



IMMIGRATION: AN AMERICAN STORY

Exhibition Guide

Developed by

THE GILDER LEHRMAN
INSTITUTE *of* AMERICAN HISTORY

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GENERAL INFORMATION

This exhibition was developed by the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History (GLI). Professor Vicki Ruiz (University of California, Irvine) was the scholarly advisor for this exhibition.

Format

The exhibition is composed of seven retractable vinyl panels. Each panel measures 81 inches tall and 33 inches wide. It requires a total of 18-21 running feet and can be displayed separately or together. Detailed setup instructions are provided to the venue's coordinator upon shipment. Setup instructions can also be found on the [FAQ page of the GLI Traveling Exhibitions website](#).

Rental Security

Exhibitions may be displayed in any open indoor areas, but preferably not in a hallway. No exhibition is to be displayed outdoors or in a tent or other temporary structure. It is preferable that a staff member is in the room with the exhibition when it is open to students or guests. If a borrower causes damage or loss of any part of the exhibition, then that institution will be responsible for paying the replacement or restoration costs. The value of the *Immigration: An American Story* exhibition is \$1,875. Some institutions choose to add a rider to their insurance policy.

Shipping

The exhibition is shipped in a wheeled, plastic case measuring 39 inches x 14 inches x 14 inches and weighing approximately 75 pounds. GLI will be responsible for arranging shipping via FedEx. A week before your loan period ends, we will provide a return label and instructions.

Reporting

Each site is required to complete a condition report upon receipt of the exhibition and again after the exhibition has been packed for return. Condition reports will be sent to the venue coordinator via email.

Questions

If you have questions, please contact

Traveling Exhibitions Program
exhibitions@gilderlehrman.org
Phone (646) 366-9666 ext. 164

EXHIBITION CONTENT

Panel One: Immigration An American Story

Introductory Text

The United States has often been called “a nation of immigrants” -an oversimplification, to be sure. American Indians were present before the nation’s founding and hundreds of thousands of Africans were brought to these shores in chains

Many Americans, however, descend from immigrants who fled religious or ethnic persecution, war, or economic hardship. These same forces continue to drive immigration today. Currently, more than 40 million people in the United States are foreign-born.

Over time, each wave of immigrants has left its own imprint on the United States. It’s important to remember where we all came from and how public attitudes and policies on immigration have changed throughout the country’s history.

Immigration: An American Story presents documents, maps, and images to tell select stories of those who came to America, some by coercion and others by choice in search of a better future for themselves and later generations.

US Constitution, printed by Dunlap & Claypoole, Philadelphia, PA, September 17, 1787, page 2 (The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC03585)

Dancers at the Saint Patrick’s Day Parade in Chicago, Illinois, March 17, 2018 (Roberto Galan / Shutterstock.com)

West Indian Day Parade in Brooklyn, New York, August 1, 2014 (A. Katz / Shutterstock.com)

84th annual Greek Independence Day Parade in New York, New York, March 29, 2015 (A. Katz/ Shutterstock.com)

Chinese dragon dance at the 74th Camellia Festival Parade in Los Angeles, California, February 24, 2018 (Kit Leong / Shutterstock.com)

Panel Two: 1492 to 17th century

Introductory Text

After Christopher Columbus’s arrival in the “New World” in 1492 came Spanish, English, French, and Dutch explorers, followed by waves of settlers. Of course, the land was already home to American Indians who,

thousands of years earlier, had crossed from Asia, forming hundreds of distinct tribes. Violence and disease drastically reduced these populations as the newcomers dispersed across the continent.

In 1565, Spanish colonists and enslaved Africans established Saint Augustine (Florida), the first permanent European settlement in the United States. On the other side of the country, settlers crossed the Rio Grande to present-day New Mexico (1598). Some settlements, such as Jamestown (1607) and New Netherland (1614), were established by companies to exploit local resources. Others were settled by people seeking religious freedom, among them Puritans in Massachusetts, Catholics in Maryland, and Quakers in Pennsylvania. Many of the immigrants from northern and western Europe came as indentured servants, hoping to survive their period of servitude and build new lives for themselves and their children

Exploration and Colonization

Letter from Christopher Columbus to King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain (in Latin), Rome, 1493 (The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLCO1427)

“I discovered many islands inhabited by numerous people. I took possession of all of them for our most fortunate King by making public proclamation and unfurling his standard, no one making any resistance.”

