

Abstract

Analyzing the 1870s Chinese Migration Across America

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Two important unexamined questions about Chinese immigrants who moved during the 1860s and early 1870s to work in parts of the United States where there had previously been few or no Chinese have largely been left unanswered. First, what happened to the contract laborers such as railroad workers of the 1860s and other contract workers in the early 1870s in other parts of the country after their contracts ended? Did most, if not all, return to their original place of residence or stay in their new locations? Second, how did individual Chinese, driven out of the west by increasing anti-Chinese violence over the 1870s and later, manage to migrate to distant regions. The “answer” to the second question may lie within the “answer” to the first question. That is, individual Chinese who moved to remote regions did *not* have to do it without assistance. They had the essential help of other Chinese previously brought to these regions by labor contractors, but then were left stranded there or chose to stay after their work contracts ended.

It is hardly surprising that until the decade of the 1870s most Chinese immigrants in the United States settled in areas on the west coast where most of them first entered the country.¹ But by the end of the decade, Chinese in small but growing numbers began appearing across the country. Several factors led to this growing migration of Chinese from the west to other parts of the country, an exodus that accelerated into the twentieth century. First, Chinese were recruited for cheap labor in construction projects such as the Transcontinental Railroad and soon after for farm and plantation work, laundry work, and factory work in other parts of the country. Chinese recruited by labor contractors did not have to deal with the formidable task of relocating across the country on their own because their labor contractors took care of arranging their travel.

Secondly, as anti-Chinese prejudice and violence escalated during this time, other Chinese fled to inner and distant parts of the country seeking safety. Unlike Chinese contract laborers, however, they faced a far more challenging task of relocation as few of them spoke or understood English. They had few financial resources and were unfamiliar with many American customs.

Chinese Contract Laborers

Railroad Workers

The first, and largest, source of Chinese who relocated from the west coast were contract laborers recruited by the thousands from the mid to late 1860s to work on the western end of the Transcontinental Railroad for the Central Pacific Railroad. Construction progress was behind schedule in the mid 1860s and the recruitment of Chinese in California as well as from China was seen as a solution for the shortage of laborers.

An argument for hiring Chinese workers was that they “are nearly equal to white men, in the amount of labor they perform, and are far more reliable. No danger of strikes among them. We are training them to all kinds of labor, blasting, driving horses, handling rock, as well as the pick and shovel.”

Charles Crocker, a San Francisco tycoon who favored employing the Chinese insisted that “the race that built the Great Wall of China could certainly be useful in building a railroad.” He persuaded his reluctant foreman, James

Harvey Strowbridge, to try 50 Chinese workers. They proved so effective that before the road was finished on May 10, 1869 at Promontory Point in northeastern Utah² about 12,000 Chinese were on the payroll.³


1870 United States Federal Census																
Utah Territory > Box Elder > Corinne																
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
Dist. or Loc.	Family No.	Name, sex, and date of birth.	Age last birthday	Sex	Color	Prof. or occ.	Value of real estate	Value of personal estate	Country, place of birth, and date of immigration.	Fuller of law	Native of U.S.	If born in U.S. month and day	If married name & date	Attended school	Can read	Can write
1	147	159	Ah Sing	32	M	C	Worker on R.R.		China	/	/				/	/
2			Ah Sing	43	M	C				/	/					
3			Ah Hing	41	M	C				/	/					
4			Ah Sing	31	M	C				/	/					
5			Ah Sing	31	M	C				/	/					
6			Ah Sing	33	M	C				/	/					
7			Ah Sing	36	M	C				/	/					
8			Ah Sing	30	M	C				/	/					
9			Ah Sing	31	M	C				/	/					
10			Ah Sing	34	M	C				/	/					
11			Ah Sing	31	M	C				/	/					
12			Ah Sing	19	M	C				/	/					
13			Ah Sing	31	M	C				/	/					
14			Ah Sing	19	M	C				/	/					
15			Ah Sing	33	M	C				/	/					
16			Ah Sing	36	M	C				/	/					
17	148	160	Ah Sing	37	M	C				/	/					
18			Ah Sing	31	M	C				/	/					
19			Ah Sing	25	M	C				/	/					
20			Ah Sing	33	M	C				/	/					
21			Ah Sing	32	M	C				/	/					
22			Ah Sing	31	M	C				/	/					
23			Ah Sing	31	M	C				/	/					
24			Ah Sing	33	M	C	Worker on R.R.			/	/					
25			Ah Sing	36	M	C	Worker on R.R.			/	/					
26			Ah Sing	34	M	C				/	/					
27			Ah Sing	31	M	C				/	/					
28			Ah Sing	36	M	C				/	/					
29			Ah Sing	31	M	C				/	/					
30			Ah Sing	31	M	C				/	/					

