

# Teacher's Guide



Produced By



LIVING VOICES



ARTS FUND



## *A Journey into Immigration*

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## **What is The New American?**

**The New American** is an interactive live presentation that uses an Actor/Educator and video to create the era of America's largest tide of immigration. The goal of Living Voices' programs is to create a tangible link between students and history. Ultimately, Living Voices aims to supplement school curriculum and ignite interest and discussion in these topics that will last long after the presentation.

### **Introduction** **The New American**

**The New American** is Living Voices' journey into immigration in 1910. It tells the story of a young Irish girl whose economic outlook for herself and her family forces her to make some hard choices in order to survive. Bridget, like young people from countries around the world, makes a journey that was the only hope left for so many people, a journey to America.

### **What is required of the school?**

This play uses a live actor who interacts with a videotape containing the voices of other people in Bridget's life as well as the sounds, music, and images of the time. The New American may be presented in the classroom up to three times a day. This intimate setting allows for a closer connection between the students, the story, and the presenter.

For this setting, the school only needs to provide a TV, a VCR and a stool and the program is ready to go.

Before the presentation the Actor/Presenter will give a short introduction that will familiarize the students with the subject and the story that they will be seeing. After the presentation time is allowed for the students to interact with the presenter and ask questions about the story.

**This program will not work if the TV is mounted on the wall.** It is important that the presenter sit next to the TV. It is acceptable to combine more than one class for one presentation but we suggest you keep the numbers around ninety students.

The program has been effectively presented in libraries, multi-purpose rooms, and small auditoriums. (For these settings, please refer to the set-up instructions enclosed). Remember, smaller groups are preferred. Our goal is to maintain an atmosphere where students feel comfortable interacting with the presenter. This comfort level diminishes with larger groups.



## The Story

Our *New American* Bridget Fitzgerald, raised in County Clare, Ireland. Like people in many countries around the world, her family is beset with unremitting hardship brought on by economic and political forces beyond their control. Bridget's father finds it increasingly difficult to make enough money to pay the landlord's rent on their farm. Hoping for a little extra income, Father sends Bridget's older brother, Denny, to Dublin to work in the factories. Things are looking better until Denny disappears with no trace.

Father is forced to send his youngest child, Bridget, to America where they have a distant cousin who will take her in and allow her to work in his home. There is hope that she'll be able to make a great deal of money and return to Ireland right away.

Bridget is sent across the Atlantic in the steerage compartment with hundreds of other immigrants from around the world. She makes friends with another young Irish girl named Katie. A hard nosed, determined, no nonsense young woman, Katie is able to help Bridget survive the difficult journey at sea. Katie is traveling to America to marry a man named Johnny whom she only knows through a photograph and some letters.

Upon arrival at Ellis Island, Bridget is assaulted with a barrage of tests and questions as well as the voices of languages from around the world. The crowds and intrusions are almost more than she can take. If she were to fail any tests, however, she could be sent right back to Ireland without ever setting foot in Manhattan. That would mean disaster for her and her father. Katie is marked for suspicion for an eye disease; however, misfortune is diverted when a friendly worker tells her to hide the letter "E" that has been drawn on her shawl.

Both Bridget and Katie survive the testing and are approved for entry into the United States. Katie, however, is not allowed to leave the island until she is married to Johnny as young girls are not allowed off the island unless they are escorted by a trusted member of the family. Bridget is allowed to leave the island when her cousin picks her up.

Once in New York's lower east side, Bridget finds her cousin's 'house' is really a tenement building in which she is expected to work for no pay. Knowing that she will never be able to earn the money needed to save her father and the farm, Bridget strikes out into the streets where she finds people of all nationalities, languages, and cultures living in small neighborhoods. At an Irish aid society she finds Katie working with other refugees, and Bridget soon lands a job at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory.

Bridget is one of the only Irish girls among mostly Italian and Jewish women. She makes friends with an English girl named Rose. This friendship would never have happened in Ireland. The money that she makes

helps her father bring the farm out of debt; it looks like she may be able to return soon.

One afternoon, the entire factory catches fire and Bridget narrowly escapes being a victim in one of America's worst factory disasters. With the help of Katie and Johnny, Bridget is able to gain a job in the home of a rich Irish politician and send much more money home than she was able to make at the factory.

