

# A NATION OF IMMIGRANTS

## THE REALITIES OF LIFE AND LABOR Basic Questions About Immigration

*What are the connecting threads of the immigration experience in America?  
How is each experience unique?*

(1–2 days)

**NEW YORK STATE SOCIAL STUDIES CORE CURRICULUM, GRADE 11:  
UNITED STATES HISTORY AND GOVERNMENT**  
<http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/ciai/socst/pub/sscore2.pdf>

### AIM

Students will review

- reasons why people immigrate to the United States
- analyze primary sources
- review the immigrant experience
- analyze the similarities and differences regarding various immigrant experiences

### ACTIVITIES

#### I. Opening activity — Basic immigration question

Ask students the following questions

1. Why do people choose to leave their homes and journey to a new life in a new country?  
(Possible answers: war, persecution, better life, education, economic opportunity)
2. What conditions do people leave behind when they immigrate?  
(Possible answers are similar to the ones above)
3. If conditions were not insecure, why would people choose to leave?
4. What do people hope to gain by leaving their homes?

Alternatively ask students to list facts they already know about immigration in the 19th century and today and what they don't know.

#### II. Jigsaw group activity

Each student will each read one of the primary sources that follow.

The teachers should decide how to use the background information: to share this information before or with the activity, or to use this in the open class discussion after the group work.

1. Students using the same primary source will review key points of the document could break up the class into four or more groups, each covering one or more groups of immigrants
2. Students regroup to discuss their article with students with different primary sources. Students will complete the chart and discuss answers to the summary questions.

#### III. Summary activity

Short Research Paper — Students research a group not represented (other than their own group) in these sources and summarize their experiences and compare to those already addressed in class — i.e., Chinese, Cuban, Italian, Japanese, Jewish, Polish, Scandinavian, South Asian and Mexican.

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### Group 1 — Irish Immigration

#### Background Information

In the mid-1840s the Irish potato crop was struck by the potato blight, a plant disease that wiped out the crop, creating a famine that devastated Ireland. The Great Famine was the result of centuries-long English policies in Ireland that had resulted in an impoverished peasantry wholly dependent upon one food crop, the potato. The British government barely intervened, leaving the Irish to their fate. British policy makers strongly supported the idea of laissez-faire, an economic theory that believes that government should not intervene in a market economy. During the famine, landowners exported large amounts of wheat from Ireland. Over a ten year period, 750,000 Irish perished and two million emigrated to the United States, Canada, Australia and England.

For more information go to:

[http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/historyonline/irish\\_potato\\_famine.cfm](http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/historyonline/irish_potato_famine.cfm)

**Excerpt “Realities of Irish Life” (1847) by W. Steuart Trench, a land agent for Irish estates during the Famine.**

I did not see a child playing in the streets or on the roads; no children are to be seen outside the doors but a few sick and dying children. In the districts which are now being depopulated by starvation, coffins are only used for the more wealthy. The majority were taken to the grave without any coffin, and buried in their rags: in some instances even the rags are taken from the corpse to cover some still living body.

On arriving at Cappagh, in the first house I saw a dead child lying in a corner of the house, and two children, pale as death, with their heads hanging down upon their breasts sitting by a small fire. The father had died on the road coming home from work. One of the children, a lad seventeen years of age, had been found, in the absence of his mother, who was looking for food, lying dead, with his legs held out of the fire by the little child which I then saw lying dead. Two other children had also died. The mother and the two children still alive had lived on one dish of barley for the last four days. On entering another house the doctor said, “Look there, Sir, you can’t tell whether they are boys or girls.” Taking up a skeleton child, he said, “Here is the way it is with them all; their legs swing and rock like the legs of a doll, they have the smell of mice.”

Questions for group discussion

1. What conditions are described in this document?
2. Why do you think the writer concentrated his report on children?

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“Here and There; or Emigration a Remedy”  
*Punch Magazine*, July 15, 1848



Questions for group discussion

1. How does the cartoon portray “Here”?
2. How does the cartoon portray “There”?
3. Is the cartoon advocating a position or action? If so, what is it advocating?
4. Considered with the previous document, to what extent would this cartoon convince you to leave Ireland for the Americas?

