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INTRODUCTION

Humans have been migrating throughout every place and time in our history, so in this series we give you the tools to explore immigration through the lens of the history and social studies curricula already being taught. With this resource, we examine the wave of Chinese immigration to the U.S. in the second half of the 19th century: its social, economic, and political context and effects. Each of the two lesson plans, “Chinese Immigration in the Late 19th Century: Discrimination and Resistance Through Legal Systems” and “Immigrant Workers on the Transcontinental Railroad,” is designed to be flexible and adaptable based on the needs of your class. They can be used separately, together or in conjunction with any of the other recommended lessons and resources listed at the end of each document.

The California Gold Rush in the late 1840s attracted migrants from all over the United States and almost every continent. Conditions in southeastern China as well as China’s proximity to California led about 24,000 young Chinese men to travel to California seeking to earn money for their families. Immediately, they faced discrimination on a personal and then legal basis, in California and federally. The lesson plan “Chinese Immigration in the Late 19th Century: Discrimination and Resistance through Legal Systems” asks students to research some of the laws and court cases that systematically denied rights to Chinese immigrants. This pattern culminated in the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which made Chinese migrants the first “illegal” immigrants and created a blueprint for identity-based immigration limits and quotas. Chinese immigrants also used the court system to challenge these laws, which resulted in foundational legal precedent for citizenship and equal rights.

The vast majority of gold-seekers did not make their fortune, and many found work in other areas of the growing economy. In the 1860s, many workers were needed to work on the construction of the nation’s first transcontinental railroad. After some reluctance, company leaders began hiring Chinese workers alongside American and other immigrant workers, and soon the majority of the workforce were Chinese immigrants. The lesson plan “Immigrant Workers on the Transcontinental Railroad” invites students to explore the perception and treatment of Chinese and Irish immigrant workers on the Transcontinental Railroad through primary and secondary sources.

Both lesson plans ask students to do the critical work of making connections between history and present day. Students will find that many acts of exclusion, resistance and inclusion taken in the 1800s still reverberate today, and they may be inspired to consider their place in this history as it continues.

Lesson One

Chinese Immigration in the Late 19th Century: Discrimination and Resistance through Legal Systems

EDUCATOR NOTES:

This lesson plan and resource guide is written to support teachers in exploring the legal discrimination faced by Chinese immigrants in the second half of the 19th century and some of the ways in which they resisted oppression. Students will need some background on the time period in order to understand the context into which immigrants were arriving. If a refresher is needed, please refer to our short background text, *The First Wave: Chinese Immigration to the United States in the 1800s*, or this [six-minute video of Columbia Professor Mae Ngai on C-SPAN](#).

Part 1 is a lesson plan that introduces students to two major court cases and three major laws, culminating with the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, that specifically targeted Chinese immigrants. Also included is a reading that summarizes the important Chinese contributions to the United States in the years since they first began arriving, and the text of a 2011 official Senate apology for the discrimination faced by Chinese immigrants.

In Part 2, we encourage educators to give students the chance to examine two landmark Supreme Court cases that began with Chinese immigrants filing lawsuits against discrimination. We've included recommended lesson plans and resources for each court case, or these would be excellent opportunities for student individual or group research.

Not included in this guide is the significant physical violence perpetrated against Chinese immigrants during this time. It may come up on its own, or it may be something you choose to address directly with older students. Major events to be aware of are [the Chinese Massacre of 1871](#), [the Rock Springs Massacre in 1885](#), [the 1885 Chinese Expulsion of Tacoma](#), [the attack on Squak Valley Chinese laborers in 1885](#), [the Seattle Riot of 1886](#) and [the Hells Canyon Massacre in 1887](#).

Please discuss with all students the importance of engaging respectfully and sensitively with this material. Be sure to avoid singling out Chinese American, Asian American or immigrant students during these discussions, and do not allow other students to do so. If you do have students in class whose identities might connect them personally to the content, consider meeting with these students outside of class time to check in and preview material with them.

Lesson Plan

Part 1: Anti-Chinese Legislation

OBJECTIVE

- Students will research one major law or court case targeting Chinese immigrants in the late 1800s and share findings with a group.
- Students will examine five major laws and court cases targeting Chinese immigrants in the late 1800s to draw conclusions about history and make connections to the present day.

