

They Came by the Thousands...

By James E. Casto
Photographs courtesy of the West Virginia Archives



STATES IMMIGRATION OFFICER AT PORT OF ARRIVAL

Arriving at Port of NEW YORK

JUL 8 1918

Name		Age	Sex	Color	Place of Birth	Country	City or town	Place of birth
1	John J. [illegible]	35	M	W	Belgium	Belgium	ST. MICHAEL	
2	John J. [illegible]	35	M	W	Belgium	Belgium	ST. MICHAEL	
3	John J. [illegible]	35	M	W	Belgium	Belgium	ST. MICHAEL	
4	John J. [illegible]	35	M	W	Belgium	Belgium	ST. MICHAEL	
5	John J. [illegible]	35	M	W	Belgium	Belgium	ST. MICHAEL	
6	John J. [illegible]	35	M	W	Belgium	Belgium	ST. MICHAEL	
7	John J. [illegible]	35	M	W	Belgium	Belgium	ST. MICHAEL	
8	John J. [illegible]	35	M	W	Belgium	Belgium	ST. MICHAEL	
9	John J. [illegible]	35	M	W	Belgium	Belgium	ST. MICHAEL	
10	John J. [illegible]	35	M	W	Belgium	Belgium	ST. MICHAEL	

(Preceding Page) Italian contingent marching in a parade, date unknown

1. The Gottlieb Fahrner family, Helvetia, photographed by Walter Aegerter. David Sutton Collection

2. Hungarian Band, Number 11 Mine, Gary; August 29, 1920. Coal Life Project Collection

3. Italian construction crew working on the Twin Mountain and Potomac Railroad, date unknown. Mary Alice Hanah Collection

4. A driver and two young female riders haul a load of sawmill lumber in the Swiss settlement of Helvetia. David Sutton Collection

5. Belgian gathering, South Charleston, circa 1909. Margaret Delforge Collection

West Virginia's IMMIGRANTS

America is a nation of immigrants, and West Virginia is no exception. Think about it: Unless your ancestors were Native Americans (once referred to as Indians), your family originally came here from somewhere else.

In the colonial era and during America's earliest decades, those who sailed across the Atlantic were mostly English, Scots-Irish, German, Dutch, French, or Spanish. Many were fleeing hunger or religious persecution in their home countries.

In the years stretching from the 1860s through the 1920s, however, these first settlers would be joined by thousands of arrivals from the countries of central, eastern, and southeastern Europe. Between 1900 and 1920 alone, 14.5 million of these newest immigrants came to America. That's 750,000 a year, or more than 2,000 a day.

Typically, these new arrivals were desperately poor, with little more than the clothes on their backs and a few treasured possessions crammed into a battered suitcase. For them, the price of America was \$65—\$40 for their passage somewhere deep below decks on a trans-Atlantic steamship and \$25 to show to the officials at Ellis Island as required proof that they wouldn't be a public charge in their newly adopted country.

Many of the new immigrants stayed in New York City or located in some other large northern city, but a number made their way to West Virginia.

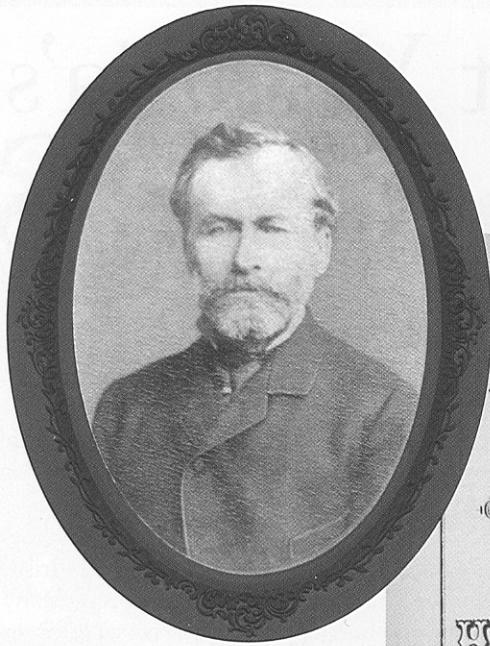
West Virginia's first settlers were Scots-Irish, sometimes mistakenly called *Scotch-Irish*. Protestants by birth, they—or perhaps their parents—came to this country to escape the bitter conflict between the Anglican English and the Irish Catholics.

