



## The Italian Immigrant Experience in America (1870-1920)

Curriculum Unit 99.03.06  
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The curriculum unit presented will be incorporated into the United States History II survey course that is required of all eleventh graders in the city of New Haven. The unit will focus on the Italian immigrant experience during the years 1870-1920. As the general population of Wilbur Cross High School is diverse, it is imperative that teachers embrace as many ethnic and racial groups as possible in the course of study. I believe that by studying the various groups students will learn not only about the differences in the cultures and backgrounds, but shared experiences as well.

In *A Larger Memory* by Ronald Takaki, it is noted that our grandparents are "worthy of scholarly attention... making choices as they left their homelands and settled in America. They helped to transform their adopted country as they became Americans." Takaki offers many personal stories that may be read and studied in the classroom. Students love to listen to and read personal accounts of immigrant experiences. I have enjoyed relating my own memories with them about growing up in an Italian-American household. Both my maternal and paternal grandparents came to America around the turn of the century passing through Ellis Island. I have told my students the stories that my grandparents told to me when I was a child. Every spring my class participates in a visit to Ellis Island and I show them the names of my grandparents on the wall of honor. America has become a nation of immigrants; persons of many nationalities, languages, customs and religion. To tell their story is also to tell the story of the United States. Oscar Handlin in *The Uprooted* begins his introduction "Once I thought to write a history of the immigrants in America. Then I discovered that the immigrants were American history."

I have divided this unit into five major categories: reasons Italians left their homeland, their crossing, experiences at Ellis Island, settlement, and discrimination.

### Objectives and Strategies

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**Students will investigate the reasons Italians left their homeland .** Between 1880 and 1920 over four million Italians were recorded as entering the United States. No other ethnic group has sent so many immigrants in such a short time. Prior to the 1870's only scattered thousands of Italians had come to areas outside of Europe to either North or South America. Up to 1900 most Italians had emigrated to either Argentina or Brazil. Those entering the United States were mostly male and many intended to return to Italy

after making some money. However, for various reasons many of them ended up staying in America.

(Daniels,p.188)

Much has been written about the suffering and discrimination encountered by the Italian immigrant in the United States, but this must be measured against what they left behind at home in Italy. The immigrant at this time left one thing behind and that was poverty. At home there was unemployment, and underemployment, high mortality, little or no medical care, little or no schooling, poor housing, semi-starvation, rigid class structure, and exploitation. (Mangione,p.25.) A very dismal picture, to say the least. For the average Italian migration was an opportunity for liberation; the hope for a better life. After all wasn't the United States supposed to be the land of opportunity where the "streets were paved with gold?" This would be a good time for teachers to stop and ask students what would motivate them to leave their country of birth? There are always students in my class who are foreign born and are willing to relate their stories to other members of the class. This is done best in small groups where you assign one student to be the recorder and one student as their facilitator to report back to the entire class the findings of the group. Students with personal experiences will feel more comfortable in a smaller group setting.

The year 1871 is considered a starting point for mass migration from southern Italy. In this year, Italy had become a unified nation with a democratic constitution, however, the south had not reaped any economic benefit from this development. Conditions had actually gotten worse. Taxes increased and yet, nothing had been done to stimulate the stagnant economy of the south. The land was not looked after properly. It was not irrigated, trees were not planted to stop erosion and floods, and little was done to improve the quality of the soil. As the land grew poorer so did the peasants. Disease took its toll. Epidemics of cholera and malaria spurred thousands of southern Italians into leaving the country. Along with disease came a mysterious parasite that destroyed most of the grapevines in southern Italy. As a result, thousands of farmers found themselves without the means to make a living. Traditionally, the south of Italy had always been worse off than central and northern Italy. By the turn of the century it was barely possible to subsist. Most of the land was owned by a few wealthy nobles who lived in the north and allowed overseers to run their estates. In many townships water was a luxury. Roads and streets were impassable in bad weather. Winter was short, but it was harsh and the hovels had no heat. Summers were fiercely hot and accompanied by drought. (Mangione, p.27) The peasants were offered terms similar to the sharecroppers of the south after the Civil War. Teachers might ask students to research the experiences of sharecroppers in the United States after the Civil War and see if a comparison can be made to the farming peasants of Sicily. Then ask students to diagram the cycle of sharecropping. What they will probably find is that sharecroppers in the south after the war were supposed to have a chance to climb the economic ladder, but by the time they had shared their crops and paid their debts, they rarely had any money left. A sharecropper frequently became tied to one plantation, having no choice but to work until his debts were paid. Sicilians did not have the opportunity to climb any social ladder, for you had to be born into a noble class. Hard work made no difference.

The Italian peasant was not the only one who suffered from the general poverty of the south. Skilled workers could no longer find employment. Thousands of men left their families behind to find work in America. Both my grandfathers left Italy at age 16. They hoped to find work in America as stonemasons and send money home to their families as soon as possible. Like many young men they had learned their trade by working along side their fathers at a very early age.

