

High School Lesson on Angel Island By Noreen Naseem Rodriguez

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.

Background Information:

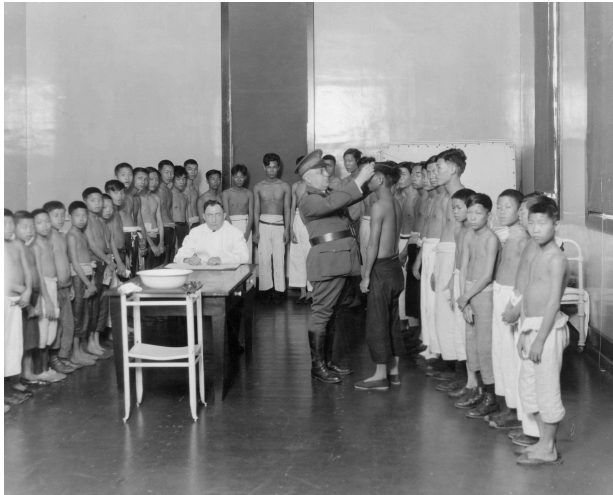


Most lessons on immigration begin and end with Ellis Island, which primarily served as a port of entry for European immigrants from 1892 to 1954. However, on the West Coast, another immigration station opened the gates of the United States to a much broader range of immigrants from Russia, Asia, Central and South America, Africa, and Australia. Angel Island, located in the San Francisco Bay, did not have the same reputation as Ellis Island, nor was there 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 directly in response to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. As the first piece of legislation to establish federal control over immigration (as well as the first to legally ban a group from immigrating on the basis of nationality), the Chinese Exclusion Act established new immigration inspection procedures that stipulated that passengers on incoming sea vessels must be inspected and approved before landing in the United States. For almost twenty years, Chinese passengers were moved from one steamship to another as immigration officials reviewed their cases. In 1898, a two-story wooden “detention shed” was built on Pier 40 to house Chinese detainees. The detention shed was horribly overcrowded and unsanitary, leading to enough complaints that Congress appropriated \$250,000 to construct a proper immigration facility similar to Ellis Island. Angel Island was selected and the immigration station was hastily constructed, opening on January 21, 1910. The next day, 101 Chinese detainees and one “gloomy Hindu” were transferred to Angel Island from the detention shed, along with 400 mostly Chinese new passengers from steamships.



A study by Robert Barde suggests that 70% of foreign arrivals, as well as U.S. citizens, were detained at Angel Island, leading scholars Erika Lee and Judy Yung to describe Angel Island as a symbol of exclusion. This exclusion was only applied selectively, however, and overwhelmingly toward Chinese immigrants, who were subjected to invasive group health examinations and grueling interviews with questions like, “How many feet is your house from the one next door?”



Of those detained on Angel Island, nearly 60% were confined up to 3 days; on Ellis Island, only 10% were detained for legal reasons and another 10% were detained for medical treatment. 80% of Ellis Island applicants passed immigrant and medical inspection. From 1910 to 1940, 178,000 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. Chinese made up 70% of the station's detainee population.

From 1849-1882, 258,000 Chinese were admitted to the US. From 1882-1943, 303,000 Chinese were admitted. Of the approximately 300,000 people detained on Angel Island between 1910-1940, $\frac{1}{3}$

are believed to have been Chinese.

The intensive and lengthy interrogations and detentions were developed in response to a system of false immigration claims that began before the Angel Island Immigration Station 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 created an opportunity for members of these exempt classes to profit off Chinese immigrants who belonged to the excluded group. Exempt Chinese would invent names and profiles for nonexistent family members to create false identification papers, which they would then sell to desperate laborers. Those who held fake documents were known as paper sons and daughters.

One of the most famous paper sons was the artist responsible for the lush artistry in the Disney film *Bambi*. Tyrus Wong arrived at the Angel Island Immigration Station as a child. In a 2015 documentary named after him, Wong describes the interrogation he was subjected to. The Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation website (<https://www.aiisf.org/curriculum>) has several lesson plans available for free, including one with sample interrogation questions.

Unlike Ellis Island, where only 10% of immigrants were detained for legal reasons and another 10% were detained for medical treatment, 60% of the immigrants at Angel Island were confined up to 3 days. Ten percent of Angel Island detainees had longer stays, with an average of two weeks. A Chinese man named Kong Din Quong had the longest known detention of 756 days, and was deported after 25 months. Detainees were held in barracks segregated by race and gender, and some prospective immigrants released their frustrations by carving poetry into the walls.



Some of these powerful and painful poems have been preserved and they can also be found in books like *Island* by Him Mark Lai, Genny Lim, and Judy Yung and the film *Carved in Silence*, available from the Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation. 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 the story of 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. To learn more about Angel Island, read *Angel Island: Immigrant Gateway to America* by Erika Lee and Judy Yung as well as the more student-friendly texts recommended below.

Instructional Resources and Suggestions:

- In a language arts classroom, highlight the poetry of Angel Island using the resources at <https://www.aiisf.org/poems-and-inscriptions>, which includes a video about the barrack poetry, a graphic of where the different language poems were located (which makes clear how the barracks were segregated by ethnicity and race)
- In a social studies setting, use a Venn diagram so students can compare and contrast information about Ellis and Angel Island using resources such as the following:
 - Ellis Island National Museum of Immigration: <https://www.statueofliberty.org/ellis-island/overview-history/> and <https://www.statueofliberty.org/discover/educational-resources/>
 - Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation: <https://www.aiisf.org/> and curriculum guides available at <https://www.aiisf.org/curriculum>
- Recommended texts for independent student reading:
 - *Angel Island: Gateway to Gold Mountain* (nonfiction)
 - *Attachments: Faces and Stories from America's Gates* from the National Archives (nonfiction)
 - *The Dragon's Child* by Laurence Yep (historical fiction)
 - *Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island, 1910-1940* by Him Mark Lai, Genny Lim, and Judy Yung (poetry)

Images Used:

1. Women detained at Angel Island. Public domain via National Library of Medicine
2. Original Caption: "U.S. Quarantine Station, Angel Island, Cal. Officers of the U.S. Public Health Service making quarantine inspection of passenger on a trans-Pacific line from the Orient." National Archives, Record Group 90: Records of the Public Health Service. Series: Public Health Service Historical Photograph File
3. Original Caption: "Angel Island, Cal. Intensive physical examination of aliens, Immigration Hospital." National Archives, Record Group 90: Records of the Public Health Service Series: Public Health Service Historical Photograph File
4. 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. The Jon B. Lovelace Collection of California Photographs in Carol M. Highsmith's America Project, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.