

1.0.2 – Manilamen: The First Asian American Settlement

The Asian American Education Project

Grade Levels	4-8
Lesson Overview	According to many social studies state standards, students will study the development of the nation up to 1850, with an emphasis on the people who were already here, when and from where others arrived, and why they came. However, Asian American histories or contributions are not specifically mentioned in the standards which could inaccurately lead students to believe that Asian American communities did not exist during this time period. In fact, Asian Americans, specifically Filipino Americans, settled in the U.S. as early as 1763. Asian Americans were here at the formation of the United States. Filipino sailors arrived in California as early as 1587. In 1763, Filipino sailors settled in a Louisiana bayou, and became the first Filipino immigrants to settle in the United States, known as “Manilamen.” Along with enslaved people and other people of color, the Filipino immigrants built a small fishing village called Saint Malo. The Manilamen made many contributions including revolutionizing the shrimping industry.
Lesson Objectives	Students will be able to: ● Describe early Filipino American history ● Describe the Saint Malo settlement in Louisiana ● Describe the contributions of early Filipino Americans ● Analyze the influences of colonization on early Filipino American settlers

Lesson Implementation:

This lesson can be completed in one instructional session or over a period of 1-2 weeks. The following are options for lesson implementation:

- One instructional session: Complete Activity 2 plus Discussion Questions.
- Two instructional sessions: Complete Activity 2 plus Discussion Questions and Activity 4
- One week: Complete Activity 1, Activity 2 plus Discussion Questions, One option from Activity 3, One option from Activity 4, One extension activity
- Two weeks: Complete additional options from the activities.

Manilamen: The First Asian American Settlement Essay:

In the 16th century, the Philippines was a **colony** of the Spanish Empire. Manila, the capital of the Philippines, was at the center of one of Spain’s main trade routes. Goods, mainly from China, were transported from Manila to the western colonies of the Spanish crown known as “New Spain.” New Spain consisted of Latin America, the U.S. west coast, and Louisiana.

The first colony in the United States was founded at Jamestown, Virginia, in 1607 by English settlers. However, 20 years prior, on October 18, 1587, Filipino sailors arrived to what is now known as Morro Bay, California, becoming the first Asians to step foot in the Americas. These Filipino men, or **Indios**

Luzones, worked on a Spanish ship as part of the Manila **galleon** trade which sailed from Mexico to the Philippines. This trade route was a thriving global network that operated between 1565 and 1815, connecting the economies of Asia, the Americas, and Europe for over two centuries.

Upon landing in Morro Bay, the crew claimed the land for Spain by putting up a cross made of branches. On their third day, violence broke out between the crew and the **indigenous** people. At least one Filipino sailor was killed. As such, the crew returned to their ship and left.

In 1763, Filipino sailors, as part of the Manila galleon trade, grew tired of the abuse from the Spanish and **deserted** the ships, escaping into the **marshlands** of Louisiana. They settled in a Louisiana **bayou** on the shore of Lake Borgne, and became the first Filipino immigrants to settle in the United States, known as “Manilamen.”

Along with enslaved people and other people of color, the Filipino immigrants built a small fishing village called Saint Malo. The village was a harsh place, storm-prone and mosquito-infested, it was isolated and undesirable. However, these traits made it a perfect place to hide from Spanish officials.

The Manilamen governed themselves and lived peaceful lives. They lived in small homes made of wood and fronds. These homes were raised with **stilts** and resembled traditional huts in the Philippines. The Manilamen used wire netting to keep out reptiles, insects, and other creatures. They stuffed their mattresses with dried **Spanish moss**.

The Manilamen were used to island life since the Philippines consisted of over 7,100 islands. As such, they were expert sailors and navigators. They were also skilled at fishing and shrimping along the Louisiana coast. Their main diet was seafood, especially raw fish with oil and vinegar.

The Manilamen **revolutionized** the shrimping industry by introducing methods such as the ancient Chinese tradition of “dancing the shrimp.” They separated shrimp shells from the meat by dancing and stomping on piles of shrimp in a circular motion. In addition, their tradition of drying shrimp and smoking fish was an effective way to **preserve** food before the invention of **refrigeration**. Today, Louisiana has become one of the nation’s top shrimp producers, greatly increasing the state’s economy.

