

Immigrant Discrimination

As more and more immigrants poured onto American shores, a rising wave of discrimination against the immigrants began to arise. Immigrants were blamed for contributing to the socio-economic problems that were common in industrialized societies such as poverty, crime, labor unrest, and overcrowding. Congested tenement buildings, in which the majority of immigrants resided, were seen to foster violence and disease, and further burdening social programs, charities and police forces who tried to maintain order. This strong xenophobic reaction was primarily fostered by a select group of Americans known as “**nativists**.” They strove to maintain the nation’s character and believed that the mass arrival of Irish, Italian, Japanese, Chinese and Jewish immigrants would pollute this character. In their assessment of the multitudes of immigrants flooding American shores, nativists saw only a deluge of poor, uneducated, religiously and linguistically dissimilar people who would never be able to assimilate and who would destroy American culture with their foreign lifestyle.

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Immigrants were also accused of causing a variety of economic problems, chief among them the seizure of jobs previously held by American citizens. Immigrants became a prime source of cheap unskilled labor and were consequently favored by employers. It was also argued that immigrants resisted American assimilation, with claims that “the mother tongue is preserved, the English language is ignored, the institutions of the home country are revered, and American habits are despised.” Growing opposition to immigrant entry was voiced in social commentary publications of the day. One author, John C. Van Dyke, wrote in 1909: “To the cry of Mr. [Jacob] Riis, ‘Abolish the tenements!’ there may be suggested an alternative. Why not abolish the tenants?”

Artist Childe Hassam leaned toward nativist beliefs, a fact that can be seen through his compositions. Initially purely proud of his Anglo-Saxon heritage, Hassam’s bias morphed into nativism with age. He believed in the ethnic purity of Anglo-Saxon America espoused by the nativist groups and his propensity to only feature middle and upper-class subjects is illustrative of these sentiments towards the evolving industrialization of the city, and consequently, the immigrant population. Scenes of industrialization were equated with a more heterogeneous urban population which included a large amount of so-called undesirables. Hassam was a man much aligned with tradition, favoring the old style of Impressionist painting and abhorring the new style advocated by the Ashcan School. His adherence to the older style of painting and to genteel subjects was also of matter of great economic importance matter to the artist. Hassam was keenly aware that his views of the city in their most attractive form resonated with his

upper-class patrons. The cheerless images of immigrant ethnic enclaves depicted by his Ashcan School contemporaries such as Everett Shinn were less likely to attract sales. As such, Hassam's work always seems to suggest to its viewers that despite the rapid industrial growth, a heavy influx of immigration and all-over modernization, New York remained a civilized, charmingly picturesque city.

One prominent proponent of immigration restriction was Massachusetts Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, a founder of the Boston-based Immigration Restriction League. He and the League maintained that America's open-door policy admitted "races most alien to the body of the American people and from the lowest and most illiterate classes among these races." Legislation supported by the League advocated for literacy tests for all incoming immigrants, in addition to severely restricting entry and levying higher **head taxes** so as to discourage immigration. This first bill, which was passed by Congress, was vetoed by President Grover Cleveland in 1897. In defending his veto, Cleveland stated:

I cannot believe that we would be protected against these evils by limiting immigration to those who can read and write in any language twenty-five words of our Constitution. In my opinion it is infinitely more safe to admit a hundred thousand immigrants who, though unable to read and write, seek among us only a home and opportunity to work, than to admit one of those unruly agitators and enemies of governmental control, who can not only read and write but delights in arousing by inflammatory speech the illiterate and peacefully inclined to discontent and tumult. Violence and disorder do not originate with illiterate laborers.

Literacy tests were vetoed again in 1913 by President William Howard Taft. The president explained his veto stating, "It was a visit through the [lower] east side [of Manhattan] that led me to veto the Immigration Bill containing the literacy test when it finally came to me. I saw among the young men and girls of the east side a spirit of appreciation, a gratitude, a patriotism that wouldn't hurt some of those whose fathers and great-grandfathers were born in this country."

A further bill to institute a literacy test was vetoed in 1916 by President Woodrow Wilson. The president declared that the bill, "seeks to all but close entirely the gates of asylum which have always been open to those who could find nowhere else . . . and it excludes those to whom the opportunities of elementary education have been denied, without



[President William Howard Taft](#), 1910,
Allyn Williams, watercolor on ivory,
Smithsonian American Art Museum

regard to their character, their purposes, or their natural capacity.” However, Wilson’s veto was subsequently overturned by Congress by a two-thirds majority the following year and the first literacy test was officially made into law as part of the **Immigration Act of 1917**. The passage of the law directly related to the increase in xenophobia Americans succumbed to as the country formally declared war on Germany and entered **World War I** that same year. Those that were largely suspected of disloyalty were German immigrants and even German-American citizens.

Glossary

Head taxes: Essentially an entry fee for arriving immigrants. The charge of one to two dollars per person was instituted to discourage immigration of poor immigrants who might become a public burden to American taxpayers.

Immigration Act of 1917: The first federal law that imposed a restriction on immigration in the form of a literacy test. It also designated an “Asiatic Barred Zone,” which barred immigration to the United States for much of Asia and the Pacific Islands.

nativists: Nativists primary came from Anglo-Saxon Protestant backgrounds and favored the rights and interests for those already established in America.

World War I: (1914-1918) The United States formally entered the war in 1917, after a German submarine sunk the New York-bound British passenger ship the *Lusitania*, killing 128 Americans, tensions between the U.S. and Germany quickly escalated. Prior to this event the U.S. had declared itself a neutral country, but with Germany’s blatant attack, it could no longer afford to stay neutral. The sinking of the *Lusitania* also turned American public opinion against German-Americans and immigrants in general, fueling a wave of xenophobia.