Bridget's father sends word that Bridget's brother Denny was recently killed by British troops during fighting in Dublin. He is regarded as a political hero. Father then informs Bridget that he intends to give the farm to their cousin Patrick and that she should consider staying in America. Bridget realizes that there is no life for her in Ireland any more.

Bridget makes the decision to become a citizen of the United States. Even though she still longs for Ireland, she realizes that she now belongs with the people from around the world who have come together to create a new way of life in a new world. She knows that she is an American.

### THE IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE



Definition: (**Migration, Immigrant, Emigrant**) The English word migration derives from the Latin verb migrare, meaning “to move from one place to another.” Two other words associated with migration are “emigrant” and “immigrant.” An emigrant is someone who leaves one place for another. An immigrant is a person who comes into one country from another. Thus, a person who migrates to the United States from Ireland is an emigrant from Ireland and an immigrant to the United States. (\*1)

### Reasons for Immigration.

If people are satisfied where they are, they will not migrate. For migration to take place, there must be some factor that pushes people out or that pulls them to a new environment. Throughout history, people have left their native lands for a variety of reasons: **religious or racial persecution, lack of political freedom, economic deprivation.** The forces that attracted them to new homelands were the opposites of these: religious and political freedom, ethnic toleration, economic opportunity (\*1)

Ask your students to identify some of the reasons that forced Bridget to leave Ireland.

**A. Were Bridget and her family the victims of persecution?**

**B. Did the Fitzgerald family have a lack of political freedom?**

**C. Was Bridget a victim of economic deprivation?**



### THE FIRST IMMIGRANTS

Native Americans were our country’s first immigrants. Anthropologists say they came from northeastern Asia. They resembled the early Mongoloid people of that region. Nobody knows when or how they came. They probably arrived when ice sheets covered much of northern North America. This may have been 20,000 to 30,000 years ago. They may have come because they were wandering hunters, like most people of that era. They crossed the Bering Strait to Alaska, seeking new hunting grounds. Bridges of land existed then, making passage easy. There seems to have been ice-free land and game in Alaska and open land east of the Rocky Mountains, leading into the

heart of North America. Perhaps the Indians moved along this area as they needed new hunting grounds. Gradually the ice melted, and the Indians spread to most parts of both Americas. (\*1)

### IRELAND

In the mid 1800’s Ireland was strongly controlled by England who had decided that they would turn the island into a “cattle civilization” for the benefit of England. The Irish were deprived of their civil rights and those who could not work were discarded into the streets. During a visit to Ireland in the 1840’s, the African-American statesman Frederick Douglass witnessed unspeakable suffering inflicted on the Irish by the British. Douglass, a freed slave, was “much affected” by the “wailing notes” of Irish music and commented that it reminded him of the “wild notes” of American slave songs. (\*2)

In 1910, Ireland was fighting for independence from England. Most of the people of Ireland were still extremely poor, consumed by massive unemployment and hunger. The native language had been almost

destroyed as well as the native way of life. After two famines, much of the population had already left for America or died from disease brought on by the famines.

### **THE IMMIGRANTS OF THE 1910'S**

The Irish were not the only people experiencing great suffering at the turn of the 20th Century. At the time that Bridget's story takes place there were examples of persecution and poverty around the world that forced millions of people to come to America.

In Russia the czarist "pogroms" were forcing Polish and Russian Jews to leave their farms and villages or face death at the hands of Czarist soldiers.

In Italy political and economic chaos forced Italians from Sicily and parts of the mainland to give up their homes and try to make a new life for themselves across the Atlantic.

### **The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire**

In **The New American** Bridget takes a job at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory. This factory was a "sweatshop" located in Manhattan's Lower East Side. Thousands of immigrants worked in these factory's. Crammed together on floor after floor, they operated large sewing machines and worked long hours. Social activist and union organizer Clara Limlich likened sweatshop work to slavery and said, "(The Bosses) yell at the girls and 'call them down' even worse that I imagine the Negro slaves were in the South." With no ventilation, badly stored flammables, exhausted workers, and locked fire escapes, these factories were always extremely dangerous. (\*2)

On March 26, 1911, a fire suddenly erupted in the factory when a lit cigarette or match came in contact with oily rags. With 800 young women trapped inside, fire rushed through the stairways, up the elevator shafts and covered the walls of every floor. Workers who could not get through the locked fire escapes died in the smoke and the heat of the inferno; many others jumped to their deaths from the windows rather than be engulfed by the raging fire.