The majority of immigrants around the turn of the century were males between the ages of 24 and 45. Many expected to stay in the United States only long enough to earn money to improve their family situation.

Others intended to send for their families as soon as they could. (Amfitheatrof, p.158) Ask students if they can imagine leaving their parents and extended family and going to a new land. Have them think about the emotional drain on them when they would part from their loved ones; the feelings of isolation that they would encounter ;along with alienation in a new land where they would be unfamiliar with the language and the customs of the people. Teachers might suggest that they create a fictional journal recording the experiences of the immigrants during the crossing and immediate settlement. It would be helpful if students conducted research from first person histories which have been authored by Salvatore John La Gumina, *The Immigrant Speaks* and Ronald Takaki, *A Larger Memory*. Both selections offer first hand accounts of Italian immigrants from a variety of occupations and social stations. Another option for a classroom activity might include the creation of an imaginary classroom that includes the following students: Patrick O'Brien, Elpedio Vitale, Rachael Lemsky, Betty Washington, Jane Choi, and Carmen Rodriguez. If these students were asked to identify their backgrounds, they might answer, Irish, Italian, Jewish, African -American, Chinese, and Mexican. Given an assignment to learn about their family histories they might include the following reports, Patrick O'Brien's great-great-grandfather left Ireland as a result of the Great Potato Famine that occurred in Ireland in 1845, Elpedio Vitale's great-great grandfather left Caserta, Italy to find work in America as a stone cutter, Rachel Lemsky's great-great grandmother fled Russia in 1901 to escape the religious pogroms inflicted on her people by the Czar's Cossacks. Betty Washington traces her heritage five generations removed from slave ancestors in South Carolina. Jane Choi's great-great-grandfather came to California from China in the 1860's to work on the Central Pacific Railroad, and finally Carmen Rodriguez's great- grandfather was recruited to work as a farm laborer during the second world war. These imaginary family histories illustrate a wide variety of circumstances over a period of 150 years. After doing their research students should report their findings back to the class for discussion on common experiences, as well as the different kinds of decisions the immigrant groups faced.

**Students will examine the conditions the immigrants experienced during the crossing** . Major improvements in transatlantic travel were achieved by the 1870's when larger ships entered the trade and steam powered vessels which were safer and faster outnumbered sailing vessels. Since the majority of the Italian immigrants crossed the Atlantic after 1870, their journey was shorter than those who had crossed in the 1830's. The average crossing in the early 1800's was around 40 days depending on the weather, and the conditions aboard the ship were deplorable. By 1900 the average crossing took one week. Conditions improved somewhat, but they were by no means easy. The average steerage fare at this time was thirty dollars. Rarely allowed on deck, the third class or steerage passengers spent most of their time crowded together, sleeping in the same clothes alongside their luggage because there was no room for it elsewhere. They usually were provided with soup or stew. They had to wash themselves with salt water which sometimes caused skin irritations and infections. (Mangione p.29) Students should be encouraged to research and compare the conditions aboard ship faced by the immigrant in the early part of the 1800's with those who arrived in the later 1800's. An excellent source for the students to use is *The Uprooted* by Oscar Handlin. He offers a detailed account of the crossing in easy to read language. Or students upon visiting Ellis Island might listen to audio tapes compiled as part of the Ellis Island Oral History Project. This project included first hand accounts of immigrants traveling to America between 1892 and 1954. It includes over 1500 taped and transcribed interviews of actual Ellis Island immigrants and staff all of which are available to the public for research. Immigrants talk about their reasons for leaving their country of origin, their journey, processing, and their adjustment to living in the United States. These interviews can be obtained in the Library at the Ellis Island Immigration Museum.

Teachers might want to consider showing the section of the mini series *Ellis Island*. This film recreates the immigrant experience of an Irish woman, an Italian man and a Jewish man by creating fictional characters

based on real experiences. It is an excellent re-enactment of what it was like crossing the Atlantic, as well as the processing experience at Ellis Island. The film was shot on location at Ellis Island before it had reopened to the public in 1986.

On a positive note, for the first time in their lives, Italians from different parts of Italy found themselves forced to mix with each other in the crowded steerage sections. There were Neapolitans and Sicilians from the various provinces of Abruzzi, Apulia, Basilicata, and Calabria, as well as those from the northern provinces. They all spoke different dialects and sometimes could not be understood. At home the Italians from the North looked down on the Southerners because of their lack of education and social status. And yet on the ship, crossing the Atlantic, these differences disappeared, as they clung together once they realized they would all be on an equal footing in America.

