

# What's in the Envelope?

## Using Authentic Inquiry and Primary Sources to Explore Immigration and Citizenship

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### Introduction

What is the first thought that comes to mind when you hear the words immigration and citizenship? For many, these words conjure up historical images, descriptions of people crossing the ocean packed on ships and seeking a better life, the Statue of Liberty, and the American Flag waving over Ellis Island. Others may initially think about individuals speaking a variety of foreign languages or imagining cultural differences. While these images and thoughts may have their place in the teaching of immigration and citizenship, they are not the only lens by which these topics should be taught. In a contemporary sense, these words may conjure divisive or controversial undertones. As such, teachers need to leverage multiple perspectives when teaching a subject, such as this, especially within the current political context. Now more than ever, students need to have the ability to connect the past and the present and engage with content as they develop the critical thinking skills necessary for citizenship in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Hilburn & Taylor Jaffee, 2016). In this article, we set out to do just that from a middle grades classroom: begin with the past, build upon the foundation, and apply the knowledge in a real-world setting.

### Framework

*"...give the pupil's something to do, not something to learn; and the doing is of such a nature as to demand thinking, or the intentional noting of connections; learning naturally results."*

*-John Dewey, 1916*

What Dewey (1916) posits seems like such a simple premise: let students learn by doing. In many cases, educators seem to lose this focus (Grant, 2007; Russell, 2010). Often, the focus for coursework is on the memorization of facts, assigned readings from the textbook, and lectures from the "all-knowing sage on the stage," rather than the content being student-driven and acquired through authentic and engaging methods (Chiodo & Byford, 2004; Grant, 2007). State standards and the high-stakes testing culture have forced teachers to rely on instruction which is laser-focused, spotlighting key issues, facts, and dates in attempt to prepare students for the next test, grade level, or unit (Furgione, Evans, Walker, & Russell, 2018; Grant, 2007; Rothstein, 2004). The traditional expectation of having all students in a particular grade level learn carefully defined and sequenced content at the same time is outdated and limits a teacher's ability to engage students in authentic and inquiry-based projects, which should be at the core of social studies instruction (Grant, 2007; Waring & Robinson, 2010; Wineburg, 2001). If students are provided the opportunity to learn and teachers properly facilitate inquiry-based investigations, the environment within the classroom changes, as does the motivation to learn (Dole, Bloom, & Doss, 2017). Using Dewey's ideology as a foundation for the teaching of social studies content helps a teacher to focus upon building a framework of instruction in which *doing* and *investigating* are the primary goals.

The approach within this unit leverages scaffolded tasks, an overarching mystery, and an envelope filled with primary source materials, to drive instruction. Students are tasked with solving a mystery and developing deeper understanding throughout the lesson regarding a particular topic. In this case, the focus is on immigration and citizenship for middle grades students, though it can be adapted for use at other levels. While simple in construction, the framework capitalizes on an often-overlooked resource in the classroom: curiosity.

Teachers have the opportunity to create rewarding connections with the content students are learning and foster more profound understanding. “What’s in the Envelope?” uses the *Understanding by Design* (UbD) framework established by Wiggins and McTighe (2008) to combine best practices with engaging activities. Using the UbD framework, the unit was developed by first establishing the desired results (understanding of the immigration and naturalization process), developing performance tasks and products to provide evidence of understanding (gallery walk, letter to potential citizen, etc), and establishing the learning plan which students will experience during the lesson. The following is the basic structure of a “What’s in the Envelope?” unit plan.

- Focus on the end goal. What do students need to understand?
- Develop a theme that drives the inquiry and generates open-ended questions – think, what will spark curiosity?
- Scaffold the lesson in stages. During each stage, the learning should progressively build upon the previous task.
- Select the appropriate resources. The right primary sources are essential!
- Fill the envelope.
- Empower students and allow them to direct their learning.
- Have fun! Fun is a vital piece of the puzzle.

