AMERICAN CIVIC HOLIDAY RESOURCES

ASIAN AMERICAN AND PACIFIC ISLANDER HERITAGE MONTH
MAY 2024

Developed by Audi Hecht, Director of Education and Innovation

As we enter May, we proudly salute the rich contributions and vibrant history of Asian Americans, marking the occasion of Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month. A recent Pew Study conducted in May 2023 revealed that Asian Americans comprise over 23 million individuals in the United States. Interestingly, approximately half of these individuals identify by their country of origin, often paired with 'American,' such as Chinese-American, Indian-American, or Japanese-American. In contrast, around 50 percent identify as either Asian-American or American.

These statistics not only underscore the significant presence of Asian Americans in our nation but also reflect the diverse backgrounds and identities within this community. Asian Americans possess deep historical roots in our country and have contributed immensely to its cultural richness and diversity.

To commemorate this month, we've curated a collection of primary sources highlighting pivotal moments in Asian-American history. Accompanying these resources are guiding questions designed to prompt students to engage thoughtfully with the material, encouraging meaningful learning and ways to consider learning from moments that may not capture our nation’s finest moments.

Source 1: Wong Hau-hon, "A Chinese Immigrant Recalls the Dangers of Railroad Work," SHEC: Resources for Teachers.

In the 19th century, tens of thousands of Chinese immigrants moved to the United States during the Gold Rush and then again in the 1860s as laborers recruited to work on the transcontinental railroad. They were central to building our nation's monumental railroad, connecting the country in commerce and expansion. They endured horrendous working conditions, as reflected in the primary source below.

Our foreman then ordered us to pack up and return to Yale. So, although already suffering pangs of hunger, we had to start on our way immediately. When we were passing China Bar on the way, many of the Chinese died from an epidemic. As there were no coffins to bury the dead, the bodies were stuffed into rock crevices or beneath the trees to await their arrival. Those whose burials could not wait were buried on the spot in boxes made of crude thin planks hastily fastened together. There were even some who were buried in the ground wrapped only in blankets or grass mats. New graves dotted the landscape and the sight sent chills up and down my spine. . . .

The work at Hope was very dangerous. On one occasion, there was a huge rock on the slope of the mountain that stood in the railroad's path and must be removed by blasting before the tracks could go through. However, the sides of the rock were nearly perpendicular all around and there was no easy way to reach the top. The workers had to scramble to the top by use of timber scaffolding and by ropes fastened to the rock. After they reached the top they drilled holes in the rock to hold the dynamite charges. I was one of the workers who were assigned the task of drilling. Each morning I climbed the rock, and after I had finished the day's work I was lowered again by rope. I remembered that in blasting this rock, more than three hundred barrels of explosives were used. . . .

Another incident occurred about ten to fifteen miles west of Yale. Dynamite was used to blast a rock cave. Twenty charges were placed and ignited, but only eighteen blasts went off. However, the white foreman, thinking that all of the dynamite had gone off, ordered the Chinese workers to enter the cave to resume work. Just at that moment, the remaining two charges suddenly exploded. Chinese bodies flew from the cave as if shot from a cannon. Blood and flesh were mixed in a horrible mess. On this occasion, about ten or twenty workers were killed.

Questions for Discussion:

1. What conditions did Chinese laborers face in 19th-century America?
2. Which laws introduced during the Progressive Era would have prevented some of these circumstances and outcomes?
3. Is there something about today's work climate that you would like to propose a new approach or law to improve working conditions in current times?

Source 2: United States v. Wong Kim Ark, 169 U.S. 649 (1898). Excerpt.

The Landmark Wong Kim Ark case established an important precedent involving birthright citizenship.

Mr. Justice Gray, after stating the case, delivered the opinion of the court.

The facts of this case, as agreed by the parties, are as follows:

Wong Kim Ark was born in 1873 in the city of San Francisco, in the State of California and United States of America, and was and is a laborer. His father and mother were persons of Chinese descent, and subjects of the Emperor of China; they were at the time of his birth domiciled residents of the United States, having previously established and still enjoying a permanent domicil and residence therein at San Francisco; they continued to reside and remain in the United States until 1890, when they departed for China; and during all the time of their residence in the United States they were engaged in business, and were never employed in any diplomatic or official capacity under the Emperor of China. Wong Kim Ark, ever since his birth, has had but one residence, to wit, in California, within the United States, and has there resided, claiming to be a citizen of the United States, and has never lost or changed that residence, or gained or acquired another residence; and neither he, nor his parents acting for him, ever renounced his allegiance to the United States, or did or committed any act or thing to exclude him. In 1890 (when he must have been about seventeen years of age) he departed for China on a temporary visit and with the intention of returning to the United States, and did return thereto by sea in the same year, and was permitted by the collector of customs to enter the United States, upon the sole ground that he was a native-born citizen of the United States. After such return, he remained in the

