

Stockton, California: The Story of Sikh Immigration

*Adapted lesson formats from Facing History and Teaching With Historic Places .
Segments for 50-60 minute periods.*

INTENDED FOR:

Grades 9 – 12

World History (Human Rights, Religion), Government (Law, Politics), U.S. History (Civil Rights, Current Affairs)

TOPICS

The lesson can be used in units on immigration or on multiculturalism in America. It can also be used to enhance the study of South Asian American history.

Time period: 19th and 20th century

State Standards differ, however, below are some sample standards demonstrating where the lessons in this pack could be taught:

- Understands massive immigration after 1870 and how new social patterns, conflicts, and ideas of national unity developed amid growing cultural diversity
- Understands how the U.S. changed between the post-World War I years and the eve of the Great Depression
- Understands economic, social, and cultural developments in contemporary U.S
- Strands from Social Studies Standards – Themes on Culture; People, Places and Environment; and Individuals, Groups and Institutions.

OBJECTIVES

1. To explain the contribution of Sikh immigrants to the development of California's agricultural industries.
2. To identify and describe the obstacles encountered by South Asian cultural groups as they struggled to make a living and find a place in American society.
3. To analyze the function and significance of Stockton Gurdwara to early Sikh and South Asian immigrants using evidence from online media pieces.
4. To locate and learn about ethnic enclaves that made contributions to the history of the student's own community.

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SECTION 1: INQUIRY QUESTIONS

1. How is the Sikh story of immigration to the US related to this place of worship?
2. In what ways do community places of gathering help create a foundation for new diaspora communities?



SECTION 2: SETTING THE STAGE: HISTORICAL CONTEXT

STOCKTON, CALIFORNIA. THE STORY OF SOUTH ASIAN IMMIGRATION

Stockton is a city in San Joaquin County in the Central Valley of Northern California. It was founded by Captain Charles Maria Weber in 1849. The city is named after Robert F Stockton (a US Navy commodore involved in the capture of California during the Mexican-American War). The city is located on the San Joaquin River in the northern San Joaquin Valley and had an estimated population of 320,554 in 2017. Built during the California Gold Rush (1848), Stockton's seaport serves as a gateway to the Central Valley and beyond. Stockton was the first community in California to have a name that was neither Spanish nor Native American in origin.

Early settlers included gold seekers from Asia, Africa, Australia, Europe, the Pacific Islands, Mexico and Canada. The historical population diversity is reflected in Stockton street names, architecture, numerous ethnic festivals. In 1870, the Census Bureau reported Stockton's population as 87.6% white and 10.7% Asian.

Stockton is the site of the first Sikh Gurdwara in the United States which opened on October 24, 1912. It was founded by Baba Jawala Singh and Baba Wasakha Singh, successful Punjabi immigrants who farmed and owned 500 acres on the Holt River.

Adapted from Stockton, California Wikipedia.

WHO ARE SIKHS?

Sikhs are followers of the Sikh religion, the fifth largest religion in the world. There are approximately 25 million Sikhs in the world. Sikhism (or as Sikhi as it is referred to by Sikhs), is a distinct religion different from Hinduism or Islam. It was founded in the 15th century in South Asia in an area called Punjab (which is now split between India and Pakistan since partition in 1948). Most of the Sikhs live on the India side of Punjab border. Sikhs believe in One God, the Creator and in the equality of all humankind.

WHAT IS A GURDWARA?

Sikhi is based on the teachings of ten Gurus who lived from 1469-1708. In 1708 the tenth Guru declared the sacred scripture, the Guru Granth Sahib, to be the eternal Guru, or spiritual teacher and guide for the Sikhs. A Gurdwara literally means the home of the Guru, the Guru Granth Sahib and the sacred scripture is the central point or focus of the Gurdwara. The Gurdwara is a place of prayer, a place of service and a place for community gathering. Langar, a free community meal is prepared and served at all Gurdwaras by volunteers in the spirit of equality and hospitality. Gurdwaras have always had an 'open door policy' and welcome people of any faith tradition or background, not just Sikhs.

SECTION 3: LOCATING THE SITE: MAPS



a) Map of Stockton, California



b) Map of pre-partition Punjab



c) Map illustrating the relation of both locations (Stockton, California, USA and Punjab, India) to show the immigration path of Sikhs to California.

