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Former Gateway to America Now Historical Site, Tourist Attraction

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Immigration is a key issue in the U.S. presidential campaign, but immigrants are not new to the United States. It is a nation of immigrants. More than a hundred years ago, the U.S. government set up a station on Ellis Island in New York Harbor to process new arrivals. Paige Kollock reports for VOA on how the New York landmark is keeping history alive.

Between 1892 and 1954 roughly twelve million immigrants came through Ellis Island, a small patch of land looking just off the tip of New York City. Today hundreds of people still pass through each day but they're tourists not immigrants.

David Samuelsen is from Britain:

Many people lost their lives over the years for freedom and that lady symbolizes why we're here today.

Ellis Island was the first federally controlled immigration system in America. Each day thousands of immigrants arrived from Europe.

Gary Moreno is a historian at the Ellis Island immigration museum:

Before Ellis Island was opened, there were very few controls over immigration. Immigrants... At one point you didn't need anything...

Only money enough to buy a steamship ticket. But in 1921 due to the large influx of people, the government tightened controls on immigration and implemented a screening system.

They were weeding out undesirable immigrants. So the inspectors were ordered to prevent the entry of anarchists or also bolcheviks. So therefore you had to find out who is an anarchist who is a bolchevik or a communist.

If immigrants were illiterate or in poor health or didn't have enough money they were held in a detention center in Ellis Island until they were either admitted or deported back to their home country. If immigrants committed a crime while in the U.S. they too were held or deported. In the sixty-two years of Ellis Island's operation all but one per cent of immigrants were eventually admitted. Well, the make up of immigrants to America has greatly changed. Forty per cent of all Americans have a relative they can trace to Ellis Island. That makes the family history center a popular spot.

Here people can look up a relative who came through the port of New York. This woman found her grand-mother:

My grand-parents were steerage pasengers. They weren't first or second class, they came with ten bucks in their pockets. And so now I'm here I realize how difficult it was to leave everything ... their

homes... their families ... their commune ... And they made it and they made it good for us. So ... isn't that cool?

With about twenty-five million individual records on file, the family history centres allows visitors to connect to their ancestors in a way many never have. And as the melting pot of America grows and families disperse, the historical records are increasingly valuable to those who wish to remain connected to their past.