

An Exceptional Diplomat

Remembering Anson Burlingame

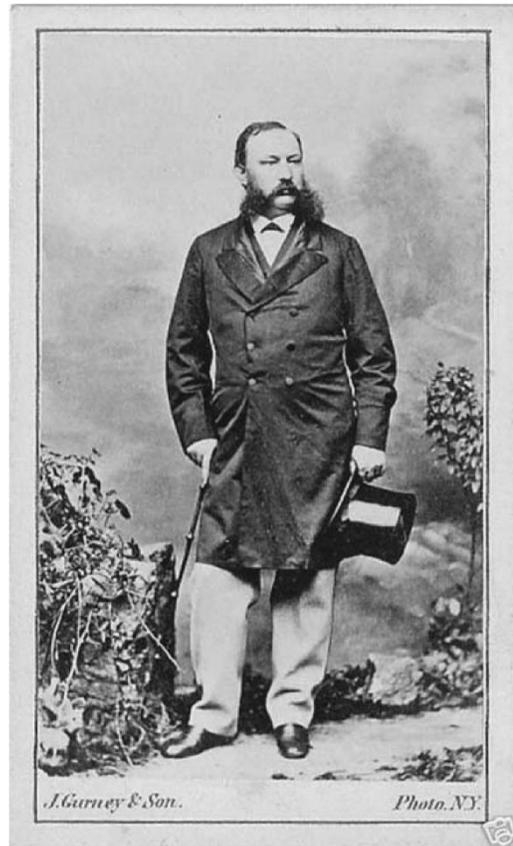
By Stanton Jue

As we celebrate this year the 90th anniversary of the Rogers Act creating the U.S. Foreign Service and AFSA, I want to call attention to the remarkable contributions of an American diplomat who was Abraham Lincoln's envoy to China (1861-67) and later China's envoy to Washington with a specific mission to renegotiate China's many unequal treaties imposed by the west since the Opium War.

Unlike most other diplomats then in Beijing, Burlingame played a pivotal role in bringing China out into the international community by treating China with respect, understanding, equality and fairness. Upon the end of his tour, the Imperial Court of Qing dynasty asked him to represent China as envoy to renegotiate its unequal treaties with the west. He accepted the assignment with approval from Washington.

Burlingame and Secretary Seward drafted a new treaty titled the Seward-Burlingame Treaty of 1868 which accords equality, justice and reciprocity to China. Unfortunately, this treaty was terminated shortly under the pressure of xenophobic forces of the time which led to the enactment of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882.

In his travel to Europe, he and his Chinese delegates were warmly received by the heads of state. In Russia the winter was too severe, he died of pneumonia while negotiating with Tsar Alexander II in St. Petersburg, on February 23, 1870.



Burlingame's spectacular achievements were generally ignored or forgotten in official Washington. But the Qing Imperial Court was appreciative of what he had done for China by conferring on him a posthumous civil service title of First Rank and a pension of about \$10,000 and other privileges for his family. He was buried in a Boston cemetery, his coffin draped with both American and Chinese flags.

As we celebrate this year the 90th anniversary of the creation of the U.S. Foreign Service, it is important to remember his contributions in the diplomatic history of the United States and China.

The following message appears in the May issue of the *Foreign Service Journal*:

Recalling Anson Burlingame by Stanton Jue

In reference to the March AFSA News article, "AFSA Memorial Plaque: The Forgotten,

Found,” I believe that one other exceptional American diplomat omitted from the list should be honored and remembered: Anson Burlingame, Abraham Lincoln’s first envoy to Imperial China (Qing Dynasty).

While serving in Beijing (1861-1867), Burlingame often spoke up for ordinary Chinese whose voices were rarely heard. He articulated the issues of unfairness perpetuated by foreign powers seeking special privileges, extraterritoriality, access to commerce in coastal ports and other demands.

At the end of his China tour, the Qing Imperial Court asked him to serve as its envoy to help renegotiate the many unequal treaties Western powers had imposed following the Opium Wars of 1839-1842. The State Department authorized him to do so.

As part of his mission to help China, the envoy drafted eight articles to supplement the 1858 Treaty of Tientsin. These formed the Burlingame Treaty of 1868, also known as the Seward-Burlingame Treaty. This new treaty accorded equality, fairness and reciprocity to China.

Regrettably, the national mood in the United States at that time was highly xenophobic, and Congress tried to abrogate the treaty by legislation. President Rutherford Hayes vetoed that bill, citing the constitutional principle of separation of powers, but the treaty was later nullified by the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882.

En route to Europe, Burlingame and his large Chinese delegation stopped in London, Paris, Stockholm, Copenhagen, Berlin and St. Petersburg, and were warmly received at each stop by heads of state. Sadly, the Russian winter

was too severe for Burlingame, who died there of pneumonia on Feb. 23, 1870.

He was buried in a cemetery in Cambridge, Mass., with both American and Chinese flags draped over the coffin. In honor of his diplomatic service, the Qing Court conferred a posthumous Civil Service title of the first rank on him and set up a pension of \$10,000 for his family.

The city of Burlingame outside San Francisco International Airport was also named after him.

In retrospect, perhaps Mark Twain’s words in his tribute to Burlingame expressed it best: “For he had outgrown the narrow citizenship of a state and became a citizen of the world, and his charity was large enough and his great heart warm enough to feel for all its races and to labor for them. ... In greatness, ability, grandeur of character and achievement, he stood head and shoulders above all the Americans of today. ... He was a good man and a very, very great man. America lost a son, and all the world a servant, when he died.”



*Stanton Jue, FSO, retired,
Arlington, Va*