



An Ellis Island Group

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Breaking With Tradition

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WHEN Thomas Jefferson in his message of 1801 dedicated the United States as the free asylum of oppressed humanity the open door and extended arms became the fixed immigration policy of this country. So traditional did this policy become in a short time that nearly a century elapsed before it was subjected to national legislation and not until 1917 was radical departure made from the long established practice of leaving the door ajar. Since then the movement away from the traditional custom has been rapid and far reaching until today the new plan not only rigidly restricts the number of aliens who may be admitted annually to residence in our country, but selects from the list of applicants those who are considered best qualified to enter our ports.

What has caused this break with tradition? Many factors have combined, wittingly or unwittingly, to produce the new immigration policy which has substituted the turn-stile for the open door. Among the elements which have contributed something towards the restriction and selection policy, the more important are the political, racial, economic and ethical points of view of our present heterogeneous population. The contributions of all these factors have not been equal in value or influence; nor are the reasons advanced for restriction by the various groups, equally sound. While they have all had a thumb in the pie, the large plum must go to economic considerations—for this ultimately determines all immigration policy.

Policy, after all, is merely the attempt of man to so administer his affairs that he may benefit by the turn of events. But

events very often take their mold from causes outside the influence of man and so it has been with the immigration to our country. The policy has followed the changes and has undergone revision with the shifting economic conditions. The one big influence in the original policy was determined almost solely by the question of land. So long as land could be had for the asking or the taking, there was plenty of room for all and neighbors were welcomed by the first comers. Indeed, the first citizens pleaded for them to come. They did not ask embarrassing questions about "where" or "why," but invited strangers to view the big unsettled sections awaiting the ax and the plow. Both state and federal government encouraged immigration. "Westward Ho," became the cry and journey of more and more until our frontier outposts were pushed farther and farther westward and finally almost disappeared. Under such conditions, with more land than people to cultivate it, every influence urged the freest possible admission to our country. The West wanted settlers and they asked for them as late as 1895.

But in later days when land was no longer had for the asking, the immigration policy took on a new aspect. Something more definite than negative policy, merely following the line of least resistance, became necessary. Before we enter upon the new era and the changing economic conditions that brought about the break with the old tradition, it might be well to summarize the attitude the nineteenth century took towards immigration, in order that we may have the necessary background for viewing in the best light the tremendous changes that the early years of the twentieth century forced into prominence.

So long as free land was available, conditions did not require much departure from or addition to the Jeffersonian open door policy. For a long time it worked very well and the door remained consistently open. In fact, few realized that we had such things as doors on our ports of entrance; for all that had been done in the way of national legislation during this long period was a law of 1819 making provision for the greater comfort and convenience of steerage passengers en route to this country. This law was amended in 1847 and again in 1848 in order to improve the steerage conditions even more. Aside from these moves, the question of immigration was left to the various states until 1882. During the state control period, two efforts,

based on religious and political considerations, were made to close the door to certain immigrants, particularly Irish and German Catholics. The first effort was the "Native American" movement which reached its greatest strength in 1845 when it claimed a membership of over 100,000 in the Eastern States. The second effort was the "Know-Nothing Party" of the fifties. Both organizations had a hectic existence and met with little actual success.¹

Shortly after the death of these parties, the traditional policy of the open door was again vigorously reasserted and the National government passed a law in 1864 to encourage immigration. This law was the result of President Lincoln's annual message to the Thirty-seventh Congress in which he strongly recommended such legislation. Conditions incident to the Civil War; the necessity of replacing the men drawn from industries and agriculture; the heavy losses of life in the war; and the general disturbed economic conditions were largely responsible for the President's recommendation and the resulting law.

The general immigration policy, however, was, aside from this one national attempt to encourage it, left to the states until 1882 when the control passed out of the states hands into Federal control. This change was effected largely on account of certain regulations of the various states being declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court, which recommended Federal control. Yet the open door policy remained in force, the only restrictions placed on immigration being a head tax of fifty cents on each immigrant landed, the forbidding of the importation of contract labor, the exclusion of persons afflicted with loathsome disease, polygamists, paupers, criminals and some other undesirables. These features were not all incorporated into our immigration policy at one time but represent the high spots of legislation between 1882 and 1900.

The first intimation of a radical departure from the long accepted policy occurred in 1897 when a bill was passed by Congress providing for an educational test for immigrants. The bill, however, did not become a law for it was vetoed by President Cleveland. It was the first gesture at restriction and it presaged the radical departure that was to take place in our

¹For a detailed examination of these organizations, see the article, "The Chameleon of Bigotry" in "Dominicana," December, 1923.

regulations of immigration. What was responsible for the new attitude? The cause must ultimately be located in economic reasons, which presented an entirely new set of problems.

