

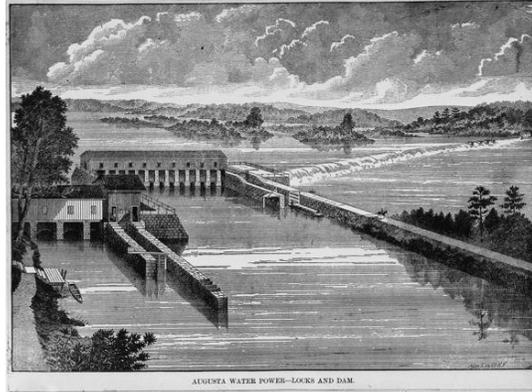
Eighth Grade Lesson on Early Chinese Immigrants in GA By Sohyun An

SS8H6 Analyze the impact of Reconstruction on Georgia.

Background Information

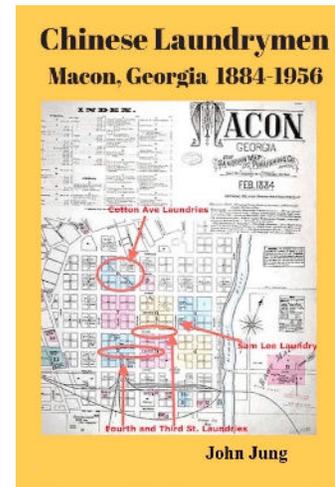
Did you know that Chinese workers came to Georgia as early as in 1873 and built the Augusta Canal? Did you know that some of them chose to settle and built a Chinese American community in Georgia? Here's a forgotten story of early Chinese immigrants in GA.

During the Reconstruction, dominant whites in the South sought to undermine the changing power shift between freed African Americans and whites by encouraging non-Black migration. They viewed the Chinese as a source of cheap labor to replace freed Blacks in the cotton and rice fields of the South.



In this context, 35 Chinese men from Indianapolis were recruited as cheap labor to deepen and widen the Augusta Canal in Augusta, Georgia in 1873. By 1875, 165 Chinese laborers resided in Augusta. The Augusta Canal, originally constructed in 1845, provided water to the city, power to textile mills and factories, and transportation for canal craft.

When the canal project was completed 2 years later, most Chinese left to work elsewhere. But some remained and opened grocery stores or hand laundries in Augusta. The 1880 Census reported 10 Chinese living in Augusta (out of a total of 17 in Georgia) and 8 Chinese grocery stores. By 1900 Augusta's Chinese population was 41 people with 29 Chinese grocery stores and 8 laundries run by them.



The slow increase of Chinese residents in the city was due to the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882), which barred immigration of Chinese laborers until its repeal in 1943. Also, it was this law that the Chinese who settled turned to start a small business because the law allowed merchants, not laborers, to immigrate and settle in the US.

Although small, the Chinese American community in Augusta was the largest Chinese population in Georgia until the 1960s when anti-Asian immigration laws were repealed and skilled workers from various Asian countries were favored to immigrate to the US. The 1940 Census reported a Chinese population of 224 and 63 grocery stores.



In 1927, the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association of Augusta was established. This organization served as the hub of Augusta Chinese community, where people gathered for banquets, weddings, community events, and Chinese language schools.

Because of the small number, white residents in Augusta and Georgia in general didn't view Chinese immigrants as a threat to the racial order. So long as Chinese immigrants kept to themselves and did not

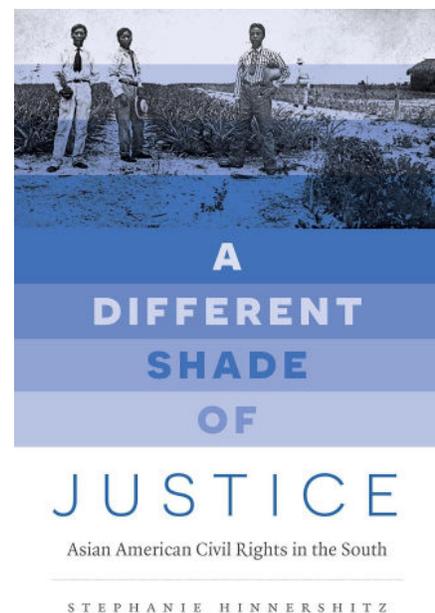
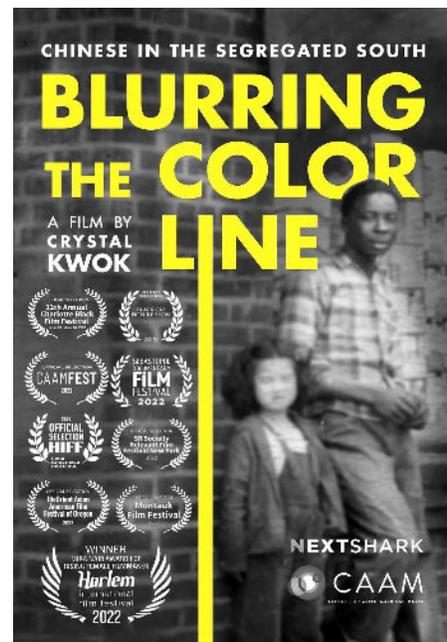
attempt to intervene too directly in white society, they were tolerated. The small number also allowed some privileges that Georgia's Black population and Asian immigrants in other states couldn't such as attending white schools, riding in the white sections of railroad cars, being classified as white on state issued driver's licenses.

