

# Inspections

“Inspections” is a chapter from the book *Hope and Tears: Ellis Island Voices*, written by Gwennyth Swain and published in 2012.

GWENYTH SWAIN

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Tier 2 terms

inspection, undesirable, bundle, suspected, lameness, manifest

Web Version: <https://www.tolerance.org/classroom-resources/texts/inspections>

## CHAPTER THREE: INSPECTIONS

Arriving at Ellis Island, immigrants had already passed through a number of inspections. The steamship companies were supposed to do their best to sort out any “undesirable” immigrants before they got to America. Until the 1920s, immigrants did not need passports to board a ship, but they did have to show that they were healthy. Doctors inspected them before they left ports in Europe as well as on shipboard, making notes on inspection cards. Immigrants carried these cards with them to show the doctors on Ellis Island. Pinned to their clothing before arrival was another card, called a boarding tag, which was given to immigration officials.

Once their feet touched the ground on Ellis Island, immigrants were sorted into groups of about thirty. Women and children were grouped separately from men, but all group members were passengers of the same ship. Each immigrant - often carrying a large bundle or bag - stood in a line that made its way to the ground floor of the main building on Island One.

Upon entering the building, immigrants stood before a United States Public Health Service doctor. Any immigrant made breathless by the short walk from the dock was suspected of hiding illness. Those who limped also were pulled aside. Immigrants removed their hats so doctors could inspect for lice or scalp diseases, such as favus. Farther along the inspection line, still more doctors turned up the eyelids of each immigrant, looking for trachoma, a contagious eye disease. Some of the doctors used their fingers. Others used small metal hooks more commonly used to button boots.

If an immigrant showed signs of disease (either mental or physical), the doctor took a piece of chalk and made a mark on the immigrant's clothing. The mark was meant to tell other doctors in nearby examination rooms what was wrong. H stood for "heart"; L for "lameness"; X for "suspected mental illness".

Those who passed "line" inspections by doctors were then directed up the stairs and into lines stretching across the Registry Room floor. At the far end of the room, the immigrant could see a row of inspectors sitting at high wooden desks. These inspectors first checked off the immigrant's name and number (from the boarding tag) against a long list called a ship's manifest.

Then inspectors questioned immigrants, looking for any legal reason not to admit them. For example, immigrants were required to have a certain amount of money (about twenty dollars) in order to enter the country. Beginning in 1917, immigrants had to pass a test to prove that they could read. They might have been turned away if they claimed to have a job already lined up in their new home. Such arrangements could have stopped current American citizens from finding work.

For people who passed inspection, Ellis Island was a short stop (three to five hours on average) on the long journey toward becoming American. But being short didn't make the Ellis Island experience any less frightening.

Planning a lesson or unit on Ellis Island? Try grouping this text with "[Margaret Batchelder, Immigrant Inspector \(1903\)](#)" and "[Najeeb Abreely, Immigrant Inspector \(1890's\)](#)."

## Source

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## TEXT DEPENDENT QUESTIONS

### 1. Question

Reread paragraph one.

Paraphrase the following sentence in your own words: "The steamship companies

were supposed to do their best to sort out any 'undesirable' immigrants before they got to America.”

2. Question

Name all of the inspections immigrants had to pass, according to the text.

3. Question

Why might a previously secured job have stopped an immigrant from entering the United States?

4. Question

Based on the text, why do you think immigrants had to pass so many inspections?

## TEXT DEPENDENT QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

### 1. Question

Reread paragraph one.

Paraphrase the following sentence in your own words: "The steamship companies were supposed to do their best to sort out any 'undesirable' immigrants before they got to America."

Answer

The companies that owned the boats bringing the immigrants to the United States were supposed to take off any unwanted immigrants before they got there.

### 2. Question

Name all of the inspections immigrants had to pass, according to the text.

Answer

They had to pass inspections by the steamship companies, doctors on the ship, U.S. Public Health Service doctors at Ellis Island and legal inspectors.

### 3. Question

Why might a previously secured job have stopped an immigrant from entering the United States?

Answer

This job could have been given to an American citizen.

### 4. Question

Based on the text, why do you think immigrants had to pass so many inspections?

Answer

The United States did not freely open its arms to immigrants. The government wanted to limit the number of immigrants, so it created a large number of tests that people needed to pass before they were allowed to enter the country.