New Immigration

Between 1880-1920 over 20 million people immigrated to the United States

Immigration had been nothing new to the U.S.

The so-called "old immigration" in the 1700s and early 1800s had brought thousands of Irish and German immigrants to the new world in search of religious freedom and land.

But in the 19th century a "new immigration" wave of different ethnic groups came to America.

Many hailed from southern and eastern Europe as well as from Asia.

This created a hodgepodge of languages, religions and diversity that would add to the American melting pot.

The old immigrant groups mostly came to America by choice. They had many similarities with each other. They had mostly come from northern and western Europe.

Most knew about representative government.

Except for the Irish, most immigrants were Protestant, literate, and had some money.

During the Gilded Age, the age following Reconstruction, in America, new groups arrived by the boatload, a majority landing in the east coast cities of New York and Philadelphia.

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Over 4 million came from Italy; another 4 million from the Austro-Hungarian lands; over 3 million came from Russia, over 2 million came from Germany; another 1.5 million came from Sweden-Norway; and yet another 1.5 million came from Ireland.

Other immigrants came from Greece, France, Serbia, and Poland

From Asia, nearly a quarter million Japanese arrived as did over 100,000 Chinese. They migrated to the west coast through such ports as San Francisco.

Virtually none of the new immigrants were Protestant – the religion of most people living in the U.S at the time.

They were mostly Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox. Many new Jewish immigrant were migrating to America from Eastern Europe to escape persecution. The newcomers did not speak English and many were illiterate -- even in their own language.

Many of the new immigrants came from repressive countries ruled by monarchs o military men. Notions of Democracy and American governance was unfamiliar to the newcomers.

The most destitute seemed to migrate to the new large cities.

Areas of ethnicities were created in the cities and called Chinatown, Greektown or Little Italy.

Once settled in these areas, the different ethnic groups rarely mingled.

Even though tenement housing and factory work was oppressive, the money they earned and the food they regularly ate in their new land, was more than they had in their former lives.

In the years between 1880-1920, at least 25% of European immigrants did not intend to become American citizens.

They just wanted to earn enough money to support their families until they could return to their old country.

Factory owners were happy with the cheap labor and willingness to work by the immigrants.

American laborers were not so happy with their new competition.

The so called 'nativists' lobbied to restrict immigration to America.

In 1882, Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, barring the Chinese from entering the U.S. entirely. 25 years later they banned the Japanese as well.

Congress banned criminals, contract workers, mentally ill, anarchists and alcoholics from entering as well.

A bill was passed in 1917 requiring immigrants to pass a literacy test.

The Immigration Act of 1924   limited the annual number of immigrants who could be admitted from any country to 2% of the number of people from that country who were already living in the U.S as of the 1890 census.

The law was primarily aimed at further restricting immigration of southern and eastern Europeans particularly Italians and Jews.

Moreover, it severely restricted African immigration and outright banned the immigration of those of Arabic descent.

But, by this time millions had already immigrated. America became a diverse nation with pieces of old cultures sewn into the fabric of the United States.

The Immigration Acts sorely tested the words found on the Statue of Liberty:

"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she

With silent lips. "

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!"