### **Literature Review**

*“We’ve robbed history of stories. Humans are story-telling beings. Go back to the etymology of the word history—story. But we’ve stopped telling stories in the classroom.”*

– Sam Wineburg, 2011

It is imperative that social studies instruction includes the narratives of the agents actually involved in the creation of history, and the integration of primary sources helps to tell the stories of the past and bring those agents to life. Primary sources bring the dead, the buried, the marginalized, and the destroyed back to life. If educators use sources with students, they can turn a classroom from fact-based dispensaries to laboratories of inquiry (Grant & Gradwell, 2005; Waring & Robinson, 2010; Waring, LaVallee, & Purdin, 2018; Wineburg, 2001). As noted on the Library of Congress’ (n.d.) website, authentic engagement with primary sources allows students to gain “a powerful sense of history and the complexity of the past. Helping students analyze primary sources can also guide them toward higher-order thinking and better critical thinking and analysis skills” (para. 2).

It makes sense to have primary sources serve as the centerpiece of investigation-based lessons. While social studies has often been labeled as boring or a second-tier subject to many students (Allen, 1994; Black & Blake, 2001; Chiodo & Byford, 2004; Waring & Robinson, 2010; Zhao & Hoge, 2005), primary sources and historical mysteries can shake student perceptions that social studies subjects are boring and in turn, help reinvigorate the classroom setting. When students are engaged in learning, they participate. When students buy-in, they ask questions. When students are *doing*, learning changes. When students actively engage in inquiry and they are learning with a purpose, their desire to contribute and partake in the lessons grows (Levstik & Barton, 2011; Wiggins & McTighe, 2008).

This desire to learn is impacted by the lessons created and the environment provided by the teacher. A teacher must provide the structure and the scaffolding necessary for students to engage in authentic educational inquiry at any grade level. For this to occur, teachers must be cognizant of the overall goal of the lesson and ensure that academic accommodations are in place to meet the academic needs of each of their students. The procedures, process,

and questions generated by the teacher provide the overarching scaffolding necessary for students to gain control of the learning in the classroom (Levstik & Barton, 2011). Within the scaffolding process, a critical decision must be made: selecting the proper resources. While the use of primary sources in the history classroom has been recognized and widely accepted as good teaching practice by many educational participants, simply using primary sources does not make a great lesson or the students more enlightened (Barton, 2005). Teachers must select the proper sources and text for their students to engage with during a lesson (Grant & Gradwell, 2005). In selecting sources, teachers can ensure that students are exposed to multiple perspectives, can generate their own questions, and foster the creation of historical narratives that go beyond what a textbook or a lecture could. This selection process can lead to increased engagement and student buy-in (Cowgill, 2015; Waring & Robinson, 2010). The right sources can challenge misperceptions, stereotypes, and aide in developing a student’s critical thinking abilities through the study of history.

The framing of this unit follows similar guidelines to that of the Understanding by Design framework (McTighe & Wiggins, 2012; Wiggins & McTighe, 2008). With the end in mind, teachers can focus on the path, which students can take in order to achieve the required educational goals. If a teacher knows what he or she wants students to understand and accomplish, selection of sources and materials becomes an even more vital component to the structure of the lesson. As students develop their skills throughout the lesson, teachers can progressively release control of the classroom environment and provide greater autonomy to the students. Simply put, starting with the end allows the teacher to lay out a sequence of events and activities to build understanding. This is the heart of the unit provided in the next section.

### **Lesson Overview: What’s in the Envelope?**

Imagine you get an envelope in the mail, and it is filled with mysterious items. These items include pictures, images, charts, letters, maps, passports, and census documents – all primary sources. You have a mystery to solve – *What’s in the envelope?* So you begin to generate questions. *What does this chart mean? Why is this map in another language? Why are these people being looked at? Who are these people? What does “census” mean? Who are “Emidio and Massime Guerrieri?” Why is that wall keeping people out?*

This is the start of a lesson focusing on immigration and citizenship. It is an investigation of sorts, driven by mystery and curiosity. This is facilitated through the utilization of unknown materials, linked by a common theme, waiting to be woven together. The need to piece together the unknown to understand the historical narrative behind immigration and what is required to become a citizen in the United States is what draws the students in and allows the learning to be memorable and effective.

