



# A Fluid Frontier: Minority and Ethnic Groups and Opportunity in Oklahoma

OKLAHOMA HISTORY CENTER EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

## A Fluid Frontier

Oklahoma is home to people of many **diverse** backgrounds. Many **ethnicities** and cultures helped shape the state of Oklahoma. This land is a place of diversity with many cultures, which is something to be celebrated. Since its beginning, Oklahoma has served as a unique frontier for interaction and opportunity.

When the land that is now Oklahoma was first being explored, and later officially opened for settlement in the late 1800s, many people came in the hopes of achieving a better life.

These adventurers did not all share the same backgrounds and ethnicity. This created **cross-cultural interaction** unseen in other parts of the United States, making Oklahoma distinct.

Since Oklahoma is made up of so many wonderful cultural backgrounds, this exhibit focuses on a selection of ethnic **minority** groups that interacted on the frontier, making Oklahoma unique from the start.

Oklahomans with roots in China, Kiehn Acct., photograph, c. 1938  
(21412.M587.17, Z. P. Meyers/Barney Hilleman Photographic Collection, OHS).<sup>1</sup>



Dr. Michael A. Shadid (2012.201.B1237.0640, Oklahoma Publishing Company Photography Collection, OHS).<sup>4</sup>



Captive rescued from Comanche, c. 1871  
(172, Oklahoma Historical Society Photograph Collection, OHS).<sup>2</sup>

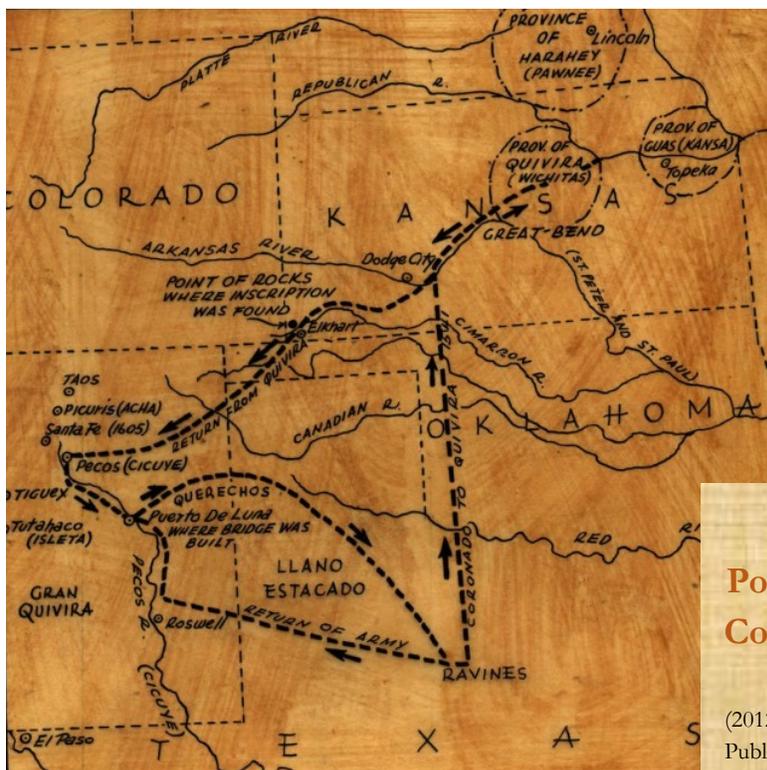


S. Douglas Russell, c. 1900 (5494, William Parker Campbell Collection, OHS).<sup>3</sup>

## Latinx on the Frontier

Hispanics make up the third-largest ethnic minority group in Oklahoma. Many Oklahomans can trace their **ancestry** back to the Latin American nations or Puerto Rico.

The Hispanic story connected to Oklahoma from the beginning, starting with early exploration into the lands now known as the United States. **Expeditions** from Mexico led by Francisco Vázquez de Coronado in 1541 and Juan de Oñate in 1601, each crossed into present Oklahoma territory, marking the beginning of Hispanic influence in the region. Interactions between the Spanish and the American Indian tribes produced lasting impacts, such as the introduction of the horse to the West.