GUIDING QUESTION

- How did white Americans respond to Chinese immigration in the second half of the 19th century?
- How have Chinese immigrants contributed to the United States despite discrimination?

COMMON CORE STANDARDS

Grade 6-8

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.1](#)

Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.2](#)

Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.9](#)

Analyze the relationship between a primary and secondary source on the same topic.

Grade 9-10

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.1](#)

Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, attending to such features as the date and origin of the information.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.2](#)

Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of how key events or ideas develop over the course of the text.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.9](#)

Compare and contrast treatments of the same topic in several primary and secondary sources.

Grade 11-12

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.1](#)

Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.2](#)

Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.9](#)

Integrate information from diverse sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources.

MATERIALS

- Copies of the background text, or access to this six-minute video of [Columbia Professor Mae Ngai on C-SPAN](#)
- Copies of primary source images to display (listed under Activities)
- Copies of graphic organizer: Anti-Chinese Legislation and Rulings
- Computers or other internet-connected devices for student research
- Copies of or access to the New American Economy article: [Transcontinental Railroad at 150: The Contributions of Chinese Immigrants and Chinese Americans](#)
- Copies of or access to text: [Senate Resolution 201](#)

ACTIVITIES

Opening:

Share with students the following images (on a display board, as a gallery walk, with copies at tables or as a digital image gallery, etc.).

- ▶ [Chinese immigrants at the San Francisco custom-house](#)
- ▶ [A street in Chinatown](#)
- ▶ [To the President of the United States, and to the Senate and House of Representatives in Congress assembled](#)
- ▶ [Which color is to be tabooed next?](#)

Ask students to think and write silently about each image: What do you notice? What questions do you have?

Discuss students' observations and reflections.

Ask: What topic do you think this lesson will be about?

Introduce the lesson topic to students giving additional background information as necessary.

Share with students the two guiding questions and ask them to make predictions or use what they already know to try and answer them. Let students know they will be checking their knowledge and learning more today.

Jigsaw:

Assign students to "home groups" of five to six. Distribute the Anti-Chinese Legislation and Rulings graphic organizer and explain that these are five major pieces of legislation (three laws and two court cases) that systematically discriminated against Chinese immigrants after they began arriving in significant numbers around 1850. These fit a pattern of many more specific

and local laws and incidents (especially in California, where many Chinese arrived) which were explicitly unwelcoming to Chinese immigrants.

- ▶ *People v. Hall* (1854)
- ▶ Act to Prohibit the “Coolie Trade” (1862)
- ▶ Page Act (1875)
- ▶ *In re Ah Yup* (1878)
- ▶ Chinese Exclusion Act (1882)

Let students know that they will be responsible for researching one of these laws or rulings and bringing their information back to their home group. Give students a few minutes to divide up assignments.

Once each student knows their responsibility, have them rearrange into “expert groups,” meeting with students from other groups to collaborate on researching their assigned law or case. Students will need internet-connected devices for research and will need to access primary texts as well as several other reputable secondary sources for context. Suggested sources, if needed, are at the end of this guide.

1. How did this law/ruling discriminate against Chinese immigrants?
2. What was the justification or stated reason for this law/ruling?
3. Relevant direct quote from the law/ruling:
4. When was this law/ruling repealed or replaced?

Give students time to complete their research. When all expert groups are finished, have students reassemble into home groups and share out what they learned, giving time for all students to fill out their graphic organizer and ask each other questions.

DISCUSSION

Discuss findings with students; this will depend on the age and background knowledge of the class. Suggested discussion starters:

- ▶ What patterns did you see among the five laws/rulings?
- ▶ What surprised you? What didn't surprise you?
- ▶ Do you see any connections to events you know of that came before or after this time period?
- ▶ How does this relate to modern times with respect to who makes the laws and who is governed by them?
- ▶ How is the law used, in history and present-day, to keep power structures in place? What does it take to overcome this?

