

May Diversity Tip Sheet: Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month

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Asian Pacific American Heritage Month (APAHM), now officially proclaimed **Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month** [\[1\]](#), is a celebration of the culture, traditions, and history of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in the United States

On May 1, 2009, President Barack Obama proclaimed the Month of May each year to be Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month (AKA Asian Pacific American Heritage Month [APAHM]). In his proclamation, President Obama proclaimed:

The vast diversity of languages, religions, and cultural traditions of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders continues to strengthen the fabric of American society. From the arrival of the first Asian American and Pacific Islander immigrants 150 years ago to those who arrive today, as well as those native to the Hawaiian Islands and to our Pacific Island territories, all possess the common purpose of the fulfilling the American dream and leading a life bound by American ideals of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

From 1977 to 2009, the formal recognition of Asian Americans has seen bi-partisan support. The initial action to recognize Asian Americans occurred in 1977 when U.S. Representatives Frank Horton (New York) and Norman Mineta (California) and Senators Daniel Inouye and Spark Matsunaga, both of Hawaii, introduced a Joint Congressional Resolution before both Houses of Congress. The resolution passed and ultimately was signed into law by President Jimmy Carter designating the first week of May as a time when we would recognize the contributions made by Asian Americans to the very fabric of our country. In May 1990, Congress voted and President George H. W. Bush signed into law a resolution extending the celebration from one week in May to the entire month. It was in 2009 that President Obama through proclamation expanded it to include Pacific Islanders and have the month appropriately named Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month.

The first week of May was originally selected in recognition of two important dates relating to Asian American History. May 7, 1843 was the date when the first Japanese immigrants arrived in America and May 10, 1869 marked the completion of the transcontinental railroad, which was achieved by employing a significant number of Chinese laborers.

The history of how this month long celebration came about is important as means to understand why we should recognize both Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. President Jimmy Carter once stated, "We have become not a melting pot, but a beautiful mosaic. Different people, different beliefs, different yearnings, different hopes, different dreams." Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders have greatly contributed to that mosaic through amazing contributions to society and also through significant individual sacrifice.

It is important as a country that strives to insure the health of its "more perfect union" that we appreciate what Japanese immigrants contributed in their early migration to America, what Chinese immigrants contributed to the ability to build the transcontinental railroad that transformed the United States, to fully appreciate the rich cultural heritage found in the Hawaiian Islands and to understand that in modern history it was a sovereign nation with a sitting monarchy overthrown by the United States partially as a means to gain a military position in the Pacific. President Obama eloquently outlines in his proclamation the reasons why all Americans should join in the celebration and also recognize the many hardships faced by both groups of people.

Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders have endured and overcome hardship and heartache. In the earliest years, tens of thousands of Gold Rush pioneers, coal miners, transcontinental railroad builders, as well as farm and orchard laborers, were subject to unjust working conditions, prejudice, and discrimination—yet they excelled. Even in the darkness of the Exclusion Act and Japanese internment, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders have persevered, providing for their families and creating opportunities for their children.

Amidst these struggles, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders have contributed in great and significant ways to all aspects of society. They have created works of literature and art, thrived as American athletes, and prospered in the world of academia. Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders have played a vital role in our Nation's economic and technological growth by establishing successful enterprises and pushing the limits of science. They are serving in positions of leadership within the government more now than ever before. And along with all of our great service men and women, they have defended the United States from threats at home and abroad, serving our Nation with valor.

From the beaches of the Pacific islands and the California coast, the grasslands of Central Asia and the bluegrass of Kentucky, and from the summits of the Himalayas and the Rocky Mountains, the Asian American and Pacific Islander community hails from near and far. This is the story of our more perfect union: that it is diversity itself that enriches, and is fundamental to, the American story.

During the month of May, communities in all fifty states celebrate the achievements and contributions of Asian and Pacific Americans with community festivals, government-sponsored activities and educational activities for adults and children. A simple internet search of Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month will lead you to events and opportunities in communities all across the United States.