

**"Geography is Destiny": Eastern European Immigration to the Connecticut River Valley in  
Massachusetts  
For Grades 9-12**

The title of this lesson comes from the novel *Exit West* by Mohsin Hamid.

**Guiding Question:** How did Eastern European immigrants assimilate into Franklin County, Massachusetts in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries?

**Procedure:**

Intro: Have students respond to this question either in writing, a class discussion, or both.

*If your government decreed that anyone of your ethnicity was no longer welcome in your country and you were forced to flee, where would you go and why would you choose that place? What kind of welcome would you expect and why?*

1. Tell students:

In this country, except for some Native American people, we all came from somewhere else. For some of us, this means that our ancestors came here hundreds of years ago. For others, it might mean that their grandparents came, or their parents, or maybe even themselves. Between 1870 and 1920, thousands of Eastern Europeans came to Franklin County, Massachusetts. Some came to live and some to work. Some made it their permanent home and others returned. Many sent a portion of their earnings home so that other family members could join them. This is known as “chain migration”. Newcomers from other parts of the world came as well. Many who came to Western Massachusetts were from Poland. They created their own tight communities, often with their church at the center, where their home languages were spoken.

From [How the Polish Immigrants Came to New England](#) :

*Before Polish immigrants arrived in New England they had already made it to the Jamestown colony in Virginia as craftsmen. Over the centuries Polish immigrants came to New England in waves, the first from 1870 to 1914, the second after World War II, and the third following Polish independence in 1989. By 1900, 9.3 percent of Polish immigrants in the United States lived in New England. That number increased to 10.9 percent in 1930. Only the Great Lakes and Mid-Atlantic states attracted more Polish immigrants.*

*Today, Massachusetts and Connecticut rank 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> in total population of people with Polish ancestry. Connecticut has the third densest population of Polish-Americans in the country, with 8.85 percent, behind Wisconsin and Michigan. Most Polish-Americans are descended from the first wave of immigrants, when an estimated 1.5 million fled poverty and starvation in Germany, Russia and Galicia. People called them the *za chlebem*, or ‘for bread’ immigrants, because most had neither money nor land. A large number were Jewish, escaping persecution. They came to New England to work in the factories, primarily textile mills. Thousands of Poles came to Massachusetts to work in mills in Springfield, Chicopee and Holyoke. Many saved their earnings from factory work and bought cheap, abandoned farms in the Connecticut River Valley.*

*They moved into old colonial homes and transformed the land viewed as useless into thriving onion and tobacco farms.*

[Note to teachers: the above excerpt fails to mention that many immigrants worked on farms first to raise money to buy their own places. They arrived in this country with farming skills.]

The history of the immigrant experience in this country has been greatly affected by the opportunities and constraints immigrants encountered in the places where they settled.

## 2. Assign readings:

- [The Incoming of the Poles](#), (E. Eur.), 1900
- [Aliens in New England](#), (E. Eur.), 1912
- [The Need for an Immigration Test](#), (Yankee), 1901
- [Are We to be Polanized?](#), (Yankee), 1900

Students read the articles and answer questions on the worksheet included in this lesson plan. This can be completed for homework. During the next class session, go over the homework questions with the class. Questions can be collected for a formative grade (a simple check for completion).

3. Students work alone or in pairs to create a game (either a boardgame or a computer game) wherein they create characters (game pieces) who leave “home” and travel to an endpoint (“a comfortable life” or “a farm of their own” perhaps). Along the way their characters encounter positive (move ahead, earn money, buy a farm, etc.) and negative (go back, lose a turn, get drafted before leaving home country) experiences based on information students have gleaned from the readings and their own research. Directions for constructing the games are included in this lesson plan.

## Optional Extra Credit:

See if you can find out about some possible newcomers in your family. Sometimes your last name can be a clue about where your ancestors or your family came from. Ask some adults in your family:

- when your ancestors or family came to this area
- what countries they came from
- why they left their countries
- why they came to this area
- where they worked
- ask about difficulties they might have faced
- what were their achievements? Dreams? How did they contribute to their society?

