I. The Journey Across the Atlantic

- **Steamship Accommodations** To travel to the United States, most immigrants boarded a hulking, steel steamship. The steamship on which they traveled typically held from 1,200 to over 2,000 people and was their home from 8 to 14 days. While some ships offered both first and second class accommodations, most immigrants could not afford them. Instead, they traveled in the ship's steerage compartments, which were located under the ship's deck at the front and the back of the boat. The compartments typically had no windows, little ventilation, and were 6 to 8 feet high. Everywhere the steerage passengers looked, the ship's steel walls surrounded them, and rows upon rows of metal bunks filled each compartment. One Russian immigrant described his compartment as having "three tiers of cubicles for bunks...with just enough room in the center to move about before climbing in and out of our beds." At the foot of the bunks were narrow tables at which passengers usually ate their meals. Toilet facilities varied, from one toilet for every 47 passengers to one toilet for every 1,000 passengers. Men and women had separate living areas, although sometimes the only thing separating them was a blanket strung across the compartment.

- **Living Conditions in Steerage** The living conditions in steerage were uncomfortable at best, inhumane at worst. Ships often provided steerage passengers with a bare minimum of food, so most people brought on board whatever food they could. One Lithuanian woman recalled, "All you got on the boat was water, boiled water....Sometimes they gave you a watery soup, more like a mud puddle than soup." Passengers slept on straw-stuffed mattresses—sometimes called "donkeys' breakfasts"—which ship staff threw overboard at the end of the voyage. Steerage passengers spent most of their voyage deprived of sky, sunlight, and fresh air, and the smell was often unbearable. Some ships had steerage decks, but bad weather often forced immigrants to return to their quarters. An agent from the U.S. Immigration Commission noted, "During the 12 days in the steerage I lived in...surroundings that offended every sense. Only the fresh breeze from the sea overcame the sickening odors. Everything was dirty, sticky, and disagreeable to the touch." In addition, passengers were crammed against one another, and contagious diseases such as smallpox and typhoid spread quickly. By the end of the voyage, immigrants who had survived the journey were as overjoyed to leave steerage as they were to catch a first glimpse of their new home, America.

- **Cabin Class** In the early 1900s, some steamship companies removed the steerage areas and created a special third, or cabin, class for immigrant travel. While not nearly as luxurious as the higher classes, cabin class was a vast improvement for most immigrants. Cabin class accommodations consisted of cabins that held two, four, or six beds, providing passengers with more privacy. In addition, passengers had access to better and more toilet facilities, a dining room, and a lounge.

II. Arrival in America

- **Arriving in America** From 1892 to the early 1920s, approximately 75 percent of all immigrants entered the United States through the immigration processing center at Ellis Island, located in New York Harbor. Immigrant passengers were often seized with a feverish excitement as their steamship neared New York. The ship typically entered the harbor between the boroughs of Brooklyn and Staten Island, and passengers crowded the decks to view their new homeland. Boats of all kinds usually filled the harbor: tugboats, paddleboats, and steamships carrying thousands of other immigrants toward New York's shores. The towering skyscrapers of New York City rose in the northeast, and to the west, the most majestic sight of all: Liberty Island and its world-famous monument, the Statue of Liberty.

- For many immigrants, their first glimpse of Lady Liberty would be a moment they would remember all of their lives. One woman recalled, "The first time I saw the Statue of Liberty, all the people were rushing to the side of the boat. 'Look at her, look at her,' and in all kind of tongues. 'There she is, there she is,' like it was somebody who was greeting them." Another man remembered how he and his family "looked with wonder on this miraculous land of our dreams." For many immigrants, the long, hard journey across the Atlantic Ocean dimmed beside the radiance of America's promise, inscribed on the base of the Statue of Liberty: "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door." Beyond the Statue of Liberty lay Ellis Island—or, as some immigrants referred to it, the Island of Tears—and the formidable, red-brick building where most immigrants would be inspected, questioned, and with any luck, cleared for entrance into the United States.

