



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
1980 Volume cthistory: Changing Connecticut, 1634 - 1980

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Curriculum Unit 80.ch.12  
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### **Contents of Curriculum Unit 80.ch.12:**

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Connecticut is one of the most ethnically diversified states in our country. If Connecticut's historical development is to be truly understood the ethnic heritage of the state's non-Yankee majority must be given serious attention. Within the state there are more than sixty-five living ethnic groups which still have clubs and societies. See Appendix A Those groups actively teach heritage awareness and pride in one's ancestry. For a general discussion of concepts relevant to teaching the ethnic history of Connecticut, and a general discussion of American immigration, see Unit XI of this volume. One of the major ethnic groups in Connecticut is the Italians. Approximately one of three people in the state is of Italian ancestry to one degree or another. The Italian is a strong force in the social, political, and economic life of our state. An investigation of the settlement patterns of the Italian will enrich our understanding of the state's political, social, cultural, and economic evolution. This paper will delineate settlement patterns of the Italians in New Haven in the years between 1875 and 1930, the years of their great migration.

Many of Connecticut's cities and towns have ethnic concentrations of various sizes. Moreover, it is not unusual for these groups to have gathered in specific neighborhoods. Although this narrative will present data relative to one city and one ethnic group, it should stimulate study of other groups. Certainly, the Polish in New Britain, the Puerto Ricans in Meriden, and the French in Bristol are examples of groups which can be researched. All studies, whether of large or small groups, will enlighten our heritage. The strategies and objectives included in this narrative should be useful in such studies. Also, this study, designed as a ten-day high school unit, has wide application throughout the Social Studies curriculum in Connecticut and across a wide range of grade levels.

A perspective of the social and geographic conditions that prevailed in Italy during the period between 1870-1930 is important if one is to understand the Italian emigration-immigration process. Italy is a peninsula

extending from Southern Europe 660 miles into the Mediterranean Sea. Italy's regional geographic conditions have had a decided impact on the uneven social and economic development of its people. The country, which includes the major islands of Sardinia, Sicily, and smaller islands, ranges in width from 140 miles on the peninsula to 320 miles where the peninsula connects to Europe. In square miles Italy is 116,260 miles which makes it approximately twenty-three times bigger than the state of Connecticut. Italy can best be described as mountainous and hilly, with valleys and narrow plains. The region of Northern Italy, in the Po river valley between the Alps and Apennine mountains, has a climate much like Connecticut. The Central and Southern peninsula region's climate resembles the climate of coastal Southern California. Italy is generally studied as three geographic regions: Northern-Central-and Southern. The physical climatic realities of each region played a strong role in each region's development.

The political unity of Italy was achieved in 1871. This narrative raises the question of whether unity and all it implies is applicable to the Italy of the late 1800s. In Italy each region, and more importantly each village, had mores and dialects that differentiated them from the "foreigners" outside their narrow geographic boundaries. More often than not these cultural distinctions were carried intact by emigrants to their new settlements throughout the world.

Italy has one of the most turbulent and fascinating histories of any country in the world. Its contributions to culture and to the evolution of political thought rank it among the greatest of countries. Why, for many decades, then did millions of Italians choose to leave their homeland? The answer lies in the economic, political and social confusion, perhaps even chaos, which prevailed in the Italy immediately following unification. During his unification speech the Italian King Victor Emanuel professed:

My heart thrills as I salute all the representatives of our United country for the first time, and say, Italy is free and united; it only remains for us to make her great, prosperous and happy. This statement was to remain a dream for many decades, The reality of the Italian experience-which spurred emigration-departed greatly from the King's ideal. The individual cities and villages of the country were loved by their inhabitants. The conditions, then, which caused massive emigration had to be overwhelming. They had to be powerful enough to cause the temporary or permanent uprooting and break-up of millions of families. *Poverty* and *taxes* best sum up the forces behind emigration motivation. Italy, after unification, enjoyed relative peacefulness for the next fifty years. Malarial swamps, for instance, were drained and the slow process of modernization began. It should be noted that this progress generally obtained from Rome northward. In actuality, the progress attained exacerbated demographic problems, especially in the South. In an historic-geographic sense Southern Italy never developed liked the Central and Northern regions. Perhaps the Southern region lay "too far" from mainland Europe; or, perhaps its topography was too rugged; or maybe it was its lack of energy resources needed for industrial growth; or was it an attitude? Whatever the composite, Italy from Naples southward and including the islands of Sardinia and Sicily, was impoverished and overpopulated. In 1919, for instance, when wages were on the rise in Italy, the cost of living was rising even faster. An engineer in Northern Italy was earning from sixty-five cents to one and a half dollars per day. An unskilled worker in Northern Italy was earning about sixty-nine cents per day. Most Southern Italian laborers, however, were toiling on farms where the wages were much lower. Wages in the South increased from fifty to one hundred percent during the two decades preceding World War I. Yet, in 1919, Southern males working the land earned about fifty cents a day. Women doing the same work earned twenty cents. Children could only expect twelve cents per day. Poverty, therefore, was the reality for almost all peasant farm families.

Italy's population was predominantly agricultural. Most of the agriculture, however, was controlled by a small class of landowners who often exploited the huge supply of laborers available to them. The agricultural

laborers lived on the precipitous sides of hills and mountains or in the agriculturally unsuitable portions of the valley. Southern agricultural technology was quite primitive. The landowners, after all, had all the “beasts-of-burden” necessary to them. The Italian farm family was usually medium to large in number. The offspring ranged from four to more than twelve in number. When you relate family size to family earnings, a clearer picture of the meaning of poverty becomes evident. It is also obvious, then, that the Italian immigrant did not come to our shores in response to the alliterative slogan so often taught in American schools, “Glory, God, and Gold.”

Despite the hardships of life, the peasants of Southern Italy thought of their village as the center of the universe. Everyone from outside the village was a foreigner. All incoming ideas had to be interpreted within the cultural frame of village life. The harsh village existence called for mutual help and reliance. Thus, a feeling of *campanilismo* was bred. *Campanilismo* can best be translated by the statement: “Nothing of interest happens outside the sound of the village bell.” This adage governed the lives of most Italians. It took dire economic necessity, then, to weaken the bond that tied the villager to his beloved land. Study of the economic data makes it easy to understand why approximately three hundred thousand Italian emigrants left for America each year in the decades from the 1870s through the 1920s.

Many of the young to middle-age men of entire villages left for the “New World.” This factor is very important in understanding settlement patterns, especially of Southern Italians, in the urban centers of the United States. The emotional ties to the village and your *paesani* were readily transported across the Atlantic to New Haven. That these ties died hard can be discerned in the dream of the early immigrants: to earn enough in the country to which he immigrated so that he might return to his village apart from the yoke of the landowner.

In the year 1850 there were fewer than five thousand Italians in the United States. We generally associate them with the large urban centers, especially in the East. Italians had, in fact, been influential in other areas of our country long before the era of mass immigration. They had fought on both sides during the American Civil War. Moreover, their influence has been noted in the early development of Texas, Utah, California, Iowa and other states. It was the Contract Labor Laws of 1864 which really pushed immigration, however. Immigrant labor was needed according to the proponents of the law, to fill the vacancy on depopulated farms and in the straining factories, a condition which was brought about by the Civil War. Although the laws were repealed in 1868 they pointed to the need for an ever increasing number of laborers. The period between 1875 to 1913 was one of massive immigration by several ethnic groups. More than five million Italians alone, migrated to the United States. It is no coincidence that this period approximates the period of extremely rapid American industrial growth.

It is important, now, to stress the conditions that existed in the United States during the 19th century which allowed for massive immigration. That the American frontier had vanished did not deter the impoverished Italian who could earn twice as much working in the factories of the United States as he could in the fields of the Italian boot. The decline of cheap land in America, however, certainly was one factor which helped to keep most of the immigrant in the eastern urban centers. The United States was, therefore, deprived of much agricultural genius possessed by Italians.