Sample 1870 Census Lists of Chinese Railroad Workers, Promontory, Utah

Strikebreakers At A Shoe Factory and A Steam Laundry

Chinese railroad workers established a reputation for skilled and inexpensive labor that led other capitalists to recruit Chinese labor in various forms of work. In 1870 Calvin Sampson of North Adams, Massachusetts, faced a crisis when his Irish Crispin workers went on strike at his shoe factory. Rather than yield to their demands, he hired a young Chinese labor contractor in San Francisco, Ah Sing, also known as Norman Asling, to recruit 75 Chinese, mostly young boys from California to work in place of the strikers. They arrived on June 13 and attracted many curious onlookers who had never seen Chinese previously. The arrangement did not last for more than a few years as the Chinese eventually had their own conflicts with Sampson, leading them to hold their own strike.⁴

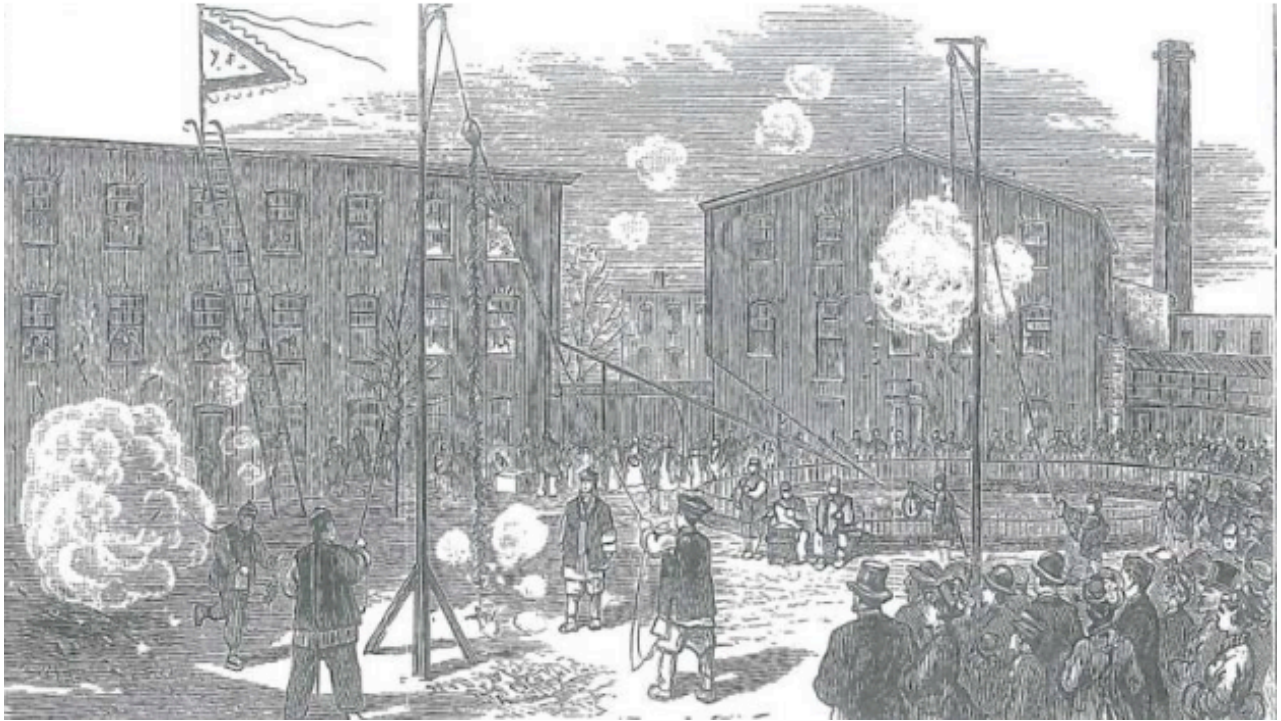


 Ah Sing, *Harper's Weekly*, July 30, 1870, page 493

1870 United States Federal Census											
Massachusetts > Berkshire > Adams											
Dwell No.	Famil No.	Name	Age	Sex	Race	Occupation	Real Estate	Personal Estate	Birthplace	Father F	Mother F
		Merritt	12	M	C	Shoemaker					
125	2102	Hon Ah Ching	18	M	C	Wade Shoe Factory	1-		China	1	1
		Sung Siu Low	15	M	C	Wade Shoe Factory	1-			1	1
		Hook Ah Ang	17	M	C	Wade Shoe Factory	1-			1	1
		Oni Ah Ang	16	M	C	Wade Shoe Factory	1-			1	1
		Song Ah Low	17	M	C	Wade Shoe Factory	1-			1	1
		Oni Ah Ang	18	M	C	Wade Shoe Factory	1-			1	1
		Hook Ah Ang	15	M	C	Wade Shoe Factory	1-			1	1
		Sung Ah Ang	14	M	C	Wade Shoe Factory	1-			1	1
		Sung Ah Low	16	M	C	Wade Shoe Factory	1-			1	1
		Ching Ah Low	14	M	C	Wade Shoe Factory	1-			1	1
		Sung Ah Ching	17	M	C	Wade Shoe Factory	1-			1	1
		Sung Ah Sing	16	M	C	Wade Shoe Factory	1-			1	1
		Wong Ah Low	15	M	C	Wade Shoe Factory	1-			1	1
		Tom Hook Low	28	M	C	Wade Shoe Factory	1-			1	1
		Shu Ah Low	15	M	C	Wade Shoe Factory	1-			1	1

A Sample of the Chinese boys recruited to work in Sampson's North Adams shoe factory.

