

Fort Ontario

"Emergency refugee shelter" established in New York by the United States government in 1944.

In 1944 War Refugee Board director John Pehle and others began pressuring President Roosevelt to establish temporary shelters in the United States for European refugees. At first, due to opposition from the State and War departments, President Roosevelt dismissed the idea. However, during his reelection campaign later that year, he agreed to create one "emergency refugee shelter" in a former US army base in the upstate New York town of Oswego.

President Roosevelt's decision did not reflect a major change in US refugee policy. The shelter was to house no more than 1,000 refugees, who would return to Europe at war's end. These refugees were not even brought from Nazi-occupied territories; rather, they came from an internment camp in Italy, where their lives were not in immediate danger.

A group of 982 refugees arrived at Fort Ontario in August. They were not allowed to leave the shelter for school or work, and tensions rose between the different nationalities. By the winter, the refugees were extremely discouraged about their situation. At war's end, most of the refugees did not want to return "home," as stipulated by President Roosevelt. In December 1945, President Harry Truman agreed to let them remain in the US.