

# **Read This Excerpt From Immigrant Kids, By Russell Freedman. Now The Examinations Began. First The Immigrants**

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Immigration has long been a defining aspect of the United States' history, shaping its cultural diversity, economic development, and societal values. Russell Freedman's *Immigrant Kids* offers a compelling, detailed account of the immigrant experience, especially during the pivotal moments when newcomers arrived at American shores and faced rigorous examinations designed to determine their eligibility to enter the country. This excerpt, titled "Now The Examinations Began. First The Immigrants," provides a vivid glimpse into the intense, often stressful process that millions of immigrants endured during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Understanding this period is crucial for appreciating the complexities and challenges faced by early immigrants, as well as the policies and attitudes that influenced immigration practices.

In this article, we will explore the historical context of immigrant examinations, delve into the specifics of the testing process, analyze its implications, and reflect on its legacy in the broader narrative of American immigration history.

## **Historical Context of Immigration to the United States**

### **The Great Wave of Immigration**

Between the late 1800s and early 1900s, the United States experienced a massive influx of immigrants, primarily from Southern and Eastern Europe. This period, often called the "Great Wave," was driven by economic opportunities, political upheaval, religious persecution, and poverty in their homelands.

Key statistics:

- Over 20 million immigrants arrived in the U.S. during this period.
- Major source countries included Italy, Russia, Austria-Hungary, Poland, and others.
- Many sought better lives, escaping hardship and oppression.

### **Entry Points and the Role of Ellis Island**

Most immigrants entered the U.S. through ports like New York City, where Ellis Island became the primary immigration station starting in 1892. Ellis Island symbolized hope and opportunity but also represented the first point of rigorous scrutiny.

At Ellis Island:

- Immigrants underwent medical inspections.
- They faced legal examinations, including questions about their background and reasons for immigration.
- Only those deemed healthy and admissible could proceed into the country.

## **The Examinations: A Closer Look**

### **The Purpose of the Examinations**

The examinations aimed to:

- Prevent the entry of individuals with contagious diseases.
- Screen for mental or physical disabilities.
- Ensure that immigrants were not likely to become public charges.
- Verify their eligibility and authenticity of their documents.

These tests reflected the societal fears of the time, including concerns about public health and social stability.

### **The Medical Inspections**

One of the initial steps was medical screening, which involved:

- Visual inspection for signs of contagious diseases such as tuberculosis, trachoma, or skin infections.
- Physical examinations by doctors.
- Use of specialized tools to detect conditions like hernias.

Immigrants found to have certain illnesses were often quarantined or sent back.

### **The Legal and Personal Examination**

After medical checks, immigrants faced a series of questions administered by immigration officials:

- Personal details: name, age, occupation, and nationality.
- Reason for immigration: seeking work, family reunification, escape from persecution.
- Legal documents: verification of passports, visas, and other identification.

The questioning could be intense and intimidating, especially for those unfamiliar with English or the American legal system.

## **The Experience of Immigrants During the Examinations**

### **Challenges Faced by Immigrants**

Many newcomers experienced:

- Language barriers, making communication difficult.
- Anxiety over the health and legality of their entry.
- The fear of being sent back to their homeland.
- The physical exhaustion from long journeys and stressful procedures.

## **Stories from the Excerpts**

Russell Freedman recounts specific stories illustrating these struggles:

- The confusion faced by Polish or Italian immigrants during questioning.
- The emotional toll of being separated from family members.
- The resilience demonstrated by those undergoing examinations.

These narratives serve as powerful reminders of the human side of immigration policies and the individual stories behind historical statistics.

## **Implications of the Examination Process**

### **Impact on Immigration Policy**

The examination process laid the groundwork for future immigration policies:

- It established health and legal standards for entry.
- It reflected societal fears and prejudices, often targeting specific ethnic groups.
- It contributed to the development of more systematic and bureaucratic immigration control.

### **Discrimination and Bias**

While designed to protect public health and order, the process often harbored biases:

- Certain ethnic groups faced harsher scrutiny.
- Stereotypes influenced the judgment of officials.
- Many innocent individuals were detained or deported based on arbitrary criteria.

Understanding these biases is essential for recognizing the complexities of immigration enforcement and the importance of fair policies.

## **The Legacy of the Immigration Examinations**

### **Evolution of Immigration Policies**

Over time, immigration examinations have evolved:

- Medical inspections became more sophisticated.
- Legal questions expanded to include security concerns.
- Policies shifted from open entry to more restrictive quotas and bans.

## **Modern Immigration Screening**

Today, the process still involves health checks and background screenings but is conducted with advanced technology and legal safeguards. The historical examinations at Ellis Island set the precedent for these procedures.

## **Lessons from the Past**

Reflecting on the examination process highlights:

- The importance of humane treatment of immigrants.
- The need to recognize biases and prevent discrimination.
- The value of understanding immigrant experiences to foster inclusion.

