Teaching history from
DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES

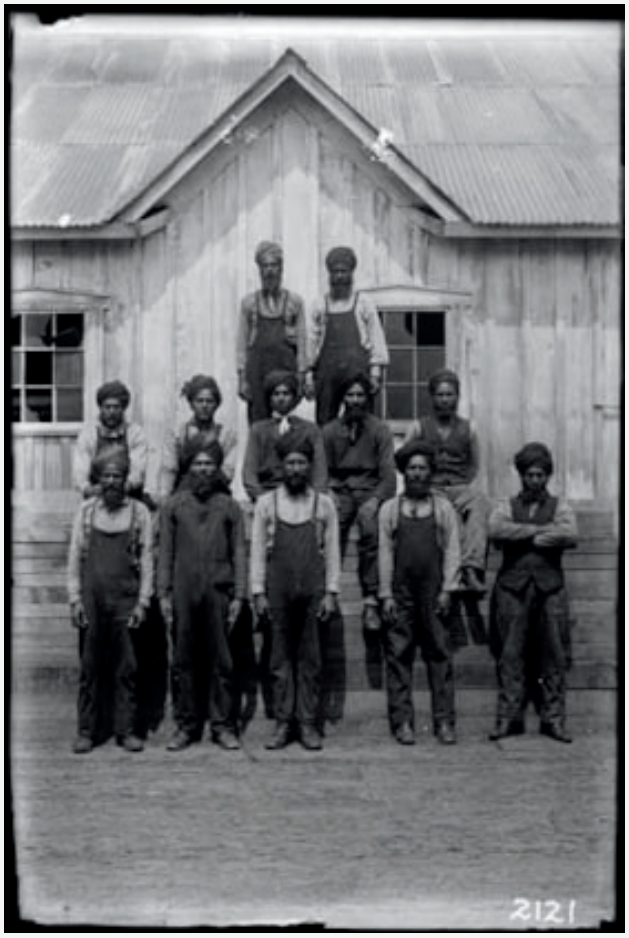
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Asian American Voices for Education

High School Lesson Plan on
Southern and Northern Border Crossing

Georgia Social Studies Standards

SSUSH14 Explain America's evolving relationship with the world at the turn of the twentieth century.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the United States transformed from a continental nation into a global empire. Traditional lessons often focus on the military side of this expansion, including the Spanish-American War, the annexation of the Philippines, and the Open Door policy. However, this era also reveals another side of American power: while the United States expanded overseas, it simultaneously restricted immigration at home and created a racialized global labor system.



The **Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882** and the **Gentlemen's Agreement of 1907** with Japan did more than limit immigration — they redirected migration routes. By closing major Pacific ports such as San Francisco and Seattle, U.S. policies forced immigrants to adapt. Canada and Mexico became important transit zones where migrants faced both economic exploitation and intense government surveillance.

The Canadian Corridor

British imperialism shaped migration from South Asia. After the 1857 Indian Uprising, British policies created widespread poverty in Punjab, leading many Punjabi Sikh men, including former British military workers, to seek opportunities abroad.

In British Columbia, employers recruited South Asian workers for industries such as timber, but governments restricted their rights and social acceptance. Canada's 1908 Continuous Journey Regulation attempted to prevent Indian immigration by requiring immigrants to arrive through a direct voyage from their country of birth — a route that did not exist for most South Asian migrants.

The Mexican Transit Route

U.S. economic influence also shaped migration through Mexico. During the rule of Porfirio Díaz, Mexico expanded railroads and industrial development with U.S. investment. These rail networks connected northern Mexico to American border cities and became important routes for Chinese migrants excluded by U.S. immigration laws.



Chinese migrants arrived at Mexican ports, traveled north by rail, and entered the United States through border communities. The harsh deserts of the Southwest became part of U.S. border enforcement strategies, with early immigration officials monitoring crossings.

Migrants responded by developing networks in cities such as Tijuana and Ciudad Juárez, using guides, railroads, and hidden routes to cross the border.

This history shows that U.S. empire building abroad and immigration restriction at home were deeply connected. Rather than stopping migration completely, U.S. policies redirected global movement, creating new systems of labor, exclusion, adaptation, and resistance that continue to influence immigration patterns today.





Historical and Modern Connections

These migration patterns continued to shape history. During World War II, more than 2,200 Japanese Peruvians were deported to U.S. incarceration camps after pressure from the U.S. government. Decades later, **Tereza Lee**, whose story inspired the original DREAM Act, followed another transnational migration route: her family moved from South Korea to Brazil before settling in Chicago. Together, these examples show how geography, borders, and migration have remained deeply interconnected across generations.

Complete Article and Lesson Plan

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

1. Sikh sawmill workers of the North Pacific Lumber Company at Barnet, photographed by Philip Timms, B.C., Canada, ca.1900's. Via Vancouver Public Library/Public domain https://localhistory.vpl.ca/link/photos6438
2. Frederic Remington's "Chinese immigrant dying of thirst in the Mohave Desert, 1800s." Racist cartoon via https://crossculturalsolidarity.com/the-origins-of-border-crossing-and-border-policing/
3. PBS LearningMedia. (2021, February 24). Tereza Lee and undocumented Asian America: Asian Americans: Grades 6-8, 9-12 social studies teaching and Lesson Resources. PBS

Contact us at info@aaved.org

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

Teach interwoven history.



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