

From Quotas to Communities: Filipino American Migration and Movement

**Commemorating the 90th Anniversary of the 1935 Filipino Repatriation Act and
the 60th Anniversary of the 1965 Immigration & Naturalization Act**

In 1935, the U.S. Congress passed the **Filipino Repatriation Act**, offering free one-way transportation for Filipinos in the U.S. to return to the Philippines, but only if they agreed to never return. At the time, the Philippines was a U.S. commonwealth and there was an annual quota of 50 Filipinos who were able to enter the country. Filipinos were considered aliens who could not become citizens (and therefore could not vote, own property, or have the same rights as other Americans). While the law was sugarcoated as an opportunity for Filipino nationals to return to the Philippines, the intentions behind the law were rooted in anti-Asian sentiment and Asian exclusion, in that it aimed to decrease the population of Filipino nationals living in the United States. Only 2,190 Filipinos (out of the estimated 100,000 at the time) took the offer and migrated back to the Philippines – making the act one of the most failed xenophobic immigration laws in American history.

Thirty years later, U.S. Congress passed the **1965 Immigration & Naturalization Act**, which became the first federal immigration law to eliminate national origin quotas that had favored Europeans, while barring or limiting Asians from entering the country. Also known as the Hart–Celler Act, this landmark legislation opened the doors for thousands of Filipino immigrants to migrate, while allowing for families to reunite and to establish multigenerational communities across the country. Nurses, engineers, physicians, domestic workers, teachers, and others sought opportunities and made the U.S. their home, bringing with them a rich legacy of resilience, labor, and cultural heritage. With this new federal law, the Filipino American population increased significantly from 176,000 in 1960 to 775,000 in 1980. Today, there are over 4 million Filipino Americans in the U.S., making them one of the largest Asian American and immigrant populations in the nation.

Today, as debates and injustices over immigration continue to shape the national landscape – particularly as governmental entities continue to unlawfully arrest, detain, and deport undocumented (and some documented) migrants – it is more important than ever to celebrate the history, humanity, contributions, and power of immigrants. Like other immigrant groups, Filipino American immigrants have transformed the U.S. through social justice activism, healthcare, education, technology, the arts, and community care. Like other immigrant groups, Filipino American immigrants have contributed significantly to building communities, strengthening the U.S. economy, enriching the nation's cultural fabric, and advancing movements for labor rights, racial justice, and immigrant equity.

This year's theme also reminds us that while migration has always involved movement across borders, it also involves movement toward justice, dignity, and belonging. It is because of the community organizing of the Manong/Manang generation – particularly in educating others about how the act was a tool to exclude and deport Filipino Americans living in the U.S. – that the 1935 Repatriation Act failed. It is because of the leaders of the Civil Rights Movement – primarily Black revolutionaries who advocated for the dismantling of racist laws – that the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act was passed. Taken together, the two laws demonstrate that when communities come together and when historically marginalized groups work collaboratively, they have the power to challenge unjust systems, reshape national policy, and expand opportunities for future generations.

Possible activities to consider regarding our FAHM 2025 theme:

- Host a teach-in or panel on Filipino immigration history that highlights personal stories and oral histories of Filipino Americans across different generations and regions.
- Use social media or virtual panels to share family migration stories through oral history projects or digital storytelling.
- Highlight local Filipino immigrant leaders and frontline workers.
- Engage youth in creative projects exploring their family's roots and movement and encouraging them to speak with their elders about their family's own immigration history.
- Curate book clubs of relevant titles (e.g., *America is the Heart*, *Little Manila is in the Heart*) or film screenings (e.g., *Nurse Unseen*, *Delano Manongs*) that describe the ways that Filipino migrants have created movements.
- Use historical knowledge to initiate dialogues about current immigration policies, citing how history often repeats itself.

Conclusion

As we honor these historical milestones during Filipino American History Month 2025, let us reflect on how far we've come—and how much work remains. By uplifting our ancestors' stories and standing in solidarity with all immigrant communities, we move closer to a future rooted in equity, remembrance, and liberation. Let this month be both a celebration and a call to action.

For more information, please visit www.fanhs-national.org or visit us on instagram at [@fanhs_national](https://www.instagram.com/fanhs_national).

Further Readings:

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