

Docent Script – In Their Shoes

Nora Katz

1. Establishing Communities (Colonial Period, 1700s)

Many colonists came to the Americas with plans for a new society. The Puritans in New England, William Penn in Pennsylvania, and James Oglethorpe in Georgia each had a vision for their ideal homeland. Jews came to America with the same dreams. The first Jewish settlers in the Americas came from Brazil, because they had been forced out by the Portuguese. In 1654, 23 men, women, and children landed in New Amsterdam. *Can anybody tell me where New Amsterdam is? What is it called today?* These Jews weren't treated with respect by the people of the colony, and they moved to Newport, Rhode Island. They were attracted to Rhode Island because it offered religious freedom and was a busy port city, which was great for business. They built the Touro Synagogue, which is the oldest existing synagogue in the United States. Jewish settlers lived in port towns along the coast where they were accepted by the local governments.

Work – Jews lived in cities such as New York, Newport, Charleston, Savannah, and Philadelphia. They were attracted to religious tolerance, good economic climates, and opportunities to open their own businesses. People in the colonies worked very hard making a new life for themselves. Boys tended to work in the fields or as apprentices for craftsmen, and girls tended to work at home with their mothers. People in towns could raise vegetables and have animals, though they didn't have a lot of land for crops. The people in the colonies were farmers, craftspeople, or merchants. Merchants traded and shipped goods to other countries and made port cities very wealthy. *Can you find an object in the gallery that would have helped someone do their job?*

Families – Older children took care of the younger children and everyone had a lot of chores around the house, the farm, or the business. *How would you feel if you had all of that responsibility?* Women married when they were about 23 years old, and men married when they were about 30 to 33. Most colonial families were very big, often with 7 to 8 children. *How do you read a family tree? What do the lines between people mean? What if there are question marks below the person's name? What does this family tree tell us about colonial families?*

School – Most children worked and weren't able to go to school. In Pennsylvania, Quakers opened schools that everyone could attend. Students learned how to read and write and do simple math. Many children learned to read and write at home if they couldn't go to school. *How would you feel if you couldn't go to school?*

Home – Houses were the way that colonial families showed their success, so they were as nice as the family could afford. Wealthier people had fancy furniture, but farmers and workers would have had barrels and boxes for furniture. *Can you find an example in the gallery of something that would have been in someone's house?*

Clothing – Only the wealthiest people could afford to buy clothing, so most people made their own clothes. Children’s clothing was made with lots of room to grow, and boys and girls wore the same clothes until they were about 6 years old. Most clothing was made out of wool, which was very hot in the summer. Men wore breeches (pants that stop below the knees), waistcoats (vests), long coats, stockings, shoes, and hats. Many wealthy men also wore wigs made from human, horse, goat, or yak hair. Women wore long dresses with petticoats underneath with aprons to protect themselves while they were cooking or working. Most people only had two sets of clothes, for weekdays and for Sundays or other days of worship. *Can you find something in the gallery that someone would wear?*

Food – Farmers sold some of their crops and saved some to feed their families. Wealthier families could buy food, but most of the poorer people in the colonies produced all of their own food. *What favorite foods would you have to live without if you had to make all of your own food?*

Worship – Jews wanted to build communities that were similar to the ones they had in Europe, and they planned to maintain their traditions and practices. However, it was often difficult to keep parts of their heritage alive because they were so far from Europe and had to face the challenges of a new home. Sometimes Jewish communities would be very strict about maintaining their religious traditions and Jews who didn’t follow the rules weren’t allowed to be a part of the community anymore. Jews worshipped privately for many years before they began building synagogues.

Discussion questions: If you had to build a whole new society from scratch, what would you do? How would you start?

