

# Chicago, City of Immigrants

If you have a chance to explore Chicago, you'll find neighborhoods with distinct personalities reflecting the immigrant groups which settled there over the decades. These adventuresome travelers were motivated, often by hardship, to leave their homes in other countries and U.S. states, in order to find work and a new life in Chicago. While the same can be said of the United States as a whole, Chicago's story is remarkable because of the high numbers of immigrants who arrived in a relatively short period of time.

Chicago was incorporated as a city in 1837 with just 200 residents, but by 1860 it had 100,000 people, and in thirty years the population had soared to one million. What attracted all of those people to the Windy City? In the early years, business and professional people migrated from the northeastern U.S. to build this promising center of trade and commerce. Chicago is ideally located between the industrializing East and the breadbasket of the Midwest, with flat terrain for railroads and access to shipping via waterways. Bold projects such as railroads and shipping channels were implemented, and these projects required huge labor forces.

Immigrants from around the world were attracted by the promise of employment, and were willing to do the hard, dirty work of digging canals and constructing railways with hand tools. The first wave of overseas immigrants came from Ireland in the 1840's, quickly followed by Germans, British, Scandinavians, Russians, Eastern Europeans and Chinese. By 1890, 79% of Chicagoans were foreign-born or children of immigrants. In addition to canal and railroad work, industries such as iron and steel, meatpacking, electrical machinery, the garment industry, printing and publishing employed each new wave of immigrants.

During the 1900's many African-Americans migrated from the South, in addition to people from Mexico, the Caribbean, Central America and Asia. Chicago's Japanese-American population grew sharply, from 400 to 20,000 people, after World War I because many of those imprisoned in "relocation camps" during the war chose to settle in Chicago instead of returning to their homes on the West Coast. Throughout the century, Chicago's ethnic communities consolidated and multiplied, creating neighborhoods with distinctive character.

Chicago was built by bold immigrants, eager to innovate, work hard, and create positive communities in which to live. Take some time to enjoy the architecture, foods, music and culture of Chicago's ethnic neighborhoods, and experience for yourself how the contributions of people from all over the world came together to create one vibrant, thriving city.

## Source(s):

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