Today's factory workers are protected by a variety of labor and safety laws as a result of this fire. Strong labor unions are also able to protect their workers in the workplace. However, many sweatshops still exist today in New York and around the country. In the Mid 1980's a chicken processing plant in the south caught fire, killing many workers who were trapped by locked fire exits just as the Triangle workers were some 70 years earlier.

**Are there any work places in your community where people are working in dangerous conditions for very little pay?**

**Are there any immigrants or migrants in your community? Where do the immigrants or migrants in your community work?**

### **AMERICA TODAY**

Among the American people today about 60 percent owe their origins to Northern Europe, with Germany, Great Britain, Ireland, Scandinavia, and The Netherlands having made the largest contributions. Southern and Eastern Europe contributed another 16 percent. Blacks, originally from Africa, total 10.5 percent; Hispanics, largely from the Western Hemisphere, about 4 percent; American Indians nearly 3 percent. There are others—Americans all—but with ethnicity retained. Certainly this is one of the great strengths of the nation.

(\*1)

**Look in the newspaper, have you heard of any countries today that are experiencing racial, political, or religious persecution?**

**Are people from those places immigrating to America?**

**Talk about your own family history. Where did they come from? Do you have more than one culture in your family background?**

### **Where Are We Coming From Now?**

When the Russians suppressed the Hungarian revolution in 1956, more than 30,000 Hungarians were admitted to the United States. In the 1960s and 1970s more than 650,000 anti-Castro Cubans arrived. Between 1975 and 1980, about 360,000 Vietnamese found their way to the United States. Legal and illegal immigrants continue to come north from Mexico. For a period the illegals could appeal under the law for citizenship. The United States has admitted many “boat people”. The Haitians are an example. Currently the troubles in the former Yugoslavia are beginning to create new rush of refugees to America.<sup>(\*1)</sup>

### **Conclusions**

Though conditions in this country weren't always safe nor were people always inviting to their new neighbors, America still represented the best hope to people from around the world who had no hope at all. An Irish girl living in New York wrote, “My dear Father . . . Any man or woman without family are fools that would not venture and come to this plentiful country where no man or woman ever hungered!” In Mexico the U.S. became known as “El Nort” and represented an answer to their dreams.

This culture is nothing if not diverse. Chinese immigrants developed Bing Cherries. American Indians gave the world tomatoes, corn, and tobacco as well as words like “Okay” and “Yankee”. American Indians created the first confederation, constitution, and bill of rights, a model for the government we now live in. Jazz, Blues and Rock & Roll originated from African Americans as well as scientific and medical discoveries. Gold mining techniques were brought here by Mexicans plus ranching and “Cowboy” techniques were brought to us by the *Vaqueros* with their *Lariats*, *Lassos* and fear of *Stampedes*. Russian Jews like Irving Berlin brought us great music like “God Bless America”, “Easter Parade”, White Christmas”, “Over There!” and many more.

Such diversity is still America's strongest and most unique quality in the world. America is not just a country of common history but a place where all the histories of all the worlds come together. There is no “true” story of America. Rather the true meaning of America lies somewhere in millions of individual stories that make up the population of the country.

The final test of America's strength will be our continued ability to respect and learn from the diversity of the people around us while feeling secure in ourselves and our place in this society. America never did and never will belong to one group. Realizing this we can better appreciate the arrival of every *New American*.

**Terms From**  
***The New American***



**POTATO FAMINE:** From 1845 to 1855 about 1.5 million people came to the United States, largely from the west and southwest of Ireland. A massive failure of the potato crop due to a fungus, *Phytophthora Infestans*, combined with British inaction and the colonial socioeconomic structure to produce massive death, destitution, and emigration. The emigrants left hurriedly and by any means they could, including overcrowded unseaworthy “coffin Ships.” These ships were characterized by a death rate similar to that of the slave ships from Africa. This group was the one of the most destitute yet one of the most aggressive of all the emigrant waves.

