The United States as a multicultural nation is a work in progress. Starting at the time of the Declaration of Independence in 1776, the United States was already becoming a multicultural nation. The young republic was home to diverse Indian tribes with a population numbering in the tens of thousands. There were settlers from England, France, Germany, Holland, Poland, Scandinavia, Scotland, Spain, and other European countries. African slaves numbered 700,000 by the time of the first census in 1790.

In the nineteenth century, the United States expanded westward incorporating parts of Mexico. The Spanish-American War added Puerto Rico and the Philippines as United States territories. The great European and Asian migrations of the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries brought Chinese, Germans, Greeks, Irish, Italians, Japanese, Jews, and Poles to the United States. Many had fled oppression at home; all sought improved conditions and opportunities for themselves and their families.

When European settlers came to the Americas, they encountered indigenous peoples with a long history and strong culture. Dominating North America for centuries, American Indians for the first time faced a struggle for the survival of that history and culture that continues to this day. American Indians have struggled to maintain their claims to sovereignty and to the centrality of place in their cultural, social, and spiritual lives.

Resisting integration and assimilation, they have sought to maintain their sovereignty and culture while interacting with the broader society. American Indians, particularly in the last twenty years, have displayed a growing pride in their heroic history while maintaining their determination to resist further encroachments on their culture. Resistance has taken the form of litigation, lobbying for legislative remedies, and direct action. American Indians have created remarkable art and literature. The story of America's indigenous peoples has been as much a story of creative survival as it has been of destruction of lives, land, and culture.

In addition to the strong influence of American Indians, other non-European peoples had an early influence on the diverse culture of the emerging United States. Since the early 17th century the forced immigration of African Americans brought a strong new cultural influence on the growing nation.
During slavery and increasingly afterward, African Americans have shaped the country's culture, contributing significantly to the arts, science, politics, sports, medicine, the law, and virtually every other field. For example, jazz developed as a uniquely American music; writers such as James Baldwin and Toni Morrison produced works that have won international acclaim. However, opportunities for African Americans have been severely limited by a long history of racial discrimination. It was not until 1947 that Jackie Robinson became the first African American to play in baseball's major leagues and not until 1948 that President Truman ended segregation of the armed forces. It was not until the mid-1950s that the country's system of legal discrimination began to be dismantled. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Black mayors, members of Congress, and Senators began to be elected throughout the country. Increased access to education expanded economic opportunities for African Americans.

With Angel Island in San Francisco Bay as the entry point, the Chinese were the first Asians to come to the United States in great numbers. Between 1849 and 1930, 400,000 Chinese immigrated to the United States. Japanese numbering in over 100,000 followed between the years 1885 and 1924. Smaller numbers of Filipinos, Koreans, and Asian Indians also immigrated during this period.

Asian immigrants played critical roles in the building of the Great Pacific Railroad, the development of mining, and the expansion of agriculture in the western states. Like other immigrant groups, Asians often faced hostility and discrimination, including the internment of 120,000 people of Japanese descent during World War II. People of Asian ancestry have contributed to a wide variety of fields. A number of Asian American scientists have won Nobel Prizes. I. M. Pei was the architect for the East Wing of the National Gallery of Art. Maya Lin designed the Vietnam War Memorial. An Wang was a pioneer in the computer industry. Joyce Chen helped introduce Chinese cuisine to the country. Drawing on a cultural legacy and heritage stretching back thousands of years, Asians introduced forms of healing and spiritual exploration that differ significantly from traditional Western approaches.

The immigration to the United States of non-European peoples was overshadowed between 1870 and 1920 when millions of Europeans, including thousands of Jews, but mainly Germans, Irish, Italians, Poles and other Slavic peoples, and Scandinavians, came to the United States, indelibly leaving their mark on American culture. They were the laborers who built the country's canals and railroads, and who shaped a diverse and vibrant urban culture. Members of each immigrant group found what work they could in the United States' growing industrial economy, redefined the country's politics, and staffed such growing urban institutions as the police, governmental service, and the public schools. For many Roman Catholic immigrants, the church was not only a center of community, but also a major source of opportunities for education and service. People such as Eugene O'Neill in literature, Frank Sinatra in entertainment, and Stan Musial in sports, as well as many others in these and other fields, discovered avenues for their efforts and talents, thus enriching the cultural fabric of American life. However, as the country develops in the 21st century, the origin of its population is becoming much less European than in the 20th. In 2000, 33 percent of the foreign population came from Mexico or some other Central American country, 23 percent from Asia, and only 14 percent
from Europe. By 2050, the Census Bureau projects a population that will be 24 percent Hispanic, and 14 percent African American, and 8 percent Asian.

Other groups are also becoming more significant parts of the United States’ population. While Syrians and Lebanese immigrated to the United States prior to World War II, more recently people from Iran and Iraq have come seeking safety and freedom. With others from India and Pakistan, they represent a major increase in the Muslim population of the country. Many cities also have large populations of Haitians. Although a relatively few Koreans came to this country in the early 20th century, since 1965 nearly 800,000 have come to the United States. Since the end of the war with Vietnam, moreover, many thousands of Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Hmong have made their homes in communities across the country.

The most significant population change and potential for influencing American culture is the growing number of Hispanics. The major influence of Hispanic culture on our national life and traditions started in the West where the expansion of U.S. territory resulted in the incorporation of a Mexican society. The United States first annexed Texas from Mexico in 1845. At the end of the Mexican-American War in 1848, Mexico ceded California, New Mexico, Nevada, and parts of what are now Colorado, Utah, and Arizona to the United States.

More recently large numbers of immigrants coming from Mexico, Puerto Rico, and other Latin American countries have brought significant changes to U.S. culture and society. Beginning in the 1960s, Hispanics have played an increasingly prominent role in politics and other areas of the country's life. For example, César Chávez, José Limón, Raul Julia, and Roberto Clemente have made major contributions to civil rights, the arts, and sports. Issues related to language, education, and political representation are becoming increasingly central to the country's politics, society, and culture as Hispanics emerge as the largest minority in America and, in some cities and counties, the majority.

The cultural diversity of the United States is strikingly evident when looking at religion. At the beginning of the twentieth century, few people in the United States practiced a religion other than one based on Christianity. Nearly a century later, a majority of Americans still identify themselves as Christian; however, the United States is also home to some 5 million Buddhists, 3.3 million Jews, 3 million Muslims, and 1.2 million Hindus.

Moreover, each of these groups encompasses a variety of religious practices. Americans identifying themselves as Christian, for example, include 67 million Roman Catholics, 16 million of the Southern Baptist Convention, 8 million Methodists, and 5.5 million Presbyterians. Over 2.5 million Americans are members of one of the Eastern Orthodox Christian churches. Four major branches of Judaism, two branches of Islam, and differing forms of Hinduism and Buddhism have all found significant numbers of adherents in the United States.