

## **Filipino American History Month**

**By**

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Filipino American History Month is more than a commemorative occasion; it embodies the centuries-long presence, contributions, struggles, and resilience of Filipino and Filipino American communities across the United States. From the earliest recorded arrival of Filipino sailors in the 16th century to modern recognition of their achievements, FAHM tells a complex story of migration, identity, cultural continuity, and civic participation. The evolution of FAHM from grassroots advocacy to widespread acknowledgment at federal, state, county, and local levels illustrates both progress and the ongoing challenge of embedding Filipino American history into the broader American narrative.

The first documented presence of Filipinos in what is now the continental United States dates to October 18, 1587, when a Spanish galleon—the *Nuestra Señora de Esperanza* carrying “Luzones Indios” arrived in the area now known as Morro Bay, California. These sailors are recognized as the first Asians to set foot on continental North America under European colonial navigation. This early presence, predating much of the commonly taught colonial narrative, has often been overlooked in mainstream U.S. history curricula. Over the centuries following that first contact, Filipinos continued to arrive in the Americas through Spanish colonial networks, particularly via the Manila-Acapulco galleon trade linking Asia, the Americas, and Europe from the mid-16th to early 19th centuries. Descendants of these early seafarers formed communities in areas such as Louisiana’s bayous, establishing one of the earliest Asian American settlements on the continent. These early connections introduced Filipino culinary traditions, artisanal skills, and maritime knowledge that would resonate centuries later in labor and cultural practices throughout the United States.

Migration intensified after the Philippines became a U.S. territory in 1898. Filipinos, as U.S. nationals, could travel and work in the United States with relative freedom, leading to the arrival of the Manong generation in the early twentieth century. Primarily young, single men, they labored in farms, canneries, fisheries, and service industries, often facing racial discrimination and legal barriers, such as restrictions on land ownership and citizenship. In response, they created mutual aid societies, fraternal organizations, and social clubs that preserved culture, fostered solidarity, and nurtured leadership skills. Many of these groups organized cultural programs, religious celebrations, and community

support networks that sustained Filipino traditions and language while promoting civic engagement. They also served as informal educational networks, teaching literacy, practical skills, and historical knowledge to younger generations, helping to cultivate leaders and civic-minded citizens within their communities.

A landmark moment in Filipino American history came in 1965 with the Delano Grape Strike, led by Filipino farmworkers in Delano, California. Larry Itliong and Philip Vera Cruz of the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee initiated the strike to demand fair wages and improved working conditions. The strike eventually merged with the Mexican American National Farm Workers Association, led by César Chávez and Dolores Huerta, forming the United Farm Workers union. This alliance not only secured labor victories but also positioned Filipino Americans as central figures in the struggle for social justice and labor rights in the United States. Beyond labor activism, Filipino Americans have contributed significantly to local communities through civic engagement, participating in neighborhood associations, school boards, and public service initiatives that strengthened community cohesion and representation. Their leadership extended to immigration advocacy, voting rights, and equitable public services, highlighting the multifaceted impact of Filipino Americans beyond agriculture.

Institutional recognition of Filipino American history progressed with the founding of the Filipino American National Historical Society (FANHS) in 1982 by Fred and Dorothy Cordova. FANHS was established to document, preserve, and promote Filipino American contributions and heritage, often marginalized or omitted from mainstream histories. In 1992, FANHS passed a resolution officially designating October as Filipino American History Month, honoring both the first documented arrival of Filipinos in 1587 and the birth month of labor leader Larry Itliong. This designation created a framework for heritage-month celebrations, educational programming, and national awareness campaigns, ensuring Filipino American history received dedicated acknowledgment each year. FAHM's establishment also encouraged scholarship, research, and archival preservation, prompting Filipino Americans to explore genealogy, document oral histories, and contribute to a more inclusive understanding of American history.

State-level recognition followed in 2006, when the California Department of Education included FAHM in its observance calendar, encouraging schools to integrate Filipino American history into K–12 curricula. In 2009, the California State Legislature passed a resolution officially declaring October as Filipino American History Month, solidifying civic recognition. These initiatives enabled broader dissemination of Filipino American history through schools, libraries, civic institutions, and community organizations. In classrooms, students learned about Filipino Americans' contributions in

healthcare, education, agriculture, technology, and the arts, fostering awareness and cross-cultural understanding among younger generations.

