Room Four: Surviving a City in Ruins

Chinese Relocation

Although class animosity had seemingly been eradicated, racism remained. As they had in the past, the Chinese bore the brunt of a longtime hatred exacerbated by the catastrophe. Chinatown, their tight-knit enclave, was destroyed, its ramshackle brick and wood buildings either providing rubble for the earthquake or tinder for the fire. Desegregated by natural disaster, the Chinese now had to join a mass society that had proven hostile to them in the past.

Some 20,000 Chinese managed to escape the city, many of them catching the ferry to Oakland. There they were offered space for relocation on the shores of Lake Merritt—just like white refugees. In San Francisco, however, it was a different story. The main Chinese refugee camp was located at Fort Mason. But the day after it was established, residents living next to the Presidio complained that they did not want to live downwind of the odors of the encampment. During the weeks following April 18, the Chinese were required to remain on the move. In their search for refuge, they were relocated no less than four times by city and military officials.

Racial animosity was part of the motivation behind these forced migrations, but economics also played a heavy hand. The old Chinatown had been located on some of the most valuable property in the city, and municipal leaders like James Phelan wanted to see the area filled with civic plazas and beautiful buildings, not overrun by the hated Chinese. The Chinese, however, also held claims to their old neighborhood. Their merchant leaders asserted that the Chinese Consulate was in Chinatown, and since it was owned by the Chinese government, the city could not make arbitrary decisions about its future. Second, the private landlords who charged the Chinese high rents wanted to preserve their incomes by keeping their old tenants. Although not entirely benevolent, these property owners were a powerful lobby that Phelan and his supporters could not override without serious consideration.