



Immigration and Ellis Island featuring Irving Berlin and Bruce Springsteen

OVERVIEW

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

What was Ellis Island, and what might have been the experience of Europeans who immigrated to the United States at the turn of the century?

OVERVIEW

“There’s treasure for the taking, for any hard working man who’ll make his home in the American land”

- Bruce Springsteen

In this lesson, students will explore the promise of the American Dream through the experience of immigrants who passed through Ellis Island in the early 20th Century. In their exploration, students will be examining artifacts from Ellis Island, analyzing song lyrics, and researching iconic songs and musical instruments created by immigrants.



Bain, George Grantham, photographer. Immigrants, Ellis Island. New Jersey New York Ellis Island, ca. 1910. Photograph. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2012646353/>.

The beauty, power, and magic of a well written song can illuminate history with an emotional clarity like no other. It can serve as a revelation, a motivation, and an inspiration to learn more. In 2012, Bruce Springsteen wrote “American Land” after being inspired by “He Lies in the American Land”, a poem by immigrant steelworker Andrew Kovaly. Kovaly was a Slovakian steelworker in McKeesport, Pennsylvania. He wrote the poem after a friend was run over by a buggy just prior to the arrival of his wife and children from Slovakia - Kovaly had to break the news to the family after they arrived. Springsteen’s “American Land” weaves a hopeful sound with lyrics that tell the story of the dreams and reality of the millions of immigrants who left their home countries for a new home in their American Land. History is about people, and the people that forever changed, built, and contributed to the United States in ways that are still being celebrated, debated, and regulated. Music’s power is in the connection it fosters with the listener. “American Land” allows students to develop a deeper empathy and understanding of the hopes and realities faced by immigrants during this time period.

Between 1900 and 1915, more than 15 million immigrants arrived in the United States. That was about equal to the number of immigrants who had arrived in the previous 40 years combined. In 1910, three-fourths of New York City’s population were either immigrants or first generation Americans (i.e. the sons and daughters of immigrants). In the years between 1881 and 1924, millions of European Jews in particular left their native lands to embark on the challenging and arduous journey to what they referred to as the “Golden Land” of America. These Jewish

immigrants were propelled from their towns and villages by persecution and the lack of economic opportunity. They settled in cities where they were clustered in downtown districts, joined the working class, spoke Yiddish, and built strong networks that embraced and preserved their Jewish culture while forging a new way in this new world.

Few Jewish immigrants embodied this experience more than one of America's most famous and enduring songwriters, Irving Berlin. Born in Russia, Berlin immigrated with his family to America at age five. Born Israel Isidore Beilin, he pulled himself out of poverty in New York's Lower East Side, and despite not knowing more than the basic principles of music composition, he wrote more than 3,000 songs, produced 17 Hollywood film scores, and created 21 Broadway scores. One of Berlin's best known songs is his 1942 hit release, "White Christmas", which was recognized as the best selling single in any category, up until the release of Elton John's "Candle in the Wind," 50 years later. He also wrote America's unofficial national anthem, "God Bless America", which was released in 1939 and became an immediate sensation. Berlin had written an earlier version of the song in 1918, however with war again threatening Europe in 1938, he made some changes to reflect the different state of the world. Additionally, Berlin co-founded the performing rights organization ASCAP (American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers), founded his own music company, and donated millions of dollars in royalties to organizations like the Army Emergency Relief and the Boy and Girl Scouts.

Immigrants not only had an indelible impact on American music by writing popular songs, but also by crafting the instruments that were used to create those compositions. Immigrants, and the descendants of immigrants, invented and produced many of the renowned musical instruments still making music today. With knowledge, passion, and technique, these newcomers to the American melting pot brought trade skills that had been learned in the old country. With those skills, immigrants built musical instruments for what are now considered iconic American brands within the music industry worldwide. These settlers never settled for ordinary, and if we listen to the instruments they built and the songs they wrote, we can hear the dedication to their craft and their contribution to the soundtrack of America—from yesterday through to today.

OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- Many European immigrants had the shared experience of entering the United States through Ellis Island
- Immigrants have contributed to the culture and economy of the United States by creating classic American songs and musical instruments for iconic American brands
- The contributions of Jewish American immigrant, Irving Berlin

2. MASTERY OBJECTIVE:

- Students will be able to explain the historical significance of immigration in the early 20th Century to the development of the United States by analyzing texts, examining media, and interpreting primary source documents.