Chinese American Contributions

Tell students that despite this significant discrimination from the very beginning, which continued to varying degrees throughout the 20th century, Chinese immigrants have made major contributions to the United States. Either in class or for homework, ask students to read this article from *New American Economy: The Transcontinental Railroad at 150*: [The Contributions of Chinese Immigrants and Chinese Americans](#). Students should use whatever tools and structures they are familiar with to support their reading, but we suggest a 3-2-1 written response:

- ▶ 3 interesting or important facts
- ▶ 2 things that surprised you
- ▶ 1 major takeaway from the article

To dive deeper, have students choose one person to research from The Immigrant Learning Center's blog post, [Nine Famous Asian and Pacific Islander Immigrants](#).

Extension: Congress Apologizes

In 2011 and 2012, Congress issued an official apology for the discrimination endured by Chinese immigrants in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Assign students to read [the text of the Senate resolution](#) and either respond in writing or discuss:

- ▶ Do you think this official apology was necessary? As a senator, would you have voted for or against the resolution?
- ▶ What do you think were the effects of this resolution?
- ▶ Do you think this apology was enough? If not, what more could be or needs to be done?

Lesson Plan

Part 2: Chinese Resistance and Landmark Court Cases

GUIDING QUESTION

What was the impact of Chinese resistance to oppression via the court system?

BACKGROUND

As laws and courts were used to restrict Chinese immigrants, some Chinese used these same systems to challenge oppression and in some notable cases set powerful legal precedent still relevant today. Two of these cases were *Yick Wo v. Hopkins* (1886) and *The United States v. Wong Kim Ark* (1898). Both of these cases would be rich material for a student research project or an excellent use of additional class time using some of our recommended resources below.

Note: Other court cases through which Chinese immigrants fought for their rights include *Lin Sing v. Washburn* (1862), *Ho Ah Kow v. Nunan* (1879) and *Wong Wing v. United States* (1896).

YICK WO V. HOPKINS (1886)

Summary



Many Chinese migrated to the U.S. during the Gold Rush and owning laundries was a common business among these immigrants. Yick Wo was one such laundromat. Most Chinese laundries were in wooden buildings and in 1880, San Francisco's board of supervisors passed legislation banning laundries from operating in wooden buildings without a permit. Following the law's passage, every single Chinese owned laundromat was denied permits while only one white owner was denied a permit. The owner of Yick Wo laundry was charged with violating the law after he continued to run his business without a permit.

The Supreme Court overturned his conviction and ruled it was unconstitutional to discriminate against a group of people in passage or enforcement of legislation. This decision opened the doors for immigrant integration in American society and established precedent for subsequent cases with similar issues affecting non-citizens. ([National Cable Satellite Corporation](#), 2021).

Resources:

- [Yick Wo v. Hopkins. 118 U.S. 356 \(1886\)](#)
- [Lesson Plan: Landmark Supreme Court Case: Yick Wo v. Hopkins \(1886\)](#)
This lesson plan from the National Cable Satellite Corporation (C-SPAN) includes a series of short videos exploring the background and impact of the case.
- [Lee Yick: Equal Justice Under Law](#)
This lesson plan from the Bill of Rights Institute uses a narrative to immerse students in the case and supports them to think about justice in their own lives.

THE UNITED STATES V. WONG KIM ARK (1898)

Summary:

“Citizenship in the United States is granted not solely by ancestral lineage, but by jus soli, or birthright citizenship, as well. In other words, if you are born in the United States, you have a legal right to citizenship regardless of your parents, and their citizenship status. That right was affirmed by the U.S. Supreme Court in the case of *The United States v. Wong Kim Ark* in 1898. Wong Kim Ark was born in the U.S. and had traveled to China several times. In 1894, when he was returning from one of those visits, he was denied entry to the U.S. on the grounds that he was not a citizen. Ruling in his favor, Justice Gray explained, “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.” ([Re-Imagining Migration](#), n.d.)

Resources:

- [United States v. Wong Kim Ark . 169 U.S. 649 \(1898\)](#)
- [Immigration and Birthright Citizenship: Wong Kim Ark and the 14th Amendment](#) and [Wong Kim Ark, the 14th Amendment and Birthright citizenship in the U.S.](#)

These resources from Re-Imagining Migration connect this court case to modern discussions of citizenship rights and include media and teaching ideas.