### **Stage I: Museum Exhibits**

The lesson starts with the unknown. Students receive a manila envelope filled with primary sources: pictures, images, charts, letters, maps, passports, and census documents. These sources come from two places; the primary source set “[Immigration: Challenges for New Americans](#)” from the Library of Congress and the lead author’s own family history, including passports, census documentation, and immigration paperwork (See Appendix A and B). These resources are copied and made to look worn and old so that students can handle and analyze them as needed without the worry of damaging the originals. In small groups of three to five, students must work together to develop a theme that connects all the sources together and eventually create a historical narrative that would explain the significance of the set of sources found within the envelope. In addition to the sources given to the students, they are provided with [document analysis sheets from the National Archives](#) in order to help scaffold the inquiry and analysis process.

The first twenty minutes are what we consider the “open inquiry” portion of the lesson. Students have the opportunity to pick up each source, discuss it with their peers, ask questions, annotate each source, and begin hypothesizing. The use of the inquiry process through the inquiry arc engages students in pursuing understanding and knowledge, not just facts to recall (National Council for the Social Studies, 2013). To help facilitate the conversations between students, the teacher should circulate and ask guiding questions like “who, what, when, where, and why.” Questioning can go a long way to deepening the students’ investigation of each of the sources, and an [Observe, Reflect, and Question](#) primary source analysis sheet from the Library of Congress can help them to organize their thoughts. Students are then asked to take a moment and discuss what they think the common theme is or what they may entitle a set such as this one. Many students have started to piece together the sources, realizing they are related to immigration in some way. They attempt to pronounce foreign words, begin telling stories of their parents or grandparents, and make personal connections with the sources.

At this stage of the lesson, students are asked to shift gears and attempt to build a display with their sources. Students are instructed that they are to serve as “museum docents” at a new museum gallery opening in forty-five minutes. They are told that the gallery will be made up of all the sources in their envelopes and that they will be required to provide an explanation of why the sources are organized together and how they relate to one another. It is also required that each source is accompanied by a placard that includes a caption or brief description. It is suggested that they be allowed to use any portion of the classroom necessary and be provided with tape, makers, and whatever else is needed to construct their galleries. Following the forty-five-minute build session, a docent from each group is invited to present their exhibit, explaining their rationale and understanding of the sources. While each group’s exhibits are unique, common themes emerge. These themes include the history of immigration, hardships facing new Americans, requirements of citizenship, and a storyline of sorts of “Emidio Guerrieri.” As students present their exhibitions, their excitement and perspectives become clear, and their understanding begins to grow.

Of course, many students have questions on specific sources. *Why do immigrants need to learn English? Who would want to climb a wall to get here? Did all people want to come to America? Do immigrants need to pass a test? Who is Emidio Guerrieri? Did everyone survive? What is required to become a citizen? Is anyone allowed to come to the United States? What was/is life like for new immigrants?* Student-generated questions serve as the springboard to the next stage of the unit and continue building the inquiry arc.

A quick note regarding personal narratives. “Emidio Guerrieri” serves as a proxy to help personalize the immigration and citizenship narrative. Like many students, you too may be asking yourself who this “Emidio Guerrieri” is. Full disclosure, the familial sources belong to the lead author. Emidio Guerrieri is the great-great-grandfather from his maternal side. We are fortunate to have passports from Italy, immigration paperwork, and census documentation (See Appendix B). As the last names are different, students have no idea of the connection, and the sources allow them to solve the mystery for a real-life person who is revealed to them at the end of the lesson. When the reveal happens, students typically react with open jaws, screams of “No way!” and “How could you trick us?” The mystery helps drive instruction. If you are unable to incorporate personal ancestral materials, utilizing resources from the Library of Congress or [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com) allow a teacher to build a narrative on a specific family or group that is publicly available. Quickly, these reactions are reeled in and their focus shifts to wanting to understand the story behind the rest of the sources.

## Stage II: Building Understanding

To this point, students have engaged in open-ended inquiry, created museum exhibits on immigration using primary sources, and generated questions they seek to answer. It is at this phase students need to solidify their understanding of the sources, as they relate to the content. Using student-generated definitions, key vocabulary words like *immigration*, *census*, *citizenship*, *naturalization*, and *passports* develop meaning. Students can build their understanding and clarify misconceptions they may have through peer discussion. If the teacher chooses, these definitions can be written in journals for future reference and as a check for understanding. Once all students have shown an operational understanding of essential vocabulary, the dialogue can transition to the evolution of immigration and what is required for naturalization and citizenship today.