United States, claiming to be a citizen thereof, until 1894, when he (being about twenty-one years of age, but whether a little above or a little under that age does not appear) again departed for China on a temporary visit and with the intention of returning to the United States; and he did return thereto by sea in August, 1895, and applied to the collector of customs for permission to land; and was denied such permission, upon the sole ground that he was not a citizen of the United States. It is conceded that, if he is a citizen of the United States, the acts of Congress, known as the Chinese Exclusion Acts, prohibiting persons of the Chinese race, and especially Chinese laborers, from coming into the United States, do not and cannot apply to him. The question presented by the record is whether a child born in the United States, of parents of Chinese descent, who, at the time of his birth, are subjects of the Emperor of China, but have a permanent domicil and residence in the United States, and are there carrying on business, and are not employed in any diplomatic or official capacity under the Emperor of China, becomes at the time of his birth a citizen of the United States, by virtue of the first clause of the Fourteenth Amendment of the Constitution, "All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside."

In construing any act of legislation, whether a statute enacted by the legislature, or a constitution established by the people as the supreme law of the land, regard is to be had, not only to all parts of the act itself, and of any former act of the same law-making power, of which the act in question is an amendment; but also to the condition, and to the history, of the law as previously existing, and in the light of which the new act must be read and interpreted. The Constitution of the United States, as originally adopted, uses the words "citizen of the United States," and "natural born citizen of the United States." By the original Constitution, every representative in Congress is required to have been "seven years a citizen of the United States," and every Senator to have been " nine years a citizen of the United States, " and "no person except a natural-born citizen, or a citizen of the United States at the time of the adoption of this Constitution, shall be eligible to the office of President." The Fourteenth Article of the Amendment, besides declaring that "all persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside," also declares that "no State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws." And the Fifteenth Article of Amendment declares that "the right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States, or by any State, on account of race, color or previous condition of servitude."

Questions for Discussion:

1. What key question about citizenship did the Wong Kim Ark case raise?
2. How was the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 connected to this case?
3. How was the concept of birthright citizenship invoked in this decision?
4. Which additional references to citizenship are referenced from the Constitution and in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments?
5. What are your thoughts on birthright citizenship?

Source 3: Executive Order 9066, February 19, 1942; General Records of the United States Government; Record Group 11; National Archives.

Executive Order No. 9066

Whereas the successful prosecution of the war requires every possible protection against espionage and against sabotage to national-defense material, national-defense premises, and national-defense utilities as defined in Section 4, Act of April 20, 1918, 40 Stat. 533, as amended by the Act of November 30, 1940, 54 Stat. 1220, and the Act of August 21, 1941, 55 Stat. 655 (U.S.C., Title 50, Sec. 104);

Now, therefore, by virtue of the authority vested in me as President of the United States, and Commander in Chief of the Army and Navy, I hereby authorize and direct the Secretary of War, and the Military Commanders whom he may from time to time designate, whenever he or any designated Commander deems such action necessary or desirable, to prescribe military areas in such places and of such extent as he or the appropriate Military Commander may determine, from which any or all persons may be excluded, and with respect to which, the right of any person to enter, remain in, or leave shall be subject to whatever restrictions the Secretary of War or the appropriate Military Commander may impose in his discretion. The Secretary of War is hereby authorized to provide for residents of any such area who are excluded therefrom, such transportation, food, shelter, and other accommodations as may be necessary, in the judgment of the Secretary of War or the said Military Commander, and until other arrangements are made, to accomplish the purpose of this order. The designation of military areas in any region or locality shall supersede designations of prohibited and restricted areas by the Attorney General under the

Proclamations of December 7 and 8, 1941, and shall supersede the responsibility and authority of the Attorney General under the said Proclamations in respect of such prohibited and restricted areas.

I hereby further authorize and direct the Secretary of War and the said Military Commanders to take such other steps as he or the appropriate Military Commander may deem advisable to enforce compliance with the restrictions applicable to each Military area hereinabove authorized to be designated, including the use of Federal troops and other Federal Agencies, with authority to accept assistance of state and local agencies.

I hereby further authorize and direct all Executive Departments, independent establishments and other Federal Agencies, to assist the Secretary of War or the said Military Commanders in carrying out this Executive Order, including the furnishing of medical aid, hospitalization, food, clothing, transportation, use of land, shelter, and other supplies, equipment, utilities, facilities, and services.

This order shall not be construed as modifying or limiting in any way the authority heretofore granted under Executive Order No. 8972, dated December 12, 1941, nor shall it be construed as limiting or modifying the duty and responsibility of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, with respect to the investigation of alleged acts of sabotage or the duty and responsibility of the Attorney General and the Department of Justice under the Proclamations of December 7 and 8, 1941, prescribing regulations for the conduct and control of alien enemies, except as such duty and responsibility is superseded by the designation of military areas hereunder.