Name _____

Class _____

Date _____

Anti-Chinese Legislation and Rulings

	How did this law/ ruling discriminate against Chinese immigrants?	What was the justification or stated reason for this law/ ruling?	Relevant direct quote from the law/ruling:	When was this law/ ruling repealed or replaced?
<i>People v. Hall</i> (1854)				
Act to Prohibit the "Coolie Trade" (1862)				
Page Act (1875)				
<i>In re Ah Yup</i> (1878)				
Chinese Exclusion Act (1882)				

OTHER RESOURCES

Suggested sources for student research in Part 1:

- *People v. Hall* (1854)
 - ▶ [Summary](#) (Immigration History)
 - ▶ [The full opinion](#) (Caselaw Access Project)
- Act to Prohibit the “Coolie Trade” (1862)
 - ▶ [Summary](#) (Immigration History)
 - ▶ [Act to Prohibit the “Coolie Trade” text](#) (Library of Congress)
- Page Act (1875)
 - ▶ [Summary](#) (Immigration History)
 - ▶ [Page Act text](#) (Library of Congress)
- *In re Ah Yup* (1878)
 - ▶ [Case text](#) (Public.Resource.org)
 - ▶ [Excerpt from Pacific Coast Law Journal article, 1878](#) (Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center)
- Chinese Exclusion Act (1882)
 - ▶ [Chinese Exclusion Act primary documents](#) (Library of Congress)
 - ▶ [Summary](#) (Our Documents Initiative)

Chinese Exclusion & Community Resistance

This two-lesson unit from the Immigrant History Initiative navigates the difficult waters of Chinese Exclusion while centering the efforts of community activists to resist racism. Students will practice primary source analysis and learn defining court cases that struck back against white supremacy and xenophobia.

Asian Americans K-12 Education Curriculum

This curriculum of 36 lesson plans for grades 9-12 accompanies five episodes covering different time periods. As resources or extensions for this content, we recommend the following three:

- ▶ Episode 1, Lesson 3: Chinese Exclusion Act
- ▶ Episode 1, Lesson 5: Angel Island & The Chinese Exclusion Act
- ▶ Episode 1, Lesson 7: Racial Identity and American Citizenship in Court

Chinese Immigration, Exclusion and the Chinese-American Experience

This unit plan written for older high school students includes history content as well as two novels, *Bone* by Fae Myenne Ng and *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan. Students will consider how many of the same issues about the laws, economics and attitudes around immigration are still at play today.

Resources from the 1882 Foundation

This list of resources includes links to primary sources documenting anti-Chinese sentiment, including media images and descriptions of violence and other tactics, and a useful legal timeline.

Lectures in History: 19th Century Chinese Immigration

In this video (48 minutes), Professor Krystyn Moon teaches a class about anti-immigration laws in the 19th century, focusing on Chinese immigrants. She describes how an influx of Chinese immigrants on the West Coast during the 1800s led to both local and federal legislation attempting to limit or ban immigrants from China.

Chinese Immigrants to the US: Past and Present

This resource and discussion guide from Re-Imagining Migration asks viewers to consider factors related to Chinese immigration in the context of other immigrant groups and time periods.

Becoming American: The Chinese Experience

This PBS video with a discussion guide from Facing History and Ourselves describes the ways the first arrivals from China in the 1840s, their descendants and recent immigrants have “become American.”

Chinese Immigrants in the United States

This Migration Policy Institute article profiles the Chinese immigrant population in 2020, including distribution, demographics, education, employment and citizenship.

U.S. Views of China Turn Sharply Negative Amid Trade Tensions

This survey and report from Pew Research Center visualize American’s beliefs and opinions about China in 2019.

Densho Encyclopedia

This brief overview of the Chinese experience in the United States can be used in conjunction with or instead of the Background handout provided in this unit.

Lesson Two

Immigrant Workers on the Transcontinental Railroad

EDUCATOR NOTES:

This lesson plan invites students to learn more about the immigrant workers, particularly Chinese and Irish, who built the Transcontinental Railroad, a critical piece of American infrastructure in the 19th century. These activities would fit well into a study of westward expansion, the Gold Rush or the building of the American railroad system. If students are in need of background information, please distribute “The First Wave: Chinese Immigration to the United States in the 1800s.” We hope that students will have the opportunity in the course of their study to appreciate the vast economic and social impact of the railroad’s completion, perhaps made even more significant by the hard work and sacrifice from foreign-born laborers.

