History Lesson 1: History of Immigration Through the 1850s

Overview:

This lesson traces immigration to the United States through the 1850s. Particular attention is paid to the initial European immigration, the bringing of black slaves from Africa, Irish immigration and nativism against the Irish, and the Mexican-American experience and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hildalgo. In the activity, students create posters relating the experiences and contributions of the different immigrant groups that have come to America.

Objectives:

Students will be able to:

- Identify the major European immigrant groups that arrived by the 1850s.
- Explain how the immigration of Africans was unique.
- Explain how and why the Irish immigrated and their experience in America.
- Compare immigrants from Mexico with those from Europe.

Standards Addressed:

National U.S. History Standard 3: Understands why the Americas attracted Europeans and why they brought enslaved Africans to their colonies . . . .

National U.S. History Standard 10: Understands how . . . increasing immigration . . . changed American lives . . . II, III (1) Understands the lives of immigrants in American society during the antebellum period (e.g., factors that led to increased immigration from . . . Ireland . . . how immigrants adapted to life in the United States and to hostility from the nativist movement and the "Know-Nothing" party . . . how immigration intensified ethnic and cultural conflict and complicated the forging of a national identity).
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**National U.S. History Standard 9:** Understands the United States territorial expansion between 1801 and 1861 . . . (5) Understands the . . . outcomes of the Mexican-American War (e.g., . . . the impact of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo on the U.S. and Mexico)

**California History-Social Science Standard 5.4:** Students understand the political, religious, social, and economic institutions that evolved in the colonial era. (6) Describe the introduction of slavery into America . . . .

**California History-Social Science Standard 5.8:** Students trace the colonization, immigration, and settlement patterns of the American people from 1789 to the mid-1800s . . .

**California History-Social Science Standard 8.6:** Students analyze the divergent paths of the American people from 1800 to the mid-1800s and the challenges they faced, with emphasis on the Northeast. (3) List the reasons for the wave of immigration from Northern Europe to the United States . . . (e.g., Irish immigrants and the Great Irish Famine).

**California History-Social Science Standard 5.8:** Students trace the colonization, immigration, and settlement patterns of the American people from 1789 to the mid-1800s . . . (1) Discuss the waves of immigrants from Europe between 1789 and 1850 . . . (5) Describe the continued migration of Mexican settlers into Mexican territories of the West and Southwest. (6) Relate how and when California, Texas, . . . and other western lands became part of the United States, including the significance of the Texas War for Independence and the Mexican-American War.

**Notes:** For the activity, you will need to provide poster or chart paper and art supplies. When students finish the project, consider (1) hanging all the posters at once and doing a museum walk with the creators explaining their posters or (2) hanging one poster a week on the bulletin board and having students tell about their poster each week.

**History of Immigration Through the 1850s**

*Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free . . . .*

- InSCRIPTION on the Statue of Liberty, New York Harbor
The United States is the most diverse nation on Earth. It has been built by millions of immigrants coming to our shores from all the nations of the world. Immigrants have enriched our culture and contributed mightily to our economic growth. Countless numbers have put down roots and found new opportunities in the United States.

The process has not always been easy. As newcomers, immigrants have faced poverty, prejudice, hostility, and even violence.

But no other nation has been as successful as the United States in incorporating diverse peoples into one nation. Immigration has defined us as a nation.

The first people in America were the ancestors of the American Indians. Most anthropologists believe these people crossed a land bridge connecting what is now Siberia and Alaska. This migration started from 20,000 to 50,000 years ago and lasted until the land bridge disappeared (it is now the Bering Strait).

**Early European Immigrants**

From 3 to 4 million Native Americans, or Indians, lived north of the Rio Grande River in North America when Europeans began to explore and settle this area in the 1500s. The Spanish, French, English and Dutch were the chief colonizers of North America.

Following the establishment of the first permanent English colonies in Jamestown, Virginia (1607), and Plymouth, Massachusetts (1620), many colonists began to arrive in America. Between 1630 and 1643, about 20,000 people settled in the New England colonies. They came for many reasons—to practice their religion freely, to own land, to escape poor harvests and hunger, to earn a better living.

Between the English colonies in New England and Virginia lay the Dutch colony of New Amsterdam. In 1624, England seized this colony from the Dutch and renamed it New York. Swedes, Danes, Portuguese, Germans, Poles and other nationality groups had already established settlements in the former Dutch colony.