The Manilamen also fought for the United States. During the War of 1812, they fought under General Andrew Jackson in defense of New Orleans. This was a decisive battle that secured U.S. victory against the British.

The Manilamen were familiar with the tropical **typhoons** of Southeast Asia; preparing for the hurricanes from the Gulf of Mexico. However, in 1915, Saint Malo was completely destroyed by the New Orleans Hurricane of 1915. As a result, many Manilamen moved to New Orleans. Some moved away and helped form other Filipino settlements in the southern United States. Some relocated to other areas.

Even though Saint Malo no longer exists, the Manilamen’s histories and contributions live on in their **descendants**. Because of racist immigration laws, Asian women were not allowed entry into the United States. In addition, there were racist laws that prohibited marriage between white and non-white people. And so the Manilamen instead married women from other communities of color. Many married into nearby Isleño, Cajun, and indigenous communities. They had generations of children, securing the legacy of Filipino Americans.

In 2005, the descendants of the Madriaga and Burtanog families hosted a grand reunion in a camp with similar stilt houses of Saint Malo. In 2019, to preserve Saint Malo’s history, the Philippine-Louisiana

Historical Society erected a marker for the lost settlement. Because of the Manilamen, Filipinos are the oldest continuous Asian American settler community in North America. Saint Malo was the oldest known permanent Asian American settlement. Over ten generations later, Filipino Americans in Louisiana and communities across the United States continue to thrive.

Bibliography:

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- Teng, Jhemmylrut. "These Filipino Fishermen Built the First Asian American Settlement in the United States." *Medium*, 18 May 2021. <https://www.medium.com/the-collector/these-filipino-fishermen-built-the-first-asian-american-settlement-in-the-united-states-a0094fa971c0>.
- Tayag, Yasmin. "Remembering America's First Filipino Settlement Before It Vanishes Into The Sea." *Huffpost*, 22 June 2021. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/st-malo-filipino-settlement-us_n_60d0b534e4b0136c1dbb43a4.

Vocabulary:¹

- **Bayou:** a marshy or sluggish arm, inlet, or outlet of a lake, river, etc.
- **Colony:** an area over which a foreign nation or state extends or maintains control
- **Descendant:** one originating or coming from an ancestral source
- **Desert:** to leave usually without permission or intent to return
- **Galleon:** a heavy, square-rigged sailing ship of the 15th to early 18th centuries used for war or commerce, particularly by the Spanish
- **Indigenous:** of or relating to the earliest known inhabitants of a place and especially of a place that was colonized by a now-dominant group
- **Indios Luzones:** indigenous people from Luzon, the largest island of the Philippines where Manila is also located
- **Marshland:** a tract or area of soft wet land with grass or cattails
- **Preserve:** to keep intact or save from decomposition or decay
- **Refrigeration:** the process of making or keeping cold or cool for preservation
- **Revolutionize:** to change fundamentally or completely
- **Spanish Moss:** a plant of the pineapple family forming pendant tufts of grayish-green filaments on trees from the southern U.S. to Argentina
- **Stilts:** posts serving as supports of a structure to keep it above ground or at water level
- **Typhoon:** a hurricane occurring in the region of the Philippines or the China sea

¹ Definitions adapted from Merriam-Webster Dictionary

Discussion Questions:

1. Why did early Filipino sailors come to the United States?
2. How did colonization affect Filipino Americans?

3. Why did the Filipino sailors settle in Saint Malo?
4. Why were the early Filipino settlers called “Manilamen”?
5. How did the Manilamen’s lives in the Philippines affect how they lived in Louisiana?
6. How did the Manilamen contribute to American history?
7. What was life like for the Manilamen?
8. How did the Manilamen preserve their history?
9. Why aren’t the Manilamen and Saint Malo settlement included in American colonial history? (Why do we know more about Jamestown and Plymouth settlements than Saint Malo?)
10. How did the Manilamen work as a community? In what ways did their sense of community help them survive and thrive?

Activity 1: Introducing Early Filipino American History

This activity helps build a shared understanding of early Filipino American history by discussing and sharing information about how Filipinos first arrived to the United States and their earliest settlement in this country.

