



This is the ninth in a series of articles by the CCK Hispanic Committee on the **Catholic Campaign for Immigration Reform** which aims to reach beyond the networks of the participating national agencies, and to enlist the support of Catholic individuals and institutions in dioceses throughout the country.

Visit www.justiceforimmigrants.org for more information. Le invitamos a visitar nuestra página con regularidad, debido a que se estará actualizando constantemente con materiales, noticias relevantes y otra información que esperamos sea de su utilidad.

A Brief Summary of US Immigration History

By Tom Gurucharri



Tom Gurucharri

The United States' history of Immigration begins in the days not too long after the Columbus "discovery" of the Americas. Immigration has always been a controversial subject with each generation of immigrants fearing the effects of the next group of immigrants. The following summary is a barebones look at this history, highlights to help us understand our past as the nation debates important immigration policy issues that will affect our future.

MIGRATION HISTORY IN THE UNITED STATES

Early Migration 1600s – 1800's

After the War of Independence (1775-1783), the movement of large groups of people seeking better economic conditions began creating individual state's concerns to protect their own labor force. When states began taking steps to control the movement of people across political boundaries, the Supreme Court ruled that border control was a federal responsibility. Congress enacted the **Immigration Act of 1891**, establishing the first Office of Immigration.

1850-1930

The industrial revolution and wars in Europe and Mexico motivated millions to immigrate to the United States. All came to find work, and to flee religious persecution and oppressive governments. Unless an individual showed obvious signs of illness, psychological disorder or had a criminal record, all were admitted, everyone was "legal."

1930 to today

The Great Depression of 1929 in the United States forced a reversal of the immigration pattern. For the first time, more people began leaving than arriving. Then, the effects of World War II altered the pattern again. The ethnic immigration restrictions severely restricted the number of refugees allowed from Germany, perhaps indirectly adding to numbers killed in the Nazi camps. Then later in the Pacific, restrictions against Asian nations virtually stopped all immigration until a reversal of the laws in 1965.

UNITED STATES IMMIGRATION SERVICE AND BORDER PATROL

The Origins of the Border Patrol

The first irony of U.S. immigration history is that its primary mission along the Southwest border was to prevent the migration of Chinese and Asian workers. As early as 1904, mounted watchmen of the U.S. Immigration Service, operating out of El Paso, Texas, patrolled the border as far west as California in an effort to prevent illegal Chinese crossings.

The second irony is that internal violation of U.S. laws eventually drove legislation to create a border patrol. The Eighteenth Amendment to the U. S. Constitution, prohibiting the importation, transport, manufacture or sale of alcoholic beverages went into effect at midnight on January 16, 1920. With the passage of this constitutional amendment and the numerical limits placed on immigration to the United States by the Immigration Acts of 1921 and 1924, border enforcement received renewed attention from the government. On May 28, 1924, Congress passed the **Labor Appropriation Act of 1924**, officially establishing the **U.S. Border Patrol**.

THE LAWS

The Early Laws

The first actual naturalization law in the United States

was the March 26, **1790 Naturalization Act** restricting immigration to “free white persons.” Residency requirements were established so foreigners could prove their economic worth over a legislated period of time. In 1870 the law was changed to allow a limited number of Africans to enter. The **Chinese Exclusion Act** of 1882 specifically excluded Chinese as they were deemed an inferior race and undesirable. This Act was repealed in 1943 when the **Magnuson Act** recognized the importance of China’s alliance with the US in the war against Japan.

In 1865, the **Fourteenth Amendment** of the Constitution, while intended to protect newly emancipated slaves, in effect made automatic citizens “All persons born or naturalized in the United States,” regardless of the citizenship of the parents. (Unfortunately, current U.S. immigration law often results in the tragic separation of families or the forced departure of children with full U.S. citizenship when an “illegal” parent is deported.)

The Quota System

The **1921 Emergency Quota Act and Immigration Act of 1924** established national quotas on immigration based on the 1910 census figures of foreign-born residents in the US. The original intent may have been to maintain some level of protection for US workers from large influxes of skilled foreign workers. But the racial and ethnic quotas clearly reflected the racist attitude of the time that white Europeans were more desirable than any other diversity.

Partly in response to the Civil Rights movement of the 1960’s, these racial distinctions embarrassed the government and were eliminated from the code with the **Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965**. However, country quotas remained for foreign-born U.S. citizens who were expected to request family reunification. A visa system was created allowing foreign family members to request legal entry to the U.S. on a first-come, first-served basis.

PRESENT DAY IMMIGRATION LAWS AND DILEMMAS

With a family-based immigration system, immigration quickly became a “Chain Migration” process in which legal immigrants already here sponsor new relatives who become legal and in turn sponsor additional relatives.

The archaic quotas of the 1960’s legislation were completely inadequate for the immigration flood of the 70’s and 80’s. There were the political refugees from Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. Then refugees escaping the wars and government persecutions in Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua. More recently, the United States is continuing to demand medical workers from the Philippines, software engineers from India and, most recently, professional business people from China.

The system was unable to handle this demand and the flood of “illegal” immigrants rapidly escalated to well over one million annually. The problem we are hearing about today was here long before the recent high-profile migrations from Mexico.

However, rather than focus on reforming the antiquated and over-burdened processing system, Congress took an enforcement approach. They enacted the **Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986** creating penalties for employers who hire illegal immigrants, an amnesty program for illegal immigrants already here, and increased support for the Border Patrol. Then in 1996, the **Illegal Immigration and Immigrant Responsibility Act** established new definitions of criminal activity for which immigrants could be deported. The current waiting time for processing legal claims to naturalization continues to grow, now exceeding five years!

The issues of immigration have been with us for over almost two centuries. They continue to be highly emotional and controversial, but they must be fixed. Regardless of where one stands on this, our nation remains for the world as the symbol for freedom and a better life. As a nation, the symbol for our principles of liberty and freedom is the Statue of Liberty. There is no clearer statement of these principles and a beacon for where we must go than the words engraved there since 1886:

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-tossed to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!

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The Catholic Conference of Kentucky (CCK) is an agency of the Catholic Bishops of Kentucky, established in 1968. It speaks for the Church in matters of public policy, serves as liaison to government and the legislature, and coordinates communications and activities between the church and secular agencies. There are 406,000 Catholics in the Commonwealth. The Bishops of the four dioceses of KY constitute CCK’s Board of Directors.

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