QUESTIONS FOR MAPS:

Using the world map (C), locate Punjab, India and California, USA. Approximate the distance between these two places. Considering the modes of transportation available in the late 19th century and early 20th century, do you think this was an easy trip for Sikhs and other South Asians to make?

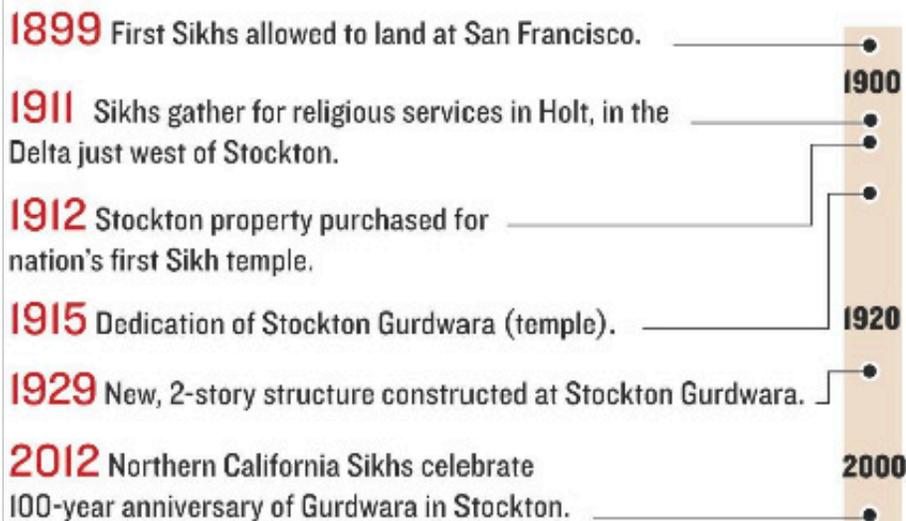
Locate San Francisco and Sacramento on a map of Northern California (you can use A as a starting point) – can you find out more about the confluence of the Sacramento and San Joaquin Rivers. Why might Stockton be a good location for agricultural industries or for immigrant laborers with agricultural experience?

Look at Map B. Do you know why Punjab is shown in this way? It is interesting to note that these initial periods of immigration of Sikhs to Northern California happened before the partition of India (1947) which split Punjab between India and Pakistan. The partition subsequently led to the mass migration of Sikhs into the India part of Punjab and contributed towards Sikh migration to different parts to other parts of the world from the 1960s onwards.

SECTION 4: DETERMINING THE FACTS

I- TIMELINE

(source: Sikhs honor rich history in Stockton)



Source: Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society

KORY HANSEN/The Record

SECTION 4: DETERMINING THE FACTS (CONTINUED)

II – Adapted from Margaret A. Gibson’s book on Accommodation Without Assimilation

Fewer than seven hundred Indians entered the United States during the nineteenth century. Between 1900 and 1920, however, nearly seven thousand Indians arrived. Most were illiterate farmers and agricultural laborers from Punjab Province on British India’s northwest frontier. By 1907 some five thousand Indian migrants, most of them Punjabi Sikhs, had reached the west coast of Canada and, within a few years, an equal number had arrived in California.

The majority of those coming to the United States took up farm work in the Central and Imperial valleys of California, where, in spite of their small numbers, they were viewed as the newest Asian threat. Most troublesome were the laws prohibiting Asian immigrants from owning land and from becoming naturalized American citizens.

Due to a landmark decision by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1923, Indians were legally prohibited from owning or leasing farmland in California because the Alien Land Laws of 1913 and 1920 now unquestionably applied to them as well. The Supreme Court decision, furthermore, made clear that the 1917 Immigration Law, which had barred from immigration those ineligible for citizenship, applied also to Indians. The law was specifically designed to restrict entry into the United States of unskilled Asian laborers.

Immigration from India, which had slowed to a trickle following the outbreak of World War I and the passage of the 1917 Immigration Act, came to an official halt after 1923. The overall population of Indians actually declined sharply during this period. Many Indians returned home voluntarily. Others died or were deported.

Of the Punjabis who remained in California, the large majority, even those who had held professional and technical posts in India, were unable to find economic opportunities apart from farm work.

The Immigration Act of 1946 brought some relief by legalizing Indian immigration and by permitting Indians the right to become naturalized citizens. The new law made it possible, at least in principle, for married men to reunite with their wives and children still in India and for bachelors to choose brides in accordance with traditional Indian marriage patterns.

