

INQUIRY

Angel Island Immigration Station: Exploring Borders and Belonging in US History

Overview

About This Inquiry

In this [C-3 style inquiry](#), students engage with the history of the Angel Island Immigration Station to think critically about the concept of borders—not simply geographic borders but the social, economic, and political boundaries erected throughout US history to separate “in” groups from “out” groups.

As they explore historical and contemporary sources, students will draw connections between the exclusionary US immigration policies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the borders that exist within American society today.

Compelling Question	How does the history of the Angel Island Immigration Station help us understand how borders are erected, enforced, and challenged?
Supporting Questions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How did the Angel Island Immigration Station both reflect and enforce borders within American society? 2. How did border enforcement at the Angel Island Immigration Station impact immigrants and their descendants? 3. How does the history of immigration through Angel Island help us understand how we create and challenge borders today?

Learning Objectives

- Explain the historical implications and legacy of Angel Island Immigration Station and the era of Asian exclusion.
- Discuss how immigrants and their descendants were impacted by the exclusionary view of American identity embedded in the nation's immigration laws, and explore the ways in which they challenged these views
- Draw connections between the history of immigration through Angel Island and the borders that exist within American society today.
- Examine how individuals and communities can challenge these present-day borders.

Rationale & Additional Background

Historical Context

This inquiry invites students to think critically about the concept of borders—not simply geographic borders but the social, economic, and political boundaries erected throughout US history to separate “in” groups from “out” groups. These boundaries, often rooted in hierarchies based on identity categories like race, gender, class, and religion, have had profound consequences. They have ultimately defined who is included and who is excluded from the nation and have functioned as a means of consolidating power, privilege, and material resources for certain groups while denying those things to others.

The history of the Angel Island Immigration Station, which operated from 1910 to 1940, provides an important case study for exploring how borders of belonging have shaped the terms of membership in American society throughout history. Most Americans think of the Ellis Island Immigration Station in New York as a haven for “huddled masses yearning to breathe free,” and the Angel Island Immigration Station is often characterized as its West Coast counterpart. While both stations served to restrict immigration, immigrants passing through Angel Island faced much more exclusionary policies and harsher treatment. The station was initially built to enforce the laws of Chinese exclusion, which banned all Chinese laborers from immigrating to the country and declared Chinese immigrants ineligible for US citizenship. Nearly overnight, the nation went from having an “open door” policy toward immigrants to excluding an entire group of people on the basis of race and national origin.

Historian Erika Lee compares Angel Island to Ellis Island:

While popularly called the “Ellis Island of the West,” the immigration station on Angel Island was in fact very different from its counterpart in New York. Ellis Island, mainly a processing center for European immigrants, was governed by American immigration laws that restricted but did not exclude European immigrants. . . . Immigrants on Ellis Island usually only spent a few hours at the island depot, whereas Asians, and particularly Chinese, on Angel Island counted their detention in weeks, months, and even years. Ellis Island was a processing station of entry, but Angel Island’s purpose was to keep immigrants out.¹

In the face of tremendous barriers built by exclusion, Chinese immigrants still found ways to make a life in the United States. In this inquiry, students reflect on the choices and dilemmas of immigrants who entered the country through Angel Island using fraudulent papers, under what is known as the “paper son” system. Students will explore how the actions of “paper sons and daughters” involved making a claim to their rightful belonging in American society and resisting unjust laws intended to keep them out. These choices, which ensured that their family members and future generations could settle in the nation, represented a direct challenge to the exclusionary view of American identity embedded in the nation’s immigration laws. As one Chinese American merchant who helped paper sons enter the country explained, “God never said that the Chinaman shouldn’t come to this country.”²

¹ Erika Lee, *At America's Gates: Chinese Immigration during the Exclusion Era, 1882–1943* (University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 75.

² Quoted in Lee, *At America's Gates*, 193.

Despite this resistance, the policy of Chinese exclusion led to an increasingly narrow definition of who could become American. Chinese exclusion set a precedent of racially targeted exclusions that sharply limited the immigration of other groups, including all Asians, Africans, and Europeans from southern and eastern Europe. Many of these groups immigrated to the United States through Angel Island and experienced treatment similar to Chinese immigrants during their detention. According to historian Roger Daniels, the Exclusion Act was “the pivot on which all American immigration policy turned, the hinge on which Emma Lazarus’s ‘Golden Door’ began to swing toward a closed position.”³ That door would stay closed to Chinese immigrants, and eventually all Asian and southern and eastern European immigrants, until the post-World War II era and passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965.

Broadening the Understanding of Borders

This inquiry asks students to draw connections between the history of immigration through Angel Island and the borders within American society that exist today, and to examine how communities can harness the power of history to challenge these borders. Students will connect recent racism against Asian and Pacific Islander (API) communities in the context of the coronavirus epidemic to longstanding racial prejudices against Asians living in the United States. They will also explore a grassroots effort to rename a street in downtown Berkeley after Kala Bagai, a South Asian immigrant who was detained with her family at the Angel Island Immigration Station and became a community and immigrant-rights activist.

Studying US history through the lens of borders and belonging provides an important opportunity to connect to students’ lived experiences. Adolescence is a time when two tasks take on special importance: determining our own individual identity and figuring out where and how we belong. Adolescents are in the process of becoming more attuned to their own social identities and to the positive and negative meanings that may be attached to them. Moreover, winning respect from their peers and acceptance in social groups is of paramount importance to them. They are thus developmentally primed to explore the divisions that separate “us” on one side of a boundary from “them” on the other side in their US history courses.

