The United States is a society of immigrants. Since its early days, the country has admitted more than 50 million newcomers, a larger number of immigrants than in any other country in history. Most people came, and still come today, for wealth, land and freedom.

1. The first immigrants: the colonial times (17th / 18th century)

After the arrival of Columbus in 1492, European people settled in and conquered the Americas. The major European groups that settled in the future United States included people from the British Isles, Spain, France and Holland. Most of these immigrants were poor people who came looking for work and land. Some fled wars in Europe or hoped that in a new world they would find peace and would be free to practice their religion without being persecuted. (e.g: English Puritans, Protestants who disagreed with the teaching of the Church of England, established settlements in the north eastern region). When they settled in the New World, many immigrants tried to preserve the traditions, religion, and language of their particular culture. The American society was then predominantly English White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP). During this period, the Europeans forced millions of West Africans to come to America as slave labor to work on sugar, cotton and tobacco plantations. During the American Revolution and for several decades after, the flow of immigrants into the new country slowed.

2. The first major immigration wave (1840-1880)

Between 1840 and 1880, new European groups migrated to the United States. During this period, 10 million people came to America. Most of them came from northern and western Europe. Many left Europe to escape poor harvests (ex: Germany), political unrest, or famines (Ireland). Between 1845 and 1851, a serious blight on the potato crop in Ireland (“the potato famine”) sent hundreds of thousands of Irish people to the U.S. to escape starvation and persecution from the British. In one year only (1847) more than 100,000 Irish people settled in the U.S. Most of them became factory workers and helped build the canals, railroads... Scandinavians were farming people who largely settled in the Midwest. The Germans migrated in large numbers because of war and failed revolutions. Many of them were skilled workers and they settled in new cities like Chicago. During this period a large number of Chinese also migrated to the U.S and settled on the West coast where they helped to build the railroads. With the end of the Mexican-American war (1846-1848), 80,000 Mexicans in Texas, California and the Southwest were given American citizenship.

The California Gold Rush (1848-1855) also attracted immigrants from Europe, Australia, Latin America and China. Immigration was encouraged by better conditions on ships and steep declines in travel time and fares which made the voyage across the Atlantic Ocean easier and more affordable. When the economy was strong, these new people were generally accepted. However, economic hard times brought strong anti-immigrant feelings including the spread of racist ideas. Some feared job competition from foreigners. Others disliked the religion or politics of the newcomers. Hostility which had first boiled over against the Chinese in the 1870s now turned against Jews, Roman Catholics, Japanese, and, finally, the new immigrants in general. Laws were then passed to better control immigration:

- In 1882 the Chinese Exclusion Act denies Chinese laborers entry into the US and the Immigration Act of 1882 levies a tax on immigrants landing at US ports and makes several categories of immigrants ("lunatics", convicts, prostitutes, polygamists, homosexuals...) ineligible for citizenship.
- In 1892 New York immigration station -Ellis Island- opened and on the West coast Angel Island opened in San Francisco Bay.

3. The second immigration wave (1880–1924)

A new wave of immigration began in the late 1880s. Millions of the new immigrants poured into the U.S from Eastern and Southern Europe and from Mexico. They included Slavic people like Russians, Poles and Ukrainians, Mediterranean groups like Italians (because of overpopulation, poverty and natural disasters in the 1910s), Sicilians, Greeks, Turks and Armenians and religious groups like the Eastern European Jews (because of the Pogroms against Jews in Russia between 1880 and 1906).

Most of them arrived by boat in New York City through Ellis Island. They were poor people who traveled in “steerage”. Most of the new arrivals from Europe settled in Eastern coast and Midwestern cities where they lived in overcrowded slums and unhealthy and unsafe housing. Many did dangerous work in mines, mills, factories. In New York
City, they dug the subway tunnels, built the skyscrapers and bridges and developed the garment industry. This new wave of immigration was so important that in the peak years - between 1900 and 1920 - the number of immigrants rose to as many as a million a year. Many immigrants were union leaders and political activists who tried to improve conditions for poor people and workers.

Anti-immigrant sentiment was growing in the U.S again. Southern and Eastern Europeans were branded as radicals and undesirables who could never become truly American.

New laws were enacted to block immigration:

- In 1917 a law required adult immigrants to show they could read and write. The law also excluded immigrants from an area known as the Asiatic Barred Zone, which covered most of Asia and most islands in the Pacific.
- In 1921 and 1924 quota laws limited the annual number of immigrants who could be admitted from any country to 3 percent of the foreign born people of that nationality who lived in the United States in 1910. It was an attempt to preserve the ethnic flavor of the "old immigrants", those earlier settlers primarily from Northern and Western Europe. According to the U.S. Department of State Office of the Historian the purpose of the act was "to preserve the ideal of American homogeneity".

4. Internal (Im)migrants (1920 – 1965)

Quotas on foreign immigration unleashed a wave of internal migration between 1920 and 1965. The largest group to move was from the US South. Rural Southern blacks and whites migrated to the Northern and Western cities seeking work in expanding factories. Many African American hoped to find increased freedom away from the racially segregated South.

Spanish-speaking Puerto-Ricans came to the mainland seeking work in record numbers during these years. Because Puerto-Rico was a US colony, Puerto-Ricans were not restricted by immigration quotas.

1952: Enforcement of the 1924 Act:

- The McCarran-Walter Act of 1952 granted residency on the basis of national origin, and was particularly discriminative towards Asians. For instance, while the quota for European immigrants was 149,667, the quota for Asian immigrants was 2,990, and the African quota was 1,400.

5. Newest immigrants.

In 1965, the United States revised its immigration laws and eliminated all race-based quotas, making it possible for millions of new immigrants to enter the country (especially from the Third-World)

The newest immigrants include tens of thousands of people from the Caribbean, South and Central America, West Africa, Eastern Europe and Asia. These people seek work and economic, political and religious freedom. Some flew to the US after upheavals in their countries (Vietnam in 1975, Iran, Cambodia...).

Despite hostility that has often greeted them, many have decided to put down roots and become United States citizens.

- In the 1980s, pressure grows to curtail illegal immigration and tighten the border with Mexico. But the effort was viewed as a failure as the US did not regain control of the border.
- After the terrorist attacks on Sept.11 2001, the US Patriot Act broadens the scope of immigrants ineligible for admission.
- In 2006 the secure Fence Act (Bush administration) authorizes the construction of hundreds of miles of additional fencing along the Southern border, more vehicle barriers, and increased use of advanced technology such as cameras and satellites to prevent illegal border crossings.
- From 2010 some states started to enact tough laws (ex: Arizona) in the absence of federal laws.

Today, the paradox between the myth of the "Open Door" and the reality of xenophobia is striking in the USA.