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THE UNITED STATES: A NATION OF IMMIGRANTS

A Lesson Exploring the Immigration History of the United States from the Colonial Period to the Present Day



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THE UNITED STATES: A NATION OF IMMIGRANTS

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*“Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”*

The text above is an excerpt from “The New Colossus,” a poem written by Emma Lazarus in 1883. The complete poem appears on a plaque mounted inside the Statue of Liberty. The United States is, and has always been, a nation of immigrants and a beacon for people from across the globe seeking a better life. From the nation’s earliest settlers to the more recent arrivals, all Americans, with the exception perhaps of the nation’s indigenous peoples, are descended from immigrants. Some argue that even First Nations peoples, who many scientists believe crossed the Bering Strait, a land bridge connecting Asia and North America tens of thousands of years ago, can also be considered the descendents of immigrants.

FACT:

The phrase “a nation of immigrants” is the title of a book written by President John F. Kennedy when he was still a senator. The book contains a history of immigration to the United States from the era of Colonial America onwards, analyses of the importance of immigration in the country’s history, and proposals to liberalize immigration law.



Immigration experiences are quite diverse. Some involve crossing oceans on a ship or plane, while others require walking for miles on foot. Immigration experiences can vary within the same group. For instance, the ancestors of many African Americans came to North America against their will as part of the slave trade. However, more recent, voluntary migrations of people from Africa are also an important part of the African-American experience.

People migrate from one place to another for various reasons. The events or conditions in the emigrant’s home country that motivate him or her to leave are known as **push factors**. Push factors can be **economic**, **social**, **political**, and **environmental**. The conditions that attract an emigrant to settle in a particular place are known as **pull factors**. Pull factors include safety and stability, political and religious freedom, and economic opportunity, as well as educational opportunities, access to healthcare, improved quality of life, and the opportunity to reunite with family and friends.

Most often, **economic** circumstances, such as poverty, overpopulation, low wages, and lack of jobs, are the principal motivations for emigrants to leave their homes. Today, there are between 31 and 100 million unemployed people in India. Meanwhile, the number of skilled workers graduating from Indian universities has never been higher. India simply does not have enough jobs for its rapidly expanding population, and unemployment leads many Indians to migrate in search of better lives elsewhere.



European immigrants at Ellis Island waiting to board a ferry for New York City, circa 1900.

People also migrate for social reasons, including social mobility (the opportunity to improve one's life), or in response to hardships, such as epidemics and famine. Between 1845 and 1849, crop failure in Ireland led to a period of mass starvation, disease, and emigration. During this time, known as the Great Famine, or the Irish Potato Famine, one million people died and a million more left Ireland. Most Irish Americans are descendents of immigrants who fled this tragedy.



Survivors of Anti-Jewish pogroms in the Ukraine, early 1900s.

FACT:

People who decide to leave their homeland permanently are known as emigrants. Once they enter another country, they are known as immigrants. The term migrant can refer to a refugee or a person moving for economic reasons.

War, political instability, political and religious **persecution** (harassment and hostility because of one's race or beliefs), a lack of rights and liberties, and government corruption are key political push factors. Some, but not all, immigrants are **refugees**, a legal term that is strictly defined as people forced to flee their home country to escape war, persecution, or violence. Before an individual is officially recognized as a refugee, she or he is considered an **asylum-seeker**. The right of **asylum** is an ancient concept under which a person persecuted by one's own country may be protected by another country or sovereign authority. For decades, European Jews were persecuted for their religious beliefs, which led many to leave and establish new homes in the United States and other countries. **Totalitarian** governments in Europe and Asia motivated people to seek freedom outside their countries' borders. During the two decades following the Vietnam War, three million Vietnamese, Laotians, and Cambodians fled conflict and humanitarian crises in their homelands. An estimated 800,000 boarded boats to escape, which led them to be known as "boat people." Civil war in El Salvador during the 1980s led 25 percent of the country's population to flee, and many settled in the United States.



Vietnamese boat people await rescue after spending eight days at sea in 1984.

