

THE IMMIGRANT PROCESSING STATION

Wisconsin State Curriculum Alignment:

English Language Arts A.4.1 – Use effective reading strategies to achieve their purposes in reading.

- Discern how written texts and accompanying illustrations connect to convey meaning.

English Language Arts A.4.3 – Read and discuss literary and non literary texts in order to understand human experience.

- Identify and summarize main ideas and key points from literature, informational texts, and other print and non-print sources.

English Language Arts A.4.4 – Read to acquire information

- Summarize key details of informational texts, connecting new information to prior knowledge.

Social Studies B.4.1 – Identify and examine various sources of information that are used for constructing an understanding of the past, such as artifacts, documents, letters, diaries, maps, textbooks, photos, paintings, architecture, oral presentations, graphs, and charts.

Social Studies B.4.3 – Examine biographies, stories, narratives, and folk tales to understand the lives of ordinary and extraordinary people, place them in time and context, and explain their relationship to important historic events.

Many immigrants started their life in America in New York City. There were other ports where immigrant ships docked – ports like San Francisco, California and Charleston, South Carolina, but New York City stations processed a significant number of immigrants coming to America in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

In 1855, the first central immigrant processing station in New York was established at Castle Garden. Located at the southern point of Manhattan Island, the building had once been used as a fort and later as a concert hall and tea garden. In 1890, Ellis Island replaced Castle Garden as New York’s official Immigrant entry point.

It was at Castle Garden that immigrants officially entered the United States. There, they were questioned and inspected. The government wanted to make sure that people with contagious diseases or with no money and little hope of finding a job did not enter the country. In this way, the government hoped to minimize the number of people depending on charity to survive and to prevent the spread of diseases among Americans. The government also collected information about immigrants at the processing centers. This helped the government to keep track of who entered the country, where they came from, and what their occupations were. Ehrich Weiss, later known as Houdini, entered the country at Castle Garden as a four-year old boy in 1878.



Immigrants Landing at Castle Garden in 1878. This illustration was taken from an 1880 *Harper's Weekly* Article and was drawn by A. B. Shults.

Read the following excerpts from an article that appeared in an 1870 *Harper's Weekly* Magazine. The author describes the arrival of new immigrants at Castle Garden and their processing there.

The steamer *Holland*, from Liverpool, had just arrived, and the steerage passengers were being landed. It was a *motley*, interesting *throng*. Slowly, one by one, the new-comers passed the two officers whose duty it is to register every immigrant's name, birthplace, and *destination* in large *folios* – a work that is often rather more difficult than it would first appear to be. In the first place, the officer in charge must be able to speak and understand nearly every language under the sun. This, however, can be learned and mastered; but then arises a second difficulty – the remarkable *want of intelligence* and the constantly *recurring misapprehension* shown by some of the passengers . . .

On they passed, one by one, in single file, till a few steps farther down they came to the desk of the so-called 'booker,' a clerk of the Railway Association, whose duty it is to *ascertain* the destination of each passenger, and *furnish him with* a printed slip, *upon which this is set forth, with the number of tickets wanted, and their cost in currency*. Having received this, the passenger is passed over to the railway counter; where, if he so desires, he purchases his ticket . . .

[He] has probably received a letter addressed to him at the Garden . . . or perhaps he desires to announce by letter his safe arrival at New York to friends far away. If so, he will find a clerk at his . . . desk, ready to write for him and forward his letter free of charge. If there is a letter for him, his name is called out loudly . . . If there is money for him, it is paid him *promptly*, or a ticket is purchased for part of it, if the sender so desires . . . If . . . he feels faint and hungry, then there is a restaurant over in the corner . . . And if he, finally, wants a *thorough ablution* before he starts for his new Western home, then there is the washroom already mentioned, where cold water, *stone troughs*, and fresh towels invite him to a bath and a change of *linen* . . .

Outside on the dock, where the passengers are landed, are the baggage-room and scales, where his boxes and '*kistes*' are weighed and checked according to his ticket . . . [At the Custom-house,] there is one lady-inspector, whose duty it is to examine the dresses of suspicious-looking female immigrants; and often she *makes a rich harvest of laces*, pieces of velvet or silk, jewelry, or the like, that is *concealed* upon the person in the most *ingenious* manner . . .

