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COMPREHENSIVE TIMELINE OF U.S. IMMIGRATION & USCIS AGENCY HISTORY

(BASED ON USCIS AGENCY HISTORY OVERVIEW
AND HISTORICAL IMMIGRATION LAWS)

The history of immigration in the United States reflects the nation's evolving identity, priorities, and legal framework. From early colonial migration to modern federal systems, each era has shaped how the country defines citizenship and opportunity.

Over time, immigration policy evolved from minimal regulation to structured federal oversight through key laws and reforms. Today, this system is administered by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), operating under the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, a structure established following post-9/11 federal reorganization.





1790 - FIRST NATURALIZATION LAW

- Congress passed the first naturalization law.
- Citizenship limited to “free white persons” of good moral character who lived in the U.S. for at least 2 years.

Courts (local and state) handled naturalization — there was no centralized immigration agency yet.

1819 - FIRST FEDERAL IMMIGRATION DATA COLLECTION

- Congress required ship captains to submit passenger manifests.
- This marked the beginning of federal tracking of immigrants entering the U.S.

1864 - FIRST FEDERAL IMMIGRATION OFFICE

- Congress created the first federal immigration office to encourage immigration for labor needs after the Civil War.
- Focus: attracting workers, not restricting them.

1882 - FIRST MAJOR IMMIGRATION RESTRICTIONS

- Chinese Exclusion Act: first federal law restricting immigration based on nationality.
- Imposed a head tax on arriving immigrants.
- Barred entry of certain groups (including “likely to become a public charge”).
- Demonstrated shift from open immigration to regulated immigration.



1891 - FEDERAL IMMIGRATION SYSTEM CREATED

- Federal government took full control of immigration from the states.
- Created the Office of the Superintendent of Immigration in the Treasury Department.
- Established federal inspection stations and expanded categories of inadmissible immigrants.
- Deportation provisions formally introduced into law.

1906 - NATURALIZATION STANDARDIZED

- Naturalization moved toward a uniform national system.
- Basic requirements included:
 - 5 years residence in the U.S.
 - English ability (later formalized)
 - Good moral character
 - Attachment to Constitution
- Federal government began issuing standardized naturalization certificates.
- Created the Bureau of Immigration and Naturalization.

1917 - LITERACY TESTS & EXPANDED EXCLUSIONS

- Congress required many immigrants to pass a literacy test.
- Expanded inadmissibility grounds: health issues, criminal history, anarchists.
- Created the “Asiatic Barred Zone,” restricting immigration from much of Asia.



1921-1924 - NATIONAL ORIGIN QUOTAS

- First numerical immigration limits introduced.
- Quota system favored immigrants from Northern and Western Europe.
- Severely limited immigration from Southern/Eastern Europe and almost all of Asia.
- Established visa system and U.S. consular processing abroad.
- Created the U.S. Border Patrol in 1924 to enforce immigration laws between ports of entry.

1933 - INS CREATED

- Bureau of Immigration and Bureau of Naturalization merged into the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS).
- INS handled:
 - Immigration enforcement
 - Deportations
 - Naturalization
 - Border control (later shared)

1940 - IMMIGRATION MOVED TO DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

- INS transferred from Labor Department to Department of Justice.
- Reflected growing emphasis on national security and enforcement during WWII.
- Alien registration required for many non-citizens.



1952 - IMMIGRATION AND NATIONALITY ACT (INA)

- Consolidated all immigration laws into one statute still used today.
- Retained quota system but added:
- Preference categories for family and employment
- Expanded grounds of deportability and inadmissibility
- Security and ideological exclusion provisions
- Formalized many enforcement powers still used today.

1965 - END OF NATIONAL ORIGIN QUOTAS

- Immigration and Nationality Act amendments eliminated nationality-based quotas.
- Created modern immigration system focused on:
- Family reunification
- Employment-based immigration
- Set first global numerical caps on immigration.

1986 - IMMIGRATION REFORM AND CONTROL ACT (IRCA)

- Legalized about 3 million undocumented immigrants.
- Created employer sanctions for hiring unauthorized workers.
- Required I-9 employment verification.
- Increased border enforcement.

1990 - IMMIGRATION ACT OF 1990

- Expanded legal immigration numbers.
- Created diversity visa lottery.
- Revised employment-based visa categories.
- Reorganized exclusion and deportation grounds.



1996 - MAJOR ENFORCEMENT EXPANSION

- Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA):
- Expanded grounds of removal.
- Created 3- and 10-year unlawful presence bars.
- Increased border enforcement and detention authority.
- Streamlined removal proceedings.

2002 - HOMELAND SECURITY ACT

- After 9/11, Congress reorganized immigration functions for security.
- Abolished INS.
- Created Department of Homeland Security (DHS).

MARCH 1, 2003 - USCIS CREATED

Immigration functions split into three agencies:

- USCIS → immigration benefits (green cards, citizenship, asylum, work permits).
- ICE → enforcement, detention, removal, investigations.
- CBP → border and ports of entry inspections.

USCIS mission:

- Administer lawful immigration system.
- Process applications and petitions.
- Promote citizenship and integration.
- Ensure national security and fraud detection in benefit adjudications.



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TODAY

USCIS oversees millions of applications annually for:

- Naturalization
- Family and employment immigration
- Humanitarian programs (asylum, TPS, T visas, U visas)

U.S. immigration system includes:

- Annual visa caps and quotas
- Extensive background checks
- Enforcement partnerships across DHS agencies

This timeline provides a clear, structured overview of major immigration laws, policy shifts, and agency developments that shaped the current system. By understanding this progression—from early migration patterns to the establishment of USCIS—we gain insight into how immigration policy has responded to economic needs, global events, civil rights movements, and national security concerns.

Together, these historical milestones illustrate how the U.S. immigration system developed into the complex legal and administrative framework in place today.

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