## **Conclusion: Remembering the Human Side of Immigration**

The excerpt from Russell Freedman's *Immigrant Kids* offers a poignant insight into the challenging, often emotional journey of early immigrants passing through rigorous examinations. Their stories remind us that behind the policies and procedures are individuals seeking better lives, facing fears and uncertainties. As modern society continues to navigate immigration issues, understanding this history fosters empathy, informs policy debates, and honors the resilience of those who contributed to the fabric of America.

By examining the detailed process of immigration examinations—what they entailed, the challenges faced, and their lasting impact—we gain a deeper appreciation for the complex history of immigration in the United States. It also underscores the importance of continually striving for fair, humane policies that respect the dignity of all individuals seeking new opportunities.

Keywords: immigration history, Ellis Island, immigrant examinations, immigrant stories, U.S. immigration policy, immigrant experiences, medical inspections, legal questions, historical immigration processes, legacy of immigration policies

## **Frequently Asked Questions**

### **What is the main focus of the excerpt 'Now The Examinations Began' from *Immigrant Kids* by Russell Freedman?**

The excerpt focuses on the challenging and often intimidating examination process that immigrant children faced upon arriving in the United States, highlighting their experiences and the difficulties they encountered.

### **How does the excerpt depict the immigrants' feelings during the examinations?**

The excerpt portrays the immigrants as feeling anxious, overwhelmed, and fearful, emphasizing the emotional toll of the rigorous and unfamiliar

testing procedures they had to endure.

### **What historical context does this excerpt provide about immigration at the time?**

It provides insight into the immigrant intake process at Ellis Island, illustrating the formal and often intimidating health and legal examinations that thousands of newcomers experienced in the early 20th century.

### **Why were the examinations such a significant part of the immigrant experience according to Freedman?**

Freedman suggests that the examinations were a crucial gatekeeping step, determining whether immigrants could enter the country and start their new lives, often defining their future based on these assessments.

### **What challenges did immigrant children specifically face during these examinations?**

Immigrant children faced language barriers, fear of separation from their families, and the pressure of proving their health and innocence under stressful conditions.

### **How does Freedman use descriptive language to convey the atmosphere of the examinations?**

Freedman employs vivid descriptions of the crowded, noisy, and tense environment, helping readers visualize the chaos and emotional intensity of the examination process.

### **What role did immigration officials play during these examinations as depicted in the excerpt?**

Immigration officials are portrayed as figures of authority who conducted the tests, often appearing stern and unyielding, which added to the immigrants' feelings of fear and uncertainty.

### **How does this excerpt help readers understand the broader immigrant experience in America?**

It highlights the physical and emotional hurdles faced by immigrants, shedding light on the resilience required to pass the examinations and start a new life, thus deepening understanding of the immigrant journey.

## **Additional Resources**

Read This Excerpt From *Immigrant Kids*, By Russell Freedman. Now The Examinations Began. First The Immigrants

In the early 20th century, millions of immigrants arrived at the United States' borders, eager to forge new lives amid the promise of opportunity. Their journeys, however, were far from over once they set foot on American

soil. As they disembarked from ships and stepped onto the bustling docks, they faced a series of rigorous and often intimidating examinations designed to determine their eligibility for entry. Russell Freedman's *Immigrant Kids* vividly captures this critical chapter in American history, shedding light on the complex and often daunting process of immigration screening that thousands of newcomers endured. This article explores the detailed procedures, the social and political context, and the human stories behind those examinations, offering a comprehensive understanding of this pivotal moment in American immigration history.

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## **The Context of Immigration in the Early 20th Century**

Before diving into the specifics of the examinations, it's essential to understand the broader context in which these procedures took place. The late 19th and early 20th centuries were a period of massive migration waves to the United States, driven by factors such as economic hardship, political unrest, and social upheaval in Europe and Asia.

Key Factors Influencing Immigration:

- **Economic Opportunities:** The booming industrial economy of the United States created a high demand for labor, attracting workers from abroad.
- **Political Unrest and Persecution:** Many immigrants fled wars, revolutions, and oppressive regimes, seeking safety and stability.
- **Population Growth and Urbanization:** Rapid urban development in American cities increased the need for new workers, but also sparked fears and nativist sentiments among some Americans.

The Role of Immigration Authorities:

To manage this influx, the U.S. government established agencies like the Bureau of Immigration and later the Immigration and Naturalization Service. Their role was not only to process arrivals efficiently but also to enforce immigration laws, which included screening newcomers for health, legal status, and potential threats.

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## **The Journey to Entry: Arrival at U.S. Ports**

Most immigrants arrived at major ports such as Ellis Island in New York Harbor or Angel Island in San Francisco Bay. These gateways became the focal points of the federal government's screening processes.

Initial Processing:

- Immigrants underwent a preliminary health inspection to identify visible signs of contagious diseases.
- They were asked basic questions about their identity, origin, and destination within the United States.

## The Significance of the Examinations:

The real challenge began once immigrants passed the initial processing. The examinations were designed to assess their health, mental fitness, and legal eligibility, often in large, crowded, and noisy facilities that could be intimidating.