ACTIVITIES

MATERIALS REQUIRED

- A device with internet access for each student

MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY

1. Display **Image 1, “God Bless America” Lyrics** and if possible, play an excerpt of the song from the Library of Congress: <https://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.100010572/>. Then ask students:
 - Have you heard this song before or have you heard of this song before?
 - What do you notice about the song?
 - When do you think this song was written?
2. Divide students into groups to discuss what the song “God Bless America” might be about. Ask groups to share their perspectives on the song’s possible meanings.
3. Explain that “God Bless America” was written by a famous songwriter, Irving Berlin. Display **Image 2, Irving Berlin Biography**. Read the biography as a class. Then ask students to return to their groups to consider if knowing the background of the songwriter gives the song new meaning. Ask student groups to share their discussion with the class.
4. Display **Image 3, “American Dream Definition.”** Read the definition individually or aloud as a class. Then ask students:
 - Can you apply this definition to the journey immigrants might have taken?
 - How might barriers such as language, income inequality, and discrimination affect the journey?
 - Does privilege play a role in realizing the promise of the dream?
 - Is the American Dream alive and well for all Americans today?

PROCEDURE

1. Distribute **Handout - “American Land” Lyrics** and if possible, play the YouTube video “American Land”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2XiaLzIYDng>. Instruct students to just read the lyrics while listening to the song (*students will complete the activity part of the handout at the end of the lesson*).
2. Inform students that Bruce Springsteen wrote “American Land” after being inspired by “He Lies in the American Land,” a poem by Slovakian immigrant steelworker Andrew Kovaly. Zirilli, name-checked in the song, is the maiden name of Springsteen’s mother, Adele, who is of Italian ancestry.

3. Explain that between 1892 and 1954, Ellis Island, located at the mouth of the Hudson River between New York and New Jersey, processed millions of immigrants mostly from Southern and Eastern Europe. Play the PBS video, “Immigration at the Turn of the 20th Century | New York: A Documentary Film.”: <https://rmpbs.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/immigration-at-turn-of-20th-century-video/new-york-documentary-film/> Then, ask students:
 - According to the clip, when did the mass immigration to Ellis Island begin? (*The 1880s.*)
 - For what reasons did immigrants arrive? (*They believed there was work for them in the United States.*)
 - What were some challenges and problems faced by newly arriving immigrants?
4. Inform students that they will be now investigating a primary source related to Ellis Island. Display **Image 4, Cover Page and Forward to “Our Immigrants at Ellis Island.”** Have students read individually or as a class the image text. Ask students:
 - Who wrote this book? (*Francis E. Clark*)
 - Who published this book? (*The United Society of Christian Endeavor*)
 - When was this book published? (*1912*)
 - According to the foreword, what is the purpose of this book? (*“This exercise has been prepared in order that our young people may know more of the conditions under which the immigrants come to our shores, and may have a more sympathetic interest in their lives.”*)
5. Explain that this book was published for students to gain a better understanding of the immigrant experience, and that in class students will be doing an activity from the book. Distribute to each student **Handout - A Day at Ellis Island Questionnaire**.
 - Are the accounts contained in the book true or false? (*“All stories here told are true accounts of real experiences of immigrants who have recently come to our country”*)
 - Why might the United Society of Christian Endeavor have wanted to publish such a book?
6. Divide the class into two groups, and distribute to each group **Handout - A Day at Ellis Island Narratives**. Have student groups conduct the activity described in the handout. Then bring the class back together, and ask students to volunteer what they learned about the people they interviewed. Then ask students:
 - How would you describe the backgrounds of the immigrants coming into the United States through Ellis Island?
 - How would you describe the intake process at Ellis Island? Do you think it was fair or unfair?
7. Distribute **Handout - “Dust” Reading** to students. Instruct students to sketch a rough timeline of the family’s story as they read it. (*This will be just for their notes and collecting their thoughts, but advise students that they will need to use the notes later in the final activity.*) After

completing the reading, ask students to describe one of the experiences the family experiences that stood out to them.

8. Explain to students that they will now examine what some European immigrants did after arriving to The United States,

and how their endeavors changed U.S. culture and the economy. Distribute **Handout - Instrument Brands** to students and instruct them to follow the directions to explore some instrument brands started by immigrants to the United States.

