CIVIC SPIRIT

AMERICAN CIVIC HOLIDAY RESOURCES

May 2025

Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month and Jewish American Heritage Month

Developed by Audi Hecht, Director of Education and Innovation

May is both Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month and Jewish American Heritage Month, offering valuable opportunities to explore the rich histories, identities, and contributions of these communities to our nation. The American model is founded on a tapestry of diverse peoples and cultures, and it is through this diversity that we continually shape and enrich the American experience.

This month's civic resource focuses on both heritages and engages with core questions of citizenship, belonging, and civic identity. One of Civic Spirit's three foundational pillars is Civic Belonging, which emphasizes the vital need for all individuals to feel included, connected, and affirmed as part of the American story.

The sources provided explore these themes through the voices of U.S. Supreme Court Justices, a Jewish American poet, and a former First Lady. Each source serves as a springboard for classroom dialogue about what it means to belong, to be included, and to help shape a more just and inclusive society.

Source 1: United States v. Wong Kim Ark (1898) Excerpts.

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 the 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 (treated a specified country as a permanent home) 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 therefrom. 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."

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 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.

Discussion Questions:

1. What are the facts of the case based on Justice Gray's overview?
2. Why does the Chinese Exclusion Act not apply to Wong Kim Ark?
3. Where is the term "citizen" referenced in the Constitution in relation to Congress and the Presidency?
4. How do the 14th and 15th Amendments add meaning to the idea of citizenship?
5. What is Justice Gray's opinion? Do you agree with him and the 5 other justices in the majority opinion?
6. How do questions of citizenship shape today's political and social discourse?
7. What proposals might you offer to strengthen civic belonging and clarity around citizenship today?

Source 2: Emma Lazarus, "The New Colossus." 1883.

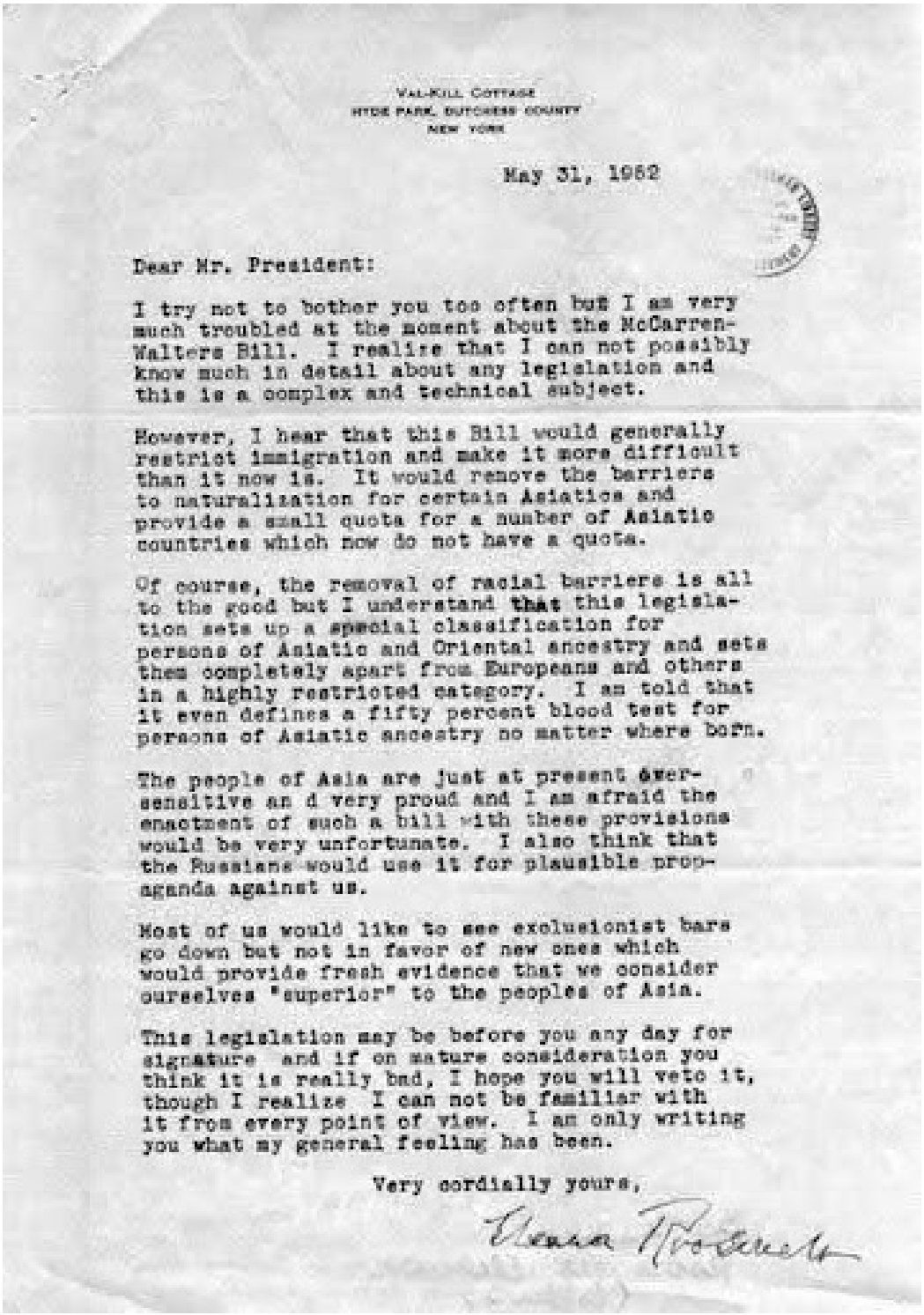
Emma Lazarus was a Jewish American celebrated poet and author of the poem gracing the Statue of Liberty.

