

EXPERT GROUPS/JIGSAW READING

Adapted from Library of Congress:

<https://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/presentationsandactivities/presentations/immigration/italian.html>



Italian earthquake
refugees
board ship for the
U.S., 1909.

VOCABULARY

peasant: poor farm person

The Great Arrival (group A)

From the 1880s to the 1900s, more than two million Italians migrated to America. By 1920, when immigration began narrower, more than 4 million Italians had come to the United States. They represented more than 10 percent of the nation's foreign-born population.

What brought about this dramatic surge in immigration? The causes are complex, and a single person or a family had a unique story. By the late 19th century, the peninsula of Italy had finally been brought under one flag, but the land and the people were by no means unified. Years of internal conflicts caused violence, social chaos, and poverty. The poor **peasants**, mostly from the south of Italy and on the island of Sicily, had little hope of improving their land. Diseases and natural disasters were extended into the new nation, but the government was in no condition to bring aid to the people. As transatlantic transportation became more affordable, and as American prosperity became popular, Italians didn't resist the dream of "*L'America*".

This new generation of Italian immigrants was different from those that had

come before. The immigrant population were no more Northern Italian artisans and shopkeepers looking for a new market. Instead, the vast majority were farmers and laborers looking for a work. There were a significant number of single men, and many came only to stay a short time. Within five years, 30 -50 percent of this generation of immigrants would return home to Italy, where they were known as *ritornati*.

Those who stayed, usually remained in contact with their family in the old country, and worked hard in order to have money to send back home. [...]



[Mulberry Street ca. 1900.](#)



[Clam seller, Mulberry Bend, ca. 1900.](#)

A City of Villages (group B)

The previous Italian immigrants who passed the test of Ellis Island, left New York City and settled elsewhere in the country. This generation of Italian immigrants, however, stopped and made their homes there; one third lived in New York City.

They settled in the New York region: Brooklyn, the Bronx, and nearby towns in New Jersey. Perhaps the greatest concentration of all was in Manhattan. The streets of Lower Manhattan, particularly parts of Mulberry Street, quickly became Italian in character, with street vendors, store owners, residents and homeless, all speaking the same language or at least a dialect of it.

In part because of the social and political divisions of the Italian peninsula, new immigrants tended to preserve this isolation in their new country, living together in close enclaves. The population of a single Italian village preserved many of the social institutions and religious habits from the old country. This enclave was named Little Italy.

Many distinctive events and practices maintained the unity of the village: weddings, feasts, baptisms, and funerals. One that often caught the attention of outsiders was the *fešta*: a parade celebrating the feast day of a particular village's patron saint. Hundreds or thousands of residents would follow the image of the saint in a procession through the streets of the neighborhood.



[Tenement house, ca. 1890.](#)



[Italian immigrants doing piecework in their home. New York City, 1912.](#)

The home conditions (group C)

Urban life was often filled with risks for the new immigrant, and housing could be one of the greatest dangers. At the end of 1800s, more than half the population of New York City, and most immigrants, lived in apartment buildings. The houses were narrow, overcrowded, with few light, under ventilated and unhealthy: diseases such as cholera, typhus, and tuberculosis were common. In a small room slept twelve men and women: two or three in bunk beds, the rest on the floor. A kerosene lamp burned in the semi-darkness.

For Italians, this way of living came as an enormous shock. In Italy, many rural families had slept in small, cramped houses; however, they spent most of their hours out of the house, working, socializing, and taking their meals in the outdoors. In New York, they used the same small room for eating, sleeping, and even working. Many immigrant families worked at home performing piecework: sewing clothes or hand-assembling machinery. [...]



[Vegetable stand, ca. 1890.](#)

VOCABULARY

Cramped: without space

sweatshops: factories that exploit workers

The working conditions (group D)

Immigrants' work places could be as unhealthy as their homes. A substantial number of southern Italian immigrants had only worked as farmers, and were qualified only for unskilled, and more dangerous, urban labor. Many Italians went to work on the growing city's municipal works projects, digging canals, laying paving and gas lines, building bridges, and tunneling out the New York subway system. In 1890, nearly 90 percent of the laborers in New York's Department of Public Works were Italian immigrants. All Italian immigrants' work was heavy and dangerous. Italians found work throughout the city, such as shoemaker, masons (***bricklayers** and **stoneworkers***), barbers and fruit-vendors. For a time, some observers felt that Italians operated every cart in the city. For many immigrants, and especially women and children, work could only be found in **sweatshops**, the unsafe factories around New York (*for example as a **seamstress** or a **tailor***). When a fire broke out at the Triangle Shirtwaist factory in 1911, killing 146 workers, nearly half of the victims were young Italian women.



Italian family picking berries in Delaware, 1910.



M. Mastrogiovanni, Italian banker. Chicago, 1901.



Italian newsboys selling papers at 10 p.m.

Working Across the Country (group E)

Immigration continued into the 20th century and Italians formed communities across the country. The Italian immigrants did a wide variety of work. In San Francisco, they work as fishermen and stevedores. In Appalachia and the mountain West, they went into the **pits** and mines, digging for coal and ore. Stonemasons worked in the **quarries** of New England and Indiana. Meanwhile, Italians labored on farms and ranches in every corner of the country, from the northeast to the Louisiana and California.

Some Italians took opportunities for a business in their new home. Italian immigrants in the north of New York State formed the Contadina food company in 1918. Andrea Sbarbaro of Genoa helped establish the California wine industry. In turn-of-the-century San Francisco, a Neapolitan American named A.P. Giannini began offering small loans to his fellow Italians, going door to door to collect interest. Today, Giannini's Banca D'Italia has become one of the world's largest financial institutions, the Bank of America.

Many Italian immigrants, however, had to work for low pay in unhealthy working conditions. At the turn of the 20th century, southern Italian immigrants were among the lowest-paid workers in the United States. Child labor was common, and even small children often went to work in factories, mines, and

[Buffalo,
New York, 1910.](#)



[Padrone at work in
New Jersey.](#)

farms, or sold newspapers on city streets.

Many thousands of Italian immigrants found themselves prisoners of the *padrone*, or patron, system of labor. The *padroni* were labor brokers who recruited Italian immigrants for large employers. In practice, many *padroni* acted more like slave holders than managers. A padrone often controlled the money, contracts, and food supply of the immigrants under his authority. Some padroni kept thousands of workers confined in locked camps, controlled by armed guards. The padrone system, despite its many injustices, was not eradicated until the middle of the 20th century.