

City of Immigrants History to Know Before You Play

Before the class begins playing MISSION US: “City of Immigrants,” here are five important pieces of historical context with which your students should be familiar. If you have not already taught this material in your class, introduce it to your students before they make their way through life in New York City in the 1900s.

1. Between 1880 and 1924, more than 25 million immigrants entered the United States.

Most came through Ellis Island in New York harbor, the nation’s major entry point for European immigration. Many came from Eastern Europe and Italy, driven by persecution or economic hardship and drawn by the opportunities offered by America’s expanding economy. By 1910, 41 percent of New York City’s almost five million residents were foreign born.

2. By 1920, immigration and industrialization had transformed the nation from a largely rural population to a majority urban population. America’s industrial growth attracted large numbers of immigrants who provided labor for the new factories. The emergence of skyscrapers, streetcars, electric lights, telephones, amusement parks, and motion pictures theaters transformed cities. The bustle and wonders of its cities symbolized America’s growth and economic power, but also indicated great inequality and disparities of wealth and poverty.

3. The years between 1890 and 1920 are known as the Progressive Era, a period when reformers strove to improve the living and working conditions of the poor. Progressivism sought to reduce corruption and increase the efficiency of government and to enact laws that regulated big businesses. Some reformers focused on directly assisting workers and the poor. One progressive institution founded by middle-class women, the settlement house, sought to teach immigrants skills along with American social and cultural customs.

4. The garment, or clothing, industry dominated New York’s economy. The garment trade was characterized by a few large firms and hundreds of small shops, with each workplace setting its own work rules and pay rates. Most garment workers were young immigrant women, with about half of workers under the age of twenty. By 1910 more than 56 percent of the workers were Jewish and 34 percent were Italian.

5. With the rise of factories in the early nineteenth century, working men and women organized labor unions to demand better conditions and pay. Union members went on strike—withheld their labor—to force employers to meet their demands, such as an eight hour workday. Strikes were often unsuccessful because of factory owners’ violent resistance, repeated economic depressions, and divisions among workers in ethnicity, race, gender, and skill level. The vast influx of a new immigrant workforce during the early twentieth century enabled the union movement to continue to expand.