If students have not discussed immigration in class for a while, it always enhances their connection to the content to set aside time for considering and sharing students’ own family stories of migration. They will likely find common ground with the Chinese and Irish immigrants who traveled to a new continent in search of a better life. We also recommend the picture book *Coolies*, by Yin, which would make a wonderful classroom read-aloud (even for older students) before or after the activities in this resource.

This lesson plan includes a guided research section, in which students explore a variety of primary and secondary sources, followed by one or more related recent articles to support students in making connections to the present. For each topic, we have curated suggestions, and we encourage teachers to read through and make selections (or determine how many options to offer) based on the age and skill level of their students. Many of the primary source documents have racist depictions of Chinese and Irish immigrants that may shock and upset students. Furthermore, students are invited to make connections to racism and xenophobia that is occurring in the present day. To create a safe environment, give students the option to work with less provoking material and provide opportunities for them to process their reactions to the images. For more tips on teaching difficult topics, read, [Handling tough topics in the classroom](#).

Lesson Plan:

Immigrant Workers on the Transcontinental Railroad

OBJECTIVES

- Students will use primary and secondary sources to learn about the immigrant workers who built the Transcontinental Railroad.
- Students will draw connections between immigrants in essential roles in the past and present, including public perception, treatment, and resistance to discrimination.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

- How were the Chinese and Irish immigrants who built the Transcontinental Railroad perceived and treated?
- How much has America's reliance on and treatment of immigrant workers changed in the last 150 years?

COMMON CORE STANDARDS

Grade 6-8

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.1](#)

Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.2](#)

Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.9](#)

Analyze the relationship between a primary and secondary source on the same topic.

Grade 9-10

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.1](#)

Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, attending to such features as the date and origin of the information.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.2](#)

Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of how key events or ideas develop over the course of the text.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.9](#)

Compare and contrast treatments of the same topic in several primary and secondary sources.

Grade 11-12

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.1](#)

Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.2](#)

Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.9](#)

Integrate information from diverse sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources.

MATERIALS

- Copies of or access to article: Descendants of Chinese Laborers Reclaim Railroad's History and/or equipment for students to listen
- Copies of or access to the photo by Corky Lee from the above article
- Copies of or access to the "Champagne Photo"
- Copies (physical or electronic) of note-catcher: The Immigrants Who Built the Transcontinental Railroad
- Copies of or access to a varied selection of primary and secondary sources about the Chinese and Irish workers on the Transcontinental Railroad (suggested resources under Guided Research)
- Copies of or access to recent articles relating to immigrants working in essential roles (suggested resources under Immigrants in Essential Sectors)

ACTIVITIES

Opening:

As a class or independently, have students read this article or listen to the radio segment: Descendants of Chinese Laborers Reclaim Railroad's History. Ensure that students can closely examine both the original "Champagne Photo" and Corky Lee's 2002 recreation, on a device or in print. More information on the original "Champagne Photo" can be found from the National Park Service, and a larger version can be found from the National Archives.

Discuss students' reactions and questions. Consider asking:

- ▶ What surprised you? What did not surprise you?
- ▶ How does this fit into what you already know about the Transcontinental Railroad?
- ▶ How do you think this photo and other "iconic" photos affect how history is remembered?
- ▶ Where else in history have a group of people been left out of mainstream memory and storytelling?

Guided Research:

Tell students that today they will be doing some research to learn more about the immigrant workers who built the Transcontinental Railroad.

Ask students: Based on the article/radio segment, the photographs, and what you already know, what questions do you have about the workers who built the Transcontinental Railroad?

Give them a minute to think. On the board or in a shared space, create a list of student questions. Let students know that for their research, there are several questions you'd like them to find the answers to, but that they should also choose one or more additional questions from this list to focus on.

Distribute note-catcher: The Immigrants Who Built the Transcontinental Railroad, and give students time to read through the questions and add their own question(s) in the last section.

For student research, give students (or groups) copies of or electronic access to the following resources. You may also choose to add or narrow down sources, or allow students to conduct their own internet research.