“Landing of Columbus [in 1492]” engraving by H. B. Hall, based on a painting by John Vanderlyn, printed by Martin, Johnson & Co., New York, NY, 1856 (The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC08878.0001)

Letter from Francisco García de Loaysa to Francisco Vázquez de Coronado, 1540 (The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLCO4883)

Letter from Sebastian Brandt to Henry Hovener, January 13, 1622 (The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC00708)

“Novi Belgii Novaeque Angliae,” by Nicholas Visscher the Elder. Amsterdam, 1656, reprinted 1682 (The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLCO3582)

Panel Three: 18th Century

Introductory Text

Throughout the eighteenth century the French established settlements from the Great Lakes, down the Mississippi River, and along the Gulf Coast. Spanish-speaking settlers journeyed north from Mexico, founding

towns such as San Antonio (Texas) in 1718 and Los Angeles (California) in 1791. As Great Britain consolidated the thirteen colonies on the East Coast, other settlers ventured farther inland.

Between 1700 and 1800, more than 300,000 Africans were captured and brought across the Atlantic by ship, to be sold and enslaved. Meanwhile, American Indians were pushed farther west. These forced migrations of Africans and American Indians played a key role in the physical development and economic growth of the country.

At the end of the century, a new American nation emerged, winning its independence from Great Britain. Of the thirty-nine men who signed the US Constitution in 1787, seven were immigrants, including a West Indies native named Alexander Hamilton. The founders chose the Latin phrase E Pluribus Unum (“Out of Many, One”) as the motto of the fledgling United States.

Settlement, Forced Migration, and Slavery

Receipt for land purchased from the Six Nations by the Penn family for \$10,000, July 28, 1769 (The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC02548)

“Californie et Du Nouveau Mexique,” map by Nicolas de Fer, 1700 (Special Collections, The Claremont Colleges Library, Claremont, California)

Letter from Fernando de Rivera y Moncada to Antonio Bucareli y Ursua, October 20, 1776 (The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC06287.08)

“I am leaving with the intention of later heading to San Francisco. I will take the families that had stopped in Monterrey. Work will begin on the first mission.” - Fernando De Rivera Y Moncada

List by Robert Livingston of imports from the West Indies, October 1725 (The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC03107.01732)

Slave shackles intended for a child, ca. 1800 (The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLCO6151)

Cargo plan for the slave ship *Brookes*, printed in *The History of the Rise, Progress, & Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave-Trade by the British Parliament* by Thomas Clarkson, Vol. II, London, 1808 (The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC05965)

Panel Four: Early 19th century

Introductory Text

Throughout the early 1800s, 6,000 to 10,000 immigrants arrived annually. After 1830, the number increased to 50,000 as Europeans fled failed revolutions and famines—particularly the 1840s Irish potato famine. Some newcomers were attracted by cheap farmland; others by the manufacturing boom sparked by the Industrial Revolution. However, despite their contributions to the development of the nation, many immigrants faced vicious discrimination.

The United States expanded dramatically with the Louisiana Purchase and the conquest of the Southwest in the Mexican-American War, fueling the idea of Manifest Destiny. The acquisition of land increased the population too, as thousands of French- and Spanish-speaking people and Native tribes were incorporated into the United States. As new states were formed, and debates over free and slave states raged, the country spiraled into civil war.

New Lands, New People

“Map of the United States of America with Its Territories & Districts,” printed by B. B. Barber and A. Willard, Hartford, Conn., 1835 (New York Public Library)

Broadside supporting the Know-Nothing party, September 1, 1857 (The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLCO9342)

A German artillery unit, photograph by Mathew Brady, Winter 1861 (The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC05111.01.0453)

Letter of reference from Lajos Kossuth for Alexis Ludvigh, December 3, 1859 (The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC02869.01)

“Heading of east portal Tunnel No. 8,” photograph by Alfred A. Hart depicting a Chinese worker for the Central Pacific Railroad in California, ca. 1865–1869 (Library of Congress)

“Joining of the rails at Promontory Point,” official photograph by Andrew J. Russell of the “Golden Spike” ceremony marking the completion of the first transcontinental railroad, Promontory Summit, Utah, May 10, 1869 (The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLCO4481.01)

Panel Five: Late 19th Century

Introductory Text

Immigration soared in the three decades after the Civil War, with nearly twelve million new arrivals. To address the increasing numbers, states began to regulate immigration. But in 1875, the Supreme Court established immigration as a federal matter, and Congress, acting upon popular prejudice, passed laws like the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882.

By 1890, immigration patterns had changed significantly: many eastern European Jews came, escaping religious persecution, while southern Europeans, Asians, and others came searching for economic opportunity.

In 1892, the federal government opened a new processing station, Ellis Island, to sift “desirable” from “undesirable” immigrants. Annie Moore, a teenager from County Cork, Ireland, was the first immigrant to be processed. Of the twelve million immigrants who passed through Ellis Island, only 2 percent were excluded.