The Board of Commissioners own on Ward's Island (a little island in the East River, about five miles from the heart of New York) an immigrant refuge and hospital, both always *densely peopled*. Here, immigrants who are without *means of subsistence* are kept and taken care of at the expense of the Board, until such time as assistance may come from their friends in the shape of money or tickets, or they can be *disposed of* as laborers . . . During 1869 there were admitted on the island 11,471 sick or *destitute* immigrants, 439 children were born, and 11,356 passengers discharged during the same period. On December 31, 1869, there remained in the institution 1959 *souls*.

On entering the Ward's Island department we pass through the offices set aside for the *reception* of immigrants by their friends . . . When you find that [your friend] has arrived, you go down to Castle Garden to this office, to which there is a separate entrance from the Battery, and there you give to the clerk in charge the name of the passenger you are expecting. This will be called out inside the *rotunda*, and if she has been on board, she will be sent to you, *when there will be any quantity of questions to put and answers to make*. It certainly is interesting to witness these meetings, as I did. Here is the name of a *comely* Irish girl called out, she enters blushing, and is the next moment in the arms of her faithful sweet-heart, who left her home in Ireland three years ago, and has now sent for her to make her his bride. There is kissing and crying and squeezing, and applause from the by-standers, who for the moment forget that they themselves in a few minutes will probably do the same sort of thing . . . Father and son, sister and brother, meet here in *fond embraces*, with tears of joy, after years of

absence. What shaking of hands, and *assurances* of love, and *inquiries* for those dear to the heart, that are still thousands of miles away!

Opposite this building is located the so-called Labor Exchange . . . Not only immigrants, but whoever else wants work, can apply here and will *generally* succeed in finding *an employer*. Farm-hands and mechanics have the best chance, and there are always a number of them to be found there, mostly *raw hands*. Miners from Wales and other places are quite a specialty, and are always in demand. Weavers seem also to find *ready employment*. Next come laborers on railroads, farm-hands, and gardeners. There is but a poor chance for office clerks and other *nondescripts*. Servant girls form a great *proportion* of the work-seekers . . .

In 1869 situations were obtained for no less than 11,673 house servants, 438 cooks, laundresses, etc.; and, of the male branch, for 17,250 agricultural and unskilled laborers, and 5594 mechanics of various classes . . .

- 1) What adjectives does the author use to describe the immigrants? If he uses any words with which you are not familiar, look them up in the dictionary. Do these words paint the immigrant in a positive or negative light?

- 2) What is the first step immigrants must complete upon their arrival?

- 3) Describe in one or two sentences how language presents a difficulty for the new comers and the officials at the immigration center.

- 4) Who is the second official the immigrants meet?

- 5) After changing his money to American dollars and purchasing his railway ticket (if he plans to settle outside of New York City), what might the immigrant do next?

Glossary

- Motley** – Varied. The group was from a wide variety of backgrounds
- Throng** – A large group of people gathered or crowded closely together
- Destination** – The place to which the immigrant is going
- Folios** – A large sheet of paper, folded once in the middle making four “pages” (two leaves front and back) of a book
- Remarkable want of intelligence** – Lack of intelligence (not smart)
- Recurring misapprehension** – Misunderstandings that happen over and over again
- Ascertain** – To find out
- Furnish him with** – Give him
- Upon which this is set forth, with the number of tickets wanted, and their cost in currency** – The slip will have the passenger’s destination, the number of train tickets wanted, and the amount they will cost printed on it.
- Promptly** – Without delay
- Thorough ablution** – Full cleansing
- Stone troughs** – Stone wash basins
- Linen** – Clothes made from linen
- “Kistes”** – Baskets
- She makes a rich harvest of . . .** – She finds a lot of lace, velvet, silk, jewelry, and other expensive materials that she confiscates because the immigrants are trying to sneak it in.
- Concealed** – Hidden
- Ingenious** – Clever
- Densely peopled** – Very crowded
- Means of subsistence** – A way to provide food and shelter for themselves
- Assistance** – Help
- Disposed of laborers** – Jobs found for them
- Destitute** – Impoverished
- Discharged** – Released, let go
- Souls** – People
- Reception** – Greeting
- Rotunda** – A large area with a high ceiling, such as a hotel lobby
- When there will be any quantity of questions to put and answers to make** – This refers to people reacquainting themselves with friends and relatives by asking and answering questions
- Comely** – Attractive
- Fond embraces** – Loving hugs
- Assurances** – Promises
- Generally** – Usually
- An employer** – In this case, a job
- Raw hands** – Workers without experience
- Ready employment** – Jobs available
- Nondescripts** – Jobs that did not require special skills
- Great proportion** – A large number