

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

There are 281 million migrants in the world today. Migrants are people who have settled in another country than they were born in. When they move out of the country they were born in, they are called emigrants. When they move into the new country they are called immigrants.

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.

Between 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.



*Emigrants, 1903. Artist: Gustav Wentzel*

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<sup>1</sup> Østrem 2014, s. 33

## WHO WERE THE EMIGRANTS

Those emigrating from Norway to America before 1880 were largely whole families. Many came from mountain villages and sparsely populated areas. At this time, there was a good supply of land in America, and many acquired land and cleared farms.

Later, it became possible for those with less money, such as servants, to travel. This was largely because the journey itself had become cheaper.



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

## WHY DID THEY EMIGRATE?

The reasons for emigrating were complex, but a major factor was the “dream of America”. America offered prospects for work and a better life for oneself and one’s family. In Norway, at the same time, there was hard competition for both work and farms.

Another reason was that many of those who left Norway went to relatives and friends in America. Those already in America helped the new immigrants find work and settle in.<sup>2</sup>



*The Beginning of the Emigrant Journey, Hordaland, 1906. Owner: Norsk Folkemuseum*

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<sup>2</sup> Østrem 2014, s. 60

## 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. Steamships became the main way to cross the Atlantic Ocean.

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.*

## 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. 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 or were forced to sell the land at very low prices.

An American law, the Homestead Act of 1862, allowed all adult immigrants to claim up to 160 acres of land to settle on. Those who settled in 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 Norwegians settled in the states of Minnesota, Wisconsin, and North Dakota.

Many also settled in cities. A large Norwegian community settled in Brooklyn, New York, and in 1910, about 30,000 first and second-generation Norwegians lived there. There were Norwegian bakeries, restaurants, and shops. 8th Avenue even got the nickname “Lapskaus Avenue” (Stew Avenue).<sup>3</sup>



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

## COMMUNICATION

As more Norwegians emigrated, they also wrote letters home telling about their new lives. These letters are called “America letters”. In Norway the letters were often read aloud, or printed in newspapers. In this way they told more people about the opportunities in America.

Norwegian settlers also published their own Norwegian-American newspapers. In these they wrote about issues of concern to Norwegians in America and shared news from Norway, both big and small.

## 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.



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

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. American popular culture, such as films and music also became popular.

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

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