Ask the students to put themselves in the shoes of an immigrant, like Emidio. They should be asked to imagine what it would be like to be raised overseas, in another country, with different laws, different responsibilities, and different rights and to try to understand what it would take to become a citizen of a new country. The teacher should then ask them to predict what it would take to become a citizen of the United States today. Students will immediately begin to pull evidence from the primary sources they have been investigating. Responses typically include: know English, pass a test, not be a criminal, be educated, and be healthy.

Combining the knowledge garnered from analyzing the primary sources with documentation from the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), students begin to deepen their understandings. Students are asked to sift through “10 Steps to Naturalization: Understanding the Process of Becoming a U.S. Citizen” (<https://www.uscis.gov/sites/default/files/USCIS/files/M-1051.pdf>), a pamphlet used by potential citizens to navigate their way through the naturalization process. Additionally, students watch “Becoming a U.S. Citizen: An Overview of the Naturalization Process” (<https://www.uscis.gov/citizenship/learners/study-test/study-materials-civics-test/becoming-us-citizen-overview-naturalization-process>). This video, created by USCIS, traces the steps, requirements, and process of becoming a citizen today. Following the video, students are asked to make connections between the steps required for naturalization and the primary sources from their museum exhibits. These connections are based on their experiences and the associations create a solid base for the final stage of the unit.

## Stage III: Letter to a Future Citizen

With the primary source set and the resources provided by USCIS as a foundation, students are now tasked with applying their newfound knowledge. Students are asked to take on the role of a USCIS employee and analyze vignettes of “potential citizens” (See Appendix C for sample vignettes). In analyzing the scenarios, students must decide if the person is eligible to become a citizen. Working in small groups, they must decide if they can begin the naturalization process and if they meet the requirements of citizenship. Once they feel prepared, they can move on aiding the potential citizen.

The next step is to draft a “Candidacy Letter” to one of the potential citizens, explaining what requirements they meet and what they need to do in order to become a naturalized citizen. Pulling from the previous stages of the lesson, the letter also must include the steps and processes required to become naturalized, what it means to be a U.S. citizen, the requirements which are met and what needs to be fulfilled, and the hardships that they may face in coming to America (a full rubric is available in Appendix D). Students are then asked to peer review each other’s work and clarify any errors, omissions, or misperceptions. The final step is to have students place their letters in envelopes addressed to the potential citizens, bringing the lesson full circle!

## Conclusion

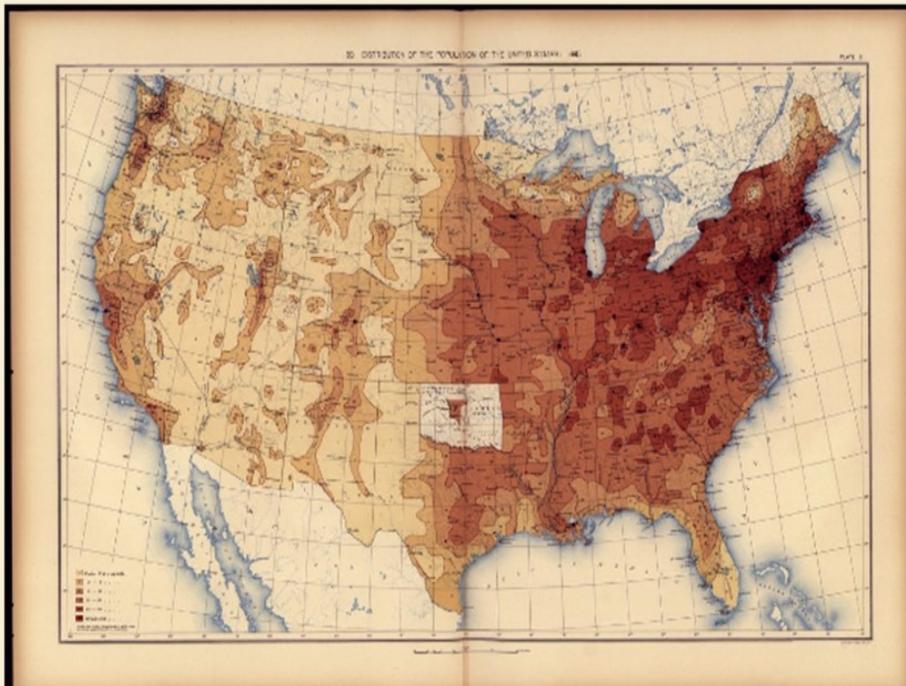
With any pedagogical practice and classroom lesson, there are limitations that must be addressed. A teacher must use professional discretion in picking the sources and themes in which they are having their students examine. Further, the topics of immigration and citizenship can be expanded upon following the lesson, allowing a space for students to discuss how the primary sources connect to current events of the day (Hilburn & Taylor Jaffee, 2016). Depending on geographic location, local demographics, school culture, and a host of other factors, teachers must be vigilant in their lesson planning. Additionally, abilities will vary from classroom to classroom, and as such, teachers must work diligently to provide the proper scaffolding. In our example, the three-stage process is scaffolded to expose students to the content, build knowledge, and put it into practice. This process may vary depending on the classroom and additional support needed, such as graphic organizers or limiting the number of sources may be required.