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### Group 2 – German Immigration

#### Background Information

“Steinway and Sons” is the story of a search for economic freedom. In 1850 the family abandoned its homeland, Germany, and sailed for America. These were people with money, skills, a home and a business, not potato-famine Irish who had no option but to leave. The wealthy Steinways left because they wanted to. In Germany they were stifled by trade barriers, a restrictive economy, disruptive riots and the failed 1848 revolution which paralyzed commerce. They settled in New York City and within three years were making their own pianos again in the unfettered American economy. (Lieberman, Richard K., “Steinway and Sons,” New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995)

**Excerpt: Letter from Charles Steinway to his brother C.F. Theodor Steinway. Charles is in New York City, Theodor is in Seesen, a town in the Duchy of Brunswick in what is now northwestern Germany.**

October 1850

Dear Theodor:

As we are tired of waiting for a letter from you in response to our first ones, I am writing to you again. Mother was ill for three weeks, but is entirely well again. Father now has a job with a German instrument maker. . . . He makes sounding boards [for pianos] and earns \$6 a week. If he did the same work for an American, he could earn at least \$7, but since he knows not a word of English and will never learn it, he will never be able to work for an American. . . . I now make \$7 a week. If I wanted to become a [piano] tuner, I could get a job at \$9 [or] \$10 a week, but I don't feel like tuning all the time. Now I am making keyboards. You can't imagine how picky the work is here. For example, keyboard makers, in order to make good wages, must make two 7-octave keyboards; an assembler must put together. There is an American here who puts three together. People here work only 10 hours a day, but they work hard. It takes ten workers to make a piano a week.

. . . I am working at a firm . . . for one year at \$3 a week. We all work in different factories, yet close-by from each other. . . . The weather is beautiful now; the autumn is very nice and pleasant in America. No the mosquitoes and bed bugs are no longer as bad as during the hot summer. Now I must describe to you how they build here. Every wall is put up all by itself and there is no connection between the walls . . . with the result that the walls are hollow and perfect homes for bed bugs, rats and mice — there is an oversupply of vermin.

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**Excerpt: Letter from Charles Steinway to his brother C.F. Theodor Steinway.**

no date, probably Fall 1852

Dear Theodor,

How are you? I hope you are better than I am, since I am now forced to play the role of the gentleman. I am moored at home since, due to chest pains, I am unable to work without risking to ruin my health. . . . I have been bothered by it for a year now. The original cause was due to strenuous tuning. . . . The disease itself is in the build of my chest, that is, in the joints and muscles, and all the doctors have assured me that heart and lungs are completely healthy. Rest is the only thing that helps since continued exertion makes it progressively weaker.

. . . From the above you can quite simply conclude that I do not advise you to come here. . . . And I advise the same to everyone, whoever it may be. Because one does have to work here, more than outside and we get so much used to the better life here that in the end we believe that the German potato soup tasted better in Germany than the daily roast here. Of course America offers a home for those who want to work and had no work in Germany and who generally had to struggle against want and sorrow. . . . In Germany we had our problems and here we have different ones. In Germany, the doctor's bill for an entire year was only one Thaler; here it is more than 50. That is the worst thing for the Germans any how: very few can stand the climate, almost all people die from chest and lung diseases, which one has to ascribe to the climate. And yet, New York is one of the healthier places.

. . . Tell people who do not know a trade to avoid coming here as much as possible, . . . there is also no way that a man over 21 and without a trade or money can make his fortune here since nobody takes him to learn a trade.

### Questions for group discussion

1. Why would someone continue to work for a year in pain? Why would people be concerned with hearts and lungs; what diseases were prevalent? What is the climate of New York City? (When Charles refers to climate, he also may be referring to living conditions.)
2. What compensation existed for workers who were ill?
3. Why does Charles recommend against immigration to America? How is this inconsistent with actual immigration patterns?

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### Group 3 – Korean Immigration

#### Background Information

In 1965, the Immigration Act abolished the quota system that had restricted the numbers of Asians allowed to enter the United States. Large numbers of Koreans, including some from the North that have come via South Korea, have been immigrating ever since, putting Korea in the top five countries of origin of immigrants to the United States since 1975. The reasons for immigration are many, including the desire for increased freedom, especially for women, and the hope for better economic opportunities. In South Korea, which is roughly the size of Maine and has a population density second only to Bangladesh, there is an oversupply of college graduates including many engineers, nurses and doctors.

Source: Mount St. Mary's College Center for Cultural Fluency,  
<http://www.msmc.la.edu/ccf/LAC.Korean.html>

#### Excerpt: "Native Speaker" by Chang Rae Lee (New York: Riverhead Books, 1995, pp.53-57)

In this novel, Chang Rae Lee depicts a Korean immigrant, Henry Park, whose father becomes a successful owner of fruit and vegetable stores in New York City, moving his family to the upscale suburb of Ardsley. These passages describe some of Park's experiences working in the store, his relationship with his father, and the struggles of an immigrant entrepreneur and the workers he hired.