Images from the Library of Congress:

- ▶ [The Great Fear of the Period](#)
- ▶ [The Chinese Question](#)
- ▶ [Work on the Last Mile of the Pacific Railroad](#)
- ▶ [The Mortar of Assimilation](#)
- ▶ [The First Blow at the Chinese Question](#)
- ▶ [In the Clutches of the Chinese Tiger](#)

Articles:

- ▶ [Workers of the Central and Union Pacific Railroad \(PBS\)](#)
- ▶ [The Chinese Workers' Strike \(PBS\)](#)
- ▶ [The Builders of the Transcontinental Railroad \(Social Studies for Kids\)](#)
- ▶ [When American Despised the Irish \(History\)](#)
- ▶ [Building the Transcontinental Railroad: How 20,000 Chinese Immigrants Made It Happen \(History\)](#)
- ▶ [A Railroad Record That Defies Defeat \(Southern Pacific Bulletin, 1928\)](#)
- ▶ ['Forgotten by society' – how Chinese migrants built the transcontinental railroad \(The Guardian\)](#)
- ▶ [Chinese Laborers and the Construction of the Central Pacific \(Central Pacific Railroad Photographic History Museum\)](#) (Note: This is a more challenging and informative article for older students, including many primary sources. It can also be printed from pages 44-60 of [this PDF](#).)

After students have had time to work, discuss answers to questions. Encourage students to clarify for each other, dig deeper into sources and raise additional questions.

Guide students, as appropriate for their age, to make connections to present-day. Go back through each question and ask if anything they've learned reminds them of things they might have heard about immigrants today. Consider asking:

- ▶ Are there some jobs or professions that are made up of mostly immigrants? Why?
- ▶ Are immigrants, or some immigrant groups, sometimes portrayed in similar ways to how the Chinese and Irish were in the 1800s?
- ▶ What do you know about working conditions for immigrants in some professions?
- ▶ What do you know about how immigrants have stood up against unfair treatment or conditions?
- ▶ What makes immigrants particularly vulnerable to unfair treatment?

Note: This conversation may turn to undocumented immigrants. Be clear with students that in the mid-1800s immigration was largely unrestricted. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was the first major piece of legislation that created the concept of "illegal" immigration.

Immigrants in Essential Sectors:

In class or for homework, ask students to read about immigrants currently working in jobs that are critical to the country's functioning, as the Transcontinental Railroad was, including infrastructure, agriculture, health care, etc.

We recommend this report: [US Foreign-Born Essential Workers by Status and State, and the Global Pandemic](#) (Center for Migration Studies). Excerpts could be used for younger readers.

Alternate or supplemental readings might include [Immigrant Workers are Important to Filling Growing Occupations](#) (Center for American Progress) and [Immigrant Essential Workers are Crucial to America's COVID-19 Recovery](#) (fwd.us).

[Quick Immigration Statistics: United States](#) (The Immigrant Learning Center) will give students an overview of key statistics on immigration in the United States.

In writing or in discussion, ask students to consider:

- ▶ What important roles are immigrants, documented and undocumented, playing in American economy and society?
- ▶ Based on the article(s), do you think immigrants working in these jobs are being treated fairly? What would you change if you could?
- ▶ What connections do you see to the workers on the Transcontinental Railroad?

If possible, we also recommend sharing with students examples of immigrants standing up against unfair treatment in connection to the Chinese workers' strike in 1867. This article from The Atlantic describes and contextualizes a 2017 "Day Without Immigrants": [A Strike to Show What America Is Like Without Immigrant Workers](#).

Take Action:

Invite students to brainstorm ways they could advocate for essential immigrant workers in today's society. See the Anti-Defamation League's [10 Ways Youth Can Engage in Activism](#) for ideas to get started.

OTHER RESOURCES

The Contributions of the Chinese Transcontinental Railroad Workers

Lesson plan and video from Asian Americans Advancing Justice (Grades 7-12).

The Impact of the Transcontinental Railroad

Lesson plan, including media and primary sources, from the National Endowment for the Humanities (Grades 6-8).

Construction of the Union Pacific Railroad

A collection of 203 photographs by Andrew J. Russell.

