

Late 19th- and Early 20th-Century Immigration: History through Art and Documents

by Tim Bailey

UNIT OVERVIEW

This unit is one of the Gilder Lehrman Institute's Teaching Literacy through History™ resources, designed to align to the Common Core State Standards. These units were developed to enable students to understand, summarize, and evaluate original texts and visual materials of historical significance. Through a step-by-step process, students will acquire the skills to analyze and assess textual and visual resources and develop well-reasoned viewpoints about them.

In these two lessons, students will explore European and Asian immigration to the United States and deportation in the late 19th and early 20th centuries through documents and images. They will analyze texts written by immigrants, migrants, and deportees, and photographs and art representing related events. Student understanding will be assessed through an expository essay using textual and visual evidence to support an argument.

UNIT OBJECTIVES

Students will be able to

- Analyze primary source documents (letters, poems) and works of arts (cartoons, photographs)
- Relate the primary sources to specific immigrant groups and explain the meaning of the documents
- Understand and explain the literal meaning and infer the stories behind each primary source
- Discuss interpretations of and draw conclusions about the primary source materials
- Write an essay using textual and visual evidence from the primary source documents

NUMBER OF CLASS PERIODS: 2

GRADE LEVEL(S): 5–12

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.2: Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.7: Integrate visual information (e.g., in charts, graphs, photographs, videos, or maps) with other information in print and digital texts.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.9: Analyze the relationship between a primary and secondary source on the same topic.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.6-8.1.a: Write arguments focused on discipline-specific content. b. Introduce claim(s) about a topic or issue, acknowledge and distinguish the claim(s) from alternate or opposing claims, and organize the reasons and evidence logically.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

More than eighteen million new immigrants entered the United States between 1890 and 1920. Their motives for migrating differed little from those of earlier emigrants—they sought safety, asylum, opportunity, homes, happiness, and work.

The search for work brought to the United States Italians, Finns, Poles, Japanese, Filipinos, Mexicans, Canadians, and many others. Russian Jews, in defiance of Czarist prohibitions against emigration, fled religious persecution and violent pogroms. Koreans resisted Japanese colonization, and, after 1910, Mexicans escaped revolution at home.

Later, these immigrants would be celebrated as builders of the American nation. At the time, however, Americans sought to limit their right to enter the United States. In 1896, the newly founded Immigration Restriction League demanded the exclusion of illiterate immigrants. In 1902, Congress excluded anarchists and violent revolutionaries. In 1906, it required all naturalizing immigrants to know English. In 1908, the State Department procured an agreement with Japan to stop the migration of new Japanese laborers (although those already in the United States could bring over wives). Exclusionary laws were also imposed on other Asian groups, most notably the Chinese but also Koreans. In 1910, the new immigrant station at Angel Island in San Francisco joined Ellis Island in sifting desirable from undesirable immigrants.

Immigrants from Mexico had begun entering the United States in large numbers between 1910 and 1926. The effects of the economic depression of the 1930s were especially severe for Mexican immigrants who had worked in factories and agricultural and building jobs in the West. Thousands of Mexicans and Mexican Americans were deported to Mexico as jobs became scarce and Americans sought jobs that had once been relegated to immigrant laborers.

LESSON 1

OBJECTIVES

Students will be able to

- Analyze a cartoon
- Read a first-person description of an event and explain the content
- View, describe, and infer the actions of individuals in a photograph
- Read a poem and interpret its meaning

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Immigrants to the United States in the late 19th and early 20th centuries had experiences that were as varied as the nations from which they came. Most immigrants during this time period, whether arriving from Europe or from Asia, came by ship. Many landed at Ellis Island in New York Harbor and Angel Island in San Francisco Bay, but there were processing stations elsewhere. Once in the United States, immigrants had to pass through an examination process that has been described in terms ranging from confrontational and agonizing to agreeable and easy.

During the Great Depression, Mexican Americans and Mexicans living and working in Southern California were encouraged and sometimes forced to leave the United States. Economic, political, and racial prejudice contributed to this forced repatriation.

MATERIALS

- **European Immigration: Image**, “Welcome to All,” cartoon by J. Keppler, *Puck*, April 28, 1880. Source: Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USZ62-29012.
- **European Immigration: Text**, “My First Impressions of America,” excerpted from Aaron Domnitz, “Why I Left My Old Home and What I Have Accomplished in America,” in *My Future Is in America: Autobiographies of Eastern European Immigrants*, ed. and trans. Jocelyn Cohen and Daniel Soyer (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 138–139.
- **Asian Immigration: Image**, “Testing an Asian Immigrant at the Immigration Station on Angel Island, San Francisco, California,” 1931. Photograph courtesy of the U.S. National Library of Medicine, National Institutes of Health.
- **Asian Immigration: Text**, “A Night at the Immigration Station” by Choi Kyung Sik, 1925. Poem published in *Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island, 1910–1940*, ed. Him Mark Lai, Genny Lim, and Judy Yung (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1991), 135.
- **Migration and Deportation: Image**, “350,000 Mexican Americans Deported,” segment of *the Great Wall of Los Angeles*, a mural by Judith F. Baca, 1976. Source: Judith F. Baca©1976. Photo courtesy of Social and Public Art Resource Center Archives, SPARCinLA.org.

