

# EMIGRATION FROM NORWAY TO AMERICA FROM 1825 TO THE PRESENT DAY

There are 281 million migrants in the world today. Migrants make up about 3.6% of the world's population lives in a country different from the one they were born in. The vast majority of migrants move voluntarily. They have, or hope to find, work. Or perhaps they have found love in another country? Some also migrate because they are fleeing, whether from war, persecution, or disasters.



*This painting of the sloop Selen is the closest we have to an image of the Restauration.  
Artist: Ole Johnsen Sebøy*

Migration is not a new phenomenon. In the 19th and early 20th century many in Europe moved to North America.

In 2025, it will be 200 years since the sailing ship *Restauration* left the Norwegian port Stavanger. It arrived in New York on October 4th, 1825, after three months at sea. The 45 passengers, as well as crew of seven, are considered the first Norwegian emigrants to North America. From 1825 to 1960, almost 900,000 people emigrated from Norway to North America, the vast majority to the USA.<sup>1</sup> After Ireland, Norway was the European country with the highest emigration rate relative to its population.

## **FACT BOX:**

*A migrant* is someone who has settled in a country other than where they were born.

*An emigrant* is someone who leaves their native country to settle elsewhere.

*An immigrant* is someone who arrives in a country from another country, intending to settle there

<sup>1</sup> Østrem 2014, s. 33

## PERIODS AND NUMBERS

The first Norwegian emigrants settled in Fox River, Illinois. This place would serve as a hub for thousands of Norwegian immigrants in the following years.

<sup>2</sup>Rumors of the good conditions in America spread to Norway, but it was not until 1836 that the next ship with emigrants left Norway. In the following 10 years, approximately 6,000 people emigrated annually from Norway to America. From 1860, emigration really took off.

From the 1860s until World War I Norwegian emigration to America can be divided into three waves: From 1866 to 1873, approximately 12,000 people emigrated annually. From 1880-1893 and from 1903-1910, the annual average was 18,000 people. The peak years of Norwegian emigration to America were 1882 with 29,000 and 1903 with 27,000.<sup>3</sup>

After 1900, there was also some return migration, meaning that many returned from America to Norway. Especially young people could travel back and forth to America several times to work in periods.



*Emigrants, 1903. Artist: Gustav Wentzel*

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2 Nerheim 2020, s. 42ff

3 Nerbøvik

## THE JOURNEY/ CROSSING

The journey to North America was by sea. A few ships sailed directly from Norway, but most traveled via England, Germany, or Holland. The crossing took approximately two months by sailing ship. From 1880, the first regular steamship routes started up. With steamships, the Atlantic crossing could be done in just over a week.

In 1910, the Norwegian America Line was established with regular departures from Kristiania (Oslo), Kristiansand, Stavanger, and Bergen, going directly to New York.



*In 1910, the Norwegian America Line was established, offering regular departures from Kristiania (Oslo), Kristiansand, Stavanger, and Bergen directly to New York. Owner: National Library of Norway.*

## WHAT DID THE FIRST EMIGRANTS ENCOUNTER?

Those who emigrated in the early period were often poorly prepared, both for the journey and for what awaited them in North America. Few spoke English, and many had only enough money for the boat ticket. In New York, many were tricked by con artists and swindlers who sought to profit from newly arrived immigrants.

The Norwegian emigrants' destination was often the Midwest or other inland areas, where relatives, friends, or acquaintances had already settled. The crossing usually took place in the summer, so emigrants often spent their first winter with acquaintances before clearing land and building houses the following spring.

## WHO EMIGRATED AND WHY?

The reasons for emigration were complex, but a major factor was the “pull of America.” America offered prospects for work and a better life for oneself and one’s family. The possibility of joining family and friends was also important. In some Norwegian communities, a large percentage of the population emigrated, often settling in the same places in America.<sup>4</sup>

In the first period, up to 1880, it was mainly entire families who emigrated. They were typically among the more well-off in their communities. Many came from mountain areas and sparsely populated districts. During this period, there was abundant land available in America, and many acquired land and cleared it to establish farms.



*The Farewell, 1858. Artists: Adolph Tidemand, Knud Bergslien*

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4 Østrem 2014, s. 60

Later, it became possible for tenant farmers and domestic servants to emigrate. This was partly because travel became cheaper, but also because many had acquaintances in America who could help find work. Emigration from the Norwegian cities also increased.

From the 1880s, the number of unmarried young people seeking their fortune in America increased considerably. In 1880, 60 percent of the women who emigrated were unmarried, and in 1907, this figure was 75 percent. Most of these were domestic servants when they left Norway.<sup>5</sup> In all periods, there was a slight surplus of men among the emigrants.

Periods of high emigration coincided with periods of hard economic times in Norway. Throughout the 19th century, the population grew rapidly, and many young people had to leave their villages and farms to find work. Many moved to cities in Norway to work in industry; for some, this was just a stopover on the way to America. Saving up money in good years, enabled them to choose to emigrate in hard times.