### Possible route of the Coronado expedition

(2012.201.B0144.0284, Oklahoma Publishing Company Photography Collection, OHS).<sup>5</sup>

## Cowboy Culture

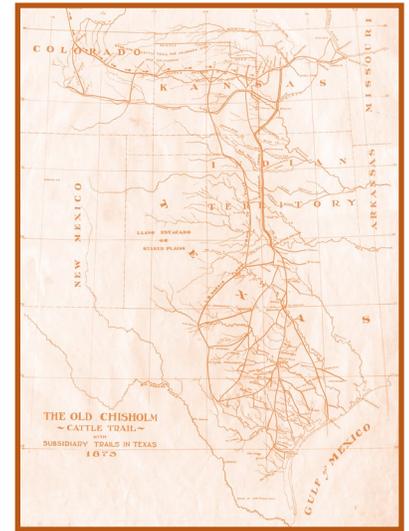
Hispanic contributions to cowboy culture did not end with the introduction of the horse. *Vaquero* is the Spanish word for cowboy. The cowboy originated with Hispanic culture and vaqueros eventually transformed the American West.

The Spanish in North America first established ranches and tended to cattle on horseback. Much of what is now Texas was Mexican territory until Texas gained independence in 1836. Due to the strong Spanish influence in Texas, the state became an important spot for ranching culture.

## Map of the Chisholm Trail

In an effort to find the best markets for selling cattle, ranchers (often Mexican Americans known as *Tejanos*) traveled through different states with their herds. Ranchers often made more money per head of cattle in the northeast, which encouraged them to take their cattle to better markets. This travel established routes across the United States called **cattle drives**, which these cowboys journeyed along with their cattle.

Many important cattle drives along the **Chisholm Trail**, the **Shawnee or Sedalia Trail**, and the **Great Western Trail** crossed through present-day Oklahoma territory.



The Old Chisholm Cattle Trail with subsidiary trails in Texas, 1873 (HISMAP.0039, Oklahoma Historical Society Map Collection, OHS).<sup>6</sup>



The famous Pawnee Bill

His clothes show how Hispanic culture has influenced the making of the cowboy

(2012.201.B0358B.0436, Oklahoma Publishing Company Photography Collection, OHS).<sup>7</sup>

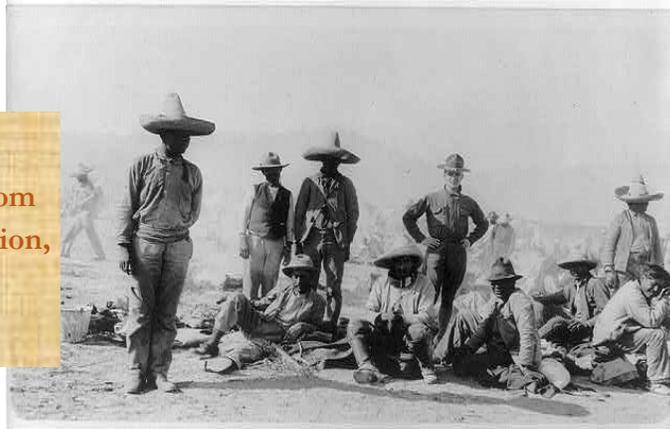


Cattle From E. K. Giles Ranch Near Coalgate, Oklahoma, 1905 (49, Oklahoma Historical Society Photograph Collection, OHS).<sup>8</sup>

### Other Involvement: 1890–1900

Oklahoma saw a major influx of immigrants fleeing the dangers of the revolution in Mexico in the early twentieth century. Oklahoma had only a small Hispanic population before the **Mexican Revolution**, which took place during the 1910s.

Mexican soldiers from  
the Mexican Revolution,  
1911



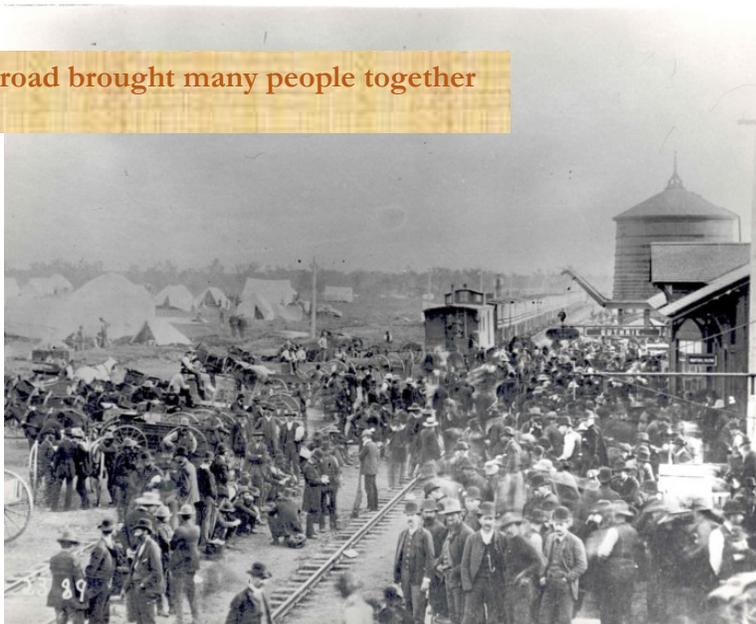
(Image courtesy of the Library of Congress)<sup>9</sup>

However, in the nineteenth century, a small number from the Latinx community found involvement in other areas of the frontier besides work as cattle hands.

