

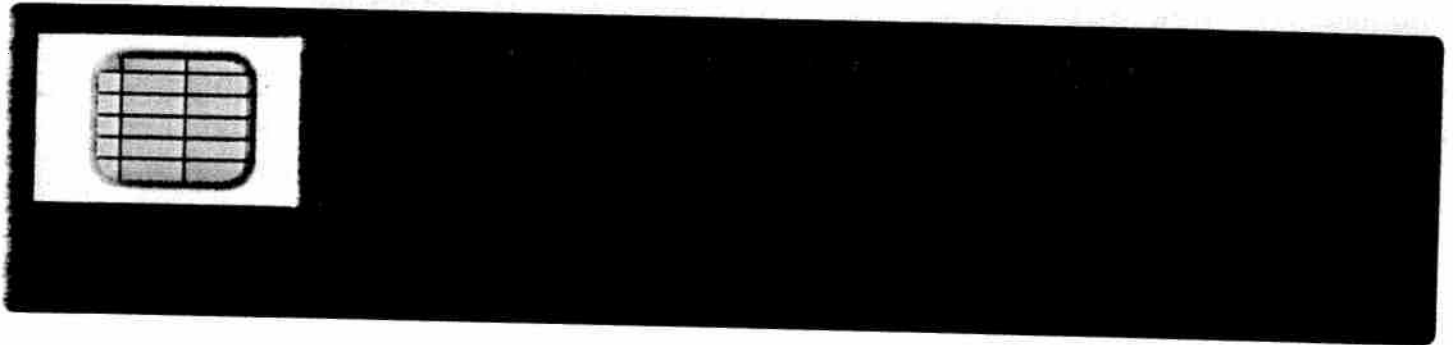
3.3 Coming to America

In what ways did the American Dream become a reality for immigrants to the United States?

Explore

Attitudes Toward Immigrants

How were immigrants treated?



The First Wave

From the 1830s to the Civil War, the first massive wave of European immigration had brought people from northern and western Europe to the American shores. In the 1840s, a potato famine caused widespread starvation in Ireland, pushing many Irish to the United States. Many other immigrants during this time came from Germany and Great Britain. In the western United States, the addition of lands after the Mexican-American War and the annexation of Texas added around 80,000 Mexicans who had been living in those regions to the U.S. population. The treaty ending the Mexican-American War made these Mexicans citizens of the United States. The gold rush in California in 1849 also attracted immigrants, many from China.

These immigrants faced a mixed welcome. Many of the European immigrants quickly found jobs working in the growing industrial cities or took advantage of government programs to distribute lands in the western territories to farmers. In New York City, Irish immigrants gained power and influence inside the Democratic Party and the police force. Pennsylvania allowed its public schools to provide classes taught in German to accommodate new immigrant children. Many German immigrants in particular were skilled workers who brought their trades with them from their homelands. Germans such as Henry Lomb, who found success creating eyeglasses and the eye care company known today as Bausch & Lomb, and Levi Strauss, who founded Levi's jeans and other products, represented the achievement of the American dream.

These early immigrants also faced opposition. Most of the immigrants from Ireland were Catholic, which some native-born Americans saw as a threat to the majority Protestant religion in the United States. Many immigrants faced discrimination in jobs. In the 1850s, an anti-immigrant political party called the American

Party, or the Know-Nothing Party, quickly gained popularity and won several seats in the US Congress. In the 1860s, California passed laws placing special taxes on businesses that hired Chinese workers.

After the Civil War

By the 1870s and 1880s, the immigration patterns had shifted. Many new immigrants were coming from eastern and southern Europe. Very few of these immigrants spoke English, as the earlier Irish immigrants had, and most were Catholic, Orthodox, or Jewish. Many came from countries that faced violent political turmoil. Again, many native-born Americans worried that these new arrivals threatened American culture. Anti-immigrant political groups, workplace discrimination, and social discrimination were common. Cartoons in newspapers and stories in magazines promoted stereotypes of new immigrants as uneducated, uncivilized, and dangerous.

Some of this discrimination came from "older" immigrants whose families had arrived in the United States less than 50 years earlier. For example, despite the religious connection, many German Jews who had arrived 20 to 40 years before sought to distinguish themselves from the Russian and Polish Jews. They saw these newcomers as an inferior group of immigrants. They claimed that these people were ill-suited to the American way of life because they were uneducated and unaccustomed to republican institutions such as elected legislatures.

Despite this opposition, millions of immigrants came to the United States looking for a better life, and many found what they sought. Like the earlier waves of immigrants, many immigrants from the 1880s to the 1920s found jobs, homes, and bright futures for their families in the United States.

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Closing the Doors on Immigration

How did nativists seek to restrict immigration in the late 1800s?

Although factory owners may have liked cheap workers, and landlords liked the never-ending source of renters, not all residents wanted immigrants on American soil. In the 1840s, **nativists** had organized to try to keep immigrants from gaining political, social, and economic power. When the second surge of immigration began in the 1880s, nativists again fought against the influx of immigrants. Immigrants were blamed for the overcrowding, sanitation, and crime issues plaguing American cities. Nativists also disliked immigrants because of their Roman Catholic or Orthodox Christian religion. They believed that new immigrants would change the culture of the United States.

Before the 1880s, immigration was not heavily regulated, but pressure from nativists helped change that. In 1882, Congress passed the **Chinese Exclusion Act**, barring Chinese immigrants from settling in the United States. Chinese Americans were accused of taking “real” Americans’ jobs. They were also blamed for keeping all workers’ wages low because Chinese immigrants were often willing to work for lower wages than other people would accept. That same year, an immigration act set a 50-cent immigration tax for everyone entering the country. It also prohibited immigration of convicts, “lunatics,” or those dependent on the state for basic needs.

Additional legislation was proposed that would have restricted immigration through literacy tests. The Immigration Restriction League, which was founded in 1894 by three Harvard College graduates, was a strong supporter of literacy tests. Members of the League believed that the United States was not capable of assimilating immigrants into the American culture. They believed that the “new” immigrants of the late 1800s, who were primarily from Italy and eastern Europe, were not able to learn American values. As a result, the League proposed establishing literacy tests to further limit immigration. With this plan, an adult would have to be able to read a minimum of 40 words in any language to be permitted to stay in the United States. Another proposal would have established quotas, setting limits on the number of immigrants from specific places.

With the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act and the 1882 Immigration Act, the United States government needed to set up new offices to oversee the immigration process. In 1891, the federal government established the Office of the Superintendent of Immigration, Part of the Treasury Department. This office was responsible for inspecting new immigrants at every port of entry.