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Immigration: Challenges for New Americans

From its beginnings, the United States has been shaped by people from many nations. Some of the men considered today to have been the founders of the United States were born far from the thirteen original colonies. Alexander Hamilton, for example, was born on the island of St. Kitts in the British West Indies. Nonetheless, issues surrounding immigration and citizenship have caused debate—and controversy--since the 1790s.

Four Immigrants and Their Belongings
http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/97501668/

Historical Background

With each new wave of immigration, Americans responded with a spectrum of attitudes ranging from the hostile to the hospitable. This primary source set offers opportunity to study the topic of immigration from the early nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century.

Challenges: Founders and Foreigners
Although the United States was founded with the help and inspiration of people and ideas from various countries, some U.S. citizens have voiced suspicions of foreigners and immigrants at various times throughout its history. In 1798, a period of diplomatic tension with France culminated in the passage of a series of laws known as the Alien and Sedition Acts. Where immigration was concerned, the bill extended the period of residency required for citizenship from five to fourteen years. It also

allowed the president (John Adams at the time) to deport any "alien" considered to be "dangerous to the peace and safety of the United States."

By 1800, the sentiment behind the acts had diminished, but would revive decades later as German and Irish immigrants came to the United States in larger numbers.

Challenges: The Know-Nothings and Immigration during the Antebellum Period
German and Irish immigrants left their homes for a variety of reasons, ranging from famine to political repression. However, some native-born Americans resented these new arrivals. In 1849, some organized into an anti-Catholic, anti-immigrant political group famously called the "Know-Nothings," which derived its name from the secrecy of its members.

Know-Nothings believed that native-born Americans were superior to the newly arrived immigrant groups on the basis that Irish and German immigrants tended to be poorer and Catholic,

Know Nothing Polka
http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2008661569/
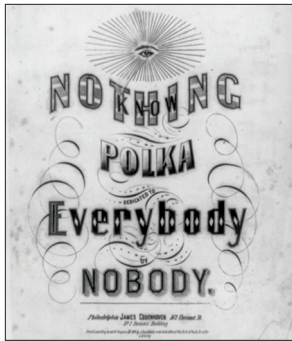
which Know-Nothings took as traits of cultural and economic backwardness. The Irish, in particular, became economic scapegoats during periods of economic uncertainty, a pattern that would repeat itself during subsequent waves of immigration. Resentment toward the Irish began to abate after the Civil War when Irish American communities became more established.

Challenges: Immigration in an Industrializing America

During the industrial era, immigrants from various parts of Asia and Eastern and Southern Europe came in even greater numbers than those from Western Europe.

Tales of the gold rush in the American West drew thousands of Chinese immigrants into North America beginning in the 1850s, as Irish immigration peaked in the East. Like thousands of disappointed Americans, they found that their opportunities were not as bright as the gold they were seeking. These early Chinese immigrants became laborers in mines and railroads, helping to construct the Central Pacific Railroad. Others became agricultural laborers. A major downturn in the American economy during the 1870s caused a backlash against Chinese immigrants in the workforce. Coercion and violence were used to eliminate competition by Chinese laborers and businesses. This outburst influenced government action, leading to the passage of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, which excluded Chinese laborers from entering the country and

barred all immigrants of Chinese descent from obtaining citizenship. It was the first legislation of its kind in American history.

Between 1880 and 1920, an estimated 4 million Italian immigrants entered the United States. Many of them passed through the cramped processing center at Ellis Island just outside of New York City; Ellis Island would become a symbol of immigration during these decades. This generation of Italian immigrants hailed

Immigrants just arrived from Foreign Countries
http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/97501095/

from rural and less developed areas and performed unskilled labor. Like other immigrant groups, Italians faced harsh conditions in these unskilled jobs. Italians who tried to fight these conditions by joining unions found that many established unions would not accept foreign-born workers. Like the Irish before them, Italians became scapegoats for economic difficulties as jobs became fiercely contested. Pseudoscientific theories

Italian family…
http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/ncl2004003316/PP/

derided them as inferior to Northern and Western Europeans because of their "Mediterranean" blood, and Nativist elements blamed them for everything from domestic radicalism to organized crime. Italians living and working in towns and cities across the United States were subject to physical attacks by anti-immigrant mobs or organized groups such as the Ku Klux Klan.

The area now known as Poland was not an independent country during the nineteenth century. Divided between three Empires – Prussia, Austro-Hungary, and Russia – Poles confronted economic difficulties as well as

political and religious repression. By 1910, an estimated 900,000 Polish immigrants had entered the United States from both the East and West coasts. Poles spread throughout many different regions, and contributed the growth of Midwestern states such as Illinois, Wisconsin, and Michigan. Others remained in New England. Polish immigrants established themselves in heavy industries such as mining. They encountered the same workplace difficulties as other immigrants struggling with low wages, and were subject to anti-immigrant prejudices.

Challenges: From Ellis Island to Main Street

Anti-immigrant sentiment peaked again after the end

Immigrants at Ellis Island
http://www.loc.gov/pictures/
item/97501640/

of World War I. New immigration restrictions put into place by Congress established quotas limiting most immigration by groups outside of Western Europe. The era of immigration ended for the time being. Even so, many who were already living in the United States built lasting communities and contributed to their new country.

Many among the recently arrived groups made great strides in American society, but some found it more difficult. Chinese immigrants maintained strong support networks in what became known as "Chinatowns" – Chinese American communities in major urban areas throughout the country. Nonetheless, Chinese immigrants would continue to struggle with negative stereotypes. Italian and Polish immigrants also maintained strong support networks, and their children adapted to the new environment. Irish Americans steadily made inroads into American life and even fielded presidential candidates.

A number of American soldiers who served during World War II were descended from recent immigrants, such as the nearly one million Italian Americans who served in the Armed Forces. In many ways, during the postwar era integration became the catchword for foreign-born Americans and their children. Despite recurring fears that immigration would stain the fabric of American society, these immigrant

Italian-American Legionnaries
http://www.loc.gov/pictures/
item/owi2001009103/PP/

groups became uniquely American while also preserving their own traditions. As a new generation of immigrants enters into American life, many of the controversies and tensions evident in previous periods might again become apparent.