Environmental disasters, both natural—earthquakes, droughts, volcanic eruptions, hurricanes, and tsunamis—and human made, including nuclear contamination and climate change, destroy homes, jobs, and economies. During the 1930s, drought in the southern United States produced severe dust storms. As winds and choking dust swept across a massive stretch of land from Texas to Nebraska, the region came to be known as “the dust bowl.” Scores of people and livestock were killed and crops failed, which intensified the crushing economic impact of the Great Depression and drove more than 2.5 million people to migrate. In 1986, an explosion at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in the Ukraine forced over 14,000 residents to evacuate their homes due to the extreme levels of nuclear radiation. Today the city remains, for the most part, a ghost town. More recently, in 2005, Hurricane Katrina displaced an estimated one million people from the New Orleans area and the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Globally, as climate change intensifies, it is estimated that millions of people, especially those living in low-lying, densely populated regions, will be forced to leave their homes due to rising sea levels and extreme weather events.

Many times, a combination of push factors motivate an individual or group to emigrate. For example, between 1876 and 1914, 14 million people left Italy. This equated to roughly one-third of the country’s population. Most of those who left came from southern Italy, where a mixture of economic, social, environmental, and political factors, including government oppression, poverty, hunger, crop failure, overpopulation, disease, and natural disasters made survival challenging. Push and pull factors are frequently **interconnected**, or related. By the



Hurricane Katrina evacuees take shelter at the Astrodome in Texas in 2005.

early 1850s, as many as 25,000 Chinese had migrated to California, lured the gold rush. Although the gold rush was an incentive, Chinese migrants, the majority of whom were young, unskilled men, also left to escape war, famine, and a poor economy in southeastern China.

Typically, immigration experiences vary between generations. Armenians began arriving in the United States en masse during the late 1800s following massacres that the Ottoman Empire perpetrated against Armenian Christians. Thousands more came in the years following the Armenian Genocide of 1915, when an estimated

1.5 million Armenians were systematically slaughtered, also at the hands of the Ottoman Empire. Since the 1950s, however, and following the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union of which Armenia had been part, many Armenians migrated to the United States for political and economic reasons.



Italian immigrants await entry to the United States at Ellis Island in the early 1900s.

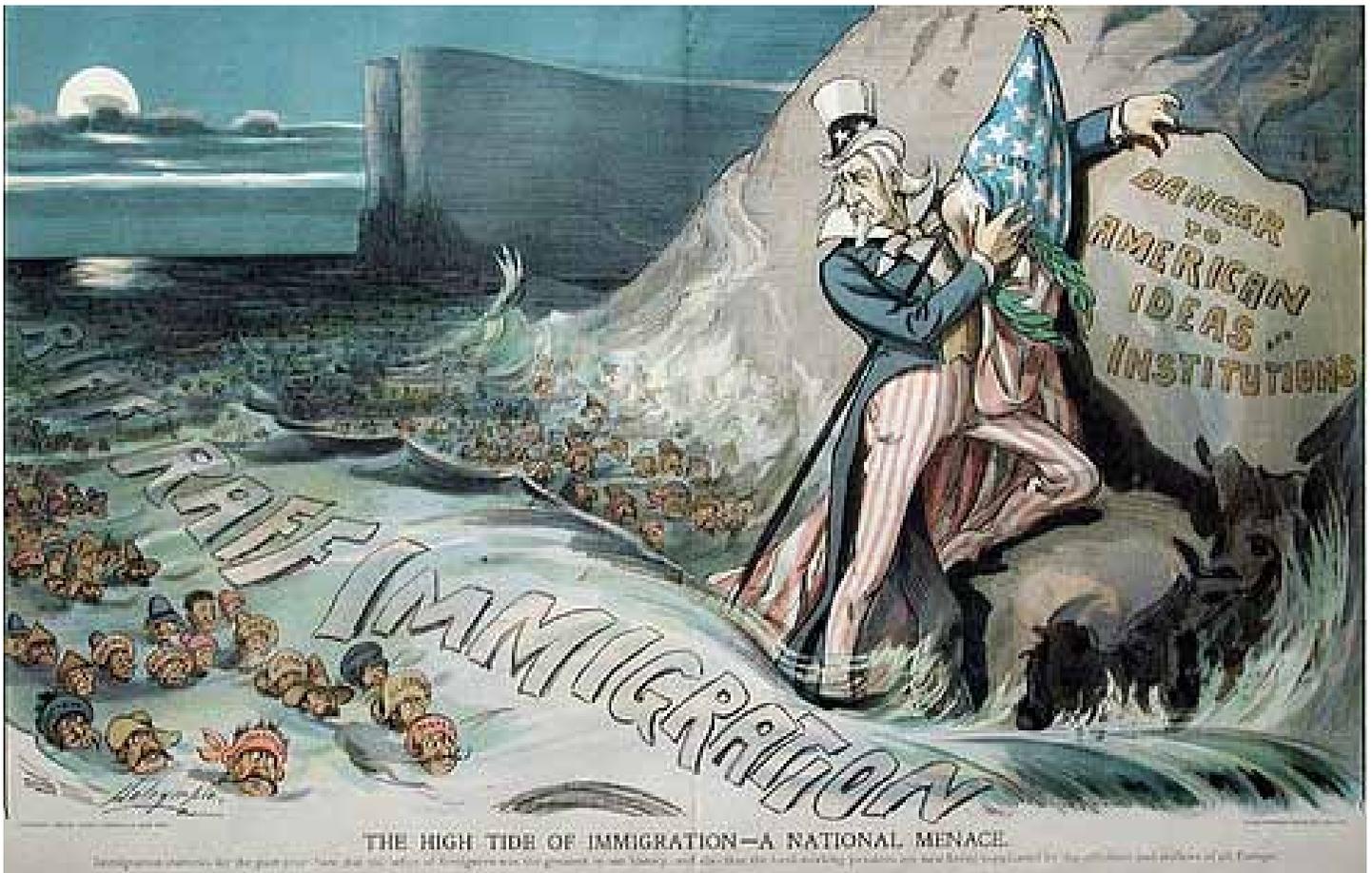
America's immigrants are responsible in part for the country's demographic growth, from a land of several million people to a nation of 300 million people. The cultural influence of immigration



