

PROJECT TITLE: Why Did They Come?	
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SCHOLARSHIP & RESEARCH

1. Primary Investigative Question(s) –

From 1850 to 1900, why did people migrate to the United States?

2. Contextual Essay –

The population of the United States tripled from 1850-1900.¹ One of the reasons for this rapid growth was a rise in immigration to the United States. Immigrants came to the United States because of a combination of personal and global factors. There were global “push” factors that led many to leave their homelands and other “pull” factors that made the United States desirable to immigrants. These global factors were matched by the individual and familial influences that led immigrants to leave their homeland and travel to the U.S. While larger global causes of mass migration can be clearly identified, each immigrant’s story of why one chose to leave their homeland and come to the United States is made up of a mixture of global and personal factors.

From 1850 to 1900, the global “push” factors that influenced many to migrate to the U.S. included: the Irish Great Potato Famine in 1845, political unrest in Central Europe, religious persecution, and poor economic conditions. These “push” factors led to an overall increase in migration, not just immigration to the U.S. There was an increase of movement in Central and Western Europe early in the nineteenth century. “They were part of a group of “moving Europeans,” responding to various economic, religious, and political opportunities and changes.”²

During that time period, there were also several factors that made the U.S. an attractive destination. Chief among them were the discovery of gold in California in 1848; the Homestead Act that allowed anyone, including non-citizens, to claim land in the rapidly settled Midwest; and

¹ U.S. Census—U.S. Population-1850: 23,191,876. U.S. Population-1900: 76,212,168

² Leslie Page Moch, *Moving Europeans: Migration in Western Europe Since 1850*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003).

the prospect of jobs spurred by rapid industrialization and urbanization in cities on the East Coast and Midwest. These major “Pull” factors influenced not only immigration to the U.S., but they also affected migration within the U.S. once immigrants arrived. The expansion of railroads (much of it built by Chinese immigrants) and the Homestead Act opened up more of the Midwest as possible destinations for new immigrants as the U.S. expanded its territory westward. A large number of German and Scandinavian immigrants moved to the Midwest during this time. Many Irish and Italians remained in the cities of the Northeast. Besides their connection to family and others from their country, this pattern of movement or settling in the cities was also influenced by whether or not the immigrants had enough money to travel to the Midwest and continue their lives there—in general more German and Scandinavian immigrants had the means to travel west than the Irish or Italian immigrants.

In the early 1800s, immigrants were mainly arriving from Western and Northern European nations (at a rate of approximately 60,000 people a year). There was a large increase in the 1840s and 1850s because of the Irish immigrants fleeing the potato famine of the mid-1840s and Germans fleeing crop failures, as well as the 1848 collapse of their countries' democratic revolutions. Between 1830 and 1860, approximately 2 million Irish immigrants and 1.5 million German immigrants arrived. This pushed the number of immigrants to nearly 5 million a year. These immigrants generally were Protestant with some Catholics (particularly the Irish). The U.S. Civil War in the 1860s and a struggling U.S. economy in the 1870s slowed these immigration rates, but the 1880s brought a boom in the return of large numbers of immigrants, and started the beginning of the largest era of U.S. immigration (1880-1920)

Those in their family, town, and country who had previously migrated to the U.S. also influenced immigrants. Letters from immigrants to family members illustrated the value of connections in their new towns and jobs in the U.S. One example of this is the letters of Gunder Bondal, who settled in Wisconsin after migrating from Norway. He wrote to his family back home that they were safely settled and had met up with their friends from their hometown in Norway.

In the month of April we moved 3 miles farther west to our friend Torge Halverson's home. There we stayed a year in his house and Hungus Holer and his wife Anne were also there. They bought for themselves 20 acres of land from Torge Halverson and then we bought 124 acres of land beside them from the government, which owns a lot of land here.³

In many cases, one member from a family would travel to the U.S. and then work to earn enough money to pay for the rest of the family to travel to the United States. Many of these letters share heart-breaking stories of marriages and families who were separated on different continents as families worked to find a way to have more opportunities.⁴ Diego Delfino's letter to his young daughter back in Italy, telling her of her mother's grave health concerns illustrate the strain that immigration had on many families:

My dear daughter, Your letter of the first of this month, just received now, and I cannot stop the tears from flowing, oh, the tears from crying. My heart is broken. Your mother is

³ Bondar, Gunder Asmundson, Aadne Asmundson Bondar, and Kari Evensdatter. Letter to siblings in Fyrsedal, Norway. Deerfield, 17 January 1854. In Gunleik Asmundson Bondal Collection. State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

⁴ <http://ihrc.umn.edu/research/dil/index.html> The Digital Immigrant Letters collection from the University of Minnesota has numerous collections of letters from immigrants to their families in Europe.

very ill, and, perhaps, when this letter will have reached its destination, who knows! She will be well again. God willing! Poor mother! Poor comforting angel of the family! Who knows! She suffers enormously, and I have no peace. I am disheartened, but I give myself courage and strength to withstand whatever misfortune. Your mother is ill, she is very ill! I can't say more. I hastily embrace you with the hope that I can give you comforting news in my next letter. Infinite kisses, my dear child of the heart. Your woeful Father, Diego⁵

These letters also share stories of romance, adventure, and hopes for fortune in their new homes.

By looking at a combination of historical factors and events throughout the globe, but also reading the primary documents from immigrants themselves, one can begin to understand the motivation of why many people migrated to the United States in the second half of the 19th century. The answer to "Why Did They Come?" may have some collective, shared, global causes, but each immigrant's story also helps to reveal answers to why so many left their homelands and endured unknown hardships as they migrated to new homes in America.

⁵ Diego Delfino Papers, <http://www.ihrc.umn.edu/research/vitrage/all/da/ihrc528.html>

Annotated Instructional Bibliography

- [Open Collections Program: Immigration to the US, Timeline](http://ocp.hul.harvard.edu/immigration/timeline.html)
<http://ocp.hul.harvard.edu/immigration/timeline.html>

This “Open Collection” from Harvard includes a wealth of primary documents relating to immigration, and a fantastic set of well-organized links in their bibliography. This site led me to nearly all of the other useful sites for this project.

- <http://www.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/1990/5/90.05.07.x.html>

Lesson plans for unit on “Irish Immigrant Families in the Mid- Late 19th Century America”. Includes a bibliography and internet links. This course linked to others on Italian and Asian immigrants with a similar set of links. Some of the links are no longer active, but the outline of the course is still helpful.

- <http://www.loc.gov/teachers/>

Library of Congress website includes “The Teachers’ Page” with a wealth of primary sources for classroom use. One of the main sets is “Immigration Challenges for New Americans,” which has a teacher’s guide and collection of photos, letters, and immigration records.

- <http://ihrc.umn.edu/research/dil/index.html>

The Digital Immigrant Letters collection from the University of Minnesota has numerous collections of letters from immigrants to their families in Europe. The site also has links to other digital collection of letters from immigrants.

- [On the Trail of the Immigrant](http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/photo_album/photo_album.html)

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From the University of Houston, it includes articles and primary documents on Irish, Italian and Asian immigration to the U.S. with primary sources, lesson plans, and other ideas for teaching U.S. Immigration.

- Leslie Page Moch, *Moving Europeans: Migration in Western Europe Since 1850*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003).

Recommended by Dr. Sinke. Looks at the movement of people through Europe—not just in who’s leaving and who’s coming in, but at movement within countries and regions and a look at how a changing society affects people’s choice to move.