**Students will become knowledgeable about the treatment and the experiences of the immigrants while at Ellis Island** . About three-fourths of the immigrants who entered the United States between 1892 and 1924 went through the Ellis Island immigration station, which was built on a small island in New York Harbor. It was originally suggested that an immigration facility be built on Liberty Island, where the Statue of Liberty sits, but opposition from nativists ended that effort. Nativists did not want the Statue of Liberty "tainted" by the immigrant masses. (McLaughlin&Lightman,p.59)

Shipping companies made large profits by carrying "human cargo" to the United States. They would bring cotton, wood, and crop cargoes to Europe and on the return trip bring immigrants to America. The federal government required the shipping companies to begin the inspection process before an immigrant entered America. If an immigrant had to be sent back to his country of origin, it would be up to the shipping company to bear the cost. Before leaving Europe an accurate listing of each passenger along with information about each person had to be entered on a formal list. This was the ship's manifest, and was always used by the captain as a record of inventory of their cargo. It now became the document of record for all persons coming through Ellis Island. Students might be interested in viewing the original ship's records. These are on display at Ellis Island museum.

As soon as the immigrants landed in New York, a New York State quarantine inspector boarded the ship and had to approve the passengers before they entered. Next a U.S. medical inspector had to approve all native born Americans as well as first and second class passengers. These people would then move directly into New York. All steerage passengers were taken in barges to Ellis Island for processing. The immigrants disembarked with all of their belongings and they were tagged with a number that designated which ship they had traveled on. Their first view of the inside of the building was the baggage room where they were told to check their belongings. They then were told to walk single file up the stairway to the second floor Registry Room. In this way they could quickly be observed by medical personnel for any obvious deformities or handicaps. Whenever a case aroused suspicion ,a large X would be marked on their coat followed by another symbol such as L for lameness, CT for Trachoma, S for senility, G for goiter, H for heart, Pg for pregnancy and so on. Next ,came a test to determine mental deficiency, for this could be grounds for deportment. Immigrants who showed no signs of mental or physical deficiencies were then sent to be questioned by immigration inspectors, many of whom could speak the same language as the immigrant. Answers to questions must match those original answers given to the ship's captain before leaving Europe. The time period did alter the types of questions asked by the inspector. Questions as simple as "what is your name?" "How are you going to support yourself?" gave way to "Are you an anarchist or a polygamist?" (Yans-McLaughlin and Lightman,p.56.) At this time I usually split up the class into groups and ask them to compile a list of questions they feel would be necessary for the immigrant to answer before gaining entry into America. Students also need to keep in mind the time

period for immigration that they are dealing with, for this may influence the type of questions they ask. An excellent source for a completed detailed explanation of the procedure can be found in *Ellis Island and the Peopling of America* by Virginia Yans-McLaughlin and Marjorie Lightman. Students might also benefit by creating human time line of key immigration laws. They should be able to explain the law as well as the impact it had on American society.

The entire procedure at Ellis Island might take three hours or more if everything went smoothly. However, the name Ellis Island often struck fear in the hearts of the Italians, for they had heard stories of families being sent back or separated for various reasons; thus, the nickname the "Isle of Tears." Ask students to compile a list of possible reasons that they would not allow people to enter into the U.S. during the time period 1870-1920. This will make for a lively class discussion, for students will often look at the problems of today and apply them to the turn of the century. Unfortunately, some of the concerns are still the same. Of the immigrants processed on Ellis Island, most of them went through successfully in a single day.

**Students will become aware of the early experiences of the immigrant upon settling in America .**

Once the immigrants set foot in the United States they had an urgent financial problem. Most had come with a minimal amount of money; some with as little as seventeen dollars. Some Italians were traveling beyond New York city and already had purchased railroad tickets to places where they expected to find work or to live with relatives or friends. My grandmother often told stories of waking up as a child in the morning, only to find a roomful of newly arrived Ellis Island immigrants smelling of disinfectant. She said her parents never turned anyone away, always making room for one more.

Most of the immigrants settled in the cities where they could find work in the factories. There was hardly a city of any size in America that did not have a section designated as Little Italy. Italians would look to settle in these areas, for it was here that they felt most comfortable. They could speak their own language and be understood, and they could eat food familiar to them. This resulted in the formation of very definite ethnic communities. The ideals, language, and customs of the Italians were preserved because of these neighborhoods. Little Italies could be found in major cities like Hartford, New Haven, Waterbury, New Britain, Torrington etc., where they were sealed off from the wider American society. This isolation served to nurture and maintain the Italian ways of life (food, language, close-knit family organization and religious practices) Students should be allowed to visit Little Italy in New York city which offers the best and most varied selection of Italian cuisine on the East coast.

