

DEFINING MOMENTS
THE DREAM OF AMERICA:
IMMIGRATION
1870-1920



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THE MELTING POT



“These [immigrant] men, women, and children were, to my mind, struggling up the face of a barren precipice ... sometimes in hope, sometimes in despair, yet bitterly determined; the abyss of vice, crime, pauperism, and vagrancy was beneath them, a tiny ray of hope above them.”

—Robert Hunter, *Poverty*, 1904

Once immigrants passed through Ellis Island and other processing centers across the United States, they confronted a strange and frightening world that was often far different from the one they had imagined. Many of these immigrants came from rural backgrounds, and they were overwhelmed by the sheer size of New York and other cities, as well as the chaotic clamor and bustle of American urban life. The sights, sounds, and smells of America were all unfamiliar, and many newcomers must have wondered if their newly adopted country would ever feel like home to them. “For many peasants it was the first time away from home, away from the safety of the circumscribed little villages in which they had passed all their years,” observed one historian. “Now they would learn to have dealings with people essentially different from themselves. Now they would collide with unaccustomed problems, learn to understand alien ways and alien languages, manage to survive in a grossly foreign environment.”¹

City of Immigrants

More than any other American city of the late 1800s and early 1900s, New York was completely transformed by immigration. The city’s labor and



Vibrant and crowded ethnic neighborhoods sprouted all across New York City during the great Age of Immigration.

housing patterns, its religious and political life, and its cultural flavor were all reshaped by the steady influx of individuals and families from Italy, Ireland, Russia, Austria-Hungary, Germany, Romania, Greece, and numerous other places. Of all the nation's metropolitan areas, New York City became its truest "melting pot"—a place where many different nationalities and ethnicities blended together. By the close of the nineteenth century, New York City contained 3.5 million people, more than twice as many residents as any other American city. Of this total, more than 80 percent were first- or second-generation immigrants. This influx became so great by 1900 that "in New York alone there are more persons of German descent than persons of native descent, and the German element is larger than in any city of Germany except Berlin," reported sociologist Robert Hunter. "There are nearly twice as many

Irish as in Dublin, about as many Jews as in Warsaw, and more Italians than in Naples or Venice.”²

Some emigrants from Europe stayed in New York City because they simply had no other options. As historian Oscar Handlin wrote, “Many a new arrival who thought simply to pause in the place where he landed was entrapped and never escaped. Some had exhausted all their funds in the coming and were already paupers when they came off the ship; these were unlikely ever to earn enough to take them away. Others simply stumbled in the unsuccessful struggle to overleap the hurdles of city life.”³

But many others who landed in New York City stayed there by choice. European Jews, for example, embraced the city. Weary of persecution in places where they were outnumbered, they settled in Jewish enclaves—neighborhoods founded by earlier generations of immigrants. And once they arrived in the United States, they rarely reconsidered their decision. For example, only one in twenty Jews who emigrated from Germany ever returned to their homeland—but more than one out of eight non-Jews eventually returned to Germany.

Jewish enclaves became larger and more prosperous as residents established a strong presence in the city’s retail and garment-making trades. Within these neighborhoods, Jews could practice their faith and culture without fear. In addition, New York’s multi-ethnic composition made it less likely that they would be singled out for persecution or violence when they went out into other parts of the city. One Jewish immigrant recalled that after her family emigrated from Romania in 1905 and settled in America, her mother was astounded that her daughter was treated kindly by her teacher and accepted by her fellow students. “My mother kept saying, ‘It’s the most wonderful thing in America that your child can go to school with gentile [non-Jewish] children, come home, her hair isn’t torn, her dress isn’t torn, she isn’t beaten up, she comes home, walks with these children in the street....’ To her, it was a miracle that nobody hit us, that nobody did anything to us.”⁴

Over time, ethnic enclaves in America’s great cities became principal destination points for multiple generations of immigrants. This phenomenon

“During the last hundred years,” wrote one American immigrant, “the ever-increasing millions of natives and newcomers have poured an incalculable sum of energy and labour into the work of transforming a boundless wilderness into a garden.”

made perfect sense; why wouldn't a Hungarian or Italian or Swedish immigrant want to make his or her new home in a place where the language and customs were familiar and comforting? In fact, some ethnic neighborhoods even became further divided by regional differences in dialect and cultural practices. For example, within the "Little Italy" section of New York City—a section known for its heavy population of Italian families and Italian-owned restaurants and businesses—some streets were dominated by emigrants from Sicily and other parts of southern Italy, while other streets were composed almost exclusively of Italians from the country's northern provinces.⁵

Life in the Tenements

In many cases, though, the comfort and support provided by these communities came at the price of terrible overcrowding and deplorable living conditions. This was especially true in New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Detroit, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, and other fast-growing industrial cities, where immigrants gathered to claim factory and construction jobs. By 1910, in fact, three out of five industrial workers in America were foreign-born.

These job opportunities put food on the table for immigrant workers, but they turned large sections of American cities into ethnic ghettos. Poorly built and maintained apartment buildings known as tenements became swollen with crowds of desperate aliens. Fire escapes and rooftops became social gathering places and even makeshift bedrooms because there simply was not enough space inside the buildings to handle all the people. City services could not keep pace with the population explosion, and streets and alleys alike became cesspools of garbage and human and animal waste. Not surprisingly, crime and disease both found fertile ground for growth in these dank and depressing areas.