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## The Examination Process: What Did It Entail?

Freedman's vivid descriptions in *Immigrant Kids* bring to life the intense and often stressful experience of the examinations. These procedures were multi-layered, combining medical and legal assessments.

### Medical Inspections

The primary goal was to identify individuals with contagious diseases or physical disabilities that might prevent them from working or pose a public health risk.

#### Typical Medical Checks Included:

- Visual inspection for signs of infectious diseases such as tuberculosis, trachoma, or syphilis.
- Examination of eyes, skin, and limbs.
- Testing for communicable diseases, sometimes involving special procedures like chest X-rays (introduced later) or skin tests.

#### Challenges Faced by Immigrants:

- Language barriers complicated understanding and communication.
- Overcrowded facilities led to stressful and chaotic conditions.
- The stigma associated with certain diseases often resulted in detention or deportation.

### Legal and Psychological Examinations

Beyond health, officials looked into the legal status and mental fitness of applicants.

#### Legal Checks:

- Verification of legal documents, such as passports and visas.
- Questioning about personal background, family ties, and reasons for immigration.
- Determining whether individuals were likely to become public charges or criminals.

#### Mental and Moral Assessments:

- Officials sometimes questioned mental health, especially for children and women.

- The so-called “six-second test” was used to judge honesty and mental acuity.
- Some immigrants were subjected to detailed interrogations about their morals and character.

The Role of Interpreters and Officials:

Given the diversity of languages and cultures, interpreters played a crucial role in facilitating communication. Despite this, misunderstandings were common, leading to unjust rejections or detentions.

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## **Criteria for Admission and Rejection**

The examinations were not solely health checks but also assessments of social and moral suitability. Immigration laws at the time reflected fears of “undesirable” elements, including:

- Convicted Criminals: Those with criminal records faced deportation or denial.
- Physically or Mentally Unfit: Conditions deemed incompatible with independent living or work.
- Individuals Likely to Become Public Charges: Those without sufficient funds or support.

Common Grounds for Rejection:

- Medical conditions like active tuberculosis.
- Signs of mental illness or developmental disabilities.
- Criminal backgrounds or suspicion of criminal intent.
- Lack of proper documentation or vague answers to officials’ questions.

Impact on Immigrants:

Many faced rejection, sometimes after days or weeks of detention, leading to heartbreak for families and individuals. Others were detained temporarily for further observation before being allowed to proceed.

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## **The Human Stories Behind the Examinations**

Freedman’s narrative underscores that behind the procedures were real people—children, parents, and entire families—whose lives were profoundly affected by these examinations.

Stories of Resilience and Hope:

- Immigrants often faced language barriers and unfamiliar customs but persevered through resilience.
- Children, especially, navigated the process with a mix of innocence and curiosity.
- Families relied on community networks and advocates to help them through

the intimidating process.

#### Stories of Injustice and Discrimination:

- Many were unfairly detained due to misunderstood symptoms or prejudice.
- Asian immigrants, particularly Chinese and Japanese, faced especially harsh scrutiny at Angel Island.
- The "depot" atmosphere often dehumanized individuals, reducing them to a list of checkmarks and diagnoses.

#### The Emotional Toll:

- The examinations could be humiliating and frightening, especially for vulnerable populations such as children and the elderly.
- The uncertainty of acceptance or rejection weighed heavily on families.
- Some immigrants recounted stories of heartbreak when separated from loved ones due to health or legal issues.

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## **The Aftermath and Impact of the Examinations**

The examination process had lasting implications for American immigration policy and public health.

#### Policy Evolution:

- The 1917 Immigration Act expanded restrictions, tightening health and legal screening.
- The 1924 Immigration Act imposed quotas that limited certain nationalities, reflecting racial and ethnic biases.
- Medical inspections became more standardized, but also more restrictive for certain groups.

#### Public Health Outcomes:

- The health screenings contributed to controlling communicable diseases.
- However, they also reinforced stereotypes and prejudices against certain immigrant groups.

#### Legacy of the Examination Process:

- The procedures set a precedent for modern immigration screening, emphasizing health and security.
- They also highlighted issues of fairness, discrimination, and human dignity that continue to influence immigration debates today.

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## **Conclusion: Remembering the Human Side of Immigration Examinations**

The examinations at ports like Ellis Island and Angel Island were more than bureaucratic hurdles; they were moments of profound human experience, fraught

with hope, fear, and resilience. Russell Freedman's *Immigrant Kids* brings to light these stories, reminding us that behind every checkmark and medical record was a person seeking a new beginning. Understanding this history helps us appreciate the complex legacy of American immigration policies and the enduring human spirit that has shaped the nation.

As immigration remains a vital and often contentious issue today, reflecting on these early 20th-century procedures offers valuable lessons about compassion, fairness, and the importance of recognizing the human stories behind policies and procedures. The examination process was a defining moment in the immigrant experience—one that tested their resolve but also laid the groundwork for the diverse and vibrant fabric of American society.

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