**Mr. Cegielski’s Study Guide: Facts about U.S. Immigration**

It is difficult to separate immigration from America's growth into a world power. Immigrants not only started the U.S., seeking freedom from British rule, but millions of immigrants continued to arrive in the U.S. and make important contributions.

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It is hard to imagine what America would be like without immigrants because U.S. history and immigration go together. Before the U.S. was an independent nation, people came to America in search of new opportunities and they continued to come as America grew and developed. Despite periods of anti-immigrant sentiment and laws intended to limit immigration, immigrants are part of the fabric of the nation.

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**The 17th - 18th Centuries: First Era of Immigration to the U.S.**

Most of the first immigrants came from England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales. They are often called settlers rather than immigrants, although they were not much different from the immigrants who came later. Many settlers came to America because property was cheaper than it was at home, allowing them to build homes and farm the land. Other settlers came as indentured servants, meaning they often had to do difficult work for their employer for several years until they earned their freedom package to help them start their own lives. This included things such as land, food, cows or new clothes. Indentured servants were a very important part of America's early economy because they helped work the land at a time when not enough people lived in America's colonies to do it without them.

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**The 19th Century: 15 Million Immigrants**

[](http://img.bhs4.com/f2/7/f2785442c5adce074e6a80c37a3f61e8a9e83d2a_large.jpg)Between the 1820s and the 1880s, over 15 million immigrants came to the U.S., mostly from Europe. If they did not go to the Midwest to farm the land, they usually stayed in the Northeast and worked in the factories and textile mills of the Northeast. On the West Coast, Irish and Chinese immigrants were an important source of labor for the Transcontinental Railroad, helping contribute to westward expansion and America developing a global economy. The U.S. began to see some people express anti-immigrant feelings, especially from the Protestant Americans against the Catholic immigrants from Ireland. The U.S. also passed the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, the only immigration law in U.S. history that excluded a single group from immigration and citizenship.

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**The 20th Century: Ellis Island**

[](http://img.bhs4.com/10/7/107cc1c5830cbbaca1d5b878db3c9c0a680e5ac5_large.jpg)Ellis Island played an important role in U.S. history and immigration. Between 1892 and 1954, more than 12 million immigrants entered New York Harbor, passing by the Statue of Liberty on their way to the immigration processing station on Ellis Island. Immigrants were required to pass a medical exam and show legal documents confirming their identity. Immigrants who were ill but could be cured were sent to the hospital, but people who were contagious or had any other condition that made it impossible to work were sent back home. Many immigrants stayed in New York, working in factories, starting their own businesses and developing neighborhoods that reminded them of home. Some of the famous people who went through Ellis Island include Sigmund Freud, actor Charlie Chaplin, composer Irving Berlin and entertainer Bob Hope.

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**U.S. History and Immigration Laws**

Beginning in 1910, many Asian immigrants began to arrive through San Francisco Bay’s immigration station on Angel Island. However, in 1921, Congress passed the National Origins Act, limiting the overall number of immigrants to the U.S. and determining how many immigrants would be allowed from specific regions. Asian immigrants were not allowed at all and eastern and southern European immigrants had severe restrictions. Western and northern European nations were allowed the highest number of immigrants. Countries from the Western Hemisphere, such as Mexico, South America and Central America were not part of the quota system and were allowed to immigrate freely. In 1965, President Lyndon Johnson signed the Hart-Celler Act, which stopped immigration quotas based on race and focused on allowing more immigrants with specific job skills or family members already in the U.S. This legislation led to increased immigration from countries such as India, Pakistan, China and Korea.

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There have been times in American history, as well as in modern times, when some have wanted to restrict immigration and the federal government has even passed laws to make immigration more difficult. However, it is said that America is a nation of immigrants and despite times of struggle and conflict, the influence of immigrants cannot be separated from the story of America.

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**References**

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