

Immigration to Iowa

What would compel people to move to a new place?

Iowa has been the destination for immigrants since it began welcoming settlers in the 1830s. The origins of those new arrivals changed significantly over the past 175 years and can be roughly divided into three waves. In each case, they came in response to a combination of “push/pull” factors. Push factors like wars or persecution at home or poverty and lack of economic prospects forced them to seek a new homeland. Pull factors included the advantages they saw in relocating in Iowa. The rich farmland and economic opportunities were the major factor in early Iowa.

Iowa’s Early Settlers

Following the Black Hawk War when Native Americans were pressured to relinquish title to a significant portion of eastern Iowa, pioneers headed for the “land across the river.” Most early settlers were attracted by the acres of cheap government land. Small farmers from the Ohio River Valley furnished a large share of the early population. The states of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois and Missouri were stopping points along the way for many families who had begun in New England or the states of the upper South like Virginia, Maryland or Kentucky.

European Boom

Europe also began its contribution to the Iowa scene. Political revolutions and repressive reactions swept central Europe in the late 1840s. Germany supplied the largest contingent, with a tidal wave following failed revolutions in 1848. Many Germans settled in the Mississippi River towns like Dubuque and Davenport where they formed strong ethnic communities. However, Germans were a sizable presence in many Iowa communities and rural neighborhoods. The potato famines of the 1840s forced many Irish families to seek a new home in America, promoting Ireland as the second largest source of early European immigrants. Great Britain, Canada, Holland and the Scandinavian countries also contributed residents to early Iowa. Railroads and the state itself promoted foreign immigration. They developed and distributed brochures throughout northern and western Europe in native languages describing the climate, economic prospects and practical information on how to reach Iowa.

In the late 1800s and until World War I, immigrants from Italy, Russia and eastern Europe began showing up in the census. Because most of the land was now privately owned and no longer available at cheap prices from the government, it was early Iowa industries that attracted these new arrivals. Coal mining was important in drawing Italians and Croats. Often a single male would arrive and get a job in a coal mine. When he had saved enough, he would sponsor a brother, son or nephew who would then also contribute to the migration costs of other family members. World War I fostered distrust of these later immigrants and efforts were made to “Americanize” them and to limit the numbers of future arrivals. Mexican immigration also increased with the demand for farm labor during the war.

Refugees

Beginning in the 1970s, a third wave of immigrants began to enter the state and this immigration continues today. These individuals were often the victims of civil wars or natural disasters. The Vietnam War created thousands of displaced persons confined in refugee camps in southeast Asia. In 1975, President Gerald Ford urged the nation to help to resettle refugees here, and Iowa’s Governor Robert Ray responded by setting up a state agency to work with private organizations. As a result, many Vietnamese arrived in the state, learned English and became productive citizens. Wars in their homelands also “pushed” Bosnians, Ethiopians and others from Africa and Asia to seek new homes in Iowa. Hispanics from Mexico, South America and the Caribbean were drawn here by work in Iowa’s meatpacking plants and became a significant segment of the population in several Iowa communities including Perry, Storm Lake, Marshalltown and Denison.

Iowa boasts several nationally-recognized museums that pay tribute to Iowa immigrant groups: Versterheim for Norwegians in Decorah; The Czech and Slovak Museum and Library in Cedar Rapids; the German Heritage Center in Davenport; and the Danish Museum of America in Elk Horn.

Supporting Questions

Why do people move or choose to immigrate?

- [Sivell Family Passengers' Contract Ticket, 1852](#)
- [Sivell Ship's Manifest, 1852](#)
- [The Great Bartholdi Statue, 1885](#)
- [Statistical Atlas of the United States' Population, 1898](#)
- [Emigrants coming to the "Land of Promise," 1902](#)

What did immigrants experience when they arrived in America?

- [Inspection Room, Ellis Island, New York, between 1900-1915](#)
- [Emigrants \[i.e. immigrants\] Landing at Ellis Island, 1903](#)
- [Immigration Figures for the United States, 1903](#)
- [Immigrants' Landing at Ellis Island, between 1910-1920](#)
- [Language Proclamation Concern Letter, 1918](#)
- [Revocation of Babel Proclamation, 1918](#)

How does one's culture influence where they choose to live?