A large number of those working in the mines and on the railroads were of Hispanic heritage. Mines and railroads provided opportunities to many seeking work on the frontier. Latinx are not the only ethnic group that found work in these positions.

Immigrant communities made up many of the hard, determined workers trying to provide for themselves and their families on the frontier as they crossed into the region that is now Oklahoma. These work environments created a place for cross-cultural interaction not seen in other parts of the country.

The railroad brought many people together



Railroad Depot, April 23, 1889 (21412.BH71.A, Z. P. Meyers/Barney Hillerman Photographic Collection, OHS).<sup>10</sup>

## African Americans on the Frontier

Both the United States and Oklahoma have been greatly influenced by African Americans. The efforts of African Americans to build businesses and communities define many parts of Oklahoma history. African Americans living in Oklahoma fostered and advanced the demands for full participation in decision making, the expectation of safety, and the equal treatment of different groups.

Exploring the lives and experiences of Blacks, specifically on the frontier, provides an interesting insight into life in early Oklahoma.

This nation's history is darkened by the mark of slavery. White plantation and business owners are often seen as the primary enslavers in this country and while that is true, slavery reached a number of other cultures as well. Some tribes included individuals that enslaved African Americans. The first African Americans in Oklahoma marched on the **Trail of Tears** with their American Indian slaveholders from the southeast after the federal government removed the **Five Tribes** to Indian Territory.

### African Americans and American Indians

One of the unique aspects of the African American experience on the frontier is the role that African Indians played. The Five Tribes participated in the slave trade, and in some cases, married and adopted African Americans as tribal members. This intermingling of American Indian and African cultures made an impact on the frontier.

Many of the African Americans introduced to Indian society were also exposed to **Euro-American** culture. As a result, many knew how to speak English. During the Revolutionary and Civil Wars, individuals who knew both English and the Native language of the tribe became valuable **interpreters**, able to communicate between tribal leaders and the American military.



Comanche  
family, c. 1900

(Image courtesy of the *IndiVisible* exhibit by the National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian.)<sup>11</sup>

During the chaotic days of the Civil War, Indian Territory provided a unique hope for many Blacks. The lack of lawful accountability in Indian Territory concerned many pro-slavery people who believed enslaved people would attempt to escape. Indeed, Indian Territory served as a destination for runaway slaves.

During the Civil War, the Union created the **First Indian Home Guard**. African Americans, whites, and American Indians worked together in this fighting unit. These units fought bravely, and most of their combat took place in Indian Territory. They also bridged cultural gaps. African Americans familiar with American Indian cultures and languages played an important role in translating information between the English-speaking command and American Indian soldiers.

Many people in the United States today have both African American and American Indian ancestry and are proud of their unique heritage.

### Post-Civil War

After the Civil War, the **Thirteenth Amendment** to the US Constitution abolished slavery in the year 1865. Once the war ended, the federal government also granted freedom to enslaved people held by the American Indians. As retaliation for tribal **allegiance** to the Confederacy, the federal government required the Five Tribes to recognize the Freedmen as tribal members. Later, tribes were instructed to provide **land allotments** for Freedmen. Some tribes, like the Cherokee, even gave their Freedmen all the rights of a tribal member.



**Chickasaw Freedmen Filing Allotments**  
(William Parker Campbell Collection, OHS).<sup>12</sup>



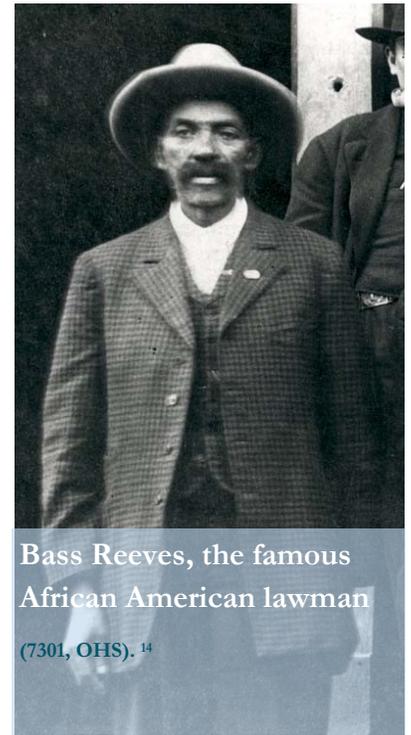
**Cherokee Strip Land Run, 1893**  
(2012.201.B1258.0920, Oklahoma Publishing Company Photography Collection, OHS).<sup>13</sup>

