

# An INTRODUCTION to "The American Dream"

## Established by Immigrants

America is and always has been a land of immigrants. Immigrants are often leaving bad situations in their home countries; from unemployment to war to a lack of educational opportunities, they all have set their sights on one location – America. They are coming to pursue the American Dream, but do they really know what that means?

- In 1607 104 immigrants from England founded the first settlement in this New World that we now call America. They were sent to this unknown land by the Virginia Company of London with the task of finding ways in which the company's shareholders might profit from the resources of the land.
- After that first colony Jamestown was founded in 1607 immigrants continued to come. Whether it was in search of financial opportunities or religious freedom, something about this new land kept attracting more and more immigrants, most of those coming from Europe and most arriving to America's eastern coast.
- Some years, such as 1790 saw as few as 60,000 immigrants, while other years like 1850 saw almost 2 million new residents arriving to America.
- Ellis Island is an island in the New York Harbor; it was the United States' business immigrant inspection station from 1892 to 1954. This is where the newcomers were processed upon their arrival to the United States. This is the place where they learned if they would be allowed to stay in this new country.
- Did you know that more than 12 million immigrants arrived to Ellis Island between 1892 and 1954, most of these coming from Europe? Some were escaping their old lives; some arrived with families, while others came alone. Regardless of their situations, they all came with one thing in common – they were seeking new and better opportunities in this new land. In fact about 100 million Americans (one-third of the current population) can trace their ancestry back to an immigrant who arrived at Ellis Island before it closed in 1954.



### STUDENT TASK

1. Did you know that Ellis Island was known as both "The Island of Hope" and "The Island of Tears" for the immigrants who arrived between 1892 and 1954? Which term do you think the family in this photograph would use to describe Ellis Island? Why?
2. What is the *American Immigrant Wall of Honor*? What purpose does it serve and what does its existence say about the pursuit of the American Dream?

## James Truslow Adams and the "American Dream"

Both historically and still today, immigrants are often leaving bad situations in their home countries; from unemployment to war to a lack of educational opportunities, they all have set their sights on one location – America. They are coming to pursue the American Dream, but do they really know what that means?

James Truslow Adams is the man credited with creating the term "the American Dream", but what he intended when he wrote about it during the Great Depression and what people interpret it to be today in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are not the same things – or are they?

In his book *The Epic of America* (1931) Adams, in an attempt to describe the expectations that people had related to religion, government, economics, and personal beliefs, defined the American Dream as

*"that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement. It is a difficult dream for the European upper classes to interpret adequately, and too many of us ourselves have grown weary and mistrustful of it. It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position."*

This book will explore if the idea of the American Dream has evolved since that first group arrived in 1607, and even since Adams formally defined it in 1931. Is the American Dream a universal idea that is the same for all people or does a person's background, race, or even economic situation affect how the American Dream is defined for him?

As you begin your work with the topic of the American Dream, it is important that you document what you believe to be its definition. After working with a variety of texts and perspectives over the upcoming days and weeks, you will be able to see if your own definition has changed at all.

### STUDENT TASK

On a blank piece of paper write a 50-75 word definition of what you think the American Dream is. Hand this into your teacher and he/she will save it until the unit is completed. Perhaps your definition will broaden. Perhaps it will narrow. Or perhaps it will completely change.

The pursuit of the American Dream did not stop with the wave of immigrants in the late 1800s and early 1900s; as this chart below shows, they are still coming.

### Immigration in the U.S. by Decade:

Date	National Population	Foreign Born
July 1, 1900	76,094,000	13.7%
July 1, 1910	92,407,000	14.8%
July 1, 1920	106,461,000	13.2%
July 1, 1930	123,076,741	11.6%
July 1, 1940	132,122,446	8.8%
July 1, 1950	152,271,417	6.9%
July 1, 1960	180,671,158	5.4%
July 1, 1970	205,052,174	4.7%
July 1, 1980	227,224,681	6.2%
July 1, 1990	249,439,545	7.9%
July 1, 2005	298,683,478	12.4%

U.S. population as of  
September 4, 2006

**299,646,523**

One birth every ... 10 seconds

One death every ... 13 seconds

One international migrant every ... 30 seconds

Net gain of one person every 10 seconds

### Projected U.S. Population on October 14, 2006: 300,000,000

Period	Immigrants to the U.S.	Emigrants from the U.S.	Net Immigration	Ratio: Emigration/Immigration
1901-1910	8,795,000	3,008,000	5,787,000	0.34
1911-1920	5,736,000	2,157,000	3,579,000	0.38
1921-1930	4,107,000	1,685,000	2,422,000	0.41
1931-1940	528,000	649,000	-121,000	1.23
1941-1950	1,035,000	281,000	754,000	0.27
1951-1960	2,515,000	425,000	2,090,000	0.17
1961-1970	3,322,000	900,000	2,422,000	0.27
1971-1980	4,493,000	1,176,000	3,317,000	0.26
1981-1990	7,338,000	1,600,000	5,738,000	0.22
Total 1901-1990	37,869,000	11,882,000	25,987,000	0.31

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

### STUDENT TASK

This data from the United States Census Bureau shows that in the 1940s the immigration numbers were beginning to decrease; however between 1990 and 2005, the US saw a large jump in the numbers.

1. Why do you think this happened in that fifteen-year timespan?
2. What predictions can you make about the percentage of foreign born residents in the US in 2015, only 10 years after the spike in 2005? Will the numbers continue to increase? Or will they decrease? Why?