

The Northeast: America's Gateway to the World

No Gold on These Streets

a writing/reading lesson on the Immigrant Experience in Tenements

INTRODUCTION:

Most people who call themselves “Americans” are descended from foreign immigrants. They came from Europe, Canada, Asia, and Latin America. They came for many reasons, but basically they were seeking a better life for themselves and their children. America was the “Promised Land,” and her “streets were paved in gold.” Of course, when they arrived at Ellis Island, or other ports of entry, they faced a different reality. Instead of instant riches, they had to work long hours in factories, coal mines, or sweatshops for very low pay. For those who lived in cities, like New York, they lived in crowded apartment buildings called **tenements**. It was this hard reality that is the subject of this lesson.

How about your family history? Ask your parents and other relatives about when, how, and where your ancestors arrived in the United States? Why did they come here? Record this important family history here:

On the next part you will be visiting the Lower East Side Tenement Museum in New York City. It is possible that your grandparents or greatgrandparents had similar experiences to the families who lived there. Keep that in mind!

PART ONE: 97 Orchard Street, New York, New York

Early in the 20th century, the Lower East Side of the island of Manhattan was one of the most densely populated areas of the world. Thousands of people were crammed into small apartments in the tenement houses. The Lower East Side Tenement Museum is housed in such a building. The museum has tried to recreate the homes of four immigrant families who once lived at 97 Orchard Street. Let's see what their lives were like.

1. Log on to the museum website: <http://www.tenement.org/> Click on the icon for **A Tenement Story**. Before reading about the families, browse the pages on the history of tenements, outdoor toilets, and the finances of tenements. List three facts you learned by reading these pages here:

(1) _____

(2) _____

(3) _____

2. The four families that the museum highlights are the Gumpertzes, the Confinos, the Rogarshevskys, and the Baldizzis. Remember that thousands of other immigrants lived at 97 Orchard Street, so they are just a small sample.

Your teacher will assign your group a family to research from this website. Which family are you learning about? _____

You need to read about this family and to look at the photos of the family and the apartment. Some rooms can be viewed in 360° with QuickTime. Record your observations here:

Family name and country of origin	
Names of all the family members who lived in that apartment	
Source of income	
Family traditions and customs	
What do you see in the photos and/or the Virtual Reality 360° view?	
Other articles on this page (<i>A Closer Look</i>)... what do they tell you about the problems faced by immigrant families?	
Any other information you found interesting or important	

3. **MAPS and OTHER IMAGES!** Look at the street map of this New York City neighborhood. Compare it to your own neighborhood. How are they alike? How are they different? _____

Now look at an aerial view of the Lower East Side. What does this photo show you? _____

Included in your packet is a floor plan of the tenement. List the rooms that make up one apartment:

What are the measurements of the apartment? _____ by _____. The parents most likely slept in the bedroom. Where did their children sleep? _____

How do these living arrangements compare to your family? _____

Finally, go back to the web page <http://www.tenement.org/story.html>. Click on the link “**97 Orchard Photo Album.**” Describe some of the images that you see from that tenement building:

Now share what you learned about the tenement building and the people who lived there with the rest of the class. If necessary, record more images in the spaces above as you listen to your classmates.

What you are building is an *image bank*. This will help you to place yourself in this building about 80 years ago. You will need these images to create a short story about life in a tenement.

PART TWO: A Short Story About an Immigrant Family

Now you are ready to be creative! You are going to develop a short story about an immigrant family living in an urban tenement in the early twentieth century. You will tell the story from the point of view of one of the immigrants.

1. Planning the story: *Character List:*

When and where does the story take place?

Description of the Tenement and Apartment:

Description of a street scene:

Crisis facing the family:

How the crisis is overcome?

2. Writing the Story: Once your teacher approves your plan, you are ready to write the story. Use the images you collected while visiting the website for the Lower East Side Tenement Museum.

Good luck!