Quotes: *“Her house is ‘round the corner from ours and is also red brick. It is two stories high with an attic and a cellar. We share a low stone wall out back. This opens up to a courtyard where there is a well for us to share with other neighbors. ‘Tis my task now to fill her water pitchers, something I am most pleased to do. Many times this morning and afternoon, I dropped the bucket down, let it sink, then pulled it up by its soggy rope. Chips of ice floated on top. My fingers were red and numb from the cold water, but I shall complain not. A girl of nine years such as myself should do for others without tears of her own.” (Five Smooth Round Stones: Hope’s Revolutionary War Diary / Kristiana Gregory)*

“Everyone in the Pennsylvania Colony worked hard. My brothers and I worked with our father in the field and we did not attend school. Other boys worked for master craftsmen. They learned trades, such as shoemaking or glassblowing. But we could all read the Bible and write. My sisters worked with our mother. They tended gardens called kitchen gardens. They used the vegetables from these gardens to feed our family. Extra vegetables were sold at market. My mother also took care of cows, chickens, and other small farm animals.” (The Pennsylvania Colony / Martin Hintz)

Recommended reading:

The Pennsylvania Colony by Martin Hintz

If you Lived at the Time of the American Revolution by Kay Moore

<http://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/religion-and-eighteenth-century-revivalism/essays/early-america%E2%80%99s-jewish-settlers>

http://www.loebtouro.org/jll_jews.shtml

http://www.loebtouro.org/jll_syn.shtml

<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/colonialhouse/history/index.html>

<http://www.icsresources.org/content/curricula/JewsInAmericaReading1.pdf>

<http://www.post-gazette.com/stories/opinion/perspectives/the-jews-of-early-america-642763/>

2. Wagon (Westward Expansion, 1820-1870)

Many settlers left for the west to find new opportunities and new places for their families to live and work. Especially during the Gold Rush, many people went to California in covered wagons in search of a better life. Life on the trail was hard, and once settlers reached their destinations, life was even harder. Many people had to build homes, set up farms, and get water without any neighbors for many miles. Towns began to grow and the western United States expanded quickly. Cities like Cincinnati and Houston were centers of Jewish life.

Work – Working as a pioneer meant making sure that the family was safe and could survive the trip West. Many families brought cattle with them, so they had to take care of their cows, milk them, and churn the butter. Children would dry beef, churn butter, and collect buffalo chips for fires. Pioneers brought very little money with them, but they used what they had to buy seed and building products from general stores in towns near their farms. Jewish merchants often set up these stores to supply towns and communities in the West with basic goods. Farmers were often very poor because of the harsh weather conditions on the prairie that ruined their crops. *If you had just been traveling in a covered wagon for several months, what would you buy in the general store to get ready for your new home? Look around the room. What would have been purchased at a trading post and what would have been carried in the wagon? Is there anything you would add?*

Families – The whole family would work on the homestead, because there were so many chores that needed to be done for the family to survive. The men worked in the fields harvesting and planting crops and the women maintained the house and worked with the animals. *What are some of the chores that pioneer children would have had?*

School – Pioneer children often couldn't go to school, so their parents taught them to read and write. In wagon trains with a lot of children, they might have lessons during lunch and dinner. Many large towns had schoolhouses for the younger children, but work took up most of their time.

Home – Settlers built their own houses out of wood or sod (bricks cut from the ground), and they would have had to dig wells for water. Houses were very dark and dirty, but the sod kept them cool in the summer and warm in the winter. On the trail, pioneers lived, slept, ate, and sometimes cooked in their wagons. The wagons had all of the belongings of 8 to 10 people, and most guidebooks recommended bringing 500 pounds of food per person. *What would it be like to spend all of your time in this covered wagon?*

Clothing – Women wore long wool dresses and bonnets. Men wore trousers, suspenders, wool socks, and caps. Everyone wore sturdy boots for walking and hats to protect their faces from the sun. Pioneers wore the same clothes all the time, even to sleep. *How would you feel wearing clothing like this all the time, even when you were working hard on the farm or walking across the prairie?*

Food – Settlers planted corn and other crops that they ate or sold in town. They could buy and sell their goods in towns, which were often very far away. Settlers produced corn, potatoes, pumpkins, wheat, and other vegetables, and they could also eat ham, venison, salt pork, rabbit, and other meats. On the trail, pioneers carried flour, sugar, coffee, eggs, cows, meat, and cooking supplies. Sometimes pioneers found berries and vegetables on the trail. Pioneers hunted buffalo for meat. It was hard to keep kosher on the trail because of the limited food options. *What foods would you most like to bring on the trail?*

Worship – Jews who lived and worked with other pioneers often had trouble finding places to worship. The harsh life in the west made it difficult to observe many traditions, and because so few Jews moved west there were no synagogues for services or major holidays. *Would you be able to keep practicing your religion even when you weren't near others who practiced it?*

Discussion questions: What would make people want to leave their homes and move West? Did the benefits outweigh the risks? If you were moving West, who would you bring with you in your covered wagon?

