

# Then: A Nation of Immigrants

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## WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about the early days of American immigration. Immigrants have been coming to the United States since before there was a United States. There are important differences and similarities between immigration in the past compared to today. Most immigrants throughout history came to the United States to make better lives for themselves and their families. Some were welcomed; some were not. American immigration covers over 400 years of time and immigrants have come from virtually every nation on Earth. It is safe to say that no two immigrants have had the exact same immigrant experience. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. A Nation of Immigrants
2. An Immigrant Experience



## BEFORE YOU START

What kinds of changes did immigrants make to adjust to life in a new country?

## 1. A Nation of Immigrants

The first immigrants to North America were Europeans who conquered and colonized the land that was held by indigenous nations such as the mid-Atlantic Powhatan or the Cherokee of the Southeast. As the United States grew, immigration from Europe continued, first from northern and western European countries like Britain and Germany, and then from southern and eastern countries like Italy and Russia. Though different from immigration, until the early 1800s, large numbers of African were transported from Africa through the transatlantic slave trade. Most of the people living in the United States today can thus trace their ancestry to a place other than North America.

As we explore this immigrant past, let's look at an immigrant story from the early 20th century.



Immigrants just arrived from Foreign Countries—Immigrant Building,  
Ellis Island, New York Harbor. Copyright 1904 by Underwood & Underwood.

*Immigrants wait to be processed at Ellis Island in New York Harbor, 1900.*

## 2. An Immigrant Experience

The United States' diversity and immigrant past are often celebrated as part of our national identity. But the realities of immigration—of people trying to find acceptance in a new place, and often having to change their

culture or traditions in the process—have often been difficult. The firsthand accounts of new immigrants reveal their struggles but also their efforts to survive and even flourish in very difficult circumstances. In such circumstances, immigrants often had to continue practicing the same agility and mobility that led them to immigrate in the first place. Let's take a look at one immigrant's story.

Born in the late 1800s, Sadie Frowne lived in Poland with her parents. Her father died when she was 10, and she and her mother struggled economically. Sadie's aunt lived in New York City, and when Sadie was 13 her aunt convinced them to emigrate. When Sadie was 16, her story was collected with those of other immigrants and published in a 1906 volume called *The Life Stories of Undistinguished Americans*.

In the passage below, Sadie describes what happened after she and her mother had begun to build their new life in New York (Holt, 1906):

**Primary Source Excerpt**

**Type:** Oral History

**Author:** Sadie Frowne

**Date:** 1906

*I was only a little over thirteen years of age and a greenhorn, so I received \$9 a month and board and lodging, which I thought was doing well. Mother, who, as I have said, was very clever, made \$9 a week on white goods, which means all sorts of underclothing, and is high class work.*

*But mother had a very gay disposition. She liked to go around and see everything, and friends took her about New York at night and she caught a bad cold and coughed and coughed. She really had hasty consumption, but she didn't know it, and I didn't know it, and she tried to keep on working, but it was no use. She had not the strength. Two doctors attended her, but they could do nothing, and at last she died and I was left alone. I had saved money while out at service, but mother's sickness and funeral swept it all away and now I had to begin all over again.*

In Sadie Frowne's account, we see evidence that hard work and scarcity were defining parts of life for newly arrived immigrants. She and her mother experienced some success by finding work and even managing to save money. But Sadie also experienced tragedy and financial setback when her mother died and her savings were wiped out. Sadie and other immigrants had to rely on their **agility skill** and **problem solving skill** to figure out how to survive and succeed in new places. These skills were necessary to do things like finding a new job, finding affordable housing, or stretching their resources as far as possible.

A primary source can give historians a window into several different aspects of life in the past. The excerpt of Sadie's story that you've just read tells us that she and her mother were able to get work and save money in New York. It also tells us how quickly sickness could bring disruption and death to a family. Let's look at another excerpt to learn more about Sadie's factory experiences (Holt, 1906):

*Primary Source Excerpt*

*Type:* Oral History

*Author:* Sadie Frowne

*Date:* 1906

*At seven o'clock we all sit down to our machines and the boss brings to each one the pile of work that he or she is to finish during the day, what they call in English their "stint." This pile is put down beside the machine and as soon as a skirt is done it is laid on the other side of the machine....*

*The machines go like mad all day, because the faster you work the more money you get. Sometimes in my haste I get my finger caught and the needle goes right through it. It goes so quick, though, that it does not hurt much. I bind the finger up with a piece of cotton and go on working. We all have accidents like that.*

Immigrants like Sadie Frowne were not always welcomed into the United States. At different points in history, people spoke out against immigration and attempted to limit it. In the next lesson, we'll examine how immigration was restricted through legislation in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.



## SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned why the United States is considered a **nation of immigrants**. You also read excerpts from an oral history given by Sadie Frowne, a Polish immigrant to New York City in the early 1900s. Her story provides insight into **the immigrant experience**, and the ways in which new immigrants used problem solving and agility skills to adapt and survive.

Best of luck in your learning!

Source: Strategic Education, Inc. 2020. Learn from the Past, Prepare for the Future.

## REFERENCES

Holt, Hamilton. (Ed). (1906). The Life Story of a Polish Sweatshop Girl. In *The Life Stories of Undistinguished Americans As Told By Themselves* (36-37). Internet Archive.

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## ATTRIBUTIONS

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