Most of the Italian immigrants were illiterate. The burgeoning industry of the cities offered these people jobs despite that fact. They arrived poor. The factories of the city offered quick wages. They were homeless. The city offered immediate housing. Another very important factor must be mentioned. In rural Italy the laborer, although involved in the fields lived in close proximity with his *paesani*. He loathed the isolation associated with American agricultural life. This, coupled with the faster monetary returns associated with factory work,

did much to dissuade a more than sparse movement of Italians to the countryside. The rapidly expanding railroads needed cheap labor to lay the track and to build the roads. The mines which produced the energy for the big steel mills and the steel mills themselves needed labor. These, and a myriad of other industries needed labor. In addition, this labor force created a huge market for industry's products and services. Connecticut's industries were in the forefront of these needs.

Historically, New Haven, was business oriented from its very inception. Commerce in Connecticut led to the growth of many industries which were always in need of labor. If fifteen thousand Italian immigrants a day were landing in New York in the years between 1875 and 1929, it was inevitable that many would be drawn to the industrial cities and towns of nearby Connecticut.

### *The New Haven Experience*

The two classic *slum* areas in New Haven were Russian Jewish Oak Street and Italian Wooster Square. <sup>1</sup>

Gregory Todd

Yale 1976 One hot summer day, the residents of Hamilton Street were thrown into great excitement, for coming up the street, was the strangest army of people that the Hamilton streeters had ever beheld. They were dark hued men with rings in their ears and the women with large bundles of clothing on their heads, with about fifty small children. <sup>2</sup>

Miller

Yale 1969 The Italians had arrived: Actually or stereo-typically?

The old white church in Wooster Square

Where godly people met and prayed  
Dear Souls: They worship Mary  
there  
Italian mother, man and maid  
In gaudy Southern scarfs ar-  
rayed:  
The horrid candles smoulder  
where  
The godly people met and  
prayed  
Alas: The fall of Wooster

Square.<sup>3</sup> It was against this matrix of stereotyping, suspicion, and concentration in slums that massive numbers of Italians came to New Haven in the 1880s. Little wonder that the spirit of *campanilismo* and the mutuality of *paesani* were sustained for many years in the “Little Italys” and “Little Naples” of New Haven.

New Haven’s census of 1870 listed ten Italian residents. By 1900, the census of New Haven listed more than five thousand Italian born residents. Most of these immigrants were drawn to this city of opportunity despite their endured prejudice and hardships by the need for laborers in the burgeoning manufacturing and expanding railroad industries. Many of these people had been contracted for American industry under the *padrone* system. The *padroni* were the agents for immigrant’s employment. Since most of the Italians who came to the United States during the latter 1800s were men, it was the *padrone* who got them jobs, got them to their destination, negotiated their wages, and saw to their housing and food. If American officials and the American press saw the *padrone* system as evil, to most immigrants it was a necessary evil. The *padrone* looked after them and helped them to adjust in this strange land. Most Italian immigrants to New Haven, however, did not arrive under the auspices of the *padrone* system.

By 1872, the *New Haven Register* had already designated the Oak Street section as the “Italian Section.” This, because the New Haven Census of 1880 listed the city’s Italian population as 102, most of whom were already congregating in neighborhood enclaves. The single men in their tenements were soon given nicknames. The natives often referred to them as “swallows” or “birds of passage.” The names emanate from the idea that most of these men would only work for a year or two and then return to their families and villages. Many did return. Moreover, upon their return they related tales of life and opportunity in the “New World.” For this reason and other reasons listed, millions of their *paesani* were encouraged to make the voyage. Often this emigration involved the greater part of whole villages.

All emigrants, however, did not return to the village . More often than not, immigrant father or brother would save his earnings until he could afford to bring the rest of the family here. The newly adopted neighborhoods quickly became bastions of nuclear and extended families and *paesani* . This situation did much to hasten the demise of the *padrone* system. The *padrone* system gave way to a myriad of societies and clubs which arose almost on every block within the immigrant enclaves.

Early on, three distinct wholly Italian or strongly Italian neighborhoods were evident in New Haven. The major enclave was in the Wooster Square section whose “degeneration” the above poem laments. This section can be demarcated by Olive Street on its West; East Street on its East; Grand Avenue on its North; and Water Street on its South. The region was to become known as “Little Naples” since most of its inhabitants were immigrants from the Southern villages, especially those around Naples. Two other “Little Italys” also existed: the “Hill” section around lower Congress Avenue-more Northern Italian and the Oak Street area, where there were also concentrations of Russian Jews and Irish.