- [Sokol Festival, July 4-6, 1911](#)
- [Sauerkraut Day, September 7, 1912](#)
- [Italian Immigrants in Iowa, 1942](#)
- [Sudanese Immigrants in Iowa, late 1990s](#)

[*Printable Image and Document Guide](#)

Additional Resources

- [***The Goldfinch: Iowa History for Young People***](#), Volume 12, Number 4, April 1991 - This Iowa history magazine for children was published quarterly by the State Historical Society of Iowa from 1975-2000. Each issue focuses on a theme and this particular volume highlighted immigration in Iowa and included articles, games, photos and fiction.
- [***Alicia Ostriker reads Emma Lazarus' "The New Colossus"***](#) - Poet and professor Alicia Ostriker reads the poem "The New Colossus" by Emma Lazarus as a donation to an auction of art and literary works intended to raise money to build a pedestal for the Statue of Liberty. According to Ostriker, Lazarus was initially not interested in contributing a poem, but "a friend convinced her that the statue would be of great significance to immigrants sailing into the harbor."
- [***Immigration: Stories of Yesterday and Today***](#) - This online toolkit allows students to experience the process of immigration to America through the eyes of an immigrant. Students can take a tour of Ellis Island, explore an interactive immigration timeline and meet young immigrants through this online resource.
- [***Civics Test \(2016\)***](#) - This document is the "Civics (History and Government) Questions for the Naturalization Test," and is an oral exam that an USCIS officer will ask the applicant up to 10 of the 100 civics questions. Applicants must answer 6 out of 10 questions correctly to pass the civics portion of the naturalization test.
- [***Iowa Pathways: Oral History Videos***](#) - The media artifacts of this collection include videos and information about different groups of immigrants coming to Iowa, such as Jewish, Dutch and German settlers.
- [***Escaping to America***](#) by Rosalyn Schanzer - This book, written for children 8 to 12, is Rosalyn Schanzer recounting how her father traveled with his family in 1921 from Sochocin, Poland, to the United States. His family left Poland under rising violence against and persecution of Poland's Jewish population.
- [***How People Migrate***](#) by Sarah De Capua - A civic book targeted as the elementary grade level that includes information about American history, government and politics.
- [***At Ellis Island: A History In Many Voices***](#) by Louise Peacock - The book follows the journey of different immigrants and their families as they recount their travels, struggles and wonders of coming to America.
- [***I Pledge Allegiance***](#) by Pat Mora & Libby Martinez - This children's book follows Libby's great aunt, Lobo, who is from Mexico. Lobo called the United States her home for many years, and she wants to become a U.S. citizen. At the end of the week, Lobo says the Pledge of Allegiance at a special ceremony. Libby is also learning the Pledge of Allegiance and she and Lobo practice together.

The Great Bartholdi Statue, Liberty Enlightening the World: The Gift of France to the American People, 1885



Courtesy of Library of Congress, New York : Published by Currier & Ives, 1885

Description

The Great Bartholdi Statue, Liberty Enlightening the World: The Gift of France to the American People was erected on Bedloe's Island in New York Harbor.

Text-Dependent Questions

- Emma Lazarus wrote this poem which was engraved on the Statue of Liberty monument in 1903. If you were an immigrant, what do you think of her message?

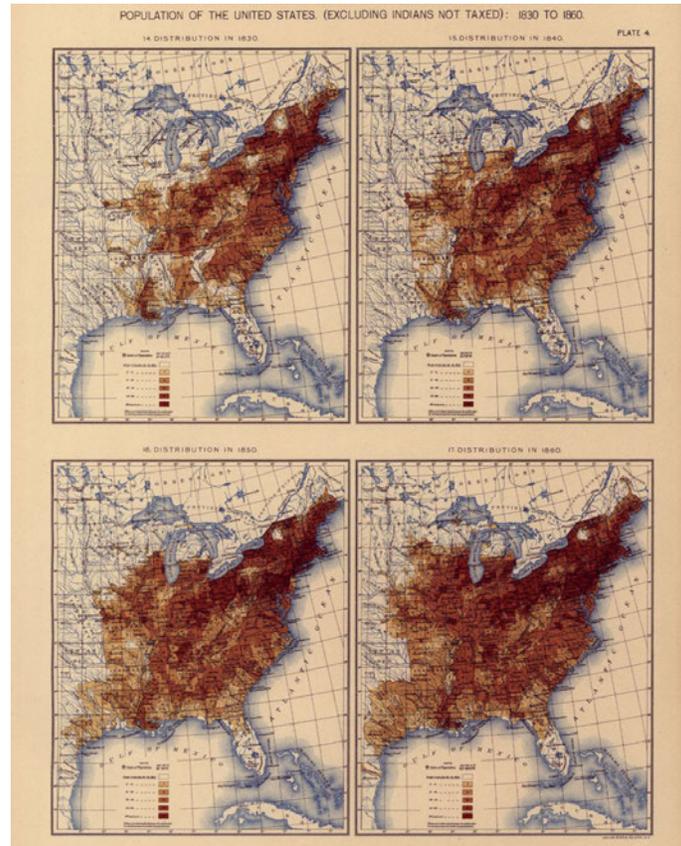
*"Give me your tired, you poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"*

- How is the Statue of Liberty a symbol of immigration?