Similarly, in 1870 John B. Hervey was having trouble with Irish women workers at his Passaic Steam Laundry in Belleville, New Jersey. He authorized the same Ah Sing who brought Chinese to Sampson's North Adams shoe factory to recruit 68 Chinese to work as strikebreakers at his steam laundry in September 1870. By 1875 he had additional Chinese come to create a total of 182 Chinese. They met hostility from parts of the community. At a mass meeting to protest the employment of Chinese one speaker denounced the importation of "coolie laborers."⁵ However, Hervey had conflicts with his Chinese workers who held their own strikes. Many left within a year. By 1882, only 60 remained and in 1885 all were fired. Some Chinese opened hand laundries in New York City and Newark where they formed thriving Chinese communities.



Chinese New Year Celebration, Belleville, N.J. *Leslie's Illustrated Weekly*, March 11, 1871

Chinese Labor For Deep South Plantations and Farms

In the Deep South, a labor crisis developed with the end of slavery in 1863. Plantation owners considered replacing slave labor with Chinese workers. In 1869 a labor contractor, Cornelius Koopmanschap, who had earlier success importing Chinese to help build the Central Pacific Railroad made a proposal at a Memphis convention of Southern planters to bring Chinese farm laborers to the South to replace black labor. He maintained that Chinese were not only cheaper, but also more reliable. However, opposition came from those who feared a large influx of Orientals.⁶

Some Chinese came to the Mississippi Delta, but did not find field labor on plantations to their liking. Instead, in virtually every delta town they opened small family-run grocery and general stores mostly in black neighborhoods to primarily serve black plantation workers.



What Shall We Do With John Chinaman? *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, 1869.

John Chinaman in Alabama.

We learn from the *Montgomery Mail* that Maj. F. H. Hanks, agent of the Chinese Immigration Company, of St. Louis, is in Alabama, engaged in making contracts with the planters for a supply of Chinese laborers. Major Hanks, in an address to the planters of the South, says:

The labor question is obviously the great problem to be solved in connection with the restoration of the South to anything like its former prosperity. The solution of that question is most readily and successfully found in the vast and overflowing population of China, the cheapness of Coolie labor, the peculiar adaptedness of that race to the climate of the South

CHINESE FOR THE SOUTH.