Medical Inspections

- **First and Second Class Inspections** While all new immigrants faced some kind of U.S. inspection, first and second class passengers did not have to endure the lengthy inspection process that awaited the steerage passengers on Ellis Island. When a ship arrived in the harbor, a quarantine inspector boarded and checked that none of the passengers had highly contagious or life-threatening diseases, such as cholera, the plague, and typhoid. Next, the higher class passengers were briefly questioned and examined by U.S. immigrant inspectors, after which the ship docked at one of the many piers that ran along the west side of New York City. The first and second class passengers then disembarked; for them, the journey was over. The steerage class passengers, however, boarded flat-bottomed barges or tugboats that would take them to Ellis Island, where they would undergo a rigorous inspection process. One immigrant, observing the privileges afforded the first and second class passengers, commented, "And so there was this slight feeling among many of us that, isn't it strange that here we are coming to a country where there is complete equality, but not quite so for the newly arrived immigrants."

- **Arriving at Ellis Island** Upon arriving at Ellis Island, the new immigrants disembarked from the crowded boats onto the island's ferry docks. Immigration officials gave each person a tag to pin onto their outer clothes. The tag identified each person by a number that corresponded to a number assigned to them by the steamship on which they traveled. Interpreters shouted out the numbers in different languages—such as Hungarian, Italian, Russian, and Yiddish—to arrange the immigrants in groups of 30 for processing. As they made their way toward the inspection building, immigrants were flooded with various feelings: hope, fear, excitement, and uncertainty. One Ukrainian immigrant remembered it as a "great, great entry. It...it was the gate to Heaven, if you will." Another immigrant from Armenia recalled, "Ellis Island—you got thousands of people marching in, a little bit excited, a little bit scared."

- **Medical Inspections** While the United States essentially had an "open door" policy toward admitting immigrants into the country, government officials sought to weed out immigrants whom they believed would require public assistance, such as the mentally ill and the sick. Therefore, each immigrant underwent a series of medical examinations upon arriving at the inspection building. The first stop was the Baggage Room on the building's first floor. There, officials encouraged the immigrants to check their belongings. Some people checked their baggage, while others—afraid of theft—refused. Next, each group of immigrants climbed single file up the grand stairway toward the Registry Hall, also known as the Great Hall. Unbeknownst to most immigrants, U.S. public health officials performed a "six second exam" by watching them walk up the stairs. According to one doctor's report, the official observed the immigrant's "scalp, face, neck, hands, gait, and general condition" to detect any noticeable disabilities or debilitating conditions. Upon reaching the top of the stairs, the immigrants received an inspection card and underwent a more thorough medical examination.

- Many immigrants found the medical examinations the most traumatic part of the inspection process. One immigration inspector recalled, "The ordeal [the immigrants] went through was not with the [immigration] inspectors. It was with the doctors." The examination usually took about 45 minutes. Physicians closely examined the immigrants for disease and any perceived defects. They often asked immigrants to unbutton or remove items of clothing that might conceal physical problems. For example, one doctor recalled, "If the immigrant is wearing a high collar, the officer opens the collar...and sees whether a...tumor or other abnormality exists." Doctors examined the immigrant's scalp for contagious diseases such as *favus*, and checked the condition of his skin, hands, throat, and voice. One of the more painful procedures was the eye exam. The doctor would peel back the immigrant's eyelid with a small metal hook to search for symptoms of highly

contagious diseases such as conjunctivitis and trachoma. If the doctor found anything suspect during the medical examination, he drew a letter on the immigrant's right shoulder in chalk, indicating the nature of the immigrant's problem. For example, "B" stood for back problems, "H" for heart problems, "K" for hernia, "L" for lameness, and "X" for "mental defect." Officials then escorted the people with medical problems—typically about 20 percent of the immigrants—to holding rooms where they awaited an additional medical examination. One Greek woman recalled the diagnosis of her sister's fatal eye disease: "My youngest sister had something in her eyes. I didn't know what was going to happen....The doctor said, 'Your sister can't go out because we have to take her to the hospital....After forty days, my sister died." Immigrants who passed their medical examination entered the Registry Hall, where they would undergo a final inspection, the legal inspection.