Children orphaned by the Armenian Genocide being deported from Turkey in 1920.

on the United States is also profound, from music and art to language, fashion, and technology. Speaking of food alone, hamburgers, macaroni and cheese, hot dogs, tacos, pizza, pretzels, and French fries—now considered “American” food—all originated somewhere else.

Even before the nation was founded, Americans have had conflicting feelings on immigration. Some viewpoints, both historic and contemporary, regard immigration as source of strength and a defining characteristic of the nation, while other opinions consider immigration a threat to American culture and American workers. Benjamin Franklin, one of the Founding Fathers of the United States, worried that too many German immigrants would overwhelm America's predominantly British culture. Today, German Americans are the largest ancestry group in the United States, though when they first arrived, they experienced discrimination, mainly because they were Catholic and because they originated from country against which the United States had fought during World Wars I and II.



This anti-immigration cartoon from 1903 states that immigration is a “danger to American ideas and institutions.” The immigrants in the cartoon are depicted primarily as Southern European and Asian and are being carried to United States’ shores by a tidal wave that reads “riff raff immigration.” The immigrants wear hats with labels that say “illiterate,” “pauper” (poor), “outlaw,” “mafia,” “criminal,” and “anarchist.”

The nation’s first major wave of immigration after 1824 consisted primarily of northern Europeans from Ireland, Great Britain, Germany, and Scandinavia. The second wave of immigrants—over 34 million people, mainly from southern and eastern Europe—arrived between 1890 and 1924. The peak year for admission of new immigrants was 1907, when approximately 1.3 million people entered the country. As waves of immigrants arrived in the United States, they were often met with **nativism**, **xenophobia**, and anti-immigrant sentiment. Nativism is a policy that promotes the interests of native inhabitants over those of immigrants, while xenophobia is a fear or distrust of what is perceived to be foreign, especially people considered “outsiders.” Just as it had been during the Colonial era, some Americans felt that there was a need to protect the country’s population and culture from being “diluted” or negatively influenced by immigrants. Nativist efforts were frequently inspired by concerns that immigrants threatened the economic and political well-being of the nation.

World War I (1914-1918) led to a decline in immigration, and Congress enacted what became a series of laws to restrict immigration, including the **Immigration Act of 1917**. The law required immigrants over the age of 16 to pass a literacy test and required all persons to undergo medical examinations to determine whether the immigrant had a contagious disease, or was affected by a physical or mental condition that was likely to prevent him or her from earning a living. The law also prohibited the

entry of immigrants from Asian nations, with the exception of Japan and the Philippines, which was a United States colony.



An early 1900s political cartoon advocating for immigration restriction that was published in the magazine Judge. The immigrants, who are depicted as rats, are being dumped in the waters off the United States from a chute that reads “Direct from the slums of Europe daily.” Notice that one of the rats wears a red, white, and green bandana—the colors of the Italian flag, and many of the immigrant “rats” are drawn with stereotypical “Italian” features. They carry knives in their mouths and are branded with words terms such as “mafia,” “assassin,” and anarchist.

Eastern Europeans, primarily Italians and Jews, who began arriving en masse after 1890, as well as Africans and Middle Easterners. The law also barred Asian immigration entirely.

