Handout 1: Old Path to Immigration

Few Restrictions before 1882

Immigration into the United States was subject to virtually no legal restrictions before 1882. Essentially, anyone who wanted to enter the United States could. No specified arrival areas existed until 1855. Individuals simply got off the ship and went about their business. In 1819, ship captains were expected to keep and submit manifests of immigrants entering the country, but there was no enforcement. Little opposition among U.S. citizens to immigration is apparent until about the 1830s with the arrival of many Catholics and unskilled workers. Nativism which is a policy of favoring the interests of local inhabitants over those of immigrants burst open. In 1892, Ellis Island was open and became the processing center for over 12 million immigrants.

Chinese Exclusion Act

The first restrictive immigration laws were directed against Asian countries. The first law was the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. This law essentially prohibited the immigration of Chinese citizens and it stayed in effect until it was removed during World War II. In 1907, Japanese immigration was substantially reduced through a Gentlemen's Agreement between Japan and the United States. In 1910, Angel Island on San Francisco Bay became the detention center for Asians.

Literacy Test Adopted in 1917

The desire to restrict immigration to the United States grew over the latter part of the nineteenth century. This growth was due partly to the high volume and rate of immigration and partly to the changing national origins of the immigrants; more began arriving from southern, central, and Eastern Europe. In 1907, Congress set up the Immigration Commission, to investigate immigration. This body issued a famous report, now viewed as flawed, concluding that immigrants from the newer parts of Europe did not assimilate easily and, in general, blaming them for various economic ills. Attempts at restricting immigration were initially made by proposing a law requiring a literacy test for admission to the United States, and such a law was finally passed in 1917. This same law also virtually banned immigration from any country in Asia.

1920s: Quota Act and National Origins Act

The Quota Act of 1921 laid the framework for a fundamental change in U.S. immigration policy. It limited the number of immigrants from Europe to a total of about 350,000 per year. National quotas were established in direct proportion to each country's presence in the U.S. population in 1910. In addition, the act assigned Asian countries quotas near

zero. In 1924, the **National Origins Act** instituted a requirement that visas be obtained from an American consulate abroad before immigrating, reduced the total European quota to about 165,000, and changed how the quotas were determined. Now, the quotas were established in direct proportion to each country's presence in the U.S. population in 1890, though this aspect of the act was not fully implemented until 1929. It remained unchanged until the **Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965** was passed. *There were no real issues with illegal immigration until after 1965.*

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