The Land of Opportunity

by Peggy Bresnick Kendler

Suggested levels for Guided Reading, DRA™, Lexile®, and Reading Recovery™ are provided in the Pearson Scott Foresman Leveling Guide.

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Scott Foresman Reading Street 5.1.5
1. What caused the United States government to pass a law in 1882 that restricted immigration by Chinese people? What was the effect? Use a graphic organizer like the one below to write down your answer.

2. Summarize how the original process of becoming a United States citizen worked.

3. Show that you know the difference between emigrate and immigrate by using both words in two different sentences.

4. This book contains photographs of Ellis Island on page 8 and page 20. Look at the photos again and write about what they seem to show.
Leaving Home

During the late 1800s and early 1900s, many people left their homelands and made the journey across the ocean to live in the United States. These people were immigrants, or people who decide to come to one country from another. The process they undertook to make their journey is called immigration.

For most immigrants, the decision to come to the United States was a hard one. They would be leaving behind friends, relatives, and their home country. But they had heard America was a land of opportunity where the streets “were paved with gold.” Such stories helped immigrants overcome their fears of leaving home.

This book tells the story of the people who immigrated to the United States during the late 1800s and early 1900s. Keep reading to find out more about this fascinating period of American history!

Many children were among the millions of people who immigrated to the United States during the late 1800s and early 1900s.
Many Reasons for Immigration

Immigrants left their home countries for all kinds of reasons. Some left because they were afraid that their government would imprison them or discriminate against them for their religious beliefs. For such immigrants, the United States held great promise as a land where all people could worship in the manner in which they saw fit. Others left because they were upset with the way their government ran their country, and were convinced that they would receive better treatment here in the United States. And many immigrants came to the United States to escape the poverty they experienced in their homelands, which prevented them from making enough money to support their families. No matter what their reasons were for leaving, all immigrants came to the United States seeking a better life.

Coming to the United States was costly. Most immigrants were poor and needed to save money for a long time to afford the journey. Some sold jewelry and other valuable possessions to raise the money for a ticket, while others worked several jobs until they had saved enough for the trip by steamship to America. It was not unusual for an entire family to work extra in order to pay for the trip.

Sometimes a lone family member, most often the father, would go to America before the rest of their family. Once there, the father would save as much money as he could and send what he could back home to the other family members so they could make the journey.

It wasn’t always the father who left first. Sometimes the eldest son would be the first to emigrate, or leave the country. Regardless of who came first, many immigrants’ family members came to the United States separately. Statistics tell the tale: In 1901 up to 65 percent of all immigrants paid for their tickets to the United States using money from a family member who was already living here.
A Long and Perilous Journey

The long journey to America, which took from two weeks to a month, could be perilous. The immigrants traveled on steamships that carried as many as two thousand people. Poor immigrants could only afford tickets for the lower cabins on these steamships, which were located in the area known as steerage. The passengers in steerage were confined to their dark, crowded cabins for weeks at a time, and many of them went the entire trip without seeing the sky. In comparison, wealthier passengers traveled in luxury in upper cabins with windows.

While at sea, the ships were in danger of being destroyed by storms. Many of the poorer passengers suffered from seasickness or other illnesses that spread quickly through steerage, while a few grew so ill during the voyage that they died while en route. Still, the trip to America, the land of opportunity, was worth the risks.

During the early 1900s, the majority of people who immigrated to the United States were from Europe. Of those people, more came to the United States from Italy between 1880 and 1930 than from any other country.

By the late 1800s, Italy had become one of the more overcrowded countries in Europe. Many Italians who immigrated to the United States were from rural communities and had not attended school. When they came to America, they were willing to take low-paying jobs as laborers in order to earn a living. About two-thirds of the Italian immigrants were men. Although many of them settled in the United States and later sent for their families, a significant number returned to Italy.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
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<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>4,600,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Austro-Hungarian Empire</td>
<td>4,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russian Empire</td>
<td>3,300,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>German Empire</td>
<td>2,800,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Britain</td>
<td>2,300,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>1,700,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>1,100,000</td>
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Source: The Statue of Liberty—Ellis Island Foundation, Inc.
Many Ports, Many Immigrants

The two most important ports for immigration during the late 1800s and early 1900s were New York's Ellis Island and California's Angel Island.

The federal immigration station at New York Harbor's Ellis Island opened in 1892. It quickly became famous for its enormous waiting room, which can still be visited today. Between 1892 and 1954, more than twelve million immigrants entered the United States through Ellis Island. In 1954 the station closed, in response to a decrease in the number of immigrants arriving by steamship from Europe.

While most immigrants to the United States entered through New York Harbor, some came through other East Coast ports. The northeastern ports of Boston, Philadelphia, and Baltimore received many immigrants, while the southeastern ports of Savannah, Miami, and New Orleans took in a smaller stream of immigrants.

