“I must have cried a bowlful of tears.” Chinese immigrant Lee Puey You, recalling her 20 months detained on Angel Island.

“I would also find it impossible to live in a country where all my family have been killed.” Richard Arvay, a refugee from Austria, describing why he did not want to return there after World War II.
One came with plenty of money; another carried only a handful of belongings. One was a visitor; another was a citizen returning home. One had her papers in order; another brought false documents hoping to find a new life.

All of these men, women, and children left likenesses and traces of their journeys to America’s entryways. Entering, leaving, or staying in America—their stories were captured in documents and photographs that were attached to government forms.

Above: Visitors entering “Attachments” will walk by a gigantic photomural of this panorama of the Angel Island Immigration Station, ca. 1910.
A new National Archives exhibition in Washington, D.C., “Attachments: Faces and Stories from America’s Gates,” draws from the millions of immigration case files in the Archives to tell a few of these stories from the 1880s through World War II. It also explores the attachment of immigrants to family and community and the attachment of government organizations to immigration laws that reflected certain beliefs about migrants and citizenship. These are dramatic tales of joy and disappointment, opportunity and discrimination, deceit and honesty.

Attachments is organized into three sections: “Entering,” “Leaving,” and “Staying.” As visitors enter the exhibition, they will walk by a large (8 feet by 26 feet) photograph of Angel Island, the main processing station on the West Coast, especially for Asian immigrants. They then pass through large gates embedded with photographs and documents from the exhibition. Each case will feature a large photograph of the individual whose story is told.

**ENTERING**

Entering America meant being able to join a spouse or parent; it meant a chance to marry, start a business, pursue an education, and bring family members to the United States. For U.S.-born Asian Americans returning to their birthplace, it was a test of their citizenship. For those escaping religious or political persecution, the outcome of their immigration application could mean life or death.

The records in “Attachments” reveal that the answer to the question of who could pass through America’s gates and be allowed to join our national community often depended on such factors as where a person was from, race and gender, and when and where the person tried to enter.

For example, when Chun Sik On arrived in San Francisco in 1883, he had to bring a certificate proving that he was a “trader” and therefore not covered by the general ban on Chinese entering the country under the recently passed Chinese Exclusion Act. In 1927, Wong Lan Fong and her new husband, Yee Shew Ning, fashioned strategies that permitted them to enter the United States despite the commonly held belief that most Asian women were trying to enter the United States for immoral purposes. Richard Arvay, a Jewish refugee from Austria, benefited from a brief relaxation in immigration regulations that allowed him to come to the United States during World War II. When faced with the possibility of having to go back to Austria after the war, he wrote, “I would also find it impossible to live in a country where all my family have been killed.”
APPLICATION FOR IMMIGRATION QUOTA (VISA)

I, the undersigned APPLICANT FOR AN IMMIGRATION VISA, being duly sworn, state that my full and true name is Kléstein Chlewne at Luniniec, Poland at the following places, to wit: Vilna & Wielka I5

That I am single, and the name of my husband is

That the names and places of residence of my minor children are:

Name; address;
Name; address;
Name; address;
Name; address;
Name; address;
Name; address;

That my calling or occupation is tailor; that my height is feet and inches; my complexion

Polish Jewish, and able to write the Polish Jewish; that the names and addresses of my parents are as follows:

Mother, Pesha Lewin; address, Wielka 15 Wilna
Father, Moshe Elstein; address, New York

That neither of my parents is living, and that the name of my nearest relative in the country from which I come is

That my port of embarkation is New York; that my final destination beyond such port is

Sister W. Rubimowicz; address, 1315 Lincoln Pl., New York

That I have never been in prison or almshouse; that I have never been in an institution or hospital for the care and treatment of the insane; that my father has never been in an institution or hospital for the care and treatment of the insane.


That I claim to be exempt from exclusion on account of the class numbered , noted above, for the reasons following, to wit:

Establishing

Sister of M. Rubimowicz, who is a citizen of the United States, 35 years of age, and resides at 1315 Lincoln Pl. New York

That because of the relationship aforesaid I am entitled to and claim the preference provided for in paragraph (i) of Subdivision (a) of Section 6 of the Immigration Act of 1924.