Their numbers were few. In the decades leading up to the American Revolution, as many as 400,000 immigrants left England, Scotland, and Ireland for America. But by the momentous year of 1776, the western portion of Virginia was home to no more than 30,000 people, mostly located in the Eastern Panhandle or in the Ohio, Kanawha, and Greenbrier valleys.

By 1863, when West Virginia became a state, that figure had grown to 380,000, but most settlers were still found in only a few scattered communities. Much of the state remained a wilderness, home to only a few hardy souls. If West Virginia was to grow, it needed thousands of workers—to farm its fields, to build its railroads, to fell its timber, to work in its new factories, and, perhaps most of all, to mine its coal. And so, in 1864, as one of its first official actions, the new West Virginia Legislature authorized the appointment of a commissioner of immigration, charged with attracting newcomers to the state.

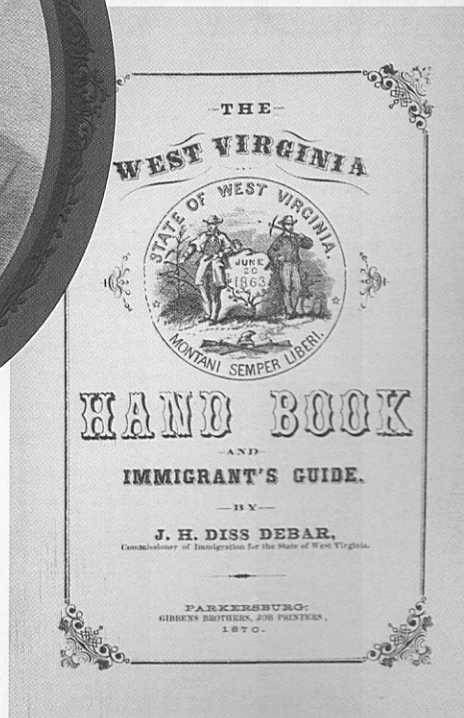
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▲ West Virginia's first commissioner of immigration Joseph Hubert Diss Debar

► Title page of Diss Debar's 1870 handbook for immigrants



Joseph H. Diss Debar, who was named to the post, was a talented artist who is perhaps best known as the designer of the Great Seal of West Virginia. Himself an immigrant, Diss Debar came to the United States from France in 1842. A land agent, he represented the claims of French veterans who had fought in the American Revolution and been rewarded with grants of land. Elected to the West Virginia Legislature, he not only wrote the legislation creating a commissioner of immigration, but he managed to get himself appointed to the post, saying he would serve without pay until the state was able to provide a salary.

In 1870, Diss Debar published *The West Virginia Hand Book and Immigrant's Guide*. In his preface to the volume, he wrote that since his appointment, he had distributed to other states and Europe "upward of 18,000 pamphlets, handbills and advertisements, exhibiting the various resources of the State, and our inducements to immigration." He further noted that "one of the results of these publications, was an amount of inquiry from all those countries, which an unsalaried officer can not be expected to answer satisfactorily by correspondence."

Hence, he continued, his decision to compile his *Hand Book*, intended to "secure the attention and confidence of that class of honest and enterprising workers in both hemispheres, whom we are most anxious to welcome as permanent settlers to our infant State."

There's no way to know how many "honest and enterprising workers" Diss Debar managed to attract to West Virginia. Whatever the number, it clearly wasn't enough, as

coal companies and other businesses, desperately short of workers, dispatched their own agents to New York to recruit immigrant laborers. Not surprisingly the agents painted the state in glowing terms and found a willing audience in the immigrant ranks.

The story behind the settling of the little town of Helvetia in Randolph County offers a perfect example of how immigrants were sometimes hoodwinked. A land agent lured a trainload of Swiss settlers with tales of a Swiss community in the hills. When the Swiss arrived at what they expected to be a thriving town, they found nothing but wilderness. Some were discouraged and left, but others stayed and built Helvetia, a remarkable community that today carefully treasures and nurtures its Swiss heritage.

