



Alabama Property Protection Act: Self-Preservation or Chinese Exclusion?

By Rachel Hargrove

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Introduction to Chinese Americans in Alabama



**Chinese laborers building the Transcontinental Railroad
(Photo: Alfred Hart/Library of Congress)**

At the close of the Civil War, after the abolishment of slavery in the United States, former plantation owners in the South were faced with the heavy workload previously carried by enslaved peoples. In an attempt to fill in the gap of workers, many began to employ Chinese immigrants (Chong).

Why Chinese Labor?

"The southern planter wants to raise his cotton crop just as cheaply as possible and every one that invests in the manufactured articles wants it at the lowest price obtainable. Chinese labor is cheap, cheaper than n**** labor and is much less trouble because it is more reliable..."

Written by Phineas Fletcher for
The Birmingham Age-Herald
October 16, 1904

The widespread employment of Chinese immigrants was heavily based on the cheap labor costs. Chinese immigrants were willing to perform more dangerous work for much less pay than most of the white workers would accept (Kennedy). Because of this, Chinese immigrants had a major hand in rebuilding the South after the war. This included working on plantations and doing construction work that other laborers did not want to do. These workers were one of the driving forces behind the building of the Transcontinental Railroad and the North East and South West Alabama Railroad. This dynamic changed greatly after the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882.

Chinese Exclusion and Yellow Peril

With the surplus of Chinese laborers in America, many citizens began to fear that Chinese immigrants were a threat to both the job market for white citizens and the "purity of the white race" (Densho Encyclopedia). This widespread belief that Chinese immigrants were dangerous led to the passing of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which barred Chinese people from entering the U.S. for ten years, with very few exceptions. This act paved the way for the anti-Asian sentiment known as the "yellow peril" (Densho Encyclopedia). This references the fear of a takeover by Asian immigrants in America



Image taken from Washington State Historical Society

In the interest of all our people, and in consonance with their almost general demand we have urged Congress for some tangible relief from the constantly growing evil of induced and undesirable immigration but without result...Recognizing the danger of Chinese immigration and responsive to the demands of the people, Congress years ago enacted an effective Chinese exclusion law, yet while the experience of our people, of our country, as well as other countries, the present law is flagrantly violated, and now by act of Congress it is seriously proposed to invalidate that law and reverse the policy.

**Excerpt from the Birmingham Age-Herald
March 22, 1906**

Chinese immigrants are “dangerous”

.....➔

The fear of China, and people of Chinese descent, is deeply rooted in Alabama history. In the past, Chinese immigrants were seen as a threat to American labor, and as portrayed in the previous newspaper excerpt, the people of Alabama were extremely against the proposal to lift the ban on Chinese immigration. The Chinese immigrants were said to be “undesirable” and “evil” and therefore unwanted in the state, despite their labor being a major factor in rebuilding the country during the Reconstruction Era.

➔.....

In opposing the unrestricted immigration of the Chinese, labor in this country is rightfully obeying the law of self-preservation, which some men call "the first law of heaven." Those who disregard this latter and more selfish view, perceive in this question of the Chinese that real law of public morality which is apart from and above all possible consideration of mere self-interest; and this is directly applicable to and against the unrestricted immigration alike of the Chinese and all other races.

**Excerpt from the Birmingham Age-Herald
March 1, 1902**

An act of "self-preservation"

The idea of the Chinese Exclusion Act was that it was a needed act of "self-preservation" for America. This implies many things about the nature of the relationship between America and Chinese immigrants, mainly that America and American people need to be protected from Chinese immigration. It plays into the idea of the yellow peril, in the way that white American citizens will be somehow harmed by the presence of Chinese people in the country.

Alabama House Bill 379: The Alabama Property Protection Act

Alabama Governor Kay Ivey recently signed House Bill 379, which prohibits certain foreign entities from purchasing land in Alabama. The bill includes restrictions for governments, government officials, and political party members from the countries specified in the Bill.

Foreign countries of concern are identified as: China, Iran, North Korea, and Russia. Taiwan is excluded from this, despite being a Chinese territory.

- Foreign principles can include:
- a. The government or any official of the government of a foreign country of concern.
 - b. A political party or member of a political party or any subdivision of a political party in a foreign country of concern.
 - c. A country or government identified on any sanctions list of the United State Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control.

The bill states that no foreign principle shall acquire title to, or acquire a controlling interest in, either in agricultural and forest property or property on or within ten miles of any military installation.

What does this mean for Chinese Americans?

While this bill does not necessarily bar Chinese American citizens from purchasing land, it still presents potential hardships facing these citizens in Alabama. For one, it lends to harmful stereotypes facing people of Chinese descent. The reference of China as a “country of concern” implies that China, and Chinese people, are inherently dangerous. This is a sentiment that has been held by residents of Alabama for many years.

The name of the bill is very telling- The Alabama Property Protection Act. This bill, similar to The Chinese Exclusion Act, is seen as an act of self-preservation for the state and citizens of Alabama. The ideas presented in the bill are very reminiscent of the sentiments of the yellow peril and the ideas that led to the original Chinese Exclusion Act. It is based on the idea that the ownership of land or property by China is inherently dangerous to the people of the state. One of the issues with this idea of self-preservation is that it indirectly implies that citizens of Chinese descent are somehow less “American” than native-born citizens. The law sees citizens born in America or citizens with no ties or loyalty to other countries, such as China, as the ones deserving protection.

Why is this relevant?

Chinese American still face intense discrimination in America, although it looks different than the blatant racism of the past.

Discrimination During the Pandemic

During the COVID-19 pandemic, discrimination against Asian Americans grew greatly, especially concerning Chinese Americans.

This was a result of the virus publicly being called the "China virus" due to its origins in China. Chinese Americans reported facing 50% more discrimination, in the form of hateful speech or violence (White).

Housing Discrimination

Asian Americans also face discrimination when it comes to finding housing. A study done by Urban Institute shows that Asian Americans are given very different treatment compared to white Americans in the housing market. When applying for housing, Asian Americans were reportedly given less information about the properties they were inquiring about compared to their white counterparts.

Similar Laws

Alabama is not the only state that has recently passed laws restricting the sale of property and real estate for foreign entities. The Washington Post reports that 33 states have introduced similar laws, ranging in intensity. Some of these laws are only concerning government entities, but some states, such as Florida, are also targeting Chinese citizens. A handful of laws restricting Chinese landownership have made it to Congress as well, none of which have been passed. Many Chinese Americans are fearing for their rights and stability in a country that is progressively trying to limit the options they are given.

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