Soon, the English colonies began to encourage northern Europeans to settle in America. Most of these people were Christians, but Jews fleeing persecution in Europe also came to some colonies.

Over 50 percent of the early European immigrants arrived as indentured servants. These individuals promised to serve their masters without pay for a set number of years. In return, the masters paid for their passage to America and for their upkeep in America. Some indentured servants, called “redemptioners,” were bound to the ship captain who brought them to the New World. He then auctioned them off after arriving in one of the colonial ports.
The Slave Trade

The first black people to land in English America came as indentured servants who could work for their freedom. But in 1664, the Maryland colonial legislature passed a law making all blacks in the colony, as well as their offspring, servants for life, and theinfamously cruel institution of chattel slavery in the British colonies in North America was born. Similar laws were passed in other colonies.

A booming slave trade quickly developed. Slave ships in England loaded up with manufactured goods like cloth and muskets and traveled to slave trading stations on the coast of Africa. Here, the captains negotiated with African slave dealers, exchanging their goods for slaves. The slaves were then forced aboard ships to make the perilous "middle passage" across the Atlantic.

Chained together, human beings were stacked on shelves below deck in filthy disease-ridden holds without light or fresh air. They were often packed so closely together that they could only lie on their sides. Many ship captains believed that overcrowding the ship would bring more
money—even if some of the slaves died. Thousands of Africans died on these slave ship voyages, which often lasted up to three months. Ships transported an estimated 1 million slaves from West African ports to the 13 English Colonies (and later to the United States).

Once in America, ship captains sold their slaves for cash, which they used to buy raw materials like sugar, tobacco, cotton, or other plantation products. They took this new cargo back to England. This was called the "triangular trade."

Slavery existed in all 13 colonies before the American Revolution, although Northern colonies legally recognized black free men and women. Southern planters became dependent on slave labor for their wealth. By 1804, all the Northern states had abolished slavery. Congress outlawed the importation of new slaves in 1808. But slavery continued to grow in the South. The division between the slave and free states led to the Civil War in 1861. After the Civil War, the 13th Amendment was adopted, and slavery became illegal throughout the United States. Severe legal discrimination against blacks persisted for another 100 years.

**Irish Immigration**

The first U.S. census in 1790 recorded about 4 million people living in the colonies—about 700,000 of African descent and 2 million of English descent. Some 400,000 Europeans came from countries other than England.

European immigration to the United States increased slowly after the Revolutionary War until 1840. Then during the next 20 years, immigration exploded. From 1841 to 1860, over 4 million people came to the United States. This represented a 600 percent increase over the previous 20-year period. Most of these immigrants came from Great Britain, Germany, and especially Ireland.

During the potato famines of the 1840s, thousands of people in Ireland died of starvation and disease. Many Irish decided to leave Ireland and come to America. They were desperate, poverty-stricken people who could only afford to travel in "steerage." This was a dark, confined area below the main deck of a ship (barely 5½-feet high), located near the steering mechanism. Despite these poor accommodations, 1.6 million men, women, and children left Ireland for America in the 1840s and 1850s.
The sailing ships took anywhere from four to 14 weeks to cross the Atlantic. Before the end of the voyage, conditions in steerage often became unbearable. There was usually little fresh water and the food (which the steerage passengers had to supply for themselves) either ran out or rotted. Overcrowding, poor ventilation, and the lack of sanitation frequently led to outbreaks of contagious diseases such as cholera. At the peak of the Irish immigration in the 1840s, about 25 percent of those in steerage died during the voyage.

The American writer Herman Melville described steerage as "an open cesspool." He went on to write that Irish passengers in steerage were "stowed away like bales of cotton, and packed like slaves in a slave ship, with no light and air; cut off from all the most indispensable conveniences of a civilized dwelling."

The Irish landed in America at the bottom of the social and economic ladder. They were poor, Catholic peasants with few marketable skills in an overwhelmingly Protestant and rapidly industrializing society. To survive, they took work as laborers and servants in the new cities of the Northeast. Through the next decades, until well after the Civil War, Irish workers contributed mightily to America's growing network of canals, railways, rural highways, city streets, sewers, and waterworks.

**Nativist Reaction Against the Irish**

The Irish faced discrimination because of their Catholicism. As more Irish people arrived, the Native American Party was formed. Supporters of this party called themselves "nativists" believing that they, as white Protestant native-born Americans, were superior to the incoming immigrants.