## WHERE DID THEY GO AND WHAT DID THEY DO?

Throughout the 19th century and well into the 20th century, there was large-scale settlement of the American continent. Through laws such as the Homestead Act of 1862, all adult men, as well as women and immigrants who had applied for citizenship, could, under certain conditions, claim up to 160 acres of land. They could then build a farm or a home. The reason for this land distribution was, among other things, a fear that plantation owners and slave drivers would acquire large areas.

The vast land areas had become available after forced removal of the Native Americans—often called Indians during that time—from their ancestral lands. The indigenous population usually had to give up these areas as part of peace treaties after wars and massacres.

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<sup>5</sup> Sogner og Telste 2005, s. 96f

Those who settled the new areas included American settlers from further east and emigrants from across the Atlantic. Norwegians participated fully in this conquest of land in North America. Most settled in the states of Minnesota, Wisconsin, and North Dakota.

According to the 1900 census, Norwegians were by far the most rural immigrant group.<sup>6</sup> In 1910, 80% of the approximately 1 million first and second-generation Norwegian immigrants lived in the Upper Midwest. In rural America they could create a life similar to what they knew from home, but with higher social and economic status.

Many also settled in cities. In the early period, most settled in cities around the Great Lakes: Chicago, Milwaukee, Detroit. Eventually, a large Norwegian community developed in Brooklyn, New York. From the 1870s, Brooklyn became the main center for shipbuilding, docking, and ship repair. Since many Norwegians had skills and experience in the ship building industry, this was one reason why they settled there. Brooklyn also attracted many Norwegian sailors who were working in New York.



*Two Men in Front of a Sod Hut with the sign: "Hotel Knap Næring".  
Owner: Anno Domkirkeodden*

In 1910, about 30,000 first and second-generation Norwegians lived in Brooklyn. There were Norwegian bakeries, restaurants, and shops. 8th Avenue even got the nickname "Lapskaus Avenue" (Stew Avenue).<sup>7</sup> Brooklyn was for a long time a base for young Norwegian men and women—especially from the southwest of Norway—who came as labor immigrants. In the 1950s and 1960s, "Brooklyn was closer than Oslo" for many who already had relatives and friends working there.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Lovoll, s. 12

<sup>7</sup> Ringdal 2007, s. 20f

<sup>8</sup> Utsagn fra Erling Dugan fra Kvinesdal, vokst opp i Brooklyn, i intervju med Kvinesdal.no (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IhLkkwQ3llo>) sett 4/3-2025

# COMMUNICATION

As more people emigrated, letters were sent home to family and friends in Norway. Books and articles with advice and tips for those who wanted to emigrate were also published.

Letters that Norwegian emigrants sent home are called “Amerikabrev” (America Letters). In these letters, the senders described life in America and the opportunities available there. The letters also kept relatives and friends updated on births and other important events. Often, the writers encouraged relatives and friends to emigrate themselves, and the letters were widely read. In some cases, they were also printed in newspapers in Norway.

Norwegian settlers also published their own Norwegian-American newspapers. They wrote about issues of concern to Norwegians in America and shared news from Norway, both big and small. An example is the “Decorah-Posten”. This newspaper was published in Norwegian in Decorah, Iowa, from 1874 to 1972.



*17th of May on Lapskaus Boulevard in the 1950s.*

# INFLUENCE AND INTERACTION ACROSS THE ATLANTIC

For centuries, Norway and the USA have influenced each other, both culturally and economically. The Norwegian constitution of 1814 was strongly inspired by the American constitution of 1787. The large Norwegian and European immigration to the USA in the 19th century changed American society. Immigrants, including Norwegians, brought their own customs, religion, art, and music. Many maintained their language and contact with their homeland. Even today, May 17th (Norwegian Constitution Day) and Norwegian festivals are celebrated in some places in the USA, including at Vesterheim Norwegian-American Museum in Iowa.

The strong ties to Europe were one of the reasons why the USA participated in World War I and World War II. After World War II, the USA strongly contributed to the reconstruction of Europe through the Marshall Plan, which, among other things, helped mechanize agriculture in Norway. Popular culture, such as music and film, from the USA also became dominant in the post-war period.

In 2000, 4.5 million Americans stated that they had Norwegian ancestry—approximately the same number as the population of Norway at that time.<sup>9</sup> In today's American society and politics, there are prominent people of Norwegian descent, for example, Deb Haaland, who has both Native American and Norwegian heritage and was U.S. Secretary of the Interior from 2021 – 2025, and John Thune, U.S. Senator from South Dakota.



*The Vesterheim Norwegian-American Museum is located in the heart of Decorah, Iowa.*

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<sup>9</sup> Den norske ambassaden i Washington. (<https://www.norway.no/en/usa/for-nordmenn/norge-og-usa/>) (besøkt 4/3-25)

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