

# Svenska Nyhetsbrev

*(Swedish Heritage Center News)*

*Welcome to the 19th edition of the Svenska News – we are excited to bring you a newsletter published by the Swedish Heritage Center. Remember that our Newsletters are now being published every 4 months, due to the rise in printing costs.*



# ELLIS ISLAND

## What was Ellis Island and why was it important?

From 1892 to 1954, Ellis Island was America's largest and most active immigration station, where over 12 million immigrants were processed. On average, the inspection process took approximately 3-7 hours.

## What happened to most immigrants when they arrived at Ellis Island?

Newcomers were numbered, sorted, and sent through a series of inspections, where they were checked for physical and mental fitness and for their ability to find work in the U.S. The consequences of failing an eye exam, or of seeming too frail for manual labor, could be devastating; one member of a family could be sent back to their homeland.

## Why did they look under eyelids at Ellis Island?

1900s. Immigrants arriving in the US on Ellis Island were checked for trachoma using a buttonhook to examine their eyelids – they often warned each other to 'beware the buttonhook men'. Anyone found to have the disease was sent home or treated before being allowed into the country. For the immigrant, the trachoma test was the most unpleasant part of the medical exam. Trachoma is an eye disease, possibly causing blindness.

## What were immigrants asked at Ellis Island?

During the interview, immigrants answered 29 questions about their identity, including their race, physical health, and how much money they carried with them.

## What was the most dreaded thing for immigrants on Ellis Island?

Fear of being separated from family led some immigrants to call Ellis Island 'the Island of Tears'. Even for those who made their way successfully through the battery of inspections, Ellis Island was generally not a pleasant experience.

## What was the kissing post at Ellis Island?

This was the place immigrants were reunited with their family. This place was on the first floor of Ellis Island. It was called the Kissing Post because it was where the families all kissed and hugged each other when the ordeal was over.



As the seasons change and life starts to get busy, be sure to take a moment and appreciate the good things in life.

***How are you going to do that this season?***

FIKA 

[fee-ka] • Swedish

(n.) a moment to slow down and appreciate the good things in life. "Coffee with friends".

# A few unknown facts about Ellis Island

It was used for pirate hangings in the early 1800s.

The first immigrants to arrive at Ellis Island were three unaccompanied minors. The first immigrant to come through Ellis Island was a child

The island wasn't the first place immigrants landed when they arrived in New York. While Ellis Island was the official entry point for immigrants to the United States, it wasn't the first piece of American soil they encountered.

The waters surrounding the island were too shallow for transatlantic ships to navigate, so most docked and unloaded their passengers in Manhattan. During the detour, American citizens and first and second-class passengers were allowed to enter the country after only a brief inspection, but steerage passengers were herded onto ferries and shuttled to Ellis Island for further processing. The stopover was occasionally clouded by corruption. Around the turn of the century, crooked immigration officials were known to take \$1 or \$2 bribes in exchange for letting immigrants get off in Manhattan without first going through inspection at Ellis Island.

Ellis Island processed over 12 million immigrants. Immigrants were subject to physical and mental exams to ensure they were fit for admittance to the United States.

Upon arrival at Ellis Island, immigrants were ushered into a room called the Great Hall and paraded before a series of medical officers for physical inspection. Most were allowed to pass by in a matter of seconds, but those whom the doctors deemed physically or mentally deficient were marked with chalk and taken away for additional screening. Questionable candidates were forced to submit to more detailed questioning and medical exams, and any signs of contagious disease, poor physique, feeble-mindedness or insanity could see an immigrant denied admittance on the grounds that they were likely to become a ward of the state.

In later years, doctors at Ellis Island even devised puzzles and memory tests to ensure that certain immigrants were intelligent enough to find work. New arrivals could also face rejection if they were anarchists, had a criminal record or showed signs of low moral character. Despite the litany of guidelines for new immigrants, the number of people denied entry at Ellis Island was quite low. Of the 12 million people who passed through its doors between 1892 and 1954, only around 2 percent were deemed unfit to become

citizens of the United States.

Immigrants didn't have their names changed at the island.

American cultural lore is rich with tales of immigrants' ethnic sounding names being Anglicized or shortened during their passage through Ellis Island, yet there is no evidence that such a practice ever took place. Immigration officials merely checked the person's identity against the manifests of the ships that brought them to America, and there was no policy advising them to forcibly alter names.

Some immigrants voluntarily chose to change their names to help assimilate into American culture, but they did so before they left their home country or after they had gained admission to the United States. A notable exception to the name changing policy came in 1908, when a traveler named Frank Woodhull admitted that he had been born a woman named Mary Johnson and had spent the previous 15 years living as a man. After briefly detaining Woodhull, officials allowed him to enter the country—but not before changing his name back to Mary Johnson.

Ellis Island was used as a detention facility during WWI and WWII.

Shortly after the United States declared war on Germany in 1917, the government turned a suspicious eye toward all German-born, non-naturalized citizens residing within its borders. Potential "alien enemies" were placed under harsh restrictions, and those suspected of harboring pro-German sentiment were rounded up and detained. Since immigration had tapered off World War I, officials designated Ellis Island as one of the main holding centers for would-be enemies of the state, and some 1,500 people were eventually detained there. The island's double life as a prison later continued during World War II, when it was used to house suspected Nazi sympathizers.

It eventually became more famous for deportations than immigration.

The island was used to imprison and evict suspected communists and political radicals during the Red Scare, and later served as a detention center for communists during the Cold War. The government's legally ambiguous detainment policies eventually spawned a series of high profile lawsuits that stained Ellis Island's reputation with the American public. In November 1954, the port was closed for good as part of a federal cost-saving measure.

# Swedish Heritage Center

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## UPCOMING EVENTS

### SUNDAY BRUNCH MENU

May 3 – Swedish meatballs over noodles

May 23 – Alumni Swedish meal

June 7 – Midsommar typical menu

July – no meal as this is the 4th of July

August – Salad Luncheon

We encourage you to attend our Sunday meals. These brunches help pay our monthly utility and technology bills. The brunches are held each 1st Sunday of the month from 11:00 – 1:00 and the cost is a free will donation. You can order your meal(s) take out, if you wish. Just give us a call that morning.

And if you'd ever like a tour of the Center – or have company in town who would like to visit – we are more than happy to give you a tour. Hours and days of operation are:

Tuesdays & Thursdays  
10:00 – 2:00  
Saturdays 9:00 – noon

Or call 402-380-9744  
if you want to stop in on an  
alternate day and time.