The 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act repealed the national origins quota system and removed other racist features of earlier laws, thus ending more than eighty years of exclusionary policy toward Asia.

SECTION 4: DETERMINING THE FACTS (CONTINUED)

III – ADAPTED FROM SPEECH BY BRUCE LA BRACK: A CENTURY OF SIKHS IN CALIFORNIA (JULY 3, 2011)

I would like to take a few minutes to discuss the crucial role that the Stockton, California, Sikh Temple played in Sikh life in the first half century of the 20th century. The Sikhs of California will be celebrating their Centenary of the founding of the Stockton Sikh Temple in 2012.

Just as it is difficult to overestimate the role that gurdwaras play in the contemporary social and political life of the Sikh majority, it has been so since the formation of the Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society in 1912, and the building of the first gurdwara in the United States in Stockton, California, in 1915. Since that time, the socio-political concerns that face the Sikh community have been inextricably intertwined with religious issues. The Stockton gurdwara gave a focal point to Punjabi life on the West Coast; it served as a combination church, dining hall, rest home, employment information center, meeting place, political forum, and sanctuary where Punjabi culture and language were understood. The Stockton facility was a hub of social, religious, and political life for all Sikhs and many other Punjabis in California between 1915 and the late 1970s. It performed the same vital role that other contemporary Sikh worship centers worldwide continue to perform, however, the Stockton gurdwara remained the only Sikh worship center in the United States until 1947.

Thereafter, additional gurdwaras began to be built throughout the United States, including the second gurdwara acquired in California at El Centro in 1948.

As of 2010, Sikhs have founded nearly fifty gurdwaras in California. In the last quarter of the 20th century, the agricultural population center for Sikhs in Northern California shifted to Yuba City, symbolized by the establishment of new Sikh gurdwara in 1969 at Tierra Buena Road, and the subsequent building of several additional gurdwaras in the area.

Incidentally, in November 2010, the Yuba City Sikhs celebrated the thirty-first Nagar Kirtan and Sikh Day Parade. It drew at least 80,000 participants, perhaps as many as 50,000 being Sikhs. With fifty floats stretching almost four-and-a-half miles, it is one of the largest such events in the United States.

SECTION 4: DETERMINING THE FACTS (CONTINUED)

IV – DID YOU KNOW? STOCKTON GURDWARA IS HOME TO:

1. The Gadar Party. Decades before Gandhi, Stockton Gurdwara's founders created the Gadar Party. Publishing a Punjabi newspaper with a hand-cranked printing press and traveling to India to organize India's independence struggle, the Gadarites left a living legacy at Stockton Gurdwara.
2. Founders Baba Jawala Singh and Baba Waskaha Singh. The two Babas built Stockton Sikh Gurdwara in 1912. Farmers of California's fertile Central Valley, they also cultivated the largest émigré opposition to British rule of India. Both traveled to India to lead India's independence movement. Wasakha Singh was impoverished by British occupiers, who stole his land and sentenced him to life imprisonment for his role in the struggle for independence.
3. Dalip Singh Saund. He first served as Secretary of Stockton Gurdwara, but Dalip Singh Saund was also the first Sikh, first Asian and first Indian to ever serve in U.S. Congress. He served from 1957 to 1963 as a Democrat representing California's 29th Congressional District, which then comprised Riverside and Imperial counties.

SECTION 5: VISUAL EVIDENCE: IMAGES

Questions for images:

How has the Gurdwara and its architecture evolved over the years?

What role did the Gurdwara play for the Sikh community in particular and for the wider South Asian communities during periods of immigration?

What features can you see, particularly in the last image, that identify it? Do you see a flag flying from the building? What do you think it means?



[L] Stockton Gurdwara (c. 1912)



[R] Stockton Gurdwara (c. 1929)



Stockton Gurdwara Present Day c.2015

Background Information

Significance of the Nishaan Sahib

Sikh flag, the Nishaan Sahib The Nishaan Sahib is a saffron-colored flag which flies from every Gurdwara (Sikh place of worship) denoting the presence of the Sikh community and if outside a building, that it is a Gurdwara. A Gurdwara is the home of the Guru Granth Sahib (eternal Guru and sacred scripture of the Sikhs) as well as a place of prayer and selfless service. Every Gurdwara also serves a meal called Langar free of charge, prepared by volunteers. The Nishaan Sahib signifies that these services are offered here. The Nishaan Sahib is also a beacon of refuge and hope – anyone from any community, background or religion knows that if they see a Nishaan Sahib they are welcome in the Gurdwara and will be served with hospitality or given help or shelter in times of need.



