

INTRODUCTION

Annie's in charge and she'll decide when she's good and done with me.

She first tripped into my life back in 2002, and every time I think I've moved on from my obsession with her, she pulls me back in for another round. I may well spend the rest of my life excavating pieces of her past, but with 2024 being the 150th anniversary of her birth and the 100th of her passing, it seemed a fitting time to share what I've learned about Annie Moore over the years.

Anna "Annie" Moore was the first immigrant to arrive at Ellis Island. Students across the globe have traditionally been taught that the United States is a nation of immigrants, but a blanket statement like this requires serious qualification. Native Americans were here thousands of years before the first immigrant and most Africans were brought against their will. That said, if you're an American with even a single ancestor who was not Native or African, then Annie's story is part of yours, too. And Ellis Island, of course, is synonymous with the concept of immigration.

True, it's entirely random that Annie was the first to alight, but by being so, she became a very real symbol of the immigrant dream, and by proxy, the American dream.

It also happens that Annie was from Ireland, a country that has the distinction of being almost as defined by those who have left as by those who stayed. Were you to generate a word cloud pertaining to Ireland, “emigration” would feature prominently. As one of millions who has departed her shores, Annie is also a symbol of Ireland’s diaspora.

Annie set sail from Cobh, then known as Queenstown, which is Ellis Island’s Irish counterpart. Though our ancestors came through more than a hundred ports including Seattle, Boston, Galveston, and Baltimore, Ellis Island dominates in our collective psyche, mainly due to its scale. In just a few generations, the more than 12 million who entered through its gates have proliferated so successfully that it’s estimated their descendants now include roughly 40% of Americans. Similarly, more than 40% (2.5 million of 6 million) of those who left Ireland during the country’s peak emigration period of 1848-1950 took their last steps on Irish soil at Cobh.

Through this double fluke of timing and geography, Annie accidentally became a representative of two nations – one historically known for importing people and the other for exporting them. The complementary, and in many ways, world-defining forces of immigration and emigration are all wrapped up in this one poster child – one who, it’s worth noting, was actually a child.

All of this is why a seemingly random immigrant has chapters dedicated to her in a variety of history books including Tyler Anbinder’s *City of Dreams: The 400-Year Epic History of Immigrant New York*, Małgorzata Szejnert’s *Ellis Island: A People’s History*, and Turtle Bunbury’s *The Irish Diaspora: Tales of Emigration, Exile and Imperialism* in which he describes Annie as “the most famous emigrant in American history.”

And yet, we got her story all wrong. Annie Moore, as you might expect, is a very common name, and we allowed a different Annie Moore to slip into the cracks of history and usurp the place of the true Annie – a case of historical identity theft. The story that follows will explain how that happened, the discovery of the error, the sleuthing to find the correct Annie, and what her life was really like.

I hope in sharing her tale to also offer a glimpse of the messiness of the research process. If you watch any of the popular roots shows, everything seems so linear – chronological and tidy – but that’s only done after the fact when inches of paper and gigabytes of data are streamlined and distilled for easy consumption. My aim is to reflect something closer to reality.