Quotes: *“We cooked our meals outside the wagon and slept on Mama’s quilts spread on the ground. Papa told us the names of the stars and about the moon, how it rose and set, and how the moon and the stars were the same ones that shone over Grandma and Grandpa’s house. The very ones we used to see through our bedroom window. The sound of the wind in the grass was like the sound of the rivers we’d known back home. Day and night the sound was in our ears. Sometimes we came to real rivers, and when we did we washed ourselves and topped our water kegs. Sometimes a river was easy to cross and sometimes hard, with Brownie and Blackie so frightened as they swam, and us holding onto them and the wagon too. Sometimes we even had to cross on a ferry pulled by ropes. It had been weeks since we started our journey.”*
(*Dandelions* / Eve Bunting)

“This morning we woke up early. The guidebook showed that there were only a dozen or so miles ahead, and none wanted to sleep. We descended the last stretch of eight miles. The road is smooth and level, dotted with farms and homesteads. We are finally, safely here! The other families we meet are all so friendly. One fruit seller welcomed us with a watermelon and astonishing news – California has just been admitted to the Union. We are not only back in civilization, we are back in the United States of America! Pa grinned at Mother and handed her the first slice of melon. Tomorrow we would find our homestead.” (*Rachel’s Journal: The Story of a Pioneer Girl* / Marissa Moss)

Recommended reading:

Dandelions by Eve Bunting

If You Traveled West in a Covered Wagon by Ellen Levine

Daily Life in a Covered Wagon by Paul Erickson

Roughing It on the Oregon Trail by Diane Stanley

Rachel's Journal: The Story of a Pioneer Girl by Marissa Moss

<http://www.selah.k12.wa.us/soar/projects2000/pioneerweb/index.html>

<http://www.neh.gov/humanities/2010/januaryfebruary/statement/jewish-pioneers>

http://www.stljewishlight.com/features/article_25d5fae6-ad89-11e0-a874-001cc4c002e0.html

3. Experiencing Immigration (1880-1924)

Millions of European Jews left their homes for a better life in America. They landed at various ports, including New York, Boston, Baltimore, and Philadelphia. About 10,000 Jews went to Galveston, Texas, because they didn't want to live in the overcrowded cities on the East coast. However, many immigrants chose to stay in the cities because of opportunities for work or because they wanted to stay with their families. Religious charities were responsible for taking care of the poor people in their ethnic groups, so many Jews relied on Jewish charities (like the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society) when they arrived in the United States. Most Jewish immigrants came from Central and Eastern Europe, spoke Yiddish, and had strong communities both at home and in the United States. Immigrants saw the Statue of Liberty and were hopeful about their new lives but scared of the challenges they would face in the United States.

Work – Most Jewish workers worked in the garment industry, making various kinds of clothing, including shirtwaists, a kind of fancy woman's shirt. Many Jewish immigrants worked in factories, as shop owners, as peddlers, as vendors, or as shop workers. Everyone worked to support their families in the United States and at home in Europe. Many immigrant workers were involved in forming trade unions, groups that helped workers get better working conditions. Many children worked in factories, often in bad conditions, because there weren't any laws yet that kept children from working even when they were very young. Many children worked 12 to 18 hours a day, six days a week.