St. Louis, Mo., March 8.—The Hon. Henry F. Scharrett, a planter, of Pass Christian, Miss., is now here, and says that in view of the negro exodus from the South, and the disturbed condition of things in California, the planters in his part of the country have canvassed the question to some extent of attempting to obtain Chinese laborers. Correspondence has already been had with one of the Chinese companies, and probably some Chinamen will be set to work in Southern Mississippi in a few weeks.

Newspaper coverage of Chinese Workers in the South.

1870 United States Federal Census

Mississippi > Bolivar > Ra

Family No.	Name	Sex	Race	Occupation	Real Estate	Personal Estate
133 138	Loc Chang	30	m c	Farm Labor		
	Shungjung	25	m c	" "		
	Sooleung	25	m c	" "		
	Seegong	36	m c	" "		
	Lee Sam	28	m c	" "		
	Chow Ho	32	m c	" "		
	Clegg Ing	36	m c	" "		
	Pon papa	22	m c	" "		
	Tang Jong	34	m c	" "		
	Hong Ching	40	m c	" "		
	Wang Ha	38	m c	" "		
	Jipsin Gbi	38	m c	" "		
	Ho Cheung	35	m c	" "		
	Wan Gong	37	m c	" "		
	Go Yew	30	m c	" "		
		

Enumerated with Whites

Some Chinese farm laborers in 1870 in Bolivar County, Mississippi.

Other Chinese from the west coast as well as from China, and even Cuba came to work on cotton and sugar plantations in Louisiana, Mississippi and Arkansas. The Arkansas Immigration Company announced plans to bring 1000 Chinese to work on farms, but there is no evidence that so many actually came.⁷ The initial enthusiasm was short-lived as the work of Chinese in the fields did not meet the expectations of either the planters or the Chinese.

1870 United States Federal Census for Falk San												
Arkansas > Chicot > Masona												
32	Dwelli	Family	Name	Age	Sex	Race	Occupation	Real	Personal	Birthplace	Father Fo	Mother F
33	No.	No.						Estate	Estate			
34			Chang	12	M	B						
35	55	35	Young Park	25	M	C	Laborer			China		
36			Sau Park	25	M	C				"		
37			Qow	23	M	C				"		
38			Long	22	M	C				"		
39			Chow	24	M	C				"		

Chinese recruited for farm labor listed in 1870 Census for Chicot County, Arkansas.

In 1870 a sugar plantation owner, Edward Gay James, decided to recruit over 50 Chinese immigrants from San Francisco to labor in his Louisiana sugar fields. He thought that Chinese would be more docile and easier to handle than black workers. He was mistaken as Chinese workers cost him more money than he expected. Within a year they had all left his sugar fields.⁸

In 1874, a local newspaper reported that 14 Chinese contract laborers arrived by ship in Savannah from Darien, Georgia where they had worked in rice plantations and were going to similar work in South Carolina. They were regarded by black workers as "intruders" or competitors for work.

Augusta Canal Construction

A labor contractor, E.L. Rider, himself half Chinese, recruited 25 Chinese to Augusta, Georgia, from Indianapolis in late 1872, with plans to bring up to 200 later, to build the expansion of the Augusta Canal to provide hydroelectric power for mill operations.