Many of the individuals and families trapped in these tenements desperately wanted to leave. But many new arrivals—and even second-generation immigrants—did not have the economic power to relocate to healthier and more comfortable housing. In an age without cars or local mass transit options, workers had no other choice but to live in the shadows of the industrial factories where they worked. And competition for jobs was so fierce in many parts of the country that employers could keep wages low—even as they demanded long hours of toil in frequently dangerous working conditions. "Immigrants' livelihoods were precarious, and survival often meant that everyone in the fam-



Child employees at a cotton mill in South Carolina in 1908.

ily had to pitch in,” summarized one history of the era. “After school and on weekends, youngsters helped with piecework at home or took over household chores so their mothers could go out to work. Children peddled newspapers, sold chewing gum, shined shoes, or ran errands to bring in extra income. Millions of other children joined the ranks of adult laborers and worked ten to twelve hours a day in textile mills, glass factories, canneries, and coal mines.”⁶

Some Americans called on state and federal agencies to address the crushing poverty, unfair working conditions, and grim health problems that afflicted these urban pockets, but their calls went unanswered. Year after year, conditions in these “great foreign cities in our slums” worsened until they became “wildernesses of neglect,” in the words of sociologist Robert Hunter.⁷ Meaningful child labor and workplace safety laws were not passed until the first two decades of the twentieth century—and even then, some states were quicker to pass this type of legislation than others.

Everyone an Immigrant?

When the Industrial Revolution swept across the United States in the nineteenth century, it created new opportunities and challenges for millions of immigrants. But immigrants were not the only ones who had to navigate the turbulent waters stirred up by new technologies, new industries, and furious expansion into previously undeveloped territories. As the famous American journalist Walter Lippmann noted in his 1914 work *Drift and Mastery*, industrialization brought challenges for *all* people in America, not just newcomers. According to Lippman, the industrial era churned up feelings of unease and anxiety across all sectors of American society:

The most dramatic revelation of this crisis is among the newer immigrants in an American city. They come suddenly from the fixed traditions of peasant life into the distracting variety of a strange civilization. America for them is not only a foreign country where they have to find a living in ways to which they are unaccustomed; America is a place where their creeds do not work, where what at home seemed big and emphatic as the mountains is almost unnoticed. It is commonplace to say that the tide of emigration [since 1890] has shifted from the Northwest to the Southeast of Europe, and that America to-day is receiving a radically different stock than it did twenty years ago. That is undoubtedly true. But the difference is not only in the immigrants. America itself is different. Those who are coming to-day have to bridge a much greater gap than did those who entered this country when it was a nation of villages.

All of us are immigrants spiritually. We are all of us immigrants in the industrial world.... We are an uprooted people, newly arrived, and *nouveau riche* [newly rich]. As a nation we have all the vulgarity that goes with that, all the scattering of soul. The modern man is not yet settled in his world. It is strange to him, terrifying, alluring, and incomprehensibly big.

Source: Lippmann, Walter. *Drift and Mastery: An Attempt to Diagnose the Current Unrest*. New York: Mitchell Kennerley, 1914, p. 208.

By the 1890s, New York City contained more than 39,000 dank and dirty tenement buildings that were stuffed with more than 1.33 million people. The vast majority of these unfortunate souls were immigrants who had fled various parts of Europe in search of a better life. Instead, some of them found themselves wishing that they had never left their homeland. “Here is a woman,” explained one historian:

In the Old Country she had lived much of her life, done most of her work, outdoors. In America, the [tenement] flat confines her. She divides up her domain by calico sheets hung on ropes, tries to make a place for her people and possessions. But there is no place and she has not room to turn about. It is true, everything is in poor repair, the rain comes through the ceilings, the wind blows dirt through the cracks in the wall. But she does not even know how to go about restoring order, establishing cleanliness. She breaks her back to exterminate the proliferating vermin. What does she get? A dozen lice behind the collar.⁸

To some observers, the conditions in the tenements indicated that the American dream of equal opportunity and good fortune would remain out of reach for entire generations of immigrants. According to their perspectives, the conditions in the tenements seemed to call into question whether America was truly a place where all men and women could meet their fullest potential, irrespective of their ethnic heritage or religious background.

In fact, Hunter and other reformers charged that native-born Americans seemed increasingly willing to lay the foundations for their own comfort and prosperity on the bruised and ragged shoulders of long-suffering immigrant laborers. “In the poorest quarters of many great American cities and industrial communities one is struck by a most peculiar fact—the poor are almost entirely foreign born,” wrote Hunter.

On a small scale we have Russia’s poverty, Poland’s poverty, Italy’s poverty, Hungary’s poverty, Bohemia’s poverty—and what other nation’s have we not? ... In certain large cities of this country almost everything separates “the classes and the masses” except the feeling which inheres in the word “humanity.” The rich and well-to-do are mostly Americans; the poor

are mostly foreign, drawn from among the miserable of every nation. The citizen and the slave of Greece were scarcely more effectually separated.... In [other] countries there are the masters and the workmen; the rich and the poor, separated by wealth, by position, and by place of dwelling. But in the largest cities of America there are many other things which separate the rich and the poor. Language, institutions, customs, and even religion separate the native and the foreigner. It is this separation which makes the problem of poverty in America more difficult of solution than that of any other nation.⁹

Despite all this, however, many of the immigrants who toiled in the factories, mills, oil fields, and smelters of turn-of-the-century America continued to persevere. They refused to give up, even as disease, crime, workplace accidents, and feelings of hopelessness picked off fellow immigrants to their left and right. And for millions of these men and women, the years of hard work eventually enabled them to build better lives for their families—and a proud legacy to pass on to their children.

Looking Beyond the Cities

From its opening in 1892 until its closure in 1954, Ellis Island processed the arrival of twelve million immigrants to America's shores. About four million of these aliens settled in the New York metropolitan area, but the remaining eight million built lives in other parts of the country. Industrial cities in the Northeast and the Great Lakes region were the leading destination for these immigrants, but the territories of the Great Plains, the Southwest, and the West Coast also received significant immigrant infusions. The Deep South, on the other hand, received comparatively few immigrants during this period. Economic opportunities were more limited in the South than in other parts of the country, and immigrants distrusted its history of racial violence and bigotry.

Unlike some of the industrial cities of the North, which struggled mightily to absorb the relentless waves of new immigrants, less populated parts of the West were eager to accept newcomers. Business leaders and legislators west of the Mississippi River actively campaigned to attract the attention of immigrants, which were seen as key to the settlement and economic development of the West. And over time, their efforts to lure immigrants away from the great cities of the East gained momentum.



