

Immigration Stories: Using Primary Documents to Help Students Explore Historical and Contemporary Immigration

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Most likely the principal's day started off like so many other days, with routine tasks and pressing matters that are part of any first month of school. But the rhythm of the day shifted when unexpected visitors arrived. A woman, accompanied by a young boy and girl, said the family had just moved into the neighborhood. She asked about enrolling the children in school. However, the principal noted that the children did not look like other children currently attending the school. They were not originally from the United States, nor did they speak any English.

After the newcomers left, the principal called her secretary in to dictate a letter to federal immigration officials. She knew that she had to inform them of the situation and find out whether the children—and their family—were in the United States legally, or not. She began her letter with the date, September 29, 1921, and finished by referring to the law in question: “Knowing that a Chinese Exclusion Act exists, we felt that this case should be investigated.”¹

By the time Philadelphia Principal Frances L. Bowers wrote her letter in September 1921, the Chinese Exclusion Act had been in place for almost 40 years. In fact, Principal Bowers may have had no memory of a time when the Act was not in effect. And it would remain in place for another 22 years after she received a reply to her letter. It was not until 1943—during World War II—that

the Act was abolished. China was at that point an ally of the United States in the war effort, and Congress officially cancelled the Chinese Exclusion Act. It had been a defining part of U.S. immigration policy for more than 60 years.

But what did the Chinese Exclusion Act say, and what did it restrict? There are several important clues in the letters exchanged between Principal Bowers and Immigration Commissioner J.L. Hughes. A close reading of these letters will connect students with the story of two children close to their own age (13 and 9). It will introduce them to some of the situations and challenges the children and their family faced. And it can help students launch an in-depth investigation of the Chinese Exclusion Act while giving them a lens to compare historical and contemporary immigration policy.

Principal Bowers's letter offers the first clue to how encompassing the Chinese Exclusion Act was. The Act restricted whether or not children could go to public schools, based on the immigration status of the family. Commissioner Hughes's reply also illuminates several important aspects of the law: he informed Principal Bowers that an “investigation” had been conducted into the family, which tells us that his staff included people whose job it was to investigate possible violations of the Chinese Exclusion Act. (The laws created new bureaucratic structures and job titles such as “Chinese Inspector.”) However, in the course of outlining the results of the investigation Hughes also indirectly referenced an important part of the Act—that it applied not just to Chinese nationals, but also to United States citizens of Chinese descent.

Commissioner Hughes wrote that the children's father, Yee Quong, was “a native born citizen of the United States.”² It is important to note that birth in the United States was the only way that people of Chinese descent could become citizens at that point. The Chinese Exclusion Act precluded any path to citi-

KEYSER-MEEHAN PUBLIC SCHOOL

MORRIS AND COULTER STREETS

RECEIVED

SEP 30 1921

IMMIGRATION SERVICE
PHILADELPHIA

OFFICE OF THE PRINCIPAL

September 29th, 1921.

United States Commissioner of Immigration,
Gloucester, New Jersey.

My dear Sir:-

We desire to call to your attention a Chinese family, living at 405 W. Queen Lane, Germantown. The children, a boy 13 and a girl 7, have applied to us for admission. Neither child speaks English. The negro woman who is employed by the family brought the children to school and told us that the family had been in this country only three months. Knowing that a Chinese Exclusion Act exists, we felt that this case should be investigated.

Very truly yours,

Frances D. Bowers

LMR

Principal

*9/30/21
Have investigated
advise the writer
from him
JH*

3284-C.

October 8, 1921.

Miss Frances L. Bowers,
Principal, Keyser-Meehan Public School,
Morris & Coulter Sts., Philadelphia, Pa.

Madam:

Adverting to my letter dated the 5th instant, which was in reply to your favor of September 29, 1921, respecting two Chinese children residing at 405 W. Queen Lane, Germantown, Pa., I have to inform you that an investigation conducted with relation to this matter discloses that the father of the two children in question, one YEE QUONG, is a native born citizen of the United States, and is the holder of certificate of identity No. 15320, issued to him at Vancouver, B. C., under date of May 21, 1914, as such citizen.

