

TEACHING AMERICAN HISTORY PROJECT
An Immigrant in New York City (1830s)
From Christine Brooks

Grade –8

Length of class period –50 minutes

Inquiry – What conclusions can be made about the life of an immigrant in an urban environment in the 1830s? What issues did the fast growing cities face with the rapid increase in population?

Objectives - Students will identify factors that impacted the life of an immigrant.
Students will draw conclusions about city living and urban development.
Students will be able to demonstrate an understanding of the impact of immigration on the United States historically.

Materials - "A Working Man's Recollection of America," Knights Penny Magazine 1 (1846) 97-112 <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5839/> (attached at end)

Vocabulary Sheet

Fact Chart for facts discovered from the reading

Exit Conclusions Slip

Rubric for Assignment

Activities - Preparation: "Chunk" the reading to accommodate the number of groups.

1. Warm-up: Read the introduction with the students and conduct a discussion.
2. Assign groups a section of the reading with the appropriate vocabulary list.
3. Explain the expectations for learning and assessment of the lesson.
4. Students will read the section together in their groups.
5. Students will look up words from the vocabulary sheet for meaning and discuss the reading together.
6. Students will fill the chart with facts that they discover from their reading. (Later they will fill in the entire chart as groups share their findings.)

* The teacher should act as a facilitator as the students are reading.

7. Have the groups share what they read with the class. Each student should finish filling in the chart as they share. This can act as a wrap up for the lesson, with teacher questioning and expansion.
8. See assessments to complete lesson. Explain the expectations.

Assessment - Informal: Exit Conclusion slips will be given out (see attachments) then collected as students leave.

Formal: Students will have the choice to write a letter to the Mayor of New York explaining the issues of the immigrant communities OR Draw a political cartoon to illustrate the problems of urban life. Evaluate with attached rubric.

Connecticut Framework Performance Standards –

- 1.6 Analyze and draw conclusions on immigration's impact on United States at different stages in its history.
- 3.2 Analyze the options available to an individual in a historical situation.

Immigrant Life in New York City RUBRIC

Presentation of ideas	Very poor presentation, messy, not effectively done.	Decent job, rather neatly done, with some attention to detail.	Very well done, neat, great attention to detail.
Details included from the class activity.	Few to no details from activity included.	Some details are included from the activity.	Many details are included from the class activity.
Exhibits (shows) an understanding of the material.	Little understanding is shown of the material.	Some understanding of the material is shown.	An excellent understanding of the material is shown.
POSSIBLE SCORE	1	2	3

NAME: _____

DATE: _____

SCORE: _____

CLASS: _____



[home](#) | [many pasts](#) | [evidence](#) | [www.history](#) | [blackboard](#) | [reference](#)
[talking history](#) | [syllabi](#) | [students](#) | [teachers](#) | [puzzle](#) | [about us](#)

• SEARCH GO!

• ADVANCED SEARCH GO!

find

“They Must Work Harder Than Ever”: “A Working Man” Remembers Life in New York City, 1830s

Early nineteenth-century cities experienced enormous growth. New York’s population tripled after 1810, numbering over 312,000 by 1840. As the population exploded, the gap between rich and poor also deepened. Writing in a British periodical in 1845, “A Working Man” described changes in the urban workplace and also in residential and leisure patterns. Recounting his family’s emigration to America in 1825–35, he emphasized emigrants’ enormously high expectations and frequently ensuing disappointments. While work was plentiful, the pace was brutal and hours long. With its congested thoroughfares and colorful vistas, the city made a vivid impression upon residents and visitors alike. While residents could boast of an abundance of fruit and other items in the markets, the city’s unstructured growth also resulted in rampant disease and filthy streets. “A Working Man” was struck by the city’s youthful population, but also by the low esteem reserved for old age.

We were not sorry to leave the boarding-house where the charges had been higher than we could well afford, and to take possession of our new house, in which, although there was nothing but the bare walls and our chests and boxes, yet there was domestic privacy, that great essential to comfort and contentment; and the more prized as we had been strangers to it from the time we set foot on shipboard in the previous month of April. It was on the 5th of July that we removed; and as we walked through St. John’s Park we saw great numbers of the black population, with gay coloured scarfs and banners, preparing to celebrate the anniversary of their manumission, by perambulating the city on the day after the great national holiday.

