

# Immigration

## Seeking an American Home: Refugees of Today and Migrants of Yesterday

Subject: History/Geography/English Language Arts

Grades: 9-12

### **Skills:**

- Professionalism
- Researching
- Brainstorming
- Interviewing
- Listening/Writing
- Filming/Film editing

### **Materials:**

- A family or volunteer community member
- Video camera on your phone, using a tripod for filming or Zoom access
- Computer access to edit an oral history video recording

### **Summary:**

Throughout history, there have been many different pressures upon individuals which caused them to seek life in our country. At times, the interest in coming to America was to realize an improved life. These were migrants, like the French Canadians who sought work in Lewiston's mills in the 1860s.

At other times, people left their homelands due to more desperate measures, like staying alive. Religious persecution, famine, and dangerous living environments all contributed to a refugee's need to flee and seek asylum in America. Today, our border has been tightened, allowing fewer refugees in than in recent times: 22,000 in 2018 vs. 85,000 in 2016.

An understanding of the United States' historical approach to recording immigrants is useful when thinking about immigration issues today and yesterday. This excerpt from the National Archives (<https://www.archives.gov/research/immigration/border-mexico>) reads:

*"Early records relating to immigration originated in regional customhouses. The U.S. Customs Service conducted its business by designating collection districts. Each district had a headquarters port with a customhouse and a collector of customs, the chief officer of the district. An act of March 2, 1819 (3 Stat. 489) required the captain or master of a vessel arriving at a port in the United States or any of its territories from a foreign country*

*to submit a list of passengers to the collector of customs. The act also required that the collector submit a quarterly report or abstract, consisting of copies of these passenger lists, to the Secretary of State, who was required to submit such information at each session of Congress. After 1874, collectors forwarded only statistical reports to the Treasury Department. The lists themselves were retained by the collector of customs. Customs records were maintained primarily for statistical purposes.*

*On August 3, 1882, Congress passed the first Federal law regulating immigration (22 Stat. 214-215); the Secretary of the Treasury had general supervision over it between 1882 and 1891. The Office of Superintendent of Immigration in the Department of the Treasury was established under an act of March 3, 1891 (26 Stat. 1085), and was later designated a bureau in 1895 with responsibility for administering the alien contract-labor laws. In 1900 administration of the Chinese-exclusion laws was added. Initially the Bureau retained the same administrative structure of ports of entry that the Customs Service had used. By the turn of the century it began to designate its own immigration districts, the numbers and boundaries of which changed over the years. In 1903 the Bureau became part of the Department of Commerce and Labor; its name was changed to the Bureau of Immigration and Naturalization when functions relating to naturalization were added in 1906. In 1933 the functions were transferred to the Department of Labor and became the responsibility of the newly formed Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). Under President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Reorganization Plan V of 1940, the INS was moved to the Department of Justice. The INS was abolished in 2003, and its immigration and naturalization recordkeeping functions were transferred to the new Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services within the new Department of Homeland Security, established January 24, 2003, by the Homeland Security Act of 2002."*

**Discuss:**

- The topic of immigration is one that has received lots of political attention as well as media-reporting in the past four years. What are your initial thoughts on immigration reform and security?
- Do you know any first-generation immigrants and how has their life been affected by coming to America? Do they feel isolation or discrimination, or support and community?
- What is your understanding as to the reasons why the US might want to limit entry into the country? How do you feel about building a "wall" along the Mexican border?
- In order to learn more about how an immigrant experienced a move to America, can you imagine what questions you might ask them through open-ended questions. These could include: Can you tell me about your journey to America? Talk to me about what emotions or feelings you had during the transition? How do you feel now that you have settled here? What do you long for, from your homeland? Why did you leave?

***Instructions:***

Using the Unit on Immigration, explore who was coming and going to and from Lewiston and Auburn, Maine in the 1860s. Then, use the Unit on Immigration to listen to an oral history from an immigrant millworker and listen to the Museum Curator speak about traditions of immigrants in the mills. Can you begin to paint an image of how you might take on the role of interviewer, to collect an oral history from an immigrant?

Prepare yourself to conduct an oral history of an immigrant, with the goal of understanding why they came to America, what their journey was like, and how they feel here in the United States.

Reach out to friends, family or a list of volunteers your teacher has assembled for interviews. Set a time to meet in person, or by video conference, like Zoom. Ask your participant for permission to record them, and even invite them to put this agreement in writing. Tell them you might use the final product in a museum display.

Record your interview and then edit, preparing a final 3-4 minute movie. Imagine your movie might become part of a display at the Museum LA on Immigration, so work on all levels of professionalism. If you are working in a classroom setting, perform peer reviews and then edit.

When you are done, send it along to Museum LA at [info@museumla.org](mailto:info@museumla.org)!