Such policies remained in effect until 1965, when Congress passed the **Immigration and Nationality Act**, which eliminated quotas based on nationality and allowed Americans to sponsor relatives from their countries of origin. As a result, the nation experienced a shift in immigration patterns and demographics, and today, the majority of the country’s immigrants come from Asia and Latin America.



Newly admitted citizens of the United States recite the Pledge of Allegiance.

Throughout United States history, ideas surrounding who “belongs” in this country as an “American” have changed continuously. When Germans and Irish first arrived, they were seen as different from



Members of the Jouriye family, refugees from Syria who were resettled in the United States in 2016. (Courtesy of AP/Adayleh)

earlier groups, such as the English, and were excluded. As Italians and Jews began settling in the United States, they were considered impossible to **assimilate**, or integrate, into the “American” way of life. The idea of “us” (as Americans) vs. “them” (outsiders) continues to change and be redefined, depending on which populations are more successfully accepted or marginalized.

Although immigrants’ nations of origin may have changed over the centuries, the push factors that motivate immigrants to leave their countries and the pull factors that draw them to the United States, remain largely the same. For decades, if not centuries, the United States has played an important role in welcoming and resettling refugees. Today, there are more than 65 million people displaced in the world, more than at any time since the end of World War II, and, in 2017, an average of one person was displaced from their home every two seconds.

What would you do if you were forced to leave your home country as a result of war, persecution, or environmental, economic, or social reasons? Or, if you left your home for one of these factors, what was your experience?



The United States: A Nation of Immigrants

A lesson exploring the factors motivating human migration and United States immigration policy.

Objectives

Students identify push factors that motivate people to leave their country of origin and the pull factors that draw them to the United States or elsewhere.
Students will draw parallels between immigrant groups throughout United States history.
Students find examples of the link between human rights and immigration in both the modern and the historical context.

California State Content Standards History and Social Science

- 5.4 Students understand the political, religious, social, and economic institutions that evolved in the colonial era.
- 5.8 Students trace the colonization, immigration, and settlement patterns of the American people from 1789 to the mid-1800s, with emphasis on the role of economic incentives, effects of the physical and political geography, and transportation systems.
- 8.5 Students analyze U.S. foreign policy in the early Republic.
- 8.6 Students analyze the divergent paths of the American people from 1800 to the mid-1800s and the challenges they faced, with emphasis on the Northeast.
- 8.7 Students analyze the divergent paths of the American people in the South from 1800 to the mid-1800s and the challenges they faced.
- 8.12 Students analyze the transformation of the American economy and the changing social and political conditions in the United States in response to the Industrial Revolution.
- 10.5 Students analyze the causes and course of the First World War.
- 10.6 Students analyze the effects of the First World War.
- 10.7 Students analyze the rise of totalitarian governments after World War I.
- 10.8 Students analyze the causes and consequences of World War II.
- 10.9 Students analyze the international developments in the post-World War II world.
- 10.11 Students analyze the integration of countries into the world economy and the information, technological, and communications revolutions (e.g., television, satellites, computers).
- 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.
- 11.3 Students analyze the role religion played in the founding of America, its lasting moral, social, and political impacts, and issues regarding religious liberty.
- 11.4 Students trace the rise of the United States to its role as a world power in the twentieth century.

- 11.5 Students analyze the major political, social, economic, technological, and cultural developments of the 1920s.
- 11.6 Students analyze the different explanations for the Great Depression and how the New Deal fundamentally changed the role of the federal government.
- 11.7 Students analyze America's participation in World War II.
- 11.8 Students analyze the economic boom and social transformation of post-World War II America.
- 11.9 Students analyze U.S. foreign policy since World War II.
- 11.11 Students analyze the major social problems and domestic policy issues in contemporary American society.
- 12.3 Students evaluate and take and defend positions on what the fundamental values and principles of civil society are (i.e. the autonomous sphere of voluntary personal, social, and economic relations that are not part of government), their interdependence, and the meaning and importance of those values and principles for a free society.

Materials: *The United States: A Nation of Immigrants* (reading) and computers or devices with Internet access. Materials will vary depending on the activities selected as part of this lesson.

Directions: Students read, independently, as a class, or in groups *The United States: A Nation of Immigrants*. Educator assigns short-answer questions or leads class in discussion. Educator also assigns one or more of the class projects described below. *The United States: A Nation of Immigrants Matching Activity* and *The United States: A Nation of Immigrants Quiz* can also be administered.

