



MEDICAL INSPECTION ON ELLIS ISLAND

On Ellis Island between 1892 and 1924 the government of a young nation examined and recorded the people of the Old World. The immigrants by choosing the United States as their destination also chose to enter history. The story of Ellis Island is the story to the immigrants, but it is also the story of the Americans who officially received them. Among these Americans were the doctors and inspectors of the U.S. Health Service who in 1891 were assigned the task of medical inspection of all immigrants entering the United States.

The U.S. Health Service was founded in 1798 as the U.S. Marine Hospital Service with the responsibility for caring for American Merchant Marine sailors. In 1903 in recognition of its expansion into wider areas of quarantine and infectious disease control, its name was changed to the U.S. Public Health and Marine Hospital Service. In 1912 the Service was officially renamed the U.S. Public Health Service by an act of Congress.

The medical inspection was the first examination, which an immigrant had to pass on Ellis Island. After the first and second class passengers were landed in New York, the passengers traveling in steerage were brought by barges to Ellis Island. On entering the Main Building a young man in a military uniform, a U.S. Public Health Inspector would look very hard in systematic observation which commenced at the feet and ended at the head. The medical inspector was working at the best school for physical diagnosis in the world, "the Line Inspection at Ellis Island." For he was expected to pick out in the time it took each man, woman and child to walk past him every physical and mental defect which might make the immigrant unacceptable for admission to the United States. It was estimated that a total of six seconds was spent on each immigrant inspected on the "Line."

The doctors and medical inspectors would mark any immigrant they suspected of having a disease or physical defect with a chalkmark and detained them for further examination. Immigrants found to be in acute distress were sent to the hospital for treatment. If an immigrant was found to have an incurable disease he was marked for deportation to his port of departure. The majority of immigrants passed through the medical inspection and were cleared to enter.