



## **Bringing *Life* to History**

Study & Resource Guide

*The New American*

### **ABOUT THE PROGRAM**

[Living Voices](#) combines live performance with archival film to authentically represent diverse perspectives from the past that resonate today.

In 12 different dynamic, original programs, the unique Living Voices signature technique synchronizes historical film footage and photographs with a single live performer. Based on real people and events, each production gives the audience a chance to experience how the world looked, sounded, and felt during a significant time in history, highlighting lesser-known points of view. Pre- and post-show visual aids and discussion extend the learning. All programs are available both in-person and online.

Our mission is to bring life to history: educating and inspiring youth and communities to promote justice, stand up against intolerance, empathize with people different from themselves, understand history through a personal, inclusive lens, and see themselves as part of it.

### **SHOW DESCRIPTION**

[The New American](#) follows a young immigrant's journey from steerage and Ellis Island to the tenements of New York City and the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire. Bridget leaves the turmoil and poverty of Ireland for the promise of work and better opportunities in the United States, where she faces the challenges and discrimination of immigrant life on the road to citizenship.

Significant historical topics and themes include:

- Great Wave of immigration
- Ellis Island immigrant experience
- Immigration and assimilation in the early twentieth century
- Tenement and sweatshop life, labor laws and issues
- Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire

**GRADE LEVEL:** 4<sup>th</sup> and up

**[Common Core English Language Arts Standards](#)**

**Speaking & Listening: Comprehension and Collaboration**

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.1](#): Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.2](#): Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.3](#): Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.

### **Reading: Key Ideas and Details**

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.3](#): Analyze how and why individuals, events, or ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.

### **Reading: Integration of Knowledge and Ideas**

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.7](#): Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

### **Writing: Research to Build and Present Knowledge**

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.9](#): Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

## **Washington State Social Studies Standards**

Social Studies 1: Uses critical reasoning skills to analyze and evaluate claims.

Social Studies 3: Deliberates public issues.

Civics 2: Understands the purposes, organization, and function of governments, laws, and political systems.

Civics 4: Understands civic involvement.

History 2: Understands and analyzes causal factors that have shaped major events in history

History 3: Understands that there are multiple perspectives and interpretations of historical events.

History 4: Understands how historical events inform analysis of contemporary issues and events.

## **National Core Arts Standards**

Responding: Understanding and evaluating how the arts convey meaning.

7. Perceive and analyze artistic work.

Connecting: Relating artistic ideas and work with personal meaning and external context.

11. Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding.

## **ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS**

- What were the reasons people emigrated to the United States during the Great Wave? How are these reasons the same or different today?

- What was the experience of an individual immigrant at Ellis Island?
- What was the experience of an individual immigrant becoming an American in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century?
- How do Bridget's experiences relate to current events and issues?

### **HISTORICAL CONTEXT: Immigration**

Sources: [Ellis Island \(statueofliberty.org\)](https://statueofliberty.org/); [Closing the Door on Immigration \(nps.gov\)](https://nps.gov/clos); [U.S. Immigration Station, Angel Island \(nps.gov\)](https://nps.gov/imm)

#### **Ellis Island**

From 1892 to 1924, Ellis Island was America's largest and most active immigration station, where over 12 million immigrants were processed. 1907 marked the busiest year, with approximately 1.25 million immigrants, primarily from Europe.

Third class passengers, commonly referred to as “steerage,” traveled in crowded and unsanitary conditions near the bottom of steamships, often spending up to two weeks seasick in their bunks during rough Atlantic Ocean crossings. After the steamship docked in New York Harbor, steerage passengers boarded a ferry to Ellis Island for their detailed inspection.

First and second-class passengers were not required to undergo the inspection process at Ellis Island. These immigrants received a brief inspection aboard their ship before disembarking to New York, under the assumption that if a person could afford a first or second class ticket, they were unlikely to become a public charge in America for medical or other reasons. However, regardless of class, sick passengers or those with legal problems were sent to Ellis Island for further inspection.

The Ellis Island inspection process lasted 3 to 5 hours. In the Registry Room (Great Hall), doctors would briefly scan every individual for obvious physical ailments. During these “six second physicals,” doctors would separate out anyone who required closer examination.

The ship's manifest log, filled out at the port of departure, contained the immigrants' names and their answers to 29 questions. This document was used by the legal inspectors at Ellis Island. Contrary to popular belief, interpreters of all major languages were employed at Ellis Island, making the process efficient and ensuring that records were accurate.