Local governments and communities have expanded FAHM observance. Cities and counties with large Filipino American populations including San José, Santa Clara, Milpitas, Daly City, and Los Angeles issue annual proclamations and host events highlighting contributions to healthcare, technology, education, civic service, and the arts. Filipino Americans have historically excelled in healthcare, particularly as nurses and caregivers, contributing to hospitals, clinics, and public health programs while mentoring future healthcare professionals. In education, Filipino Americans serve as teachers, administrators, and counselors, promoting inclusive curricula, mentorship, and civic engagement. Artists, musicians, dancers, and culinary entrepreneurs have enriched California's cultural landscape, offering performances, workshops, and food experiences that highlight Filipino heritage and connect communities through shared traditions.

In 2023, Santa Clara, California, issued its first official proclamation declaring October as Filipino American History Month, formally presented to the Philippine Consulate General in San Francisco. This recognition reflects both the demographic presence and civic influence of Filipino Americans in Silicon Valley. In smaller cities such as Gilroy, Filipino Americans participate in religious and community organizations, operate small businesses, and contribute to civic events. Grassroots activities including cultural gatherings, church-based celebrations, and educational programs demonstrate how Filipino American heritage is actively maintained and celebrated locally. Community centers, advisory committees, and local initiatives in Gilroy ensure representation in cultural programming and public planning, while Filipino American-led gardens, food cooperatives, and arts projects exemplify the integration of heritage and civic life.

Historical milestones illustrate the depth and continuity of Filipino American contributions. From the first arrival in 1587 to the Manila-Acapulco galleon trade, the Manong generation in the early 20th century, the Delano Grape Strike in 1965, the founding of FANHS in 1982, the formal establishment of FAHM in 1992, California's Department of Education recognition in 2006, and the State Legislature resolution in 2009, each milestone affirms the importance of preserving memory, asserting identity, and achieving public acknowledgment. Local proclamations and grassroots efforts, including those in Santa Clara and Gilroy, underscore the ongoing evolution of heritage observance and cultural affirmation across the United States.

The broader implications of FAHM lie in its ability to counter narratives of invisibility and marginalization. Filipino Americans have made significant contributions across sectors. In healthcare, they have played pivotal roles during crises, advocating for public

health and mentoring future professionals. In education, they influence curricula, mentor students, and foster civic engagement. Entrepreneurs and small-business owners have strengthened local economies and cultural vibrancy, offering products, services, and culinary experiences that celebrate Filipino heritage. Civic leaders and elected officials from the Filipino American community have promoted representation and policymaking in cities, counties, and state governance, addressing issues such as equitable public services, housing, and healthcare access. These multifaceted contributions demonstrate Filipino Americans' enduring impact and leadership.

Negotiating identity has been a persistent theme in Filipino American history. From early 20th-century laborers to contemporary professionals and civic leaders, Filipino Americans navigate complex intersections of ethnicity, nationality, and heritage. FAHM provides an annual opportunity to honor resilience, examine ongoing social and political challenges, and facilitate intergenerational dialogue. Elders share experiences of early migration and labor struggles, while younger generations engage in leadership programs, cultural storytelling, and civic initiatives, ensuring historical memory is preserved alongside modern advocacy.

Community and cultural preservation remain central to FAHM. Beyond formal proclamations, everyday practices family gatherings, religious celebrations, small businesses, social organizations, and storytelling sustain Filipino American culture in cities like Gilroy and beyond. Local churches host Simbang Gabi, community centers organize cultural workshops, and family-run businesses sponsor scholarships or events. These practices demonstrate that culture is lived daily, complementing public ceremonies and institutional recognition.

FAHM's decentralized observance spanning federal, state, county, city, school, and family levels both enriches and challenges heritage recognition. It allows communities to tailor celebrations to local histories and demographics while demanding ongoing documentation and communication. Archival work, oral histories, and community-led initiatives ensure Filipino American contributions remain visible, especially in smaller towns where public recognition may be limited.

Analyzing the evolution and scope of Filipino American History Month reveals persistent themes: migration and colonization, labor activism, social challenges, community solidarity, and cultural preservation. Filipino Americans have actively shaped labor movements, cultural production, civic life, and education. Their history, from 16th-century arrivals to contemporary engagement, reflects resilience, agency, and lasting impact.

Filipino American History Month is more than an annual celebration; it bridges past and present, honors historical struggles, empowers communities, and educates the public. From the earliest arrivals in 1587 to contemporary recognition in California, including Santa Clara and Gilroy, FAHM demonstrates the enduring presence and contributions of Filipino Americans. Through formal recognition, educational programming, cultural events, civic engagement, and everyday life, Filipino Americans continue to preserve, celebrate, and share their history, ensuring their stories and contributions from healthcare and education to arts, entrepreneurship, and civic leadership remain integral to the American narrative.