



## Why People Want to Live in America

Every year, more than one million immigrants arrive in the [United States](#) as permanent residents, refugees, and asylum-seekers. Why is this?

The United States continues to be one of the most popular countries for immigration; people come from around the globe to settle down because they want to live in America. Historically, there have been many reasons that people have wanted to immigrate to America; these reasons would shape the cultural identity and policy of the nation as it grew into the world power that it is today.

These reasons still drive immigration today because they offer people the freedom to chase dreams, live their lives in relative peace, and find their own versions of success. Although the United States is far from perfect, here are a few reasons why people have migrated to America in hopes of a new life.



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**Flag of the United States of America**



## 1. America Offered Economic Opportunities

The United States has never promised economic success to its citizens; instead, it has offered the opportunity for everyone to be successful, and people succeed or fail based on their own efforts. This ideal has not always been upheld perfectly, but it has drawn many immigrants to America's shores. Many of the first immigrants came to the American colonies to become wealthy – only the first-born son inherited land in England, so younger sons had to seek their fortunes elsewhere.

European countries started colonies to make money from crops like tobacco and animal skins. As the colonies grew, they became a source of taxation, although this eventually backfired for the British as the American Revolution started with cries like “No taxation without representation!” After the French and Indian War, Britain tried to pay off their war debts with a plan that involved enforcing taxation, which the colonists protested by declaring themselves independent.

The economic opportunities continued after the United States started its journey to become an independent country. The Industrial Revolution in America was marked by the creation of factories, urbanization, and interchangeable parts. These might not seem groundbreaking to us today, but interchangeable parts revolutionized how things are made.

Relatively unskilled workers could now construct things like muskets and, later, sewing machines and typewriters, so the demand for workers was strong enough to support the new flow of immigrants coming from Europe looking for a job. Factory work was often dangerous in the 1800s, but people kept coming because America offered the chance for them to make a life.

## 2. America Offered Religious Freedom

Before America was even a country, people longed to immigrate to it. While many of the first European immigrants were looking to make their fortunes, others came because the new land offered them religious freedom.

The Pilgrims first made their dangerous journey on the Mayflower because the New World offered them religious and economic opportunities that Europe did not. These Pilgrims were part of the Puritan movement in England, which sought to purify the Church of England. They tried to live morally upright lives; however, their highly conservative religious sect was not popular in England, so the Pilgrims moved to the Dutch Republic, where they found religious tolerance.



Despite this, the Pilgrims weren't happy – they lived in poverty and watched as their children began assimilating into the Dutch culture around them. They needed somewhere where they practice their religion freely and have economic success; that place was America.

The Pilgrims then boarded the Mayflower and founded their colony in Massachusetts. Although they barely survived their first winter, they eventually made their colony reasonably profitable. America offered so much religious freedom to everyone who came because it did not belong to one European country. England, France, the Dutch Republic, and Spain sent expeditions and had colonies there, so there was no single approved religion.

The Pilgrims weren't the only religious group to immigrate to America; the Huguenots – a name for French Protestants – and the Quakers eventually found their way to its shores as well, and with so many groups who had lived through religious persecution, America began its journey with an inclination towards religious tolerance and plurality.

### **3. America Offered Land to Immigrants**

When the United States first became independent, it wasn't very big – 13 colonies in all – situated along the continent's eastern coast and across the Appalachian Mountains. But this quickly changed when Thomas Jefferson negotiated the Louisiana Purchase in 1803.

This area was about 828,000 square miles running from New Orleans to modern-day North Dakota and Montana; Thomas Jefferson negotiated the land deal with the French after the French Revolution left their government scrambling for money. They agreed to sell the land to the United States for fifteen million dollars, which came out to approximately eighteen dollars per square mile.

This purchase doubled the size of the United States and allowed Americans to expand west. At the time, many people associated owning land with freedom and upward mobility, but there was so much land that the United States government passed the Homestead Act in 1862.

This Act granted heads of families 160 acres of land provided they farmed or otherwise improved it and lived there for at least five years.

The intent was to move ambitious citizens west to settle the land under American control, and it was reasonably successful at accelerating Western expansion. It did come at the cost of displacing the Native American tribes who already lived there, though. Of course, some people took advantage of the Homestead Act – speculators, cattle farmers, and railroads all claimed land intended for small farmers.





However, people continued to move west, searching for land, more freedom, and wealth, and they developed new towns and states along the way.

## **4. America Offered Democracy and Political Equality**

When the United States began, voting was generally limited to only white, land-owning men, although a few states did allow for other groups like Black men and unmarried women to vote early on.

