

# Making Ellis Island socially relevant

Ellis Island, March 6th, 2015



- Korte bespreking van inhoud gesprek
- Learning and outcomes

## Address:

- Ellis Island, National Park Service, New York, NY 10004

## Meeting with:

- Peter Wong, educator at Ellis Island ([peter\\_wong@nps.gov](mailto:peter_wong@nps.gov))

## Short introduction to the museum:

Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty NM resort under the National Park Service which safeguards more than 400 places in the United States. The NPS is a bureau of the Department of the Interior. Directly overseeing its operation is the Department's Assistant Secretary for Fish and Wildlife and Parks. Law enforcement is under the jurisdiction of the United States Park Police.

From 1892 to 1924, Ellis Island was America's largest and most active immigration station, where over 12 million immigrants were *processed*. On average, the inspection process took approximately 3-7 hours. For the vast majority of immigrants, Ellis Island truly was an 'Island of Hope' - the first stop on their way to new opportunities and experiences in America. For the rest, it became the 'Island of Tears' - a place where families were separated and individuals were denied entry into this country.

The museum collection of the Statue of Liberty National Monument and Ellis Island includes approximately 390.000 individual **artefacts** and over 1 million archival records, which represent the

cultural and natural histories of both Liberty and Ellis Islands. The collection consists primarily of site-related materials that the National Park Service is legally mandated to collect and preserve and contributes to the Park's interpretive themes. These materials are used to educate and inspire present and future generations about the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island through exhibits, research, interpretive programs, publications, and the media. Visitors can explore the facilities of the Ellis Island building and the exhibits. The exhibits tell the story of Ellis Island as America's first federal immigration station. Themes such as 'leaving', 'struggle and survival', and 'building a nation' are touched upon in graphic panes and through first-person stories.

The educators at Ellis Island are called rangers and wear a national park uniform. The Education Department developed many educational activities: field trips, lesson plans and support materials for all grades, traveling trunks (a traveling educational kit with an assortment of materials for teachers to use in their classroom for a period of 2 weeks), *Ranger in your classroom*, *Junior ranger program*

### Five most noted features

- Making Ellis Island socially relevant

New York society and the United States have become super-diverse (hyphen). While telling the stories of Ellis Island (registry, examinations, courtyard, ...) it is worthwhile to connect with stories that visitor's bring in. And they are often willing to as people want to connect to the site. more than one third of USA citizens have ancestors from abroad. Ad Still 25% of New York citizens are of first or second generation immigrants. A lot of them came by Ellis Island (not those 25 % - make this more clear). Ellis Island is a site of conscience and ~~it can~~ works as a powerful symbol to more contemporary issues. Rangers try to experiment with involving visitors into this process. Questions from one hundred years ago still remain actual. What makes up the American identity? Why do immigrants change their name after arrival? Where do some of the myths about Ellis Island come from? How do immigrants feel after having crossed borders? Or How does it feel to be denied access? What is a community? Why do we think in terms of us versus the others? How do we interpret a *wanted citizen* or an *unwanted immigrant*?

- Contemporary issues of immigration

Ellis Island will open an exhibit in May 2015 on immigration after the closure of Ellis Island in 1954 and will bring the story of migration to the present day. The challenge for the educational department will be to create tools for the rangers to cope with issues of immigration in many creative ways while guiding visitors. For example: Some walls at the main building still wear traces of inscribed names of travellers. Projects on this graffiti will be undertaken with local organisations and teens.

- Ranger in your classroom

As a visit to Ellis Island takes a lot of time for school (bus to and from the harbour) and is dependent on weather conditions, the educational department developed the free program 'Ranger in your classroom'. Park ranger teams visit at least 3 classes in a school and offer a series of presentations. Each program runs approximately 45 minutes or one class period.

- The site of Ellis Island is being renovated

The story of Ellis Island is being told in the main building. But the south side of the island also contains 25 buildings that are mostly unrestored. These structures included general hospitals, isolation and psychiatric facilities for immigrants needing treatment or isolation. Fund raising programs are set up to safeguard these places and share the stories with the visitors. A lot of stories are being untold. The hospital tells the story of the new medicinal techniques of the staff. Medicine students were happy to train at the Ellis Island facilities to develop experience as diseases from different parts of the worlds were common there.

(<http://www.nps.gov/elis/index.htm>)

Visitors will find extensive information about Ellis Island to prepare their visit, divided in categories as 'people', 'places', 'stories' and collections.

The Statue of Liberty and Ellis Foundation also provides digital access to passengers lists (<http://libertyellisfoundation.org/passenger>).

- Junior ranger program

This program gives children (ages 7 - 12) the opportunity to learn about the Ellis Island heritage by becoming a Junior Ranger. An activity book will guide them through the historic Ellis Island site. Children learn what it was like to be an immigrant, and why it's important to protect and preserve historic places. It takes about one hour to complete the booklet.

### Opportunities for Flanders

- Connection between the stories in Ellis Island and the Red Star Line Museum in Antwerp exist. The Red Star Line Museum in Belgium is preparing a travelling exhibition through the United States which will open at the Ellis Island Immigration Museum in 2016.
- The model of *ranger in the classroom* (italic) can also work in Flanders, in cases where it is difficult for students to travel. Although digital programs exist, such as *Expert in the classroom* (online visits to a museum or archive and chats with educators), personal contact and a dynamic face to face workshop can gain more impact.
- Flanders also is getting hyper-diverse. Collection pieces can work as go betweens to address issues of contemporary society.

### Learning and outcomes

- A dynamic approach, with space for interaction and active participation, can work very well for some visitors. Others may prefer a more formal visit.
- Contemporary migration and the hyper-diverse society is also a topic that should be part of our educational work.