

# Immigrants at Ellis Island



**ABOUT THE SOURCE** Starting in 1892, immigrants who traveled to the United States in steerage had to pass through Ellis Island. At the immigration station there, they were questioned and inspected for disease, a process that could take up to five hours. Edward Steiner, a professor at Grinnell College in Iowa, investigated the Ellis Island immigrant experience first-hand. The passage below is from his book, *On the Trail of the Immigrant*.



*As you read note the difficulties immigrants faced at Ellis Island. The following words may be new to you: **commodious**, **emaciated**, **stalwart**, **pathos**. You may want to use a dictionary to look them up.*

Mechanically and with quick movements we are examined for general physical defects and for the dreaded trachoma, an eye disease, the prevalence of which is greater in the imagination of some statisticians than it is on board immigrant vessels.

From here 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.

Already a sifting process has taken place; and children who clung to their mother's skirts have disappeared, families have been divided, and those remaining intact, cling to each other in a really tragic fear that they may share the fate of those previously examined . . .

The examination can be superficial at best; but the eye has been trained and discoveries are made here, which seem rather remarkable.

Four ways open to the immigrant after he passes the inspector. If he is destined for New York he goes straightway down the stairs, and there his friends await him if he has any; and most of them have. If his journey takes him westward, and there the largest percentage goes, he enters a large, **commodious** hall to the right, where the money-changers sit and the transportation companies have their offices. If he goes to the New England states he turns to the left into a room which can scarcely hold those who go to the land of the pilgrims and puritans. The fourth way is the hardest one and is taken by those who have received a ticket marked P.C. (Public Charge), which sends the immigrant to the extreme left where an official sits, in front of a barred gate behind which is the dreaded detention-room.

The decision one way or the other must be quickly made, and the immigrant finds himself in a jail-like room often without knowing just why. There is not much time for explanation . . .

A Russian Jew and his son are called next. The father is a pitiable looking object; his large head rests upon a small, **emaciated** body; the eyes

speak of premature loss of power, and are listless . . . Beside him stands a **stalwart** son, neatly attired in the uniform of a Russian college student . . . “Ask them why they came,” the commissioner says rather abruptly. The answer is: “We had to.” “What was his business in Russia?” “A tailor.” “How much did he earn a week?” “Ten to twelve rubles.” “What did the son do?” “He went to school” . . . “Ask them whether they are willing to be separated; the father to go back and the son to remain here?” They look at each other; no emotion as yet visible, the question came too suddenly. Then something in the background of their feelings moves, and 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.” And, “The one shall be taken and the other left,” for this was their judgment day.

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Source: Edward A. Steiner, *On the Trail of the Immigrant*, 1906

**WHAT DID YOU LEARN?**

1. What did immigrants at Ellis Island fear?

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2. According to Steiner, where did immigrants go after they had been examined by an inspector?

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3. Why do you think the Russian father agreed to be separated from his son?

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# Labor Union Flyer



**ABOUT THE SOURCE** Racism was widespread in the United States in the late 1800s. In the western states, Asian Americans faced segregation and employment barriers. In 1882 Congress passed a law banning Chinese immigration. Native-born Americans often blamed Asian immigrants for taking needed jobs away from whites. Labor unions in Butte, Montana, printed the flyer below in 1896.



*As you look think about the intended purpose of this flyer. The following word may be new to you: **retrogression**. You may want to use a dictionary to look it up.*

J Exhibit 4. Copy

# BOYCOTT

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A General Boycott has been declared upon all CHINESE and JAPANESE Restaurants, Tailor Shops and Wash Houses. Also all persons employing them in any capacity.

All Friends and Sympathizers of Organized Labor will assist us in this fight against the lowering Asiatic standards of living and of morals.

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**AMERICA vs. ASIA**  
**Progress vs. Retrogression**  
 Are the considerations involved.

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BY ORDER OF  
 Silver Bow Trades and Labor Assembly  
 and Butte Miners' Union

NARA, Pacific Alaska Region (Seattle)

**Life at the Turn of the 20th Century**

**Primary Source**

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**WHAT DID YOU LEARN?**

1. How does the flyer characterize people from Asia?

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2. What did the union members who printed this flyer want the people of Butte to do?

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3. How did the labor unions think this flyer would improve the economic situation of their members?

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