New Haven's Italian colony centered around Wooster Square. It was at first a neighborhood for the Irish. There were many large mansions in the area. However, after the Civil War, industry began flourishing and factories moved into the area. Landlords turned the remaining homes into multiple dwellings which became overcrowded and neglected. Italians in the area went to work at the Candee Rubber Company, which was the first factory to hire them. Later J.B. Sargent Co. began to hire Italians. The owner of the Sargent Company was married to a woman of Italian descent.(Capobianco&Gould,p.75)

For the most part the Italian immigrant was ignorant of the laws and customs of America, and without much opportunity for learning about them except from what he observed. His contact with Americans was with those who probably exploited his labor for as little pay as possible; or with his landlord who took as much as he could get in rent money. Students will examine the padrone system which allowed for Italian laborers to find work throughout the United States. The padroni or employment agent furnished contractors, longshoremen, miners, and railroads with the necessary labor. He would sometimes work on commission and exercised a great deal of control over the Italian laborer. The immigrant worker did not have to be afraid to

travel. The padrone would make sure that he was escorted to the work site and would maintain close vigilance over him until the job was done. Overall, the padroni played a vital role in stimulating and directing the Italians in America. He insured that once the laborer came here he would have a job. Unfortunately, many padroni sought to exploit and enslave their own countrymen. These were the ones who cared nothing for the poor Italian laborer and did them real injustice. As Italians became more self-sufficient they relied less and less on the padroni. (Capobianco & Gould, p.77) A good source for students who wish to further investigate the padroni system can be found in *The Children of Columbus* by Erik Amfitheatrof. He describes the worst of the padroni as "flesh peddlers" who recruited peasants from southern Italy, stuck them in the disgusting tenements (all in the same room) and took over 60% of their pay as his commission. The padrone system flourished for two reasons; one was the immigrant did not speak English and could easily be taken advantage of and two was fear of living in a large city. Once the immigrant learned how to speak English he was able to fend for himself. As the years passed Italians depended less on the padroni, but they continued to settle in those areas originally opened up by the padroni.

Italians upon first arriving in New York city were forced to live in the worst section of New York referred to as Mulberry Bend. Jacob Riis, a police reporter for the New York Tribune and an immigrant himself, described the horrors of these tenements in his book *How The Other Half Lives*. Students should be encouraged to obtain a copy of this book, not only for its prose, but for the photographs he took of the immigrants living in these deplorable conditions. Students have always found these photos to be unbelievably compelling. He reports "one room 12x12 with five families living in it, comprising twenty persons of both sexes and all ages, with only two beds, without partitions, screen, chair or table." This is an example of the worst type of living conditions, but the constant numbers of immigrants that needed a place to live in New York city allowed for rents to be at an all time high at the turn of the century. In the tenements, it would not be unusual for an immigrant to pay ten to twelve dollars a month rent for two to three rooms. This would have to come out of his average monthly wage of thirty dollars. Life in the tenements was grim. The plaster was always falling down; there was no drinking water for days, pipes froze in the winter; bedbugs were commonplace. They suffered from oppressive heat in the summer, rats, flies, sickness, and the stink of cats. (Handlin, p.133) Students often shudder when they read the descriptions of these tenements. How could places like this be allowed to exist, they ask? Then they mention the projects in New Haven. Can they really compare to these tenements? What about building codes and violations of the housing law? These questions make for a lively discussion in the classroom.

**Students will realize that Italians were subject to prejudice and discrimination** . The hostility that greeted the Italian immigrants grew out of a rising anxiety about large scale immigration. This anxiety began to influence a political response by the middle of the 19th century. In the 1840's and 1850's the Know-Nothing Party characterized immigrants as paupers and called for a drastic curtailment in citizenship privileges. The most common proposal was to require a twenty one year period for naturalization and bar the foreign born from holding any but minor local offices.

Most Italians who came to America at the turn of the century were farmers. However, they did not choose to farm in America for a variety of reasons. Students should split into groups and brainstorm possible reasons why Italian farmers chose not to or could not farm in America. There were many reasons for this. First, was financial—they had to make money as quickly as they could and farming requires time. Secondly, land in America was expensive. All of the free land offered in various parts of the west under the Homestead Act was no longer available. Another possible reason is that farming reminded them of the miserable conditions they had left behind. Finally, farming in America was too isolated. Neighbors were too far apart. They were afraid of being separated from other Italians and that leads us to the next issue. For some Italians, neighborhoods became their permanent destination. They were afraid to venture beyond the familiar streets They were

weary of strangers and they had a very limited English vocabulary. Italians settled among their own kind even if it meant living in a dark and dirty city tenement. They had been warned not to trust Americans; that Americans called them "dirty" names like "wop," "guinea," and "dago." They had heard many stories from relatives about how they were not welcome. Some stores refused to sell groceries to Italians, or rent homes to them in the hopes that they would just leave. Immigrants would probably have found life easier in America if they had learned the language. Unfortunately, they had no time to go to night school after working a 12 to 14 hours a day. And so it became a vicious circle; the Italians remaining ignorant of the American ways and the Americans not taking the time to understand the new immigrants. Students might be interested in drawing comparisons to the problems faced by the immigrants of the nineties to see if there are any shared experiences. Students might draw up a series of common questions to ask foreign students at Wilbur Cross High. We have a rather large ESOL program and have a variety of students from many different parts of the world.

