

Behind the “Golden Door”

By Nick Richardson

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-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!
—“The New Colossus,” Emma Lazarus, 1883

Ellis Island has lived many lives; it’s as [storied](#) as the many immigrants who arrived there. Its large oyster beds fed Algonquian Native Americans. After the Revolutionary War, it housed a military fort to defend New York City. Once an immigration processing facility opened there in 1892, Ellis Island became America’s “golden door.”

That “golden door” [wasn’t always open](#). The Immigration Act of 1891 barred entry to “idiots, insane persons, paupers or persons likely to become public charges,” along with felons, polygamists, and those with infectious diseases. After World War I and the Russian Revolution, fears of radicalism spurred further legislation establishing nationality quotas and literacy tests that significantly curbed immigration in the 1920s. The island became a detention center for suspected Nazis and fascists during World War II, and then for suspected Communists at the start of the Cold War. With immigration all but stalled, Ellis Island closed down in 1954.

In its 62 years of service, nearly 12 million immigrants passed through Ellis Island. The National Park Service began interviewing these immigrants in 1973. Their stories — nearly 2,000 of them — are preserved in the [Ellis Island Oral History Project](#), the transcripts from which became the source material for *Vignettes: Ellis Island* by Alan Louis Smith. Paul Sigrist, then-director of the Project, sent Smith 30 pages of quotes from various interviews, selected for their inherent musical quality. Smith took his favorites and organized them to chronicle an immigrant’s journey from Europe to America. The resulting song cycle was a birthday gift for his friend, mezzo-soprano Stephanie Blythe. Together they gave the piece its New York premiere in January 2001, only months before U.S. immigration policy would [significantly shift again](#).

Today’s news cycle focuses on immigration at the country’s southern border; however, New York remains an important destination for immigrants — and not just New York City. According to a report this year from the Immigration Research Initiative, the Utica-Rome metro area is a model community for integration, with its nationally-recognized resettlement agency, [The Center](#). Over 17,000 refugees have settled in the region, [reversing four straight decades of population decline](#) and [revitalizing forgotten neighborhoods](#). 73% of residents find [immigration benefits the local economy](#), with 11% of all area businesses [owned by immigrants](#). The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) once named Utica “[The Town that Loves Refugees](#).” For today’s immigrants, Utica and other welcoming communities are a new “golden door.”