

Chinese and the Panama Canal

Judge Williams States Some Facts Bearing on Exclusion—Opinion Which Concerns Laborers

PROPOSE in this writing to express my views upon the proposition of the Government to employ Chinese labor in the construction of the Panama Canal, but before proceeding to that, I will give a brief history of the Chinese question, so far as the action of the Government therewith is concerned. Prior to 1844 China was comparatively a terra incognita to the people of this country. In that year Caleb Cushing, our Minister to China, made a treaty with the government of that country, the chief object of which was to establish commercial relations between the two nations. There was nothing in the treaty about the immigration of Chinese to the United States. In 1858 another treaty was made by William B. Reed, our then Minister to China, which was nothing more than an extension into details of the Cushing treaty. In 1862 Congress passed an act prohibiting vessels of the United States from engaging in the "coolie trade," but it seems to have been a dead letter and there was nothing in the act to prevent foreign vessels from importing coolies into the United States, and the trade went on without interruption. In 1868 Anson Burlingame, acting for the Chinese Government, and William H. Seward, then Secretary of State, made a treaty, sections 5 and 6 of which read as follows:

The United States of America and the Emperor of China, cordially recognizing the inherent and inalienable right of man to change his home and allegiance and also the mutual advantage of the immigration and emigration of their citizens and subjects respectively from one country to the other for purposes of curiosity, of trade, or of permanent residents. The high contracting parties therefore join in reprobating any other than an entire and voluntary emigration for these purposes. They consequently agree to pass laws making it a penal offense for a citizen of the United States or Chinese subject to take Chinese subjects either to the United States or any other foreign country or for a Chinese subject or citizen of the United States to take citizens of the United States to China or to any other foreign country without their free and voluntary consent respectively.

First Move to Restrict Chinese.

This treaty, though made in 1868, was not published until some time in 1870. On the 6th day of December, 1869, I introduced in the Senate a bill, of which the following is a copy:

Section 1. That any contract or agreement to procure or encourage the importation or immigration of Chinese into the United States shall be null and void and any person entering into any such contract or agreement shall be deemed guilty of a misdemeanor and upon conviction thereof shall be fined in a sum not less than \$100 and not more than \$500 or imprisoned not less than six months or both at the discretion of the court.

Some Questions to Answer.

Panama is only eight degrees north of the equator, and the heat there is continuous and intolerable, and the natives do not wear themselves to the midday sun more than is absolutely necessary. Every day there are heavy showers of rain, followed by a blazing sun, the heat of which makes the atmosphere thick and heavy with a hot vapor in which respiration is much like breathing in a room filled with steam. The atmosphere is most insupportable, and almost every day there is made up of dead and decaying vegetation which has been rotting for ages in the humidity and heat of a tropical climate. Mr. Gompers, in his speech, describes the atmosphere of the Isthmus as "pestilential and miasmatic," and yet he seems to want our laboring men to go down there and work in this "pestilential and miasmatic" atmosphere. All experience shows that white men born and reared in a temperate climate cannot work safely upon land located in the torrid zone, and I believe this fact has been demonstrated in the rice and tobacco fields of the Philippine Islands. Does Mr. Gompers really want our best and ablest men to leave our beautiful country, in which they can live and find plenty of employment at remunerative wages, and go down to the Isthmus of Darien and dig in the rotten soil and the "pestilential and miasmatic" atmosphere of that country at the peril of their lives, or is he influenced in his proposition by war upon the Administration on that account by other considerations?

Would Mr. Gompers be willing to take his shovel and go down to the Isthmus and dig on the canal, or does he prefer to make political speeches in the State of Maine?

I believe it will be a sorry business for the Chinese if they accept the invitation to work on the Panama Canal, for in my opinion it will not only cost hundreds of millions of dollars but it will also be necessary to complete the canal, unless the work is done by persons acclimated by birth or otherwise to the temperature and conditions of the torrid zone. I have examined what Mr. Gompers has said upon this subject from his speech published in the Labor Press of this city.

Palisades Formation.

Allied in Formation to Mount Holyoke and Cape Blomidon. "The Gates of the Hudson," in Century. The complete height of the cliff was much higher, originally, for the glacier that buried North America down to this latitude eroded billions of tons which went to the upbuilding of Long Island, trap bowlders being common in the soil of Brooklyn, and I have found on the top of the Palisades, opposite Spuyten Duyvil, glacial groovings and polishings that have survived the presumptive 16,000 years since the glacier melted. The outpour of this mass from a volcano whose crater we cannot so much as guess in this day, was tremendous, and it cut the Hudson and Hackensack valleys asunder and pushed the harbor several miles to the southward, while related activities thrust above the surface, either as downpours or upstarts, the thousand miles of basaltic hills that chain the Carolinas to the Bay of Fundy, so that our Palisades are allied in form and time to Mount Holyoke and Cape Blomidon, while they relate in cause to the steam storms that swept thousands into eternity at Krakatoa and Martinique, and were felt around the world. To the mineralogist our Palisades do not yield as much of interest as we find in the rotting trap of Paterson, a few miles away, from which have been taken the largest prehnites in the world, sea green and wonderful; royal amethysts; balls of silky pectolite, and quartz pseudomorphs that copy them; but we find in these cliffs occasional duplicates of the columns that make the Giant's Causeway and Fingal's Cave—geometric shapes of three, four, five, six and more sides, not a result of crystallization, as was once imagined, for trap is a rock, not a mineral, but of lateral shrinking when it has cooled.

Hardships of Past Ages.

Life. Facto—In the ages past how did people ever manage to live without telephones and the telegraph? Philos—They didn't, they all died.

Mr. Gompers' Ignorance of Facts.