Lessons utilizing the “What’s in the envelope” framework can engage students. They require students to analyze complex text and primary sources, work collaboratively, and solve real-world problems. Education opportunities that promote inquiry and capitalize on curiosity can push students to understand and enjoy learning about the content. They can address issues of engagement, draw students in, and help foster the skills the next generation will undoubtedly need. Do you know what’s in the envelope...primary sources, authentic historical inquiry, and engaged students!

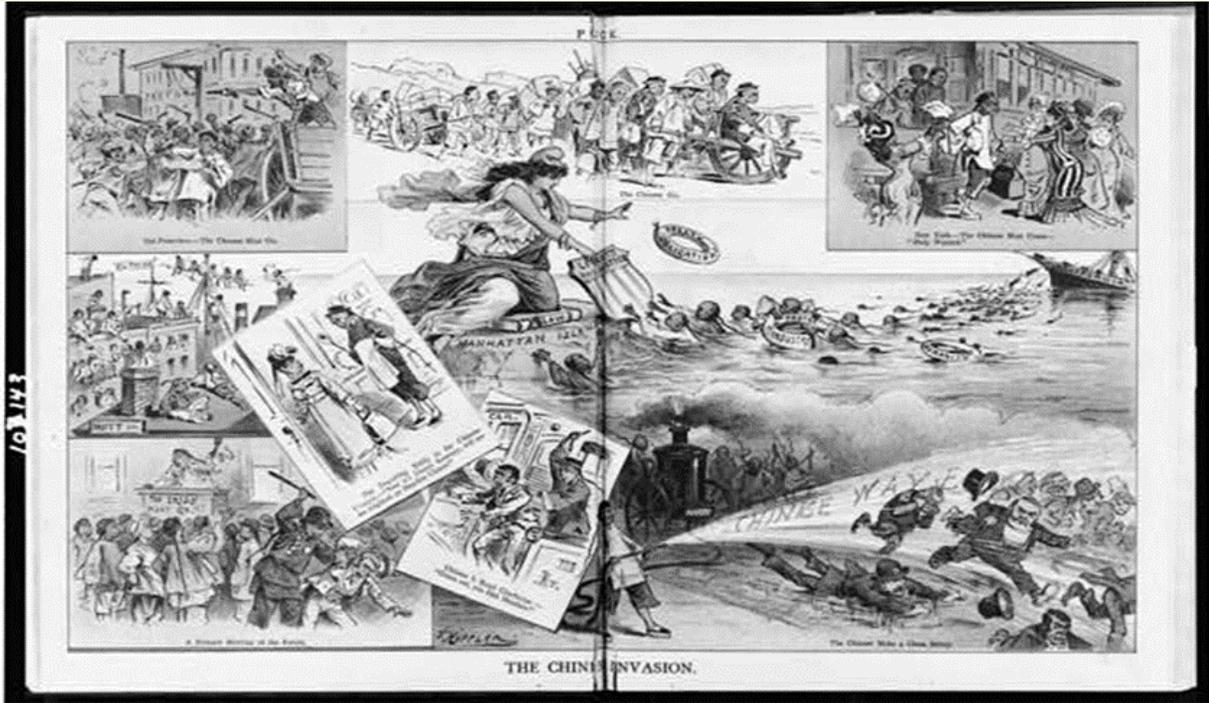
## Appendix A:

### Selected Primary Sources from [\*Immigration: Challenges for New Americans\*](#) [Document Set](#)

**Source 1:** *Statistical atlas of the United States, based upon the results of the eleventh census*



Source 2: *The Chinese Invasion*



Source 3: *Free classes in English!*  
Learn to speak, read, & write the language of your children. [...] Special classes for educated foreign born

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פארבערייטונג צו ווערען א בירגער אלע סקול גענעטן-שמענדע. ספעציעלע קלאסען פאר געבילדע דעטע אימגענדער.

אינפארמאציע וועגען די קלאסען ען קענט איהר קריגען אין...

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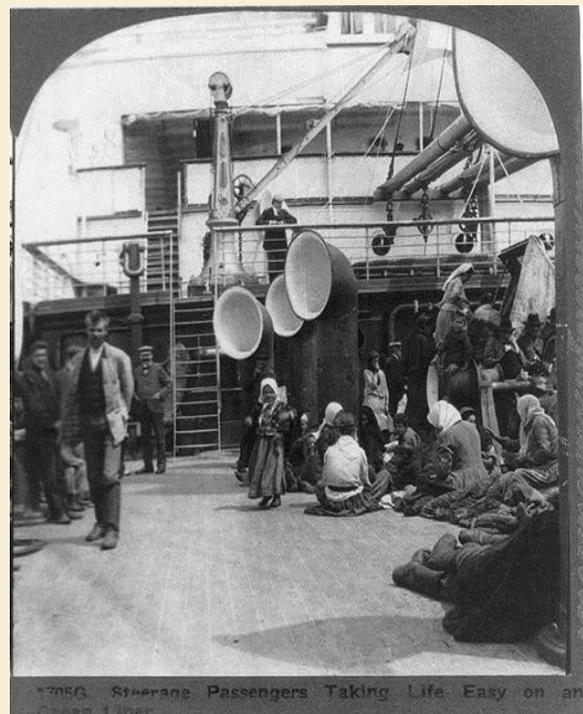
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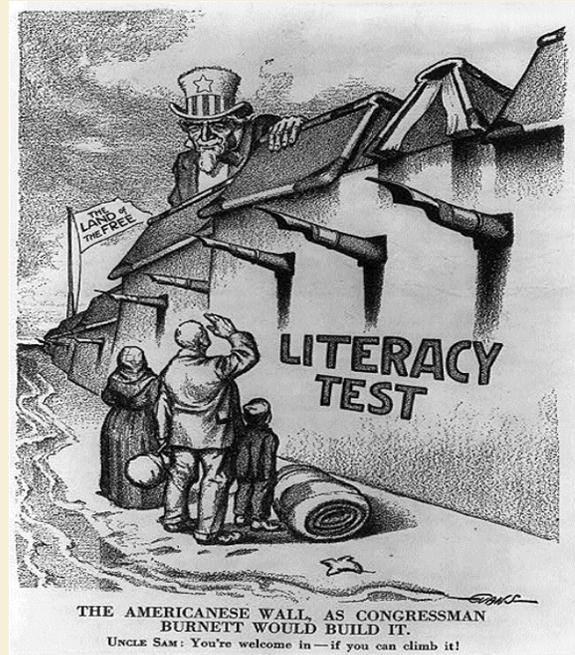
Source 4: *Steerage Passengers Taking Life Easy on an Ocean Liner* (c1905)