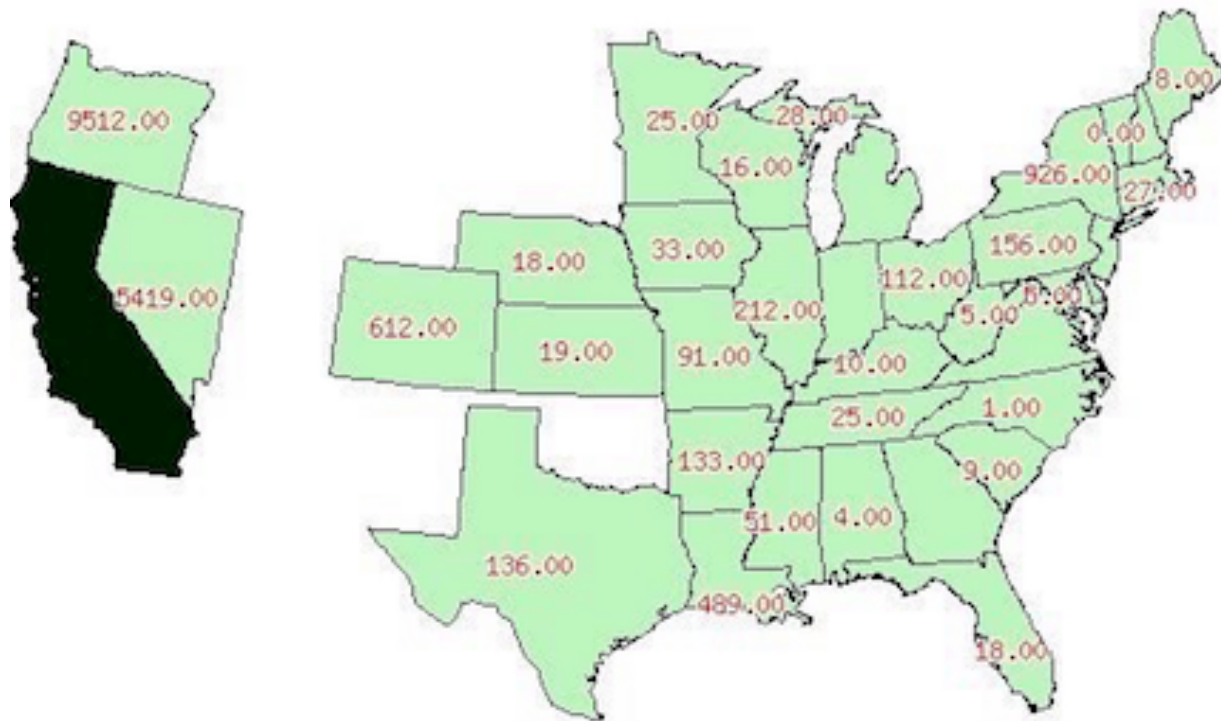
On November 8, 1873, it was confirmed that 35, not 25, "Celestials" (as they referred to Chinese then) had arrived the previous morning via the Georgia Railroad.⁹ Despite concerns that Chinese workers, small in stature, would not be sturdy workers, they acquitted themselves well.

Driven Out By Anti-Chinese Violence

Other Chinese who moved to inner sections of the country were individuals seeking refuge from anti-Chinese prejudices and violence on the west coast and Rocky Mountain area. Over the 1870s Chinese began moving eastward, in part because of increasing anti-Chinese feelings that was often expressed in destruction of their living quarters and physical violence toward them.¹⁰ After the Chinese Exclusion Act was initially passed in 1882, Chinese were literally driven out of many western towns including Tacoma, Washington, Eureka, California, and Rock Springs, Wyoming during the mid-1880s.¹¹

Migration of Individual Chinese without Labor Contracts

Other than the several contingents of contracted Chinese laborers in the 1870s earlier mentioned there were virtually no Chinese immigrants in the mid sections of the United States, especially in the Deep South. However, inspection of 1880 Census records shows a handful of Chinese living across the country in regions like the mid-west and Deep South which previously had no Chinese. Small towns in Kansas, Missouri, Kentucky, Virginia, Florida, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee had one or two Chinese men, mostly unmarried. Many were the only, or among a handful of, Chinese in their towns initially, and for decades for some.



Laundries Became A Major Economic Niche

Chinese opened or worked in hand laundries starting in the early 1870s in places where previously there had never been any Chinese. As early as 1870 two Chinese operated a laundry in Kansas City, Missouri and two other Chinese, Sam Sing and Less Sing, probably brothers, ran a laundry in Campbell, Kentucky. Surprisingly, Chicago did not have a Chinese laundry until 1872, but it seems to have closed by 1873. However, in 1874, there were as many as 18.¹² Reports from St. Louis in 1869 claimed that 100 Chinese laundrymen recruited from San Francisco had arrived there en route to work in a Chicago Chinese laundry. Given that in 1869 there were no Chinese laundries in Chicago, the claim seems in error.

