

*History*  
UNFOLDING

# THE IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE



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**MindSparks**  
CHALLENGING STUDENTS TO THINK HISTORICALLY

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# Introduction

## **The Immigrant Experience in U.S. History**

The subject of immigration to the United States is vast. Since the 1600s, America has been created by wave after wave of uprooted people hoping to start over in a new land. In a way, the history of immigration is the history of the country itself. To encompass it completely with just twelve illustrations and a few lessons would be impossible.

We might have based the lessons on the key immigrant groups that have come to America since its founding. Inevitably, however, we would have left out many such groups. Yet while each group's encounter with America varied in its details, certain experiences were common to all. At least that is the assumption behind the way this booklet is organized. The pattern of experiences shared by nearly all immigrants is the focus of four lessons, each of which uses three illustrations to explore one broad theme in the overall story of immigration. Briefly, the four lessons are as follows:

### **Departure for the New World**

Some immigrants came simply to improve their lives. Millions of others felt forced to leave to escape intolerable economic or political circumstances at home. But except for enslaved Africans, nearly all immigrants came willingly, one individual, family, or small group at a time. For each of them, whether crossing an ocean or a border, the trip has almost always been dangerous and traumatic, an experience of confusion, fear, and hope.

### **First Contacts in America**

The trip and the first encounters with America were a kind of initiation ritual in which the immigrant passed from one culture to another, one lifetime to another. The illustrations in this section capture the disorienting nature of these encounters and the initial efforts immigrants made to help themselves and others of their background cope and begin to adjust.

### **The Immigrant as Seen by Others**

No account of immigration would be complete without some attention to the way the newcomers were seen by Americans already here. As the illustrations in this lesson show, that reaction has been a mixed one. Confidence about the immigrants and about America's ability to welcome them in has coexisted with fears about the threat alien cultures might pose to widely shared American norms and traditions.

### **Adapting to a New Life**

Also mixed have been immigrant reactions to the idea of adjusting to and living in American society. A desire to hold to old ways has to one degree or another been felt by just about every immigrant, even those anxious also to learn how to be Americans. Perhaps this mix of feelings is itself a part of what it means to be an American—a respect for older traditions along with a readiness to risk all for a different future.

## Using Photos, Cartoons, and Other Visuals to Teach History

Many textbooks are full of colorful visuals. However, all too often these visuals function primarily as window dressing. They make the text more entertaining, or at least more palatable. Only occasionally do the visuals in textbooks do more than offer simple pictorial reinforcement of ideas already presented in the text. In many cases, they pander to the visual orientation of the young while doing little to help young people master the challenges of the visual media that dominate their lives.

By way of contrast, our approach to using visual materials emphasizes their unique strengths as historical documents. The lessons in this booklet focus students on the visual symbols and metaphors in editorial cartoons, the dramatic qualities of certain photographs, the potential of many images to make abstract ideas more specific and concrete, the implicit biases and stereotypes in certain images, their emotional power, and their ability to invoke the spirit of a time and place. In the process, we make every effort to strengthen students' visual literacy skills in general, as well as their ability to think critically and engage in spirited but disciplined discussions.

## How to Use This Booklet

The booklet is divided into four lessons, with three illustrations per lesson. Each lesson consists of the following:

**A BACKGROUND INFORMATION SHEET** This page provides brief summaries explaining the three illustrations on which the lesson is based and their relevance to the lesson's objectives.

**DIGITAL IMAGES** The booklet's PDF allows you to project the images for use in your class discussions.

### **DISCUSSION-ACTIVITY SHEETS**

Each sheet displays one illustration. It includes a sequence of questions to help you plan an all-class discussion while using the projected images. The questions take students step by step through an analysis of the illustration. If you wish, you may reproduce these pages and hand them out. In addition to the discussion questions on the illustration itself, one or two follow-up activities are suggested. Some of these can be made into individual assignments. Others will work best as small-group or all-class activities.

*The Immigrant Experience***OBJECTIVES**

1. Students will consider some of the factors that might lead people to uproot themselves and become immigrants.
2. Students will better appreciate the difficulties immigrants face in just getting to America.

# Departure for the New World

*Use the background information on this page to help your students better understand the three illustrations making up this lesson. The questions and activities presented in the rest of the lesson can be used to help students clarify meanings and debate important issues.*

**BACKGROUND INFORMATION****Illustration 1**

Throughout the history of the United States, millions of people in other parts of the world have made the decision to uproot themselves and begin a new life in America. The general causes for immigration varied from country to country, and from one historical time period to another. This scene shows immigrants leaving Ireland in the mid-1800s. Famine, religious strife and political persecution all drove people out of Ireland in those years. Whatever the general causes for immigration, the decision to leave was almost always made individually, family by family. It was a traumatic and risky leap into the unknown. This scene captures the dramatic moment when last farewells separated immigrants from friends, loved ones, and all they had known of the world until that day.

**Illustration 2**

At first, the journey to America took months. In the 1700s and early 1800s, it could involve several separate trips through different nations, with tolls, border fees, and other expenses along the way—to say nothing of many other kinds of dangers. Then the trip across the Atlantic might take six weeks or more. Death and disease were common on board. Even in the late 1800s, steam ships still took up to two weeks to cross, with poorer immigrants confined for nearly the entire trip below deck in cramped, unhealthy steerage quarters. The sight of the Statue of Liberty must have thrilled these immigrants—even though many of them might not have heard of the Statue itself.

**Illustration 3**

The immigrant experience has always been full of difficulties and worries even when it was undertaken legally. But millions of people have broken the law to get into this country. Many of them come across the U.S.-Mexican border without asking anyone's permission, as this man did long ago in 1912. How much of a problem do such immigrants cause for the nation? That's a question many Americans argue about today. Photos like this can't supply an answer. But they do tell us something about the determination of such immigrants—and millions of others who have set out with little or nothing to start their lives over again in the United States.

## Lesson 1—Departure for the New World

# Illustration 1



Courtesy of the Library of Congress

### **Discussing the Illustration**

1. The immigrant's journey to America began in many different ways. Here, a group is starting out from a village in county Kerry, Ireland, in the mid-1800s. What problems would poor immigrants to America then have been likely to face just in getting here?
2. What can you learn about Irish immigrants in the 1800s just from this drawing? For example, what can you know about how they decided to leave? About what they took with them? About what they might have been expecting or hoping for?
3. What do you suppose the people leaving in this scene are thinking and feeling? What about the people saying goodbye to them?
4. Between about 1820 and 1880, about 3.5 million people from Ireland came to the U.S. But about 2 million of them arrived in the 1840s alone. From your knowledge of history, can you explain what some of the causes were that led so many to leave Ireland in the 1840s?

### **Follow-up Activities**

1. Suppose you were moving to go live in another country for good today. Make a list of all the things you would have to decide and do in the weeks just before you left. Now make an additional list of the kinds of decisions the people in the above drawing probably had to make. As a class, share and discuss the lists you have come up with.
2. Millions of Irish immigrants came to this country in the 1840s. Why? Here is a list of possible causes.

- Crop failures
- Famine
- Landlord evictions of tenants
- Religious conflict
- Great Britain's rule over Ireland

Read more about the troubles in Ireland in the 1840s. Based on what you read, rank the above list of causes in order, from most important to least important. In a brief report to the class, explain your ranking of these causes.

## Adapting to a New Life

# Illustration 3



Courtesy of the Library of Congress