

California Gold Rush

James Winston Marshall came to California from New Jersey, with the intention of building a water-powered sawmill for John Sutter. While digging near the Sierra Mountains, he unearthed gold flakes. Just days after the discovery, the United States negotiated the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, acquiring California, as well as multiple other states. The speculation of gold in California caused 4,000 miners to come to California by August of 1848. In the year of 1849, miners either borrowed money or spent their life savings to travel to California to get their own share of the wealth.

While the phenomenon of the Gold Rush was enticing families to travel to California, China experienced its own turmoil, when Britain attacked Canton in 1839 for China's attempt to regulate and eliminate the opium trade. The economy and political instability influenced Chinese citizens to emigrate toward California, with the mythicized "Gold Mountain", due to the Gold Rush. The Chinese saw San Francisco as an avenue to get rich quickly and they'd go back to their homeland, after a sojourn in California. Another reason why the Chinese went to California was because of China's shores being closer to the state, rather than the East coast. They came to California, much like other miners, borrowing money from merchants for passage to the West. The Chinese realized however, they could only excavate the leftovers of what the white men originally dug.

Due to the limitations of the mines, along with their debt to merchants and the need to provide for their families, the Chinese took wages at whatever price they could find. They took low-skilled jobs, involving construction, manufacturing, agriculture, and working for service industries. At the time, California accepted these immigrants, because they were diligent and did not demand higher salaries compared to American laborers. During the peak of the Gold Rush, California Governor John McDougal declared the Chinese as one of the most worthy newly adopted citizens. McDougal's endorsement created the perception of the Chinese as unobtrusive and unselfish. The Chinese, meanwhile, had the opportunity to work, send money back to their families, and were welcomed in California.

The amount of gold dwindled, however, as more miners flocked to California. The positive mood of the citizens in California reduced, and as more miners became disappointed with the lack of gold, the more they frequently projected their dismay and bitterness onto the Chinese. The diggers claimed the immigrants were stealing the gold, while declaring the gold belonged to Americans. Gold dust that the Chinese excavated was sought after by the Americans, causing the Chinese to be driven out of the mines. Mexicans, Chileans, French, and Chinese immigrants were persecuted due to the chauvinistic attitude of the Americans. In comparison to European immigrants, the Chinese stood out because of their distinguishable physical appearance. In 1850, the Foreign Miners' License Law passed into legislation, which required all non US citizens to carry a mining license, which cost three dollars per month to renew. Because

of this license, Chinese miners were only making three dollars a month. John Bigler, the successor of McDougal, used the bigotry of the American citizens to his advantage, calling the Chinese avaricious, disobedient to moral laws, and a danger to the public welfare.

As the quantity of gold continued to diminish, American miners began to seek work within the laborer community. To their displeasure, they found that the Chinese laborers were willing to work for cheap, sent their money back to China, and took away jobs from American citizens, which led to the belief that the Chinese laborers were leeches. Chinese laborers were exported to Cuba and other parts of South America to work under low wages. This incident caused the American public to believe in the fallacy of the definition of the word “coolie”, which the Chinese laborers called themselves. In China, coolies were ranked above merchants and below scholars. The word coolie, in Chinese, meant those who rent out their muscles. In California however, American citizens described them as contract laborers, who were bound to their master to work a certain number of years at small wages. The incident of agents signing laborers to work on the Transcontinental Railroad fed into the misconception of coolies.

American citizens wanted to either drive the immigrants back to China or send laborers to the mines, but both options would create a significant loss in revenue. Rather than expending money, the government decided to pass legislature to harass the Chinese. The Chief Justice of the Supreme Court included the Chinese into the term “Indian” under the ruling that Indians and African Americans cannot testify against a white man in court. Although vetoed, the pig tail ordinance attempted to pass through legislation, where prisoners would be forced to cut their pig tail behind their head.

Chaos struck America, when the Burlingame Treaty was signed by America and China in 1868. Under this act, Chinese citizens were to be treated equally in America, just as American citizens were to be treated in China. With the belief that the American government was against its citizens, Americans decided to take initiative. On October 24th, 1871, 500 white men came into Chinatown and burned Chinese establishments, approximately 20 Chinese were killed with 19 being hung, and one being shot, and 40,000 dollars of goods were stolen.