Immigrants wait to board a train in Minneapolis, c. 1910.

America's all-powerful railroad industry played a central role in these campaigns. The Iron Horse, as the locomotive was often called, completely reshaped the economic and societal character of the United States during the nineteenth century. This exciting technology made it much easier for manufacturers and farmers to send their products to market, allowed harvesters of coal, timber, and other natural resources to penetrate the most remote corners of the continent, and made coast-to-coast travel a practical reality for the first time. Railroad promoter and land speculator William Gilpin spoke for millions of nineteenth-century Americans when he declared that "railways, multiplied and spanning the continent, are essential domestic institutions—more powerful and more permanent than law, or popular consent, or political constitutions. They thoroughly complete the grand system ... which fraternizes us into one people."¹⁰

Once railroads came to be accepted as essential to the settlement of the West and the economic development of the entire nation, the federal government worked mightily to aid the industry. During the 1850s, 1860s, and 1870s

the federal government gave huge land grants to the railroads. All told, dozens of railroads received grants of western land totaling more than 170 million acres during this time. As soon as they received these gifts, railroad companies turned their attention to convincing immigrants and restless native-born citizens of the East to come settle it. The railroad owners knew that if they could bring farmers, miners, ranchers, craftsmen, and storekeepers to their empty lands, their landholdings would jump in value. Even more importantly, they would be able to generate increased revenue from transporting wheat, corn, coal, timber, cattle, and other trade goods produced by these settlers.

Selling the West

Determined to maximize their profits, American railroads became the single greatest voice urging new immigrants to consider starting their new lives in the West. They set up sophisticated operations in major eastern port cities to convince new arrivals from Europe to look west for their fortunes. Promoters distributed colorful posters, brochures, and pamphlets throughout ethnic neighborhoods. These pieces of propaganda described wide swaths of the West as wonderlands of natural beauty, rich farming soil, and ideal weather.

Some of these promotional brochures provided a fairly accurate reflection of conditions in California and other parts of the West. Some regions *did* have good weather, good soil, and abundant resources. As a result, from the 1850s through the 1880s, “immigrants and disenchanting easterners poured into prairie states like Nebraska, Iowa, and Missouri, their imaginations alight with the promises of prosperity fed to them by the railroad land agents who prowled the streets of New York, Boston, and Philadelphia.”¹¹ Many of these fortune seekers left for the West via special “immigrant trains” that the railroad companies established in the nation’s leading eastern seaports.

Other promotional campaigns, though, used blatant falsehoods to lure immigrants. Railroad companies that operated in semi-arid territories of the Great Plains, for example, brazenly misled settlers about soil quality and rainfall levels. In many cases, these claims worked just as well as the more legitimate ones.

American railroad companies devoted even more energy to their promotional efforts in Europe. Their widely distributed posters, pamphlets, and other advertisements, combined with those of steamship companies and others who benefited financially from immigration, exerted a powerful pull on



Finnish-American loggers pose at a Great Lakes timber camp, c. 1915.

millions of restless Europeans. U.S. railroad giants sold hundreds of thousands of tickets each year to European immigrants. Many of these tickets were package deals that included steamship passage to Ellis Island or other major points of entry.

One of the most successful strategies employed by the railroads was to encourage “group settlement” or colonization. Under these plans, large groups of families from a single European village or town agreed to relocate to the American West and re-establish their community there. These arrangements were enormously profitable to railroads because it enabled them to sell dozens or even hundreds of tickets at one time. But colonization provided genuine benefits to immigrants as well. It enabled them to resettle in America among familiar neighbors who held the same values, beliefs, cultural traditions, and farming practices—and spoke the same language. As a result, group settlement was promoted by a wide range of religious groups and benevolent societies in Europe as a way to simultaneously maintain Old World beliefs and enjoy New World prosperity.

Ethnic Germans from Russia, Swedish Lutherans, and Irish Catholics were among the leaders of the colonization method of immigration. These and other groups transplanted themselves all the way from Europe to various parts of the Midwest, Great Plains, and Intermountain West. Once they reached their destinations, they dusted off their cultural traditions and religious practices at the same time that they unpacked their clothing, family heirlooms, and farming tools.

Sometimes these mass relocations from Europe were initiated by a single individual or family who became established, then sent word back home for others to follow. These so-called migration chains became an important element in the settlement of the West. By 1900, in fact, “the majority of immigrants were traveling on prepaid tickets sent from America, indicating the remarkable strength of family ties and the human desire for roots and continuity.”¹²

However they arrived in the West, the new immigrants immediately lent their labor and ingenuity and determination to the cause of settlement and development. And their contributions, combined with the efforts of native-born Americans, transformed the continent into a mighty economic machine that generated ever-greater percentages of the planet’s production of wheat, cotton, oil, beef, and other goods. This knowledge was a source of tremendous pride for immigrants such as British-born Horace J. Bridges. Writing in his 1919 memoir *On Becoming an American*, Bridges declared that

During the last hundred years, the ever-increasing millions of natives and newcomers have poured an incalculable sum of energy and labour into the work of transforming a boundless wilderness into a garden. Nothing in the world’s history is comparable with what has been done here. We have million-peopled cities where, within the memory of men yet living, there were primeval solitudes. Trackless deserts and virgin mountains have been spanned by magnificent railways. What has elsewhere been the growth of generations and centuries has here been accomplished in years and decades.¹³

Finding Work

Wherever immigrants decided to settle in America, their first priority was to find jobs. In many cases, ethnic groups were drawn to regions where

the dominant industries could make use of skills and knowledge that the immigrants already possessed. In other words, immigrants who had worked as farmers, miners, and textile-makers in Europe gravitated to regions of the United States where farming, mining, and textile jobs could be found. By the late 1800s, this phenomenon was evident all around the country. “Many Scandinavians traveled to Minnesota and went into farming, while Slavic groups tended to go to the mines and steel mills in Pennsylvania and slaughterhouses in Chicago,” explained one history of the era. “French Canadians made up the majority of workers in New England’s textile mills. Mexicans, Japanese, Chinese and Filipinos generally headed for California and other western states, where they worked in farming and manufacturing or opened small businesses.... By 1897, about 75 percent of the construction workers in New York City were Italian immigrants, and the same was true of other major cities.”¹⁴