## Extension Activity:

- Research the history of immigration legislation & issues (especially laws from the 1880s-1924) and compare to 2019/2020 immigration laws & issues
- The literacy test might be compared to immigration issues today- who is allowed to enter the U.S. and why? Do we set limits?

## Massachusetts History and Social Studies Curriculum Frameworks

### U.S. History I

Topic 6. Rebuilding the United States: industry and immigration [USI.T6]

4. Using primary source images, data, and documents, describe the causes of the immigration of Germans, the Irish, Italians, Eastern Europeans, Chinese, Koreans, and Japanese to America in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, and the major roles of these immigrants in industrialization and the building of railroads.

### U.S. History II

Topic 2. Modernity in the United States: ideologies and economies [USII.T2]

1. Analyze primary sources (e.g., documents, audio, or film recordings, works of art and artifacts), to develop an argument about how the conflict between traditionalism and modernity manifested itself in the major societal trends and events in the first two decades of the 20th century. Trends and events students might research include:

- d. the influx of World War I refugees leading to the Red Scare and the 1924 restrictions on immigration

## Massachusetts English Language Arts & Literacy Frameworks

### Grades 9–10 Reading Standards for Informational Text [RI]

#### **Key Ideas and Details**

1. Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what a text states explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.
2. Determine a central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of a text.
3. Analyze how an author unfolds an analysis or series of ideas or events, including the order in which the points are made, how they are introduced and developed, and the presence or absence of connections between them.

#### **Craft and Structure**

5. Analyze in detail how an author's ideas or claims are developed and refined by particular sentences, paragraphs, or larger portions of a text (e.g., a section or chapter).
6. Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text and analyze how an author uses rhetoric to advance that point of view or purpose.

#### **Research to Build and Present Knowledge**

7. Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.
8. When conducting research, gather relevant information from multiple authoritative print and digital sources, using advanced searches effectively; assess the usefulness of each source in answering the

research question; integrate information into the text selectively to maintain the flow of ideas, avoiding plagiarism and following a standard format for citation.

### **Grades 11–12 Reading Standards for Informational Text [RI]**

#### **Key Ideas and Details**

1. Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what a text states explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.
2. Determine two or more central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to provide a complex analysis; provide an objective summary of a text.
3. Analyze a complex set of ideas or sequence of events and explain how specific individuals, ideas, or events interact and develop over the course of the text.

#### **Craft and Structure**

6. Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text in which the rhetoric is particularly effective, analyzing how style and content contribute to the power, persuasiveness, or beauty of the text.
- Integration of Knowledge and Ideas.

#### **Research to Build and Present Knowledge**

7. Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.
8. When conducting research, gather relevant information from multiple authoritative print and digital sources, using advanced searches effectively; assess the strengths and limitations of each source in terms of the task, purpose, and audience; integrate information into the text selectively to maintain the flow of ideas, avoiding plagiarism and overreliance on any one source and following a standard format for citation.

**"Geography is Destiny"  
Questions to Accompany Readings**

1. Name specific towns and numbers of Eastern European immigrants who settled in Franklin County.
2. What drew Eastern European immigrants to the area?
3. When not working on farms, where did many newcomers work, especially during the winter months?
4. How did they acquire farms and what made them successful farmers?
5. Which crops did they usually grow?
6. How did the newcomers manage to live on low wages?

7. What were the feelings, both positive and negative, of the established New England “natives” toward the newcomers in their communities? Use quotations from at least one of the readings in your response.

8. How did many Eastern European women differ from the majority of “native” New England women?

9. Why did many New Englanders fear the incoming of Eastern European immigrants to their area?

10. Why was an immigration test proposed?

**“Geography is Destiny”**  
**Questions to Accompany Readings- Suggested Answers**

**1. Name specific towns and numbers of Eastern European immigrants who settled in Franklin County.**

Whately, Deerfield, S. Deerfield, Sunderland, Hatfield, Turners Falls  
Approximately 100 each for Whately, South Deerfield and Sunderland

**2. What drew Eastern European immigrants to the area?**

Work- especially in mills and on farms; farmland to purchase cheaply

**3. When not working on farms, where did many newcomers work, especially during the winter months?**

coal mines & other industrial jobs

**4. How did they acquire farms and what made them successful farmers?**

They started out as farm hands and saved their money; they purchased small, run-down farms with low prices; they were industrious people who were willing to work long and hard to improve land New Englanders didn't want; they learned by watching their neighbors.