The Black population in the region continued to grow due to the **land run** in 1889. When the government opened the **Unassigned Lands** for **settlement**, many African Americans joined the numbers of those desiring to establish a new life here. The Unassigned Lands became a part of Oklahoma Territory in 1890.

Many African Americans fought in the Civil War. Once the war ended, the Black soldiers that remained in the Great Plains earned a unique nickname, which was given to them by the Plains Indians: **Buffalo Soldiers**. These soldiers protected Indian Territory as well as Oklahoma Territory from unauthorized invaders and kept the peace. Many soldiers acted as lawmen in the Wild West days of Oklahoma.

## Bass Reeves

Bass Reeves was a legendary African American lawman during Oklahoma's territorial days. Famous even in his own time, Reeves made himself known as an expert with firearms who was unflinchingly brave. He traveled all over Indian Territory, reportedly arresting more than three-thousand men and women. People like Bass Reeves were extremely important in upholding the law in early Oklahoma and Indian Territories. With the great expanse of new frontier came a lack of law enforcement, police, and accountability. Lawmen stayed busy keeping the territory safe from outlaws and rule breakers.



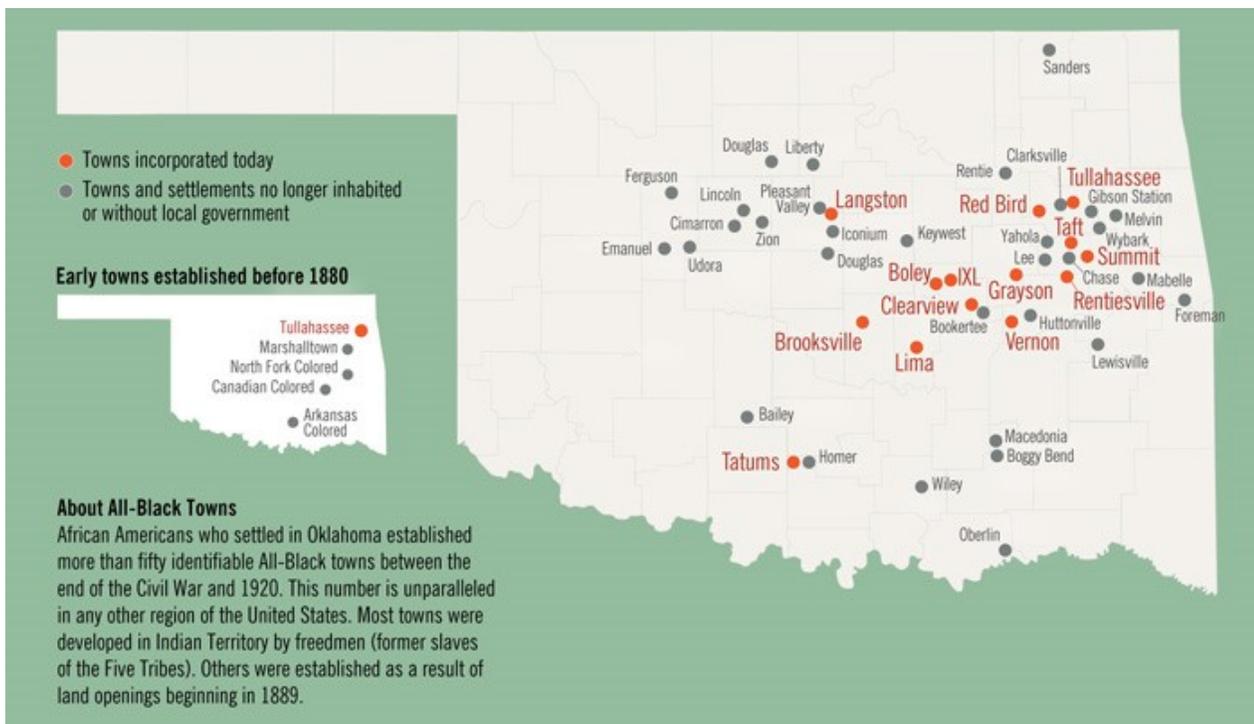
## All-Black Towns

After the Civil War, the Freedmen in Indian Territory looked to each other for support. Freedmen who received land allotments often chose tracks close together, creating strong African American communities.