While this may seem very restrictive to us today, it was still a step forward – other countries had monarchs, so there wasn't much room for voting there. An even greater step forward came during Andrew Jackson's presidency; Jackson believed that restricting voting rights to land-owning males allowed the government to be run by the elites, creating an aristocracy.

He also believed in universal male suffrage; all white male citizens over the age of 21 should be allowed to vote. Jacksonian democracy did not extend to women or people of color, but it was still an important step toward offering a voice in the government to all people.

Black people won the right to vote after the Civil War – the Fourteenth Amendment confirmed their citizenship, and the Fifteenth Amendment guaranteed their right to vote. Still, the establishment of Jim Crow laws discriminated against Black citizens and prevented them from exercising their rights.

These laws were finally taken down during the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, allowing all citizens the right to vote regardless of skin color. Native Americans were not considered citizens until 1924. Although Asian immigrants could become citizens before 1952, it was hard to do due to federal laws.

There was not a set law in place barring restrictions on citizenship until that year. Women did not receive the federally-acknowledged right to vote until 1920 under the Nineteenth Amendment. Some states had allowed women the right to vote, but those rights were limited and sometimes taken away depending on the prevailing political climate.

The suffragists began to campaign for universal female suffrage in 1869, but it would take a world war before activists were finally able to convince the nation that women deserved citizenship and the right to vote.

## **5. America Offered Educational Opportunities**



While adults usually immigrated looking to improve their fortunes, they also hoped their children could have better lives. Discrimination continued to be a major issue in education until 1982 when the Supreme Court ruled in *Plyler v. Doe* that undocumented immigrants could not be denied access to the public school system. Education continues to be a major reason why people leave their home countries and move to the United States.

Immigrants from Latin American countries have confirmed that education is a big reason they come, but not the primary reason. Students in Latin American schools often struggle with poverty and gang violence – even if the school is free, the books, fees, and uniforms are not covered by the government, and schools are a recruiting ground for gangs. Some teenagers have immigrated to America to escape the violence and finish their education in peace.

Today, immigrant students and children of immigrants make up an increasing part of higher education; one study from 2020 suggested that almost sixty percent of the

growth in university enrollment came from immigrants and first-generation Americans. Although they are still facing issues and barriers in the navigation of a new environment, people are continuing to immigrate with the hope of creating a better future for themselves and their children.

## **6. America Offered Refuge From Oppressive Regimes**

Some immigrants have come to America's shores looking for refuge from oppression, disaster, or war. One of the more famous human migrations to America was during the Irish Potato Famine, which began in 1845.

The Irish were poor and utterly dependent upon the potato for their food; there was only one potato variety, and they had no backup plan. In 1845, a blight fell upon the potato crop, and it did not go away. Between 1846 and 1851, over one million people died!

In a panic, people fled their home country, and while some went to Britain or Australia, many were bound for America in the second wave of Irish immigration. Those who could afford it came straight to New York; others paid cheaper fares on Canadian timber ships that have since been named coffin ships – many immigrants did not survive that journey because lumber ships were not made for human passengers, and many of the Irish were already weak from the mass starvation in Ireland. Even though most Irish immigrants survived the journey, they experienced discrimination upon arrival.



The second wave of Irish immigrants tended to be poor – they did not have established trades or skills, so they took any job they could find in the cities. By 1860, though, the Irish discrimination began to die down as America turned its attention toward the [Civil War](#).

The Irish immigrants worked their way into American society, finding better work and better pay; eventually, they worked their way up into all parts of society, becoming an established part of America.

## 7. America Offered Gold

Although the Spaniards had first come to the Americas looking for cities of gold, many people had long given up on finding gold in the United States; they were working to gain their wealth by other means. When [James Wilson Marshall](#) discovered gold in the American River on January 24, 1848, he accidentally started the California Gold Rush, even though he was first met with disbelief.

The rush began in 1848 and peaked in 1852. Thousands of American men left their jobs and homes to move west to get their share of the gold, which dwindled quickly under the sudden demand.

The California Gold Rush made some people a fortune; it ruined others financially. Americans weren't the only ones moving to California; people immigrated from as far away as Peru, Hawaii, and China to get their piece of gold, and Europeans would soon follow.

In 1852 alone, 20,000 Chinese immigrants (out of a total of 67,000 immigrants) made their way to California. This created a multicultural environment, but immigrants were not treated well, especially as the gold began to dwindle. Violence was common, and the law did not often protect immigrants from such attacks. Many Chinese immigrants stayed anyway – they started shops or worked for the railroad building tracks.

The work was dangerous, and these immigrants were paid less than the white workers and had to pay a foreigner tax, but the Chinese workers stayed because they could earn more money in America than they could in China. Although the California Gold Rush did not bring instant wealth to everyone, it did bring many immigrants to the west coast and continued to stir the melting pot of America.