His wife WONG SHEE, aged 32, and his two children, YEE YIT, aged 13 (the boy), and YEE CHONG YIT, aged 7, (the girl), were regularly admitted as the wife and children of a United States citizen, at the port of San Francisco, Cal., and are in possession of bona fide certificates of identity as such, issued at said port under date of July 8, 1921.

It would appear, therefore, that the children about whom you inquired, were lawfully admitted into the United States and the provisions of the Chinese Exclusion Laws have not been violated in connection with their said entry.

Respectfully,

(Signed) J. L. Hughes,

Commissioner.

HMR

zenship for people who had been born in China. Naturalization—the traditional way for immigrants to the United States to become citizens—was not an option for Chinese people.

Another clue about the scope of the Chinese Exclusion Act revealed in Hughes’s letter is that Yee Quong (unlike other native born U.S. citizens at the time) had a certificate of identity. (Hughes even noted Yee’s official number: 15320.) The certificate was needed for when Yee Quong travelled out of the country, because according to the letter, his certificate had been issued to him in Vancouver, British Columbia, in May of 1914.

While the letter reveals that Yee Quong’s experience of citizenship was different than other people born in the United States in that era, it also illustrates that he still retained certain shared

privileges of citizenship. Hughes wrote that Yee Qong’s wife Wong Shee and their children, 13-year old son Yee Yit and 7-year old daughter Yee Chong Yit, “were regularly admitted as the wife and children of a United States citizen.” The children and their mother had arrived in San Francisco in July of 1921 and had been given official certificates of identity.

Commissioner Hughes wrapped up his letter to Principal Bowers assuring her that “the provisions of the Chinese Exclusion Laws have not been violated.” Presumably that was enough for her to allow the children to enroll in school. However, there may have been ongoing issues (or perhaps just a simple misfiling) because Principal Bowers wrote again to Commissioner Hughes several months later asking for a copy of his original investigation letter.

While students are doing a close read-

ing of the letters, encourage them to notice other things about the documents that pique their curiosity. Teachers may need to prompt the students for some of the details, but there is one phrase in Principal Bowers’s letter that will probably jump out to many students: “The negro woman who is employed by the family.” This phrase gives insight into racial terminology in use at the time, and the restricted employment options open to African American women, both an important part of understanding the time period and the multifaceted nature of civil rights struggles in the United States. It also helps us to learn more about the Yee family, in that they, unlike many other Chinese people in Philadelphia at the time, were financially successful enough to employ someone to work in their household.

The reference to this unnamed woman

Chinese Exclusion Act

Classroom Activities

Because students will be approaching the topic of the Chinese Exclusion Act through a specific story, creative writing activities that help students “extend” the story might be particularly effective.

1. Ask students to create a “found poem” using the words in the documents to create a poem that they believe represents the important aspects of the story and the Chinese Exclusion Acts. Have the students share their work and discuss why they chose particular words and phrases as most important.
2. Ask students to create a five-word story that describes the essence of the narrative revealed in the documents. Students should put their five-word stories on a large piece of paper and all phrases should be posted around the room for students to read and compare. Discuss with the class how the stories they created are the same, how they are different, and why that may be the case.
3. Have students create some type of short creative writing piece (letter or diary entry if you want to stick with historical writing methods; blog, texts, or tweets if you want to use contemporary communication methods) that tells the story from Yee Yit or Yee Chong Yit’s perspective. What was it like to move from home, travel to the United States, and visit the school that day in September? Or, what happened after that visit to the principal? Did the children attend the school? What were their experiences? (Since this is a creative writing exercise, explain to the students that writing the story takes some educated guesswork, but they should still stay within the parameters of the time period.)
4. Have students examine and compare immigration policy and experiences in three different time periods—one before the Chinese Exclusion Act, one during the Act, and now. Ask students to create a visual representation of some sort (chart, word cloud or map) that illustrates and compares what they learned about each time period. How have things changed, and how have things stayed the same? What are possible reasons for the continuity or change?
5. Ask the students to tell the immigration story of their own family or the immigration story of another individual or family through a comic strip. Reassure students that their drawings can be simple and still be effective in meeting the goal of sharing the most important information.