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

Discussion Questions:

1. What message is Lazarus conveying? Identify one or two lines and explain how they reflect the poem's larger theme?
2. Do you think this poem is a good fit for the Statue of Liberty? Why or why not? How does the poem align or conflict with the ideals of America?
3. If you were given the opportunity to inscribe a message on the Statue of Liberty—or at our current ports of entry into the United States, what would you write? Reflect on what message best reflects the United States today?
4. How is the immigrant story central to the character of America? How has that story evolved over time? When has the immigrant experience remained consistent, and when has it changed?

Source 3: Eleanor Roosevelt. "Letter to President Harry S. Truman." May 31, 1952.



Val-Kill Cottage
Hyde Park, Dutchess County
New York

May 31, 1952

Dear Mr. President:

I try not to bother you too often but I am very much troubled at the moment about the McCarren-Walters Bill. I realize that I can not possibly know much in detail about any legislation and this is a complex and technical subject.

However, I hear that this Bill would generally restrict immigration and make it more difficult than it now is. It would remove the barriers to naturalization for certain Asiatics and provide a small quota for a number of Asiatic countries which now do not have a quota.

Of course, the removal of racial barriers is all to the good but I understand that this legislation sets up a special classification for persons of Asiatic and Oriental ancestry and sets them completely apart from Europeans and others in a highly restricted category. I am told that it even defines a fifty percent blood test for persons of Asiatic ancestry no matter where born.

The people of Asia are just at present over-sensitive an d very proud and I am afraid the enactment of such a bill with these provisions would be very unfortunate. I also think that the Russians would use it for plausible propaganda against us.

Most of us would like to see exclusionist bars go down but not in favor of new ones which would provide fresh evidence that we consider ourselves "superior" to the peoples of Asia.

This legislation may be before you any day for signature and if on mature consideration you think it is really bad, I hope you will veto it, though I realize I can not be familiar with it from every point of view. I am only writing you what my general feeling has been.

Very cordially yours,

Eleanor Roosevelt

Discussion Questions:

1. What is Eleanor Roosevelt conveying to President Truman? Why does she oppose the pending bill?
2. Which aspects of checks and balances are present in her argument?
3. How does this letter showcase the power of civic involvement?
4. What is one way you can use your voice to influence an issue you care about, as Roosevelt did?

Source 4: Our Lady of the Common Law. Benjamin Cardozo. 1928. Excerpt.