Additionally, the land run in 1889 created opportunity for many African Americans who wanted to develop a new community in the hopes of escaping **racism** and **prejudice**. Soon All-Black towns and communities arose in Indian Territory, and some lasted into statehood. These communities prospered and continued to grow as African Americans from around the country saw the opportunity for life in a prejudice-free environment.

From 1865 to 1920, at least fifty All-Black towns were established in Oklahoma. Some people held the vision of Oklahoma eventually becoming an All-Black state.

However, many of these towns eventually dissipated as **Jim Crow laws** passed in Oklahoma. These laws made segregation a part of Oklahoma society, causing many African Americans to leave in disappointment and frustration. Later, many fled the state when the **Great Depression** hit in the 1930s.



## Asians on the Frontier

During the days of the frontier, Oklahoma was home to a small Asian population. According to census records, it appears that there were fewer than one hundred Asian residents before statehood. The number of Asian residents did not increase dramatically until the 1970s. However, in the nineteenth century, Asians established a presence that continues to today.

Asians found their way to the land that is now Oklahoma in a variety of ways. The major Asian countries of China, Korea, and Japan opened their previously closed ports to US merchant ships, allowing **emigration**. China opened ports in 1787, Japan in 1853, and Korea in 1882.

Many Asians originally settled on the West Coast, near California, during the years of the **Gold Rush**. Over time the Midwest saw development in mining and agriculture, which brought more people to the area, including Asian immigrants from the West Coast.

**Mining towns** proved to be very racially diverse areas in the territory because of immigrant communities constituting much of their population.



### Mines

#### A mine in Peoria, Oklahoma

(2012.201.B1013.0098, Oklahoma Publishing Company Photography Collection, OHS).<sup>16</sup>



### RAILROAD WORKERS

#### Group of men building a railroad

(2012.201.B1017.0115, Oklahoma Publishing Company Photography Collection, OHS).<sup>17</sup>