leads to new questions. Encourage students to list some questions that they have about the documents as part of their analysis and then decide which questions can be answered through further research. For example, one question could be: Is the school that the Yee children attended (or the home they lived in) still in existence today? This is easily answerable by searching the addresses online. Or a question about how many Chinese or African American families lived in their neighborhood could be answered through a search of the 1920 U.S. census for that part of Philadelphia. One primary document leads to others, and soon students have a bigger and clearer picture of both a specific topic and its historical context.

Once students have a sense of the story as revealed through the letters, the natural next step is to have them look at the Chinese Exclusion Act itself.³ As the first immigration law in the United States to significantly restrict a specific

nationality, the Chinese Exclusion Act that passed in May 1882 was indeed historic. Originally scheduled to be in place for 10 years, the law was renewed in 1892 and made permanent in 1902.

But what was behind the Act's opening statement that "the coming of Chinese laborers endangers the good order of certain localities?" After reading the various provisions of the Act, students should examine newspapers or other sources that can help them understand how the building of a national transportation system—the transcontinental railroad—is an essential part of the story. This will aid in understanding the geography of and reasons for Chinese immigration. It will also outline the arguments presented by the people who advocated for the necessity of a new law restricting Chinese people's movements into and within the United States.

The stories revealed through primary documents related to the Chinese Exclusion Act are voluminous. There

are currently more than 200 documents about the Chinese Exclusion Act in the National Archives online education platform, DocsTeach.org. This represents only a small fraction of Chinese Exclusion Act records within the holdings of the National Archives. Browse through the selection in DocsTeach, find some documents that pique your interest, and then help students learn how to analyze primary documents while exploring the complicated—and often troubling—history of United States immigration policy. 🌐

Notes

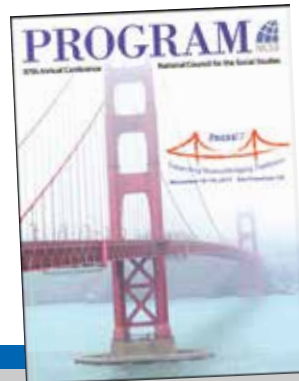
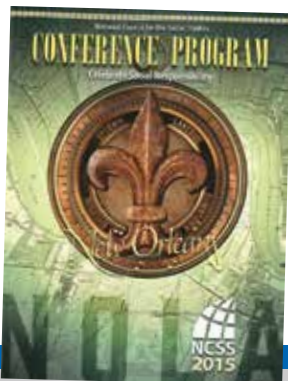
1. Letter Reporting a Chinese Family; 9/29/1921; 3284-C, Investigation re Two Chinese Children; Chinese Exclusion Act Case Files, 1895 - 1952; Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, Record Group 85; National Archives at Philadelphia, Philadelphia, Penn. [www.docsteach.org/documents/document/reporting-chinese-family].
2. Letter Regarding the Legal Status of a Chinese Family; 10/8/1921; 3284-C, Investigation re Two Chinese Children; Chinese Exclusion Act Case Files, 1895 - 1952; Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, Record Group 85; National Archives at Philadelphia, Philadelphia, Penn. [www.docsteach.org/documents/document/legal-status-chinese-family].
3. Chinese Exclusion Act, An Act of May 6, 1882, Public Law 71, 47th Congress, 1st Session, 22 STAT 58, to Execute Certain Treaty Stipulations Relating to Chinese; 5/6/1882; Enrolled Acts and Resolutions of Congress, 1789 - 2011; General Records of the United States Government, Record Group 11; National Archives Building, Washington, DC. [www.docsteach.org/documents/document/chinese-exclusion-act, July 27, 2018]

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