Answer Key for *The United States: A Nation of Immigrants Matching Activity*

1. g
2. f
3. i
4. h
5. l
6. m
7. b
8. k
9. c
10. e
11. d
12. a
13. j

Answer Key for *The United States: A Nation of Immigrants Quiz*

1. President John F. Kennedy
2. Economic, social, political, environmental
3. Safety, stability, political and religious freedom, economic and educational opportunities, access to healthcare, improved quality of life, and reuniting with family and friends
4. People forced to flee their home country to escape war, persecution, or violence

5. Immigrants have increased the population of the United States and have influenced the nation's culture, including its cuisine, music, art, fashion, language, and art
6. Great Famine or Potato Famine
7. Harassment and hostility because of one's race or beliefs
8. Nativism is a policy that promotes the interests of native inhabitants over those of immigrants
9. Xenophobia is a fear or distrust of what is perceived to be foreign, especially people considered "outsiders."
10. The Immigration Act of 1921 established quotas for the number of immigrants permitted to enter the United States from each nation and banned immigration from Asia. The Immigration Act of 1924 reduced immigration further, limiting the number of immigrants that could be admitted to the U.S. to two percent of the total number of individuals from each nationality that resided in the United States in 1890, and banned Asian immigration entirely.

Short Answer or Discussion Questions

1. Brainstorm the meaning of the phrase, "the United States, a nation of immigrants." What does this mean?
2. What is the difference between an emigrant, immigrant, refugee, migrant, and internally displaced person?
3. Define and provide examples of push factors and pull factors. How are push and pull factors related?
4. Why would a government be hesitant to allow or refuse to offer immigrants and refugees entry into their country? What are some reasons for denying entry?
5. How did the United States' policy on immigration change during the World War I era and the early 1920s?

Class Projects:

Immigrant-refugee personal narrative writing assignment

Assign students the identity of one of the following immigrants or refugees (or others of educator's choosing.) Ideally, the identity assigned to the student should be that of an individual who is different than the student's cultural makeup.

1. Abbad Alfia, 19, Syria, 2012
2. Tran Nguyen, 17, Vietnam, 1975
3. Alfredo González, 12, Cuba, 1959
4. Gyorgi Kovács, 47, Hungary, 1956
5. Vartan Bedrossian, 68, Armenia, 1915
6. Maria Cortese, 21, Italy, 1907
7. Siobhan O'Sullivan, 16, Ireland, 1848
8. Christian Hansen, 30, Norway, 1826
9. Fahad Baqri, 9, Pakistan, 1947
10. Che Kong, 50, Laos, 1974
11. Uwimana Arnica, 11, Rwanda, 1994
12. Maria Ortega, 23, El Salvador, 2017
13. Jacob Barish, 40, a Russian Jew, 1905
14. Park Su-hang, 26, North Korea, 1950
15. Sara Abboud, 32, Iraq, 1991

16. Mary Austin, 14, English Quaker, 1666
17. Esinam Botende, 8, Congo, 2016
18. Ottavia Washington, 22, a runaway slave from the Southern United States who fled to Canada, 1855
19. Olivia Brown, 44, a Scottish Presbyterian, 1663
20. Basil Papadopoulos, 73, Greece, 1967
21. Alejandra Maldonado, 25, Oaxaca, Mexico, 1997
22. Shervin Ghorbani, 15, Iran, 1978
23. Khaled Ghoga, 11, Libya, 2011
24. Moses Brooks, 33, Liberia, 2000
25. Alberto Rodriguez, 18, Honduras, 2018
26. Amela Aganović, 26, Bosnia, 1992
27. Jampa Gonpo, 53, Tibet, 2006
28. Iliana Gomez, 28, Guatemala, 2016
29. Faduma Aziz Daar, 34, Somalia, 1995
30. Abdul Malik, 19, Afghanistan, 2013
31. Monir Hussein, 9, a Rohingya Muslim from Myanmar, 2018
32. Gabriela Ibañez, 22, Chile, 1973
33. Giovanna Casanova, 27, Venezuela, 2017
34. Emmanuel Badin, 63, Haiti, 1979
35. Adele Bergmann, 28, an Austrian Jew, 1941
36. Botum Mao, 30, Cambodia, 1975

Each student then prepares a fictional account of the immigrant or refugee's experience written in the first-person perspective. Provide guidance as to the appropriate length and format of the narrative and read students an example of a personal story of an immigrant or refugee. The narrative should be well researched and based on actual events and conditions that motivated the particular immigrant or refugee group to leave their native country. Direct students to sources for locating this information, including the Internet. For instance, if the student receives the identity of Tran Nguyen, 17, Vietnam, 1975, she or he could conduct a search using terms such as "personal accounts of Vietnamese refugees," and "Vietnam 1975."

