

## Background information on Chinese Exclusion

From 1882 to 1943 the United States Government severely curtailed immigration from China to the United States. This Federal policy resulted from concern over the large numbers of Chinese who had come to the United States in response to the need for inexpensive labor, especially for construction of the transcontinental railroad. Competition with American workers and a growing nativism brought pressure for restrictive action, which began with the Act of May 6, 1882 (22 Stat. 58). Passed by the 47th Congress, this law suspended immigration of Chinese laborers for ten years; permitted those Chinese in the United States as of November 17, 1880, to stay, travel abroad, and return; prohibited the naturalization of Chinese; and created the *Section 6* exempt status for teachers, students, merchants, and travelers. These exempt classes would be admitted upon presentation of a certificate from the Chinese government.

The next significant exclusionary legislation was the *Act to Prohibit the Coming of Chinese Persons into the United States* of May 1892 (27 Stat. 25). Referred to as the Geary Act, it allowed Chinese laborers to travel to China and reenter the United States but its provisions were otherwise more restrictive than preceding immigration laws. This Act required Chinese to register and secure a certificate as proof of their right to be in the United States. Imprisonment or deportation were the penalties for those who failed to have the required papers or witnesses. Other restrictive immigration acts affecting citizens of Chinese ancestry followed. During World War II, when China and the United States were allies, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed an *Act to Repeal the Chinese Exclusion Acts, to Establish Quotas, and for Other Purposes* (57 Stat. 600-1). This Act of December 13, 1943, also lifted restrictions on naturalization. However until the Immigration Act of October 1965 (79 Stat. 911) numerous laws continued to have a restrictive impact on Chinese immigration.

Certain Federal agencies were particularly active in enforcing the exclusion laws. Initially the Customs Service took the lead because of the maritime nature of immigration. In 1900 the Office of the Superintendent of Immigration, which had been established in the Department of the Treasury in 1891, became the chief agency responsible for implementing Federal regulations mandated by the Chinese exclusion laws. This office evolved into the present Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). Both the Chinese Bureau within the Customs Service and the Chinese Division of the INS employed "Chinese" inspectors, people designated to enforce the Chinese exclusion laws. Immigration-related decisions made by these Federal officials were sometimes appealed to Federal courts, which also heard criminal cases involving Chinese alleged to be living in the United States illegally. Many of the records created to implement the Chinese exclusion laws are now in the custody of the National Archives and Records Administration's (NARA) Regional Archives. The records are a major resource for the study of Chinese immigration and Chinese-American travel, trade, and social history from the late-19th to mid-20th century. Because many documents relate to individual immigrants, they are invaluable for the study of Chinese and Chinese-American family history. These records document the rationale and actions of Federal officials and other persons involved with Chinese exclusion policies and the strategies and activities of Chinese and Chinese Americans who struggled against the prohibitive effects of those policies.

<http://www.archives.gov/locations/finding-aids/chinese-immigration.html>