It was evening by the time our things were all removed. Our beds had been lost overboard at the anchorage: I therefore went out and bought several bundles of straw which we spread upon the floor, and laying blankets on the top we enjoyed sleep as sound and refreshing as it would have been in the best appointed chamber. The next day we drew our biggest chest to the middle of the room for a table, while the smaller trunks

and boxes served as seats; and thus we went on pleased with our contrivances, until the end of the first week, when out of my surplus earnings we bought a bedstead and a two chairs, and with these we determined to be content until a small store of dollars should have been saved. We were well off as regards fuel, for my boss was pulling down an old workshop, and gave me two loads of the waste wood; among this I found sufficient to make a small bench, which I hoped to turn to good account, and made place for it in one corner of our room; the remainder I sawed into lengths for burning in the open hearth common to the inferior class of house throughout the States, and such as is seen in farm-houses in England. When a small fire is needed, or for the burning of charcoal, it is customary to use a "furnace" made of fire-clay, in shape like a large flowerpot with a double bottom, the upper one being pierced full of holes for the admission of air. These, in the hot weather, are frequently laid in the open air, and as they concentrate the heat, cooking may be very conveniently performed upon them.

The cheapness of provisions at that time was in our favour; the profusion of meat, fruit, and vegetables was such, that two dollars and a half, or ten shillings sterling, sufficed for our weekly expenses. In the spare hours of the morning and evening, as often as the great heats would permit, I set myself to make a table: and I shall not soon forget the pleasure we felt when on its completion we placed it in the centre of the room. When our life on shipboard is taken into account, we had been so long without a table, that for some time we could not cease to congratulate ourselves on the great convenience it afford us. A shelf for books was fitted into a recess at one side of the fireplace, and then we considered our domestic arrangements complete.

In embarking for America, it was with the resolution to give the country a fair trial; that if we fell short of the anticipated benefit it would be from no inattention on my part. We contented ourselves for many months with the simple provision above described; and during the first two years, with the exception of » week's illness, I was not absent from work for more than a single day. It may be said that if a man would resolutely pursue such a course in England, he would hardly find it necessary to emigrate; but shame stands in the way; many do not like to sink in the eyes of their neighbors and friends. To "get along" in England as thousands do in America would be considered a disgrace, although such a course in the moral discipline induced might be fraught with the happiest effect.

It would not perhaps, be out of place to say a few words on the fallacious notions and expectations generally entertained by actual or intended emigrants. They cross the Atlantic with very exaggerated ideas of their own importance, and the advantages they expect to derive from the change of situation: but with regard to the United States, they will find a host of unforeseen difficulties awaiting them. They expect to go through life with less labour or less difficulties than they have previously endured, but they must work harder than ever if they wish to gain a comfortable living. They are in a country where, although many try to live without working, and look down with contempt on the jacket and apron, there is no sympathy with idleness. They expect to meet a people of imperfect skill and little improvement, who will give them any price for their knowledge; but on the contrary they find the new people have improved almost every object involving mechanical skill, from a stay-lace to a steam-boat; most articles of domestic

use, tables, chairs, brooms, and brushes, are lighter and more tasteful than similar articles in the "old country;" and instead of being the leaders, such emigrants are content to drop into the rear, happy if they can maintain their footing. Then there are the vicissitudes of the climate, which in most seasons are intolerably severe and trying to the constitution. The new emigrant, again, has heard of the successes of some of his acquaintance who went out years ago, and he looks for equal success in his own case, losing sight of the multitudes who left their homes with the same views and have been miserably disappointed. He finds difficulties, discouragements, and expenses which were altogether unanticipated; he finds it difficult to keep pace with the stirring rivalry around him; and unless he be a man of unflinching courage and perseverance, his fate is the fate of thousands; he abandons the struggle, falls into habits which he great heats and the cheapness of exhilarating drinks render but too prevalent; and his career ends hopelessly, while he has never ceased to regret his departure from *home*.

These remarks, however, apply principally to those who cannot exist away from the noise and excitement of a city; while they who can rely on the strength of their principles and their arms, may betake themselves to the smaller towns and villages of the interior, where the field of labour is wide and the temptation to idleness small. There, with common industry, a man may soon call himself the owner of a piece of land, on which he builds a house, and then, secure of a home, works on in all the gladness of honourable independence, in the anticipation of welcome repose in age. I know but of one objection to this: wages in country places are more often paid in kind than in money. I knew a man who for three weeks' work, in the neighbourhood of Buffalo, was paid with a load of hay.

