

A Consequential Closing

THE CHINESE EXCLUSION ACT OF 1882

By Rebecca Stanton

The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 prevented the immigration of Chinese people into the United States from the late 1880s until the early 1940s, under the premise that “the coming of Chinese laborers to this country endangers the good order of certain localities within the territory thereof.”

That act—the first in the nation to place a ban on an entire ethnic and national identity—contributed to a climate of anti-Chinese sentiment in Michigan and left lingering consequences in towns both large and small.

In the late nineteenth century, the American government feared that Chinese immigrants were beating out local workers. While Chinese workers were paid low wages because they were willing to work at any job—sending money to family in China or repaying those who had brought them to the United States—American workers often required and bargained for higher pay to afford the cost of living with a family. Pressures between European Americans and Chinese immigrants increased in the job market due to many factors, the biggest being that many contractors did not let laborers from China return to their home country after completing work on projects such as the Transcontinental Railroad.

Western states such as California proposed anti-Chinese legislation on a statewide scale, but the national government often refused to pass similar laws due to the 1868 Burlingame-Seward Treaty, which prevented American influence from dominating China's internal affairs. It also simplified the immigration process in both countries. A grand success for American commerce and industry, the treaty initially brought a steady influx of Chinese workers and offered economic stability.

The Road to Exclusion

During the second half of the nineteenth century, anti-Chinese opinions became more common, leading to the passage of the Page Law of 1875 that barred Chinese women from entering the country. Another step toward the Chinese Exclusion Act was the Angell Treaty of 1880, formulated in part by University of Michigan (U-M) president James Burrill Angell. As the minister to China under President Rutherford B. Hayes,

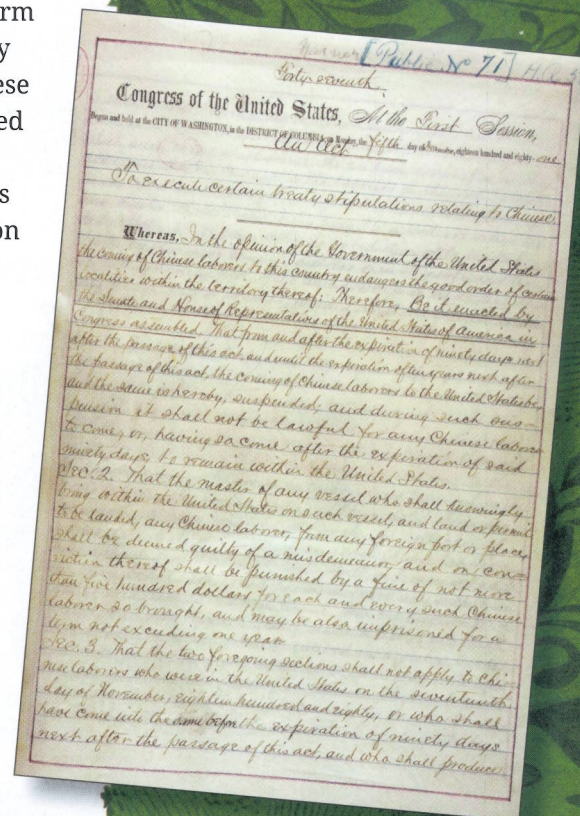
Angell's main goal was to reform the Burlingame-Seward Treaty and limit the number of Chinese allowed into the western United States—though he personally supported Chinese immigrants and believed that a total ban on their immigration “would be diametrically opposed to all our national traditions.”

Taking a leave of absence from U-M and moving to China for a year, Angell and other Americans negotiated with Chinese representatives. The talks went smoothly until the latter party asked for one final condition: a total ban on U.S.-China opium trade, which was greatly affecting people in China. The American representatives were apprehensive about addressing the unexpected request without Senate sign-off, but they ultimately granted it in the form of a second law.

Passed on May 6, 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Act—prohibiting the immigration of Chinese laborers—was originally intended to stand in place for ten years as a temporary “solution” to the



University of Michigan president James Burrill Angell, who helped develop the Angell Treaty of 1880 that shaped the course of Chinese exclusion in the United States. (Photo courtesy of the Bentley Historical Library, BL003649.)



The first page of the Chinese Exclusion Act, which suspended “the coming of Chinese laborers to the United States.” (Photo courtesy of the U.S. National Archives & Records Administration.)

perceived immigration problem. It was extended for another decade in May 1892 by an “act to prohibit the coming of Chinese persons into the United States,” known as the Geary Act. In 1902, the federal government renewed the 1882 act for a third time, with no definite expiration date.

Regardless of the unfair treatment and animosity that waited for them in the United States after the exclusion act's passage, many Chinese people still saw America as the land of opportunity. The number of immigrants from China was actually higher during the exclusion era than it had been before.

Those risk-takers fought for what they wanted, battling “fiercely against the laws and the ways they were enforced [and] charging the U.S. government with racial