

Timeline of Immigration to the United States



1565: First permanent European settlement in the U.S. is established at St. Augustine, Florida, by the Spanish.

1598: Spanish immigrants settle in what is now Texas and New Mexico.

1619: The first shipload of 20 indentured African slaves arrives in Jamestown, Virginia, beginning large-scale importation of African slaves to the U.S. for labor.

1630–1640: Termed “The Great Migration,” the Massachusetts population sky-rocketed with the arrival of approximately 21,000 immigrants to New England, about a third of them being Britons.

1718: Scottish and Irish immigration begins from Ulster, with most of the immigrants settling in or around New England, Maryland, and Pennsylvania.

1807: The U.S. Congress declares it illegal to import African slaves.

1812: The War of 1812 brings immigration to a virtual standstill as hostilities prevent oceanic transport.

1820 (–1880): Marking the period known as “the first great wave of immigration” in the U.S., over 10 million immigrants arrive, predominantly from Northern and Western Europe.

1825: Great Britain decrees that England is overpopulated and repeals laws prohibiting emigration.

1845: The potato crop fails in Ireland, sparking the Potato Famine, which leads to the death of over one million people. This prompts almost 500,000 Irish to immigrate to America over the next 5 years. In the following years, more crop failures in Europe force mortgage foreclosures, sending tens of thousands of displaced people to the U.S.

1848: The Mexican-American War ends, with the U.S. acquiring additional territory and people under its jurisdiction. Also, German and Hungarian political refugees flee to the U.S., following failed revolutions there.

1849: The discovery of gold in California lures people from all over the world, most notably from China, to work mining claims.

1860: Poland’s religious and economic conditions prompt immigration of approximately two million Poles by 1914.

1862: The American Homestead Act allows any male over 21 and who is the head of a family to claim up to 160 acres of land, increasing immigration from all over the world, especially from Scandinavia.

1864: Congress enacts legislation to help stimulate immigration by authorizing employers to pay for the passage of prospective immigrants.

1868: Previous legislation is repealed. Also, the Burlingame Treaty is ratified, pledging unrestricted immigration of Chinese citizens to the U.S.

1869: Japanese immigration begins to the U.S., mostly to California as political refugees or to Hawaii to work in the sugar cane fields.

1880: Italy’s troubled economy, crop failures, and political climate drive mass immigration of Italian nationals to the U.S.

1881: The assassination of Czar Alexander II prompts instability in Russia and the immigration of Russian citizens to the U.S.

1882: Anti-Semitism in Russia prompts mass immigration to the U.S. of Russian nationals. Also, the Chinese Exclusion Act is passed in the U.S., suspending the immigration of Chinese laborers.

1885: The U.S. Congress bans the admission of contract laborers.

1894: To escape massacres by the Young Turks government, Armenian Christians flee Armenia for the U.S.

1898: The Spanish-American War ends with the U.S. acquisition of Puerto Rico, the Philippines, and Guam, and the people in their jurisdictions.

1907: President Theodore Roosevelt negotiates the Gentleman’s Agreement with Japan in which the Japanese government refuses to issue passports to laborers wishing to immigrate to the U.S. and the U.S. agrees not to impose a quota on Japanese immigration, effectively ending migration of Japanese laborers to the U.S.

1910: The Mexican Revolution sends thousands of Mexicans to the U.S. looking for security and employment.

1911: The U.S. Immigration Commission (also known as the Dillingham Commission) identifies Mexican laborers as the best solution to the Southwest labor shortage. Mexicans are therefore exempted from immigrant “head taxes.”

1914–1918: World War I interrupts mass immigration to the U.S.

1917: A literacy test for incoming immigrants finally becomes law; however, Mexican immigrants are exempted from this and other anti-immigration laws so that they can provide labor.

1919: Two years after the Russian Revolution succeeds, panic over a Communist threat in the U.S. prompts officials to seize and/or deport thousands of immigrants for their suspected Anarchist and Communist beliefs.

1921: The Emergency Immigration Restriction Law introduces a quota system for immigrants, which favors northern and western Europeans.

1924: The Immigration and Naturalization Act imposes permanent numeric limits on immigration and creates the U.S. Border Patrol largely to control Chinese immigration across the U.S.-Mexico border.

1941: The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor prompts panic in the U.S. and the incarceration of over 1,000 Japanese-American leaders. Through the end of World War II, in 1945, over 120,000 Japanese-Americans are forced into internment camps.

1942 (–1964): The Bracero Program provides temporary residence permits to attract Mexican and South and Central American workers during a labor shortage (caused by World War II).

1943: The Magnuson Act repeals the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882.

1945: The War Bride Act and the G.I. Fiancés Act (1946) allow the immigration of foreign-born wives, fiancé(e)s, husbands, and children of U.S. Armed Forces personnel to the U.S. In addition, large-scale Puerto Rican migration to the U.S. begins due to crushing poverty on the island.

1948: The United States admits persons fleeing persecution in their native lands, allowing 205,000 refugees to enter within 2 years.

1954: Operation Wetback, President Eisenhower’s border control program begins, cutting Mexican immigration and increasing anti-Latino discrimination. This program also results in the deportation or departure of more than 1 million undocumented Mexican immigrants who were already in the U.S.

1959: Fidel Castro’s Cuban Revolution prompts mass exodus from the island, with over 200,000 people emigrating over three years.

1964 (–1975): The Vietnam War creates a pool of Southeast Asian refugees.

1965: “Freedom flight” airlifts begin for Cuban refugees. Also, the Bracero Program ends after temporarily employing 4.5 million Mexican nationals alone.

1966: The Cuban Refugee Adjustment Act permits more than 400,000 Cuban citizens to enter the U.S.

1980: The Refugee Act of 1980 systematizes the refugee immigration process and codifies asylum status. This act is created in response to the Vietnamese and Cuban refugee crises.

1990: The Immigration Act increases legal immigration ceilings, creates a “Diversity Admissions” category, and establishes temporary protected status for immigrants jeopardized by armed conflict or natural disasters in their native countries.

1996: The Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act and the Anti-Terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Acts curb rights for certain groups of immigrants.

2001: The September 11th attacks drive the U.S. Congress to pass the USA Patriot Act, which creates a number of new immigration policies that restrict the flow of immigrants into the U.S.



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