The Main Hospital Building opened in March 1902, with space and equipment to care for 125 patients diagnosed with trachoma, favus, and other contagious illnesses. Over the next 7 years, additional buildings were added to the hospital complex, including the Psychopathic Ward, a Contagious Disease Hospital, and Isolation Wards.

Only 2% of arriving immigrants were excluded from entry. The two main reasons for exclusion were the diagnosis of a contagious disease that could endanger public health, or concern that an immigrant was likely to become a public charge.

Ellis Island experienced a rapid decline beginning in the early 1920s. Anti-immigration legislation dramatically reduced the number of immigrants allowed to enter the United States.

The Immigration Act of 1924 allowed immigrants to undergo inspection before they left their homeland, making a stop at Ellis Island unnecessary. Ellis Island became a detention center for a small number of immigrants with problems or those being deported. Parts of the island fell into disuse after 1924. The facility was abandoned in 1954.

### **Angel Island**

On the West Coast, most Asian immigrants entered the United States through Angel Island in San Francisco, where they faced a far more difficult process than European immigrants on the East Coast. While the goal of Ellis Island was to let immigrants in, the goal of Angel Island was to keep immigrants out.

Between 1910 and 1940, the Angel Island immigration station processed up to 1 million Asian and other immigrants, including 250,000 Chinese and 150,000 Japanese, as well as Australians, New Zealanders, Canadians, Mexicans, Central and South Americans, and Russians.

Each Angel Island arrival received a full medical examination at the station hospital. If an examiner found evidence of a disease, the infected immigrant could not enter the United States. Healthy immigrants were detained on the island for an immigration hearing, conducted by 2 immigration inspectors, a stenographer, and a translator. These hearings functioned more like interrogations, as immigration officials tried to expose fraudulent claims by asking about the minute details of a person's life. This process could take days, months, or even years.

Thousands of detained immigrants were held in Angel Island's prison-like environment. Detainees resided in barracks with locked doors, unable to go out without a guard's supervision. Officials separated the immigrants by race and sex, including families. Immigration officers inspected all incoming and outgoing letters, packages, and other communications. They could not receive visitors until after their cases cleared. Angel Island Immigration Station operated until a fire burned the administration building in 1940.

### **Immigration Laws**

Economic concerns and ethnic prejudice demanded increased restrictions on immigration to end America's "open door" immigration policy.

Congress passed America's first major restriction, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, in reaction to the arrival of Chinese immigrants. The 1907 "Gentlemen's Agreement" with Japan and the Immigration Act of 1917 further reduced Asian immigration. The addition of a literary test was also intended to impede entry from Southern and Eastern Europe, which represented over 50% of all immigrants.

The Emergency Quota Act of 1921 established the first limits on the number of immigrants, by setting quotas based on country of origin. The quota for each nationality was set at 3% of that nationality's representation in the U.S. census of 1910. These limits were specifically designed to keep out "undesirable" ethnic groups and maintain America as a nation of white Northern and Western European people.

The National Origins Act of 1924 made these quotas stricter and permanent. Under this act, quotas were set at 2% of that nationality's representation in the 1890 U.S. census. To implement the quotas, the American immigration process was changed to the visa system we still use today.

### **HISTORICAL CONTEXT: The Triangle Fire**

Source: <http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/trianglefire/>

The fire at the Triangle Shirtwaist Company in New York City was one of the worst disasters since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. The Triangle Shirtwaist Company was a typical Manhattan sweatshop, exploiting workers with low wages, long hours, and unsanitary and dangerous working conditions. Near closing time on Saturday afternoon, March 25, 1911, a fire broke out on the top floors. Within minutes, the afternoon erupted into madness. By the time the fire was over, 146 of the 500 employees had died. The victims and their families, the witnesses, and the City of New York would never be the same.

Many of the Triangle factory workers were women, some as young as 15 years old. They were mostly recent Italian and Jewish immigrants who had come to the United States to seek a better life. Instead, they faced grinding poverty and horrifying working conditions. As recent immigrants struggling with a new language and culture, the working poor were ready victims for the factory owners. For these workers, speaking out could risk the loss of desperately needed jobs, a prospect that forced them to endure personal indignities and severe exploitation. Some turned to labor unions; many more struggled alone. The Triangle Factory was a non-union shop, although some of its workers had joined the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU).