1. Ask students to list everything they know about Filipino history or culture. Tell them that Filipino American history started in 1587.
2. Have students study a [map](#) of the Manila Galleon Trade route.
 - a. Explain that this trade route was significant because it established trade relations between Asia and the Americas, ushering in a modern age of economic globalization.
 - b. Explain that this trade route is how the first Filipinos came to the United States.
 - c. Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of global trading.
 - d. Discuss the impacts and consequences of colonization.
 - e. Make a parallel between how Great Britain colonized the Americas to increase trade and goods in order to increase their national wealth, and how Spain colonized the Philippines for the same reasons.
3. Ask students what they know about New Orleans. Tell them that this area is home to the first Filipino American settlement.
 - a. Show a [map](#) of Saint Malo in Louisiana.
 - b. Show a picture of the [historical marker](#) in Saint Malo. Have students read the inscription.
 - c. Ask students: Why isn’t Saint Malo in their history books? Why was it important for the Philippine Louisiana Historical Society to erect this marker?

Activity 2: Saint Malo and the Manilamen

This activity develops a deeper knowledge of the Saint Malo settlement and the life of the Manilamen who lived there. Students will identify and explain the significance of Saint Malo as an early settlement in the now-United States.

1. Have students do a close reading of the essay. (Option: Create a slide deck with the essay content.) Facilitate a discussion (see Discussion Questions).
2. Show students the *TAYO News* video, “St. Malo: The First Filipino Community”: <https://youtu.be/kpzVK8nerQY> (Run time: 1 min. 41 sec.). Ask students the following questions:
 - a. What new information about Saint Malo did you learn from this video?

- b. What information about Saint Malo was confirmed for you by this video?
 - c. Why is it important for more people to know about Saint Malo?
3. Have students complete this graphic organizer by drawing pictures and writing captions to answer each question in the boxes:

Who were the “Manilamen” that settled in Saint Malo? What were their reasons for doing so?	Where is Saint Malo? Why is the location important?
How did the “Manilamen” live?	What did the “Manilamen” eat?

4. Show students the *Kababayan Weekly* video about a descendant of the Manilamen, “Lives of Manila Men in Louisiana According to Descendants”: <https://youtu.be/nv9Y4nGO8ms> (Run time: 7 min. 27 sec.).
 - a. Ask students what they learned.
 - b. Have students research a narrative of a descendant from another group of early settlers. Have them compare the experiences of these descendants via a Venn Diagram noting how their experiences were different and similar.
 - c. Discuss the differences between the descendants of recognized settler communities (i.e., the Mayflower) versus hidden settler communities (i.e., the Manilamen).
 - d. Ask students: Why is it important to be recognized as a descendant of an early settler community? What is significant about the Manilamen community?

Activity 3: Exploring Filipino History and Experiences

This activity offers four different options for further expanding students’ knowledge of Filipino Americans and their hidden histories.

Teachers can choose one or more of the following options:

1. Have students research the history of colonization of the Philippines by both Spain and the United States. Have students complete the following:
 - a. Make a timeline with pictures and captions.
 - b. Write a report about why Spain and the United States wanted to colonize the Philippines.
 - c. Discuss the effects of colonization on the Filipino people.
 - d. Compare the colonization of the Philippines to the colonization of what is now known as the United States by Great Britain.

2. Jigsaw students into small groups and have each one study an aspect of the Manilamen's settlement of Saint Malo.
 - a. Tell students that early settlers must solve various problems in order to survive: land, shelter, diet (food), movement (transportation), government (leadership), and family-building.
 - b. Give students time to conduct their research and then have them come together as a whole class to complete the below chart:

Problems	What obstacles did the Manilamen face?	How did the Manilamen solve the problems in Saint Malo?	How were the Manilamen influenced by their lives back in the Philippines?
Land			
Shelter			
Diet/Food			
Movement			
Government			
Family-Building			

- c. Have students analyze the data in the chart and discuss the findings by asking the following questions: How were the Manilamen successful as settlers? How were they not successful as settlers? How are their experiences similar to or different from the colonial American settlers?
3. Have students research Louisiana's shrimping industry including how much the state makes from shrimping; how shrimp impacts Louisiana's culture especially food; and how many jobs does the shrimping industry provide, etc. Have students study Filipino shrimping practices/techniques. Have students analyze the contributions Filipino Americans have made to the Louisiana shrimping industry.
4. Explain how the Manilamen are an example of "hidden history." Have students research other examples of hidden histories from communities of color in the U.S.
 - a. Have each student create a one-page infographic of the hidden history.
 - b. Create a class timeline on a large wall space. Make two parallel horizontal lines. On the top line, add major U.S. historical events that students have studied. On the bottom line, have students add their infographics on the timeline in correct chronological order.
 - c. Facilitate a discussion by asking students: Why are the histories of communities of color in the United States not as well-known as those of white communities? What did the Founding Fathers mean when they wrote, "We the people..."? What does this say about what "people" get to be "American" and who doesn't?

