

TEACHING WITH ON-LINE PRIMARY SOURCES: DOCUMENTS FROM THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES

PERSPECTIVES ON THE "NEW IMMIGRANTS," 1903-1911

Michael Hussey
National Archives and Records Administration

On November 4, 1911, William Williams, Commissioner of Immigration at Ellis Island, penned a brief note in which he added some "finishing touches" to his annual report. In spite of his editing, however, Williams's report resulted in a protest from residents of New York's Lower East Side. They informed President William Howard Taft that Williams had referred to them as "ignorant" and of "filthy habits." Public officials, they argued, ought not to be allowed to issue "libelous charge[s]." Although the controversy diminished quickly, the debate between Williams and the Lower East Side's Citizens' Committee of Orchard, Rivington, and East Houston Streets, offers us a window into competing early twentieth-century views of immigration and urban life.¹

Between 1820 and 1880, nearly nine million immigrants arrived in the United States, the great majority from Germany, Scandinavia, England, Scotland, and Ireland. Beginning as early as the 1880s, immigrants increasingly arrived from southern and eastern Europe. Just under 55,000 Italians, for example, immigrated from 1871 to 1880. For the years 1881-1890, the number jumped to just over 300,000. Similar trends were also evident for Russians, Greeks, and groups from the Austro-Hungarian Empire.² These "new" immigrants spoke a wide variety of languages and many of them were Catholic or Jewish rather than Protestant.

This "newness" was deemed threatening by some, including Commissioner Williams. In a 1903 speech, he had stated that there had been a dramatic change in the quality of immigrants arriving in New York. He noted the "radical sociological, industrial, racial and intellectual distinctions which exist between the Anglo-Saxon, Teutonic, and Scandinavian races and the Slav, Magyar, Italian, Greek and Syrian races."³ He claimed that the Anglo-Saxon, Teutonic, and Scandinavian immigrants

¹File 53294/8-8b, Subject and Policy files, 1893-1957 (Entry A1-9), Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, Record Group 85, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC, ARC number 3854680. Hereinafter referred to as File 53294/8-8/b.

²Arrivals of Alien Passengers and Immigrants, 1821-1913: By Nationalities and by Decades, Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1913, 94. See: http://fraser.stlouisfed.org/publications/stat_abstract/page/18501/4227/download/18501.pdf.

³"Address delivered by William Williams, Commissioner of Immigration, in New York, on January 27, 1903, before the Federation of Churches and Christian Organizations of New York City," 1-2; available through Harvard University Open Collections Program: "Immigration to the United States, 1789-1930,"

(continued...)

"more closely resemble our people in blood, traditions and ideas of Government than is the case with any of the larger countries of Europe from which our immigrants come."⁴ Perhaps more ominously, Williams suggested, the "large influx of undesirable and unintelligent people from Southern and Eastern Europe may be at least one of the reasons why we do not get the better labor that used formerly to come here" from Germany and England.⁵

As he wrote in his 1911 annual report, the "new immigration" "proceeds in part from the poorer elements of the countries of Southern and Eastern Europe and from backward races with customs and institutions widely different from ours and without the capacity of assimilating ... Many ... have very low standards of living, possess filthy habits and are of an ignorance which passes belief."⁶ This "new" type of immigrant, wrote Williams, crowded into the tenement districts of Elizabeth, Orchard, Rivington, and East Houston Streets of New York's Lower East side.

Williams noted that for the fiscal year ending June 30, 1911, Ellis Island staff had inspected nearly 750,000 immigrants. He wrote that a large number of these immigrants were a "real benefit to the country." However, approximately 14,500 others were deported.⁷ He regretted that this number was not higher, yet he could not turn away those who while "able to earn a living, cannot in any sense be termed desirable. They are nevertheless admissible under the low requirements of existing law."

The Citizens' Committee of Orchard, Rivington, and East Houston Streets responded in quintessential American fashion with a letter of grievance and a petition.⁸ The Committee argued that not only were these claims untrue but that they were also "apt to arouse unwarranted prejudices against immigrants, and especially among immigration inspectors." Its members urged the President to "vindicate our reputation and that of our families and neighbors." The Citizens' Committee argued that while most of its members were of foreign birth, they sought to become citizens, to raise and

³(...continued)

at <http://pds.lib.harvard.edu/pds/view/7434417>.

⁴Ibid., 3.

⁵Ibid., 4.

⁶File 53294/8-8/b.

⁷Ibid.

⁸The petition and report of the Citizens' Committee and Williams's rebuttal are available through the National Archives at <http://archives.gov/research/arc/>. In the search box, type the following Archival Research Catalog (ARC) number 3854680.

educate their children "as good Americans," to enjoy the "blessings of freedom," and to perform the "obligations which residence and citizenship entail."

In typical Progressive Era fashion, the Citizens' Committee also prepared a sociological study of its neighborhood, complete with detailed statistics. The study noted that the neighborhood included 624 "industrial establishments" (e.g., bakeries, mineral water factories, cap manufacturers, tailoring shops, and watchmakers); 671 "social centres" (e.g., libraries, synagogues, Hebrew schools, churches, moving picture places, and 112 candy and ice cream parlors); 745 "merchandise establishments" (e.g., delicatessens, egg stores, grocery stores, shoe stores, and clothing stores); and 191 professionals (e.g., lawyers, doctors, dentists, midwives, rabbis, piano teachers, and veterinarians).

