

## A Brief Ethnic History of the United States

Today's newcomers are adding to the rich mix of races, cultures, ethnicities, and languages that have always made up the United States. This paper briefly highlights some of the important moments in the nation's long and complex ethnic history.

### Native Americans



The terms *Native American*, *American Indian*, and *Indian* are used to describe indigenous peoples in the current-day United States (including Alaska and Hawaii). Humans first migrated from Eurasia to the Americas some 16,500 – 13,000 years ago via Beringia, a land bridge that connected Siberia and Alaska when sea levels were low. These early Americans spread throughout the Americas, diversifying into hundreds of culturally distinct nations, tribes, and ethnic groups.

European colonization of the Americas led to centuries of conflict and adjustment. Native Americans lived in hunter/farmer subsistence societies with different value systems than those of the European colonists, leading to deep misunderstandings and conflicts. After the colonies revolted against Great Britain and established the United States of America, the ideology of Manifest Destiny spurred the American nationalist movement. In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, the concept of "civilizing" Native Americans spread, and in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, some were removed from their homelands and placed on reservations to accommodate American expansion. By the American Civil War, many Native American nations had been relocated west of the Mississippi River. Up until the 1890s, major Native American resistance took place during what were called the *Indian Wars*.



Native Americans who were not already U.S. citizens were granted citizenship in 1924. In 1975, Congress passed the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act, marking the U.S. government's turn away from its policy of forcibly assimilating Native Americans into the wider society. Today, Native Americans can be found as members of nations, tribes, or bands that enjoy some independence from the U.S. government.

### Immigration to the "New World"

It has been said that the history of the United States is the history of immigration: Other than Native Americans, all Americans have in their family background at least one person who came to the country by choice or force.



Historians have divided immigration to the United States into four waves:

1. Colonial period – 1880: Immigration of Northern Europeans, mainly the English, Germans, and Irish; Africans through the slave trade; and Chinese (towards the end of this period)
2. 1880 – 1920: Massive waves of immigration, primarily from Italy, Poland, Russia, Hungary, Mexico, and Japan
3. 1920 – 1960s: Low immigration due to WWI and WWII, restrictive immigration laws, and the Great Depression
4. 1965 – present: Influx of immigrants from around the world, especially Asia, Mexico, and Central America, after passage of the 1965 Immigration Act abolishes quotas restricting immigration from

non-European countries; influx of refugees from Southeast Asia in 1975 begins the modern era of refugee resettlement.

## Major Ethnic Groups

The following is a brief overview of the major ethnic groups in the United States.

### European Americans

The word *America* derives from the name of Italian cartographer and explorer Amerigo Vespucci. After Vespucci proved that Columbus' islands of the New World were in fact a new continent, German cartographer Martin Waldseemüller named the new continent after him on a map in 1507. Later, in his pamphlet *Common Sense*, Thomas Paine wrote that "Europe, not England, is the parent country of America," making it "melting pot" of many cultures in the U.S.<sup>1</sup>



Europeans immigrated to America seeking political refuge, economic opportunities, and religious freedom. The **Spanish** established the first permanent European settlement at St. Augustine, Florida in 1565. The **English** arrived in Jamestown, Virginia (1607) and Plymouth, Massachusetts (1620), while the **Dutch** arrived in Hudson River in 1626. The first **Poles** also came as skilled artisans to the Jamestown settlement alongside the first **Germans**, but it wasn't until the 1680s that significant numbers of Germans began immigrating, setting in place a process that continued through the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Other immigrant groups during the early Colonial period included the Scots, Swedes, Finns, the French, Portuguese, Scots, and Swedes.



The **Irish** migrated to the United States in moderate numbers before the American Revolution as domestic servants, indentured servants, or as a result of penal deportations. By the 1820s their numbers had grown as Irish immigrants (mostly men) arrived to work in canal construction, lumbering, and civil construction projects in the Northeast. Small but tight communities developed in the growing cities of Philadelphia, Boston, New York, and Providence. During and after the Great Irish Famine of 1845-1849, millions of Irish Catholics came to North America, although many died on the way from poverty, ill health, and poor conditions.

**Italians** arrived between 1890 and 1900, escaping poor economic conditions in Italy. Many Italian immigrants were peasant farmers in Italy and arrived with little cash or education; most worked as manual laborers. Civic and social life flourished in Italian-American neighborhoods, providing new immigrants with extensive social networks.

**Jews** arrived in small numbers as early as the Colonial period of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Some of the earliest Jewish communities were Sephardic Jewish immigrants fleeing the Spanish Inquisition. Jewish immigration to the United States increased in the early 1880s as a result of persecution and anti-Semitism in parts of Eastern Europe; it included a wave of Yiddish-speaking Ashkenazi Jews arriving from the poor rural Jewish populations of the Russian Empire. By 1880, there were approximately 250,000

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.unc.edu/~perreira/198timeline.html>

Jews in the United States. Over two million Jews arrived between the late 1800s and 1924, when immigration restrictions increased due to the National Origins Quota of 1924 and the Immigration Act of 1924. Most of these immigrants were Yiddish-speaking Jews from Eastern Europe who settled in New York City, establishing one of the world's major Jewish concentrations. The 20<sup>th</sup> century wave of immigration – followed by the Holocaust that destroyed most of the European Jewish community – made the United States the home to the largest Jewish population in the world.