Regional and village names were often connected to a street or block of streets. The “Hill” had its Marchigiani people from the North, while names such as Avellino, Benevento, Caserta, Calabria, Atrani, Amalfi, and others, were common in Wooster Square and the side streets of Oak Street. Wooster Square was the most cloistered, an “island” of Southern mores and traditions. Initially, these clusters arose from practical more than cultural needs.

Wooster Square had always been associated with the business of the city and New Haven. From its very inception, New Haven had a strong business orientation. The mansions of the early entrepreneur graced the streets surrounding the Wooster Square Park. Then, as the center of the city became more congested, the

industries-which arose from the city's business orientation-moved into the Wooster area. Its labor hungry enterprises needed workers. This need spurred the immigrant to flock to the neighborhoods which surrounded the industry.

Before the war, in Wooster

Square,  
The carriages then went and  
came  
The common folk used to wait and  
stare  
They bowed to beauty and to  
fame.  
And then it ceased to be the  
same;  
The doors are tarnished all and  
bare  
Where shone each all colonial  
name  
Departed now from Wooster

Square. <sup>4</sup> After 1914, the inhabitant of Wooster Square was certainly more apt to be an Italian tenement dweller. Each day, often working alongside paesani, he would walk to Sargent and Company, the hardware manufacturer; or to Candee Company which manufactured rubber products; or to work on the track gangs of the New Haven Railroad. To find whole villages employed in these "walk-to" factories was not unusual. Walking, moreover, was an economic necessity for the immigrant, a necessity which hastened their congregation into distinct neighborhood patterns. The pay of the immigrant was generally low. The cost of commuting by trolley was relatively high. Many of the native New Haveners would have liked it if the immigrants had settled on the city's outskirts. For most immigrants, however, this was even more of an

economic impossibility. Rents could be had in the “Little Italy” or “Little Naples” sections for two dollars and fifty cents per month.

Crowding, therefore, was a natural consequence of the lack of real or conceived egress from the “neighborhoods.” A building boom took place at the beginning of the 1900s. The builders in Wooster Square were motivated by one idea: maximize the profit from their building investment. Little thought was given to accommodating the needs of the tenant. In Wooster Square the Italian had long been displacing the “upwardly mobile Irish” from already deteriorating buildings. The clash between these two groups was another strong impetus for neighborhood concentration and, eventually, toward Italian unification efforts from within.

Building of new tenements was planned for maximum utilization of space. Made of brick, they generally accommodated six or more families. They were narrow from front to rear. A store front was generally added for more revenue. The average cost of these tenements was about forty-five hundred dollars. The Italian immigrant flocked to these buildings. The Wooster Square area went from 5% Italian in 1890 to 98% Italian by 1920. Mores, developed long ago in Italian villages were readily discernible in and around the tenements of every “neighborhood-village” of the “square.” Dense living arrangements truly fostered a community within the community.

A stronger Italian identity was evolving from several forces. Disruptive effects of emigration and resettlement certainly called for mutual aid. These conditions gave strong impetus for unity from within. This unity evolved in a much broader sense. Eventually it was to encompass most Italians regardless of their village or regional ties. From this affiliation came the Italian-American, and then the American of Italian ancestry.

During the late 1800s and the early 1900s, however, the neighborhood was a self-contained sanctuary. Acculturation was slowed by the fact that within the “square” an inhabitant could put his money in Italian banks; buy his food and clothing at Italian stores, be treated by Italian doctors; and enjoy feasts and festivals, all from and with fellow *paesani*. More importantly, he could avoid the slurs of “dago,” “wop,” and “guinea” so often voiced by the “foreigners” from without.

A major force which helped to maintain ethnic values, while ameliorating the rigors of assimilation into the greater community, was the Catholic Church. From the very beginning the immigrants had a need for their own church. Local non-Italian priests, even when tolerant, were considered outsiders with whom it was difficult to communicate. By 1885, a series of Italian priests began to serve the immigrants. By 1890, St. Michaels Church, located on Wooster Square became the focal point of the expanding Italian community. For an account of a similar experience among the Poles of New Britain, See Unit X of this volume.

