

Immigration

The United States of America has long been the world's chief receiving nation for immigrants. An immigrant is a person who leaves his/her country to settle and remain in a new country. Over the years, many millions of people have uprooted and left family and friends to move to America. Some felt forced to come because they feared for their lives. Their countries were at war or they didn't have the freedom to say and practice their faith. Most, however, came for a better life. Their countries didn't have work or they were starving because there wasn't enough food. Whatever the reason, immigrants in history gave up everything they had to take a chance on a new world and a new life.

The United States has seen four waves of immigration throughout its history. The first period was from the 1600s through 1775. This group included the first colonists and settlers of the United States. Most of these immigrants were from England. Others arrived from France, Germany, Ireland, Scotland and Spain. Many of these colonists came here looking for economic opportunity. They wanted better land to farm or better work. Others came to escape religious **persecution**.¹ Some were even **convicts**² transported from English jails. This first wave also included West Africans that came to America against their will. They were captured, sold into slavery and shipped to the United States.

A second wave of American immigration took place from 1820-1870. Over seven million people made the voyage to America, mostly from northern and western Europe. About a third of these immigrants were Irish people trying to

¹ **persecution** – the act of continually treating someone cruelly and unfairly

² **convicts** – persons serving a prison sentence

escape a **famine**³ that struck their country in the mid-1840s. Almost a third was German. The Chinese also began to immigrate during this time. They got word of a Gold Rush in California. They came to work in the mines and get rich.

This flood of immigrants wasn't always welcome by those already in America. Some feared these newcomers would take away their jobs. Others didn't like the politics or customs and religions the new immigrants brought with them. For example, many Irish were **discriminated**⁴ against for being Roman Catholic. The Chinese also suffered greatly from discrimination.

A growing number of people demanded laws to make it harder for foreigners to become American citizens. In 1875, Congress passed its first immigration law. It kept undesirables out, such as convicts. In 1882, Congress also passed the Chinese **Exclusion**⁵ Act. It prohibited Chinese workers from coming to the United States. A few years later, other laws were passed. One required adult immigrants be able to read and write. Another limited the number of immigrants from countries outside the Western Hemisphere. In 1965, a law was passed ending these limits based on nationality.

The third wave of US immigration was by far the greatest. Over 23 million people immigrated to the United States between 1881 and 1920. These new Americans came from countries in Southern and Eastern Europe. Once the Great Depression hit in 1930, however, immigration took a sharp decline. There were actually more people leaving America than coming to America during this time.

³ **famine** – a serious lack of food in a place

⁴ **discriminated** – treated differently or unfairly because of a person's race, age, or gender

⁵ **exclusion** – the state of being kept out or shut out

The fourth wave of immigration began in 1965 and continues today. Most immigrants come from Asian countries as well as South American, Caribbean countries, and Mexico. A large number of these immigrants settle in the East and Midwest. However, many others move to Florida and California.