In response to Commissioner Williams's fear that "new immigrants" would not assimilate, the Citizens's Committee cited evidence of "Americanization" in neighborhood libraries and schools. Of books checked out of her library, Miss Ida Simpson of the Seward Park branch reported that "while fiction (and it was invariably of the best kind) led numerically, sociology was second and economics third; 5,200 works in civics and American history are on the catalogue of this branch, but they are in constant use. Books representing simple methods for the study of English ... are likewise in great demand."

The neighborhood's Public School Number 188 had 2,500 boys enrolled in 1911. Of these, the Citizens' Committee report noted, only eight were arrested in that year and "they on charges that were trivial. There was but one who evinced serious moral delinquency." Indeed, the school offered an orchestra, glee club, literary societies, and athletics, all "useful factors toward Americanizing the children of this locality."

In October 1912, Williams informed President Taft that, in spite of the Committee's complaints, he was on record as in "praise of good immigration from whatever sources." He wrote that he had not said that all "or even a large portion" of the neighborhood's residents were of the disreputable "types" mentioned in his report. Some were, however, and this was "known to all who are conversant with the situation." The Committee's report, he argued, failed to include illiteracy rates, adult crime statistics, overcrowded housing, or that many of the "new immigrants 'herd' together, forming in effect foreign colonies ..., a sad but well established fact" The complaint and report of the Citizens' Committee was, according to Williams, a "misrepresentation" that sought to ignore unpleasant realities.⁹

Clearly, Commissioner Williams and the Citizens' Committee were not in agreement. However, neither of them had a monopoly on the truth. Both attempted to depict the Lower East Side in such a manner as to win the President's approval. Williams was correct that New York tenements were often dangerously overcrowded and unsanitary. The Committee's report did not mention this reality. However, the

⁹File 53294/8-8/b.

Citizens' Committee by its very existence proved that immigrants could quite successfully find a place for themselves within American life. Indeed their petition is a clear example of its members' grasp of their rights under the U.S. Constitution.

What emerges from these documents is a glimpse of a nation undergoing profound demographic changes. Vast numbers of immigrants arrived in New York and other ports, bringing new traditions, new foods, and new languages with them. At the same time, a country that had once been predominantly agricultural was becoming predominantly urban. Some sought to mitigate the worst of the new era's harsh realities, for example, overcrowded tenements and unsafe working conditions, through more efficient city management and governmental regulation. Still others, like Commissioner Williams, looked to the disreputable "types" of immigrants entering Ellis Island as the source of the problem and immigration exclusion as the solution.

Teaching Suggestions:

1. **Focus Activity:** Photographs of immigrants at Ellis Island are available through the National Archives website. Go to www.archives.gov/research/arc. Three examples are available by typing their identifying Archival Research Catalog (ARC) numbers into the Search box. These numbers are: 595034, 595650, and 594479. This will require three separate searches.

Also, photographs of early twentieth-century life in New York's immigrant neighborhoods are available through the National Archives website. Go to www.archives.gov/research/arc. Three examples are available by typing their identifying ARC numbers into the Search box. These numbers are: 535469, 535468, and 3854683. This will require three separate searches.

Ask your students to interpret these photographs through a series of questions. These could include: What do you see? Who do you think these people are? Where do you think they are from and where are they going? How do the images of the immigrant neighborhoods compare (or contrast) with the Ellis Island photographs?

It might also be helpful to use the photograph analysis work sheet at: http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/worksheets/photo_analysis_worksheet.pdf.

2. Direct your students to the photograph with ARC number 595650. Ask them to imagine that they are one of the immigrants in the photograph.

Invite them to read the Citizens' Committee's description of its neighborhood (in pages 1 through 7 of their study) from the perspective of this immigrant. Ask them to imagine what he or she thought of this neighborhood. They should also

draw on clues that they find in the photograph. Encourage them to take notes about their impressions.

Facilitate a class discussion in which students share “their” immigrants’ views.

[For access to the petition and report of the Citizens’ Committee and Williams’s rebuttal, visit <http://archives.gov/research/arc/>. In the search box, type the identifying ARC number 3854680.]

3. Share the information from the background essay on Commissioner Williams’s views of the “new immigration” and the Lower East Side of New York. Also, review with your students the photographs cited above and this article’s featured document.

Assign your students to write a letter from one of the immigrants in the photographs to a friend or family member in Europe that draws on these primary sources. The letter should describe what they have seen in New York and their opinions of their new home.

4. In their petition to the President, the Citizens’ Committee wrote that they had immigrated to the United States with the purpose of “rearing and educating their children as good Americans, and of enjoying the blessings of freedom, at the same time assuming and performing the obligations which residence and citizenship entail.”

Divide your students into groups of three or four. Ask them to list and discuss terms that come to mind when they hear the phrases “the blessings of freedom” and “performing the obligations which residence and citizenship entail.” Then have the students reconvene as a class to further discuss their views.

5. Involve students in a writing simulation. Instruct them to write “letters to the editor” or “open letters to President Taft” in response to Williams’s statements as if they were citizens of the tenement districts. Lead a discussion based on these letters and on how Williams might have responded to them.
6. Ask your students to write an essay in which they formulate their own portrait of the “new” immigrant’s life on the Lower East Side of New York. What portions—if any—of Williams’s views or that of the Citizens’ Committee do they find convincing? They can also draw on the photographs in their formulation.

Additional Resources:

- For photographs of Commissioner William Williams, Secretary of Commerce and Labor Charles Nagel, and President William Howard Taft go to the following link: <http://digitalgallery.nypl.org/nypldigital/id?1693109>.
- One of the signers of the Citizens' Committees' petition lived at 97 Orchard Street, the current home of the Tenement Museum. Their website, <http://www.tenement.org/>, includes additional information on immigrant life and further teaching activities.