Dramatic Growth and the Wider World

“Chinatown Declared a Nuisance!” published by the Workingmen’s Party of California, 1880
(The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLCO6232.03)

The Tape Family, 1884 (From the Alisa J. Kim Collection)

Immigrants seated on long benches, Main Hall, US Immigration Station, Ellis Island, New York, ca. 1907-1912 (New York Public Library)

“A group of immigrants, most wearing fezzes, surrounding a large vessel which is decorated with the star and crescent of... the Ottoman Turks,” photograph by William Williams, Ellis Island, New York, ca. 1902-1913 (New York Public Library)

View of Essex and Hester Streets in New York City, published by Brown Brothers, New York, New York, 1907 (New York Public Library)

Panel Six: Early 20th Century

Introductory Text

At the turn of the century, immigrants from southern and eastern Europe were joined by those from Japan, China, and the Philippines, as well as by Mexicans and Russians escaping revolutions.

In the 1920s, just after World War I, Congress passed laws that established a quota system capping immigration levels. Nativists painted many of the new immigrants as undesirable menaces, incapable of becoming American.

The United States entered World War II following the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941. In turn, 120,000 Japanese Americans were sent to internment camps in reaction to unfounded fears about their loyalty. After World War II, the US government began to loosen immigration restrictions. The Chinese exclusion laws were repealed, and the Displaced Persons Act allowed the admission of 400,000 European refugees between 1948 and 1952.

Isolationism and the World at War

Examining Passengers aboard ships at Angel Island, California, Public Health Service Historical Photograph File, 1931 (National Archives)

“Justice the Issue! Shall Sacco and Vanzetti be Judicially Murdered?” broadside published by the Sacco-Vanzetti Defense Committee, ca. July 1927 (The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC05712.01)

“Sometimes I tell my children that I would like to go to Mexico, but they tell me ‘We don’t want to go, we belong here.’”

Mexican mother in California. Photograph and caption by Dorothea Lange, June 1935 (Library of Congress)

Japanese internment broadside, May 3, 1942 (The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC06360)

Japanese-Americans transferring from train to bus at Lone Pine, California, bound for war relocation authority center at Manzanar, photograph attributed to Clem Albers, US War Relocation Authority, April 1942 (Library of Congress)

Panel Seven: 1965 Onward

Introductory Text

The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, signed by President Lyndon B. Johnson, ushered in the modern era of US immigration policy. The law replaced quotas, giving preference to refugees, immigrants with relatives in the United States or with needed skills, and those who would increase diversity. Immigration from Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean, and Africa increased.

Since 1965, Americans’ views on immigration have continued to be influenced by demographics, the global economy, and world events. US policy makers have struggled to address American concerns in a rapidly changing world.

The Story Continues

Vietnamese refugees awaiting rescue from their fishing boat after eight days at sea. From the Records of the Office of the Secretary of Defense, May 15, 1984 (National Archives)

Lester Holmes and family (Private Collection)

“I just want to live a peaceful life and help people.” -Lester Holmes

“The education that I received in my first few years in the United States made it possible for me to reach my dreams and ambitions, as well as to raise a family who contribute to the success of our community.”

Soussan Semerciyan, ca. 1983 (Private Collection)

“America provided more opportunity to grow in my field. It was, at times, tough to be here because I knew nobody. We came with \$8 in our pocket and one suitcase. Knowing how to speak English helped make the transition smoother.” - Soussan Semerciyan

Passport photo of V. Venugopal (Private Collection)

Passport photo of Lakshmi Venugopal (Private Collection)

Activists rallying in support of the immigrant community, Portland, Oregon, September 5, 2017 (Diego G Diaz /Shutterstock.com)

Panel 1: Immigration — An American Story

The United States has been shaped by people who came here by choice and by force. While American Indians lived on this land long before the nation existed, immigrants from around the world—and enslaved Africans—helped build the country. Immigration has always been part of the American story, even as attitudes and laws have changed over time.

Panel 2: 1492–17th Century

After 1492, European explorers and settlers arrived in lands already home to diverse American Indian nations. Colonization brought new settlements, trade, and religions—but also violence and disease that devastated Native populations. Some newcomers came seeking opportunity or freedom, while others were forced into labor.

Panel 3: The 18th Century

During the 1700s, migration expanded across the continent. Enslaved Africans were forcibly brought to America, and American Indians were pushed from their homelands. At the same time, immigrants helped shape a new nation founded on the idea of *E Pluribus Unum*—“Out of Many, One.”

Panel 4: Early 19th Century

Immigration increased as people fled famine, war, and economic hardship. Westward expansion and Manifest Destiny drew settlers inland, transforming the nation’s landscape. Immigrants played key roles in farming, industry, and transportation, even as many faced discrimination.

Panel 5: Late 19th Century

Millions of immigrants arrived in the United States during this period, changing cities and communities. In response, the federal government began restricting immigration through new laws. Ellis Island became the main gateway for newcomers seeking opportunity and a new life.