The narratives should include the following:

The name, age, and country of origin of the immigrant or refugee.

What was life like in the immigrant or refugee's country prior to his or her departure? Did the immigrant have an occupation or attend school? Was the immigrant or refugee married? Who were the other members of the immigrant or refugee's family? Had life been difficult for an extended period of time, or did it suddenly deteriorate? Describe in detail the challenges faced. Were there food shortages, conflict, an environmental disaster, or persecution?

Why, exactly, did the immigrant or refugee leave? What did the immigrant or refugee fear might have happened if he or she had remained?

The immigrant or refugee is permitted to take one small bag or suitcase containing a maximum of ten items that would fit in a bag or suitcase that could be easily carried during the journey. What would she or he bring and why?

What method did the immigrant or refugee use to leave or escape? What was the journey like? Did it involve walking, taking a boat, boarding an airplane, or something else? How long was the journey? Did it require the immigrant pass through or spend time in other places, such as a

refugee camp or another country, before arriving at his or her final destination or before securing his or her safety?

Who, if anyone, accompanied the immigrant or refugee on his or her journey? Who did they have to leave behind? Did anyone help the immigrant or refugee reach safety? What perils did the immigrant or refugee face during the journey?

Where did the immigrant or refugee sleep and find food and water during his or her journey? What emotions did the immigrant or refugee feel as part of the experience and during the various parts of the journey, including departure, travel, and arrival? Emotions can include anger, fear, anxiety, abandonment, shame, betrayal, defeat, and alternating emotions such as hope and despair.

Please note, this assignment may be difficult for some students, especially those who may be immigrants or refugees themselves.

Class Quilt

Celebrate and explore students' cultural backgrounds with a class quilt. Distribute 8-inch squares of sturdy light-colored paper and explain the symbolism of quilts. Quilts tell stories, represent family heritage, and bonds between people. Comprised of many diverse pieces that, when connected, form one, quilts are a metaphor for the American nation, born from a multitude of ethnic and cultural traditions.

Using markers or other art supplies and collage materials, have students create a quilt square that represents their family and culture. Encourage students to use diverse materials, such as photographs and recipes and three-dimensional items. Squares can be reinforced with cardboard if necessary. When the squares have been completed, invite students to explain their panel to the class. Punch holes in the four corners of each square and connect the quilt panels with yarn. Display the finished quilt.

Name: _____ Period: _____

The United States: A Nation of Immigrants Matching Activity

1. "The New Colossus"	a. Further restricted immigration and banned Asian immigrants from entering the United States
2. Environmental push factors	b. Resulted in the deaths of 1 million Irish and the emigration of 1 million more during the mid-1800s
3. Boat people	c. An economic pull factor that led many to settle in California
4. Asylum seeker	d. Required immigrants pass a literacy test
5. Nation of Immigrants	e. Consisted primarily of northern Europeans
6. Pull factors	f. Hurricanes, droughts, earthquakes, and nuclear contamination
7. Great Famine	g. A poem written by Emma Lazarus that appears on a plaque mounted inside the Statue of Liberty
8. Economic push factors	h. An individual who has fled their country seeking safety in another but who has not officially been recognized as a refugee
9. Gold Rush	i. Vietnamese, Laotians, and Cambodians who fled conflict and humanitarian crises in their countries following the Vietnam War
10. First major wave of immigration to the United States	j. Ways in which immigrants have influenced the United States culturally
11. Immigration Act of 1917	k. Poverty and lack of jobs
12. Immigration Act of 1924	l. The title of a book written by President John F. Kennedy
13. Cuisine, art, language, music	m. Political and religious freedom

Name: _____ Period: _____

The United States: A Nation of Immigrants Quiz

1. Who is credited with popularizing the term “a nation of immigrants”?

2. List the four *categories* of push factors.

3. Provide three *examples* of pull factors.

4. Define the term “refugee.”

5. List three ways in which immigrants have shaped the United States.

6. Upwards of one million people left Ireland in the mid-1800s as a result of what?

7. Define persecution.

8. Define nativism.

9. Define xenophobia.

10. List three components of the Immigration Acts of 1921 and 1924.