People from everywhere went through Ellis Island, but for immigrants arriving from parts of Asia, Canada, Mexico, and Central and South America, it made little sense to travel halfway around the world to enter the United States through New York. Instead, they came through the immigration station at California's Angel Island.

Located in San Francisco Bay, Angel Island's immigration station opened in 1910. It was frequently used to hold detainees, or immigrants who were confined to migration centers until they were allowed into the country.

In the mid-1800s, many Chinese people immigrated to the United States. These new immigrants were willing to work for very little money. At the time the U.S. economy was doing well, and people welcomed the cheap labor that they provided.

By the 1870s, however, the United States economy had declined, work was scarce, and many Americans on the West Coast felt that Chinese immigrants were taking jobs away from them. In 1882 the government passed a law that made it difficult for Chinese immigrants to enter the country. Because of the law, many Chinese immigrants were held at Angel Island's immigration center for months or years before being admitted into the country.

The immigration station at Angel Island as it looked during the early 1900s
For many immigrants, their first glimpse of the United States came when they saw the Statue of Liberty. A gift from France to the United States, the statue was dedicated on October 28, 1886, on another island near Ellis Island. It served as a symbol of freedom to all immigrants.

After steaming past the Statue of Liberty, the immigrants’ ships docked in Manhattan to let the wealthier passengers off. Most of these wealthy passengers were given a brief exam on the ship, after which they were free to enter the United States. The government saw these passengers as being less of a risk in terms of spreading illnesses or committing crimes. However, if the wealthier passengers had been in trouble with the law back home, or were ill, they were sent to Ellis Island for further examination.

Ellis Island itself had no areas for docking, so the rest of the passengers, consisting mainly of the poor immigrants in steerage, were sent to Ellis Island on barges. By this time they were tired from the long voyage and anxious to step foot on land. Most of all, though, the immigrants were excited about the opportunities that lay ahead in the United States.

Thousands of immigrants were processed daily at Ellis Island. The travelers waited for a little while before they were examined by a doctor, who made sure they were healthy. They were also given a verbal test of twenty-nine questions concerning their identity and past. Most of the immigrants did not speak English, and for this reason their questions were asked through an interpreter, who translated the questions into the immigrant’s native language.

The immigrants who did not pass the tests were not allowed to come ashore. If one or more family members was ill, then the entire family had to stay on Ellis Island until everyone was healthy. Once everyone passed the tests and was healthy, the family could leave the island to start their life in the United States. About 98 percent of all immigrants were allowed to enter the country. The remaining 2 percent had to return home.
When immigrants first came to America, many were forced to live in crowded, old, dark apartment buildings called tenements.

**Immigrant Life**

Once processing was completed, the newly arrived immigrants were free to live in their new land. They soon found out that it took money to live well in the land of opportunity, although few of them had the resources to do so. Most immigrants in 1903 came to the United States with only a few dollars in their pockets, money soon eaten up by the high cost of living experienced in most urban areas.

Most immigrants settled in the city where they arrived, as settling in another place would have been too costly. Since they did not have much money and could not easily find work, most newcomers were forced to live in dark, run-down buildings called tenements. The tenements were so overcrowded that as many as four thousand immigrants could be found living in just one city block.

Despite their poor economic circumstances, the immigrants were determined to make good lives for themselves in their new home. They helped each other out, sharing their resources and developing close-knit communities. Many of those who were already settled took in recent immigrants from their homelands, letting them stay at their apartments until they found places to live.

Neighborhoods made up almost entirely of immigrants sprang up in many major cities. Within these areas, immigrants could speak their native languages, celebrate their traditions, and enjoy foods from their homelands.

The immigrants of the early 1900s created communities that still exist today, communities that consist of many people who are descendants of immigrants from the turn of the twentieth century. If you visit one of these communities, you can eat foods and hear the music of the immigrants' native countries.

New York City's Chinatown, located on the Lower East Side, was created by immigrants more than one hundred years ago.
A Land of Challenges

Perhaps the biggest challenge immigrants faced was finding ways to earn money. Some earned money by working at home sewing clothes or sorting goods, a job that did not require knowledge of the English language.

Most immigrants’ jobs paid very little, and what pay they did earn went mostly to food and rent. Leftover money was often sent back to family members in their homelands.

American industries were booming during the early 1900s, and as a result employers were more willing to hire immigrants. Immigrant men often found work as laborers, while immigrant women were frequently hired to work in factories. Earlier immigrants from northwestern Europe, who were often highly educated, found jobs quickly because of the skills they brought, while immigrants who came later from southeastern Europe did not find work so easily because they were not as highly skilled.

The immigrants from southeastern Europe came to the United States through Ellis Island. They were very different from the Chinese immigrants that you read about earlier. However they were similar to them in one important way: They were willing to work for lower wages than non-immigrant Americans.

For immigrants such as these Chinese railroad workers, the work was hard, but the pay was low.

