

BECOMING WELCOMING COMMUNITIES

Immigration in Light of Biblical Faith:
A Study Guide for Wisconsin Congregations



WISCONSIN COUNCIL
OF CHURCHES
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Becoming Welcoming Communities - Wisconsin Council of Churches- Session 1, Handout 1B

Immigrants in Wisconsin in the 1800s

The first quarter of the nineteenth century was marked by westward migration of small numbers of French, English, and Americans from the eastern US into the rich lands and waters north and west of the Ohio River. By the mid-nineteenth century, the Native Americans who had been the primary inhabitants of Wisconsin had been forced to give most of their lands to the federal government, and some were relocated west of the Mississippi River. Thus, the settlement of Wisconsin by European immigrants was made possible by the coerced reduction of tribal lands and the forced removal of Indian populations. Although the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 prohibited slavery in Wisconsin, the 1840 census showed 11 slaves in the territory, as well as 185 "free colored persons" who may have originally come to Wisconsin in bondage.

Between 1836 and 1850, Wisconsin's non-Native American population increased from 11,000 to over 305,000. Economic and social changes, coupled with natural disasters such as the potato blight in Ireland, increased Europeans' discontent and desire to emigrate and seek a better life.

Of the more than 100,000 foreign-born Wisconsinites in 1850 – one-third of the state's population -- only 48,000 could claim English as their native language (and half of these were Irish immigrants). Of the non-English speaking immigrants, the Germans were by far the most numerous, followed by Norwegians and French Canadians. Other ethnic groups left their mark, including the Finns in Douglas County, the Danes in Racine County, and the Italians in Kenosha.

Between 1852 and 1855, the Wisconsin Commission of Emigration actively encouraged the settlement of European immigrants in Wisconsin. Pamphlets extolling the state's virtues were published in German, Norwegian, Dutch, and English and were distributed throughout Europe as well as in eastern port cities. Advertisements were placed in more than nine hundred newspapers. Propaganda produced by land speculators and immigrants' letters to Europe encouraging friends and family to join them also stimulated immigration to Wisconsin.

By 1855, however, the rise of antforeign sentiment led to the dissolution of the Commission of Emigration. Waves of ethnic conflict between "Yankees" and Germans swept through Wisconsin, in part around the teaching of German language and culture in schools.

In 1890 the state legislature enacted the Bennett Law, requiring all schools, public and private, to conduct classes in English. German Americans denounced the Bennett Law as an assault on their culture by Yankees who sought to force their own values on everyone else. Opposition was loud, persistent, and widespread, and after only a single term the politicians responsible for the Bennett Law were voted out of office, and the Law was repealed the following legislative session.

Adapted from Wisconsin Historical Society webpages:

“Slavery in Wisconsin” <https://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Article/CS1784>

“19th-Century Immigration” http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/turningpoints/tp-018/?action=more_essay

“Americanization and the Bennett Law” http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/turningpoints/tp-031/?action=more_essay .

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