

[U.S. LIFE](#) > [People](#) > [Diversity](#) > People: One from Many

Portrait of the USA

CONTENTS

1. (People):
[One From Many](#)

2. (Geography):
[From Sea to Shining Sea](#)

3. (History):
[Toward the City on a Hill](#)

4. (Government):
[A Responsive Government](#)

5. (Business):
[The Business of America](#)

6. (Education):
[A Diverse Educational System](#)

Chapter One ONE FROM MANY

Immigration patterns and ethnic composition

The story of the American people is a story of immigration and diversity. The United States has welcomed more immigrants than any other country -- more than 50 million in all -- and still admits between 500,000 and 1 million persons a year. In the past many American writers emphasized the idea of the melting pot, an image that suggested newcomers would discard their old customs and adopt American ways. Typically, for example, the children of immigrants learned English but not their parents' first language. Recently, however, Americans have placed greater value on diversity, ethnic groups have renewed and celebrated their heritage, and the children of immigrants often grow up being bilingual.

NATIVE AMERICANS

The first American immigrants, beginning more than 20,000 years ago, were intercontinental wanderers: hunters and their families following animal herds from Asia to America, across a land bridge where the Bering Strait is today. When Spain's Christopher Columbus "discovered" the New World in 1492, about 1.5 million Native Americans lived in what is now the continental United States, although estimates of the number vary greatly. Mistaking the place where he landed -- San Salvador in the Bahamas -- for the Indies, Columbus called the Native Americans "Indians."



[The Statue of Liberty](#)

7. (Science & Medicine):
A Republic of Science

8. (Religion):
Separating Church and State

9. (Social Services):
The Social Safety Net

10. (The Arts):
Distinctively American Arts

11. (Sports & Entertainment):
Exporting Popular Culture

12. (The Media):
The Media and Their Messages

Holidays:
National Celebrations

During the next 200 years, people from several European countries followed Columbus across the Atlantic Ocean to explore America and set up trading posts and colonies. Native Americans suffered greatly from the influx of Europeans. The transfer of land from Indian to European -- and later American -- hands was accomplished through treaties, wars, and coercion, with Indians constantly giving way as the newcomers moved west. In the 19th century, the government's preferred solution to the Indian "problem" was to force tribes to inhabit specific plots of land called reservations. Some tribes fought to keep from giving up land they had traditionally used. In many cases the reservation land was of poor quality, and Indians came to depend on government assistance. Poverty and joblessness among Native Americans still exist today.

The territorial wars, along with Old World diseases to which Indians had no built-up immunity, sent their population plummeting, to a low of 350,000 in 1920. Some tribes disappeared altogether; among them were the Mandans of North Dakota, who had helped Meriwether Lewis and William Clark in exploring America's unsettled northwestern wilderness in 1804-06. Other tribes lost their languages and most of their culture. Nonetheless, Native Americans have proved to be resilient. Today they number almost 3 million (0.9 percent of the total U.S. population), and only about one-third of Native Americans still live on reservations.

Countless American place-names derive from Indian words, including the states of Massachusetts, Ohio, Michigan, Mississippi, Missouri, and Idaho. Indians taught Europeans how to cultivate crops that are now staples throughout the world: corn, tomatoes, potatoes, tobacco. Canoes, snowshoes, and moccasins are among the Indians' many inventions.

THE GOLDEN DOOR

The English were the dominant ethnic group among early settlers of what became the United States, and English became the prevalent American language. But people of other nationalities were not long in following. In 1776 Thomas Paine, a spokesman for the revolutionary cause in the colonies and himself a native of England, wrote that "Europe, and not England, is the parent country of America." These words described the settlers who came not only from Great Britain, but also from other European countries, including Spain, Portugal, France, Holland, Germany, and Sweden. Nonetheless, in 1780 three out of every four Americans were of English or Irish descent.

Between 1840 and 1860, the United States received its first great wave of immigrants. In Europe as a whole, famine, poor harvests, rising populations, and political unrest caused an estimated 5 million people to leave their homelands each year. In Ireland, a blight attacked the potato crop, and upwards of 750,000 people starved to death. Many of the survivors emigrated. In one year alone, 1847, the number of Irish immigrants to the United States reached 118,120. Today there are about 39 million Americans of Irish descent.

The failure of the German Confederation's Revolution of 1848-49 led many of its people to emigrate. During the American Civil War (1861-65), the federal government helped fill its roster of troops by encouraging

emigration from Europe, especially from the German states. In return for service in the Union army, immigrants were offered grants of land. By 1865, about one in five Union soldiers was a wartime immigrant. Today, 22 percent of Americans have German ancestry.