The map of the United States of 1900 was vastly different from the one of 1801. One hundred years growth had pushed the boundary lines to the extreme limit; had erased the vast and unexplored sections; had dotted the land with cities and towns; had bound the whole country together with steel tracks, long highways, telephone and telegraph poles. The marvelous development of machine industry had spread over the entire country. Mills, factories and industries of various kinds were growing intensely. Our cities were increasing in number and size and industrial importance. The whole problem of immigration had to be adjusted to the new economic conditions.

Immigrants were still flowing into our country in increasing numbers, but they were no longer seeking the soil.² The free lands had disappeared and with them the guarantee they offered against low wages and unemployment. The trend was wholly cityward and while the expanding industries and manufacturing establishments required additional workers to man the machines, the number of aliens pouring into our cities exceeded all ability to absorb them. Immigration not only normally increased during this period, but was artificially stimulated through steamship companies, contractors and employers of labor.

In times of business depression and unemployment this large influx of aliens to our shores sharply accentuated the problem. The intense panic of 1893 with the general unemployment prevalent at that time—and yet with hundreds of thousands of unemployed pouring in—was unquestionably one of the important factors that brought about the demand for some restriction. This, as we have seen, was sought in the first restrictive measure of 1897 which failed to become a law. With no barrier raised against them the stream of immigrants continued unchecked, reaching the enormous total of 1,285,349 in 1907 and 1,218,480 in 1914. Between 1900 and 1917 at least 10,000,000 people sought our shores.

During this time the country suffered three major periods of industrial inactivity and business depression—the general depression of 1903-04; the slump of 1907-08 and the pre-war in-

² In 1900 the foreign born whites constituted only 7.6 per cent of the total rural population of our country.



En route to America

"Last year over 90,000 immigrant children arrived in this country"

activity of 1914. All of which served to direct attention to the immigrant policy—or lack of it—and to shape opinion in favor of some radical departure from the traditional method of leaving the door open to all who might desire to pass through.

Some idea of the extent of immigration to this country and of the increasing hordes who sought our shores might be obtained from the following table which covers the total immigration from the time we started to count them officially.

Period	Immigrants	Percentage
1820-1830.....	151,824	.45
1831-1840.....	599,125	1.78
1841-1850.....	1,713,251	5.09
1851-1860.....	2,598,214	7.72
1861-1870.....	2,314,824	6.88
1871-1880.....	2,812,191	8.36
1881-1890.....	5,246,613	15.59
1891-1900.....	3,687,564	10.96
1901-1910.....	8,795,386	26.13
1911-1920.....	5,735,811	17.06

Since the last general census in 1920, 1,450,264 aliens have been admitted into our country. These figures on immigration do not represent the total net increase in population, for many immigrants return to their native lands. A conservative estimate, however, places the net addition at 70 per cent.

The 1920 census lists a total white population of 94,820,915 and of these 36,398,958 are either foreign born or of foreign stock. Over fifteen million of them are of foreign parentage, that is, both parents were born abroad and nearly seven million are of mixed parentage, that is, one parent was born abroad. The remainder, nearly fourteen million are aliens who have sought our shores, and of these, less than half are naturalized American citizens, for the average alien is in this country ten years before he assumes citizenship.

The impressive thing about these figures is that they show the changed aspect of the immigration problem and account in some measure for the growing concern over the large influx. The cityward trend has now reached such proportions that 51 out of every hundred people or a total of fifty million are now city dwellers and of these but twenty-four millions are native born of native parentage while over twenty-six millions are either foreign born or of foreign stock.

The whole situation today is, therefore, vastly different from what it was when Jefferson made his historic address.

These changing conditions were first felt by the workers who had to compete with immigrant labor and no nice ethnic questions, no religious or political policy, but the stern necessity of economic pressure caused him to raise his voice in protest against the traditional open door. This protest first resulted in the exclusion of contract labor (those who came here with a guarantee of labor and a contract for service secured in advance of emigration). This was our first actual restriction and it was achieved in the face of formidable opposition.³ The measure was a mild one and did not suffice to stem the tide. Until 1917 the only practical limit to immigration into this country was the capacity of the steamship lines.