Franklin D. Roosevelt
The White House,
February 19, 1942.

Questions for Discussion:

1. What was FDR's reasoning for Executive Order 9066?
2. What historical event prompted this action?
3. How can we as a nation learn from this dark moment in American history?

Source 4: Remarks on Signing the Bill Providing Restitution for the Wartime Internment of Japanese-American Civilians" for August 10, 1988.

President Ronald Reagan shared the following remarks upon signing this bill, providing restitution for Japanese- Americans who were interned as a result of Executive Order 9066.

The Members of Congress and distinguished guests, my fellow Americans, we gather here today to right a grave wrong. More than 40 years ago, shortly after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, 120,000 persons of Japanese ancestry living in the United States were forcibly removed from their homes and placed in makeshift internment camps. This action was taken without trial, without jury. It was based solely on race, for these 120,000 were Americans of Japanese descent.

Yes, the Nation was then at war, struggling for its survival, and it's not for us today to pass judgment upon those who may have made mistakes while engaged in that great struggle. Yet we must recognize that the internment of Japanese-Americans was just that: a mistake. For throughout the war, Japanese-Americans in the tens of thousands remained utterly loyal to the United States. Indeed, scores of Japanese-Americans volunteered for our Armed Forces, many stepping forward in the internment camps themselves. The 442d Regimental Combat Team, made up entirely of Japanese-Americans, served with immense distinction to defend this nation, their nation. Yet back at home, the soldiers' families were being denied the very freedom for which so many of the soldiers themselves were laying down their lives.

Congressman Norman Mineta, with us today, was 10 years old when his family was interned. In the Congressman's words: ``My own family was sent first to Santa Anita Racetrack. We showered in the horse paddocks. Some families lived in converted stables, others in hastily thrown together barracks. We were then moved to Heart Mountain, Wyoming, where our entire family lived in one small room of a rude tar paper barrack.'' Like so many tens of thousands of others, the members of the Mineta family lived in those conditions not for a matter of weeks or months but for 3 long years.

The legislation that I am about to sign provides for a restitution payment to each of the 60,000 surviving Japanese-Americans of the 120,000 who were relocated or detained. Yet no payment can make up for those lost years. So, what is most important in this bill has less to do with property than with honor. For here we admit a wrong; here we reaffirm our commitment as a nation to equal justice under the law.

I'd like to note that the bill I'm about to sign also provides funds for members of the Aleut community who were evacuated from the Aleutian and Pribilof Islands after a Japanese attack in 1942. This action was taken for the Aleuts' own protection, but property was lost or damaged that has never been replaced.

And now in closing, I wonder whether you'd permit me one personal reminiscence, one prompted by an old newspaper report sent to me by Rose Ochi, a former internee. The clipping comes from the Pacific Citizen and is dated December 1945.

``Arriving by plane from Washington,'' the article begins, ``General Joseph W. Stilwell pinned the Distinguished Service Cross on Mary Masuda in a simple ceremony on the porch of her small frame shack near Talbert, Orange County. She was one of the first Americans of Japanese ancestry to return from relocation centers to California's farmlands.'' ``Vinegar Joe'' Stilwell was there that day to honor Kazuo Masuda, Mary's brother. You see, while Mary and her parents were in an internment camp, Kazuo served as staff sergeant to the 442d Regimental Combat Team. In one action, Kazuo ordered his men back and advanced through heavy fire, hauling a mortar. For 12 hours, he engaged in a singlehanded barrage of Nazi positions. Several weeks later at Cassino, Kazuo staged another lone advance. This time it cost him his life.

The newspaper clipping notes that her two surviving brothers were with Mary and her parents on the little porch that morning. These two brothers, like the heroic Kazuo, had served in the United States Army. After General Stilwell made the award, the motion picture actress Louise Allbritton, a Texas girl, told how a Texas battalion had been saved by the 442d. Other show business personalities paid tribute -- Robert Young, Will Rogers, Jr. And one young actor said: ``Blood that has soaked into the sands of a beach is all of one color. America stands unique in the world: the only country not founded on race but on a way, an ideal. Not in spite of but because of our polyglot background, we have had all the strength in the world. That is the American way.'' The name of that young actor -- I hope I pronounce this right -- was Ronald Reagan. And, yes, the ideal of liberty and justice for all -- that is still the American way.

Thank you, and God bless you. Let me now sign H.R. 442, so fittingly named in honor of the 442d.

Thank you all again, and God bless you all. I think this is a fine day.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Does President Reagan's remarks and the restitution offered, in your view, provide the necessary remedy for the actions against Japanese-Americans during WWII? Why or Why not?
2. What would you propose as a just remedy?
3. Do any of the firsthand accounts related here especially striking? How?