Panel 6: Early 20th Century

Fear and prejudice led to strict immigration quotas and discrimination against certain groups. During World War II, Japanese Americans were unjustly imprisoned in internment camps. Over time, U.S. policies began to shift again, especially after the war.

Panel 7: 1965–Present

The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 transformed U.S. immigration policy, opening doors to people from Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean. Immigration continues to shape American culture, economy, and identity—and remains an important topic of national discussion today.

Study Guide

Immigration: An American Story

For Middle & High School Students (Grades 7–10)

Essential Question: How has immigration shaped the United States, and how have laws, attitudes, and experiences of immigrants changed over time?

Panel 1: Immigration—An American Story (Overview)

Key Ideas:

- The United States includes Native peoples, forced migrants from Africa, and voluntary immigrants from around the world.
- Immigration is driven by push factors (war, famine, persecution) and pull factors (jobs, land, safety).
- Public attitudes and government policies toward immigrants have changed over time.

Key Term: push and pull factors

Panel 2: 1492–17th Century

Key Ideas:

- European colonization followed Columbus’s arrival in 1492.
- American Indian populations suffered devastating losses from disease and violence.
- Some immigrants came as indentured servants; others were enslaved.

Key Term: colonization

Panel 3: 18th Century

Key Ideas:

- Forced migration of enslaved Africans and displacement of American Indians shaped early America.
- Immigrants contributed to the founding of the United States.
- The idea of *E Pluribus Unum* reflected diversity within the new nation.

Key Term: forced migration

Panel 4: Early 19th Century

Key Ideas:

- Immigration increased due to famine, revolution, and industrialization.
- Manifest Destiny expanded U.S. territory and population.
- Immigrants contributed to infrastructure and industry but faced discrimination.

Key Term: Manifest Destiny

Panel 5: Late 19th Century

Key Ideas:

- Immigration reached record levels.
- The federal government began restricting immigration.
- Ellis Island became the main processing center for immigrants.

Key Term: exclusion

Panel 6: Early 20th Century

Key Ideas:

- Quota laws limited immigration.
- Fear and prejudice led to discrimination and internment, especially of Japanese Americans.
- U.S. policies shifted again after World War II.

Key Term: nativism

Panel 7: 1965–Present

Key Ideas:

- The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 reshaped immigration patterns.
- Immigration increased from Asia, Latin America, Africa, and the Caribbean.
- Immigration remains a debated issue today.

Key Term: diversity

Student Worksheet (10 Questions)

Name: _____ Date: _____

Directions

Use the exhibit panels to answer the following questions. Answer in complete sentences unless otherwise noted.

1. What does the phrase “a nation of immigrants” leave out or oversimplify about U.S. history?
2. Describe one push factor and one pull factor that influenced immigration to the United States.
3. How did European colonization affect American Indian populations in the 1500s and 1600s?
4. What role did forced migration play in shaping early American society?
5. How did Manifest Destiny influence immigration and westward expansion in the 19th century?
6. Why did immigrants in the 19th century face discrimination despite contributing to the nation’s growth?
7. What was the purpose of Ellis Island, and who was most likely to pass through it?
8. How did immigration policies change in the early 20th century, and what groups were most affected?
9. **South Dakota Perspective:** How did immigration, westward expansion, or U.S. government policies affect people living in what is now South Dakota? In your answer, you may reference settlers, Native nations, or later immigrant communities.
10. How did the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 change immigration patterns in the United States?

Teacher Answer Key

Sample Answers

1. It overlooks the presence of American Indians before European arrival and the forced migration of enslaved Africans.
2. Push factors include war, famine, or persecution; pull factors include jobs, land, safety, or opportunity.
3. Colonization caused population decline due to disease, violence, and loss of land for American Indians.
4. Forced migration brought millions of enslaved Africans to America and displaced American Indian nations, shaping the economy and society.
5. Manifest Destiny encouraged westward expansion, increasing immigration and settlement while displacing Native peoples.
6. Many immigrants were viewed as culturally or racially different and were blamed for economic problems.
7. Ellis Island processed immigrants, mainly from Europe; most were admitted, with only a small percentage denied entry.
8. Quota laws restricted immigration, especially from southern and eastern Europe and Asia; Japanese Americans were later interned during WWII.
9. **South Dakota Perspective:** Expansion and settlement displaced Native nations such as the Lakota, Dakota, and Nakota, while later immigrants contributed to farming, railroads, and community development. (Accept accurate regional examples.)
10. The 1965 law ended quota systems and increased immigration from Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean.

Teacher Notes

- Encourage use of evidence from the panels.
- Accept well-supported answers even if wording differs.
- This worksheet is suitable for gallery walks, document analysis, or post-visit discussion.