This tremendous influx of immigrant labor received a mixed reception in America. Certainly, the owners and managers of the country’s factories, mills, construction companies, and shipyards were happy to receive these workers. The immigrants provided them with a vast pool of labor willing to work long hours in poor conditions for meager pay. As a famous 1907-1908 report by the Russell Sage Foundation bluntly stated, the powerful Pittsburgh-based Carnegie Steel empire liked to hire new immigrants because of “their habit of silent submission ... and their willingness to work long hours and overtime without a murmur.”¹⁵

These same attributes, however, greatly alarmed workers who were already struggling to make ends meet in America. The leadership of early labor unions such as the American Federation of Labor and the Knights of Labor opposed unrestricted immigration as a threat to good wages and job security. These groups played an important role in the passage of laws such as one in 1885 that outlawed “contract laborers”—immigrants who came to America with jobs already promised to them. And their hostility to immigrants became even greater after factory owners began using immigrants as strike breakers—workers called in to replace employees who called labor strikes to seek better wages and working conditions.

The labor movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, though, was not unified on this issue. Some workers believed that immigrants who were brought into the union fold could actually increase labor’s power

and leverage in its dealings with management. And they argued that bigotry against the new wave of immigrants was not only unwise but unjust. “We have no right to raise a cry against any class of human beings because of their nationality,” declared the Irish-born union activist Joseph McDonnell.

Let our first stand be against those rich and intelligent thieves who strive to perpetuate and establish a system of overwork and starvation pay. And then against all those, whether they be Chinese or American, Irish or English, French or German, Spanish or Italian who refuse to cooperate with us for their good and ours, and that of the whole human family.... We favor every effort against the conspiracy of the rich to import cheap labor from Europe and Asia, but we warn the workingmen that no action but International Labor action, and no cry but that of high wages and short hours will lead us into the promised land of peace, plenty, and happiness.¹⁶

But cultural and language barriers, combined in some cases with long-standing ethnic tensions between different groups, made unionizing the immigrants a difficult task. In addition, many companies and industries actively worked to stoke ethnic tensions between different groups so as to keep them from taking united stands against management.

Helping Hands and Cold Shoulders

Immigrants also received a mixed reception from the wider American public. Some native-born Americans and long-established emigrants from Western Europe saw no reason to fear the men and women who poured into the United States from Eastern Europe, Asia, and elsewhere during the late 1800s and early 1900s. They did not view the arrival of these newcomers as a threat to American culture and vitality. Instead, they saw their entrance as an opportunity for national enrichment. They also recognized that many immigrants were eager to assimilate and become fully “American” (see “Forging a New Identity in America,” p. 172).

Finally, immigration supporters believed that by taking the best elements of each ethnic group, America could forge a new and exciting identity for itself. And many of these Americans believed that they had a moral obligation to lend a helping hand to the newcomers. “Everybody had something to give



Some Italian immigrants supported themselves in America as fruit vendors, selling their wares at open-air markets.

me for help,” recalled a Jew who emigrated from Russia in 1908. “It wasn’t a question of money, it was a question of being a human being to a human being. And in those days people were apparently that way. There were so many nice people that were trying to help us when we came to this country.”¹⁷

Support for immigrants took many other forms as well. Influential journalists like Jacob Riis sought to assure fellow Americans that schools and other institutions would help newcomers assimilate. “While the [American] flag flies over the public school, keep it aloft over Ellis Island and have no misgivings. The school has the answer to your riddle.”¹⁸ This confidence proved well-placed. American schools taught young immigrants how to read, write, and speak English and instructed them in U.S. history, government, and customs. In numerous instances, this deep indoctrination into the national culture helped children become “American” much more quickly than their parents.



Immigrant children playing on the roof of an elementary school in Boston in 1909.

In addition, social reformers like Jane Addams, Lillian Wald, and Grace Abbott founded influential charitable organizations and settlement houses to help immigrant families survive in the big cities. By 1910, more than 400 settlement houses across the country were providing a helping hand to newcomers. These facilities assisted immigrants with everything from finding jobs and providing child care to learning English. Settlement houses also became important rallying places for urban reformers seeking to improve workplace safety, eliminate child labor, and strengthen municipal trash collection, tenement inspections, and public aid programs. Their efforts bore fruit in the first two decades of the twentieth century, when many laws designed to protect workers and consumers—and rein in the power and greed of corporations—were passed at local, state, and federal levels.

Another important source of aid for new immigrants was the benevolent society. These groups were charitable organizations established by various

ethnic and religious groups to help needy fellow members when they came to America. For example, New York City's Russian Jews formed the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) to provide shelter, meals, transportation, and job leads for fellow Jews after they landed at Ellis Island. The HIAS even provided legal defense services for Jews who were targeted for deportation by Ellis Island inspectors. "Immigrants used to come in crying and crying," recalled one Jewish immigrant who eventually took a job with HIAS. "My heart would break, and naturally you tried to do the best you could for them. Having been an immigrant, I knew what they're going through."¹⁹

Other segments of American society, however, did not welcome the immigrants that poured into the country from the 1870s through the early 1920s (see "A Native-born American Lashes Out at East European Immigrants," p. 152). In addition to the opposition based on fears about job security and wages, many Americans simply believed that the newcomers posed a threat to their way of life. Some believed that America's unity and strength would gradually fade if it was forever trying to assimilate different ethnic traditions and belief systems. Concerns were also raised about the fast-dwindling availability of public land for settlement and development, as well as America's depletion of its forests and other natural resources.