There were growing public concerns for issues of health and safety in the early 20th century. Groups such as the ILGWU fought for better working conditions and protective laws. The Triangle Fire illustrated that current fire inspections and precautions were inadequate. Survivors of the fire reported their helpless efforts to open the ninth-floor doors to the Washington Place stairs, their only viable escape route because the Green Street stairs were completely engulfed by fire. They and many others believed the doors were deliberately locked: the owners had frequently locked the exit doors during the workday. For all practical purposes, the ninth-floor fire escape led nowhere, and it bent under the weight of the workers using it. Others waited at the windows for rescue, only to discover that the firefighters' ladders were several stories too short and the water from the hoses could not reach the top floors. Many chose to jump to their deaths rather than burn alive.

In the weeks that followed, the city reeled at the atrocity that could have been averted with a few precautions and protested the lack of concern and greed that had made this possible. The people called for action to improve the unsafe conditions in sweatshops and protect the vulnerable and the oppressed. Workers flocked to union headquarters to offer testimonies and demand that the Triangle owners be brought to trial.

Eight months after the fire, a jury acquitted the factory owners of any wrongdoing. The task of the jurors had been to determine whether the owners knew the doors were locked at the time of the fire. The defense attorney planted enough doubt to win a not-guilty verdict. Grieving families

and much of the public felt that justice had not been done. Twenty-three civil suits were brought against the owners of the building. On March 11, 1913, three years after the fire, the owners settled. They paid 75 dollars per life lost.

Even today, sweatshops have not disappeared in the United States. They keep attracting workers in desperate need of employment.

## **TIMELINE**

Sources: [Timeline - Immigration History](#); [Immigration Has Been a Defining Element \(migrationpolicy.org\)](#); [Cornell University The Triangle Factory Fire timeline](#)

- 1790 Naturalization authorized for "free white persons" who have lived in the United States for at least two years and swear loyalty to the U.S. Constitution. The racial requirement remained until 1952.
- 1875 Immigration Act (Page Act) bars the admission of criminals, Asian forced laborers, and Chinese women.
- 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act bans immigration of Chinese laborers for 10 years, bars Chinese naturalization, and provides for the deportation of unauthorized Chinese immigrants. Follow-up laws passed in 1888 and 1892.
- 1882 Immigration Act bans entry of "convicts, lunatics, or persons unable to take care of himself or herself without becoming a public charge."
- 1891 Immigration Act extends the list of excludable and deportable immigrants, including polygamists, "idiots, insane persons, paupers," and those with infectious diseases.
- 1892 Geary Act renews the Chinese Exclusion Act and expands its enforcement.
- 1904 Congress indefinitely extends the Chinese Exclusion laws.
- 1906 Naturalization Act requires immigrants to speak, read and understand English to become naturalized citizens.
- 1907 Expatriation Act strips citizenship from U.S.-born women who marry non-citizen immigrant men.
- 1909 New York garment workers strike
- 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire
- 1912-13 Department of Labor and New York Legislature pass multiple new protective labor laws
- 1913 trial of Triangle Shirtwaist Factory owners

- 1917 Immigration Act establishes a literacy requirement for immigrants over age 16 and prohibits immigration from the "Asiatic barred zone," covering most of South and Southeast Asia and the Middle East.
- 1921 Emergency Quota Act creates the national-origins quota system. Drawing on eugenics research, this measure limits immigration "scientifically" by imposing quotas based on immigrants' country of birth.
- 1924 Immigration Act (Johnson-Reed Act) establishes an even more racially discriminatory quota system, highly preferencing those from Northern and Western Europe. The law includes no provisions for immigration from South and Central America or Mexico.
- 1924 Indian Citizenship Act determines that all Native Americans born in the United States are automatically U.S. citizens. Native Americans are the last main group to gain this 14th Amendment right.
- 1943 Chinese Exclusion Act repealed.
- 1952 Immigration and Nationality Act (McCarran-Walter Act) continues the national-origins quota system but grants quotas to all countries, opening the door to many nationalities previously barred on racial grounds, although 85% of quotas are allocated to Western and Northern Europeans. Asian countries receive comparatively tiny quotas, and remain the only population tracked by race. Naturalization now requires the ability to read, write, and speak English.
- 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act (Hart-Celler Act) creates a new system of immigration control to replace the national origins system, preferencing families, employment, and refugees. Each country, regardless of ethnicity, receives an identical annual quota.

