



TITLE

PATTERNS OF ASSIMILATION : HOW DOES ONE BECOME “AMERICAN”?

GRADE LEVEL: MIDDLE SCHOOL TO HIGH SCHOOL

SUBJECT: History, Social Studies

THEME: Activism, Bias and Stereotype, Civil Rights, Identity and Culture, Immigration, International Affairs, Labor, Mental Health

STANDARDS: Educating for American Democracy: History – Theme 3: We the People. Civics: What Values, virtues, and principles can knit together “We the People.”

OBJECTIVES:

Students will be able to:

- Identify people and events associated with the concept of assimilation and what that term meant at the time.
- Analyze the historical and sociological circumstances of the times to explain reactions to different peoples coming into the U.S.
- Consider the relevance of *assimilation* today.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS:

- What does it truly mean to be accepted as an American?

CLASSROOM TIME:

1 to 2 Periods

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BACKGROUND:

The word assimilation and its companion metaphor, the melting pot, have long been used to convey an understanding or assumption that newcomers—immigrants—must somehow conform to a certain notion of “Americanness” in order to fit in, be accepted, and ultimately become a citizen. The notion of assimilation has existed since the very beginnings of our country going back deep into colonial times. One question behind this concept is, “Who is assimilating into what?” The lesson starts with taking students through a quick overview of the history of what assimilation has meant in American history with a particular focus on the Asian American experience. Following the overview, students will explore the challenges that Chinese and Asian Americans have faced on that path towards becoming American. Some of these challenges are ones faced not only by immigrants, but also by Native Americans and African Americans. Other challenges have taken on specific characteristics related to stereotypes about Asians, most notably ones portraying Asians as the model minority and the perpetual foreigner. By the end of the lesson, students will reassess the meaning of assimilation in the context of today’s America.

ACTIVITIES:

Icebreaker:

Ask the class to think back into American history and list all the various nationalities or groups of people who came to settle America and arrived as immigrants later. They can do this in small groups: make lists, add approximate dates, share and compare lists with classmates. See how they match up with the history.

See: History.com

<https://www.history.com/topics/colonial-america>

Immigration History

<https://immigrationhistory.org/timeline/>

Show the accompanying slideshow to the class: E&R 5-18 presentation

During the presentation, the teacher should use the notes (**see Supplement at end of lesson plan**) in the slideshow as the basis for note-taking by students. The notes are also provided as a supplement at the end of the lesson.



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ASSESSMENTS:

Along with **the notes** above, have students apply their understanding of the term assimilation given what they have learned from the lesson. Consider questions such as:

- Are there other words or terms that better describe how immigrants go through the process of “Americanization”? (*adaptation, belonging, adjusting, integrating...?*)
- What parallels can be drawn from the past to today’s questions about immigration, race, and ethnicity?
- Using as inspiration the letter of Isaac Landman in *The Hebrew Weekly* from 1924 that asks W.E.B. DuBois to join in imagining the future in 2000, turn that question to the present and imagine what America will be like in 2100?
- Draw a political cartoon, express your thoughts through a drawing, collage, photo, or poem that captures a theme you identify that runs through this theme of becoming an American.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

History.com

<https://www.history.com/topics/colonial-america>

Immigration History

<https://immigrationhistory.org/timeline/>

Digital History, Bhagat Singh Thind v. United States

http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/disp_textbook.cfm?smtid=3&psid=41

Melting Pot Theory

“One Nation, Indivisible: Is It History?”:

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/national/longterm/meltingpot/melt0222.htm>

“From the Melting Pot to the Tossed Salad Metaphor: Why Coercive Assimilation Lacks the Flavors Americans Crave”: <https://hilo.hawaii.edu/campuscenter/hohonu/volumes/documents/Vol04x06FromtheMeltingPot.pdf>

The Mortar of Assimilation – and the one element that won’t mix.

