Chinese Americans

The earliest Chinese immigrants came to America during the 1780s, but only in small numbers. It wasn't until the Gold Rush in California in 1849 that a larger migration occurred. In the thirty years following the beginning of the Gold Rush, more than three hundred thousand Chinese came to the United States. They worked mostly in the gold mines and the communities supporting the mining industry. A smaller number worked on farms or in fishing villages.

The Gold Rush was the biggest "pull" factor for Chinese immigrants. They heard stories of the gold coming out of the mountains and the riches to be had because of it. The Chinese had a history of immigration as they had traveled the world for centuries. Chinese merchants, bankers, miners, and artists had settled in faraway colonies all over the world, including in Asia, Europe, and the Americas. The prospect of gold was just one more attraction that would take them out of their homeland to venture to a new world. The heard about *gam saan*, "gold mountain," and they wanted to see whether they, too, could find gold.

There were several "push" factors that prompted the Chinese to emigrate during the 1840s and 1850s. Several major natural disasters occurred during those decades. A drought, a flood, and a famine left devastation in much of the country. Peasants lost their homes. The economy crashed. Foreign trade fluctuated, and when it hit its lowest, the people of China suffered.

Gold Mountain ended up being a disappointment for many Chinese. The work was hard, if they could find it. They faced hostile treatment from the locals. They struggled to make enough money to eat. And without money, there was no going back home to China. Thousands of Chinese immigrants found themselves in a new land, with nothing to support them. White miners felt threatened by the increased presence of Chinese workers. They did not want the competition. They did not want to fight for claims, and fight for jobs to support those claims. They demanded that the California Legislature do something to protect them. In May 1852, the California Legislature passed a Foreign Miners' Tax, requiring that every miner who was not a citizen pay a monthly fee. The Chinese were the main target of this tax.

The Chinese miners looked for work elsewhere. What the gold camps of the Sierras lost, the Transcontinental Railroad building companies gained. In 1865, fifty Chinese workers were hired by the Central Pacific Railroad to start work building a railroad east out of Sacramento. These fifty were great workers, so Central Pacific Railroad and other railroad companies decided to hire more Chinese laborers. During the peak time of construction, Central Pacific Railroad employed more than twelve thousand Chinese immigrants. They represented about 90 percent of Central Pacific's workforce.

The completion of the Transcontinental Railroad in 1869 prompted many railroad workers to become farm laborers. Others headed east, to plantations in the South, or to booming towns in the Midwest and on the East Coast.

Angel Island

Hundreds of thousands of Chinese immigrants came to the West Coast of the United States, expecting to disembark at a port in San Francisco. Instead, many were ferried to Angel Island, a small island across the bay. Angel Island had been a hunting and fishing ground for the Miwok people, a private cattle ranch, a military base, and a quarantine station. It became the West Coast's main immigration facility in 1910. The island is approximately 740 acres and is situated in San Francisco Bay, near Alcatraz Island and the Golden Gate Bridge. The Angel Island Immigration Station was different from Ellis Island. Officials at Ellis Island gave every immigrant a chance to be questioned and checked, while officials of Angel Island enforced discriminatory policies that prevented Asians from entering the country. The anti-Asian sentiment was a product of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882.

The Chinese Exclusion Act

The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 prohibited Chinese laborers from entering the country. The act was the first major legislation to suspend immigration for a specific nationality. It was the result of the outcry by white Americans who did not want to fight with the Chinese for jobs. They also felt the Chinese had peculiar customs, and they did not feel comfortable around them. The act reflected blatant racial hostility. And many see it as the start of an era in American history in which immigrants were no longer welcome.

The act originally lasted for ten years, and then it was extended another ten years in 1892. This extension required people of Chinese origin to carry identification papers, or they would otherwise be deported. It also limited their access to bail bonds and made it difficult for those who were not teachers, students, diplomats, or tourists to get into the country. The act was extended once more in 1902; this extension made it nearly impossible for any Chinese immigrant to enter. The act was finally repealed in 1943 with the passage of the Magnuson Act. This later act allowed for a quota of 105 Chinese immigrants to enter the United States every year. A quota system was common for immigrants of other nationalities.

97 Orchard Street/Tenement Museum

The Lower East Side of Manhattan was originally farm territory. In the late 1700s, as the area became more populated, small family houses were built in rows, covering the once fertile ground. Then, when the population boomed in the 1800s, the small houses were replaced by buildings six or seven stories high. These buildings were designed to house twenty or more families. This was the beginning of tenement housing in New York City.

One particular tenement was built on 97 Orchard Street in the Lower East Side. The architect is now unknown, but it was built with an Italian-style façade. A staircase in the center of the building led to twenty three-room apartments, composing a total of five stories. The area of each apartment was only about 325 square feet. It was typical for a family of seven or more to stay in an apartment of that size. The apartments did not have many windows, so they were very dark and void of fresh air. The building did not initially have running water. Bathrooms were located near the rear of the building. Heat came from fireplaces located in the apartment kitchens.

The original tenants of 97 Orchard Street were German immigrants. From 1900 to 1925, the majority of the tenants were Russian, or were of eastern and southern European descent, and many were Jewish. This influx of Jewish immigrants changed the demographics of the building, and of the Lower East Side neighborhood in general. Other nationalities had a presence in the tenement throughout the 1900s. When the building opened, it had seventy-seven tenants, and in later years, as many as 111. It is believed that more than seven thousand immigrants called 97 Orchard Street home.

In 1901, legislation changed the way the tenants at 97 Orchard Street lived. The Tenement House Act required improved sanitation measures and greater access to light; it also prohibited tenements from being constructed on small lots.

In 1988, 97 Orchard Street became a museum, honoring the immigrants of New York City. The first restored apartment was opened to the public in 1992; six more have been restored.

The Fourteenth Amendment

The Fourteenth Amendment outlines major criteria for American citizenship in the Citizenship Clause, the first section of the amendment. Ratified in 1868, the amendment granted citizenship and citizenship rights to free African Americans and enslaved workers who had been emancipated after the Civil War. To do so, the amendment specifies that people born in the United States are citizens and, as such, are entitled to equal protection under the law. It also specifies that naturalized citizens—immigrants who are granted American citizenship—are entitled to equal protection under the law. Thus, the amendment ensures that no citizen is deprived of life, liberty, or property without due process of law.

The Fourteenth Amendment consists of five parts, four of which were written as separate proposals a few years earlier, but had stalled in the legislative process. They were joined into a single proposal in 1868.

It replaced the provision in the Constitution that counted slaves as three-fifths of a person, and it prohibited former civil and military officeholders who supported the Confederacy from holding a state or federal office.

The first part of the amendment states that anyone born or naturalized in the United States is a citizen of both the United States and the state where they live. It prohibits states from making or enforcing laws that limit or deprive citizens' rights without due process. It also prohibits states from denying citizens equal protection under the law.

The remaining parts of the amendment:

- establish rules for population-based apportionment of representatives
- prohibit former Confederate officeholders (civil or military) from holding any state or federal office
- allow for the repeal of the prohibition by a two-thirds vote of each house of Congress
- uphold the national debt
- declare that state and federal governments are not responsible for any Confederate debts
- give Congress the power to enforce the amendment