During the post-famine years from 1855 to the 1920’s, emigration became an institutionalized part of Irish life. Over 2.5 million Irish came to America. Emigration during this period was generally the result of deteriorating economic conditions and increased political repression. Evictions began to increase and agrarian violence and disobedience intensified. These emigrants came largely from the economically impoverished areas of west and extreme southwest Ireland. It was this group that sent back massive amounts of money to Ireland in order to improve the conditions of those left behind or to pay for further emigration of relatives.<sup>(\*)3</sup>

**WAKE:** Many cultures hold “wake” as ceremony in honor of a person who has just died. In Ireland, a wake is characterized by considerable revelry with the body of the deceased present. It is thought that the soul needs this liveliness in order to protect it from the evil spirits that it will encounter on its way to heaven. When the participants have determined that the dead person’s soul is safe, they follow their revelry with great “wailing” and crying.

Sometimes a wake was also performed for people who were emigrating to America. This was done since the great distances made seeing that person again unlikely and for all other purposes they could be considered dead.

**STEAMSHIP:** At the Turn of the Century the only way to get to America was by ship. Most immigrants from Europe at this time were brought over in “Steamships”. Steamships were large passenger ships that didn’t use masts. Huge steam engines turned propellers (or “screws”) providing the ships with a speedy and reliable method of propulsion. Steamers were divided into different classes such as “First” “Second” and “Third”, The first class compartments were the most expensive and provided the most luxurious amenities; the Second Class was the most popular for middle class and professionals, Third Class provided no luxury and only the barest essentials. Usually very dreary, this is the class most often used by the Immigrants.

**STEERAGE:** At the back of ship is the area where the rudder and propeller are located (the steering mechanisms). This is the part of the ship called steerage. Third class was often called “steerage class” since this is the part of the ship where third class compartments were usually located.

**STATUE OF LIBERTY:** An Immigrant herself, The Statue of Liberty is perhaps the most well known symbol of America and immigration. The Statue is on Liberty Island in Upper New York Bay commanding the entrance to New York City. Originally known as “Liberty Enlightening the World,” it was initially proposed by the French historian Edouard Laboulaye in 1865 to commemorate the French Alliance with the American Colonies during American war of independence. A Franco-American Union (founded in 1875) raised funds, and the statue was designed by the French sculptor F.A. Bartholdi as a woman with an uplifted



arm holding a torch. The Statue, using Bartholdi's 9 foot model, was constructed of copper sheets. It was shipped to New York City in 1885, where it was assembled and dedicated in 1886. The base of the statue is an eleven pointed star. A 150 foot pedestal, American Funded, is made of concrete faced with granite. An elevator runs to the top of the pedestal, with steps within leading to the crown. The statue became a national monument in 1924, and an American Museum of Immigration was established there. In 1965, Ellis Island was named part of the Statue of Liberty Monument. In 1982, Secretary of the Interior James Watt announced the creation of the Statue of Liberty / Ellis Island Centennial Commission. The Centennial of the Statue of Liberty was celebrated in a four day extravaganza in July 1986, with President Ronald Reagan, French President Francois Mitterand, and many other dignitaries in attendance.<sup>(\*)3)</sup>

**ELLIS ISLAND:** The United States Immigration Station (1892-1954). It has been called "the Gateway," "The Golden Door," and "the Island of Hope and the Island of Tears." Situated in the Narrows, between Brooklyn and Staten Island, it is now part of the Statue of Liberty National Monument. Originally 3.3 acres, the island was expanded by landfills in 1890, 1913, 1920, and 1934, to its present size of 27.5 acres.

Ellis Island was opened as an immigration station on January 1, 1892. Before then, it was used as an oyster-shucking place and as a storage depot for powder magazines. Its immigration history relates to the passage of the Immigration Act of 1882, which excluded "any convict, lunatic, idiot, or any person unable to take care of himself or herself without the becoming a public charge." Until Ellis Island opened, immigrants were processed at Castle Garden on lower Manhattan Island. But concern for crowding, crime, and lack of supervision brought the immigration process under federal control. Ellis Island was chosen as the place to process newcomers because it was difficult to escape from an island.

After the original buildings burned in 1897, the present structures were completed. The first floor contained the baggage room, administrative offices, a railroad room, and a wide stairway that led up to the Registry Room where the actual inspections took place.