Others opposed immigration for more nakedly bigoted reasons. They thought that the new immigrants hailing from southern and eastern Europe and Asia were of inferior moral character and intelligence, and they treated them with the same contempt that they directed at Native Americans and African Americans whose distant ancestors had been born on American soil. "They wanted the complete exclusion of people different from themselves," wrote Progressive Era historian Michael McGerr. "Not content to let immigrants live apart in urban enclaves, these Americans ... advocated immigration restriction, a wall built around the United States."²⁰ And in 1924, after nearly a half-century of effort, these anti-immigration forces finally got what they wanted.

Notes

- ¹ Handlin, Oscar. *The Uprooted*. 1951. Reprint. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002, p. 35.
- ² Hunter, Robert. *Poverty*. New York: Macmillan, 1904, p. 262.
- ³ Handlin, p. 49.
- ⁴ Quoted in Coan, Peter Morton. *Ellis Island Interviews: In Their Own Words*. New York: Facts on File, 1997, p. 328.
- ⁵ *Immigrants: The New Americans*. Editors of Time-Life Books. New York: Time-Life, 1999, p. 49.

- ⁶ Chermayeff, Ivan, Fred Wasserman, and Mary J. Shapiro. *Ellis Island: An Illustrated History of the Immigrant Experience*. New York: Macmillan, 1991, pp. 63-64.
- ⁷ Hunter, p. 266.
- ⁸ Handlin, pp. 135-6.
- ⁹ Hunter, pp. 262-63.
- ¹⁰ Quoted in *New Perspectives on the West*, PBS, 1996. Available online at www.pbs.org/thewest/program/episodes/five/onepeople.htm
- ¹¹ Hillstrom, Kevin. "Origins and Development," in *The Industrial Revolution in America: Railroads*. Edited by Kevin Hillstrom and Laurie Collier Hillstrom. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2005, p. 22.
- ¹² Chermayeff, p. 26.
- ¹³ Bridges, Horace J. *On Becoming an American: Some Meditations of a Newly Naturalized Immigrant*. Boston: M. Jones, 1919, p. 10.
- ¹⁴ Chermayeff, p. 56, 59.
- ¹⁵ Fitch, John. *The Pittsburgh Survey, Vol. 3: The Steel Workers*. New York: Charities Publication Committee, 1910.
- ¹⁶ McDonnell, Joseph. "The Chinese Must Go." *Labor Standard* (New York), June 30, 1878. Available online at www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/asian_voices/voices_display.cfm?id=24.
- ¹⁷ Quoted in Chermayeff, p. 76.
- ¹⁸ McGerr, Michael. *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 211.
- ¹⁹ Quoted in Coan, p. 245.
- ²⁰ McGerr, p. 211.



George Frisbie Hoar (1826-1904)

Republican Senator and Advocate for Immigrants

George Frisbie Hoar was born on August 29, 1826, in Concord, Massachusetts. His parents were Sarah (Sherman) and Samuel Hoar, and he was the grandson of Roger Sherman, who had helped draft both the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution. He attended Concord Academy before enrolling at Harvard College. After earning his undergraduate degree in 1846, he enrolled in Harvard Law School. He graduated with a law degree in 1849 and promptly began practicing law in Worcester, Massachusetts.

In the early 1850s Hoar briefly involved himself with the Free Soil Party in Massachusetts, but he quickly moved on to the Republican Party. He became an important state party organizer in the 1860s and 1870s, and he was elected to serve in both the state House of Representatives (in 1852) and Senate (in 1857).

In 1869 Hoar was elected to the first of four consecutive terms in the U.S. House of Representatives. During these eight years he became one of Congress's greatest supporters of black civil rights and women's suffrage. In 1877 the Massachusetts state legislature appointed him to an open seat in the U.S. Senate. Hoar represented Massachusetts in that capacity until his death, winning re-election four different times during that 27-year span.

A Friend to Immigrants

As a U.S. Senator, Hoar consistently fought for equal rights for all Americans. He believed that the Constitution guaranteed such equality. With this in mind, he was contemptuous of the American Protective Association (APA), an anti-immigration group built on a foundation of "nativism"—preferential treatment for native-born Americans and hostility toward the foreign-born.

In the late 1870s Hoar expressed particular disgust with anti-Chinese bigotry in the American West. When anti-immigration forces introduced the Chinese Exclusion Act in Congress in 1882, Hoar attacked the bill as un-American and deeply unfair to Chinese immigrants. "During Senate debate," noted one

historian, “Hoar was virtually alone among Republicans in defending the rights of Chinese immigrants. In the West, anti-Chinese groups held rallies in which Hoar ... was denounced and burned in effigy.”¹ Hoar’s efforts, though, were not enough to prevent the bill’s passage. The Act choked off virtually all Chinese immigration to America for the next half-century, and it made it impossible for Chinese immigrants already in the United States to become citizens.

In the 1880s Hoar spent much of his time working on legislation to address corporate corruption. He was an important architect of the 1890 Sherman Antitrust Act, one of the earliest Congressional efforts to rein in the powerful corporate trusts that dominated the U.S. economy. As the 1890s unfolded, he repeatedly opposed the anti-immigration maneuvers of the Immigration Restriction League (IRL), despite the fact that the other U.S. senator from Massachusetts, Henry Cabot Lodge, was the League’s closest Congressional ally. Hoar also vocally opposed Republican President William McKinley’s military action in the Philippines, even though it was enormously popular with many of his fellow Republicans.

Hoar remained one of the Senate’s great champions of immigrant rights into the early years of the twentieth century. This was an era in which hostility toward immigrants was on the rise in many parts of America. But Hoar never faltered in his belief that immigration was essential to America’s historic development and its future vitality and health. In 1903, for example, he delivered a commencement address at the University of Iowa in which he declared that, in America,

prosperity and adversity, hope and fear, joy and sorrow, come to all alike. As civilization and wealth grow, they come to read the same books and to think the same thoughts. They follow the same flag. They stand side by side on the same battle fields. The kindly charities of life melt the ice [between people of different backgrounds and origins]... I think we can affirm without doubt, if history teaches us anything, that the greatest and strongest nations always have been and always will be those that are constantly getting new blood from an unbroken stream of immigration.²

When he was not engaged in Senate business, Hoar pursued a wide range of other interests. He was an avid reader of English and classical litera-

ture and history, and he contributed his time and energy to the development of the U.S. Library of Congress. Hoar also served as a regent of the Smithsonian Institution for many years, and he served as an overseer of Harvard University from 1874 to 1880 and then again from 1896 to 1904. He was also known for his dedication to the Unitarian Church and his fondness for friends and family. Hoar died on September 30, 1904.

