Teaching history from
# DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES

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Asian American Voices for Education

## 4th Grade Lesson Plan on
## Who Can Be a Citizen? The Legacy of Reconstruction and United States v. Wong Kim Ark (1898)

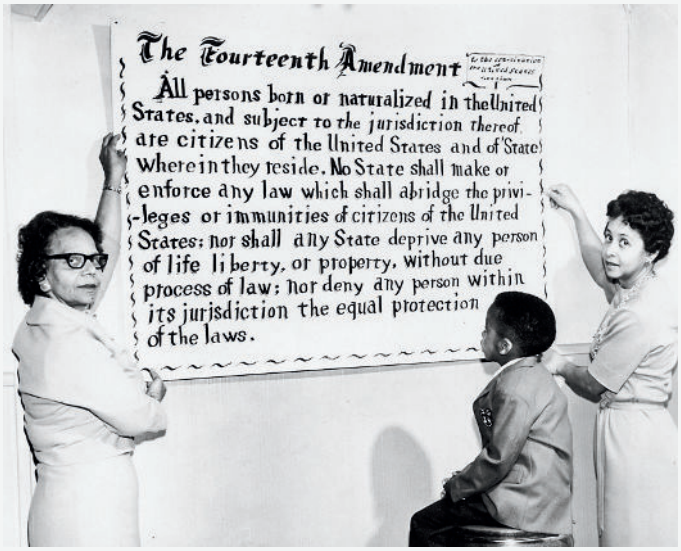
### Georgia Social Studies Standards

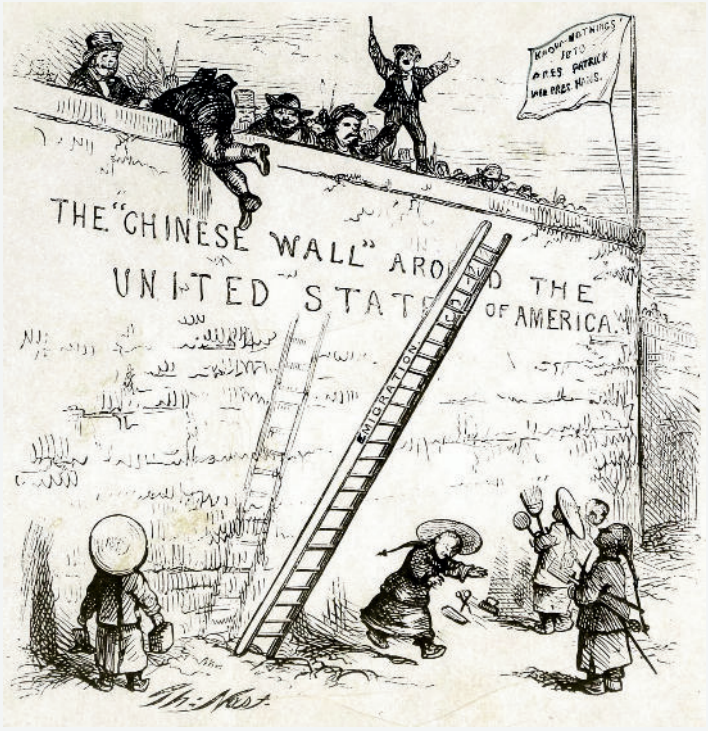
**SS4H6** Analyze the effects of Reconstruction on American life.
a. Describe the purpose of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments.

**Background Information**

Following the devastation of the Civil War, the United States entered the Reconstruction era, a period dedicated to rebuilding the nation and legally defining the rights of millions of newly emancipated Black Americans. A cornerstone of this era was the passage of three foundational updates to the Constitution, known collectively as the Reconstruction Amendments:

- 13th Amendment (1865): Formally abolished slavery across the United States.
- 14th Amendment (1868): Granted citizenship to **all persons born or naturalized in the U.S.** and guaranteed them "equal protection of the laws."
- 15th Amendment (1870): Protected the right to vote regardless of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.




While the 14th Amendment was explicitly catalyzed by the need to secure and protect the citizenship of Black Americans, its exact wording would soon become a powerful tool for other marginalized groups fighting institutional exclusion.

In the late 19th century, federal immigration laws explicitly signaled who the nation desired as citizens and who it did not, particularly targeting Asian immigrants through discriminatory laws like the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. This landmark legislation completely banned Chinese laborers from entering the United States and prohibited existing Chinese immigrants from ever obtaining U.S. citizenship. It marked the first time in US history that a specific ethnic group was explicitly excluded by federal law.



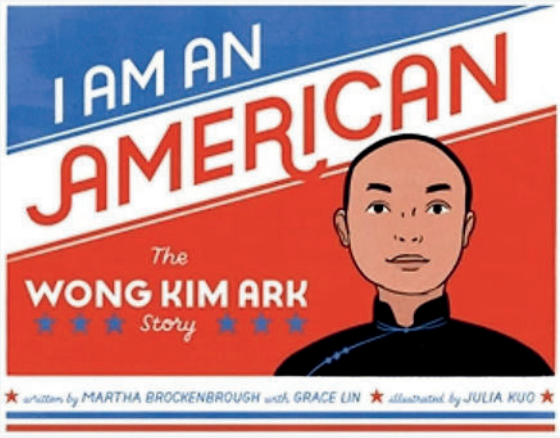
The landmark case United States v. Wong Kim Ark (1898) directly tested whether the Reconstruction protections applied to non-Black minorities. Wong Kim Ark was born in San Francisco, California, to Chinese immigrant parents. Because he was born on U.S. soil, he was a citizen under the **14th Amendment—a principle known as birthright citizenship**. However, upon returning from a family visit to China in 1895, immigration officials detained him at the port, claiming that because his parents were Chinese citizens, he was an alien and could not enter.



Wong resisted this exclusion and sued the government. His case reached the Supreme Court, which ruled 6–2 in his favor. The Court affirmed that the 14th Amendment's protection was territorial, granting citizenship to any individual born on U.S. soil, regardless of race or their parents' status. This victory proved that the legal legacy of Reconstruction reshaped rights not just for Black Americans, but for all.

**The 14th Amendment Today**

The legal framework built during Reconstruction remains an active battleground. Today, the debate centers on how the 14th Amendment applies to the children of undocumented immigrants and temporary visa holders.




Following multiple lower court injunctions, this debate culminated in the Supreme Court case Trump v. Barbara, proving to fourth graders that the promises of Reconstruction are still being negotiated today.

## Complete Article and Lesson Plan

**Photo Credit:**
**(Top to Bottom, Left to Right)**

1. Sylvia N. Thompson (left) with her daughter Addie Jean Haynes and Addie's ten-year-old son Bryan Haynes holding up a poster-sized copy of the 14th Amendment at the NAACP Portland office in 1964. Via Zinn Education Project
2. "Throwing Down the Ladder by Which They Rose," cartoon by Thomas Nast, Harper's Weekly, July 23, 1870. Via Encyclopedia Brittanica
3. Wong Kim Ark, in a photograph taken from a 1904 U.S. immigration document. Public domain via Wikimedia commons.
4. Brockenbrough, Martha and Grace Lin. I am an American: the Wong Kim Ark Story. New York: Little, Brown Brown Books for Young Readers, 2021.

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History is the context of "**now**", "**why**", and "**how**".

Teach interwoven history.



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