



SCHENECTADY MUSEUM

On-line Lessons

Immigration &
Communities
Grades 3-8

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“Letters from America”

Question:

What was it like for kids to move to a new country or join a new community? Finding new friends, going to a new school, moving from a farm to a city are big changes in your life. How much can we learn from an immigrant's memories of their childhood? How much can we learn from someone who comes from a different part of America?

Try This:

- Read the excerpts from an oral history that tell about Gemma, an Italian immigrant's memories of coming to Schenectady, New York in 1938, as an eight year old girl.
- Read excerpts from an oral history of James Stamper, an African-American boy who moved from Atlanta to Schenectady in 1930.
- Pretend you are Gemma, and you are writing letters to Giacomo, a friend who lives on a farm outside Naples, Italy, and use the template to write a letter to them, tell your friend a story about something that happened to you in your community.
- Pretend you are James, and you are writing letters to a friend who lives back in Atlanta, and use the template to write a letter to them. In your letter, tell your friend a story about something that happened to you in your community.
- Make a drawing or a collage that tells the whole story in one picture and make a quilt square.
- Take a story from your life (when you went on a vacation, your birthday, visiting the Schenectady Museum, whatever).

More to Explore:

Visit the Shaping Schenectady exhibit at the museum to see what kinds of objects people brought with them when they moved to Schenectady. Find the objects that tell stories about how they joined in and became part of the new community.

Things to Think About

- Collecting family stories is an important way to preserve your cultural history.
- Does your family have special recipes that have been handed down and are prepared for family celebrations?
- Does your family have special objects that are treasured?
- Ask your parents or grandparents or people who are special to you to share some stories of their childhood with you.
- Write them down or record them to preserve your own family history.

Fun Facts

The AIDS Quilt, the largest on-going arts project in the world has the stories of people who have been affected by AIDS on 44,000 panels, had more than 84,000 names on it, is 792,000 square feet in size (the equivalent of 26 football fields with walkway or 16 football fields without walkway), is 50 miles long if all 3'X6' panels were laid end to end, and weighs more than 50 tons.

What's This All About?

Oral history, family and community history, interpreting historical documents, immigration.

History, Art, Research, Textile Design, Storytelling, Math

Web Links for More Information

<http://teacher.scholastic.com/immigrat/seymour/chap1.htm>

http://www.quiltguilds.com/new_york.htm

Gemma Cacciolfi

The following excerpts are from a researcher's log of a taped conversation with a lifelong community resident of the Front Street neighborhood of Schenectady, New York. The excerpts relate the experiences of an Italian immigrant named Gemma Cacciolfi who came from a farm outside of Naples, Italy and moved to Schenectady in 1938, as an eight-year-old girl.

Note: The researcher is TC, and Gemma Cacciolfi is GC.



TC says the neighborhood was very strongly Italian, though Polish people were here too. Did GC feel it was more Italian? GC says, "I did, because that's all we hung around with was the Italian families. You know, across the street from us were Italians, on the other side were Italians. So when we came from Italy, we relied on those kids to help us, because they spoke Italian too. So we didn't feel out of place. They were able to help us. To go to school, they used to take us to school with them and everything. So that helped. But there was more Polish people too. It's just like I said, we happened to be Italian, so we hung around with the Italian kids."

TC asks about GC's first impression of the neighborhood, having come from Italy. GC says she really liked it, but her sister did not. "My sister didn't like it. She's the one that wanted to go back to Italy. She ran away a couple of times, because she didn't want to stay here ... She missed home. Italy was home to her, even though my mother was here. But Italy was home. But like I say, we came in an Italian community, we had all these Italian friends. So I didn't really miss, I didn't miss Italy at all. Cause I had more friends here than we did in Italy, really."

GC says they lived on Front Street when they first came. "There was a store there. We had a grocery store there for years and years. We had a meat market there on Jefferson Street ... Sewicky's butcher shop. That was a Polish-run place." TC says, so you went there too, and GC says, "Oh definitely. Oh sure. A steak isn't Polish or Italian, it's just a steak, right?"

"There was another little store on College Street ... the name of it was Stern's ... and that's where all the kids would go, before they went to school, before they went back to school from our lunch hour. We had to come home for lunch. There was no school lunches, everybody walked home. Then going back, our parents would give us, maybe one penny, and we would all go into Stern's, to buy a penny's candy."