We soon felt the difference between an English and American summer. The weather, when we landed, and for a short time afterwards, was about as warm as the same season on the eastern side of the Atlantic; but at the beginning of July the heat became intense; the thermometer in the sun stood at 120° and at 96° in the shade. It is scarcely possible to imagine the state of feeling produced by such an extreme. While sitting perfectly still in the thinnest clothing, the perspiration streams from every pore, trickles from every hair of the head, and falls in a shower to the floor. The garments become saturated and stick to the skin, which, irritated as it already is by the "prickly heat," a disease common to warm climates, suffers an intolerable degree of discomfort. The desire to drink is irresistible, and copious draughts of water are taken to compensate for the excessive waste; breathing, in fact, becomes almost too great an effort. The physical inconveniences here described are those of a state of repose; what then must be the weariness and exhaustion attendant on eleven or twelve hours' labour in a confined workshop? I have felt at times so worn out as scarcely to be able to crawl home in the evening, where, seating myself in a cool place, though this was rather difficult to find with the thermometer at 90° after sunset, I seldom stirred until the lapse of some hours of darkness, or the blowing of the evening breeze gave reason to hope that sleep might be sought with a chance of success. Repose, however, attends but seldom on the pillow; the torrid atmosphere generates such swarms of bugs that with the greatest care it is impossible to completely extirpate them. These alone are sufficient to worry a weary man into madness, to say nothing of the incessant noise, like that produced the knife-grinders, caused by the locusts, and the contentious chirrup of the kaly-dids which abound in the trees that grow along each side of the street

as high as the first-floor windows; and later in the season the swarms of mosquitoes with their exasperating sting and Lilliputian trumpets:—no wonder the inhabitants look so thin and haggard when their repose is thus destroyed by the very cause which renders it the more necessary.

On the public pumps in the streets printed placards were pasted with the words “DEATH TO DRINK COLD WATER;” but in spite of the warning several deaths occurred from inconsiderate drinking, principally among Irish labourers. Some of the masons who were at work on the great Astor Hotel dropped down dead from the effects of the heat. In consequence of these deaths the builders generally came to the resolution to suspend out-of-doors work every day from the hours of twelve to four, until the weather moderated. The brute creation did not escape; horses fell dead in their harness. The whole effect of these events was very startling to a stranger. The fiercest intensity of the heat, however, seldom lasts for more than three days at a time; it is then succeeded by an appalling thunderstorm, after which the temperature is a shade more bearable for a few days. Millions of flies infest the air, swarm in every room, and settle on every article of food, so as to be truly disgusting. I have seen them congregated in such numbers on the tea-table, that the butter and sugar looked like nothing else than moving masses of blackness, and the noise of their buzzing when a candle is lighted in the evening is altogether insupportable.

I underwent a severe attack of bilious fever before being thoroughly acclimated; it laid me by for a week, and eventually yielded to copious bleeding, but left me very weak for some time afterwards. The worst was, however, to come: our little daughter, who had lived through all the trials of the voyage, fell a victim to the disease so fatal to infant life throughout the United States, known as the “summer complaint,” or *cholera infantum*. For many days our hopes struggled with our fears we prayed that she might recover; but at last, when reduced to the extremity of attenuation, her gentle heart ceased to beat. In the hot season there is but a short interval between the death and the burial: on the evening of our day of bereavement I saw our darling laid in the earth; and owing to the negligence of the grave-digger, was obliged to stand by while he dug the grave: on turning to leave the ground he ran after me, shouting that it was customary to pay cash, and he would write a receipt.

Death’s first inroad among a little family becomes a melancholy halting-place in its annals. To our eyes Time had left a footstep visible on his trackless path. A knell of sorrow sounded in our ears, whose echo yet lingers in our hearts.