Boundaries are fixtures of students’ lives. Whether crossing a geopolitical border, navigating between the digital and “real” world, or traveling from their neighborhood to school, students are constantly encountering borders and boundaries. Young people can greatly benefit from thinking deeply and critically about the concept of *borders*: how we negotiate them and, in moments when they are meant to limit us, how we can challenge and rise above them.

Preparing to Teach

Notes to Teacher:

1. Structure of the Inquiry

In addressing the compelling question (“How does the history of the Angel Island Immigration

³ Roger Daniels, *Guarding the Golden Door: American Immigration Policy and Immigrants since 1882* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2004), 19. The poem [“The New Colossus”](#) was engraved on the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty in 1903.

Station help us understand how borders are erected, enforced, and challenged?”), students work through a series of supporting questions, formative performance tasks, and featured sources in order to construct an argument supported by a variety of evidence.

See the [Inquiry Blueprint](#) for an at-a-glance view of all inquiry materials.

2. Length of the Inquiry

This inquiry is expected to take five to seven 50-minute class periods. The inquiry time frame could expand if teachers think their students need additional instructional experiences or historical background information.

Teachers are encouraged to adapt the inquiry in order to meet the needs and interests of their particular students. Resources can also be modified as necessary to meet individualized education programs (IEPs) or Section 504 Plans for students with disabilities.

3. Prerequisite Knowledge

This inquiry is designed to help students explore, through a focused examination of the Angel Island Immigration Station, the ways that US policies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century were designed to exclude certain immigrant groups. The inquiry is intended to supplement an American history course and is not an exhaustive study of US immigration history, the Chinese or Asian exclusion era, or Chinese American history.

In order to engage fully with the content and activities of the inquiry, it is expected that students will already have some foundational knowledge about the various waves of immigration to the United States, including Chinese immigration to the West Coast, during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Students should also have some knowledge about the movement that arose to restrict US immigration during that period, especially the role that ideologies like Social Darwinism and eugenics played in fueling that movement.

Students must also be familiar with the concept of race as a social construct that nonetheless carries very real and powerful social consequences. We recommend teaching the lesson [The Concept of Race](#) before teaching this inquiry if students have not yet been introduced to the socially constructed meaning of race and how that concept has been used to justify exclusion, inequality, and violence throughout history. In addition, since students will be confronting ethnic and racial stereotypes in this inquiry, we strongly recommend teaching the lesson [Stereotypes and “Single Stories”](#) if you have not yet introduced students to those concepts.

Finally, this inquiry explores the stories of immigrants who came to the country without proper documentation. If you haven’t broached this topic before, you might want to prepare students for this exploration by setting some class norms, one of which should be that students do not refer to immigrants without papers as “illegal immigrants.” The video, [“No Human Being Was Born Illegal,”](#) provides a powerful entry point for exploring these issues through the eyes of students at a Los Angeles school.

Inquiry Blueprint

Compelling Question: How does the history of the Angel Island Immigration Station help us understand how borders are erected, enforced, and challenged?

Staging the Compelling Question	Students will define the term “borders” and think about borders that exist in their own lives. They will also review the history and significance of the Chinese Exclusion Act and the era of Chinese exclusion.
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Supporting Question 1

How did the Angel Island Immigration Station both reflect and enforce borders within American society?

Formative Task

Students will hold a class discussion about how the Angel Island Immigration Station both reflects and enforces America's borders.

Featured Sources

Handout: Five Facts about Angel Island and Ellis Island, 1910–1940
Video: The Immigrants of Angel Island (0:00–8:04)
Reading: Quotes from Historians Erika Lee and Judy Yung
Reading: Immigrants' Experience at Angel Island, 1910–1940
Reading: Immigrants' Experience at Ellis Island, 1892–1921

Supporting Question 2

How did border enforcement at the Angel Island Immigration Station impact immigrants and their descendants?

Formative Task

Students will submit an exit card explaining three ways that border enforcement at the Angel Island Immigration Station impacted immigrants and their descendants, using evidence from at least two featured sources.

Featured Sources

Video: Paper Sons and Daughters (0:00–5:41)
Reading: Paper Sons and Daughters and the Complexity of Choices during the Exclusion Era
Reading: Angel Island Poetry

Supporting Question 3

How does the history of immigration through Angel Island help us understand how we create and challenge borders today?

Formative Task

Students will write a paragraph reflection, supported with evidence from two featured sources, discussing how the history of immigration through Angel Island helps us understand how we create and challenge borders today.

Featured Sources

Reading: “Not American Yet”
Reading: “Berkeley Renames Downtown Street ‘Kala Bagai Way’ After South Asian Immigrant Activist”

Summative Performance Task	<p>ARGUMENT “How does the history of the Angel Island Immigration Station help us understand how borders are erected, enforced, and challenged?” In a format of your choice (e.g., digital presentation, poster, essay), use the example of the Angel Island Immigration Station and America’s earliest immigration laws and policies to craft an argument in response to the compelling question. Discuss the effects of Angel Island, on immigrants, their descendants, and all Americans, and the lessons we might apply from this history as we wrestle with the borders that exist in American society today.</p>
Taking Informed Action	<p>UNDERSTAND View animated videos from the <i>New York Times’s</i> Hyphen-Nation project to explore contemporary issues related to belonging and American identity and what it means to be excluded in American society today.</p> <p>ASSESS Identify one issue related to exclusion in the United States today that affects your school or local community.</p> <p>ACT Using a format of your choice, educate your school or local community about your chosen issue. This might include inviting experts and/or community members affected by the issue to a public forum, creating a website related to the issue, or interviewing community members affected by the issue and publishing your interviews in a podcast or on social media.</p>