



Ellis Island

Pre-visit Activity: Background Reading - The Immigration Process

Between 1815 and 1915, approximately 30 million European immigrants arrived in the United States. There were many social, political, and economic reasons (push and pull factors) that prompted their decisions to leave Europe during this period. For most, leaving their native country and moving to America was a difficult process that involved selling their possessions, leaving behind family and friends, and traveling great distances to an unfamiliar place.

The countries of Europe experienced great political changes during the 1800's caused primarily by wars in Europe. Different leaders came to power and made many changes that were not good for the common people of Europe. There was a general distrust and fear of the government by the working class. Leaders took land away from landowners, and many leaders denied personal freedoms to the people. Social problems arose in some countries because certain religious groups were persecuted and those who spoke out against the new governments were jailed.

Economic factors pushed some people out of Europe as well. A wide-spread potato fungus caused potato crops to fail year after year—which led to a lack of income and the inability to pay rent. As Europe became industrialized, people left their farms to find work in the cities, which led to overcrowding and disease. To make matters worse, there were not enough jobs for all the people who moved into the cities. In addition to feeling pushed out of Europe by these economic difficulties, many immigrants felt pulled to America by contract labor agreements. These agreements were offered by recruiting agents, who represented large emerging industries in America. The contract labor system was initially designed to attract foreign skilled laborers to the mining and railroad industries during the Industrial Revolution. The immigrant-laborers agreed to work for reduced wages in American industries in exchange for free passage on a steamship. As the economy changed in later years, laws were enacted to address the anti-immigration feelings of



many Americans who felt that they were losing job opportunities to the newly arriving immigrants, especially those who had few

skills. With the passage of the Alien Contract Labor Law (the Foran Act) of 1885, the federal government prohibited *“any company or individual from bringing unskilled foreigners (aliens) into the United States under contract to work for them.”* As a result, immigrants who unknowingly signed letters with employers to work on commercial farms or other well established industries risked deportation as unskilled laborers under violations of the Alien Contract Labor Law.

Other pull factors, such as the opportunity to own land attracted many immigrants. They had seen pamphlets advertising the availability of free or cheap farmland in the western region of the U.S. Being able to farm their own land was a dream come true for many impoverished Europeans who had only been allowed to work on land owned by a landlord in their native country.

Whether it be the pull of a better job, the chance to own their own land, or the promise of freedom from persecution, the hope that life would be better in America was the primary reason millions of Europeans decided to leave their homes in Europe. Once the decision was made to leave their homeland, immigrants had to be certain they had enough money to make the journey. They needed money to travel to a port city, to buy a ticket on the steamship, and to enter into America. This was often a challenge because most of the working-class people of Europe had very little money and very few possessions. Saving enough for the journey required years of hard work, sacrifice, and possibly selling everything they owned. In order to travel, documentation showing proof of identity was required. Obtaining documentation usually meant going to a local government or church official to request a record showing their legal name and birth records (date and location).

After getting money and documentation, the immigrant then had to travel to a port city in order to buy a ticket to get on a steamship bound for America.



Depending upon the location of his home in Europe, getting to a port city might mean days or weeks of travel on foot, a river-boat, or horse-drawn cart. Once he arrived at the European port city, the immigrant had to pass a series of inspections from the steamship officials to determine whether or not he would be approved for immigration by the U.S. government. The immigrant had to give satisfactory answers to a list of 26 questions because the U.S. government had laws regulating immigration. In 1891, for example, Congress barred from admission those *“suffering from a loathsome or a dangerous contagious disease”* and those *“convicted of a misdemeanor involving moral turpitude”* like anarchists, and polygamists. As a result, steamship lines were careful about whom they let on board. Immigrants had to have their travel documents checked and their health inspected before departure. Sometimes immigrants had to spend several days waiting before boarding a ship. If so, the steamship company provided food and lodging.

After enduring several weeks of travel aboard the steamship to America, the immigrant would reach Ellis Island only to pass through the medical and legal inspections once again. The journey was long and difficult and people would often become ill on board. America wanted to ensure that anyone entering the country was legal, law-abiding, healthy, and able to work so that the government would not have to support them. For the majority of immigrants, the final inspection process at Ellis Island took only a few hours. Only a very small percentage were sent back to their home countries—at the expense of the steamship lines—after failing inspections.

Keep in mind that most immigrants did not travel to America alone, instead all of the steps in getting to America involved entire families. Women were not even allowed to enter America unless accompanied by a male. There were many instances of young men going alone in order to make money in America, and then sending it back to family members in Europe, however, it was more common for families to immigrate together.

Source: PBS, *“Destination America”*



Ellis Island

Pre-Visit Activity: Background Reading - The Immigration Process

Name: _____ Date: _____

Use the information from reading The Immigration Process to answer the following questions:

1. Was it difficult for people to immigrate to America? Explain your answer.
2. List one **political factor** that caused people to leave Europe.
3. List two **economic factors** that caused people to leave Europe.
4. List two pull factors that caused people to immigrate to America.
5. List three steps involved in the process of leaving Europe.
7. How did immigrants get enough money to make the journey to America?
8. Why were potential immigrants inspected by the steamship company before being allowed to buy a ticket?
9. Why did America have laws concerning who would be allowed to enter America?
10. Why did America require immigrants to be inspected before leaving Europe and upon arrival at Ellis Island? Explain your answer.



Ellis Island

Pre-Visit Activity: Background Reading - The Immigration Process

KEY

1. Was it difficult for people to immigrate to America? Explain your answer.

Yes, for common Europeans the difficult process included:

-selling possessions

-saving money to purchase steamship tickets, money to travel and start a new life

-traveling from home to a port city, long journey on a steamship to America

-cultural barriers upon arrival in America (new location, didn't understand the language or culture)

-undergoing medical and legal inspections

-general fear and distrust of government at home made them leery of the whole inspection process at port city and upon arrival at Ellis

2. List one **political factor** that caused people to leave Europe.

The working class did not trust the government, new leaders came into power, government took land from landowners and rights away from people

3. List two **economic factors** that caused people to leave Europe.

potato fungus- famine, lack of jobs, overcrowding in cities, inability to own their own land

4. List two pull factors that caused people to immigrate to America.

opportunity for owning land, jobs, freedom

5. List three steps involved in the process of leaving Europe.

legal documentation showing proof of identity and birth records, save money, get to a port city, undergo inspections- pass inspections

7. How did immigrants get enough money to make the journey to America?

save for years or sell their possessions

8. Why were potential immigrants inspected by the steamship company before being allowed to buy a ticket?

to make sure they were healthy enough to travel, meet legal requirements to travel with documentation, etc.

9. Why did America have laws concerning who would be allowed to enter America?

Some Americans were concerned that they were losing jobs to unskilled immigrant workers who were entering the country. The laws were meant to



restrict the number of people coming to America and why they were coming.
(skilled vs. unskilled workers)

10. Why did America require immigrants to be inspected before leaving Europe and upon arrival at Ellis Island? Explain your answer. America wanted to make sure that those who were coming to America were legal, law-abiding, healthy, and able to work. They did not want anyone who would become a burden to the state. The inspections were meant to screen people for that purpose.