**5. Which crops did they usually grow?**

onions, tobacco

**6. How did the newcomers manage to live on low wages?**

They lived frugally and provided much of what they needed by themselves, such as cutting and preparing the timber needed to build barns or cleaning their own rooms; they took in boarders; several families lived together; families tended to be large- providing extra hands to work; everybody in a family helped.

**7. What were the feelings, both positive and negative, of the established New England “natives” toward the newcomers in their communities? Use quotations from at least one of the readings in your response.**

They added to the “general prosperity” by improving abandoned farms and patronizing local businesses  
They were willing to take on work that New Englanders didn't want to do; they were good businessmen and paid debts on time

They were not violent except against their own kind

They wouldn't make good citizens for a long time because “They are too slow moulded, too steeped in the conditions of life in which they and their ancestors have lived for centuries on their home soil, to become for a long time imbued with American ideas.”

They were promiscuous

They were honest, helped each other in times of need

Women were not neat when they first arrived

They were good-natured and teachable

It was hard for them to learn English

They put more money into their farms than their homes and needed to learn to have more pride in their homes

Children were “eager to learn and are bright and quick”, but parents didn't assimilate easily because of the language differences- “they remain as strangers in a strange land”.

They wanted to become Americanized

**8. How did many Eastern European women differ from the majority of “native” New England women?**

They were willing to put on men’s clothing and work in the fields; they managed family finances; they were willing and able to put in long, hard hours, even in the heat; they were thought to be hardier

**9. Why did many New Englanders fear the incoming of Eastern European immigrants to their area?**

They feared New England was becoming over-run with foreigners and feared most farms would be taken over by them; New Englanders viewed newcomers as being too much competition

“Isn't it time for men of brains and capital to set about reclaiming their own, and not leave some of our choicest possessions to be acquired for the occupation, almost, by the ignorant victims of European oppression?”

**10. Why was an immigration test proposed?**

Too many newcomers were illiterate and ignorant, leading to criminality and corruption

“...there is a relation between literacy and the very desirable quality of thrift for one thing, is proved by the figures, which show that literate immigrants have brought much more money into the country than the illiterate. Indeed, the figures show that the per cent of money brought in varies in almost inverse ratio to the per cent of illiteracy.”

The area already had enough illiterate newcomers to do menial work and the literacy test would bar more from coming



**“Geography is Destiny”  
Game Creation Instructions**

Using information from the readings, create either a board game or a computer game, where the winner is the first Eastern European immigrant to establish a successful farm in Franklin County, Massachusetts, in the late 1800s to early 1900s.

**Directions:**

1. Using information from the readings, start by creating a chart of ups and downs immigrants may have encountered on the way from their home country until they acquire a farm of their own in Franklin County. Your chart might look like this:

<u>POSITIVE</u>	<u>NEGATIVE</u>
Get passage on a ship to New York	Forced to flee from home country
Learn of job opportunities in Massachusetts	Do not speak English

2. Decide the format of your game. Will players roll dice to advance along their journey? Will they draw cards? Will they move through a computer graphic-generated landscape encountering obstacles?

3. Use your positive and negative chart to create your game. For example, your game character (a little person, or simply a disc or block) may land on a space that says, “robbed in New York = lose a turn,” or “your partner makes extra money working on an onion farm = move ahead 3 spaces.” Get the idea?

**POSSIBLE GRADING RUBRIC:**

Game uses at least 20 pieces of information from the readings	= 40 points
Both negative and positive experiences are included	= 10 points
The game is colorful, creative and shows obvious effort	= 50 points