Families – Many families were broken up by the immigration process. People who arrived at Ellis Island could be sent home if they had infections or diseases or if they didn't pass the tests that they had to take before entering the United States. Immigrants went through medical, mental, and legal exams before they were allowed to live in the United States. Many people came to the United States alone, worked for a few years, and then sent money home so the rest of their families could come to America. Everyone in the family worked because wages were very low. Families needed as much money as possible to live in their houses and buy food. *What would you do if someone in your family was sent home from Ellis Island? Would you go home with them or would you stay in the United States?*

School – Many immigrant children had the opportunity to go to school in the United States, but many had to work to make enough money for their families. The public education system allowed many children to go to school for free. Children learned about American culture and learned English, which helped them serve as translators for their parents. Some parents wanted their children to receive a Jewish education, which was mostly available for boys at local homes

or cultural centers. There were also opportunities for adults to get an education so they could feel more comfortable in the United States. *How would you feel if you started school in a new country with a new culture?*

Home – People of the same ethnic group often lived together in big apartment buildings, called tenements. A tenement apartment was a tiny, rented room that would often house 12 or more people. Sometimes families would take in boarders to make extra money. Tenements were tiny, dark, and often had no electricity. Before 1900, most tenements didn't have bathrooms. *How is the tenement bedroom different from your bedroom at home? How is it the same? Look at the tenement living room in this picture. How is it the same as or different from your living room at home?*

Clothing – Immigrants wore traditional clothes from their home countries but would buy new, American clothes when they had enough money. Factory workers wore everyday clothes in the factories. Women wore long skirts and shirts, girls wore dresses that came to their ankles, and men wore pants and vests. Boys wore short pants, called knickerbockers. For factory workers, clothing wasn't fancy, because very nice clothing was very expensive.

Food – Food was very expensive, and most immigrants lived in cities and so they couldn't grow their own food. Immigrants bought food in the cities and embraced new kinds of food from all over the world. It was very hard to keep kosher, but with more Jewish immigrants, more kosher stores opened and it was easier to follow religious rules.

Worship – Jews stayed with other Jews and tried to preserve their traditions and culture. However, it was very hard to observe the Sabbath as a factory worker, because most factories were only closed on Sundays. *What would you do if you couldn't leave work to go to a religious service?*

Discussion questions: How would you feel if you had to leave your family and come to America alone? What would you do when you came to a new country by yourself? Where would you go?

Quotes: *“Years later Yehuda remembered his first days in America as a confusing jumble of new experiences. Even though Yehuda was 12 years old, he had to start school in the first grade because he could not speak English. His first grade teacher gave him the name Julius. Julius learned English very quickly, and within two months he moved up to the second grade. Later, he skipped from grade to grade and soon was in a class with students of his own age. By the time Julius reached high school, he realized that his mother needed help to support the family. The school principal arranged a schedule so that he could take his most important subjects in the mornings. It took a long time before he felt at home in America, but he knew he would never have to run or hide from anyone again.”* (Journey to Ellis Island / Carol Bierman)

“She sat on her trunk and cried. Passengers pitied the girl with the auburn hair and ginger-colored freckles. But what could they do? Crammed together and fearful, speaking strange

languages, huddling close to keep warm, what could they do for Jessie? The ship sailed west for many days. At first it was stormy. Jessie lay curled on a mat, too ill to eat, too ill to sleep. She thought about Grandmother in the hut with the slanting roof, eating her soup alone. On the fourth morning the sun came up and the passengers dried out. They played cards and sang, and sometimes they argued. But mostly they talked, swapping stories and dreams. Dreams of America, where the streets were paved with gold. America, land of plenty. On a fine fall day they sailed past the Statue of Liberty. America! No one swapped stories or argued. Babies hushed. Even the oldest passengers, and the most seasick, stood against the rail. America! And there it was, New York City with those tall, tall buildings that touched the sky. Grandmother! Jessie thought. If only you could see what I see now!" (*When Jessie Came Across the Sea* / Amy Hest)

Recommended reading:

When Jessie Came Across the Sea by Amy Hest

The Keeping Quilt by Patricia Polacco

The Memory Coat by Elvira Woodruff

Rebecca (American Girl series) by Jacqueline Dembar Greene

Life on the Lower East Side by Jennifer Blizin Gillis

Hannah's Journal: The Story of an Immigrant Girl by Marissa Moss

Coming to America: The Story of Immigration by Betsy Maestro

http://jewishmuseum.net/?page_id=893

<http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/haventohome/haven-century.html>

<http://www.nps.gov/elis/historyculture/index.htm>

<http://www.scholastic.com/teachers/article/history-child-labor>