Italians were also not welcomed by the trade union movement. The unions were fearful that the European immigrant would be willing to work for just about any amount of money. They felt this would be a threat to the American worker. "We keep out pauper-made goods, why not keep out the pauper?" stated an add placed by the American Federation of a Labor. They were referring to the protective tariffs. In fear that immigrants would take away their jobs, slogans like "America for American" began to appear. The American Protective Association was organized to close the doors to all Roman Catholics using the argument that the pope would end up ruling America. Curiously, this was one of the strategies used against John Kennedy in the 1960 presidential campaign. As we know, Kennedy holds the distinction of being the only Roman Catholic President. Students might find it interesting to research other examples of politically motivated religious bigotry that has occurred in our history.

The unfriendly attitude of the American press toward the Italian immigrants only served to isolate them from mainstream society. As the numbers of Italians entering New York swelled each day, some newspapers started to print angrier words such as "a herd of steerage slime" In 1882, Thomas Bailey Aldrich published a poem in the Atlantic Monthly that began "Wide open and unguarded stand our gates, and then through them passes a wild motley throng." Students should be given a copy of the poem in its entirety and asked to interpret what Aldrich was trying to say. Then ask students to read a copy of the poem "The New Colossus" by Emma Lazarus that is inscribed on the base of the Statue of Liberty. Ask students to contrast the meanings of these two selections.

An example of one of the worst cases of discrimination and violence against Italians was the situation that occurred in New Orleans in 1891. Many Sicilians had settled in this area and were employed as fishermen or farmers. The police chief of this city had been investigating reports of what he considered to be "mafia" activity in the city. He was assassinated by unknown persons and the backlash against the Italian community was an hysterical one. Suspicion fell on the Italians in the community and ten were arrested and put on trial for the crime. There never seemed to be any doubt that this was not going to be an impartial trial. The mayor of the city had made an announcement to the press that "We must teach these people a lesson they will not forget for all time." All ten of the men were acquitted. However, a mob of 5000 angry New Orleanians stormed the jail and shot 11 men to death in their cells. One of the men was being held for a smaller crime. Afterward, a spokesperson for the mob passed the blame to the jury for having acquitted these ten men in the first place! Students might find it interesting to investigate in more detail the facts of this case. They could even write a script and present a mock trial for the class The New York Times condemned the act as "cowardly". However, they called the Sicilians "sneaky and descendants of bandits and assassins who have transported to this country the lawless passion, cut-throat practices, and oath bound societies." Students

might also be assigned to investigate the power of the press in this trial. What role did they play? What were the local newspapers reporting about this case?

This case caused a rift between the American government and the Italian government that was not settled for one year. The Italian government withdrew its minister from Washington and broke diplomatic relations with the United States. Eight of the murdered men were naturalized American citizens and three were Italian citizens. Not until the United States agreed to pay \$25,000 to the families of the three non-American victims were relations resumed.

Another issue that should be dealt with is anarchism. Anarchism had deep roots in Italy and some Italian laborers had already converted. Others acquired anarchist views in America. Two of the most famous Italian anarchists were Nicola Sacco and Barotolomeo Vanzetti, a fish peddler and a shoemaker who were living in Massachusetts. They were charged with the murder of a guard at a shoe factory that they had allegedly robbed. Both men were known anarchists. They were found guilty of the crime and questions arose as to whether they were tried on their views as anarchists, as well as the fact that they were Italian immigrants, or on the evidence. There were witnesses at the trial who swore that Vanzetti was delivering eels on the day of the robbery. Both men were found guilty and were put to death. Questions still remain today concerning the facts of the case. Students might also enjoy recreating the courtroom issues in this case and have the class decide whether or not these men should have been found guilty of the crimes. Students might also consider-is this jury nullification in reverse?. Recent trials can be investigated where juries have come in with not-guilty verdicts as a protest against racism.

The most controversial aspect of the Italian -American experience involves crime or organized crime. The persistence of the image of the Italian as a criminal or a gangster has been encouraged both by the print , television and movie world. Whether it was a "Black hand" assassin with a stiletto, to a prohibition gangster, the notion of an international mafia centered in Palermo, dominating all Italian crime seems ridiculous. Nevertheless, this idea has been perpetuated. How many times have Italians been asked if they are in the Mafia? Students find this topic fascinating and they should be encouraged to research the true story of the origin of the term mafia, in order to end the mystique. Italians have been scapegoats and their participation in the political process was low because they were late to arrive.