E. Legal Inspections

- **The Registry Hall** After undergoing the medical examination, immigrants faced a final legal inspection in the Registry Hall. The hall was huge—200 feet long, 100 feet wide, and 56 feet tall—and could hold as many as 5,000 people. Light filtered into the room though large, arched windows located near the ceiling, and a third floor mezzanine encircled the hall. For many immigrants, the most striking feature of the Registry Hall was its formidable network of iron railings, designed to keep the immigrants in orderly lines as they waited to be questioned. Immigrants typically waited two to three hours to be questioned, although occasionally the wait was as long as a day. One 1905 journalist posing as an immigrant noted, "We pass into passageways made by iron railings, in which only lately, through the intervention of a humane official, benches have been placed, upon which closely crowded, we await our passing before the inspectors." (After 1911, many of the railings were removed.) At the head of the bench aisles sat a row of U.S. immigrant inspectors. Each inspector sat on a high chair in front of a desk that held each ship's passenger list. Accompanying the list was each immigrant's answers to the questionnaire previously administered by the ship's officials. It was the U.S. inspector's job to confirm the immigrant's answers face to face, and determine whether the immigrant should be allowed entrance to the United States. One Hungarian immigrant recalled the imposing figure cut by the inspector: "The immigration officer sat on a podium like a judge. And to a child looking up, you know, it looked like he was up in the sky."

- **The Final Inspection** The legal inspection was essentially the same for each immigrant, and lasted approximately two to three minutes. First, a registry clerk called out the name of the immigrant when it was her turn to be questioned. The U.S. immigration inspector noted the tag pinned to her outer clothing, which identified her number on the ship's passenger list, and looked up her name and her answers to the ship's questionnaire. Assisted by a language interpreter, the inspector—who was usually a foreign-born citizen himself—asked the immigrant 32 questions to determine whether she, as one author explained, "was coming to this country for a legitimate reason, had a proper moral character, and was unlikely to become a ward of the state, or a violent revolutionary." The questions ran from the basic—such as "What is your name?" and "Are you married or single?"—to the more specific, such as "Do you have money with you? More than $30?

How much?" "Are you going to join a relative? What relative? Name and address?" "Have you ever been in prison, in a poorhouse, or supported by charity?" and "What is the condition of your health, mental and physical?" Many inspectors recorded immigrants' names incorrectly. One eastern European immigrant recalled, "My father's surname was Kapelovich. When we arrived at Ellis Island, the immigration people heard the name and spelled it Kaplowitz on our papers."

- Many immigrants remembered their experiences at Ellis Island as one of the worst times of their lives. One immigrant wrote on a wall at Ellis Island, "Why should I fear the fires of hell? I have been through Ellis Island." Fortunately for most immigrants, few were denied entrance to the United States before 1921. U.S. officials detained approximately 20 percent of all immigrants after the legal inspection, but only 2 percent were actually sent back to their homeland. Nevertheless, for the unfortunate 2 percent, the experience of being deported was gut wrenching. An immigration interpreter, Fiorello La Guardia—who would later become mayor of New York City—recalled, "I never managed during the years I worked there to become callous to the mental anguish, the disappointment and the despair I witnessed almost daily." Journalist Edward Steiner witnessed the painful decision of a Russian father who was asked by an inspector if he was willing to return to Russia while his son remained behind: "The father, used to self-denial through his life, says quietly, without pathos and yet tragically, 'Of course.' And the son says, after casting his eyes to the ground, ashamed to look his father in the face, 'Of course'...for this was their judgment day."

I. Ethnic Enclaves

- **Ethnic Enclaves** After arriving in the United States, about two thirds of immigrants settled in urban centers, such as New York City, Chicago, Boston, and Philadelphia. By 1920, 75 percent of foreign-born U.S. residents lived in cities. Many immigrants initially stayed with friends or relatives, a majority of whom lived in close-knit ethnic neighborhoods, or enclaves, in America's cities. These enclaves provided new immigrants with a sense of community and security, as the immigrants were surrounded by the familiar customs, food, language, and institutions of their homeland. Consequently, many new immigrants settled in the enclaves permanently. One Polish immigrant recalled, "There were Irish neighborhoods, German, Italian, and Chinese ones nearby also, but we tended to stay in our own area." Most enclaves were very crowded, and their streets teemed with local residents, peddlers and merchants, and horse and carriages. One eastern European immigrant observing a Jewish enclave in New York City commented, "It is one of the most densely populated spots on the face of the earth—a seething human sea fed by streams, streamlets, and rills [rivulets] of immigration flowing from all the Yiddish-speaking centers of Europe."