Activity 4: The Manilamen's Experiences

This activity offers three different options for teachers to assess students' comprehension of the Manilamen and Saint Malo community.

Teachers can choose one or more of the following options:

1. Explain to students that many Manilamen wrote home and also sent money back to their families. Have students write a letter from the perspective a Manilamen describing what life was like in Saint Malo. Include at least 2 struggles and 2 successes.
2. Have students create a video or slide deck documenting the history, experiences, and contributions of the Manilamen/Saint Malo community.
3. Have students write a report with the following three components:
 - a. An explanation of why the Manilamen settled in Saint Malo.
 - b. A description of what life was like for the Manilamen.
 - c. An argument for why the Manilamen should be included in American history books and classroom lessons.

Extension Activities:

1. After Activity 2, implement The Asian American Education Project lesson entitled, "Perpetual Foreigner - Systemic Racism Against Asian Americans," <https://asianamericanedu.org/perpetualforeigner.html>." Facilitate a discussion with students using the following questions:
 - a. How and why are Filipino Americans seen as "perpetual foreigners" despite having thousands of years of history in the United States?
 - b. How does learning about the Manilamen redefine what being "American" means? How do we work to make this definition more inclusive?
2. Have students watch the first episode (30 minutes) of the docuseries "Take Out with Lisa Ling" on HBO Max. (Note: Requires Subscription to View. Option: Watch clip from 3:40-7:20) Discuss how the Manilamen paved the way for the region's shrimp industry. Have students learn more about their own family's food traditions and history. Have students create and share their own videos about their family's cultural food history.
3. Have students learn more about enslaved Asians who were shipped from the Spanish Philippines in the Manila Galleon Trade. Compare their experiences to those of the enslaved Africans in colonial America. (Enslaved Asians were all called "Chino," which meant Chinese in Spanish. In reality, these Asians were from many places including China, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia, Bengal, among others. Most of these enslaved Asians were male, and from Portuguese slave traders who obtained them from their colonies and outposts of India.) Discuss the harmful consequences of colonization and imperialism.
4. Have students learn more about Lafcadio Hearn, a journalist who published a *Harper's Weekly* article in 1883 which documented the Manilamen. Discuss the significance of this being the first published article about the Filipinos in the United States. Have students study a community and write an article about that community.

5. Have students learn more about Juan San Malo, Saint Malo's namesake. (Malo was a leader of a group of runaway enslaved people who took refuge in the marshlands.) Discuss how and why Malo was an appropriate name for this area. Have students conduct research about the sources of names for local places in your community.
6. Have students research Filipino migrations including: family members of Manilamen; soldiers who fought in World War II; beneficiaries of the Immigration Act of 1965; and Jefferson Parish Filipino teachers, restaurant workers, etc.
7. Have students watch the PBS documentary, "Little Manila: Filipinos in California's Heartland," <https://www.pbs.org/video/kvie-viewfinder-little-manila-filipinos-californias-heartland/> (Run time: 26 min 46 sec). Have students compare and contrast the Filipino settlements in Stockton versus Saint Malo. If possible, plan a field trip to a local Filipino ethnic enclave. Have students make a list of place-making markers.
8. Have students research a modern ethnic community (i.e., Hmong resettlement in Minneapolis, Minnesota). Have students compare and contrast this group with the Manilamen/Saint Malo community.
9. Have students take a field trip to a local Filipino community (i.e., Filipino Town). Have students draw a map of the area and select a landmark. Have students research the history and cultural significance of the landmark.

Further Information:

Lesson Plan: "1904 World's Fair - Exhibition of the Igorot Filipino People." *The Asian American Education Project*,
<https://asianamericanedu.org/1904-worlds-fair-exhibition-of-the-igorot-filipino-people.html>.

Lesson Plan: "Filipino Farmworkers Fight for their Rights." *The Asian American Education Project*,
<https://asianamericanedu.org/larry-itliong-cesar-chavez-grape-strike.html>.