

Name _____

Class _____

Date _____

Note Catcher: The Immigrants Who Built the Transcontinental Railroad

1. Why was the Transcontinental Railroad workforce made up of mostly immigrants? Why were owners reluctant to hire Chinese workers initially?
2. What was the public perception of Chinese immigrants? What was the public perception of Irish immigrants?
3. How were Irish and Chinese railroad workers treated?
4. How did Chinese workers resist unfair treatment?
5. Additional question(s) for research:

Name _____

Class _____

Date _____

Anti-Chinese Legislation and Rulings

	How did this law/ ruling discriminate against Chinese immigrants?	What was the justification or stated reason for this law/ ruling?	Relevant direct quote from the law/ruling:	When was this law/ ruling repealed or replaced?
<i>People v. Hall</i> (1854)				
Act to Prohibit the "Coolie Trade" (1862)				
Page Act (1875)				
<i>In re Ah Yup</i> (1878)				
Chinese Exclusion Act (1882)				

The First Wave: Chinese Immigration to the United States in the 1800s

The first large wave of Chinese immigration to the United States began during the California gold rush in 1848 and ended abruptly in 1882 with the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act. This first wave was marked by an entrepreneurial spirit, as Chinese immigrants, fleeing harsh conditions in China, adapted and found ways to earn livings despite challenging circumstances. Yet this period was also defined by virulent anti-Chinese racism on both personal and societal levels.

In the 1850s, the prospect of striking it rich drew many to the West Coast. Pushed from China by political and social instability, many Chinese men ventured to the “Golden Mountain,” a nickname for the United States. By the mid 1850s, Chinese immigrants made up 20 percent of the mining population in the United States, making them the largest non-White group. Many quickly became disillusioned. Mining was difficult and uncertain, and locals were hostile. Lacking money to bring over their families or return to China, many Chinese immigrants were stranded. Faced with language barriers and racial discrimination, they opened businesses in mining towns in professions that were typically looked down on by locals as “women’s work,” such as laundry and cooking.

During this time, U.S. railroad companies were vying to expand across the country as quickly and cheaply as possible. In 1863, the Central Pacific Railroad Company broke ground on the first transcontinental railroad, a pivotal piece of infrastructure that shortened the coast to coast travel time from several months to about a week. Facing a labor shortage, the company increased their recruitment of Chinese immigrants, who worked for lower pay and were less likely to unionize than most other workers. It was dangerous work and the pay was low, but it gave many Chinese immigrants with little work experience or English ability a means to enter the workforce. By the mid 1860s, the company was recruiting laborers directly from China. By 1867, almost 90 percent of the Central Pacific workforce was Chinese. It’s estimated that as many as 20,000 Chinese immigrants worked on the Transcontinental Railroad.

The Chinese experience in the United States in the 1800s was also marked by hostility and violence. Discriminatory laws and regulations were passed targeting Chinese Americans and immigrants. Chinese Americans, and White business owners who employed Chinese laborers, successfully challenged many of these laws and ordinances in court. However, an economic depression in the United States in the 1870s further fueled anti-Chinese sentiment and the misperception that the Chinese were “stealing” jobs from White citizens.

On December 17, 1882, the United States passed the first Chinese Exclusion Act, which halted all immigration of Chinese laborers for 10 years and banned Chinese immigrants already living in the United States from becoming citizens. The Act was renewed in 1892 and made permanent in 1902. The Act is significant as it's the first time U.S. immigration policy banned immigration from a specific country. While the number of immigrants from China did increase significantly during the 1800s, it is important to note that immigrants from other countries were not subject to the same discrimination. When the Act was passed in 1882, there were 110,000 Chinese in the United States, mainly concentrated in California where they made up 10 percent of the population but 20 percent of the working population. By contrast, nearly 1.5 million Germans immigrated to the United States in the 1880s, and about 250,000 arrived in 1882 alone. While there still was limited immigration from China after the Chinese Exclusion Act, it was greatly curtailed. The Act remained in effect until 1943.

After the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act, there was a period in the late 1800s called the “Driving Out” in which Chinese immigrants were driven out of their communities and subjected to large-scale violence. According to the Library of Congress, “Racial hatred, an uncertain economy, and weak government in the new territories all contributed to this climate of terror and bloodshed. The perpetrators of these crimes, which included Americans from many segments of society, largely went unpunished” ([Library of Congress, Immigration and Relocation in U.S. History: Chinese: Intolerance](#)).

With railroads completed, the Gold Rush over, and facing social and legal discrimination, many Chinese immigrants moved together to urban areas. Now called “Chinatowns,” these communities provided safety, community, work opportunities and a vibrant culture.