## GLOSSARY

Sources: [Glossary - Immigration History](#); [Anti-Defamation League](#), [Jewish Virtual Library](#); [Fashion History Timeline](#); [History of Sweatshops National Museum of American History](#)

**Citizen/citizenship:** a person/the status of being a legal member or resident of a state of nation, which includes specific rights and responsibilities.

**Emigrant/emigration:** a person/the process of leaving one country to settle in another.

**Immigrant/immigration:** a person/the process of relocating to live permanently in a new place.

**Persecution:** the systematic mistreatment of an individual or group, usually because of race, religion, politics, gender, or sexual orientation.



**Refugee:** someone who leaves their native land because of expulsion, invasion, oppression, or persecution.

**Shirtwaist:** a woman's tailored blouse, styled like a man's dress shirt with buttons, collar and sometimes tie, popular 1890s-1920s.

**Steamship:** a large ship that holds many people, powered by steam engines turning large propellers.

**Steerage:** area of a steamship that housed the third-class passengers, at the back and bottom of the ship where the rudder and propellers are located (the steering mechanisms).

**Sweatshop:** a workplace where relatively unskilled employees work long hours for substandard pay in unhealthy, unsafe, and illegal conditions.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Many of the following websites contain and/or lead to additional links. Please consider this list as a starting point for your own research and exploration.

### **Museums & organizations**

[Ellis Island Part of Statue of Liberty National Monument \(nps.gov\)](https://www.nps.gov/ellis)

[The Statue of Liberty — Ellis Island Foundation](https://www.ellislandfoundation.org/)

[Angel Island Immigration Station - San Francisco](https://www.angelislandimmigrationstation.org/)

[U.S. Immigration Station, Angel Island \(nps.gov\)](https://www.nps.gov/angelisland/)

[Immigration Museum NYC | Tenement Museum](https://www.tenementmuseum.org/)

[Tenement Museum Virtual Tour](https://www.tenementmuseum.org/virtual-tour/)

[National Famine Museum - Famine House - Strokestown Park](https://www.faminehouse.org/)

[Remember the Triangle Fire Coalition](https://www.rememberthetrianglefire.org/)

### **Teacher Resources**

[Immigration and Relocation in U.S. History | Classroom Materials at the Library of Congress](https://www.libraryofcongress.org/education/immigration-relocation-in-us-history/)

[Re-imagining Migration](https://www.re-imaginingmigration.org/)

[Immigration History](https://www.immigrationhistory.org/)



[Curriculum | Angel Island Immigration Station - San Francisco](#)

[Immigration and Displacement \(nga.gov\)](#)

### **History & research resources**

[The History Place - Irish Potato Famine](#)

[Selected Images of Ellis Island and Immigration, ca. 1880-1920 \(loc.gov\)](#)

[Internet History Sourcebooks](#)

[Ellis Island - HISTORY](#)

[Passenger Arrival Lists | National Archives](#)

[On the Lower East Side: \(tenant.net\)](#)

[How the Other Half Lives by Jacob Riis \(tenant.net\)](#)

[Cornell University - ILR School - The Triangle Factory Fire](#)

[Triangle Fire \(famous-trials.com\)](#)

[The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire \(osha.gov\)](#)

### **Film & video**

[Destination America | PBS](#)

[Forgotten Ellis Island — Preview | PBS](#)

[Forgotten Ellis Island - YouTube](#)

[Immigration Through Ellis Island - Award Winning Documentary - YouTube](#)

[Exploring the Immigration Hospitals on Angel Island and Ellis Island - YouTube](#)

[Angel Island Immigration Station Tour - YouTube](#)

[Angel Island: More Important To Remember Now Than Ever - YouTube](#)

[Asian American & Pacific Islander Heritage Month at Angel Island State Historic Park - YouTube](#)

[Immigration History at Angel Island State Historic Park - YouTube](#)

[Watch Triangle Fire | American Experience | Official Site | PBS](#)

[Extra History : Irish Potato Famine: 5 episode series - YouTube](#)

[The Triangle Shirtwaist Fire - Horror in Manhattan - Extra History - YouTube](#)

## Podcasts

[The Triangle Shirtwaist Fire of 1911: An Emigrant's Experience Part 1 • Irish History Podcast](#)

[The Triangle Shirtwaist Fire of 1911: An Emigrant's Experience Part II | Irish History Podcast](#)