Most persons were taken to the island by a ferry where they were led into the baggage room. They were processed in groups of thirty, corresponding to the number on the manifest sheet that had been completed by the ships captain. At the top of the steps began the physical examination. Those with problems were given tags or letters on their lapels: "L" for lung problems, "H" for heart disease, and "X" for mental deficiencies. If they survived this part, the next stop was the Registry Section, and as many as thirty-three questions. Name? Age? Height? How did you pay for you passage? Do you have any relatives here? Do you have promise of a job? Where born? Last residence?

For those who passed inspection, this whole process took only forty-five minutes. For them, final arraignments were made at the currency exchange and the railroad ticket office. But approximately 2 percent were detained and many were deported, after an appearance before the Board of Special Enquiry.

In 1916 Germans saboteurs damaged the facility and caused the evacuation of hundreds of occupants. During WWI German ship crews were detained on the Island. In 1919 thousands of suspected communist immigrants were detained on the island and later deported.

In the early 1920's a quota system was put into place that severely reduced the number of immigrants allowed to enter the country. The Island fell into worsening condition until the late forties when a brief rise in

immigration took place. Survivors of WWII were coming to America to escape the destruction in Europe and start a new life in America.

On November 9, 1954 Ellis Island was vacated and declared excess Federal Property. After attempts to sell the island failed it was added to the Statue of Liberty National Monument. Today the Main building has been refurbished and turned into museum.<sup>(\*3)</sup>

**THE LOWER EAST SIDE:** A part of Manhattan Island where most Immigrants first settled. This part of the city was once one of the most densely populated areas in the world. Tight conditions, bad facilities (or no facilities) and rows upon rows of tenement buildings characterizes this part of New York. Immigrants from around the world would bring their own culture into their part of the neighborhood, a walk through the lower east side was like walking around the world.

**TENEMENT:** Buildings that contain low rent apartments. Typically found in the lower east side of Manhattan and other poor neighborhoods. According to one report to the city of New York the tenements were described as “overcrowded, not ventilated, unlighted, unsanitary, and were fire hazards.” (\*3) Tenement buildings are able to house a large number of people on a small lot of land. Numerous rows of tenement buildings in New York and other large American cities allowed large numbers of immigrants to be located in concentrated areas. The buildings themselves typically had very few amenities, usually one toilet per floor shared by everyone on that floor, and small one or two room apartments for an entire family.

**AID SOCIETIES:** A number of the different immigrant groups who settled in America created aid organizations in order to help new immigrants from their home countries adapt to American society. Sometimes these organizations were fronts for gambling and other sorts of organized crime as well as a place where a person could gather with other people from their own culture.

**THE TRIANGLE SHIRTWAIST FACTORY:** A “sweatshop” where shirts and other garments were made. This factory was typical of factories in the garment industry and other businesses. Workers were jammed into large rooms with no ventilation where they worked elbow to elbow at huge sewing machines for long hours. Children were hired younger than fourteen and made to do all sorts of dangerous work such as climbing behind the large looms to thread the machines or fix them if they became jammed. On March 26, 1911 this factory caught fire, killing 146 workers who couldn’t get through the locked fire escapes. Many of the casualties were woman who jumped to their deaths from the highest floors rather than be caught in the blaze.

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#### Bibliography

\*1 Compton’s Multimedia Encyclopedia, 1991, Britannica Software

\*2 A Different Mirror, a History of Multicultural America, Ronald Takaki, 1993, Little Brown Books.

\*3 Dictionary of American Immigration History, Francesco Cordasco, 1990, The Scarecrow Press, Inc

## *Some Suggested Reading*

*A Different Mirror, a History of Multicultural America*, Ronald Takaki,

*Dictionary of American Immigration History*, Francesco Cordasco

*American Mosaic*, Joan Morrison & Charlotte Fox Zabusky

*Gateway to Liberty*, Mary J. Shapiro

*America's Immigrants Adventures in Eyewitness History*, Rhoda Hoff

*Fame Fortune and Sweet Liberty the Great European Emigration*, Dirk Hoerder &  
Diethelm Knauf

*Ellis Island Gateway to the American Dream*, Pamela Reeves

*The Afro-Americans*, Howard Smead

*The Irish Americans*, J.F. Watts