That I am a skilled agriculturist and entitled to and claim preference provided for in paragraph (2) of Subdivision (a) of Section 6 of the Immigration Act of 1924.

Valid Passport, birth cert. doctor cert. cert. of good conduct
LEAVING

Americans see their country as “a nation of immigrants”—a place to get a fresh start and a chance to make a new home. Millions who came here found freedom and opportunity, if not for themselves, then for their descendants.

But others who came to America’s gates could not enter, and some who entered later decided to return or were sent home. For some, leaving was part of their original plan—to make money on a temporary sojourn or to simply visit the United States. For others, tragedy, a criminal past, or injustice drove them away. Immigrants who wanted to enter but failed to qualify because of laws or regulations were cut off from their dreams. Even those who crossed America’s threshold were subject to government control and deportation if, as aliens, they committed a crime, supported an unpopular political cause, or violated a regulation.

Mary Yee, a white woman born in Michigan, “became” Chinese in the eyes of the law when she married Yee Shing. As the couple prepared to leave the United States in 1922 to educate their children in China, they had to certify her right to return to the United States using a form designed for a “lawfully domiciled Chinese Laborer.”
Lee Puey You, a Chinese woman, came to America in 1939 posing as the daughter of a man already admitted. She spent 20 months on Angel Island before being deported and remembered her time in detention bitterly, saying that she “must have cried a bowlful of tears,” there.

Kim Ok Yun, a Korean nationalist, fled from the Japanese occupying her homeland. She spent a few years in college in the United States during the 1930s but then returned to Korea and resumed her political activities until she was arrested and probably executed.

**STAYING**

Coming to America meant leaving behind the familiar. And while not all immigrants chose to stay, those who did faced both opportunities and challenges in making a life in a new land. Feelings of loss and nostalgia over what was left behind mixed with the thrill of greater freedom and the chance to begin anew. The safety and comfort of associating with compatriots from “the old country” competed with a desire to demonstrate loyalty to new communities and a new nation. American ideals of inclusion, democracy, and individual rights faced off against the reality of prejudice, discrimination, and stereotyping.

Mary Louise Pashgian came to the United States fleeing persecution in Armenia. After Michael Pupa’s parents were killed by the Nazis, he spent two years hiding in the Polish forests; he eventually came to the

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**To learn more about**

- Finding records in the National Archives relating to ethnic heritage, go to [www.archives.gov/research/topics/ethnic-heritage.html](http://www.archives.gov/research/topics/ethnic-heritage.html).
United States and was raised by a family in Cleveland, Ohio. Kaoro Shiibashi, who was born in Hawaii, was taken to Japan as a toddler. In the 1930s he decided, “I wanted to see my native land,” and he returned to the United States. Despite his Hawaiian birth certificate, he was initially refused entry. Eventually admitted, he spent the rest of his life in the United States, including a stay at the Heart Mountain internment camp in Wyoming during World War II.

All these details—the inspiring and uplifting as well as the mundane and heartbreaking—are recorded in the documents presented in “Attachments.” The documents themselves represent a kind of a gateway—a gateway to America’s immigrant past and a gateway to understanding its complexity.

Above: This package of Raumo Egyptian cigarettes from about 1914 contained a “coaching note” in Chinese. Such notes were sometimes smuggled to Chinese immigrants held on Angel Island so that their interview answers would match those of their friends and family. Below: In 1918, San Francisco police seized this photograph and postcard from a local chapter of the International Workers of the World. Louis Vagadori, seated left, was accused of holding radical and “destructionist” political views but was eventually allowed to stay in the United States. The postcard shows European and American workers waving to each other across the ocean and has a quotation in Italian by Karl Marx, “Workers of the World Unite!”


Author

Bruce I. Bustard is senior curator in the Center for the National Archives Experience at the National Archives in Washington, D.C. He is the curator of “Attachments: Faces and Stories from America’s Gates,” and the son of an immigrant from Scotland.
Attachments

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