The excerpt students should read begins on p. 53 with the sentence, "I grunted my best Korean to the other men." and ends on p. 57 "Then, too, did I wonder whether he'd assumed he could be an American engineer who spoke little English, but of course he didn't."

#### Questions for group discussion

1. Why did Henry Park not want to be seen by the customers?
2. What is implied in the view of the Koreans as "Oriental Jews"?
3. Many Korean immigrants were well-educated, but spoke little or no English. How did this limitation affect their work options?
4. Why did Henry Park's mother not want him to question his father about his work?

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### Group 4 – Haitian Immigration

#### Background Information

Haiti is the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, with a per-capita income of \$1,900. Eighty percent of the population lives in poverty. Poverty stems from a combination of overpopulation, high unemployment, high illiteracy, high inflation and widespread deforestation. Most Haitians descend from the West African slaves brought by the French to work on sugar plantations. After independence, Europeans and Americans imposed diplomatic and economic isolation on Haiti. For most of the second half of the 20th century, Haiti was ruled by the dictatorship of François “Papa Doc” Duvalier and his son Jean-Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier, who succeeded him. They relied on an extensive network of secret police, the Tonton Macoutes, to impose order by terror and violence. Many Haitians have faced imprisonment and death at the hands of government forces. “Baby Doc” Duvalier was overthrown in 1986, but Haiti continued to face political, social and economic instability in the years that have followed and remains the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere. Many Americans believe that Haitian immigrants are mainly coming to America to flee the nation’s poverty.

#### Excerpt: “Brother, I’m Dying” (2007) by Edwidge Danticat (pp. 120–123)

Story background: Danticat’s father had been trained as a tailor, but lost his job when cheap clothing came to Haiti from the United States. He then started selling shoes, but when he learned of the possibility of immigration to the U.S., he left to support his family.

The excerpt students should read begins on p. 120 with the sentence, “A few years ago, I discovered, then lost again a few lines . . .” and continues to the end of the chapter on p. 123.

#### Questions for group discussion

1. Why was Edwidge Danticat’s father willing to risk life and limb driving a cab?
2. What kind of work is available to unskilled immigrants?
3. How *well* do think Edwidge Danticat’s family lived?
4. Why did Edwidge Danticat’s father not tell his family about the dangers of his work?
5. Does Edwidge Danticat’s father see great opportunity for himself? Why or why not?

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| Question for Discussion  | Irish Immigrants | German Immigrants | Korean Immigrants | Haitian Immigrants |
|--|------------------|-------------------|-------------------|--------------------|
| Why did immigrants come to America?  |                  |                   |                   |                    |
| What sacrifices did they make in coming to America?  |                  |                   |                   |                    |
| What sacrifices did they make in America?<br>For themselves?<br>For their families?                  | N/A              |                   |                   |                    |
| What was their knowledge of English? How did it affect their integration into American society?      | N/A              | N/A               |                   |                    |
| What do you think their standard of living was? I.e., poor, working class, middle class, upper class |                  |                   |                   |                    |

Also for discussion

- What do their experiences have in common?
- What makes their experiences different?
- Why are people willing to put up with the hardships of immigration?
- Why are immigrants subject to violent crime? What recourse do they feel they have?
- What do immigrants wish for their children? Is this the driving force behind immigration?
- How does immigration in the 1800s differ from immigration in the late 20th century and early 21st.
- What is the relationship between immigrants and their home country — now, mid-1800s, late 1900s? How has it changed or stayed the same?
- Is America the “golden land,” as some immigrants referred to it? Based on what you’ve learned, are the hardships of immigration worth it?

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### DISCOVERING HISTORY IN TODAY'S NEW YORK TIMES

1. Select a nationality of immigrants not discussed in the packets of materials you have received. Then prepare a research paper identifying the possible reasons why these immigrants decided to come to America, where most of them settled, the support groups that may have been available to them, and other relevant information. Your selection could include recent immigrants from Vietnam, Pakistan or India. Refer to the grid at the end of your packet to prepare a list of differences and similarities compared with the four groups of immigrants covered in the packet of materials.
2. Security at American borders has become a major political issue. Means to secure the borders include high-tech apparatus to patrol the areas, cameras, increased patrols and aerial surveillance. Despite these efforts, politicians and the news media point out that the borders are still not secure and undocumented immigrants are on the increase. Over several weeks, check The New York Times for commentaries on border security. If possible, select articles that might give explanations of why individuals are entering American illegally and often risking their lives to do so.
3. Based on the articles you selected for # 2 above, create a map of the border entry points where problems have been identified. Search the Web for more detailed information on border security. As you gather your information, your map may be expanded to include border problems occurring in many states.