

The Chinese in 19th Century California

Quick Facts for Docents and Visitors

Why talk about the Chinese?

Chinese immigrants of the 19th century played an important role in making California what it became. It's a story that is not widely known. The Point San Luis Light Station, whether one walks up or rides the trolley, provides much directly viewable evidence of that story. It's a real teaching opportunity and we should not miss out on it.

Talk about what you can see:

- Along the road to Port Harford one can see the **cut away hillsides and a roadbed** – the cuts were begun and the first tracks were laid by Chinese workers with picks and shovels. Chinese labor built Port Harford and the Pacific Coast Railway which connected Port Harford with towns as far away as Los Olivos.
- Most of the **bricks making up the foundation** of the light station were hand made at Ah Louis' brickyard in San Luis Obispo. There are a few other, special-purpose bricks in other locations, such as fireboxes of the fireplaces - these were not made by Ah Louis.
- The "**blessing**" in the basement offers a tantalizing hint that at least some Chinese labor might have been used a some point during the construction of the lighthouse.

Where did they come from?

During the Gold Rush, a very large number of Chinese came to California. They were fleeing war and poverty in their homeland. By the time the light station was built, they were California's largest and most conspicuous minority. Chinese immigrants comprised at least 10% of California's population in 1890.

They were welcomed at first, because of their willingness to do manual labor. The Chinese tried their hand at mining, but they were also willing to wash clothes, cook, fish, do farmwork, dig ditches, dig tunnels, build roads, build levees, and build railroads. They are most famous as the builders of the western leg of the Transcontinental Railroad, completed in 1869.

Ah Louis worked as a cook in the French Hotel in San Luis Obispo when John Harford met him. Harford used Ah Louis's Chinese crews to build Port Harford and the Pacific Coast Railway in the 1870's. Ah Louis's crews built the first decent roads over Cuesta Grade, and when the Southern Pacific finally connected San Luis Obispo by rail to San Francisco, Chinese labor was used to clear brush, cut the rail-bed, dig tunnels, and lay track.

Why did they leave our area?

As the gold rush waned, intense animosity arose against the Chinese on the part of working class whites who felt that the Chinese were taking away their jobs. A series of discriminatory laws, both state and federal, specifically targeted the Chinese. These included "Chinese Exclusion Act" of 1882, passed just 8 years before the lighthouse was built.

Among the restrictions in effect against the Chinese in 1890 were:

- Chinese had to pay a special "Coolie Tax" in order to work as laborers. This tax applied to no other nationality.
- Chinese who mined had to pay a special "Foreign Mining Tax" of \$20 per month. In practice, this was not assessed for anyone but the Chinese.
- No further Chinese immigration was to be allowed.
- If Chinese returned to China, they could not come back to the United States.
- Chinese could never become American citizens, no matter how long they lived here.
- Children born in the United States to Chinese parents were not American citizens. (This part was overturned by the Supreme Court in 1898).
- A Chinese could not testify in a court of law against a white man.
- Chinese were legally prohibited from marrying non-chinese.

The Chinese in California were 90-95% male. They sent most of their earnings back to China to support their families, or they saved money with the idea of someday establishing a family in the US. The Exclusion Act meant that they could never bring their families to the US, nor could they visit China and return. Those who remained in California would never see their families again, and most who were unmarried would never have a family. By the early part of the twentieth century, most of the big railroad projects had been completed and many Chinese laborers were laid off.

Where did they go?

The majority of Chinese living in America returned to China during the early 1900's. While they were not wealthy by American standards, most were considered successful and prosperous on their return to China. Unfortunately, the ones that returned would face a century of civil disorder, revolutions, wars, and famine.

Early in the 20th Century, those that remained in California tended to concentrate in the major cities of the Pacific Coast where there were more Chinese and more job opportunities (San Francisco, Los Angeles, Sacramento, etc.). They took what jobs they could get, and raised their families as Americans. The three founding Chinese families in San Luis Obispo remain to this day; the Louis's, the Gins and the Chongs.

Ah Louis himself returned to China when he was 93 years old; he planned to finish out his life there, but he found he was no longer happy in China; he had become a Californian. Since he was a merchant who still owned a business in San Luis, he was able to take advantage of an exception in the Chinese Exclusion Act and return to San Luis Obispo. He died in San Luis Obispo three years later, in 1936.