Puck Magazine, 1889

Source: American Social History Project: <https://shec.ashp.cuny.edu/items/show/642>

Viet Thanh Nguyen

<https://vietnguyen.info/>

TIME Magazine: “I Love America. That’s Why I Have to Tell the Truth About It”:

<https://time.com/magazine/us/5455477/november-26th-2018-vol-192-no-22-u-s/>



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SUPPLEMENT: SLIDESHOW NOTES FOR TEACHERS

Slide number:

1. Introduction to “Examining Assimilation: AAPI History and Jewish Stories in America” from the 1882 Foundation’s program.
2. So how did Benjamin Franklin, one of our Founding Fathers, feel about Germans coming into America in the 1750s?
3. Introduction to “Examining Assimilation: AAPI History and Jewish Stories in America” from the 1882 Foundation’s program.
4. Let students react to this quote: Consider using it as an option for an assessment exercise.
5. Do these characteristics really make the difference to “becoming American”? Which characteristics help the most? Do some groups/nationalities have a harder time fulfilling these expectations than others? How much do you sacrifice of your own culture in trying to match the “keys” above? Do you do it willingly or not?
6. The Page Act is important because it speaks to the stereotyping of Asian women that carries on to today. It takes on various forms: from prostitute and seductress, to being compliant and quiet. Beyond the Act’s words is the pernicious impact this Act had on the future for building families, in its day, an example of what we would call today “family separation.”
7. The aftermath of the CEA. Hobson’s Choice is really no choice at all. The single long braid (queue) worn by Chinese men was a symbol of respect for the Emperor of China. Without it, they could not hope to return to China since not having the queue was an offense punishable by death in China. Staying means you face danger, prejudice, little hope for the future (no wife and family).
8. The aftermath of the CEA. Hobson’s Choice is really no choice at all. The single long braid (queue) worn by Chinese men was a symbol of respect for the Emperor of China. Without it, they could not hope to return to China since not having the queue was an offense punishable by death in China. Staying means you face danger, prejudice, little hope for the future (no wife and family).
9. Wong Kim Ark could prove his citizenship - and did, winning at the Supreme Court (1898) which found in his favor and affirmed the 14th Amendment’s definition of citizenship: born here=U.S. citizenship. The accompanying affidavit is significant because when he left, it had to be affirmed that he was a citizen and was who he said he was by three white men; couldn’t be just any three people. Thus, he would be eligible to return. Chinese were the only ones who had to carry residence papers, i.e. identity papers.
10. Outline the story of Bhagat Singh Thind and how he was denied citizenship even after serving in the U.S. Army. Came to the U.S. to study. When the Great War (World War I) drew the U.S. in, Bhagat enlisted in the U.S. Army. Did it help him with getting citizenship a few years later. No; he was denied by a Supreme Court decision in 1923.
11. In 1921, the U.S. begins to enact stricter immigration laws with expanding the Exclusion laws to encompass all of Asia, the Asiatic Barred one, stretching from what is today Pakistan in the west through the Pacific Ocean to the east. And to curb less “desirable” elements from Europe - those from southern and eastern Europe, including Jews - quotas based on the census from 1890 are codified in the 1924 Immigration Act.



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SUPPLEMENT: SLIDESHOW NOTES FOR TEACHERS (CONT.)

12. This document captures the shared experiences of African Americans and Jews of the time which carries on to the present. The implication in the excerpt above imagines that “our children’s children” will, in the year 2000, have an America that will be better. How do you think this has turned out (recognizing that we’re 22 years beyond that date now)?

13. That inspirational sentiment expressed in the previous slide is pure irony as history plays itself out over the next 100 years. The incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II proves to be another cruel twist in our pursuit of the American dream.

14. Slide speaks for itself: dehumanizing the “enemy.”

15. Here’s another immigration story. This is about my family’s journey to the U.S. My father was Chinese, but from an overseas Chinese area in the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia), and my mother, Dutch. My father’s family moved to the Netherlands (also commonly called Holland) when he was 13. My parents met in Holland during World War II and fell in love. My mother joined the Dutch Resistance against the Nazis. She got caught by the Nazis and spent months in prison at the end of the war until Holland was liberated. They married immediately at war’s end (July 1945). Interracial marriages were not common in Holland, and her father disapproved and did not attend the wedding. They, then, gave birth to my brother in Holland the next year, and emigrated to the U.S. the year after that. I came into the family in 1948.

16. This cartoon can also be used as a lead-in to an assessment option.



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