Wah Lee opened the first Chinese laundry in Indianapolis, Indiana, in 1873.¹³ In the 1874 city directory, two of the four laundries, Wah Lee's laundry

and Sang Lee's laundry, were Chinese. The 1879 City Directory of Indianapolis, Indiana, had listings for eight laundries, five of which were operated by Chinese. According to the 1880 U. S. Census, these five Indianapolis laundries employed a total of 12 Chinese workers, probably relatives of the owners.

Polk's Indianapolis (Marion County, Ind.) city directory, 1879

<i>Laundries.</i>		DS
Kopp August, 252 W Washington.		541
Ladd & Williams, 277 E Washington.		
Lee Sam (Chinese), 73 S Illinois.		B
Lee Wing (Chinese), 50 E Washington.		B
Long E (Chinese), 27 Mass ave.		B
Reed Willoughby A, 38 Kentucky ave.		B
Sing Hop (Chinese), 75 N Illinois.		B
Sing Sam (Chinese), 39 Virginia ave.		B

Chinese opened laundries in every part of the country. Memphis had one as early as 1873 and in the same year in the northeast Buffalo had a Chinese laundry. By 1875, there was a Chinese laundry in Wheeling, WV. and one in Davenport, IA.

Public Ledger (Memphis, Tennessee) • 28 Jul 1873, Mon • Page 2

LAUNDRY.

Chinese Laundry.

A CHINESE LAUNDRY HAS BEEN opened on Second street, No. 352, back of the Central Baptist Church. Different prices will be charged for washing clothing, and all clothing will be called for and returned.
125-130 HENRY YING SOLONG, Prop.

Hornellville Weekly Tribune |

(Hornellville, New York) • 12 Sep 1873, Fri • Page 3

THE HORNELL

olars at school now got 'em.

A Chinese laundry has been established in Buffalo.

The Davenport Daily Gazette (Davenport, Iowa) •

26 Jun 1875, Sat • Page 1

SAM. LEE,

Chinese Laundry,

No. 115 East Second St.

Bet. Brady & Perry Sts.

B* ALL KINDS OF LAUNDRY WORK
done in the very best manner.

Chinese Laundries Expand Over the U. S. During the 1880s

Over the 1880s, Chinese laundries grew rapidly in the Deep South with 7 in Jacksonville Florida, and 15 in Nashville, Tennessee. Other cities included Montgomery, Mobile, and Birmingham in Alabama, Chattanooga in Tennessee, Macon, Savannah, and Atlanta in Georgia, Tampa in Florida, Greenville in Mississippi, and Charleston and Charlotte in the Carolinas.

Sam Sing, operated a laundry in Newport, Kentucky, in 1880, and sometime during the 1880s, as noted by the date on his laundry price list, he operated a laundry in Bowling Green, Kentucky.

— PRICE LIST —
— OF —
CHINESE LAUNDRY,
BOWLING GREEN, KY.

MARK 188

M

To be done

.... Shirts	10c
.... Shirts, new.....	12½
.... Shirts, night.....	10 to 15c
.... Shirts, under	6c
.... Collars	2c
.... Cuffs, per pair	4c
.... Drawers	6c
.... Socks, per pair	5c
.... Handkerchiefs, per doz	25c
.... Coats	25 to 50c
.... Pantaloons.....	25 to 50c
.... Vests	15 to 20c
.... Seersucker Suits.....	75c
.... Towels	3 to 10c
Family Washing	\$1.00 to \$1.25
.....	
.....	