- **Migration and Deportation: Text**, Translation of a letter from Pablo Guerrero to Los Angeles County, May 28, 1934. Source: Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors, Los Angeles, CA.
- “Analyzing Art” activity sheet (3 copies per student)
- “In Their Own Words” activity sheet (3 copies per student)

PROCEDURE

You may choose to have the students work individually, as partners, or in small groups of no more than 3 or 4.

1. Distribute **European Immigration: Image**, “Welcome to All” and the “Analyzing Art” activity sheet. The cartoon reflects the welcome extended to immigrants in the 1880s and the concept of America as a land of freedom and opportunity, a safe refuge from the oppression of European monarchs. The sign at the open door reads, “Free Education, Free Land, Free Speech, Free Ballot, Free Lunch,” while a larger sign advertises “No Oppressive Taxes, No Expensive Kings, No Compulsory Military Service, No Knouts or Dungeons.”
2. The students will closely examine the immigration cartoon from 1880 and analyze it using the activity sheet. This can be done as a whole-class activity with discussion in small groups, with partners, or individually. If this is one of the students’ first experiences with this kind of analysis, this activity should be a whole-class exercise.
3. Distribute **European Immigration: Text**, “My First Impressions of America” by Aaron Domnitz and the “In Their Own Words” activity sheet.
4. “Share read” the text with the students. This is done by having the students follow along silently while you begin to read aloud, modeling prosody, inflection, and punctuation. Then ask the class to join in with the reading while you continue to read aloud, still serving as the model for the class. This technique will support struggling readers as well as English language learners (ELL).
5. The students will then closely read Domnitz’s description of his examination at Ellis Island in 1906 and analyze the text, answering the questions on the activity sheet.
6. Distribute **Asian Immigration: Image**, “Testing an Asian Immigrant” and “Analyzing Art.” The photograph shows an Asian immigrant receiving a medical examination to prevent the spread of infectious diseases at the Immigration Station on Angel Island, San Francisco, California, in 1931. The prevalence of major epidemic diseases such as smallpox, yellow fever, and cholera spurred Congress to enact a national law in 1878 to prevent the introduction of contagious and infectious diseases into the United States.
7. The students will study the photograph of an immigrant being examined and complete the activity sheet.
8. Distribute **Asian Immigration: Text**, “A Night at the Immigration Station” by Choi Kyung Sik, a Korean immigrant, and the “In Their Own Words” activity sheet. Share read the poem with the students as described above. The students will analyze the poem and complete the activity sheet.

9. Distribute **Migration and Deportation: Image**, “350,000 Mexican Americans Deported” and the “Analyzing Art” activity sheet. The artwork is a portion of a mural that stretches 2,754 feet depicting the history of Los Angeles. Widespread unemployment in the West during the Great Depression resulted in a mass deportation of Mexican workers and their families. This number included many Mexican Americans who were legal American citizens. The students will examine the mural and complete the “Analyzing Art” activity sheet.
10. Distribute **Migration and Deportation: Text**, Pablo Guerrero’s letter and the “In Their Own Words” activity sheet. Share read the letter with the class. The students will analyze the letter, written by a Mexican worker deported from the US with his family, and complete the “In Their Own Words” activity sheet.
11. As students or student groups share out their responses, discuss different interpretations developed by the students or student groups. Discuss information from the Historical Background.

LESSON 2

OBJECTIVES

Students will be able to:

- Demonstrate their understanding of American immigration and migration in the late 19th and early 20th centuries
- Write an expository essay using evidence from documents and images presented during the previous lesson