Significance of the Khanda

The Khanda is an emblem associated with the Sikh faith and is seen on the Nishaan Sahib. It is a representation of Sikh values including the oneness of God, separating truth from falsehood. It emphasizes that a Sikh has both spiritual obligations as well as obligations to society.



SECTION 6: PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER: ACTIVITIES

EXPLORING MEDIA SOURCES

1. Split your class into small groups
2. Choose a selection of the following media sources (following pages), depending on the size of your class and assign one to each group:
 - [*Stockton Gurdwara: A Brief History. By Bainiwal, Tejpal S. \(2021\). 3 minute video.*](#)
 - *History: Stockton Gurdwara Sahib* (by Rachel Kanner in the San Joaquin Magazine)
 - *Stockton Gurdwara* (www.pioneeringpunjabis.ucdavis.edu)
 - *Model of Interfaith: The History of the Stockton Gurdwara* (www.sikhnet.com)
 - *Sikhs Honor Rich History in Stockton* (by Kevin Parrish in The RecordNet)
 - *A Sikh Temple's Century* (by Bhira Backhaus in The New York Times)

ASSESSMENT

- Ask students to read the article they have been assigned
- On the first reading ask them to read it silently, but that they can respond to what they are reading by writing symbols or even emojis. For example '?' for anything they didn't understand, '!' for anything they found surprising, underlining anything they felt was significant, or drawing a sad or smiling face next to anything which made them feel upset or happy.
- Ask them to share and discuss with their group the responses they may have drawn or written.
- Now ask them to prepare a group presentation together to the rest of the class about the article they were assigned. You can give them a list of the following points to use as stimuli:
 - Overview of the article for the rest of the class including where it is published and when.
 - Anything new they learned about Stockton Gurdwara.
 - Anything new they learned about South Asian immigration to California.
 - What struck them about the historical significance of the Gurdwara?
 - What are the variety of activities the Gurdwara was involved in?
 - What personalities are connected with the Gurdwara?

GLOSSARY

You can put the following glossary up at the front of the class or do one copy for each of the groups if it helps with reading the articles:

- Gurdwara - Sikh place of worship and house of the Guru
- Nishaan Sahib - flag which flies outside a Gurdwara
- Ghadar movement - a movement supporting India's Independence from British Rule
- Guru Granth Sahib - the eternal Guru and Sacred Scripture of the Sikhs which is at every Gurdwara
- Akhand Paath - Continuous reading of the Guru Granth Sahib

SECTION 7: EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

ADAPTED FROM NPS "PUTTING IT TOGETHER"

ACTIVITY 1: LIFE AS AN IMMIGRANT

Have students work singly or in small "family" groups and imagine that they are immigrants to a new land. They do not speak the language of the new country. Their religion is entirely different from that of the people around them. They have never held a paying job, although they did work on their family farm in their native country. Ask students where in the new land they would seek to live, what size community they would prefer, what kind of job they would try to find, what they would do with the money they earned, and what they would do with their free time. Have them reflect on the emotions they would feel as they went about constructing this new life. Hold a general discussion after students have had 15 or 20 minutes to work, or have individuals or groups write a short essay describing their experiences.

ACTIVITY 2: ETHNIC ENCLAVES

Have students research the history of their own community through local histories and photographs. What was the economic base of the community; that is, why was it founded and what kinds of work did the residents originally do? How does this compare with the history of South Asian immigrants in Stockton? Ask students to find out if there are neighborhoods in the community that were, or are, identified with particular ethnic groups. What brought these groups to their community? Did they live near where they worked? Was the area where they lived similar to or different from other neighborhoods? Have the students visit a number of these neighborhoods to see if the ethnic groups have left traces. Have them note types of architecture and/or architectural details, church denominations, signs, specialty stores and restaurants, annual festivals, and clubs and fraternal organizations. Have them compare the physical traces left in these enclaves with the photos of Stockton Gurdwara.

SECTION 8: SUPPLEMENTARY RESOURCES

Explore two personalities connected with Stockton Gurdwara and the significance of their achievements for the South Asian communities.

1. Bhagat Singh Thind
2. Dalip Singh Saund.