The final insult for Italians came about as a result of the National Origins Act of 1924. Commonly known as the quota, this set severe limits on the numbers of immigrants that could enter the United States in any given year. A limit of 2% based on the 1890 census severely curtailed the numbers from southern and eastern Europe while favoring those immigrants wishing to enter the U,S, from northern and western Europe. Students should investigate the underlying causes for the passage of this act and be able to report them back to the class. Students should uncover the following information. Once World War I came to a close, Americans began to turn inward. The nativist spirit grew along with a growing hysteria that came to be known as the Red Scare. Immigrants became suspect to having communist sympathies and anyone with a foreign sounding last name was at risk for discrimination and possible deportation. The press fed into this frenzy by writing about the "large" number of immigrants coming to America from war torn Europe, even though statistics do not back up this claim.(Daniels,p,281) Americans feared that immigrants would take their jobs for lower wages. Around 154,00 immigrants were allowed to enter the U.S. under the quota system. Visas set aside for British, Irish, and Scandinavian took up 76% of the allotted number. The remaining numbers were divided up among the following groups: Poles -6,524, Italians-5,802. Dutch-3,153, French-3,086, Czechs-2,874, Russians-2,712, Swiss-1,707, Austrians-2,413, Hungarians-869, Yugoslavs-845, Finns 569, Portuguese-440, Lithuanians 386, Rumanians-377, and Greeks-307. No other group was allowed more than 300 people. Strict guidelines were



enforced that restricted the kinds of people who were allowed entry. First claims were given to parents of citizens and then skilled agriculturalists, (Archdeacon,p..175)

Students should research in the Congressional Record, speeches made by Congressman Johnson. Johnson was the chief author of the 1924 quota act. In 1927 Johnson was justifying the passage of the act when he wrote ;"Today, instead of a nation descended from generations of freemen bred to a knowledge of principles and practice of self government, of liberty under the law, we have a heterogeneous population, no small proportion of which is sprung from races that throughout the centuries have known no liberty at all... In other words our capacity to maintain our cherished institutions stands diluted by a stream of alien blood, with all of its misconceptions respecting the relationships of the governing power to the governed...(Daniels,p.283) ... Ask students what Johnson was trying to say. What does he mean when he uses the phrase "...diluted by a stream of alien blood...." ? Teachers might ask students to draw comparisons between Johnson's ideas and Adolf Hitler's intentions to create a master race.

## Lesson Plan One "U.S. Immigration policy in Historical Context, 1788-1986

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**Objective** : Students will examine and understand the significance of the laws that have influenced the entry and exclusion of persons from the United States.

**Procedure** : In this activity students will review the series of immigration laws between the years 1788 -1986. Before class begins the teacher should write each of the events listed below on a separate large index card. The laws are listed in chronological order. Begin the activity by explaining to students that their assignment is in two parts; first, they are about to create a human time line of the laws listed below. Randomly distribute the cards. Direct students to read the information on their card. They are responsible for placing the law in its correct chronological order. Second, they must place the law in historical context. They should think about any circumstances including famine, depression, war, technological advances, and industrialization that might have influenced the course of immigration policy. Students will have to do some research from their textbook, *The Americans*, in order to write a description of what life was like in the U.S. politically, economically. and socially at the time of their immigration law. Teachers should designate starting and ending points for the human time line. Direct the rest of the class to decide among themselves where along the line they should stand to create an accurate chronology. Students should then report to the class the law, as well as place it in historical context.

Materials Used: 5x7 index cards, textbook *The Americans*

The following time line presents a brief glimpse into the key immigration laws and events from 1788-1986.

1788 The U.S. Constitution restricts the presidency to native born citizens and gives Congress the authority to establish a uniform rule on naturalization.

1798 Alien Act, an attempt to control French radicals after the revolution, stipulates residency and deportation ; regulation repealed 1801

1808 U.S. forbids the importation of slaves

1812 Ship's captains must provide a list of all passengers including age, sex, occupation, country of origin and

deaths on route

1875 No prostitutes or convicts allowed to enter the U.S.

1876 U.S. Supreme Court declares state laws on immigration unconstitutional

1882 Chinese Exclusion Act

1882 No lunatics, idiots, convicts, or public charges allowed to enter the U.S.

1885 No contract laborers allowed to enter the U.S.

1892 Ellis Island opens. other immigration stations set up in Boston, Philadelphia, and San Francisco

1903 Secretary of Labor and Commerce assume control over immigration until 1940; anarchists excluded

1907 Head tax on immigrants raised; No persons with physical or mental defects, tuberculosis, children not accompanied by a parent.