But this does not mean that they were treated equally or they were always tolerated. In 1882, for example, William Loo Chong, a successful Chinese merchant in Augusta, married Denise Fulcher, a white woman, and moved to Waynesboro, Georgia. He wanted to open a farmer's market and grocery store there. But, when white residents found out Loo Chong was married to a white woman, they threatened them with physical violence and told them to leave town.

Also, in 1884, GA legislators attempted to change the 1865 Georgia antimiscegenation law, which prohibited white and Black marriages, by including provisions for "marriages between persons of Mongolian descent and persons of the white race." The bill failed to pass in the Georgia House of Representatives because outside Augusta there were not enough Chinese men to stir public concern. Although failed, white Augusta merchants petitioned city officials to ban Chinese residents from acquiring business licenses in 1885. With the growing anti-Asian sentiment in the 1920s, however, Georgia legislators successfully passed a bill that added "Mongolians" and "Asiatics" to the growing list of those who were barred from intermarrying with whites in 1927.

House Representative James Davis of Dekalb County introduced in July 1925 a bill "to define who are persons of color and who are white persons and to prohibit the intermarriage of such persons." This legislation became signed into law in August 1927 stating that: "The term 'white person' shall include only persons of the white or Caucasian race, who have no ascertainable trace of either Negro, African, West Indian, Asiatic Indian, Mongolian, Japanese, or Chinese blood in their veins. No person shall be deemed a white person any one of whose ancestors has duly registered with the State Bureau of Vital Statistics as a colored person or person of color. . . . After passage of this Act it shall be unlawful for a white person to marry any save a white person."

Occupational patterns established in the 1880s in these three cities influenced the type of exemptions they used. Since most Chinese in Augusta were in the grocery business, they were allowed to travel under the exempted merchant category and their wives and children as merchant dependents. Augusta's Chinese community grew in size and became one of the largest Chinese communities in the South before 1965. Chinese in Savannah and Atlanta generally worked as laundry operators, an occupation not exempted; they could not legally bring over dependents because of their occupation. Atlanta's Chinese population experienced continual decline until the end of the Second World War and Savannah's stabilized with the migration of some Chinese families from Augusta to Savannah who ran grocery and convenience stores.



On May 19, 2023, the Georgia Historical Society dedicated the state's first-ever Asian American historical marker to the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association, the oldest Chinese organization in Georgia, to recognize the Augusta Chinesees and their stories.

Trivia: [a girl from China named Soong Mei-ling studied at Wesleyan University in Macon, Georgia and went on to become Madame Chiang Kai-shek.](#)

Instructional Suggestion

1. Have students read the news of the historical marker recognizing the oldest Chinese American community in GA.
2. Have students watch a trailer of a documentary "Blurring the Color Line: Chinese in the Segregated South", which highlights race relations between the Whites, Blacks and Chinese Americans in Augusta, GA during a pivotal time in GA history.
3. Have students listen to a few oral history interviews from the Augusta Chinese-American Oral History Project and share what they learned from the oral interviews.

Resources for Teachers

- [Strangers in the City: The Atlanta Chinese, their Community and Stories of their lives](#)
- [A Different Shade of Justice: Asian American Civil Rights in the South](#)
- [History of Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association of Augusta](#)
- [The Savannah Chinese immigrants](#)
- [A Chinese Laundry in Georgia Before the Civil War](#)
- [Chinese Laundrymen, Macon, Georgia 1884-1956](#)