Jews came to the United States in large numbers beginning about 1880, a decade in which they suffered fierce pogroms in eastern Europe. Over the next 45 years, 2 million Jews moved to the United States; the Jewish-American population is now more than 6 million.

During the late 19th century, so many people were entering the United States that the government operated a special port of entry on Ellis Island in the harbor of New York City. Between 1892, when it opened, and 1954, when it closed, Ellis Island was the doorway to America for 12 million people. It is now preserved as part of Statue of Liberty National Monument.

The Statue of Liberty, which was a gift from France to the people of America in 1886, stands on an island in New York harbor, near Ellis Island. The statue became many immigrants' first sight of their homeland-to-be. These inspiring words by the poet Emma Lazarus are etched on a plaque at Liberty's base: "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!"

UNWILLING IMMIGRANTS

Among the flood of immigrants to North America, one group came unwillingly. These were Africans, 500,000 of whom were brought over as slaves between 1619 and 1808, when importing slaves into the United States became illegal. The practice of owning slaves and their descendants continued, however, particularly in the agrarian South, where many laborers were needed to work the fields.

The process of ending slavery began in April 1861 with the outbreak of the American Civil War between the free states of the North and the slave states of the South, 11 of which had left the Union. On January 1, 1863, midway through the war, President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, which abolished slavery in those states that had seceded. Slavery was abolished throughout the United States with the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment to the country's Constitution in 1865.

Even after the end of slavery, however, American blacks were hampered by segregation and inferior education. In search of opportunity, African Americans formed an internal wave of immigration, moving from the rural South to the urban North. But many urban blacks were unable to find work; by law and custom they had to live apart from whites, in run-down neighborhoods called ghettos.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, African Americans, led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., used boycotts, marches, and other forms of nonviolent protest to demand equal treatment under the law and an end to racial prejudice.

A high point of this civil rights movement came on August 28, 1963, when more than 200,000 people of all races gathered in front of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., to hear King say: "I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slaveholders will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood....I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character." Not long afterwards the U.S. Congress passed laws prohibiting discrimination in voting, education, employment, housing, and public accommodations.

Today, African Americans constitute 12.3 percent of the total U.S. population. In recent decades blacks have made great strides, and the black middle class has grown substantially. In 2001, 38 percent of employed blacks held "white-collar" jobs -- managerial, professional, and administrative positions rather than service jobs or those requiring manual labor. That same year 56 percent of black high school graduates were enrolled in college, compared to 38 percent in 1983. The average income of blacks is lower than that of whites, however, and unemployment of blacks -- particularly of young men -- remains higher than that of whites. And many black Americans are still trapped by poverty in urban neighborhoods plagued by drug use and crime.

In recent years the focus of the civil rights debate has shifted. With antidiscrimination laws in effect and blacks moving steadily into the middle class, the question has become whether or not the effects of past discrimination require the government to take certain remedial steps. Called "affirmative action," these steps may include hiring a certain number of blacks (or members of other minorities) in the workplace, admitting a certain number of minority students to a school, or drawing the boundaries of a congressional district so as to make the election of a minority representative more likely. The public debate over the need, effectiveness, and fairness of such programs became more intense in the 1990s.

In any case, perhaps the greatest change in the past few decades has been in the attitudes of America's white citizens. More than a generation has come of age since King's "I Have a Dream" speech. Younger Americans in particular exhibit a new respect for all races, and there is an increasing acceptance of blacks by whites in all walks of life and social situations.

LANGUAGE AND NATIONALITY

It is not uncommon to walk down the streets of an American city today and hear Spanish spoken. In 1950 fewer than 4 million U.S. residents were from Spanish-speaking countries. Today that number is about 35 million. About 50 percent of Hispanics in the United States have origins in Mexico. The other 50 percent come from a variety of countries, including El Salvador, the Dominican Republic, and Colombia. Thirty-two percent of the Hispanics in the United States live in California. Several other states have large Hispanic populations, including Texas, New York, Illinois, and Florida, where hundreds of thousands of Cubans fleeing the Castro regime have settled. There are so many Cuban Americans in Miami that the *Miami*

Herald, the city's largest newspaper, publishes separate editions in English and Spanish.

The widespread use of Spanish in American cities has generated a public debate over language. Some English speakers point to Canada, where the existence of two languages (English and French) has been accompanied by a secessionist movement. To head off such a development in the United States, some citizens are calling for a law declaring English the official American language.