TC asks about gardens. GC says, "We had a big garden. Not so much at our house. But they used to, the people that lived down here would farm, all that area down by the river. Across the river, and everything. Everybody had their gardens, and every night they would walk, across the bridge, and go take care of their gardens. We walked across the bridge, the railroad bridge that's there... right near the river."

TC asks about the neighborhood and where she went to visit and play. "...Well we had neighbors. There was a lot of homes there. And they were all, they all had three, four, five kids, and we always had plenty of people to play with... And that's why we hung around right here. But we did go down to Riverside Park ... In back of the stockade, along the river... And we had a lot of activities over there, all summer long."

GC talks about social life. "...Every Saturday night we'd meet at someone's house. Most of the time it was ours, because my father made wine, he played the accordion, people used to lie to sing..."

Use this page to write your letter.

*Gemma Caccioppo
Front Street
Schenectady, New York, U.S.A*

September 12, 1938

Dear Giacomo,

*From Your Good friend,
Gemma*

James Stamper

The following excerpts are from a researcher's log of a taped conversation with a community resident of The Stockade section of Schenectady, New York. The excerpts relate the experiences of an African-American immigrant named James Stamper who came from Atlanta, Georgia and moved to Schenectady in 1930, as an eight year old.

Note: The researcher is TC, James Stamper is JS.

TC asks about growing up in Schenectady and any differences than in the South.

JS: "When my mom told me that we were going to move from Atlanta to Schenectady, I was elated, and I thought we were coming to the big, liberated North. And I got here, and I found that it wasn't as savory as I thought. The people were still conscious of who you are, they would look at you because of the pigmentation of your skin, or the texture of your hair, they felt that you were different and should be treated differently, and that you should take the back seat on the trolley or the buses, or the back seat anywhere. I didn't expect that in Schenectady. We didn't HAVE to do that here. But, if I sat in a seat by myself...and the trolley, the place would fill up with white people, nobody wanted to sit along side you, it was as though they felt you would contaminate them, you know, that you were poisonous or something. So, you're cautious of that sort of thing. But a lot of that has disappeared, and I'm glad - especially since the Civil Rights Act of 1964. It made a lot of people come to their senses, and it made them realize that people are people. And yo have to treat them that way. And people are different and you have to recognize those differences, you have to respect those differences."

TC asks about the neighborhood and its mix. Did everyday people follow the idea of respect?

JS: "It was ... not everyone was sharing that view about race, it was just certain individuals. In fact, when we lived on Green Street, after moving from my Uncle's house, we lived in a housing unit with Italian people, and we got along fine. The best of friends, enjoying each other's company. It was just like one family. We were just like a part of the family. And we enjoyed there living with them. My mother, and I remember Mrs. Olashio, members of her family were just like sisters and brothers. But, unfortunately, once we left the house or roamed around in the community, we would run into certain individuals with backwards currents in their minds, they just felt that they were above you, and would rather that you would not be near them - they would draw a line of demarcation, just because of who you are, and not only because of us being black, we've seen people raise that line when Jewish people were in their midst, they would feel the same way about us. Didn't want to sit at the table with them, eat a meal with them, just didn't want anything to do with them. It was as though they were trash and that they themselves were above them. It was unfortunate. I'm glad to say that I've lived to see the day when that has disappeared. And it's good to see that people are people and they need to be respected for their differences."

JS continues about how life was different in the North than the South during World War II when he was 30 years old.

JS: " Let me tell you something that has always stayed with me and that I've found to be ridiculous. When I was in the service, I came home on furlough. At the time I was stationed in Alabama. Got on the train, coming back from Alabama to Schenectady with a whole bunch of soldiers, sailors, military. Below the Mason-Dixon we had to sit in what they called a *Jim Car*, a *Jim Crow Car*, and when it was time to have dinner, or eat or whatever meal it was, the conductor would come back and tell you that the Dining Car was open, and they would come to the military people, and say, "Military go first." So we felt like we were treated differently, but, when we got to the Dining Care, we noticed that there was a section cordoned off for us to seat and eat in. And there was a curtain that would be drawn, so you had you own private dining area. No one could see you, you were in a booth. And we would eat and enjoy that special treatment. And then they would invite the civilians to come and eat. And the black civilians were invited to that sectioned off area of the car. Now, when we got ABOVE the Mason-Dixon Line, we didn't have that privilege we were the same as anybody else. They would push the curtains back to the wall. They would blend in with the deco of the car. And if you didn't know the curtain was there, you wouldn't pay attention that it wasn't there. Now when they said the Dining Care was open, and you're invited to come in and eat, you had to get in line with everyone else, because we're all the same now. Same car. Same Train. But above the Mason-Dixon Line, we're different people. And we're treated just like everyone else. And I used to say to myself, how silly, how ridiculous it was, you know. It didn't hurt anybody to sit and eat together, but below the Mason-Dixon Line they had the Jim Crow Section. But I'll never forget that. That was something."