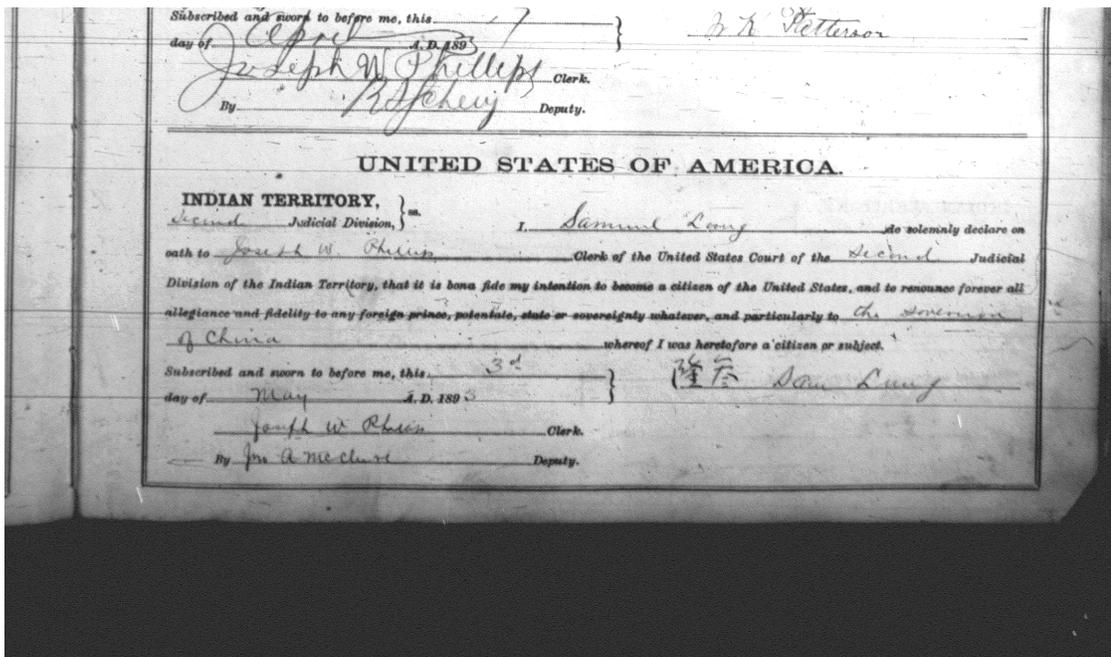
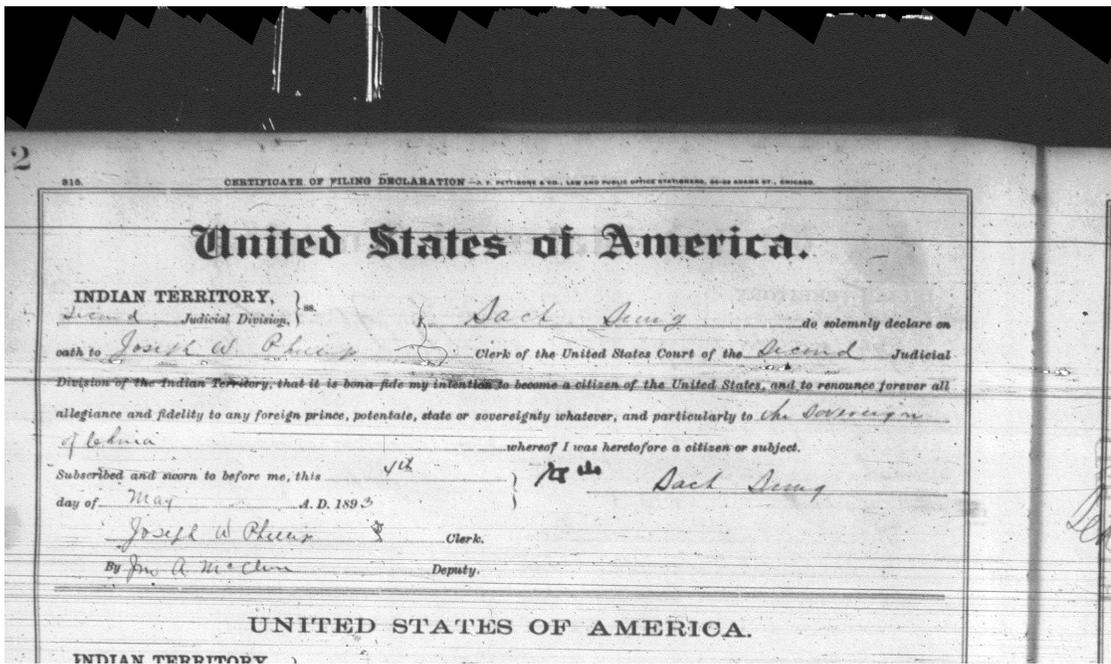
Additionally, one of the primary causes of Asian **dispersal** on the frontier was the **transcontinental railroad**. A number of Asians maintained jobs as railway workers, which brought them through the Unassigned Lands. Some of these workers remained in the territory.

## Immigration Control

Various laws passed by the federal government created **immigration** restrictions limiting Asian presence on the frontier, including Oklahoma, for a number of years. Fear grew in the United States among some white workers that Asian immigrants created too much competition for jobs.

As a result, Congress enacted the **Chinese Exclusion Act**, which **barred** Chinese workers from entering the United States and kept the Chinese already present from obtaining citizenship. Similarly, racist legislation was developed against Japanese immigrants in the US. The United States and Japan made the **Gentlemen's Agreement of 1907**. This informal agreement resulted in the United States agreeing to stop the segregation restrictions on Japanese immigrants in the United States if Japan agreed to stop allowing emigration to the United States except for agreed upon cases. Other similar acts passed that restricted Asian immigrants.

Due to these laws promoting discrimination, many years passed before Oklahoma saw a large Asian population.



Naturalization documents for Chinese immigrants, 1893

18/19

## Middle Easterners on the Frontier

“Middle Eastern” is a term that refers to land in the Mediterranean Sea and the Persian Gulf. “Middle Easterners” can be people from many different countries such as Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Israel, Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and many more locations.

It is important to recognize that just like Europe and North America have many ethnicities, there are many ethnic backgrounds that make up the Middle East.



**A few traveling  
“peddlers.”**  
(Image courtesy of the Library of Congress.)<sup>20</sup>

### Business on the Frontier

The first Middle Easterners in present Oklahoma came in the late nineteenth century. Many of these early immigrants began in business. A number of stores in the mining towns were operated by people of Middle Eastern background.

A practice called **peddling** proved common in the days of the frontier. Stores on the frontier were few and not always close to those who lived outside of town. Since this makes shopping more difficult, stores often sold products to individuals who then traveled across the territory to the more remote locations and resold products to the people there. These traveling salesmen earned the name “peddlers.” Many Middle Easterners became peddlers on the frontier.