Because of this, when the economy got worse, Americans on the East Coast worried that they would have to compete for jobs with the immigrants from southeastern Europe. This mirrored how Americans on the West Coast had once worried that they would have to compete with Chinese immigrants for work. And just as Americans on the West Coast came to resent Chinese immigrants, Americans on the East Coast came to resent newcomers from southeastern Europe.

Eventually, the resentment led the federal government to pass many laws restricting immigration during the early 1900s. These laws were very similar to the law passed in 1882 that restricted Chinese immigrants.
Becoming a Citizen

It was the dream of many immigrants to become full-fledged citizens, or legal residents, of the United States. In order to become naturalized, or made citizens, the immigrants of the early 1900s had to live in the United States for at least one year, and were also required to pass an examination designed to test their knowledge of American history and other facts about the country.

To pass the test, immigrants studied long hours to learn about United States history. They studied the United States Constitution, the presidents, and the three branches of the federal government. Many immigrants studied these subjects at night classes, after they had worked at their jobs.

The reward for their studying was considerable. Once they became citizens, immigrants were allowed to vote! They were also granted the rights of all other Americans.

Over the years, the laws for citizenship changed. For instance, in 1922, the law was changed so that immigrants had to live in the United States for at least five years in order to be able to apply for citizenship. This is still a requirement for citizenship today.

This Jacob Lawrence painting from 1974 stresses the importance of having citizens vote.
Education for All

Some immigrant children came from villages where there were no schools, while others came from places where they were not allowed to receive an education. Additionally, some immigrant parents refused to send their children to school in the United States, fearing that they would learn things that went against the beliefs of their native culture.

Other immigrant parents were not as worried about cultural issues. They could put up with their children learning less about their heritage if the trade-off was learning the English language and American customs. These parents knew that their children would have greater opportunities by learning English and the American way of life.

Regardless of their parents’ attitudes, for most immigrant children the educational opportunities they found in the United States were much better than those available back home. The United States’ free public school system created a powerful lure to immigrate.

This class, for immigrant children living in Boston in 1909, was taught at night. For many immigrant children, education had not been an option in their homelands.
Ellis Island and Angel Island Today

Today, four out of every ten Americans descend from immigrants who passed through Ellis Island. In September 1990 the main building on Ellis Island, which millions of immigrants passed through on their way to a new land and new lives, reopened as the Ellis Island Immigration Museum.

Nearly two million visitors tour the museum at Ellis Island each year. The museum has more than five thousand artifacts and hundreds of photographs telling the story of immigration in the late 1800s and early 1900s.

In 1963 Angel Island was established as a state park. A museum was also established in the old barracks, or group of buildings, where Chinese immigrants stayed as they waited to be allowed into the United States. Named the Immigration Station Barracks Museum, it can be reached by ferry, just like the museum at Ellis Island.

The immigrants who came through Ellis Island and Angel Island during the late 1800s and early 1900s faced many challenges. But by working hard they were able to carve out a place for themselves in American society. By visiting the museums at Ellis Island and Angel Island, you can learn all kinds of things about the history of American immigration!
Now Try This

Imagining an Immigrant’s Life

You now know what it was like to come to the United States during the early 1900s. But what would it have been like to immigrate to a different country from the United States during that time? Try this activity to find out!

1. Think about which country you would have preferred to immigrate to, other than the United States. What would be your reasons for wanting to immigrate to that country? Once you got there, would you want to stay in the city you arrived in? Or would you want to find someplace else to live? What kind of opportunities would you expect upon arriving in the country you have decided to immigrate to?

2. Write a list of the things that you would take with you to your new country. List things such as clothing, tools, and household items. Also write down the things you would bring to help remind you of your homeland. Remember that many of today’s household appliances were not yet invented in the early 1900s!

3. Imagine what the actual process of immigration would be like. How would you feel if you had to wait for a few days at a place like Ellis Island before you were actually allowed into your new country? How would you feel if you did not speak the language? What other problems might you have?

4. Write a letter to a relative in the United States. Describe your new experiences and how they make you feel. Include an illustration of your new home with your letter. Finally, share your letter with your classmates!

Here’s How to Do It!
Glossary

barracks *n.* a building or group of buildings for people to live in, usually in a fort or camp.

citizens *n.* people who by birth or immigration are members of a nation and receive certain rights.

detainees *n.* people who are kept from moving forward; delayed.

emigrate *v.* to leave your own country to settle in another.

interpreter *n.* someone who orally translates from one language to another.

naturalized *adj.* having been made a citizen of a country by an official act.

steerage *n.* the part of the ship occupied by passengers traveling at the cheapest rate.

tenements *n.* buildings that are divided into sets of rooms occupied by separate families.

Reader Response

1. What caused the United States government to pass a law in 1882 that restricted immigration by Chinese people? What was the effect? Use a graphic organizer like the one below to write down your answer.

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