Over the decades, countless Italians, Poles, Serbs, and Turks were put to work building railroads, cutting timber, and running sawmills. Other industries, too, benefited from immigrant labor. Even before the Civil War, German and Swiss immigrants traveling up the Mississippi and Ohio rivers found jobs in the iron works located in the Wheeling/Weirton area. English and Belgian craftsmen were recruited to work in the state's glass factories. Germans came to brew beer.

Talented Italian stonemasons crafted fine homes, buildings, and walls, many of which can still be seen.

But surely the biggest recruiter of immigrant labor was the coal industry. When the state's mines began to operate commercially in the late 1880s and 1890s, the operators hired experienced Welsh and English miners, yet they were unable to recruit them in sufficient numbers. By the early twentieth century, thousands more miners were needed.

In 1907, John Nugent left the ranks of the United Mine Workers and became the state's second commissioner of immigration. Unlike Diss Debar, Nugent was paid a salary—with money from the coal companies. That fact prompted union leaders to denounce Nugent as a turncoat and complain that his sole goal was to replace union workers with cheap, nonunion labor.

Whatever Nugent's agenda, his efforts at recruiting new miners proved a success. From 1900 to 1920, the state's mine workforce more than tripled, growing from 28,000 to 97,000. Something like 40 percent of these were White, native-born Americans. Another 20 percent or so were African Americans who had moved to West Virginia from the South, and the remaining thousands hailed from Italy, Hungary, Poland, Austria, Russia and a long list of other countries.

Bewildered by their new surroundings and seldom able to speak more than a few halting words of English, the immigrants were whisked away to West Virginia. With the mines

almost always located in remote, out-of-the way locations, operators had to build housing for the miners and their families, company stores, schools, and even churches. The worst of these were squalid “coal camps” of flimsy, tarpaper shacks, where the miners—native-born Whites, African Americans, and immigrants alike—were treated like little more than slave labor.

Other, more enlightened mine operators erected attractive little towns with comfortable housing, sidewalks, extensive recreation facilities, and other amenities, and accorded their miners far better treatment.

Housing in the coalfields was strictly segregated, with native-born Whites living in one section of town, African Americans in another, and immigrants in clusters of houses designated by their nationality and often christened with derisive nicknames such as “Colored Town,” “Little Italy,”

important to most immigrants. They were often wary of native-born Whites, African Americans, or those from other countries, and so they kept to themselves. Members of tight-knit immigrant communities seldom married outside their ethnic group. But their children showed no such reluctance, often to their parents’ displeasure. Those in the third generation generally were thoroughly assimilated into mainstream America. In the process, much of the language, customs, food, music, and folkways that their grandparents brought to West Virginia faded away, all but obscuring the rich legacy of tens of thousands of individuals who came to the state from foreign shores and, over the years, contributed so much to its economic and culture life.

In recent years, West Virginia has recorded small yearly gains or losses in population. But from the 1950s through the 1990s it suffered massive outmigration, as the state’s



◀ Lebanese immigrants Lillian and Joseph Skaff and son, Paul, pose in front of their new store on Court and Donnally streets in Charleston in 1931. St George Antiochian Orthodox-Paul Skaff Collection

or “Hunky Hollow.” How ironic that the miners worked side by side underground, but once they came out of the mine, they were expected to go their separate ways.

Not all the immigrant workers who came to West Virginia were imported by coal companies or other businesses. Many found their way here on their own, either because they had heard there were good jobs to be had or because they were invited to join family members who were already here.

Beginning in the 1880s, Jews came to West Virginia to escape anti-Jewish violence in Russia, Poland, Hungary, Latvia, and Lithuania. Most settled in the state’s growing cities, where many of them opened fledgling businesses. Many Greeks and Lebanese who came to West Virginia displayed a similar entrepreneurial spirit, opening restaurants and stores.

Whatever their nationality, family ties were tremendously

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James E. Casto is a retired Huntington newspaperman and the author of a half-dozen books on local and state history. His latest, *The Chesapeake & Ohio Railway, is a photo history of the C&O.*