Others consider such a law unnecessary and likely to cause harm. They point to differences between America and Canada (in Canada, for example, most speakers of French live in one locale, the province of Quebec, whereas speakers of Spanish are dispersed throughout much of the United States) and cite Switzerland as a place where the existence of multiple languages does not undermine national unity. Recognition of English as the official language, they argue, would stigmatize speakers of other languages and make it difficult for them to live their daily lives.

LIMITS ON NEWCOMERS

The Statue of Liberty began lighting the way for new arrivals at a time when many native-born Americans began to worry that the country was admitting too many immigrants. Some citizens feared that their culture was being threatened or that they would lose jobs to newcomers willing to accept low wages.

In 1924 Congress passed the Johnson-Reed Immigration Act. For the first time, the United States set limits on how many people from each country it would admit. The number of people allowed to emigrate from a given country each year was based on the number of people from that country already living in the United States. As a result, immigration patterns over the next 40 years reflected the existing immigrant population, mostly Europeans and North Americans.

Prior to 1924, U.S. laws specifically excluded Asian immigrants. People in the American West feared that the Chinese and other Asians would take away jobs, and racial prejudice against people with Asian features was widespread. The law that kept out Chinese immigrants was repealed in 1943, and legislation passed in 1952 allows people of all races to become U.S. citizens.

Today Asian Americans are one of the fastest-growing ethnic groups in the country. About 10 million people of Asian descent live in the United States. Although most of them have arrived here recently, they are among the most successful of all immigrant groups. They have a higher income than many other ethnic groups, and large numbers of their children study at the best American universities.

A NEW SYSTEM

The year 1965 brought a shakeup of the old immigration patterns. The United States began to grant

immigrant visas according to who applied first; national quotas were replaced with hemispheric ones. And preference was given to relatives of U.S. citizens and immigrants with job skills in short supply in the United States. In 1978, Congress abandoned hemispheric quotas and established a worldwide ceiling, opening the doors even wider. In 2000, for example, the top 10 points of origin for immigrants were Mexico (173,900), China (45,700), the Philippines (42,500), India (42,000), Vietnam (26,700), Nicaragua (24,000), El Salvador (22,600), Haiti (22,400), Cuba (20,800), and the Dominican Republic (17,500).

The United States continues to accept more immigrants than any other country; in 2000, its population included more than 28 million foreign-born persons. The revised immigration law of 1990 created a flexible cap of 675,000 immigrants each year, with certain categories of people exempted from the limit. That law attempts to attract more skilled workers and professionals to the United States and to draw immigrants from countries that have supplied relatively few Americans in recent years. It does this by providing "diversity" visas. In 2000 some 50,000 people entered the country under one of three laws intended to diversify immigration.

ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS

The U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service estimates that some 5 million people are living in the United States without permission, and the number is growing by about 275,000 a year. Native-born Americans and legal immigrants worry about the problem of illegal immigration. Many believe that illegal immigrants (also called "illegal aliens") take jobs from citizens, especially from young people and members of minority groups. Moreover, illegal aliens can place a heavy burden on tax-supported social services.

In 1986 Congress revised immigration law to deal with illegal aliens. Many of those who had been in the country since 1982 became eligible to apply for legal residency that would eventually permit them to stay in the country permanently. In 1990, nearly 900,000 people took advantage of this law to obtain legal status. The law also provided strong measures to combat further illegal immigration and imposed penalties on businesses that knowingly employ illegal aliens.

THE LEGACY

The steady stream of people coming to America's shores has had a profound effect on the American character. It takes courage and flexibility to leave your homeland and come to a new country. The American people have been noted for their willingness to take risks and try new things, for their independence and optimism. If Americans whose families have been here longer tend to take their material comfort and political freedoms for granted, immigrants are at hand to remind them how important those privileges are.

Immigrants also enrich American communities by bringing aspects of their native cultures with them. Many black Americans now celebrate both Christmas and Kwanzaa, a festival drawn from African rituals. Hispanic

Americans celebrate their traditions with street fairs and other festivities on Cinco de Mayo (May 5). Ethnic restaurants abound in many American cities. President John F. Kennedy, himself the grandson of Irish immigrants, summed up this blend of the old and the new when he called America "a society of immigrants, each of whom had begun life anew, on an equal footing. This is the secret of America: a nation of people with the fresh memory of old traditions who dare to explore new frontiers...."

[Chapter 2: From Sea to Shining Sea >>>>](#)