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¹ Tichenor, Daniel J. *Dividing Lines: The Politics of Immigration Control in America*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002, p. 106.

² Hoar, George Frisbie. "American Citizenship. Address delivered before the state university of Iowa, June 17, 1903. Iowa City: State University of Iowa, 1903.

Forging a New Identity in America

Every immigrant's experience in America was unique. Some thrived in their adopted country, while others experienced years of disappointment and heartbreak. Millions disappeared into America's great cities of the east, while millions of others headed west to establish themselves. And although many immigrants found jobs and raised their families in ethnic communities and neighborhoods, many others left the familiarity and security of these enclaves in their search for financial and spiritual fulfillment.

Marcus Eli Ravage was one of the immigrants to America whose quest for a better life took him far away from the ethnic immigrant neighborhoods that many of his fellow travelers chose. A Jew raised in Romania, Ravage left his homeland for the United States in 1900, at just sixteen years of age. He never saw his parents again. After reaching America, he found work in a textile workshop in New York and found companionship with friends and relatives who had also emigrated from Romania. But he later left his Romanian Jewish neighborhood in New York to attend school at the University of Missouri in Columbia. He then became a journalist and part-time rabbi.

The following excerpt is from An American in the Making, Ravage's 1917 memoir of his immigration experience. In the first part of the excerpt, Ravage explains how difficult it was for immigrants to learn American ways. In the second part, he discusses how his university experience led him to leave New York City behind and forge a new "American" identity.

Oh, if I could show you America as we of the oppressed peoples see it! If I could bring home to you even the smallest fraction of this sacrifice and this upheaval, the dreaming and the strife, the agony and the heartache, the endless disappointments, the yearning and the despair—all of which must be ours before we can make a home for our battered spirits in this land of yours. Perhaps, if we be young, we dream of riches and adventure, and if we be grown men we may merely seek a haven for our outraged human souls and a safe retreat for our hungry wives and children. Yet, however aggrieved we may feel toward our native home, we cannot but regard our leaving it as a violent severing of the ties of our life, and look beyond toward our new home as a sort of glorified exile. So, whether we be young or old, something of ourselves we always leave behind in our hapless, cherished birthplaces. And the heaviest share of our burden inevitably falls on the loved ones that remain when we are gone. We make no illusions for ourselves. Though we may expect wealth, we have no thought of returning. It is farewell forever. We are not setting out on a trip; we are emigrating. Yes, we are emi-

grating, and there is our experience, our ordeal, in a nutshell. It is the one-way passport for us every time. For we have glimpsed a vision of America, and we start out resolved that, whatever the cost, we shall make her our own. In our heavy-laden hearts we are already Americans. In our own dumb way we have grasped her message to us.

Yes, we immigrants have a real claim on America. Every one of us who did not grow faint-hearted at the start of the battle and has stuck it out has earned a share in America by the ancient right of conquest. We have had to subdue this new home of ours to make it habitable, and in conquering it we have conquered ourselves. We are not what we were when you saw us landing from the Ellis Island ferry. Our own kinsfolk do not know us when they come over. We sometimes hardly know ourselves....

It seems to be assumed by the self-complacent native that we immigrants are at once and overwhelmingly captivated by America and all things American. The mere sight of this new world, he fancies, should fill our hearts with the joy of dreams realized and leave us in a state of surfeited contentment, empty of all further desire. Why, he would ask, if the doubt were ever to occur to him—why should we not be happy? Have we not left our own country because we were in one way or another discontented there? And if we have chosen America, it is quite clear that we must have been attracted by what she offered us in substitution. Besides, no man with eyes could fail to see right off the superiority of this great Republic to every other country on the face of the earth. Witness how the tide of immigration is forever flowing—and always in one direction. If the alien were dissatisfied with America, would he not be taking the first steamer back instead of inviting his friends and family to follow him?

And yet, in spite of logic and appearances, the truth remains that the immigrant is almost invariably disappointed in America. At any rate, of this much I am certain: I myself was very bitterly disappointed in America. And, unless observation has been altogether astray with me, I think I am justified in the generalization that nearly all other new-comers are at least as disappointed as I was. It was not that this land of my aspirations had failed to come up to my dream of it, although in a measure it did fall short there. Neither was my disillusionment due to the dreariness, the sordidness, and the drudgery of immigrant life, although this, too, may have entered into the equation. All these things came only later. I am writing of the first impact of America—or of

that small fraction of it which was America to me—of the initial shock that came to me when I first set foot on American soil. And I say that long before I had had time to find out what my own fate would be in this new world, I experienced a revulsion of feeling of the most distressful sort.

What were the reasons for it? Well, there were a variety of them: To begin with, the alien who comes here from Europe is not the raw material that Americans suppose him to be. He is not a blank sheet to be written on as you see fit. He has not sprung out of nowhere. Quite the contrary. He brings with him a deep-rooted tradition, a system of culture and tastes and habits—a point of view which is as ancient as his national experience and which has been engendered in him by his race and his environment. And it is this thing—this entire Old World soul of his—that comes in conflict with America as soon as he has landed. Not, I beg you to observe, with America of the Americans; not, at any rate, immediately. Of that greater and remoter world in which the native resides we immigrants are for a long time hardly aware. What rare flashes of it do come within range of our blurred vision reveal a planet so alien and far removed from our experience that they strike us as merely comical or fantastic—a set of phenomena so odd that we can only smile over them but never be greatly concerned with them....