Name _____

Class _____

Date _____

The Immigrants Who Built the Transcontinental Railroad

1. Why was the Transcontinental Railroad workforce made up of mostly immigrants? Why were owners reluctant to hire Chinese workers initially?
2. What was the public perception of Chinese immigrants? What was the public perception of Irish immigrants?
3. How were Irish and Chinese railroad workers treated?
4. How did Chinese workers resist unfair treatment?
5. Additional question(s) for research:

The First Wave: Chinese Immigration to the United States in the 1800s

The first of three large waves of Chinese immigration to the United States began during the California gold rush in 1848 and ended abruptly in 1882 with the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act. This first wave was marked by an entrepreneurial spirit, as Chinese immigrants adapted and found ways to earn livings despite challenging circumstances. Yet this period was also defined by virulent anti-Chinese racism, on both personal and societal levels.

In the 1850s, the prospect of striking it rich drew many to the western United States, and Chinese immigrants were no different. Pushed from China by political and social instability, many Chinese men were drawn to the “Golden Mountain,” a nickname for the United States. By the mid 1850s, Chinese immigrants made up 20 percent of the mining population in the United States, making them the largest non-White group. Yet many quickly became disillusioned. Mining was difficult and uncertain, and locals were hostile. Lacking money to bring over their families or return to China, many Chinese immigrants were stranded. Faced with language barriers and racial discrimination, they opened business in mining towns in professions that were typically seen by locals as “women’s work,” such as laundry and cooking.

During this time, U.S. railroad companies were vying to expand across the country as quickly and cheaply as possible. It was dangerous work and the pay was low, but for many Chinese immigrants — young men with little work experience or English ability — it gave them a means to enter the workforce. In 1863, the Central Pacific Railroad Company broke ground on the first transcontinental railroad, a pivotal piece of infrastructure that shortened travel time across the country from several months to about a week. Facing a labor shortage, the company increased their recruitment of Chinese immigrants, who worked for lower pay and were less inclined to unionize than their White counterparts. By the mid 1860s, the company was recruiting laborers directly from China. By 1867, almost 90 percent of the Central Pacific workforce was Chinese. It’s estimated that as many as 20,000 Chinese immigrants worked on the transcontinental railroad.

The Chinese experience in the United States in the 1800s was also marked by hostility and violence. Discriminatory laws and regulations were passed targeting Chinese Americans and immigrants. Chinese Americans and White business owners who employed Chinese laborers successfully challenged many of these laws and ordinances in court. However, an economic depression in the United States in the 1870s further fueled anti-Chinese sentiment and the misperception that the Chinese were “stealing” jobs from White citizens.

On December 17, 1882, the United States passed the first Chinese Exclusion Act, which halted all immigration of Chinese laborers for 10 years and banned Chinese immigrants already living in the United States from becoming citizens. The Act was renewed in 1892 and made permanent in 1902. The Act is significant as it's the first time U.S. immigration policy banned immigration from a specific country. While the number of immigrants from China did increase significantly during the 1800s, it is important to note that immigrants from other countries were not subject to the same discrimination. When the Act was passed in 1882, there were 110,000 Chinese in the United States, mainly concentrated in California where they made up 10 percent of the population but 20 percent of the working population. By contrast, nearly 1.5 million Germans immigrated to the United States in the 1880s, and about 250,000 arrived in 1882 alone. While there still was limited immigration from China after the Chinese Exclusion Act, it was greatly curtailed. The Act remained in effect until 1943.

After the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act, there was a period in the late 1800s called the “Driving Out” in which anti-Chinese Americans drove Chinese immigrants out of their communities and subjected them to large-scale violence. According to the Library of Congress, “Racial hatred, an uncertain economy, and weak government in the new territories all contributed to this climate of terror and bloodshed. The perpetrators of these crimes, which included Americans from many segments of society, largely went unpublished” ([Library of Congress, Immigration and Relocation in U.S. History: Chinese: Intolerance](#)).

With railroads completed, the gold rush over, and facing social and legal discrimination, many Chinese immigrants moved together to urban areas. Now called “Chinatowns,” these communities provided safety, community, work opportunities and a vibrant culture.