PIECES

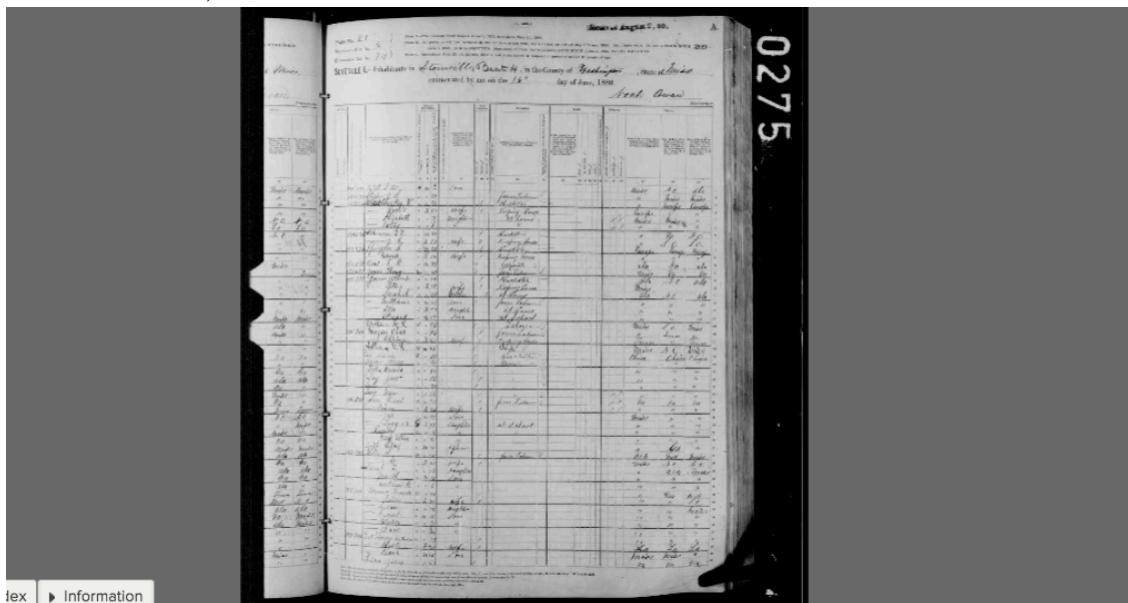
Positively no work will be delivered until the bill has been paid at the office.
No claim allowed unless made within two days, and accompanied by our original list.
SAM SING, Proprietor.

One or more Chinese laundries could be found in many cities east of the Rocky Mountains during the 1880s as shown by this sample listing.

St Louis, MO. Omaha, NE.
 Bismarck, ND. Detroit MI.
 Bangor, ME. Cincinnati, OH.
 Minneapolis, MN. Milwaukee, WI.
 Charleston, SC. Charlotte, NC.
 Austin, TX. Ft. Wayne, IN.
 Phoenix, AZ. Bloomington, IL.

Chinese Open Grocery Stores

Chinese in the South opened grocery stores throughout the Mississippi Delta as early as 1880 when 5 Chinese operated small grocery stores in Stoneville in Washington County, Mississippi and soon other Chinese came to the region to open grocery stores. When white plantations began to close their commissaries, Chinese saw an opportunity in running small family-run grocery stores to serve black cotton pickers.¹⁴ Similarly, Chinese opened grocery stores in the Southwest, and the Southeast.



Name	Gender	Age	Marital Status	Race	Occupation	Relationship to Hea...	Birth Year (Estimated)	Birthplace	Father's Birthp
Hong Gyan	Male	21	Single	Chinese	Grocer	Other	1859	China	China
Winn John	Male	28	Single	Chinese	Grocer	Other	1852	China	China
Jew Lay	Male	52	Married	Chinese	Grocer	Other	1828	China	China
Mun Luie	Male	22	Single	Chinese	Grocer	Other	1858	China	China
Warn Twy	Male	56	Married	Chinese	Grocer	Other	1824	China	China

1880 Census List of Chinese grocers, Stoneville, MS.

Other Economic Opportunities

Other Chinese worked as laborers in factories, farms, and mines. Some became domestic servants or houseboys for white families. They assumed the tasks of cooking meals, washing and ironing clothes, and providing childcare.

Some Chinese started small restaurants in small towns but they did not serve authentic Chinese dishes such as those on the menu in restaurants in cities where there were Chinatowns. It was not until after 1900 that restaurants overtook laundries as the primary form of self-employment among Chinese.

Two Unanswered Questions

What happened to Chinese contract laborers?

One important unanswered question is what happened to the thousands of Chinese recruited to work for the Central Pacific Railroad in the mid to late 1860s after the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad in 1869?

