

# SAVING FORGOTTEN ELLIS ISLAND

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Quarantined Children, Ellis Island, c. 1910s, Courtesy of the Department of Health and Human Services



## Alexandra M. Lord

When Carl Peterson, a young boy, fell on board the SS *Sweden*, his parents were concerned but not overly alarmed. But by the time the ship reached Ellis Island, Carl, who had developed osteomyelitis, a bone infection, was in severe pain. Public Health Service officials who examined Carl sent him to the hospital on the south side of Ellis Island. His terrified parents joined him there.

An operation saved Carl's leg but during his recovery, Carl contracted diphtheria. A slow recovery followed but in an extraordinary stroke of bad luck, Carl now contracted scarlet fever. Three months after he had arrived in America, Carl Peterson

was finally deemed fit to enter the U.S. in January of 1921.

Carl's story was unusual. Most immigrants landed at Ellis Island, underwent a quick medical inspection by officers of the U.S. Public Health Service, and quickly left the island for New York and other destinations. Of the approximately 10 million immigrants processed at Ellis Island, only 1% to 2% were detained at Ellis Island for medical reasons.

In fiction, however, stories about immigrants who were detained at Ellis Island are common. And although most immigrants spent less than a day at Ellis Island, family stories also often discuss, at length, our ancestors' experiences at Ellis Island as

though they spent days or even months on the island.

Yet, for all that we all remember---and often imagine---the story of the immigrant detained at Ellis Island, the hospitals where sick immigrants were housed were forgotten and abandoned in 1954. Over the decades that followed, this large complex fell into disrepair, with the many buildings becoming empty shells.

In 1982, Americans rallied to raise funds to save and restore the main immigration building on Ellis Island but this restoration did not extend to the hospitals.

Part of the problem lay in the difficulty of determining who actually owned and controlled the south side of the island. In 1834, when Ellis Island was a three acre site, New Jersey had agreed to cede the island to New York while retaining the surrounding waters and submerged lands. In the decades that had followed, 24 acres were added to the island as landfall. Who controlled and owned the additional 24 acres was unclear.

Despite the 1834 compact, the two states bickered for control over the island, both during the heyday of Ellis Island and even after the site was abandoned. In 1993, matters came to a head when New Jersey sued New York for control of the island. As a boundary dispute between two states, the case went directly to the Supreme Court.

In their decision, Justices Steven G. Breyer and Ruth Bader Ginsberg wryly noted that although many of our ancestors assumed that they had arrived in New York, they had really arrived in New Jersey---which owned the south side of the island.

The Supreme Court decision cleared the way for New Jersey to take control of the south side of the island. New Jersey Governor Christie Todd Whitman then formed an advisory committee to decide how to protect and preserve the site and a non-profit organization, Save Ellis Island, was created to direct this work in 1999.

With the National Park Service, Save Ellis Island (SEI) has



## Deserted Hallway, Ellis Island, Hospital Complex, C. Highsmith, The Library of Congress

worked to oversee the stabilization and preservation of the buildings in the years since. To rehabilitate the site, the Historic American Building Survey (HABS) of the National Park Service has mapped out four phases of documentation. Two of those phases were completed in 2009.

“Documentation was produced for the contagious disease hospital complex on Ellis Island,” explains Catherine LaVoie, Chief of the Historic American Building Survey, “The complex was built from a standardized design and arranged in a pavilion plan - a wing and corridor form popular for hospitals since the nineteenth century. The pavilion plan isolated contagious patients from those in the main hospital and also helped prevent the spread of disease among patients with other infectious illnesses.”

LaVoie points to the contradictory nature of the hospital structures, saying “this effort represents both compassion in providing highly professional medical care for ill immigrants and fears regarding urban public health and the potential diseases carried by arriving aliens.”

For the Public Health Service officers stationed at Ellis Island, an assignment at Ellis Island provided an extraordinary education in public health as they were exposed to a range of diseases and as they were taught to make rapid diagnoses.

For immigrants like Carl Peterson, the hospitals provided state of the art medical care.

But the hospitals had only a short life-span.

“By 1925, the government had mandated that all immigrants coming to America be examined



**Examining an immigrant to check for trachoma, c. 1910 (Left)**

**A nurse in a hospital ward, Ellis Island, 1920s, (Right)**

**Images Courtesy of the Department of Health and Human Services**



in their home country--before boarding a ship headed to Ellis Island. As a result, the hospital buildings were no longer necessary because sick immigrants were no longer being allowed into America,” Lorie Conway, the director and producer of the documentary *Forgotten Ellis Island*, explains.

In 2007, Save Ellis Island opened the first of the buildings to be restored, the Ferry Building. Here, at the site where immigrants landed, visitors can see an exhibit about medical inspections and the treatment provided to immigrants.

“We do expect visitors will be able to see the hospital buildings within a few years,” the Director of Education and Public Programs at SEI, Dorothy Hartman, told The Ultimate History Project, “We

have completed preservation studies and interpretive plans for spaces including the morgue, a contagious disease ward, the powerhouse and an operating room.”

Ultimately, the site will become an educational institute and conference center, a goal that will require the restoration of several buildings. Since 1999, workers have removed asbestos and lead paint from the buildings but because these structures were in such decline, the restoration is still some years from completion.

Work on restoring the hospitals is ongoing but saving what many have called the “forgotten side of Ellis Island” and restoring the buildings so that they

can be used again requires extensive funding. Although many Americans whose ancestors came through Ellis Island are committed to restoring Ellis Island, the poor economy of recent years has made fund-raising difficult.

However, Hartman points that among many groups “the value of using this historic site to address current immigration and public health issues resonates.” Fund-raising in an era of economic instability is difficult but for many Americans, saving and interpreting the hospitals here is seen as crucial not only for understanding our past but also for assessing how we will approach immigration today.

You can visit Save Ellis Island [here](#) and donate funds to help restore this important part of American history.

For Further Reading:

Alan Kraut, *Silent Travelers: Germs, Genes and the Immigrant Menace*

Lori Conway, *Forgotten Ellis Island: The Extraordinary Story of America's Immigrant Hospital*

Alexandra M. Lord was the Acting Historian for the U.S. Public Health Service from 2004 to 2008. Her maternal grandmother arrived at Ellis Island seven months pregnant in 1932.



The operating room, Ellis Island, Image Courtesy of The Department of Health and Human Services