### African Americans

Most African Americans are the descendants of African slaves held in the United States from 1619 to 1865. The existing market for slaves in Africa was exploited and expanded by European and American powers in need of labor for New World plantations. Blacks from the Caribbean whose ancestors immigrated – or who themselves immigrated – are also traditionally considered African American, as they share a common history of predominantly West African or Central African roots, the journey by slave ship from Africa to the Americas, and slavery. During the American Civil War in 1863, President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, freeing slaves in the southern states. In 1865, the 13<sup>th</sup> amendment of the U.S. Constitution outlawed slavery throughout the United States. In 1868, the 14<sup>th</sup> amendment granted full U.S. citizenship to African Americans. The 15<sup>th</sup> amendment, ratified in 1870, extended the right to vote to black males.



The Civil Rights Movement began when the Supreme Court handed down a landmark decision in the case of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) of Topeka. This decision led to the dismantling of legal segregation in all areas of southern life – from schools to restaurants to public restrooms – but change occurred slowly and only after much protest and activism. The ruling also brought new momentum to the Civil Rights Movement. Boycotts against segregated public transportation systems sprang up in the South, the most notable being the Montgomery Bus Boycott. In 2004, the U.S. elected Barack Obama, the first Black president of the United States.

### Asian Americans

The term *Asian American* includes Americans with a diverse range of heritages: Cambodian/Khmer, Chinese, Filipino, Indian, Japanese, Korean, Pakistani, Vietnamese, and others. The U.S. Census classifies people with ancestry from East Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia racially as Asian, while people with ancestry from Siberia, Central Asia, and Western Asia are classified as White. The term *Asian American* was first used in the 1960 by activists seeking an alternative to the term *Oriental*, which they felt was derogatory.



In 1763, **Filipinos** established the small settlement of Saint Malo in the bayous of current-day Louisiana, after fleeing mistreatment aboard Spanish ships. Since there were no Filipino women with them, the Manilamen, as they were known, married Cajun and Native American women. **Chinese** sailors first came to Hawaii in 1778, the same year that Captain James Cook arrived at the island. Many settled and married Hawaiian women. Most Chinese, **Korean**, and **Japanese** immigrants in Hawaii arrived in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as laborers to work on sugar plantations. Later, Filipinos also came to work as laborers. Escaping poverty back home, numerous Chinese and Japanese began immigrating to the U.S. in the mid-19<sup>th</sup>

century. Many worked as laborers on the transcontinental railroad. Although the absolute numbers of Asian immigrants in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century were small compared to those from other parts of the world, many settled in the West, and their rapid increase there triggered an anti-Asian reaction to what was called the "yellow peril." The United States passed laws such as the Asian Exclusion Act and the Chinese Exclusion Act to sharply restrict Asian immigration. A little more than half a century later, following the outbreak of war with Japan in 1941, the U.S. government declared Japanese Americans a risk to national security and undertook the Japanese American internment, forcing the relocation of approximately 112,000 to 120,000 Japanese and Japanese Americans to hastily constructed *War Relocation Centers* in remote portions of the nation's interior.



Asian immigration greatly increased after the 1965 Immigration Act altered the quota system. In addition, the end of the Vietnam War triggered an influx of Southeast Asian refugees from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia into the United States. The influx began in 1975 and continued through the 1980s.

### Hispanic/Latino(a) Americans

The history of Hispanic immigration to the United States includes people from Central America, South America, and the Caribbean. Each Hispanic country has had its own immigration policies and patterns.

The first Hispanics to immigrate north were **Mexicans** who, after the Mexican-American war (1846-1848), were granted U.S. citizenship. Thousands more followed, fleeing the political and economical instability of Mexico during the Mexican Revolution of 1910. In the United States, most took agricultural jobs. The depression of the 1930s drove thousands of Mexicans out of the United States; some left willingly (due to a lack of work), while others were deported. Another large migration north occurred from 1942 to 1962, when the U.S. and Mexican governments made an agreement to allow Mexican contract workers into the United States.



**Puerto Ricans** also migrated in large numbers as American citizens after the Spanish-American war made Puerto Rico a U.S. possession. This migration continued throughout most of the 1900s. Many of the migrants were well-educated professionals who could not find jobs back home.

**Cuban** immigration started in the late 1860s with the Ten Year War against Spain that drove thousands from the island. Modern Cuban immigration began in 1959 after the revolutionary Fidel Castro came to power. In the early 1960s, more than 200,000 Cuban—many of them well-educated professionals—fled Cuba for the United States. In 1980, President Castro opened the doors of Cuba to anyone who wanted to leave the island, and hundreds of thousands immigrated to the coast of Florida.