The certainty of employment left me at liberty to notice in my daily walks some of the peculiarities of the city and its inhabitants. One feature that particularly strikes a stranger is the bright and unsmoked appearance of the streets and houses. The predilections of the early Dutch colonists in favour of paint, which they introduced, with many other characteristics of their native Holland, into their new country, have come down to their descendants, or rather successors. A house painted all over with a clear brilliant white first attracts the eye: the next will be a flaring red, with the joints of the bricks “picked out” in white; its neighbor will most likely be yellow, succeeded by green, followed in

turn by a front covered with red and white chequers after the fashion of a draught-board. All this, though not in the best taste, yet being renewed annually, serves to give the city, above the surface of the streets, a clean and cheerful appearance. The leading thoroughfares look like long green avenues during the fine season, bordered by the trees planted at the verge of the footways, whose shade is really grateful in the hot days, of which I have attempted a description in the preceding passages. The paving is, however, execrable; the roughness and inequality of the surface impede alike the progress of horses, vehicles, and human beings. At the yearly Municipal elections “Inspectors of Streets” are duly appointed and paid, but their utility is very questionable, since the streets are seen covered with all sorts of rubbish, ashes, bones, refuse vegetables, among which pigs prowl in undisturbed felicity. The 1st of May in every year is the time chosen for removals; then household furniture of all descriptions, in every species of conveyance, may be seen in busy motion in all the streets, as though the owners were flying from a besieging army. For some days before and after this event the public ways, always dirty and encumbered, receive fresh contributions: old shoes, pots, pans, kettles, shattered relics of the pantry and scullery, are pitched into the streets as the readiest mode of getting rid of them. The straw beds universally used are now emptied of their worn contents, and the heaps of old straw thus scattered in all directions furnish rare sport to the young republicans, who set fire to them after nightfall, throwing in whatever combustibles may lie around; and so ends “flitting day” with a general blaze.

In consequence of the want of sewers the drainage is all on the surface, which tends very much to increase the unsavouriness of the streets, swept but once *a* week during the summer, while in the winter the dirt is left undisturbed, mingled with the snow, for months together. The fatal effects of this negligence are often felt in the great heats, in the breaking out of epidemic diseases. The fearful visitation of the cholera in 1832 will long be remembered by the New Yorkers. The public health is not, however, entirely lost sight of, for during the hottest season medical advice and medicine are gratuitously given to all poor or sickly applicants in the different wards of the city: close alleys and the gutters of narrow streets are limewashed; cesspools are inspected, and when necessary purified by the throwing in of several bushels of lime, as a means of prevailing the generation of contagious miasm.

Another peculiarity observable by a stranger is the youthfulness of the population. Young men from twenty to twenty-five are there seen in positions which in older countries are filled by men of twice that age. The appearance of the busy throngs that pass up and down the streets would lead one to deduct a third from the chance of life as compared with Britain. There is much less of variety in physical development than we are accustomed to see in Europe. The comely and portly personages met with in all parts of England are very rarely seen there; occasionally an old person of one or the other sex is encountered, but withered and sapless, as though the torrid heat; and arctic frosts had drawn out all their vital juices. The season of infancy and boyhood, like the spring of the natural year, is brief and ungenial; soon swallowed up in the assumption of a manly bearing— of the privileges of age without its experience. The want of “veneration” which pervades all the social and political relations of the country is nowhere so manifest as in the intercourse between parents and children. “Honour thy father and thy mother” is a

precept little regarded where the domestic ties are slight, where the fireside virtues are but little esteemed. The holy and elevating influence of age upon youth is completely lost in the engrossing claims of business on the one hand, and on the other, in the precocious desire for independence and enjoyment.

A short residence in New York is sufficient to prove that the convenience of pedestrians is not an object of paramount importance, as in London. The side walks of many of the leading thoroughfares are encroached upon in the most reckless manner. In front of nearly every "grocery" stands a huge ugly bin, from which the supply of charcoal is retailed, supported on either side by old hogsheads, barrels, and sugar-boxes, forming a mass as unsightly as it is inconvenient and dangerous. In front of timber or "lumber yards," the occupiers raise high piles of wood on the foot and roadway, without any regard to the facilities of traffic.

Wood is the staple fuel of the inhabitants: carts loaded with it may always be seen passing from the country boats moored alongside the wharfs, to all parts of the city, where the load is "dumped" opposite the door of the purchaser. This wood being in lengths of four feet, must then be sawed into shorter lengths, convenient for the hearth or stove; an operation performed in the street by some of the many "wood sawyers," most of them negroes, who are continually on the look-out for a job; and when the quantity they have to cut is large, an accumulating heap of little blocks remains on the ground during the whole of their tedious labour.