Benjamin Cardozo was a Jewish Supreme Court Justice, appointed by Herbert Hoover in 1932. His family emigrated from the Iberian Peninsula before the American Revolution and was Moses Seixas' great-great-nephew and a cousin to Emma Lazarus. Below is an excerpt from his speech at a Law School graduation ceremony.

So today, as preacher of the ancient platitudes, I summon you, the new recruits, to do your part in this unending struggle, the charge on the redoubts of fear and hatred and prejudice and passion, and the injustice that is born of them. You will need to know much more than the piffie-paffie of procedure. You will need to know much more than law, or rather till you know many other things not often ranked as law, you will find that law itself is in reality unknown. As in any other fight, you will hear the call for patience and skill and courage and firmness and endurance. I have faith you will not fail us. As I look into your faces, I figure to myself what it will mean, in days to come, to the profession of the law if you and those to follow you out of this school will think worthily and highly of this great vocation of your choice. What a spiritual power you will then be in the age-old fellowship into which you are to enter! What a leavening force you will become in this great conglomerate bar of ours, moved as it is, at times, by the ferment of high thoughts and fine ideals, and yet at times in danger of becoming sodden and inert by reason of that very mass which might make it so irresistible a power for good! How it lies with you to uplift what is

low, to erase what is false, to redeem what has been lost, till all the world shall see, and seeing shall understand, that union of the scholar's thought, the mystic's yearning, the knight's ardor, and the hero's passion, which is still, in truest moments of self-expression, the spirit of the bar! You will not fail us, I am sure. After all, the main thing is to dare. "As at the Olympic games," says Aristotle, "as at the Olympic games, it is not the finest and strongest men who are crowned, but they who enter the lists, for out of these the prizemen are selected; so, too, in life, of the honorable and the good, it is they who act who rightly win the prizes." The bugle call is heard, and its echoes wake the hills. Like Socrates and other bores, I have earned the draft of hemlock if you choose to pass the cup.

Discussion Questions:

1. What is Justice Cardozo's message to the graduating class about capturing the true essence of justice?
2. How can this message be adapted to any profession one may pursue, not just the legal field?
3. What is Cardozo conveying in this quote by Aristotle-" As at the Olympic games, it is not the finest and strongest men who are crowned, but they who enter the lists, for out of these the prizemen are selected; so, too, in life, of the honorable and the good, it is they who act who rightly win the prizes."?
4. How can we empower ourselves—and others- to help maintain this ideal?
5. In the spirit of Cardozo's message, how can ethical thinking be applied to civic matters today?

For Younger Students

Source 5: Woody Guthrie. This Land Is Your Land. New York. 1945.

This land is your land, this land is my land
From California to the New York island;
From the red wood forest to the Gulf Stream waters
This land was made for you and me.

As I was walking that ribbon of highway,
I saw above me that endless skyway:
I saw below me that golden valley:
This land was made for you and me.

I've roamed and rambled and I followed my footsteps
To the sparkling sands of her diamond deserts;
And all around me a voice was sounding:
This land was made for you and me.

When the sun came shining, and I was strolling,
And the wheat fields waving and the dust clouds rolling,
As the fog was lifting a voice was chanting:
This land was made for you and me.

As I went walking I saw a sign there
And on the sign it said "No Trespassing."
But on the other side it didn't say nothing,
That side was made for you and me.

In the squares of the city, in the shadow of the steeple,
By the relief office I seen my people;
As they stood there hungry, I stood there asking
Is this land made for you and me?

Nobody living can ever stop me,
As I go walking that freedom highway;
Nobody living can ever make me turn back
This land was made for you and me.

Activity:

1. Play the song for the students and have students follow along by reading the lyrics.
2. Ask students to circle words highlighting nature, landforms, or places.
3. Students identify phrases that speak to freedom, belonging, or fairness and discuss what these phrases might mean.
4. Art Connection: Students draw pictures representing what a “land made for you and me” means to them.
5. Students explain their drawings, focusing on how they interpret their idea of belonging in America.