Chinese immigration continued to be banned or severely restricted until 1965, and even then there was no immigration from mainland China until the People's Republic of China lifted most of its restrictions on emigration to the US in 1977. Up until that time, there had been very little Chinese immigration into the US for nearly one hundred years.

What were they like?

Mark Twain came to California in 1864, previously having spent two years in Virginia City, Nevada. He had not encountered Chinese before coming west. Here are his observations from his travelogue, *Roughing It*, published in 1872, just two years before Harford built his port:

OF course there was a large Chinese population in Virginia--it is the case with every town and city on the Pacific coast. They are a harmless race when white men either let them alone or treat them no worse than dogs; in fact they are almost entirely harmless anyhow, for they seldom think of resenting the vilest insults or the cruelest injuries. They are quiet, peaceable, tractable, free from drunkenness, and they are as industrious as the day is long. A disorderly Chinaman is rare, and a lazy one does not exist. So long as a Chinaman has strength to use his hands he needs no support from anybody; white men often complain of want of work, but a Chinaman offers no such complaint; he always manages to find something to do. He is a great convenience to everybody--even to the worst class of white men, for he bears the most of their sins, suffering fines for their petty thefts, imprisonment for their robberies, and death for their murders. Any white man can swear a Chinaman's life away in the courts, but no Chinaman can testify against a white man. Ours is the "land of the free"--nobody denies that--nobody challenges it. [Maybe it is because we won't let other people testify.] As I write, news comes that in broad daylight in San Francisco, some boys have stoned an inoffensive Chinaman to death, and that although a large crowd witnessed the shameful deed, no one interfered.

There are seventy thousand (and possibly one hundred thousand) Chinamen on the Pacific coast. There were about a thousand in Virginia. They were penned into a "Chinese quarter"--a thing which they do not particularly object to, as they are fond of herding together. Their buildings were of wood; usually only one story high, and set thickly together along streets scarcely wide enough for a wagon to pass through. Their quarter was a little removed from the rest of the town. The chief employment of Chinamen in towns is to wash clothing. They always send a bill, like this below, pinned to the clothes. It is mere ceremony, for it does not enlighten the customer much. Their price for washing was \$2.50 per dozen--rather cheaper than white people could afford to wash for at that time. A very common sign on the Chinese houses was: "See Yup, Washer and Ironer"; "Hong Wo, Washer"; "Sam Sing Ah Hop, Washing." The house servants, cooks, etc., in California and Nevada, were chiefly Chinamen. There were few white servants and no Chinawomen so employed. Chinamen make good house servants, being quick, obedient, patient, quick to learn and tirelessly industrious. They do not need to be taught a thing twice, as a general thing. They are imitative. If a Chinaman were to see his master break up a centre table, in a passion, and kindle a fire with it, that Chinaman would be likely to resort to the furniture for fuel forever afterward.

All Chinamen can read, write and cipher with easy facility--pity but all our petted voters could. In California they rent little patches of ground and do a deal of gardening. They will raise surprising crops of vegetables on a sand pile. They waste nothing. What is rubbish to a Christian, a Chinaman carefully preserves and makes useful in one way or another. He gathers up all the old oyster and sardine cans that white people throw away, and procures marketable tin and solder from them by melting.

He gathers up old bones and turns them into manure. In California he gets a living out of old mining claims that white men have abandoned as exhausted and worthless--and then the officers come down on him once a month with an exorbitant swindle to which the legislature has given the broad, general name of "foreign" mining tax, but it is usually inflicted on no foreigners but Chinamen. This swindle has in some cases been repeated once or twice on the same victim in the course of the same month--but the public treasury was not additionally enriched by it, probably. . . .

They are a kindly disposed, well-meaning race, and are respected and well treated by the upper classes, all over the Pacific coast. No Californian gentleman or lady ever abuses or oppresses a Chinaman, under any circumstances, an explanation that seems to be much needed in the East. Only the scum of the population do it--they and their children; they, and, naturally and consistently, the policemen and politicians, likewise, for these are the dust-licking pimps and slaves of the scum, there as well as elsewhere in America.