Citation Information

"The great Bartholdi statue, liberty enlightening the world: the gift of France to the American people." New York: Published by Currier & Ives, 1885. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

Statistical Atlas of the United States' Population (excluding Indians not taxed), 1898



Courtesy of Library of Congress, United States Census Office, 11th Census (1890), and Henry Gannett, Washington, 1898

Description

A statistical atlas of the United States is based upon the results of the 11th census, completed in 1890, showing the population of the U.S. in 1830 and 1860. The atlas does not include the population of Native Americans who were not taxed.

Text-Dependent Questions

- Where was the greatest population found in the U.S. from 1830 and 1860?
- What changes happened regarding population from 1830 to 1860?
- What may have caused these changes?

Citation Information

United States Census Office, 11th Census (1890), and Henry Gannett. *Statistical atlas of the United States, based upon the results of the eleventh census*. Washington, 1898. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

Emigrants coming to the "Land of Promise," 1902



Courtesy of Library of Congress, Rau, William H., 1902

Description

The 1902 photograph captures emigrants huddled together on their journey to the United States. The image was taken by American photographer William Herman Rau.

Text-Dependent Question

- Compare this image to the ["Sivell Family Passengers' Contract Ticket."](#) What do you notice in this image that relates to the Sivell family passengers' contract ticket description?

Citation Information

"Emigrants coming to the 'Land of Promise,'" Rau, William H., 1902. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

Inspection Room, Ellis Island, New York, between 1900-1915



Courtesy of Library of Congress, Detroit Publishing Co., between 1900 and 1915

Description

The inspection room was where new arrivals waited to be inspected and registered by Immigration Service officers. On many days, over 5,000 people would file through the space to undergo medical and legal examinations.

Text-Dependent Questions

- Why are American flags prominently placed in the inspection room?
- How is the inspection room physically structured in a way to aid in processing new immigrants?

Citation Information

"Inspection room, Ellis Island, New York, N.Y.," Detroit Publishing Company, between 1900 and 1915. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

Emigrants [i.e. immigrants] Landing at Ellis Island, 1903



Courtesy of Library of Congress, Abadie, Alfred C., United States: Thomas A. Edison, Inc, 1903

Description

"Emigrants Landing at Ellis Island," a contemporary Edison film, shows a large open barge loaded with people of many nationalities, who just arrived from Europe. The immigrants are disembarking at Ellis Island in New York. The film opens with a view of the steam ferryboat "William Myers," laden with passengers, approaching a dock at the Ellis Island Immigration Station. The vessel is docked, the gangway is placed and the immigrant passengers are seen coming up the gangway and onto the dock, where they cross in front of the camera.

Text-Dependent Questions

- What do you notice about the people disembarking from the ship? What objects did immigrants bring with them?
- If you were to leave your home and travel to a new country with only the items you could carry, what would you bring?

Citation Information

Abadie, Alfred C., "Emigrants [i.e. immigrants] landing at Ellis Island," United States: Thomas A. Edison, Inc, 1903.
[Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

Immigration figures for the United States, 1903

ILLITERACY.

Number of persons in each hundred immigrants over fourteen years of age who cannot write or cannot read and write their own language, from those races (*not nations*) which contributed upwards of 2,000 immigrants to the United States during any of the past four fiscal years:

	1900.	1901.	1902.	1903.
WESTERN EUROPE.				
Scandinavian	0.9	0.8	0.5	0.6
Scotch	—	1.2	1.2	1.2
Bohemian and Moravian	3.0	1.5	1.6	1.6
English	0.2	1.8	1.9	1.6
Irish	3.3	3.2	3.9	3.8
Finnish	2.7	2.2	1.4	2.2
French	3.9	3.9	4.8	3.8
German	5.8	4.1	5.4	4.6
Dutch and Flemish	9.6	7.8	7.6	6.9
Italian (North)	11.2	15.7	14.4	12.7
Average of above	4.2	5.6	4.4	3.9
EASTERN EUROPE (WITH SPAIN AND PORTUGAL).				
Spanish	—	—	—	8.9
Magyar	16.8	7.5	13.3	10.5
Roumanian	—	—	28.3	21.5
Slovak	27.9	30.7	25.9	21.6
Greek	17.1	25.9	30.0	27.7
Russian	—	—	—	31.9
Polish	31.2	37.5	38.4	32.1
Croatian and Slovenian	37.4	39.7	42.2	35.2
Bulgarian, Servian, Montenegrin	—	—	—	44.7
Lithuanian	31.7	49.8	54.1	46.6
Ruthenian	49.0	53.2	50.0	49.4
Italian (South)	54.6	59.1	56.4	51.4
Portuguese	59.9	63.8	71.6	73.2
Average of above	39.8	46.0	44.3	39.7
OTHER RACES.				
Cuban	6.8	—	8.0	4.2
Chinese	—	6.9	—	12.9
Hebrew	22.9	23.6	28.6	26.5
Japanese	8.9	6.7	1.2	27.0
African (black)	—	—	—	32.5
Syrian	55.9	56.1	51.0	53.8

Courtesy of Library of Congress, U. S. Commissioner-General of Immigration, From data furnished by the Commissioner-general of immigration. Comparison of the fiscal years ending June 30, 1902 and 1903

Description

This source from 1903 highlights the number of immigrants coming to the United States who were illiterate in their native language in reading and writing.

[Transcript of Immigration Figures](#)

Text-Dependent Questions

- When considering the data, what can you conclude about illiteracy?
- What does it mean to be literate? How might being literate in your native language influence learning a new language?
- Would this document support or dismiss [Governor William Harding's proclamation](#)? Why or why not?

Citation Information

"Immigration figures for 1903," U. S. Commissioner-General of Immigration, From data furnished by the Commissioner-general of immigration. Comparison of the fiscal years ending June 30, 1902 and 1903. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

Immigrants' Landing at Ellis Island, New York, between 1910 and 1920



Courtesy of Library of Congress, Detroit Publishing Co., between 1910 and 1920

Description

More than 12 million immigrants made their first stop in America at the Ellis Island Immigration Station between 1892 and 1954.

Text-Dependent Questions

- What is an immigration station?
- Why was this a good location for an immigration station?

Citation Information

"New York, N.Y., immigrants' landing, Ellis Island," Detroit Publishing Company, between 1910 and 1920. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](#)

Language Proclamation Concern Letter, June 6, 1918

Pastor
Swedish Ev. Luth. Mission Church
1212 Broadway Street

Sioux City, Iowa,
June 6th, 1918

Governor W. L. Harding
Des Moines, Iowa.

Dear Governor:-

Forgive me for writing to you in regard to the proclamation regarding the language question here in Iowa.

My church here, the Swedish Mission church in Sioux City, has a membership of 290 about. The church is intensely loyal, and always has been. We have bought Liberty Bonds all of us, and W.S.S., and have an auxiliary Red Cross that meets every Wednesday to save for our dear soldier boys. Our church have invested this years building fund, which is approximately \$1500, in Thrift Stamps, and we are very proud of it. In every way possible have we helped the country, and will till our dying day.

My members have mostly imigrated when at an advanced age. They are therefore incapacitated to understand a sermon in English, i.e. most of them. It is very pathetic to see them weeping in there homes because they can not gather in church any more to hear the Word of God in their language. Now, my dear Governor I appeal to you, if it would be possible for me to use the Swedish language in the Sunday forenoon services. But Sunday evenings use the English, and thereby get used to the change. I feel so sorry for my members. It is very pathetic, and, therefore, I appeal to you as a man of justice to grant us this favor.

Would you please answer me before Sunday. If the time does not allow to send it by mail, please wire at my expense.

Your humble fellow-citizen,

C.A. Gavert

Courtesy of State Historical Society of Iowa, 6 June 1918

Description

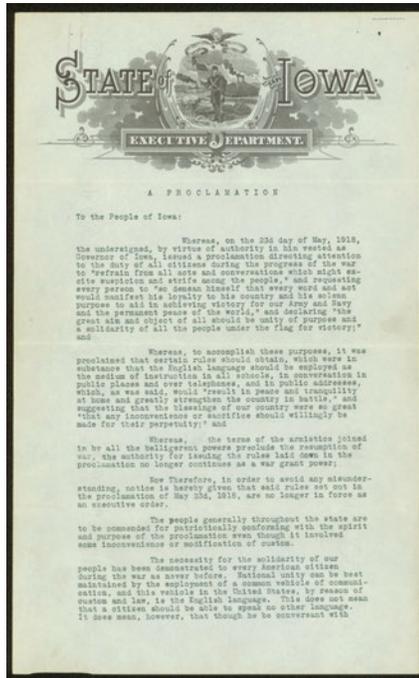
This is a letter from Pastor C.A. Gavert to Governor William Harding pleading for church services to be spoken in their native language, which would go against [Gov. Harding's proclamation](#) that states, "Only English was legal in public or private schools, in public conversations, on trains, over the telephone, at all meetings and in all religious services."