No one knows for sure what happened to these Chinese after this work ended. Some undoubtedly returned to the west coast as well as to China, but it is likely that some unknown number remained and settled within a short distance of Promontory Point, Utah, the site where the Transcontinental Railroad was completed. The 1880 Census listed some Chinese working for the railroad but how many were from the original workers and how many were new laborers cannot be determined. In the 1880 Census, Chinese in Box Elder County, site of Promontory, were not limited to work on railroad maintenance. Some worked in laundries, restaurants, grocery stores, and others worked as tailor, prostitute, doctor, and engineer.

Other railroad workers may have found other work such as farming and mining along the route of the railroad as census records of the late 1800s show Chinese in many small towns located along the Transcontinental Railroad route from California all the way to Chicago such as Elko, Nevada, Ogden, Utah, Laramie, Wyoming, and Omaha, Nebraska.

In her book, *Chinese in the Post Civil-War South, A People Without A History*, historian Lucy Cohen found that some Chinese workers on the Transcontinental Railroad later worked on construction of regional rail lines.¹⁵ The Houston and Texas Railroad in the Southwest had 250 Chinese working, but for less than a year. In addition, on Dec. 31, 1869, 500 Chinese contract laborers arrived in St. Louis en route to work on Texas railroads.¹⁶ Another 1,000 Chinese were recruited to work on the Alabama and Chattanooga Railroad in the Southeast before it went bankrupt within a year. In 1871, several hundred Chinese rail workers arrived in New Orleans from Alabama to work on sugar plantations, cotton plantations, and cotton mills in Louisiana, Arkansas, and Mississippi. None of these arrangements lasted for long due to mistreatment of Chinese and differences over contract terms.

And what happened to the smaller groups of about 50 to 100 Chinese workers that labor contractors, white as well as Chinese, recruited from the west coast and China in the 1870s to work in factories, laundries, farms, and plantations?

Some of the Chinese contracted to work in Hervey's laundry in Belleville, later opened their hand laundries in nearby Newark, New Jersey.¹⁷ A history of Newark's Chinatown found there were 2 Chinese hand laundries as early as 1880, 23 by 1885, and 47 as well as a steam laundry by 1887.¹⁸ In 1872, one Chinese from the Belleville laundry, Ong Yung, is believed to have opened the first Chinese laundry in New York City, and it is likely that others followed his example.¹⁹

What happened to the Chinese contract laborers in the South such as in Augusta after they completed their work on the canal? There is no documentation but perhaps some remained to open some of the grocery stores in black neighborhoods, Some Chinese in the Plaquemines, Louisiana sugar fields apparently stayed in the region because a decade later, the U. S. Census listed 144 Chinese laborers living there.

The second unexamined question is how individual Chinese managed to migrate to regions far from the west coast? How they managed to migrate from the west coast to settle hundreds, and for some, thousands, of miles from the west coast to areas where they were often the first, and perhaps, only Chinese residents is an unanswered question.

Is it possible that the “answer” to one question is part of the “answer” to the other question? In other words, some of the Chinese escorted to inner America by labor contractors to work on railroad and canal construction, in shoe factories, laundries and on plantations, may have stayed in these regions or nearby after their contracts ended especially since it is highly unlikely that labor contractors provided laborers with return transportation.

Stranded in the midsections of the country, where they faced racism in many communities, they were still safer than if they returned to the west where anti-Chinese sentiments was rampant during the late 19th century. They were resourceful and earned their living by starting laundries, grocery stores, and restaurants between 1870 and 1880 in towns that had never seen Chinese before.

These Chinese trailblazers then served as the “anchors” or “contacts” for bringing other Chinese to these parts of the country. They eventually encouraged and assisted some of their male relatives, brothers, sons, cousins, fathers, and uncles to join them in working in their laundries, grocery stores, and restaurants. Thus, the answer to the question of how individual Chinese managed to move to remote areas is that they did *not* have to do it by their own means. They had the essential help of other Chinese already in these areas brought there earlier by their labor contractors. After their labor contracts expired, these Chinese remained in these areas to start new lives.

References

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- ¹² Paul C. P. Siu. *The Chinese Laundryman: A Study in Social Isolation*. New York: New York University Press, 1987. P. 23.
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¹⁹ <http://www.northjersey.com/community-news/first-chinese-immigrants-established-community-in-belleville-1.1353349> Accessed Nov. 1, 2016.