In 1917 the literacy test became a law after a prolonged and intense struggle extending over eleven years; after having been vetoed once by President Taft and twice by President Wilson. President Wilson stated his objection to the measure on the ground that it was a radical departure from the traditional policy of the nation in almost destroying the right of political asylum and in excluding those who have missed the opportunity of education without regard to their character or capacity—and further, that it did not represent the will of the people. Congress did not agree with the President for the bill, upon return, was immediately repassed over his veto by 25 more than the required two-thirds majority in the House and by a vote of 62 to 19 in the Senate, thus becoming a law on February 5, 1917. The literacy test is, however, not a difficult one, the only requirements being that persons over sixteen years of age who are physically capable of reading must be able to read some language before being eligible for admission. Exceptions are made for near relatives of admissible aliens and for those fleeing religious persecution.

Just what effect this law had upon prospective immigration it is impossible to ascertain definitely for conditions prevailing in Europe after the World War operated to make emigration more difficult. However, it is certain that it did not stem the tide sufficiently to relieve the growing alarm; for with the literacy test in operation the arrivals totaled nearly 2,000,000 in

³ Other restrictions have been made concerning the Asiatic immigration, with which we are not here concerned as this immigration presents peculiarities not associated with European immigration and offers a problem, distinct from the one we are here considering.

the next five year period, reaching in 1921 a pre-war level of over 800,000.

The result of the constant agitation over the problems as yet unsolved by any of the restrictive measures was the Per Centum Law of 1921. For the first time a law was passed in this country restricting immigration as to numbers. This law was enacted as a temporary measure and limited the number of aliens of any nationality who may be admitted into the United States to three per cent of the number of foreign born persons of such nationality resident in the United States as shown by the 1910 census. The law applied in its general scope only to European immigrants and the total number admissible in any one fiscal year was 357,803. As originally passed the act expired by limitation on June 30, 1922, but it was later extended to June 30, 1924.

The bill being considered by the present Congress (the 68th) proposes, for the time at least, the permanent immigration policy of the country. This law is not only restrictive but also selective. It limits the number of aliens admissible in any fiscal year to 2 per cent of the foreign born of any nationality resident in the United States and the basis of computation is the census of 1890. A flat figure, however, of 200 is provided for all countries before the 2 per cent computation starts. Selection and preliminary examination of the applicants are provided for before embarkation. The 1890 census is proposed as the basis for calculation in order to reduce the number of aliens who come to our shores from southern and eastern Europe. Since the natives of these countries have come to America in large numbers only since 1900, by moving the basis back to the 1890 census, they would be effectively discriminated against. The contention of those supporting the proposed measure is that the people of northern and western Europe furnish better material for citizenship. This selective feature has raised a storm of protest which is gathering force and which may, happily, defeat the proposed selective feature. But, aside from the merits or demerits of the proposed measure, it indicates how far-reaching is the changed attitude towards immigration.

Thus after a period of one hundred years the traditional policy of immigration has made a complete about face. It would not be just to attribute the entire change to economic consideration alone. Other factors principally the one of "better immi-

grants for better citizens" and the one of the alleged or actual threatened danger to our government if the prospective citizens cannot be properly assimilated have contributed no little share to the protective shield that has been raised. Likewise it is contended that unrestricted immigration is a menace to our American institutions, our American life and standards and thus national expediency has been made the basis for much of the agitation concerning rigid restriction.

The whole question is one of how much the social, economic and political life of the nation is threatened by unrestricted immigration. On this question the opinions are quite divergent and minds starting from the same point, by pursuing diverse reasoning arrive at diametrically opposite conclusions. All extremes are represented in the opinions held and each deserves a proper and respectful consideration. Some would retain the old policy and remove the hinges from the gates—or even dismantle them entirely, while others would lock the doors tight for a number of years. Some think we need more immigrants for laborers; that restriction is a handicap to industry and others say "no." The National Liberal Immigration League says: "In framing its immigration policy, Congress of late seems to have taken the noisy voice of the restrictionist for the will of the people. But the nation is adverse to this policy." The American Legion has spoken in meeting with a loud voice and a set of resolutions calling for more restriction. Secretary of Labor Davis advocates the restrictive law.

Thus the opinions are as varied as the interests of our American people. Many problems are involved and the whole issue is one admitting of wide discussion. The ultimate determinant will be, as always, the economic phase. But this much remains settled—we have entered upon a new era. We have discarded the century old open door policy and have set up rigid barriers. The far reaching consequences of this policy to the American of today and to the American of tomorrow cannot now be accurately gauged, but the results will be profound. The task has not been completed, the last word has not been said. Soon we may look back over the long road and reseek the hard beaten path of the old tradition; or again, we may, in the light of subsequent events, regard it as the folly of youth and advance more rapidly on the present course. At any event we are traversing a new road for America.