Use this page to write your letter.

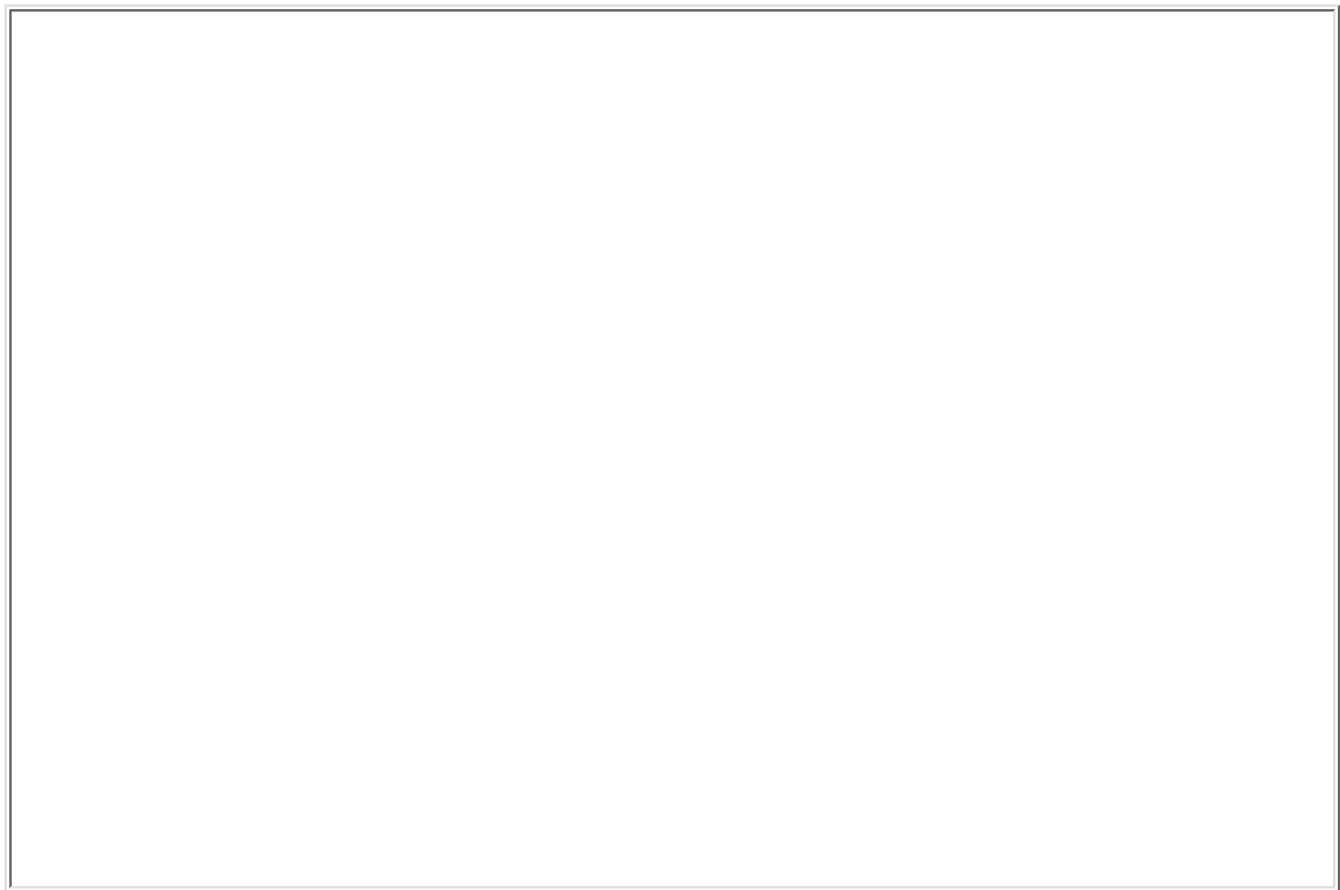
*James Stampet
Front Street
Schenectady, New York, U.S.A*

September 12, 1932

Dear .

*From Your Good friend,
James*

Using the square, make a drawing for a quilt square.



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