1917 Immigrants over 16 must be literate in a language; virtually all Asians banned,

1921 Quotas established

1924 National Origins Law (Johnson-Reed Act)

1929 Quotas of 1924 are made permanent

1939 Refugee bill defeated that would allow admittance of 20,000 children from Nazi Germany

1940 Attorney General given control of immigration

1942 Bracero program begun

1943 Repeal of Chinese Exclusion Laws

1946 War Brides Act

1948 Displaced Persons Act

1950 Internal Security Act

1952 The Immigration and Nationality Act (McCarran-Walter Act)

1957 Refugee Escape Act

1960 Cuban refugee program

1964 Bracero program ended

1965 Immigration and Nationality Act

1975 Indochina Refugees Resettlement Program

1976 Immigration and Nationality Act amendments

1980 Refugee Act

1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act

## Lesson Plan Two Immigration-Terms

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**Objective** : Students will become familiar with and understand vocabulary that is associated with immigration.

**Procedure** : Teachers will distribute the meanings of vocabulary associated with immigration. Students are to take the list home and study them for homework. The next day teachers should divide the class into four to five teams. Teachers will then review the terms by playing jeopardy. The team with the highest number of points should receive a reward to be decided upon by the classroom teacher.

Material Used Vocabulary list on immigration

Immigration Terms:

1. The crossing- refers to the passage of immigrants by ship by way of the Atlantic Ocean.
2. steerage- the cargo holds below a ship's waterline; many immigrants traveled in the steerage class where by the end of the 1800's ticket prices had been reduced to \$15
3. Statue of Liberty- a gift from France to the U.S. in 1886; became a symbol of hope and opportunity for the New Immigrants.
4. "The New Colossus"- a poem inscribed on the base of the Statue of Liberty. Written by Emma Lazarus, it serves as a welcoming message for immigrants.
5. The Golden Door- an expression that referred to the U.S. as the land of economic opportunity.
6. Angel Island- in San Francisco Bay. Between 1910-1940 about 50,000 Chinese immigrants arriving on the West Coast passed through this island. In contrast to the procedure at Ellis Island, processing at Angel Island included harsh questioning and a long detention.
7. Ellis Island- located in New York harbor; all immigrants traveling steerage class and docking in New York harbor were processed into America by way of Ellis Island .
8. Ellis Island disinfectant- immigrants and their clothes were sprayed for lice with this chemical before being allowed to leave Elis Island.
9. runners- people from various ethnic groups who met the immigrants at Ellis Island; because they spoke the same language as the newly arrived immigrant they were usually trusted; they would find work and a

temporary place to stay for the immigrant; many times they took advantage of them.

10. Baggage Room-located at Ellis Island. Immigrants arrived first in this room and were told to check their belongings while they were being processed

11. Registry Room-located on the second floor at Ellis Island; medical exams were performed here as well as intelligence tests; gathering of personal information by inspectors.

12. Detention- referred to being kept at Ellis Island for a variety of reasons such as medical or legal, or waiting to be picked up by a family member; women traveling alone would not be allowed to leave the island without an escort.

13. Trachoma- a highly contagious eye disease; grounds for denial of entry into the U.S.(even today).

14. sweatshops- workers experienced deplorable conditions; overworked, underpaid, poor ventilation and hazardous conditions.

15, piecework- workers paid by what they produce each day and not by the hour.

16.melting pot- a mixture of people of different cultures and races who blended together by abandoning their native languages and customs.

17. nativism- overt favoritism toward native-born Americans.

18. tenements- apartments that were rundown; poor ventilation and lighting; overcrowded conditions

19. neighborhoods- immigrants settled in areas near their own people; thus, areas sprang up like Little Italy, Little Warsaw, Chinatown, etc.

20. Old Immigrants- people from northern and western Europe who were usually skilled workers and literate; came in the early 1800's.

21. New Immigrants- people from southern and eastern Europe who came to the U.S. in the late 1800s; usually unskilled workers and illiterate.

22. contadini- Italian peasantry

23. mafie- small bands of bandits in western Sicily, originally formed as a self help system of retaliation against the French and Spanish rulers who kept the people oppressed and illiterate.

24. padrone- boss or leader and was the name given to the work agents who hired Italian laborers and shipped them to the United States on a contract basis.

## Lesson Plan Three "A Walk through Ellis Island"

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**Objective** : Students will be able to understand the experiences of the New Immigrants at Ellis Island.

**Procedure** : In this activity students will review the series of key events that immigrants experienced at Ellis Island. Teachers need to set the stage for the students. This activity may be done in two different ways; a visual presentation or a scripted play or presentation. Remind students that the immigrants at Ellis Island had already experienced a long and difficult journey before arriving in New York harbor. But their journey was not quite over. Immigrants needed to proceed through a set immigration process before they could set foot in America. For the visual presentation the class should be divided into three groups. Each group will present a different aspect of the Ellis Island experience. These groups are then to present their findings in a poster presentation that includes written as well as visual material. Then they are to present their findings back to the class. Another way of meeting the objective of this lesson is to have the students present a scripted play where specific roles have been assigned. It is helpful if this is done with the cooperation of the English teachers. Suggestions for possible roles include: immigration official, medical examiners, legal inspectors, runners, and

immigrants from various countries in southern and eastern Europe.