- Mark Twain in "Roughing It" - 1872

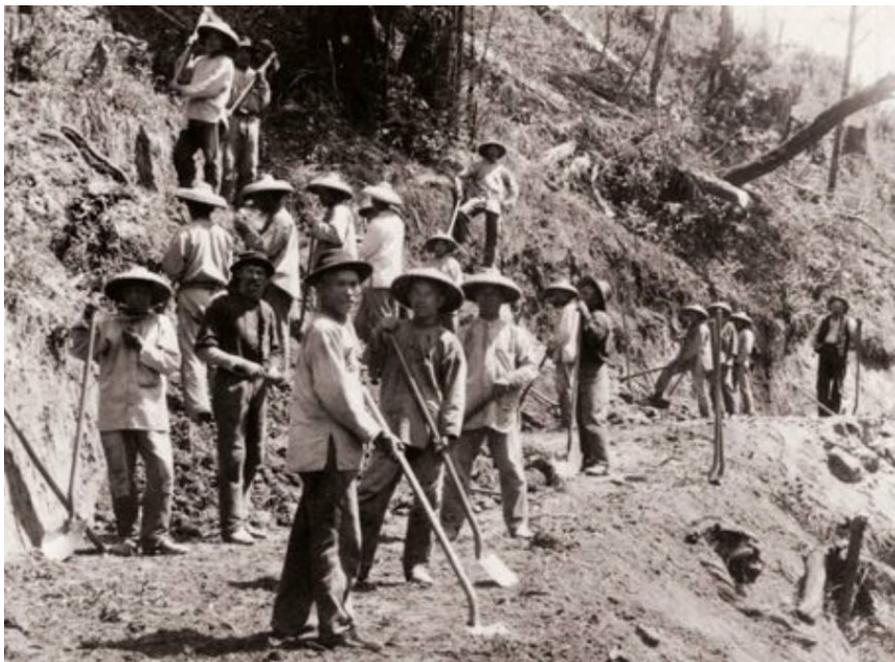
Photos, Clippings

Monument to the Chinese workers of the Pacific Coast Railway – San Luis Obispo



(© Loco Steve - <http://www.flickr.com/photos/locosteve/5997532687/>)

Chinese railway workers making a road cut in Northern California; the road cut for Port Harford would have been done the same way.



Ads in the San Luis Obispo Tribune: 1875 (left), and 1876 (right). After 1875, the Tribune would no longer carry Ah Louis's ad; Mrs. Sutherland's ad became a regular feature.

AH LUIS'
CHINESE
LABOR AGENCY
&
STORE!

Dry Goods,
Black Teas,
Sugars,
Rice,

And all kinds of

Chinese Provisions.

Chinese Labor contracted for on short notice.

Satisfaction Guaranteed in all Business Transactions.

Office:—On Palm street, San Luis Obispo.
 326-6m.

SAN LUIS LAUNDRY.

Opposition to Chinese

Patronize White Industry!

AND

SAVE MONEY

MRS. M. E. BUTHERLAND hereby announces to the people of San Luis Obispo, that she has opened a laundry, on Oros street, just back of, and one block distant from the residence of O. W. Dana, where she is prepared to do all kinds of washing, at rates below Chinese prices.

LARGE PIECES, per dozen, - - - \$1.00
 SMALL PIECES, " - - - 25cts

Orders left at the Telegraph Office will be promptly attended to.

SATISFACTION GUARANTEED

301-H

During the gold rush, virtually all the laundries in the west were run by Chinese. As the wave of immigration changed from gold seekers to settlers, many new arrivals thought these jobs should be theirs.



This flyer refers to a later extension of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act. In the Post Civil War era, the Democratic Party is associated with the South and with the urban working poor; particularly Irish immigrants. It often bills itself as "The White Man's Party". Railroad owners and operators are generally Republican and favor open immigration.

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Further Reading About Chinese Immigration in the 19th Century

The Chinese in California 1850 - 1925

This is a huge collection of photos, articles, and historic documents compiled by the Library of Congress, the Bancroft Library at the University of California - Berkeley, and the California Historical Society. Start with the "Topical Overview" and you'll be guided from there.

<http://vm136.lib.berkeley.edu/BANC/collections/chineseinca/>

Joe Jue on the Southern Pacific Railroad

This is a personal family history of a Los Angeles family whose ancestor helped build the road over Cuesta Grade.