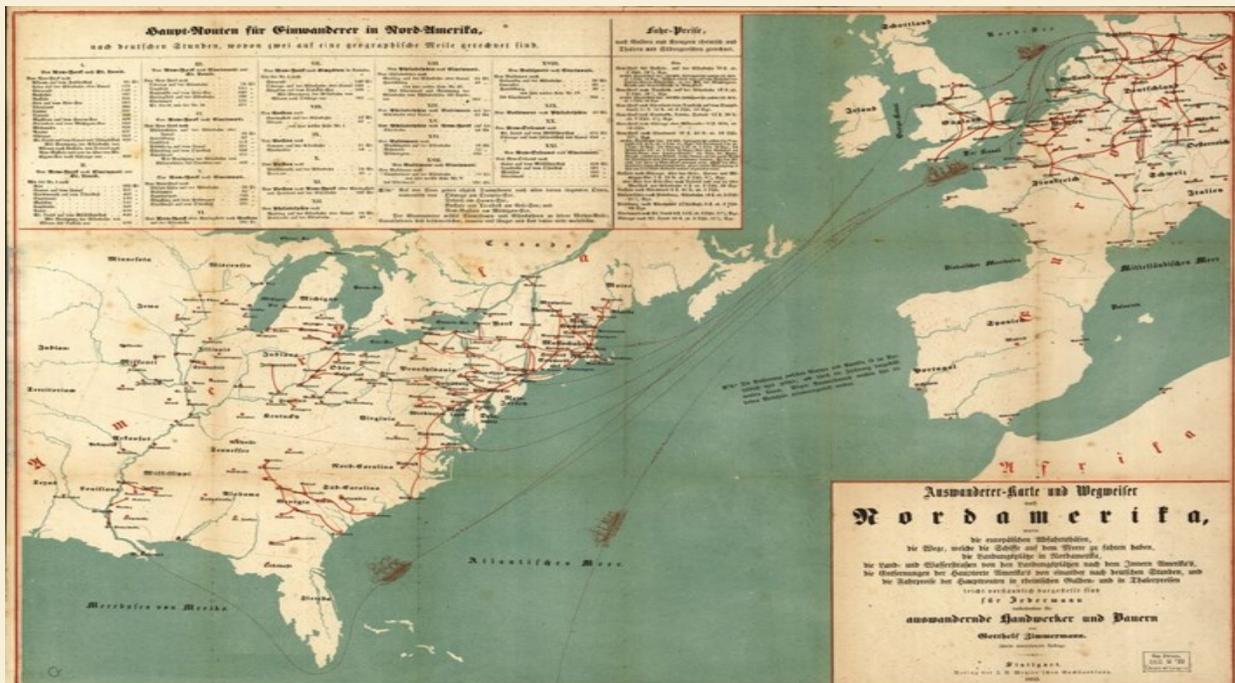
**Source 5:** U.S. inspectors examining eyes of immigrants, Ellis Island, New York Harbor



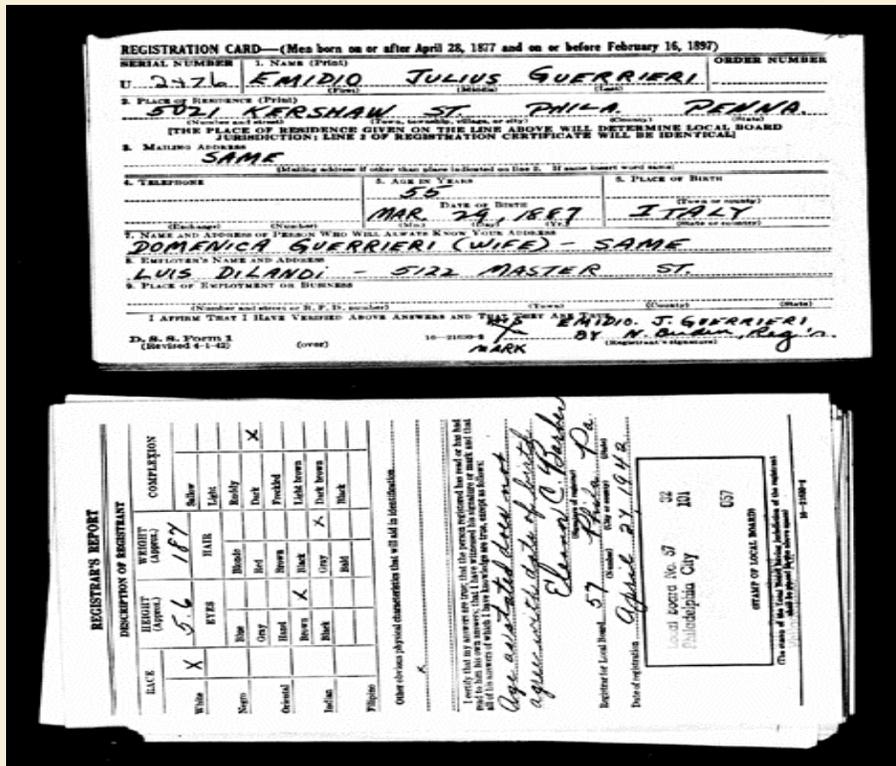
**Source 6:** The Americanese wall - as Congressman [John Lawson] Burnett would build it