Along with the church and its endeavors, many other organizations which stressed mutual help arose from village-neighborhood loyalties. If each village, in the spirit of *campanilismo*, had a patron saint, so too did each neighborhood. Societies were organized to keep the saints and their teaching alive in the hearts and minds of the “displaced” villager. Just as important were the clubs. The villagers had a long tradition of mutual help, which in Italy, helped them to cope with geographic and social problems. This spirit was readily carried to the “New World” neighborhoods. In 1884, LaFratellanza, the first Italian society, was organized in Connecticut. Almost immediately other clubs and societies were begun in the “Hill” section, along Oak Street, and in the village-neighborhood, of Wooster Square.

These organizations helped to relocate and house fellow Italians. They paid benefits to members which extended from birth to death. More importantly, they began to give breath to the concept of the Italian-

American. Since the “outsiders” seemed to view all Italians as the same, it became evident to the clubs that unity among them meant power and led toward the road of assimilation. The extent of assimilation desired by the Italians obviously varied with the era and state of the Italian community. By 1930, more than eighty clubs and societies served more than ten thousand Italians in New Haven. Although, initially, the clubs may have inhibited acculturation and assimilation into the greater community, their power and voice quickly crossed ethnic lines. In national, state, and local affairs they actively campaigned for an end to prejudice and violence against Italians in general and individuals in particular.

It is about time that we should raise our voice and say: it is enough! No opportunity escapes a certain insignificant portion of the population of this country-the public press to insult us . . . 5

Fair Play-Pro Patria

Anthony Spinello, 1896 The church, societies, clubs, and the communication they engendered, did much to further understanding from within and from without the ethnic enclaves.

American education was another major problem area for the Italian immigrant. Since ties to the homeland were strong it was only natural to celebrate its traditions and to keep them alive by education from within the family, church, and other internal structures. The pressure from the greater community, however, was to “Americanize” all immigrants. Neighborhood celebrations, initially at least, did much to polarize the attitudes both of the Italian immigrant and those who suspected that they would be difficult, at best, to “Americanize.” Immigration caused crises situations in many American cities. Huge numbers of children poured into inadequate educational facilities. The teaching staff was taxed to the fullest. Free secondary public education, moreover, was still looking for its philosophical base.

Then, as now, the community was pressuring the school system to teach and inculcate values that previously had been thought to be the province of parent and child. The Board of Education looked upon this charge with much apprehension. One of its early reports referred to New Haven’s “increasing and promiscuous population . . . a population containing a large foreign element.” The Italian, especially the Southerner, appeared to care little for formal education. The Board of Education was looking to instill patriotism toward America and its traditions among people who had left a homeland where they had no real sense of national patriotism or national traditions and values.

The immigrant often saw the schools as places of ethnic conflict. More importantly, children of school age were needed to contribute to the family income. During the settlement period immediately before and after the turn of the century, the economic need for the children’s income often superseded the education system’s need to teach a foreign language-English.

All of these conditions contributed to the evolution of Italian colonies within the city of New Haven. What has happened to these colonies can foster an historical study of great interest. Do the colonies still exist totally or partially? What cultural and physical forces have been at work in these neighborhoods which may have caused their disintegration or rehabilitation? Can there be a spirit of campanilismo among later generations of Americans of Italian ancestry?

Study of these and other pertinent questions will further understanding of the Americanization process and ethnic mobility patterns. The activities developed below should be used to substantiate the above narrative data and to stimulate further study of ethnic history.



## Notes

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1. Gregory Todd. "The Impact of the Immigrant Areas on the Residential Structure of Downtown New Haven, 1890-1920," Yale: History 95, p. 8.
2. Morty Miller. "New Haven: The Italian Community" Yale: History 90, p. 6.
3. Ibid., p. 65.
4. Ibid., p. 65.
5. Ibid., p. 14.
6. Samuel Koenig. *Immigrant Settlements in Connecticut: Their Growth and Characteristics* . Connecticut State Department of Education, 1938, p. 17.

