

Remembering the Past: AAPI History That Shapes Today's Teens

History can feel like a bunch of dates, names, and events buried in textbooks—but for Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) communities, history is personal, emotional, and still shaping the world teens live in today. From laws that barred entire groups of people from entering the U.S. to forced internment camps during World War II, and the struggles of refugee families seeking safety, AAPI history is full of stories of resilience, survival, and identity.

Take the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, for example. This was the first law in U.S. history to block immigration based on nationality. Chinese immigrants were fleeing famine, poverty, and political turmoil at home, hoping for a better life in America. Instead, the law labeled them as “undesirable” and made it nearly impossible to bring their families over or become citizens. Families were torn apart, communities faced discrimination, and generations had to navigate a country that made them feel like outsiders in the land they called home.

Fast forward a few decades, and the Japanese internment camps during World War II show another layer of struggle. After the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, over 120,000 Japanese Americans, two-thirds of whom were U.S. citizens, were forcibly removed from their homes and sent to internment camps in remote parts of the country. Families lost businesses, homes, and years of stability. Teens growing up during this time missed school, friendships, and normal teenage experiences, living under constant suspicion and fear. Even today, the emotional impact of those camps continues to ripple through families, shaping how younger generations view identity, belonging, and trust.

Then there's the story of the Hmong refugee community, many of whom came to the U.S. after the Vietnam War. Teens in these families often face the dual challenge of growing up in a new culture while carrying the memories and trauma of war and displacement from their parents. Learning English, catching up in school, and balancing cultural expectations at home can be exhausting, but it also fosters resilience and adaptability in ways most teens can only imagine.

Why does knowing these stories matter for today's teens? For one, history gives context to current issues. Anti-Asian hate crimes have surged in recent years, and seeing how past laws and policies targeted AAPI communities helps teens understand that discrimination isn't new—it's systemic. Knowing the past can empower young people to speak out, advocate for justice, and build solidarity with peers from all backgrounds.

It's also about identity. Many AAPI teens navigate multiple worlds—home and school, tradition and modern culture. Learning about Chinese, Japanese, Hmong, and other histories can provide a sense of pride and connection. For example, understanding the sacrifices of ancestors during internment or resettlement can help teens appreciate their own opportunities today and motivate them to carry forward a legacy of resilience and advocacy.

Some teens are already taking action. Across the country, high school students are creating clubs, organizing cultural heritage events, and starting social media campaigns to share stories

of AAPI history. These projects aren't just about learning—they're about teaching others, raising awareness, and making history feel alive and relevant.

Teachers and schools can also play a role by incorporating more AAPI history into classes. Teens often report that learning about these stories makes history feel "real" rather than distant. Field trips to local museums, virtual interviews with elders in the community, or even history projects focused on family stories help students connect personal identity with national history.

Ultimately, remembering the past isn't about dwelling on tragedy—it's about learning lessons, finding inspiration, and shaping the future. Teens who understand AAPI history can challenge stereotypes, speak up against injustice, and carry forward traditions and stories that might otherwise be forgotten. It's a way to honor those who came before while making sure the next generation grows up with awareness, empathy, and pride.