In 1844, violent rioting broke out between nativists and the Irish in Philadelphia. Several people were killed, and nativist mobs burned Irish homes, stores, schools, and even churches. The army was called in to stop the riot.

At their national convention the following year, the members of the Native American Party called the newly arrived immigrants a "swarm of aliens, who, like a deluge, annually poured moral and political corruption upon us."

In 1852, a nativist secret society, later known as the Order of the Star Spangled Banner, was
formed to oppose Catholics in public office. Members of this society had to be white, native-born, Protestant, born of Protestant parents, and not married to a Catholic. They attacked Irish neighborhoods and Catholic churches in the 1850s. When they were questioned about their activities, they frequently replied, "I know nothing." Because of this response, other Americans soon called them "Know-Nothings".

The "Know-Nothings" joined other nativists to successfully elect sympathetic politicians to public office. They opposed the further immigration of "cheap working foreigners." In 1854, nativists elected nine governors and numerous members of state legislatures and Congress. Two years later their presidential candidate, Millard Fillmore, won almost 25 percent of the national vote for president. He had already served a term as president before joining the Native American Party. But nativists divided over the issue of slavery, and the Native American Party eventually collapsed.

**The Mexican Borderland**

A 2,000-mile border today separates the United States from Mexico. This borderland region stretches from the Gulf of Mexico on the east to the Pacific Ocean on the west. The entire area was once part of Mexico. Following the Mexican War, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed in 1848. Under its provisions, Mexico ceded all of present-day California, Arizona, New Mexico, and parts of other states to the United States. In addition, the treaty approved the 1845 annexation of Texas to the United States. The treaty also recognized rights of Mexicans living within these areas, including the right to keep their language, religion, culture, and property.

In the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, Mexico ceded to the United States all of present-day California, Utah, Nevada, New Mexico, and parts of other States. The treaty also approved the 1845 annexation of Texas by the United States. (Perry-Castaneda Map collection, University of Texas Library)

When the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed, about 75,000 Spanish-speaking people lived in the Southwest. They became American citizens because the U.S.-Mexican border shifted several hundred miles to the south.
Before the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, Mexicans traveled freely in and out of the area. After the treaty was concluded and the area became part of the United States, this pattern of movement continued. Although maps showed a new international border, Mexican citizens residing south of the border kept visiting their relatives who now lived north of the border and vice versa. A constant stream of people moved back and forth across the border with little regard for border or immigration regulations.

Mexicans also sought out work in the borderland area. They stayed in the United States for a few weeks, or for a few months, or for many years. Some spent major portions of their lifetimes living in both Mexico and the United States. Others remained in this country permanently, raised families, worked, and paid taxes. By being born in the United States, their children automatically became citizens.

**For Discussion and Writing**

1. What were the major European immigrant groups before 1850?
2. How was the immigration of Africans unique?
3. What is steerage? Why do you think people put up with traveling in such conditions?
4. Why did the Irish come to America? How do you account for the rise of nativism against the Irish? Why do you think that members of most large immigrant groups have experienced resistance to their settling in America?
5. In what ways have immigrants from Mexico differed from those who came from Europe? What are some similarities of those two groups?

**Activity**

**Immigration Poster**

In this activity, students create a poster exhibit on one of the many immigrant groups that have come to America.

1. Divide the class into groups of two or three students and assign each group one of the Immigrant Groups listed below.

   2. Each group should do the following:
      1. Research the immigrant group. Find information to answer these questions:
1. When were the major period or periods of immigration for this group?
2. Why did the immigrants come during the major period(s) of immigration?
3. What obstacles did they face in the United States?
4. How has this immigrant group contributed to America?
5. Who are three important people of this descent? Describe who they are and why they are important.

6. Create a poster exhibit that answers the five questions above. Consider putting on your poster quotations from important people, pictures (illustrations, photos, paintings) of something related to the questions, copies of newspaper articles on your topic, cartoons, maps, or other objects related to your topic.
7. Be prepared to describe and explain your poster to the class.

**Immigrant Groups**

African
Arab
Cambodian
Canadian
Central American
Chinese
Cuban
English, Welsh, and Scottish
Filipino
German
Indian
Irish
Italian
Japanese
Jews from Eastern Europe and Russia
Korean
Mexican
Polish
Russian
Thai
Vietnamese
Another immigrant group (your choice)