

ELLIS ISLAND

OYSTERS, PIRATES AND AMMUNITION: THE EARLY DAYS OF ELLIS ISLAND



Native Americans, pirates, settlers, and explosives: Ellis Island had a colorful history even before it became the busiest point of entry for immigrants to the United States.

Ellis Island is famous as the place where most immigrants entered the country in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It is believed that 100 million Americans have ancestors who were admitted through Ellis Island. Maybe you are one of them.

Did you know that this famous island started out as just three acres of sand in New York Harbor, south of Manhattan? The Native Americans who lived nearby, the Mohegan tribe, named it Kioshk, which means "Gull Island". In the 1630s, Dutch settlers called it "Oyster Island" because it had rich oyster beds and good fishing. The British took over the area in 1664. At first, they named it "Gull Island", but that soon changed. The island was used as a place to hang pirates, and so it was soon called "Gibbet Island" because "gibbet" is another word for "gallows". Samuel Ellis bought the island in the 1770s, around the time of the Revolutionary War. By then, it had had at least six different names.

Samuel Ellis turned his island into a picnic spot. In 1785 he tried to sell it again, but could not find a buyer. New York bought it in 1807, after Samuel Ellis had died. The United States government bought it from New York in 1808 for \$10,000. Over time, the island grew from its original size of just over three acres to 27.5 acres because soil, rocks and other debris were dumped there.

In the years leading up to the War of 1812, the United States government built defenses on islands in the area. During that war, Fort Gibson was built on the island to hold prisoners. Later, during the Civil War, the island was used as a munitions arsenal for the Union army. "Ellis Island" became the island's official name in 1861.

Before 1890, individual states were responsible for regulating immigration. The Castle Garden immigration facility, located on the southern tip of Manhattan, was the New York State immigration station from 1855 to 1890. Eight million people entered the United States through Castle Garden. Most came from Northern and Western Europe. The federal government took over the job of regulating immigration in 1890, and Castle Garden closed on April 18, 1890. A second wave of immigration lasting from 1890 to 1924 was beginning to reach the United States, and the federal government built a new federal immigration station on Ellis Island to process the large number of immigrants arriving in New York.

The Ellis Island immigration facility opened on January 1, 1892. A fifteen-year-old Irish girl named Annie Moore was the first of more than twelve million people who would ultimately pass through the Ellis Island facilities on their way into the United States.

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QUESTIONS ABOUT *OYSTERS, PIRATES AND AMMUNITION: THE EARLY DAYS OF ELLIS ISLAND*

1. Why was Ellis Island once called "Gibbet Island"?
 - a. It was once owned by a man named Edward Gibbet.
 - b. "Gibbet" is a Native American word meaning "oyster".
 - c. Pirates were once hung there, and "gibbet" means "gallows".
 - d. "Gibbet" is a Dutch word meaning "gull island".

2. Who gave Ellis Island its first name, "kioshk"?
 - a. The Mohegan tribe
 - b. The Dutch
 - c. The English
 - d. Samuel Ellis

3. How much did the United States government pay for Ellis Island?
 - a. \$10
 - b. \$100
 - c. \$1000
 - d. \$10,000

4. Who regulated immigration into the United States prior to 1890?
 - a. Samuel Ellis
 - b. The federal government
 - c. State governments
 - d. Dutch settlers

5. Why do you think authorities decided to build an immigrant processing facility on an island and not in the middle of New York City?

Name _____ Date _____

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ANSWERS FOR OYSTERS, PIRATES AND AMMUNITION: THE EARLY DAYS OF ELLIS ISLAND

1. c
2. a
3. d
4. c
5. answers will vary