

Nearly 50 years later, Asian American and Pacific Islander month features revelry and racial justice

By Terry Tang
The Associated Press

It has been almost 50 years since the U.S. government established that Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders and their accomplishments should be recognized annually across the nation.

What started as just one week in May has evolved over the decades into a monthlong tribute of events in cities big and small. The nature of celebrations also evolved. Asian American and Pacific Islander or Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander Heritage Month is not just about showcasing festive fare like food and fashion, but hard subjects like grief and social justice. The rise of anti-Asian hate during the pandemic only heightened that effort.

“I think the visibility and the level that the increased participation of organizations in Asian Pacific Heritage Month activities is also an indication of the increasing voice of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in civic life more generally,” said Karen Umemoto, director of the UCLA Asian American Studies Center. “And also an indication of the spaces that we’ve come to collectively enter to be able to create those.”

Indeed, Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month celebrations are not relegated just to ethnic enclaves or culturally specific venues. Across the U.S. this year, events were planned at public libraries, parks, and museums either highlighting a specific Asian culture or a myriad of them.

How did AAPI Heritage Month start?

Many credit the observance’s origin to Jeanie Jew, a co-founder of the congressional Asian-Pacific staff caucus. In 1977, the Chinese American shared a moving story with New York Republican representative Frank Horton about how her grandfather had helped build the transcontinental railroad in the 1800s and then was killed amid anti-Asian unrest.

Jew believed Asians should appreciate



their heritage and “Americans must know about the contributions and histories of the Asian-Pacific American experience,” Horton said in 1992, according to congressional archives. At that time, Black History Month and Hispanic Heritage Month had already been instituted. Yet, Asian Americans were described as the fastest growing racial group.

Horton and California Democratic representative Norm Mineta proposed President Jimmy Carter issue a proclamation that the first week of May be “Asian/Pacific American Heritage Week.” Hawai’i senators Daniel Inouye and Spark Matsunaga, both Democrats, brought up a similar bill in the senate.

Why is it in May?

May was chosen because of two significant events. The first Japanese immigrants to the U.S. arrived on May 7, 1843. Then on May 19, 1869, the final spike for the transcontinental railroad track, in which Chinese laborers played a crucial role, was embedded.

Umemoto recalls hearing talk of Asian Pacific Heritage Week as a college student. But it wasn’t something that was mainstream.

“I think it was more of a kind of cultural

celebration in the early days,” she said. “And so a lot of student groups, I remember as doing programming around the different histories, cultural traditions, and issues in the community.”

In May 1990, President George H.W. Bush expanded the designation to the entire month. In 2009, President Barack Obama changed the name to Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month. President Joe Biden’s administration now refers to it as Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander Heritage Month.

“As artists and journalists, doctors and engineers, business and community leaders, and so much more, AA and NHPI peoples have shaped the very fabric of our nation and opened up new possibilities for all of us,” Biden said in an official Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islanders Heritage Month proclamation.

The White House held a celebration in Washington on May 13 to commemorate 25 years since the inception of the White House Initiative on Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders.

How has it grown in significance?

Asian American and Pacific Islander advocacy groups have long used the month

HERITAGE MONTH HISTORY. Guests listen as President Joe Biden speaks on May 13, 2024 in the Rose Garden of the White House in Washington, D.C., during a reception honoring Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders during Heritage Month. (AP Photo/Susan Walsh)

as a platform to bring resources to underserved communities and educate the public. But, the one-two punch of COVID-19 and assaults on Asian people in the U.S. really gave some a new appreciation for the heritage month’s purpose.

Pre-pandemic, Amber Reed, of Montclair, New Jersey, didn’t really think about Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month. A Korean-American adoptee who grew up one of few Asian children in rural Michigan, she said she didn’t feel a strong connection to her Asian ancestry. That changed after the March 2021 Atlanta spa shootings that left eight dead, including six Asian women.

“Certainly it jolted me out of thinking that my family could be safe and that we could just sort of muddle through without sort of reckoning with some of the very vicious currents of racism in our culture,” Reed said. “And I take no pride in having needed that moment to wake me up.”

In response to the shootings, Reed and around 50 others started the nonprofit AAPI New Jersey — originally AAPI Montclair. Their advocacy began with surveys of local schools and other institutions’ recognition of Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month.

The group then quickly organized the Lantern Festival for Justice and Remembrance for May. The Chinese tradition of lighting lanterns became a vehicle to honor victims of hate or injustice, Reed said. The event is now in its fourth year.

“I think one thing Asian cultures do so well is provide these rituals, including for collective grief,” said Reed, who still finds it surreal that the group continues to grow.

What events mark the month?

The variety of subjects and cultures feted during Asian American and Pacific

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