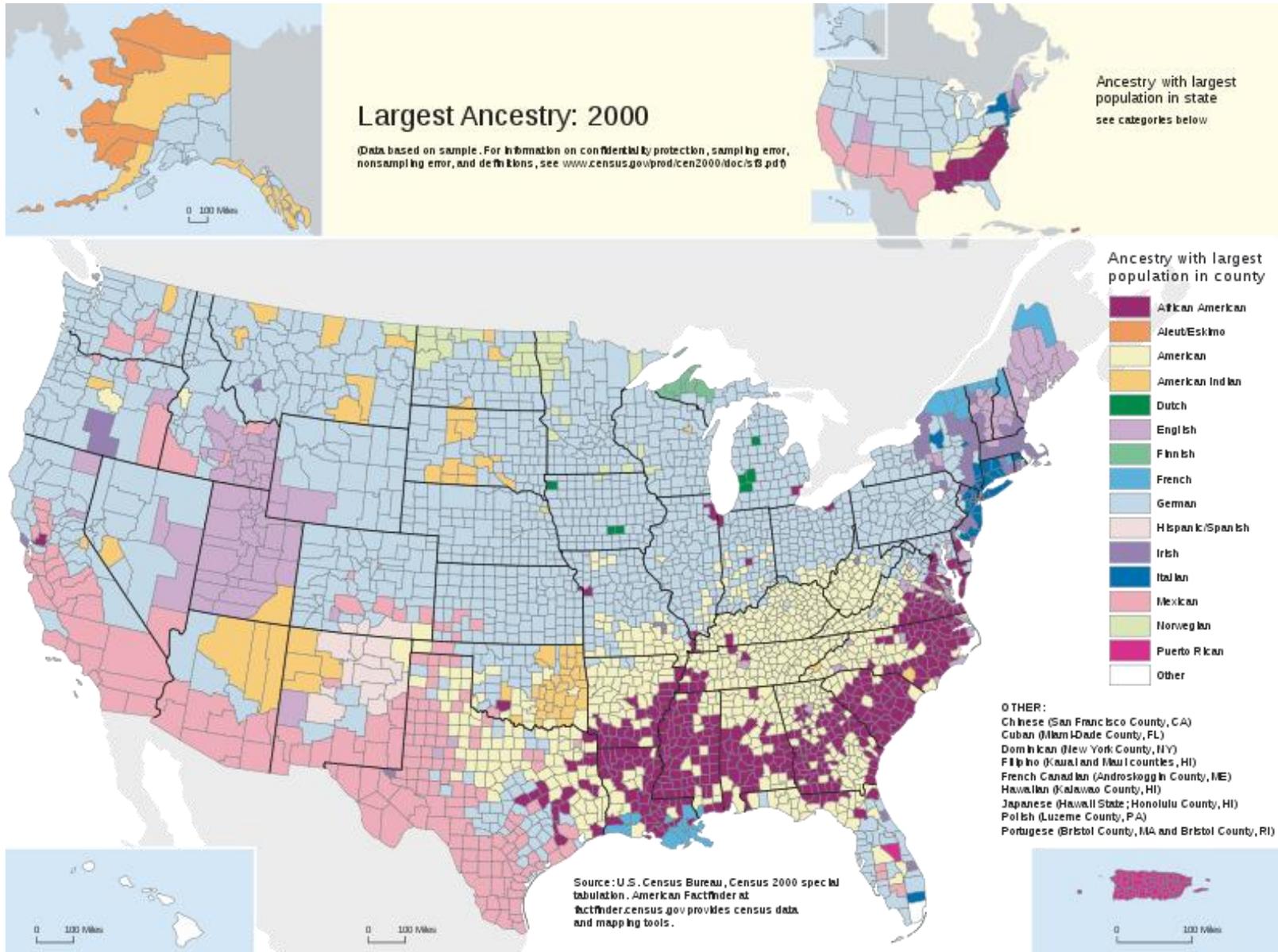
Other countries in **Central and South America** have contributed to the large number of immigrants that enter the United States every year. These include Bolivia, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Venezuela. Today most are immigrants seeking economic opportunities, but in the 1980s many came to the United States as refugees fleeing civil war, political violence, and government repression.

### **And beyond...**

The United States is a large and diverse country with a rich ethnic history, and this brief document only touches upon its complexity. Today, immigration continues to diversify the ethnic make-up of the United States, with immigrants and refugees from all over the world. Whatever their origins, today's refugees have come to the United States seeking the same things that past groups have sought: opportunity and freedom. If you are interested in learning more, ask HPL staff members to recommend resources.

### **Resources**

- Immigration Timeline: <http://www.unc.edu/~perreira/198timeline.html>
- Timeline of Black history: <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/slavery/timeline/index.html>



<sup>2</sup> <http://www.census.gov/prod/2004pubs/c2kbr-35.pdf>