[Transcript of the Language Proclamation Concern Letter](#)

Text-Dependent Question

- Would you agree or disagree with Pastor Gavert's plea to the governor? What evidence would you use to support your answer?

Revocation of Babel Proclamation, 1918



Courtesy of State Historical Society of Iowa, 1918

Description

The [Babel Proclamation](#) was issued by Iowa's Governor William L. Harding. He took the anti-German sentiment in the wake of World War I further than any other state, and he proclaimed that "Only English was legal in public or private schools, in public conversations, on trains, over the telephone, at all meetings and in all religious services." This proclamation from Harding removed executive order from the provisions of the "Babel Proclamation," but upheld the use of English only in classrooms. A revocation is the official cancellation of a decree, decision or promise.

Excerpt from Revocation of Babel Proclamation

"...the English language should be employed as the medium of instruction in all schools, in conversation in public places and over telephones, and in public address, which, as was said, would "result in peace and tranquility at home and greatly strengthen the country..... While we welcome enlightened and thrifty people to our shores and to all the advantages of free institutions under our representative form of government, this is not with the view, and should not be so interpreted, of enabling them to establish themselves in communities by themselves and thereby maintaining the language and customs of their former country. All should understand that they are welcome to come, but for the purpose of becoming a part of our own people, to learn and use our language, adopt our customs, and become citizens of our common country. In Testimony Whereof, I have here unto set my hand and caused to be affixed the Great Seal of the State of Iowa. Done at Des Moines, this fourth day of December, 1918. By the Governor: W. L. Harding W. S. Allen, Secretary of State."

Transcript of Revocation of Babel Proclamation

Text-Dependent Questions

- What will Governor William Harding's proclamation mean for immigrants in Iowa?
- Where were immigrants expected to speak English?
- In what ways does requiring immigrants to speak English in school impact an immigrant student's school experience?

Sokol Festival, July 4-6, 1911



Courtesy of State Historical Society of Iowa, 1911

Description

This image shows a drill team performing during the Sokol festival and tournament at Alamo Park in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Sokols were gymnastics and drilling clubs that originated in Czechoslovakia.

Text-Dependent Questions

- How do immigrant groups build community to maintain a connection to their homeland?
- How might native-born Americans feel threatened or uncomfortable by Sokol festivals?

Sauerkraut Day, September 7, 1912



Courtesy of State Historical Society of Iowa, 7 September 1912

Description

A large crowd amasses on the town street during Sauerkraut Day in 1912 and are waiting in line for the celebrated food of finely cut cabbage. The town shown actually changed its name from Germania, Iowa, to Lakota, Iowa, in 1917 due to anti-German sentiment created by World War I.

Text-Dependent Questions

- How did immigrants continue cultural traditions when settling in America?
- How do festivals like Sauerkraut Day help immigrants maintain their cultural identity?
- How might native born Americans respond to immigrant festivals?

Italian Immigrants in Iowa, April 15, 1942



Courtesy of State Historical Society of Iowa, 15 April 1942

Description

Carmen Benardino places a service star for her brother, Luis, on a Sons of Aliens Service tag during a ceremony at the Polk County Courthouse in Des Moines, Iowa in 1942. Some U.S. communities viewed Italian-Americans as “enemy aliens” during the World War II and forced them to relocate from certain areas. Ceremonies like the one shown in the photo were meant to remind the public that Italian-Americans were doing their patriotic duty for their country.

Text-Dependent Question

- What evidence is there of patriotism in the photograph? Are those patriotism symbols important, why or why not?

Sudanese Immigrants in Iowa, late 1990s



Courtesy of State Historical Society of Iowa, late 1990s

Description

These Sudanese refugees received acculturation support at Hawthorn Hill Center in Des Moines, Iowa. Refugee assistance programs help refugees find a place to live, basic needs, jobs and lessons to learn the English language.

Text-Dependent Question

- What are the Sudanese refugees seeking help for at the Hawthorn Hill Center?