On the whole, I take it, the foreign colony in our larger cities is a little unfavorably regarded by the conventional enthusiasts for Americanization. These kindly ladies and gentlemen appear to assume that the trick of turning American is some kind of an affair of a rubber stamp and an oath of allegiance and bath-tubs. It is quite simple. You go down there, to the East Side, or Little Italy, or Little Poland, and you establish a settlement and deliver lectures and furnish them a pointed example, and behold! the fog lifts, and before your eyes stands the new-born American. The sooner this effective performance is accomplished the better, for it is quite clear that the immigrant invariably hails from an inferior world, with queer notions about manners and the use of soap and fresh air and constitutions, and if he is long left to himself and his fellows he will settle down to this pestiferous imported life of his and never become one of us at all. He will become a confirmed alien, a dangerous, disruptive element.

Into this complacent view the patent fact that Americanism is a compromise does not enter. It is quite overlooked that the adoptive American has always been and will always remain a composite American. My good friends

are unwilling to see that the alien has as much to teach as to learn, that his readjustment is inevitably a matter of give and take, and that he only begins to feel at home in this new country when he has succeeded in blending his own culture and ideas and mode of life with those of the people that came here before him. Your self-complacent native takes stock of the Americanized alien and cries, delightedly, "See how America has changed him!" But I suppose he would be greatly astonished if the immigrant were to answer, with equal truth, "Look how I have changed America!" ...

[Ravage saved up enough money to attend the University of Missouri for a year. Unsure of himself, he struggled to make friends with his fellow students, most of whom had been born and raised in America. At the end of his freshman year Ravage returned to New York City, where other family members lived and where he hoped to earn money for a second year of study at Missouri. Upon returning to his old neighborhood, however, Ravage realized that his year out west had changed him forever.]

So to New York I went, and lived through the last and the bitterest episode in the romance of readjustment. During that whole strenuous year [at Missouri], while I was fighting my battle for America, I had never for a moment stopped to figure the price it was costing me. I had not dreamed that my mere going to Missouri had opened up a gulf between me and the world I had come from, and that every step I was taking toward my ultimate goal was a stride away from everything that had once been mine, that had once been myself. Now, no sooner had I alighted from the train than it came upon me with a pang that that one year out there had loosened ties that I had imagined were eternal.

There was [brother] Paul faithfully at the ferry, and as I came off he rushed up to me and threw his arms around me and kissed me affectionately. Did I kiss him back? I am afraid not. He took the grip [suitcase] out of my hand and carried it to the Brooklyn Bridge. Then we boarded a car. I asked him where we were going, and he said, mysteriously, "To Harry's." A surprise was awaiting me, apparently. As we entered the little alley of a store in the Italian quarter I looked about me and saw no one. But suddenly there was a burst of laughter from a dozen voices, a door or two opened violently, and my whole family was upon me—brothers, a new sister-in-law, cousins of various degrees, some old people, a few children. They rushed me into the apartment behind the store, pelting me with endearments and with questions. The table was set as for a Purim [a Jewish holiday] feast. There was an odor of pot-

roasted chicken, and my eye caught a glimpse of chopped eggplant. As the meal progressed my heart was touched by their loving thoughtfulness.

Nothing had been omitted—not even the red wine and the Turkish peas and rice. Harry and every one else kept on urging me to eat. “It’s a long time since you have had a real meal,” said my sister-in-law. How true it was! But I felt constrained, and ate very little. Here were the people and the things I had so longed to be with; but I caught myself regarding them with the eyes of a Western American. Suddenly—at one glance, as it were—I grasped the answer to the problem that had puzzled me so long; for here in the persons of those dear to me I was seeing myself as those others had seen me.

I went about revisiting old scenes and found that everything had changed in my brief absence. My friends were not the same; the East Side was not the same. They never would be the same. What had come over them? My kinsfolk and my old companions looked me over and declared that it was I who had become transformed. I had become soberer. I carried myself differently. There was an unfamiliar reserve, something mingled of coldness and melancholy, in my eye. My very speech had a new intonation. It was more incisive, but less fluent, less cordial, they thought. Perhaps so. At any rate, while my people were still dear to me, and always would be dear to me, the atmosphere about them repelled me. If it was I who had changed, then, as I took in the little world I had emerged from, I could not help telling myself that the change was a salutary one.

While calling at the old basement bookshop on East Broadway I suddenly heard a horrible wailing and lamenting on the street. A funeral procession was hurrying by, followed by several women in an open carriage. Their hair was flying, their faces were red with weeping, their bodies were swaying grotesquely to the rhythm of their violent cries. The oldest in the group continued mechanically to address the body in the hearse: “Husband dear, upon whom have you left us? Upon whom, husband dear?” A young girl facing her in the vehicle looked about in a terrified manner, seized every now and then the hand of her afflicted mother, and tried to quiet her. The frightful scene, with its tragic display, its abysmal ludicrousness, its barbarous noise, revolted me. I had seen the like of it before, but that was in another life. I had once been part of such a performance myself, and the grief of it still lingered somewhere in my motley soul. But now I could only think of the affecting simplicity, the quiet, unobtrusive solemnity of a burial I had witnessed the previous spring in the West.

The afternoon following my arrival I flew up-town to see Esther. She waved to me and smiled as I approached—she had been waiting on the “stoop.” As she shook my hand in her somewhat masculine fashion she took me in with a glance, and the first thing she said was, “What a genteel person you have become! You have changed astonishingly.” “Do you think so?” I asked her. “I am afraid I haven’t. At least they do not think so in Missouri.” Then she told me that she had got only ten points, but that she was expecting three more in the fall. She was almost resigned to wait another year before entering college. That would enable her to make her total requirements, save up a little more money, and get her breath.... “But let us not talk about my troubles. You are full of things to tell me, I know.”