**Source 7:** Auswanderer-karte und wegweiser nach Nordamerika. (Emigrant Map to North America)







Document 3:  
Emidio Guerrieri's  
Registration Card

## Appendix C: Potential Citizen Scenarios

### Scenario 1: Mynor

Mynor is 20 years old and living in the United States. He moved to the U.S. from Guatemala when he was 5 years old after his father's company expanded to Florida. His father applied for a Green Card and has been a legal resident for 15 years. Mynor can read, write, and speak in English fluently. He did very well in school, especially in his U.S. History class. He had a job at a local supermarket, but Mynor was fired after he was caught stealing money from the registers. He was sentenced to 6 months in jail and 2 years of community service. Mynor wants to become a citizen so he can vote in elections. Help Mynor out!

### Scenario 2: Massimo

Massimo is an Italian man who just turned 24. Although he lived in Italy for most of his life, he wants to become a full citizen of the United States. He arrived in America four years ago, obtained his Green Card and is a legal resident of the United States. He currently resides in Altamonte Springs, Florida. He has never been in any legal trouble and is a law abiding citizen. Massimo speaks English fluently and has recently taken a classe at Seminole State College on U.S. History for new citizens. Help Massimo out!

### Scenario 3: Ahmed

Ahmed is a 12 year old boy who lives with his parents in Orlando. He was born in Turkey, but his family moved here 3 years ago for work. He can speak, read, and write English fluently, but has little knowledge of U.S. History. Ahmed's father is not a United States citizen, but his mother was born in the U.S. and lived here as a child. Help Ahmed out!

## Appendix D: Letter to a Future Citizen Rubric

Letter to a Future Citizen Rubric						
Criteria	Ratings					Pts
Content Accuracy	The letter contains accurate facts about the topic and explains the naturalization process in detail and thoroughly. 4.0 pts	The letter contains accurate facts about the topic and explains the naturalization process but misses some details. 3.0 pts	The letter contains inaccurate facts about the topic and explains the naturalization process but misses many details. 2.0 pts	The letter contains little to no accurate facts about the topic and naturalization process. 1.0 pts	No Marks 0.0 pts	4.0 pts
Ideas/Thoughts	Ideas are clearly expressed and organized. It is easy to follow and figure out what the letter is about. 4.0 pts	Ideas are expressed somewhat clearly, but organization is lacking in areas. 3.0 pts	Ideas are somewhat organized but not in a clear fashion. It took more than one reading to understand what the letter was about. 2.0 pts	The letter seemed to be a collection of unrelated sentences. It was difficult to understand/read. 1.0 pts	No Marks 0.0 pts	4.0 pts
Grammar, Spelling, & Punctuation	Writer makes no errors in grammar or spelling. Writer makes no errors regarding capitalization or punctuation. 4.0 pts	Writer makes 1/2 errors in grammar or spelling. Writer makes 1/2 errors regarding capitalization or punctuation. 3.0 pts	Writer makes 3/4 errors in grammar or spelling. Writer makes 3/4 errors regarding capitalization or punctuation. 2.0 pts	Writer makes 5+ errors in grammar or spelling. Writer makes 5+ errors regarding capitalization or punctuation. 1.0 pts	No Marks 0.0 pts	4.0 pts
Neatness	Letter is nearly hand-written, clean, not wrinkled, with no distracting error corrections. It was done with pride. 4.0 pts	Letter is sloppily written, crumpled/torn, possibly stained. Has distracting corrections, done with some care. 2.0 pts	No Marks Letter looks like it was written in a moving car, shoved in a pocket, and brought everywhere... Distracting marks/stains. Appears to be done with little pride and rushed. 0.0 pts			4.0 pts
Format	Complies with all required formatting. 4.0 pts	Complies with most formatting requirements, but not all. 2.0 pts		Does not comply with formatting standards. 0.0 pts		4.0 pts
Total Points: 20.0						

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