Mr. Gompers has declared war upon the Government because it proposes to employ Chinese in the construction of the Panama Canal. He says that such employment would be in violation of the exclusion act, as that act excludes Chinese laborers from the United States and "its possessions." Mr. Gompers is mistaken; there is nothing in the act about "possessions." I quote the exact language of the act:

That from and after the passage of this act and until the expiration of ten years next after the passage of this act it shall be

of Chinese laborers to the United States be and the same is hereby suspended and during such suspension it shall not be lawful for any Chinese laborer to come from any foreign port or place or having so come to remain within the United States.

The Isthmus of Darien is not the United States or any part of the United States. The United States has jurisdiction over what is called the "Canal zone" to protect its property and preserve the public peace, but the inhabitants of that zone have as much right to participate in the government of their country as they ever had. It would be as much of a violation of the exclusion act to bring Chinese laborers to the United States from Panama as it would be to bring them from Hongkong. Moreover, the proposed contract for the employment of Chinese provides that they shall be immediately deported when they cease to work.

Mr. Gompers says that Mr. Shonts promised not to employ Chinese upon the canal. What Mr. Shonts has to say about this does not appear, but assuming that he made this promise, he had a right to change his mind. He may have said and may have intended at one time not to employ Chinese, but if he found that it was impracticable to prosecute the work successfully with West Indian negroes, and that the employment of Chinese had become a necessity, it was not only his right but his duty to do what in his judgment the public interest required, irrespective of any conversation he may have had with Mr. Gompers. But what Mr. Shonts said or did not say is of no consequence. The question is, will the employment of Chinese in the construction of the Panama Canal be prejudicial or injurious to the rights and interests of the wage-earners of the United States?

No Place for a White Man.

The only possible reason that can be given for the exclusion of the Chinese from the Isthmus is that their employment there will deprive our wage-earners of the right to work upon and dig the Panama Canal, but the conclusive answer to this reason is, that the white wage-earners of the United States, if they were willing, cannot do this work. I have crossed the Isthmus several times, and on one occasion I was told by an engineer who assisted in the construction of the Panama Railroad that if the dead bodies of the men who died in working upon that road were laid side by side, they would reach across the Isthmus. This may be an exaggeration, but it is a well-known fact that within three months from the time a shipload of laborers from the United States arrived on the Isthmus to work on the railroad, a majority of them were dead. The survivors were returned as invalids to the city from which they were taken, I with shiploads of passengers, at one time was detained at Panama for a week, during which time many of these passengers contracted the Panama fever, and almost every day there was a burial at sea on our way from Panama to San Francisco. I am aware that the sanitary regulations are much better now than they were then, but sanitary regulations cannot change the climate or the rays of a tropical sun.

Some Questions to Answer.

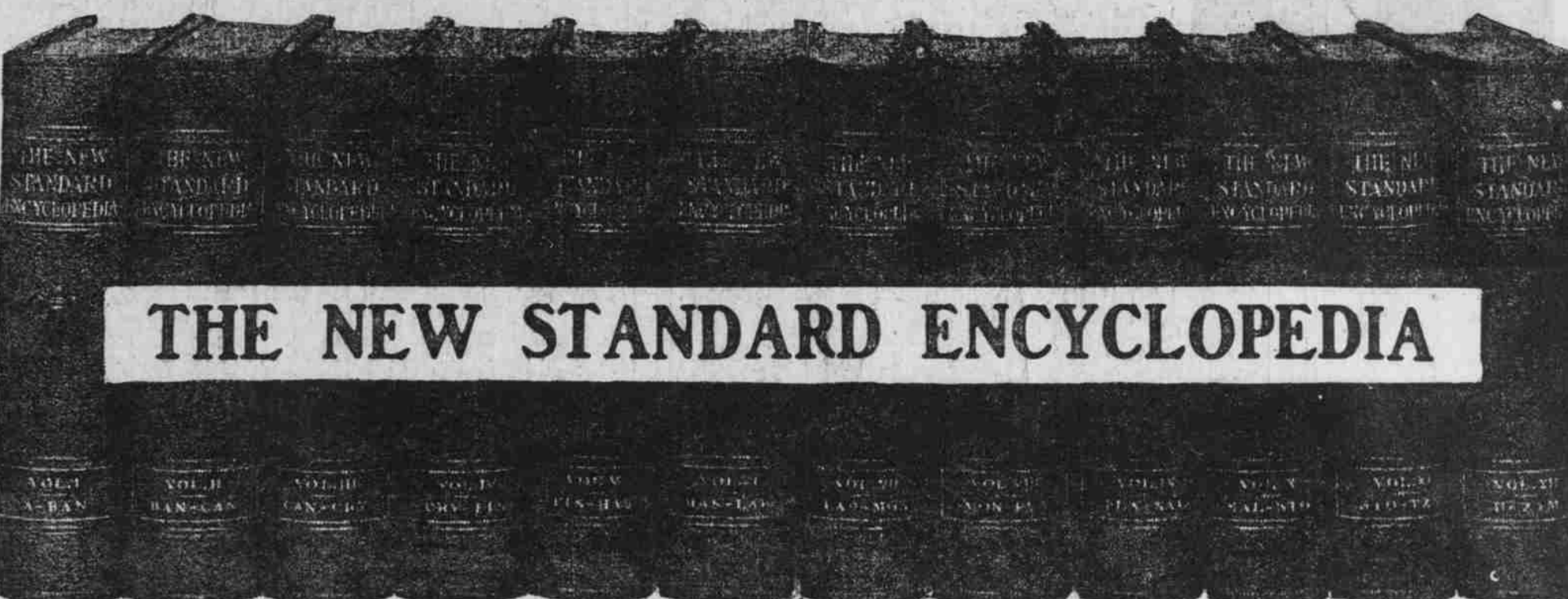
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GEORGE H. WILLIAMS.

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