The markets of New York teem with a rich supply of vegetables and fruits in the fine season: the duty of going to market is not confined exclusively to females; most of it is done by the men. I have often started for the market as early as five o'clock in the morning, in order to be ready for work at six, as well as to take advantage of the cool hours for the buying of meat, which in the hot months must be cooked soon after it is killed, to prevent putrefaction. What a tempting sight to an Englishman is the display of pine-apples, melons, peaches, and profusion of tropical fruits! I have frequently bought a large and juicy melon for three cents, and a peck of the most delicious peaches for ten cents, whose flavour, ripened by the glowing sun of an American sky, far exceeds all that I have ever tasted in this country. He only who has panted under that sultry sky can have any adequate conception of the luxury and enjoyment of cutting open a rich cool melon, and suffering its pulpy substance to dissolve in the mouth. It is then we gratefully feel how bountifully Nature compensates for all her apparent annoyances and inconveniences.

To one who has been accustomed to see meat sold, as in England, by ounces—to weigh the loaf against the appetite—the abundance and cheapness of an American market are very gratifying. Instead of buying a chop, wherewith to flavour a large mass of potatoes, he will carry home a quarter of a sheep or a lamb, or a solid rib of beef, with as many vegetables as he can well stagger under, pleased with the anticipation that the tender frames of his little growing family will receive due development under the generous nourishment. In such a case there is no stint; no uneasy thoughts about the coming day's supply; no impending dread of hungry looks or hungry stomachs among those who claim his best affections. This, I have often thought, is the chief cause of the firmer tone and

manner which soon becomes apparent in the person of newly-arrived emigrants: shadowed forth in glowing colours in the letters which they write to their friends at home. Unfortunately, it too often ends here:—the physical is fostered, but the moral is neglected.

At the approach of winter, the “tow-boats” that bring down country produce are laden to a tenfold degree; apples, potatoes, poultry, pigs killed and scalded in readiness for cutting up, absolutely crowd the decks, piled many feet in height. Customers are not wanting, as the prices are lower than in the markets, and it is a common practice among nearly all classes to lay in a stock of such provisions as will keep at the commencement of the cold season. At such times I have bought apples at fifty cents a barrel (three bushels), potatoes eighteen cents the bushel; while the piles of fat hogs are sold at from four to five cents a pound: and a whole sheep for a dollar.

These prices are, however, subject to great fluctuations: the severe winters cause a general rise in all kinds of vegetable produce; at such times twelve or eighteen cents will be charged for a cabbage; from the month of January to May, the scarcity of green food is universal. The price of bread also is not less uncertain: I have often paid six cents for a loaf, which a few weeks earlier in the season would not have cost more than half that sum. For more than half of the five years that we lived in New York, the prices of provisions were, with very slender exceptions, as high as those in the large towns of this country.

Source: "A Working Man's Recollections of America," *Knights Penny Magazine* 1 (1846) 97–112

Exit Conclusions Slip

Write two conclusions that you could make (that would be supported by evidence from the reading) about life of an immigrant in New York City during the 1830s in the United States.

1. _____

2. _____

Exit Conclusions Slip

Write two conclusions that you could make (that would be supported by evidence from the reading) about life of an immigrant in New York City during the 1830s in the United States.

1. _____

2. _____

Vocabulary List: "A Working Man's Recollection"

1.domestic

2.manumission

3.perambulating

4.contrivances

5.profusion

6.emigrate

7.fraught

8.fallacious

9.derive

10.contempt

11.idleness

12.vicissitudes

13.perserverance

14.exhilarating

15.prevalent

16. repose

17.extirpate

18. bilious fever

19. acclimated

20.copious

21.cholera infantum

22.attenuation

23.melancholy

24.predilections

25.execrable

26.felicity

27.epidemic

28.contagious miasm

29.ungenial

30.manifest

31.precocious

32.paramount

33.tedious

34.teem

35.putrefaction

36.profusion

37.impending

38. provisions

An Immigrant in NYC Fact Chart

Physical Description of New York					
Living Conditions of Immigrants					
Working Conditions of Immigrants					
Health Issues of Immigrants					
Sanitation Issues in NYC					

--	--	--	--	--	--