

Teaching history from **DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES:** Tenth Grade Lesson on Angel Island

GA Social Studies Standards

SSUSH11 Examine connections between the rise of big business, the growth of labor unions, and technological innovations.
d. Describe Ellis and Angel Islands, the change in immigrants' origins and their influence on the economy, politics, and culture of the United States.

Most lessons on immigration begin and end with Ellis Island, which primarily served as a port of entry for European immigrants from 1892 to 1954. On the West Coast, another immigration station opened the gates of the United States to a much broader range of immigrants from Russia, Asia, Central and South America, Africa, and Australia. Angel Island, located in the San Francisco Bay, did not have a stunning Statue of Liberty to welcome weary but hopeful travelers. It was more like a detention center, and for many Chinese immigrants, it was the only part of the United States they could reach before they were turned away and deported home.

The Angel Island Immigration Station was built in response to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. As the first piece of legislation to establish federal control over immigration, the Chinese Exclusion Act established new immigration inspection procedures. Passengers on incoming sea vessels had to be inspected and approved before landing in the United States. Initially, Chinese passengers were moved from one steamship to another until Congress appropriated \$250,000 to construct a facility similar to Ellis Island. Angel Island was hastily constructed and opened on January 21, 1910.

Angel Island

nearly
60%
were confined
up to 3 days

Ellis Island

10% Legal reasons **10%** Medical treatment
vs
80% of Ellis Island applicants passed immigrant and medical inspection

Chinese men and women were admitted to the US as new immigrants, returning residents, and US citizens.

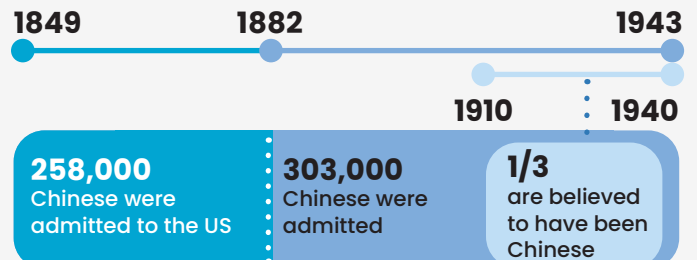
The majority came through San Francisco and around 100,000 Chinese were detained on Angel Island.

1910-1940

178,000

100,000

Chinese made up **70%** of the station's detainee population.



Unlike at Ellis Island, 70% of foreign arrivals, as well as U.S. citizens, were detained at Angel Island. Chinese immigrants were the greatest targets of detention and were subjected to invasive group health examinations and grueling interviews with questions like, "How many feet is your house from the one next door?"

The lengthy interrogations and detentions were a response to a system of false immigration claims that began before Angel Island even opened. The 1906 San Francisco earthquake and fire destroyed all of the city's birth records. While the Chinese Exclusion Act barred the entry of laborers and denied naturalized citizenship to Chinese already in the U.S., certain groups were exempt and still allowed entry: merchants, teachers, students, diplomats/officials, and tourists. This allowed members of these exempt classes to profit off Chinese immigrants who belonged to the excluded group. Exempt Chinese invented names and

profiles for nonexistent family members to create false identification papers, which they would then sell to desperate laborers who became known as paper sons and daughters. One of the most famous paper sons was Tyrus Wong, the artist responsible for the lush artistry in the Disney film *Bambi*. The Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation (AIISF) website (<https://www.aiisf.org/curriculum>) has several lesson plans available for free, including one with sample interrogation questions.

Detainees were held in segregated barracks, and some immigrants expressed their frustrations by carving poetry into the walls. These powerful poems have been preserved and can be found in books like *Island* by Him Mark Lai, Genny Lim, and Judy Yung and the AIISF film *Carved in Silence*. After a fire in 1940, the Angel Island Immigration Station was abandoned, but its history deserves to be taught to paint a fuller image of 20th century immigration to the United States.

Teaching about Angel Island offers students an opportunity to learn about immigration on the West Coast from all around the world, disrupting what may otherwise be a Eurocentric focus on immigration to the U.S. Importantly, it also makes clear how the treatment of immigrants varied by race and ethnicity and can spark questions about how that sad tradition continues today.



Complete Article and Lesson Plan

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2. National Archives, Record Group 90: Records of the Public Health Service Series: Public Health Service Historical Photograph File
3. Interior at Angel Island Immigration Station on Angel Island in San Francisco Bay, California
The Jon B. Lovelace Collection of California Photographs in Carol M. Highsmith's America Project, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.
4. National Archives, Record Group 90: Records of the Public Health Service Series: Public Health Service Historical Photograph File
5. Dormitory at Angel Island, an island in San Francisco Bay that offers expansive views of the San Francisco skyline, the Marin County Headlands and Mount Tamalpais
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