Yes, I had lots I wanted to say, but I did not know where to begin; and the one thing that was uppermost in my mind I was afraid to utter lest she should misunderstand and feel injured and reproach me. I did not want her to reproach me on first meeting. I wanted to give myself time as well as her. And so we fell into one of those customary long silences, and for a while I felt at home again, and reflected that perhaps I had been hasty in letting the first poignant reactions mislead me....

[They then attend a political gathering downtown, where the featured speaker attacked American capitalism to a crowd composed largely of poor immigrants. Ravage finds the speaker to be “honest and fiery and ill-informed,” and after he and Esther leave the hall he decides to declare “what I had hesitated to tell her earlier in the evening.”]

“Save yourself, my dear friend. Run as fast as you can. You will find a bigger and a freer world than this. Promise me that you will follow me to the West this fall. You will thank me for it. Those big, genuine people out in Missouri are the salt of the earth. Whatever they may think about the problem of universal brotherhood, they have already solved it for their next-door neighbors. There is no need of the social revolution in Missouri; they have a generous slice of the kingdom of heaven.”

Maybe I was exaggerating, but that was how I felt. From this distance and from these surroundings Missouri and the new world she meant to me was enchanting and heroic. The loneliness I had endured, the snubbing, the ridicule, the inner struggles—all the dreariness and the sadness of my life in exile—had faded out of the picture, and what remained was only an idealized

vision of the clean manhood, the large human dignity, the wholesome, bracing atmosphere of it, which contrasted so strikingly with the things around me.

No, there was no sense in deceiving myself, the East Side had somehow ceased to be my world. I had thought a few days ago that I was going home. I had yelled to Harvey [a college friend] from the train as it was pulling out of the station at Columbia, "I am going home, old man!" But I had merely come to another strange land. In the fall I would return to that other exile. I was, indeed, a man without a country.

During that entire summer, while I opened gates on an Elevated train in Brooklyn, I tussled with my problem. It was quite apparent to me from the first what its solution must be. I knew that now there was no going back for me; that my only hope lay in continuing in the direction I had taken, however painful it may be to my loved ones and to myself. But for a long time I could not admit it to myself. A host of voices and sights and memories had awakened within me that clutched me to my people and to my past. As long as I remained in New York I kept up the tragic farce of making Sunday calls on brother Harry and pretending that all was as before, that America and education had changed nothing, that I was still one of them. I had taken a room in a remote quarter of Brooklyn, where there were few immigrants, under the pretense that it was nearer to the railway barns. But I was deceiving no one but myself. Most of my relatives, who had received me so heartily when I arrived, seemed to be avoiding Harry's house on Sundays, and on those rare occasions when I ran into one of them he seemed frigid and ill-at-ease. Once Paul said to me: "You are very funny. It looks as if you were ashamed of the family. You aren't really, are you? You know they said you would be when you went away. There is a lot of foolish talk about it. Everybody speaks of Harry and me as the doctor's brothers. Can't you warm up?"

I poured out my heart in a letter to Harvey. If a year ago I had been told that I would be laying my sorrows and my disappointments in my own kindred before any one out there, I would have laughed at the idea. But that barbarian in Missouri was the only human being, strangely enough, in whom I could now confide with any hope of being understood. I tried to convey to him some idea of the agonizing moral experience I was going through. I told him that I was aching to get back to Columbia (how apt the name was!) to take up again where I had left off the process of my transformation, and to get through with it as soon as might be.

And in the fall I went back—this time a week before college opened—and was met by Harvey at the station, just as those rural-looking boys had been met by their friends the year before. When I reached the campus I was surprised to see how many people knew me. Scores of them came up and slapped me on the back and shook hands in their hearty, boisterous fashion, and hoped that I had had a jolly summer. I was asked to join boarding-clubs, to become a member in debating societies, to come and see this fellow or that in his room. It took me off my feet, this sudden geniality of my fellows toward me. I had not been aware how, throughout the previous year, the barriers between us had been gradually and steadily breaking down. It came upon me all at once. I felt my heart going out to my new friends. I had become one of them. I was not a man without a country. I was an American.

Source: Ravage, M.E. *An American in the Making: The Life Story of an Immigrant*. New York: Harper, 1917, pp. vii-viii, 59-61, 137-38, 258-66.

IMPORTANT PEOPLE, PLACES, AND TERMS

Addams, Jane (1860-1935)

Social worker and activist for immigrants and poor Americans

Assimilation

The process in which an immigrant becomes part of another culture, usually by adopting the language, customs, and other characteristics of that culture

Contract laborer

Immigrant worker who makes arrangements to take a specific job before making the journey to America

Coolidge, Calvin (1872-1933)

30th president of the United States, who served from 1923 to 1929

Dillingham Commission

A joint Congressional committee that issued a series of reports in 1910-11 identifying immigrants as a major source of America's social and economic problems—and urging the institution of a literacy test for all immigrants

Emigration

The act of leaving one country or region for another with the intention of establishing a new life

Group settlement

Instances in which large groups of families from single communities immigrate to America together

Hall, Prescott E. (1868-1921)

Co-Founder and General Secretary of the Immigration Restriction League

CHRONOLOGY

1607

English settlers land in what is today Chesapeake Bay, Virginia, and establish the colony of Jamestown.

1619

The first African slaves are transported to North America.

1625

A settlement called New Amsterdam—modern-day New York—is founded by the Dutch.

1776

The thirteen colonies of the United States of America declare their independence from England.

1781

The Revolutionary War ends with an American victory, and two years later England signs the Treaty of Paris formally recognizing the legitimacy of the United States.

1790

The United States passes its first naturalization law, which states that free white men who live in the country for at least two years are eligible for citizenship.

1791

The United States approves ten amendments to the U.S. Constitution collectively known as the Bill of Rights.

1798

Congress passes the Alien and Sedition Acts, which give federal authorities new powers to deport “undesirable” aliens.

1845

The Great Potato Famine strikes in Ireland, ushering in years of misery and starvation for the Irish people—and convincing many to leave for America.

1848

The United States expands its territory to include modern-day Texas, California, and a broad swath of the American Southwest after winning the Mexican-American War.

SOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY

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