MATERIALS

- **European Immigration: Image**, “Welcome to All,” cartoon by J. Keppler, *Puck*, April 28, 1880. Source: Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USZ62-29012.
- **European Immigration: Text**, “My First Impressions of America” excerpted from Aaron Domnitz, “Why I Left My Old Home and What I Have Accomplished in America,” in *My Future Is in America: Autobiographies of Eastern European Immigrants*, ed. and trans. Jocelyn Cohen and Daniel Soyer (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 138–139.
- **Asian Immigration: Image**, “Testing an Asian Immigrant at the Immigration Station on Angel Island, San Francisco, California,” 1931. Photograph courtesy of the U.S. National Library of Medicine, National Institutes of Health.
- **Asian Immigration: Text**, “A Night at the Immigration Station” by Choi Kyung Sik, 1925. Poem published in *Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island, 1910–1940*, ed. Him Mark Lai, Genny Lim, and Judy Yung (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1991), 135.
- **Migration and Deportation: Image**, “350,000 Mexican Americans Deported,” segment of the *Great Wall of Los Angeles*, a mural by Judith F. Baca, 1976. Source: Judith F. Baca©1976. Photo courtesy of Social and Public Art Resource Center Archives, SPARCinLA.org.
- **Migration and Deportation: Text**, Translation of a letter from Pablo Guerrero to Los Angeles County, May 28, 1934. Source: Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors, Los Angeles, CA.
- Completed “Analyzing Art” activity sheets
- Completed “In Their Own Words” activity sheets
- Historical Background: Brief biographies of Aaron Domnitz, Choi Kyung Sik, and Pablo Guerrero, from *Freedom to Move: Immigration and Migration in US History*, ed. Susan F. Saldenber (New York: The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, 2012), 94, 102, and 120.
- Essay Prompts

PROCEDURE

1. All of the students should have copies of the primary source materials as well as their completed activity sheets.
2. Distribute the biographies of Aaron Domnitz, Choi Kyung Sik, and Pablo Guerrero. Students should read through this information to round out their understanding of the important issues during this period.
3. Students will now write an expository essay defending or refuting a statement about immigration in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The students should select one of the essay prompts or you may assign a prompt of your choice. The essay prompts have been arranged from the most literal to the more inferential. Students must support their answers with textual and visual evidence from the documents they have analyzed.
4. Student essays can be completed in class or as homework.

European Immigration: Image



“Welcome to All,” cartoon by J. Keppler, *Puck*, April 28, 1880. (Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division)

Name: _____ Period: _____ Date: _____

Analyzing Art

Title of Piece: _____

Artist/Credited to: _____

Setting of the Piece: _____

What is the significance of the central figure(s) or object(s)?

What action is taking place in the art?

What mood or tone is created by the art, and what is creating that mood or tone?

What message is the artist communicating to the viewer?

European Immigration: Text

“My First Impressions of America,” excerpted from Aaron Domnitz, “Why I Left My Old Home and What I Have Accomplished in America,” in *My Future Is in America: Autobiographies of Eastern European Immigrants*, ed. and trans. Jocelyn Cohen and Daniel Soyer (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 138–139.

My first contact with my new country [in 1906] was the brief conversation between me and the immigration officials. We were put into short lines as we entered the large buildings at Ellis Island. Each line had to go by a small table next to which officials sat who questioned each immigrant in his language. The new immigrant felt right at home. My line spoke Yiddish. Hence, a big, strange country recognized my language that I had brought here with me from abroad as an official language. In Russia and Germany, I did not receive any such privilege.

One official asked me what I would do in America. I told him that until then I had been a Hebrew teacher. He smiled, “A rebbe?”

“No.” I said, “A teacher!”

A second official called out, “What’s the difference?” I explained that a “rebbe” is Hasidic. They laughed at me. “Go, go,” they said, “you’ll be a great rebbe in America,” and pushed me aside. I looked around. Here I am on the other side of the railing, among those who have been let in. But why did they laugh at me? It’s nothing. People are good-natured here and they were joking. I liked the reception.

Name: _____ Period: _____ Date: _____

In Their Own Words

Author: _____

When did the events described in the document take place?

Where do the events described in the document take place?

What clues in the text reveal why it was written?

What mood or tone is created by the author, and what words are creating that mood or tone?

What can you conclude about the author's situation as described in the document?

Asian Immigration: Image



“Testing an Asian Immigrant at the Immigration Station on Angel Island, San Francisco, California,” 1931.
(U.S. National Library of Medicine, National Institutes of Health)

Asian Immigration: Text

“A Night at the Immigration Station,” by Choi Kyung Sik (1925), in *Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island, 1910–1940*, ed. Him Mark Lai, Genny Lim, and Judy Yung (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1991), 135.

A Night at the Immigration Station

By Choi Kyung Sik (1925)

Translated by Jikyung Hwang and Charles Egan

Why are my hands,
Exhausted from crossing a vast ocean,
Now holding iron bars?
The rain cries out and wakes me up
Because it pities me.
Angel Island, sleeping tight,
No matter whether you hear this song or not,
It is the complaint of a foreign guest
Whose whole heart is burning.

Even though it's said America is wonderful,
How pathetic it has made me.
If my mother knew about this,
How shocked she would be.
This border created by rascals—
When can it be broken?
I hope people all over the world
Will become brothers soon.

Migration and Deportation: Image



“350,000 Mexican Americans Deported,” segment of the *Great Wall of Los Angeles* by Judith F. Baca, 1976.

Judith F. Baca©1976. Photo courtesy of SPARC Archives SPARCinLA.org.

Migration and Deportation: Text

Translation of a letter from Pablo Guerrero to Los Angeles County, May 28, 1934.