SUMMARY ACTIVITY

1. Organize students into groups and ask them to refer back to the **Handout - “American Land” Lyrics**. To model the activity, ask students:
 - What could the line “Wish me luck my lovely, I’ll send for you when I can” connect to from today’s lesson? (*Fathers and husbands would arrive in the United States first, and then send for their families when they had money and/or were settled somewhere.*)
2. Instruct student groups to work on the handout for an allotted amount of time. After that time, ask groups to pass the handout they worked on to another group. Ask students to write on the new handout:
 - What comparisons, comments, and new information can you add to the previous group’s handout?
3. Continue the passing of the handout from group to group for as long as time allows. Ask students to return the original handout to the original group. Then ask students:
 - What did someone write on your handout that was new to you?
4. Display **Image 3, American Dream Definition** once again. Ask students:
 - How does the immigrant experience examined in the lesson shape your thoughts on the idea of the American Dream? Does people’s experiences at Ellis Island lend credibility to the idea of the American Dream or discount it? How so?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. Guide students to investigate Immigration Figures 1903 from the Library of Congress, which chronicles countries of origin and numbers of immigrants from those countries as well as illiteracy data used to restrict immigrants from selected regions. Inform students that this document was a publication of the Immigration Restriction League.
2. Learn more about the immigration experience from the Jewish-American perspective by examining the Library of Congress resource, “From Haven to Home: 350 Years of Jewish Life in America Timeline 1800s”: https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/haventohome/timeline/haven-timeline_2.html

STANDARDS

COLLEGE, CAREER, AND CIVIC LIFE (C3) SOCIAL STUDIES STANDARDS

History

D2.His.1.9-12. Evaluate how historical events and developments were shaped by unique circumstances of time and place as well as broader historical contexts.

D2.His.5.9-12. Analyze how historical contexts shaped and continue to shape people's perspectives.

D2.His.12.9-12. Use questions generated about multiple historical sources to pursue further inquiry and investigate additional sources.

D2.His.17.9-12. Critique the central arguments in secondary works of history on related topics in multiple media in terms of their historical accuracy.

CALIFORNIA HISTORY—SOCIAL SCIENCE CONTENT STANDARDS

11.2 Students analyze the relationship among the rise of industrialization, large scale rural-to-urban migration, and massive immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe.

2. Describe the changing landscape, including the growth of cities linked by industry and trade, and the development of cities divided according to race, ethnicity, and class.

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA SOCIAL STUDIES STANDARDS

Driving Concept 2: Rise of Industrial and Progressive America

US2.16 Evaluate the reasons for and consequences of the rise in Asian, European and Latin American immigration to the United States in the late 19th and early 20th century, including the varied experiences of different individuals.

MASSACHUSETTS HISTORY AND SOCIAL SCIENCE FRAMEWORK STANDARDS

Topic 6. Rebuilding the United States: industry and immigration [USI.T6]

4. Using primary source images, data, and documents, describe the causes of the immigration of Germans, the Irish, Italians, Eastern Europeans, Chinese, Koreans, and Japanese to America in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and the major roles of these immigrants in industrialization and the building of railroads.



NEW JERSEY STUDENT LEARNING STANDARDS - SOCIAL STUDIES

Era 5. The Development of the Industrial United States (1870–1900)

6.1.12.HistoryUP.5.a: Using primary sources, relate varying immigrants’ experiences to gender, race, ethnicity, or occupation.

SOCIAL STUDIES – NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR THE SOCIAL STUDIES (NCSS)

Theme 1: Culture

Theme 3: People, Place, and Environments

Theme 4: Individual Development and Identity

Theme 9: Global Connections

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

College and Career Readiness Reading Literature Standards for Grades 9-12

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.1 Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.3 Analyze how complex characters (e.g., those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1 Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

College and Career Readiness Reading Information Text Standards for Grades 9-12

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.9-10.1 Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.9-10.7 Analyze various accounts of a subject told in different mediums (e.g., a person’s life story in both print and multimedia), determining which details are emphasized in each account.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.9-10.9 Analyze seminal U.S. documents of historical and literary significance (e.g., Washington’s Farewell Address, the Gettysburg Address, Roosevelt’s Four Freedoms speech, King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail”), including how they address related themes and concepts.



CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.1 Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.7 Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in different media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively) as well as in words in order to address a question or solve a problem.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Writing for Grades 9-12

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.2 Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.9 Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.2 Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.9 Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening for Grades 9-12

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.1 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.2 Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.4 Present information, findings, and supporting evidence clearly, concisely, and logically such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and task.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.1 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11-12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.2 Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) in order to make informed



decisions and solve problems, evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source and noting any discrepancies among the data.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.4 Present information, findings, and supporting evidence, conveying a clear and distinct perspective, such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning, alternative or opposing perspectives are addressed, and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and a range of formal and informal tasks.

LEARNING FOR JUSTICE SOCIAL JUSTICE STANDARDS

DI.9-12.8 I respectfully express curiosity about the history and lived experiences of others and exchange ideas and beliefs in an open-minded way.

JU.9-12.12 I can recognize, describe and distinguish unfairness and injustice at different levels of society.



RESOURCES

HANDOUTS

- Handout - “American Land” Lyrics
- Handout - A Day at Ellis Island Narratives
- Handout – A Day at Ellis Island Questionnaire
- Handout - “Dust” Reading
- Handout - Instrument Brands