# U.S. IMMIGRATION HISTORY

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# "MY ANCESTORS CAME HERE LEGALLY"



"Myth"
- We are a nation of laws
- We must not reward law breakers
- Immigrants today must also come here legally.

Truth
- Ignore that the U.S. system was very different back then.
- The U.S had virtually no restrictions
- Today's laws would have excluded most Americans and their ancestors

# MOST ANCESTORS WOULD NOT QUALIFY TODAY

Family
- Cap of 480,000 per year
- Preference categories with priority dates

Employment
- Approximately 180,000 per year
- Preference categories with priority dates

Asylum/Refugee

Diversity Lottery

# NO ENTRY RESTRICTIONS

The U.S. did not always have restrictions

- Until early 1900s, there were simply no federal immigration laws to break

- Immigrants did not have to first obtain visas

- Rather, they would simply arrive at a port of entry

- Only 1% of the 25 million people who entered through Ellis Island between 1880 and WWI were turned away

# NO ENFORCEMENT BUREAUCRACY

Before the 20th Century, there was virtually no bureaucracy responsible for enforcing immigration laws

U.S. land borders were largely unguarded

People in the U.S. without legal status were unlikely to get caught or deported since very little money was appropriated for immigration enforcement and deportation

# RACE-BASED EXCLUSION

In 1790, the US banned nonwhites from naturalization

In the late 1800s, the United States began banning certain groups or categories of people

Chinese Exclusion Act (1882)

- Restricted Chinese workers from immigrating, not repealed until 1943

Other laws restricted Africans, Asians (except Japanese and Filipinos) and other groups

- Prostitutes, paupers, polygamists, persons with "contagious disease," anarchists and radicals, the "insane," and illiterate

Some people lied about their health and political beliefs and entered unlawfully

# FIRST NUMERICAL CAPS

- The first numerical caps on Europeans were established in the 1920s

- The Emergency Quota Law of 1921 and Immigration Act of 1924 created a quota system based on race and nationality

- These laws heavily favored Western European immigrants and closed the door on "undesirables," including Southern and Eastern Europe

- Did not limit entry from natives of Western Hemisphere, including Canada, Mexico, and South America

- The Immigration Act of 1924 instituted a head tax, literacy test, and medical certificates as visa prerequisites prior to arrival

# UNAUTHORIZED IMMIGRATION

People kept coming, in spite of the new regulations

1924 law created Border Patrol in response to unauthorized entries

In 1925, there were 1.4 million unauthorized immigrants

In 1923, the *New York Times* reported that the government had been trying for two years "to stern the flow of immigrants from central and south Europe, Africa and Asia that has been leaking across the borders of Mexico and Canada and through the ports of the east and west coasts."

In 1927, another *New York Times* article describes government plans to increase Coast Guard patrols because thousands of Chinese, Japanese, Greeks, Russians, and Italians were landing in Cuba and then hiring smugglers to take them to the US.

# EUROPEANS BENEFITED FROM "AMNESTIES"

The Registry Act of 1929 allowed "honest law-abiding alien[s]" to register if:

- Paid a fee of $20
- Proved they have lived in the country since 1921 (8 years)
- Proved "good moral character"

Approximately 115,000 immigrants registered between 1930 and 1940 – 80% were European or Canadian

Between 1925 and 1965, 200,000 unauthorized Europeans legalized through:

- Registry Act,
- "Pre-examination"
- Discretionary suspensions of deportations in "meritorious" cases

In the 1940s and 1950s, several thousands deportations a year were suspended, approximately 73% of beneficiaries were Europeans

# IMMIGRATION & NATIONALITY ACT 1965

Replaced the overtly racist immigration regime of the mid-20th century designed to banned people from certain regions and limited southern and eastern Europeans

Flat cap on how many immigrants per county can immigrate each year replaced national quotas based on the ethnic balance of the 1890 census

Immigrants aren't approved or denied based on where they come from

Instead, they are admitted largely through family members in the US, employment or refugee status

# SUMMARY

- Unauthorized immigrants have always existed

- Depending on the laws at the time, different groups have been subject to barriers making it difficult for them to immigrate legally

- Today's laws would have excluded many Americans and their ancestors

# RESOURCES

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