By the time the 1900 census was taken, one hundred people identified as Syrians lived in Oklahoma and Indian Territories.

## Activities

### Primary Source Activity

**Read the following sections of the Chinese Exclusion Act.**

SEC. 12. That no Chinese person shall be permitted to enter the United States by land without producing to the proper officer of customs the certificate in this act required of Chinese persons seeking to land from a vessel. And any Chinese person found unlawfully within the United States shall be caused to be removed therefrom to the country from whence he came, by direction of the President of the United States, and at the cost of the United States, after being brought before some justice, judge, or commissioner of a court of the United States and found to be one not lawfully entitled to be or remain in the United States.

SEC. 14. That hereafter no State court or court of the United States shall admit Chinese to citizenship; and all laws in conflict with this act are hereby repealed.

### Guiding Thought Questions

- 1) What is your reaction to reading this passage?
- 2) What evidence supports your thoughts?
- 3) Insert your name where ever it says “Chinese person.” Has your opinion changed?
- 4) Now replace “Chinese person” with anyone who has blonde hair or anyone wearing glasses. How are you affected now that it is a group?
- 5) Do you think this is fair? Why or why not?

## Image Evaluation

Look closely at this 1864 engraving entitled *Reading the Emancipation Proclamation*.



(Image courtesy of the Library of Congress.)<sup>21</sup>

What emotions are the people expressing?

What do you think they might be feeling or thinking?

Describe the ways that the Emancipation Proclamation and the Thirteenth Amendment would impact these people?

## A Fluid Frontier Quiz

- Which TWO of the following explorers led expeditions into parts of present-day Oklahoma?
  - Christopher Columbus
  - Juan de Oñate
  - Daniel Boone
  - Hernan Cortez
  - Francisco Vásquez de Coronado
  - Marco Polo
- Which answer describes a cattle drive?
  - Bovine transport vehicles
  - The act of traveling a great distance in an automobile past large ranches
  - Trails used by cowboys and ranchers to move large herds of cattle from one state to another
- Fill in the blanks using the correct words from the word bank.

Large	Immigrant	Labor	Team-Building
Competitive	Small	Fun	Cross-Cultural

Mines and railroads often created \_\_\_\_\_ communities where there was a lot of \_\_\_\_\_ interaction.

- Circle all that are considered one of the Five Tribes.
  - Shawnee
  - Muscogee (Creek)
  - Cherokee
  - Kiowa
  - Pawnee
  - Seminole
  - Choctaw
  - Chickasaw
- True or False: African-Indian people were important during the Civil War because they acted as interpreters.
- Which is the name of the first fighting unit made of whites, Blacks, and American Indians in the Civil War?
  - First Indian Home Guard
  - First Native Home Guard
  - First Native Fighting Guard
  - First Indian Fighting Guard
- The first of the famous land runs took place in the year:
  - 1898
  - 1888
  - 1889
  - 1869
- Which is NOT one of the three major Asian countries to open its ports allowing for emigration to the United States in the late eighteenth into the nineteenth centuries?
  - China
  - India
  - Korea
  - Japan
- Fill in the blanks.

The \_\_\_\_\_ and the \_\_\_\_\_ are both examples of immigration policies made by the United States to keep Asian people from immigrating to the US.

- The first Middle Easterners came to Oklahoma in the  
  - Early nineteenth century
  - Late eighteenth century
  - Mid-eighteenth century
  - Late nineteenth century

## Storytelling: Oral History

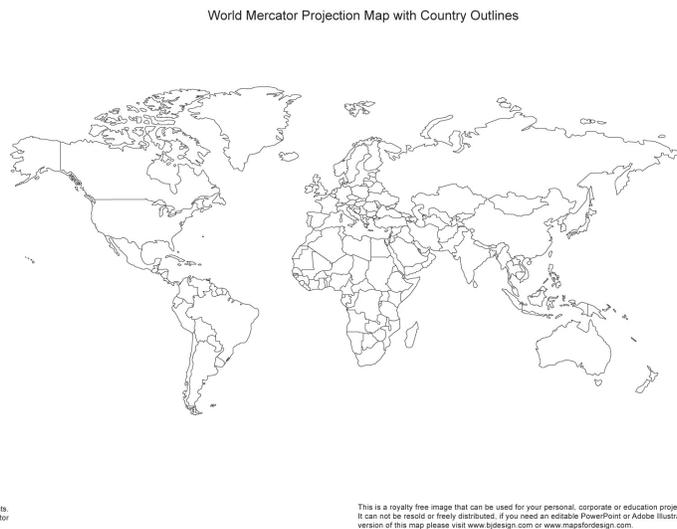
Oral history is when someone speaks verbally about their past or traditions. Historians often interview people to learn from their oral histories, and you should too.

