

# ***URBANIZATION***

## Wisconsin State Curriculum Alignment:

Art and Design E.4.1 – Communicate basic ideas by producing studio art forms, such as drawings, paintings, prints, sculpture, jewelry, fibers, and ceramics.

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 historical events.

Between 1820 and 1920, the number and size of cities in America grew at a tremendous rate of speed. “Urbanization,” the rapid growth of cities, was closely tied to immigration and industrialization. Industrialization meant that labor once done by hand could now be accomplished by machines. New inventions used technical advances to enable fewer people to be more productive than before. For one thing, this meant that less people were needed to work on farms. Farmers found that they could produce a higher yield by using machinery than by relying on slow hand-work. However, following the Civil War’s end in 1865, prices on farm produce dropped. This left farmers in a bad financial state and made paying for new farm machinery difficult. Many farmers were forced to sell their farms and move to the city. In 1820, over 50% of Americans were involved in food production on farms. Compare that to the year 2000 when only 2% of Americans produce food for the entire United States and for export to other countries as well. Also consider that in 1860, 20% of Americans lived in cities and towns were as today 50% of Americans dwell in cities and towns and an additional 25% live in densely populated suburbs.

Many new immigrants to America also settled in cities. They often established their own ethnic neighborhoods where immigrants from the same country gathered together and continued to share the traditions, language, and culture of their homeland. Often, new immigrants had very little money and the neighborhoods in which they could afford to settle reflected this poverty. Housing affordable to immigrants was usually what was known as tenement housing. Tenements were apartment-like buildings, usually built of brick with stone surrounding the windows. Tenements were often very narrow buildings with only very narrow passageways separating one building from the next. Tenement apartments were not usually made up of more than two rooms. In these two rooms the whole family would live and sometimes work. It was also very common for families to take in boarders to their tiny apartments in order to help pay the rent. Often, there were twelve people to each apartment. One room generally served as a kitchen and living space while the other served as a bedroom at night and maybe doubled as a “sweatshop” during the day. A “sweatshop” was an in-home factory where families worked together sewing clothes, rolling cigars, making silk flowers, or cutting times. Families were paid

by the piece for this type of work so that is why anybody with able hands – even small children -- had to help.

Often there was very little fresh air and light in the tenement building. Only a few rooms had windows to the outside and there was no way for that air and light to move to the interior apartments. Other rooms opened onto dark, dingy hallways. It was common for several families to share one outhouse; in fact often more than twenty families used the same outhouse. There was no running water, which meant it was hard to tenants to bathe and wash their clothes. The result of these unsanitary conditions was disease: cholera, typhoid, smallpox, and tuberculosis. Outside the tenement building, peddlers sold their goods in the streets. They sold food alongside piles of manure and garbage lying in the gutters. Children also played in the streets since there were no yards.

Read the following description of the tenements of the “Hebrew Quarter” – an area of the Lower East Side of New York City where many Jewish immigrants settled. This description of the overcrowded tenements comes from journalist Jacob Riis.

The homes of the Hebrew quarter are its workshops also . . . You are made fully aware of it before you have traveled the length of a single block in any of these East Side streets, by the whirl of a thousand sewing-machines, worked at high pressure from earliest dawn till mind and muscle give out together. Every member of the family, from the youngest to the oldest, *bears a hand*, shut in the *qualmy* rooms, where meals are cooked and clothing washed and dried besides, the livelong day. It is not unusual to find a dozen persons – men women, and children – at work in a single small room . . . The overflow from these tenements is enough to make a crowd anywhere. The children alone would do it. Not old enough to work and no room for play, that is their story. In the home the child’s place is *usurped* by the lodger, who . . . pays the rent. In the street the army of *hucksters* crowd him out. Typhus fever and smallpox are bred here . . . Filth diseases both, they sprout naturally among the *hordes* that bring the germs with them from across the sea, and whose first instinct is to hide their sick lest the authorities carry them off to the hospital to be slaughtered\*, as they firmly believe. The health officers are on constant and sharp lookout for hidden fever-nests . . .

Up two flights of dark stairs . . . smells of cabbage, of onions, of frying fish, on every landing, whirring sewing machines behind closed doors *betraying* what goes on within, to the door that opens to admit the bundle and the man. A *sweater*, this, in a small way. Five men and a woman, two young girls, not fifteen, and a boy who says unasked that he is fifteen, and lies in saying it, are at the machines sewing *knickerbockers*, “knee-pants” in the Ludlow Street dialect. The floor is littered ankle-deep with half-sewn *garments*. In the *alcove*, on a couch of many dozens of “pants” ready for the finisher, a bare-legged baby with pinched face is asleep. A fence of piled-up clothing keeps him from rolling off on the floor. The

faces, hands, and arms to the elbows of everyone in the room are black with the color of the cloth on which they are working . . .

Evening has worn into night as we take up our homeward journey through the streets, now no longer silent. The thousands of lighted windows in the tenements glow like dull red eyes in a huge stone wall. From every door multitudes of tired men and women pour forth for a half-hour's rest in the open air before sleep closes the eyes weary with incessant working. Crowds of half-naked children tumble in the street and on the sidewalk, or doze fretfully on the stone steps. As we stop in front of a tenement to watch one of these groups, a dirty baby in a single brief garment – yet a sweet, human little baby despite its dirt and tatters – tumbles off the lowest step, rolls over once, clutches my leg with unconscious grip, and goes to sleep on the flagstones, its curly head pillowed on my boot.

\* Some immigrants did not know what would happen when loved ones were taken to the hospital. This may be because they did not have access to such facilities in their homeland.

From Jacob Riis' *How the Other Half Lives*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1890.

Re-read Riis' description of the tenements to get a mental picture of what life in the tenements was like. Draw a picture of a tenement building or apartment that shows a scene from daily life as you imagine it would have been. Write a short description of what is going on in your picture.

## Glossary

**Bears a hand** – Lends a hand, pitches in

**Qualmy** – Rooms filled with sickness

**Usurped** – Taken over by

**Hucksters** – People who sell wares in the street

**Hordes** – Masses, crowds

**Betraying** – Giving up a secret

**Sweater** – Sweatshop

**Knickerbockers** – Pants gathered and banded just below the knee, knickers

**Garments** – Clothes

**Alcove** – A partly enclosed section of a room