

Asian Americans and the Model Minority Myth

Excerpts from a Washington Post article compiled by the Very Rev. Bob Scott

This month we briefly explore the experience of the Asian American community since the mid-19th century. Asian Americans' history in the United States is a long and complex story marked by both resilience and systemic discrimination. Large-scale Asian immigration began in the mid-1800s, especially with Chinese laborers recruited to build the Transcontinental Railroad and work in mines and agriculture. Despite their crucial economic contributions, these immigrants faced fierce racial hostility, rooted in fears that they threatened white labor and social norms. Such sentiments led Congress to pass some of the nation's earliest race-based immigration laws, including the 1875 Page Act and the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, the first major U.S. statute to bar immigration based on nationality—effectively halting most Chinese immigration for decades. The 1882 act also denied Chinese residents the possibility of citizenship, cementing their status as perpetual outsiders. Other laws like the 1917 Asiatic Barred Zone Act continued to restrict Asian arrivals and naturalization rights.

Discrimination was not just legal but also violent. Asian immigrant communities suffered mob violence and lynchings in the 19th and early 20th centuries, with events such as anti-Chinese riots in places like Los Angeles and Wyoming reflecting deep xenophobia. Japanese immigrants, many of whom became successful farmers on the West Coast, encountered alien land laws that prevented them from owning property. Japanese Americans also endured one of the most egregious constitutional violations in U.S. history when the federal government forcibly interned about 120,000 people of Japanese descent—many U.S. citizens—during World War II, ripping

families from their homes and confiscating property out of wartime paranoia.

As broader civil-rights movements gained strength in the 1950s and 1960s, U.S. immigration law shifted dramatically with the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, which abolished racially discriminatory quotas and opened the door to immigrants from across Asia. This new wave included many highly educated professionals, which, combined with media narratives of Asian success, helped cement the “model minority” stereotype—presenting Asian Americans as uniformly successful, hardworking, and compliant. Many Asian Americans and scholars today argue that this stereotype masks the deep diversity of experiences within Asian American communities, obscures ongoing discrimination, and can even be used to downplay systemic racism against both Asians and other communities of color.

Throughout U.S. history, then, Asian Americans have been alternately excluded, exploited, and celebrated, but their struggle against discrimination—from exclusionary laws to stereotypes like the model minority myth—remains an enduring part of the American story.

This is only one of the many themes and stories explored in the Episcopal Church series called Sacred Ground. You can learn more about Sacred Ground and how to sign up for the entire series of sessions by using this link: [EDNC Beloved Community webpage](#)