Learn about your own family history! Interview a parent or guardian, aunt or uncle, grandmother or grandfather, and find out where your family lived in past generations and how they got to Oklahoma.

Attached is a printable map of the United States and a world map. Trace a path along the map to show how your family has traveled to where you are today.

Below are a few guiding questions to help you get started and discover more about your family history. Ask these to your family!

1. How did our family get to Oklahoma?
2. Who are your parents? Who are your grandparents?
3. Did you ever hear your grandparents talk about their lives? What did they say?
4. Where have your parents lived? Where have your grandparents lived?
5. Why did our family move from where our ancestors once lived?
6. Describe our family's journey to Oklahoma.



## Glossary

**allegiance:** Commitment or support to a cause or to a person.

**ancestry:** A person's family that lived a long time ago.

**barred:** To be kept from or out of a place.

**Buffalo Soldiers:** A name Plains Indians gave to the African American soldiers assigned to the Great Plains.

**cattle drives:** Trails used by cowboys and ranchers to move large herds of cattle from one state to another.

**Chinese Exclusion Act:** An 1882 law that prevented immigration of Chinese workers. It was repealed in 1943.

**Chisholm Trail:** One of the best known cattle trails, which extended 800 miles. It was named after Jesse Chisholm, a Cherokee frontier trader who owned a trading post on the trail.

**cross-cultural interaction:** When people from different backgrounds or cultures to each other.

**dispersal:** Spread out across a space.

**diverse:** Showing great variety.

**emigration:** Moving *from* or leaving a country to settle in another.

**ethnicity:** Social group that has similar national, racial, or cultural traditions.

**Euro-American:** A person living in the US who migrated from or has ancestors from the countries of Europe.

**expedition:** A long trip taken with a specific purpose.

**First Indian Home Guard:** Union fighting force during the Civil War that attempted to protect Indian territory.

**Five Tribes:** Term used to refer to the Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Muscogee (Creek), and Seminole tribes.

**Gentleman's Agreement of 1907:** Agreement between Japanese Government and the US that greatly limited Japanese immigration to the US.

**Gold Rush:** Gold was discovered in California in 1848 and by 1849 nearly 100,000 people moved out there to make their fortune and mine for gold. This great migration of people to California in search for gold has been termed "the Gold Rush."

**Great Depression:** A time of extreme economic downturn in the 1930s that created high unemployment rates.

**Great Western Trail:** The last of the great cattle trails running through Indian Territory. It began in southern Texas and went north as far as Nebraska.

**immigration:** Coming *to* a new country.

**interpreter:** A person who explains what someone is saying in another language.

**Jim Crow laws:** Laws that promoted segregation and racist practices.

**land allotments:** Practice of the federal government dividing communally owned land among individual tribal members.

**Land Run of 1889:** The opening of the Unassigned Lands in Indian Territory for settlement.

**Mexican Revolution:** An armed civil struggle in Mexico that established a constitutional republic.

**mining towns:** Towns that arose near mines where people would work to bring those minerals out of the ground. People were usually paid by the amount they mined.

**minority:** When a person does not share the same ethnicity as the majority of the population around them they are considered to be a minority.

**peddler:** A traveling salesman, who was common on the frontier.

**prejudice:** Having an unfair opinion about someone or something.

**racism:** The belief that one's own race is better than another.

**reata:** A type of rope lasso used by cowboys.

**settlement:** When a person or group of people move from one area to another and establish residence.

**Shawnee or Sedalia Trail:** Major cattle trail that allowed longhorn cattle from San Antonio to travel east to Missouri.

**Tejanos:** A term used for people who were both Mexican and Texan in heritage.

**Thirteenth Amendment:** The amendment to the Constitution which prohibits and outlaws slavery within the United States.

**Trail of Tears:** The federal government's forced removal of American Indians from their tribal lands to Indian Territory. The American Indians were subjected to harsh conditions and many people died.

**transcontinental railroad:** The connecting of the Union Pacific Railroad with the Central Pacific Railroad, which linked the East Coast of the United States to the West Coast.

**Unassigned Lands:** Land in Indian Territory that did not belong to any one tribe.

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