It was the first U.S. law that specifically discriminated against a particular racial or cultural group and made it legal to restrict, exclude, and deport them. It also denied citizenship to Chinese laborers already here. Because of America’s interest in trade with China, however, certain Chinese and their families—merchants, diplomats, teachers, students, and visitors—were allowed to enter the United States.

A general immigration law in 1882 established broader restrictions. Criminals, paupers, lunatics, idiots, LPCs, anyone carrying a disease, polygamists, anarchists, and people convicted of a crime involving morally questionable behavior all were denied entrance.

Another law, the Scott Act of 1888, refused reentry to the United States of any Chinese who had temporarily left the country. The laws reflected a growing racism against Chinese laborers in the West.

By the early 20th century, anti-immigration sentiment was spreading across the country, and many Americans supported a wider effort to “close the door.” A diplomatic accord between the United States and Japan, known as the Gentlemen’s Agreement, ended the immigration of Japanese and Korean laborers after 1908.

The Immigration Act of 1917 called for a literacy test for all adult immigrants over the age of 16 and restricted suspected political radicals. In response to anti-Asian sentiment, the act denied entry to aliens living within a newly created geographic area called the “Asiatic Barred Zone.” All immigrants from India, Burma (Myanmar), Siam (Thailand), the Malay States, Arabia, Afghanistan, part of Russia, and most of the Pacific Islands were excluded.

The Quota Act of 1921 placed limitations on the number of immigrants from different countries or regions of the world. The quotas were based on the number of people from each nation already residing in the United States. Three years later, the 1924 Immigration Act revised the quota formula and further reduced the total number of admitted immigrants. Both laws were designed to limit arrivals from Southern and Eastern Europe and favor immigrants from Northern and Western Europe.

In an attempt to shut the door on Japanese immigrants, the 1924 act also denied admission
"Chinese? No! No! No!" This poster captures the general sentiment on the West Coast in 1892.

Pushed out of most jobs by the late 1800s, Chinese found work in occupations that did not compete with Americans. These Chinese men work in a Fish Alley booth in San Francisco's Chinatown.

to all aliens who were "ineligible to citizenship," a legal category that applied only to Asians.

In 1934, Congress passed the Tydings–McDuffie Act. The act granted *commonwealth* status to the Philippines, which had been a U.S. territory since 1898. At the same time, it limited Filipino immigration to only 50 people per year.

As the United States took steps to restrict an ever-widening group of immigrants, its processing of them became more formal and complex.

Since the majority of immigrants traveled by ship to America's shores, by the early 20th century, the United States had established 24 major ports of entry. The largest ports were Ellis Island and Angel Island.

Located in New York Harbor, the Ellis Island Immigration Station served as a detention and processing center for mostly European travelers crossing the Atlantic Ocean. Between 1892 and 1954, Ellis Island processed more than 12 million immigrants. Most of them spent
only a few hours or a few days there. Angel Island Immigration Station was located in San Francisco Bay. Most of the immigrants arriving there traveled from Asian countries across the Pacific Ocean. Because of the strict enforcement of anti-Asian immigration laws at Angel Island, the detention and processing time for Asians, especially Chinese, was measured mostly in weeks and months.

Although two thirds of the immigrants at Angel Island came from China and Japan, immigrants also came from other Asian countries, Eastern Europe, and Latin America. Russians and Mexicans came seeking refuge from the turmoil of revolutions in their homelands. Japanese and Korean picture brides came to join their husbands. Sikhs from South Asia and Filipino laborers sought work in the agricultural fields of California. Jewish, Korean, and Russian refugees hoped to find freedom from religious and political persecution.

Many of the Chinese and Japanese immigrants crossed the Pacific Ocean directly from their homelands. Others traveled great distances by land and sea before arriving in the United States. Russian and German refugees crossed Siberia and Manchuria before boarding ships in the Japanese port cities of Yokohama and Kobe. Some Asians worked first in Manila, Hong Kong, or Tokyo before arriving on the West Coast of the United States. Koreans and Filipinos worked on Hawaiian plantations and then traveled to California. Spanish laborers came north from Panama, Mexico, Cuba, and Guatemala.

During the 1930s, the United States experienced one of the worst economic downturns in its history—the Great Depression. Many Americans lost their jobs and their homes. The U.S. government not only discouraged immigration during that decade but also sent home many Mexican and Filipino laborers.

After World War II (1939–1945), most of the laws that excluded immigrants were repealed by the Magnuson Act. And in 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Immigration and Nationality Act. Also known as the Hart–Cellar Act, the law ended America’s racially biased immigration system that had been put into place almost 100 years earlier. 

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