<http://juejoeclan.blogspot.com/2010/07/details-jue-joe-on-southern-pacific.html>

Times Past - Bones would not stop the Railroad

This is a Dan Krieger article about the building of railroad to Port Harford (SLO Tribune: Subscriber password required)

<http://www.sanluisobispo.com/2012/05/19/2073764/times-past-bones-would-not-stop.html>

San Francisco history, 1879: Denis Kearney's slogan was 'The Chinese must go.'

San Jose Mercury article about Denis Kearney

http://www.mercurynews.com/bay-area-living/ci_21475090/nilda-rego-san-francisco-history-1879-denis-kearneys

On Gold Mountain - An exhibition at the Smithsonian Program for Asian Pacific Studies

This is a great series of galleries with photos and articles about the Chinese in the American West.

<http://www.si.edu/Exhibitions/Details/On-Gold-Mountain-A-Chinese-American-Experience-1421>

A History of Chinese Americans in California

A detailed history provided by the National Park Service. It's organized by decades, so check out the decade of the 1890's when the Point San Luis Lightstation was constructed.

http://www.nps.gov/parkhistory/online_books/5views/5views3d.htm

Workers of the Central Pacific Railroad

This is part of a PBS documentary about the building of the transcontinental railroad. It gives a great deal of information about contractor John Crocker and his dealings with his Chinese and Irish workers.

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/tcrr-cprrr/>

Denis Kearney and the Workingman's Party

From San Francisco's Digital Archive Foundation. Denis Kearney was an Irish immigrant, politician, and Marxist who was one of the most vocal (and violent) opponents of Chinese immigration. His "Workingman's Party" got 30% of the delegates to California's Constitutional Convention in 1879.

http://foundsf.org/index.php?title=The_Workingmen%E2%80%99s_Party_%26_The_Dennis_Kearney_Agitation

Tea Grows in China

The ads from the Tribune for the Ah Louis Store and Mrs. Sutherland's laundry are from David Middlecamp's Photos from the Vault series in the Tribune. Along with Dan Krieger's Times Past series, these are invaluable sources for local history.

<http://sloblogs.thetribunenews.com/slovault/2010/05/tea-grows-in-china/>

References about Ah Louis Personally

History in San Luis Obispo County - Ah Louis Store

A short timeline of Ah Louis and his store. A link talks about his son Howard and the family's descendants.

<http://www.historyinslocounty.org/Ah%20Louis%20Store.htm>

What California Means to Its Oldest Living Chinese

This is an interview given by Ah Louis to *Westways*, March, 1934, vol. 26, No. 3, when Ah Louis was 94 years old. He reminisces about his long life in the US and why he returned to the US from China after returning to die there.

If you're only going to read one thing about the Chinese in California, this is the one you should read.

<http://www.historyinslocounty.org/Oldest%20Living%20Chinese.htm>

Most US Chinatown's Echoed San Francisco's

This is a Dan Krieger article in the SLO Tribune about Howard Louis and SLO's Chinatown. You may need a Tribune password.

<http://www.sanluisobispo.com/2012/10/13/2261497/times-past-most-us-chinatowns.html>

SLO County's Chinese Heritage

Another Dan Krieger article in the SLO Tribune. This has a great picture of Ah Louis and his sons Howard and Fred standing in front of the Ah Louis Store in 1936. It has many great details about life in SLO's Chinatown and the operation of the old store.

<http://www.sanluisobispo.com/2012/10/20/2269283/slo-countys-chinese-heritage.html>

Books about the Chinese in America

***On Gold Mountain: The One-Hundred-Year Odyssey of My Chinese-American Family*, by Lisa See**

In this book, author Lisa See tells the story of her own family, beginning with the forbidden (and illegal) relationship between her great-grandfather, a Chinese immigrant, and her great-grandmother, an American.

Coolies, by Yin

This is a lavishly illustrated children's book, appropriate for first through fourth grade, about two young brothers who come to California to work on the Transcontinental Railroad. True story.

Thousand Pieces of Gold by Ruthanne Lum McCunn

Not a pretty story, but a true one. The author relates the story of her own ancestor, who was auctioned off as a slave in San Francisco in 1872. [It's been made into a movie](#), which you can rent.