[The Triangle Shirtwaist Fire of 1911: An Emigrant's Experience Part III | Irish History Podcast](#)

## Books

[A Different Mirror for Young People teaching guide](#)

## WORKSHOPS

[Book a post-show workshop](#) to supplement your program:

- explore the issues, historical events, and their relevance through interactive drama techniques with a Living Voices performer
- address additional [Arts Standards](#)
- available for groups of 30 or less
- can be scheduled as part of a 3-show day or separately

## EXTENSION & INTEGRATION ACTIVITIES

Adaptable for students of all levels, these activities can be used as tools for assessment or reflection, and provide deeper exploration of the essential questions, topics, and themes.

Students may respond through any artistic medium, such as:

**Writing:** write a story, poem, article, caption, monologue, scene, play, graphic novel, diary, speech

**Media/Visual Arts:** take a photograph; make a video; draw or paint a picture; create a collage, sculpture or comic strip

**Drama/Movement:** create a frozen image or series of images; plan or improvise a monologue, scene or play; choreograph a dance or movement

**Music:** write a song (vocal or instrumental); create a soundtrack

- Supplement a specific scene in the play with work in another medium; for example: illustrate it, act it out, etc.
- Re-create a scene from the play from another character's point of view.

- Imagine you could contact the main character from the play. What would you want to tell or show them about the present?
- What connections can you make between the historical events of the play and what's happening now—in your own life, your community, the country, the world?
- Research historical documents for a real person's first-person account of an event portrayed in the play. How is it similar or different to the perspective in the play?
- Research another event or movement in history or from current events. How is it similar or different to the event or movement in the play?

### **Drama Activities**

Please click on the hyperlinked text for more information on a specific activity, where available.

[Role-on-the-wall](#): a character is represented as an outline of a person on a large piece of paper. On the inside of the figure, write or draw what the character thinks and feels about themselves; on the outside, write or draw how they appear or how others perceive them. This activity can be used or repeated for any character in the play, and/or other fictional or historical figures. Students may work independently or collaboratively. For more information: [Arts-Integration Role-on-the-Wall](#).

[Voices in the Head](#): Students form two lines facing each other to make a path for the Living Voices character, representing their journey in the play. As one participant representing the character passes through the created path, other students speak to the character as the character's family & friends, as the character's own inner thoughts and feelings, or as themselves. Students may offer advice, ask questions, or share other perspectives.

[Hot seating](#): Interview a character from the play, portrayed by teacher, student, or group.

[Statues/Tableau](#): Students work individually, in pairs or small groups to create a frozen picture of a specific place, situation, event, idea or topic related to the play. Each participant uses face and body to create a statue of a character within the picture, working together in pairs or groups to present a cohesive image. A tableau can be literal or symbolic. Extensions:

- [Hot seat](#) characters from the tableau
- [Add voice](#) and/or movement to the tableau
- Create a series of statues or tableaux to present a [story or sequence](#)

[Sculpting](#): Brainstorm a list of words in response to the themes and story of the play. Guide students into pairs. One partner starts as the sculptor and the other as clay. For each round of sculpting, prompt sculptors with a word from the brainstorm list. Sculptors show a pose to reflect the given word to their partner, and the clay partner mirrors the statue. Sculptors step away from their frozen partners so the group can view the sculpture gallery. Invite sculptors to describe what they see and make inferences and connections between the sculptures and the word. Repeat the process, with partners switching back and forth between the roles of sculptor and clay. Prompt with a new word for each round.

[Persuasion Improvisation](#): Choose a moment from the play in which 2 characters have opposing points of view or objectives. Guide students into pairs. One partner starts as Character 1 and the

other as Character 2. Prompt all pairs simultaneously to improvise the conversation between the 2 characters, in which each tries to convince the other to see their point of view. Participants should share their own perspective, listen to their partner, and respond to what they hear as their character. Repeat multiple times by switching partners or changing characters.

Make your own Living Voices program: Every Living Voices character shares an important time in history through their own personal experience. They start by introducing themselves, so the audience will understand their point of view. We are living through history right now. What do you want to communicate about your own experience during this time? Create your own short video to introduce yourself. What's important to you in this moment? Who or what makes you who you are? If you want, you may use video or images. Get creative—make your voice a Living Voice, and please share your work with us at [livingvoices@livingvoices.org](mailto:livingvoices@livingvoices.org)!