## Activity For Concept Development

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Comprehension of the concept terms listed below will give structure to the learning objectives of this unit. Discussion of the categories which comprise the cognitive concept abstractions will help the student to experience the process of conceptualization. The use of concrete examples from the student's experience will enrich the study of this unit.

### **Example:**

Cognitive Abstraction *Neighborhood* .

For this unit the categories that might be experienced in an Italian neighborhood will be listed.

#### Italian Neighborhood

Catholic Church      Clubs and Societies  
Feasts and Festivals      Bocci Games  
Bakeries      Italian Restaurants  
Pizza Parlors

Allow students to add other related categories. The same process can be followed for conceptualizing the words listed below:

1. Ethnic group

2. Culture

3. Heritage
4. Mores
5. Settlement patterns
6. Campanilismo Italian words
7. Paesani
8. Emigration
9. Community
10. Immigration

*Unit Activities that Involve the Student: Examples.*

1. A comparative study of the ethnic composition of Connecticut and another state from another region of the United States.

***Specific objectives:***

1. To have the student research census data.
2. To acquaint the student with regional ethnic settlement patterns and regional diversity of ethnic groupings.

2. A research-writing project which would allow the student to trace his own ethnic-family-settlement patterns. This can be accomplished by oral techniques and through written primary sources.

***Specific objectives:***

1. To allow the student to scrutinize his own heritage: traditions, mores, emigration motivation.
2. To have student(s) compare and contrast his family experience with that of the Italian in New Haven.

3. A comparative study of the geography of Italy, especially peninsula Italy, and the geography of Connecticut.

**Specific objectives:**

1. Students will discern the climatic and physical differences of the two regions.
2. Students will appreciate that the Italian immigrant had to adjust to physical as well as cultural differences during his resettlement in Connecticut.
4. A comparative study of the political and social conditions which gave impetus to Italian Unification (1800-1870) and the creation of the United States (1700-1776).

**Specific objectives:**

1. Students will better conceptualize the categories involved in the term Nationalism.
2. Students will gain a more complete perspective of the political and social movements of the 18th and 19th centuries.

**Note to the Teacher:**

The above examples are more sophisticated projects for the older or more academically adept student. As you read the narrative many more such projects should come to mind.

*Map Activities*

**Materials needed:**

1. Blank maps of Italy (political and physical).
2. Political and physical maps of Italy. Students should locate the provinces of Italy on the political map. Students will locate the villages noted in the narrative. Students will label the mountains, rivers and major islands of Italy on the physical map.

**Specific objectives:**

1. Students will comprehend the relationship between the physical entity of the state in the United States and the province in Italy.
2. Students will get a clearer perspective of the relationship of the village in Italy to the neighborhood in New Haven.
3. Students will better comprehend the relationship of topography with concepts such as overpopulation.
4. Students will note the relationship between the mountainous terrain and thin soils and the lack of extensive agricultural plains.

**Notes to the Teacher:**

1. Other map activities could include locating the major cities of New England, with special emphasis on industrial cities with large ethnic concentrations. A physical map of New England would offer a topographic comparison of Italy and the immigrant's new home. A climatic map of the two regions, along with a study of the climatic controls would enrich the student's map and cognitive skill.

2. Have students gather recipes from various regions of Italy. Perhaps they could even prepare a similar dish using diverse regional recipes.

**Specific objectives:**

1. Students will note regional variations in food preparation. (Food is a very important part of Italian culture).
2. Students will be able to relate physical and climatic factors to recipe ingredients.
3. Have students interview Italian restaurant owners

or chefs in the area.

**Specific objectives:**

1. Students will recognize that aspects of culture are transferred in resettlement.
2. Students will be able to pinpoint neighborhood village food preparation specialties.
4. Have the students compile a notebook which would show regional dialects and accents in reference to common expressions, both in Italy and New England.

**Specific objectives:**

1. Student's comprehension of regional differences will be reenforced.
2. Student will recognize that dialects are not the same as local accents.

## Appendis A

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*(figure available in printed form)*

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\* Jr. High reading level

\*\* Senior High reading level

\*\*\* Popular treatment

+ Scholarly, but readable

\*\* Scholarly and difficult

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\*\* Clark, Francis E. *Our Italian Fellow Citizens* . Boston: Small Maynard and Company: 1919.

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