L.A. County
Mexico

5/28/34. Mexicali, Low. Calif.

Los Angeles, Cfa.

By these presents I hereby make it known that my family and myself were deported into Mexico on 12/8/32, on the S.P. trains that left Los Angeles, Calif., and in view of the fact that all of my children were born in the U.S. of A., they do not like the Mexican customs and wish to return to the U.S. in company with their parents and ask the Los Angeles County authorities, as a favor, to address the Department of Labor in Washington, requesting that the American Consulate in Mexicali, Low. Cfa. be ordered to grant me immigration papers, paying the \$18.00 dollars for each Pass-Port.

I want to arrange everything legally; I do not wish to violate the frontier Immigration Law, and I want my Pass-Port issued with the seal of an American citizen. I worked in the U.S. of A. since 1904 with different companies. I registered in the world war in Johnston, Arizona, Cochise Co. I have never given my services to the Mexican government nor to Mexican capital. I have worked all of my life, since I was 19 years of age in the U.S. of A., and that is why I wish to return to the country where I am entitled to live with my children so that they be educated in the schools of your country and not in Mexico.

Besides, the Mexican Government here does not give any assistance nor protection to children born in the U.S. of A., and for that reason I ask that my children and myself be allowed to return to the country in which they are entitled to live.

Permissions granted by the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors.

Historical Background: Late 19th- and Early 20th-Century Immigration

Aaron Domnitz (1884–1975)

On January 1, 1892, the Ellis Island Immigration Station opened in New York Harbor under the aegis of the federal government to process the growing number of immigrants arriving from Europe. Immigrants to the United States were required to pass medical examinations and interviews and supply proof that family or a job awaited them.

Aaron Domnitz, born in 1884 in a village in Belarus (western Russia), was an eager and diligent student. He graduated from a yeshiva (Jewish school) and became a teacher of Hebrew studies. By 1905 he had traveled to the city of Minsk and became aware of political unrest. He joined a socialist organization, or Bund, and witnessed escalating violence between young reformers and Russian authorities. He left Russia for the United States in 1906, restless to leave behind the village world of his parents and eager to escape the confines of a nation where Jews were persecuted.

Domnitz was met by a cousin with whom he lived in the Bronx. He held jobs successively as a plumber and a tailor and pursued a degree in dentistry. He then moved to Baltimore, where he worked as a dentist and raised a family. The arc of Domnitz's life was similar to that of many immigrants who found a first home with relatives, got jobs with assistance from religious or social agencies, and pursued higher education as a springboard to opportunity and prosperity in the United States.

Choi Kyung Sik (b. ca. 1900–1905; date of death unknown)

The passage of the Immigration Act of 1924 barred all Asians from entry to the United States, with the exception of students who had obtained visas from an American consulate. In 1925, Korean-born Choi Kyung Sik received a Japanese passport from a US consulate. Armed with this document, Kyung Sik sailed from Yokohama to San Francisco. A graduate of Chosen Christian College in Korea, Kyung Sik carried with him a letter confirming his admission to and financial support from De Pauw University. After reviewing these papers at Angel Island, the Board of Special Inquiry allowed him to proceed, noting that he spoke English and was qualified as a student. Kyung Sik spent only one night on Angel Island, while many other prospective immigrants spent weeks and even months waiting to be cleared for entry into the United States. During that lonely night on Angel Island he wrote a poem lamenting the experience. When the Angel Island facility was renovated many years later dozens of these kinds of poems were found written and carved on the walls of the holding areas.

Pablo Guerrero (b. ca. 1885; date of death unknown)

The effects of the nationwide economic depression of the 1930s were especially severe for Mexican immigrants who had worked in factories, agricultural, and building jobs in the West. Overburdened relief agencies in Los Angeles collaborated with representatives of the Mexican consulate to repatriate thousands of immigrant workers back to Mexico. Charitable agencies assisted destitute Mexicans to board southbound trains. The County of Los Angeles started programs of deportation of unemployed workers and their families.

Most Mexicans who were forcibly returned to Mexico endured increasing poverty and few opportunities to make a living. Among this group was Pablo Guerrero, who tried to return to the United States. In 1934, Los Angeles County officials received a letter from Guerrero, who had been repatriated in 1932. He requested immigrant status for his wife and children, all of whom had been born in the United States. County officials did not grant his request. The Mexican population of Los Angeles decreased 30 percent between 1930 and 1935.

Essay Prompts

Defend or refute one of the following statements. Remember to use textual and visual evidence taken from the primary sources to back up your arguments.

1. The prospect of work was the primary motivation for immigrants to come to the US in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.
2. Most immigrants who came to America a century ago found it a fairly simple and humane process.
3. In the 19th and 20th centuries, the United States government made immigration policy based on what was best for the country, not on what was best for immigrants.