

The 4 waves of immigration to US

The first wave of immigration was during colonial times when most new arrivals to North America were from England. But other European countries were represented as well, including France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Wales. By 1700 roughly a quarter million people lived in the American colonies. By the beginning of the American Revolution (1775-83), the number had climbed to 700,000. Some of these new arrivals had been encouraged to immigrate by Virginia's "headright system": Englishmen who could pay their own Atlantic crossing were granted 50 acres of land; each of their sons and servants were also granted an additional 50 acres. Other colonies also adopted the headright system, with the land amounts varying in each. Other immigrants in this first wave were poor and could not afford the price of the transatlantic passage; by signing a contract agreeing to work as an indentured servant for a period (of typically three to seven years), their fare was paid by their future master. At the end of this period, the servant became a freeman and was usually granted land, tools, or money by the former master. During the American Revolution and for several decades after, the flow of immigrants into the new country slowed.

A second wave of immigration began in 1820. During the next 50 years, nearly 7.5 million newcomers arrived in the United States. Many were Irish who escaped the effects of the Great Famine back home, settling the cities along the eastern U.S. seaboard. An equal number (roughly a third) were German, who settled the nation's interior farmlands, particularly the Midwest. An economic depression in the 1870s stemmed the tide of immigrants, but only for a short time.

Between 1881 and 1920 a third wave brought more than 23 million immigrants to American shores. These new arrivals were largely from eastern and southern Europe. German immigration reached its peak in 1882. In 1883 the United States saw the peak of immigration from Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, the Netherlands, and China. Just after the turn of the century, in 1902, U.S. immigration set new records as people from Italy, Austro-Hungary, and Russia made the transatlantic journey.

Between 1920 and 1965 immigration slowed. In the last three and a half decades of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, a fourth wave of immigration has taken place. In spring 1998 the U.S. Census Bureau released a report citing that 9.6 percent of American residents are foreign-born, or roughly one in every ten. This is the highest percentage reported since the 1930s, when 11.6 percent of U.S. residents were natives of another country—a result of the third wave of immigration (1881-1920). However, the origin countries have shifted: Latin Americans now account for about half of all new arrivals, one-fourth are Asian-born, and one-fifth are European.