### **Group One Immediate Arrival**

Students should take the role of the first immigration officials that meet the immigrants at Ellis Island. Teachers should share the following information with this group. The ferry landed in a slip next to the main Ellis Island building. A gangplank was put down and a man was at the bottom shouting that men should go one way and women and children the other. The immigration official would examine them for admission. The newcomers came off their ship with their baggage. Their outer garments were tagged with their manifest number from the steamship, a card often seen in photographs. After they walked into the building they went directly to the Baggage Room. where they were told to check their belongings. Many chose to carry their belongings with them because they were afraid of theft.

### **Group Two The Medical Inspection**

Students will think of themselves as medical officers. Teachers should share the following information with this group. It is their job to observe the immigrants as they walk single file up the grand staircase that led to the second floor Registry Room. As they made their way upstairs, medical officers observed their movements in what became known as the six second exam. They were looking for any obvious deformities or medical problems. Experienced inspectors were able to take in six details in one glance; namely, the scalp, face, hands, neck, gait and general condition. If anything unusual was noted, the immigrant would be stopped and a closer examination would be done. Next, came a more formal inspection. One of the most famous exams was for the eye disease known as trachoma. Examination was done with a buttonhook, a metal instrument used to button gloves. It was used to pull the eyelid back to exam for signs of this infection. Immigrants with medical problems were identified by marking their outer garments with white chalk. Abbreviations were used for the various problems, H for heart problems, Pg for pregnancy, E for eye problems, L for lameness . The intelligence of the immigrants was tested due to laws that had been passed excluding "idiots, imbeciles or morons and other mentally deficient persons." Students should be told that it was not always easy for medical examiners to test for mental deficiency. Students should be reminded that answers to questions asked by examiners might indicate just being stressed and nervous rather than from mental deficiency. It was often

times very difficult to make the correct diagnosis. Immigrants who had obvious symptoms of mental or physical problems were sent to the examination room. Here, they would receive a more detailed examination. If they passed the examination they would be sent back to join the main group, If they did not pass, they would be held on the island in separate dormitories until they were cured so they could enter the United States. Immigrants not cleared for entry were deported back to their country of origin.

### **Group Three The Legal Inspection**

Students must imagine they are about to question the immigrants about their personal life. After the medical inspection, the legal inspectors asked a series of questions already posed to the immigrants by the shipping companies. The inspectors asked the same kinds of questions to see if the answers matched.

The inspector would be assisted by interpreters when needed and a registry clerk recorded their responses. Immigrants were told that it was to their advantage to show letters from friends and relatives already living in the U.S. The questioning only lasted two to three minutes, but to those involved it probably seemed like forever. Immigrants who gave answers that were questionable were then sent to a special inquiry board. The boards of inquiry were independent tribunals. Their decisions were final and not subject to court review. Inconsistent responses might result in further examination. The objective was to exclude people who might become public charges, act immorally, or cause social unrest. The following questions are from Do People Grow on Trees by Ira Wolfman. These were typical questions asked by inspectors:

1. What is your name?
2. How old are you?
3. Are you married or single
4. What is your calling or occupation?
5. Are you able to read or write?
6. What is your nationality?
7. Where was your last residence?
8. Which U.S. seaport have you landed in?
9. What is your final destination in the U.S.?
10. Do you have a ticket to your final destination?
11. Did you pay for your passage over? If not, who did?
12. Do you have much money with you? More than \$30.? How much less? More?
13. Are you going to join a relative? What relative? Name ?Address?
14. Have you ever been to the U.S. before?
15. Have you ever been in prison? in a poorhouse or supported by charity?
16. Are you a polygamist?
17. Are you under contract, expressed or implied to perform labor in the U.S.?
18. What is the condition of your health?
19. Are you deformed or crippled? .

## Lesson Plan Four How did my family and I get here?

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**Objective** : Students will become aware of the various kinds of migration throughout history.

**Procedure** : Ask students to examine their own family background by questioning various members of their family. Tell them to try and interview the oldest living person they know. Those students that are not able to answer questions about their own family's past should act as interviewers or researchers of another student or family in the community. Once the research is complete, students should chart the material they have found along with a family tree that indicates their migration history? The questions listed below are just to be used as a guide to help students construct their own family history. After research is complete students should compare their findings to determine if there is any common theme among them or were their experiences totally unique.

Suggested questions that students might ask:

1. Who was the first in your family to live in another country? When was this?
2. What were the reasons for this person coming to America?
3. Did they know anyone already living in the U.S.? any relatives here?
4. What type of work did they do when they first arrived in America?
5. How much were they paid for this first job?
6. Did they speak English? If not, did they find this to be a problem?
7. What type of work did they do later on?
8. Were men treated any differently than women?

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This book provides a collection of diaries, letters, and personal accounts of people from a variety of ethnic backgrounds.

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A comprehensive textbook providing information from diverse points of view.

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