



Chinese Community in Olympia

A walking tour
of historic sites

I Capitol Way: First Legislative Plaque (1A)/Customs house (1B)

This block is the site of Olympia's earliest business center. Two blocks north of this spot, before extensive filling changed the shoreline, the city's first wharf received visitors and settlers to early Olympia. Among them were pioneers that crossed the Pacific from China to make a new home. They came looking for opportunity and to work. Many found jobs as seasonal labor in mills and lumber camps. Others worked as cooks, house servants, vegetable growers, and launderers. They formed an important part of Olympia's early economic and cultural fabric, and their contributions are reflected in the city today.



Jim Ah Toone, wife Nettie Chiang, and children born in Olympia.
Photograph courtesy of the Washington State Historical Society.

In 1852 when Olympia was still a small village, the first customs port of entry on Puget Sound opened near this site, making it the first port of call for arrivals to the region from around the world. City founder Edmund Sylvester, who operated the Olympia House Hotel, listed an "accomplished Chinese cook" as one of the luxuries attracting guests to his hotel, fully twenty years before railroad construction began in Thurston County.

By the 1890s, as the center of the business district moved south along Capitol Way, the early storefronts in this block fell into disrepair, including the building that hosted the first territorial

legislature. Its final use was as a restaurant, and one of its last proprietors was Jim Ah Toone and family who came to Olympia after the 1889 Seattle fire. The building was razed in the early 1900s after an attempt to save it for its historical value.

2 Capitol Way: Pekin Café (2A) and Kay's Café (2B)

By the late 1800s, several Chinese-owned restaurants operated in Olympia. The lumber mills and other industries on Olympia's waterfront operated three shifts a day and created an opportunity for Chinese restaurateurs who offered extended operating hours to serve the mill workers. Beginning around 1912 the Pekin Café operated on the east side of Capitol Way between Fourth Avenue and State Street.

In 1941, Charley Kay and wife Lam Shee opened Kay's Café in the old Olympia Hardware building on the west side of Capitol Way. Charley came to Olympia around 1900, and his wife and young sons joined him in 1915. Charley learned to cook in local restaurants including the legendary Doane's

Oyster House and the Hotel Olympian. Charley, whose real name was Locke Suey Kay, changed his name rather than continually explain that Chinese place family surnames first.

In fact, by the late 1800s, nearly all Chinese in Olympia were Lockes. As in other towns, Chinese surname associations provided help to the immigrants. While not all sharing the same surname were directly related, it provided a basis for a support network that facilitated employment, housing, financial services, and a sense of community in a time when America politically marginalized Asians.

Kay's Café remained in operation by the Kay family until 1976. Many longtime Olympia residents remember Kay's as the late-night hangout in Olympia, a popular destination after high-school dances.

3 Fourth Avenue Chinatown

The first known location of Olympia's Chinese quarters was on the south side of Fourth Avenue, between Columbia and Capitol Way, although a few laundries operated near the intersection of State Street and Washington Streets. By the 1870s a number of buildings lined Fourth Avenue, home to the single men that comprised the local Chinese immigrant labor population. In the 1870s, railroad building in Western Washington increased the size of Olympia's existing Chinese population.

Unable to bring wives from China and restricted from naturalization due to racially exclusive immigration laws, Chinese men lived clustered in boarding houses that were often boisterous and considered "vice districts" by the white community. Nevertheless, the Chinese community attracted curious visitors, especially during holiday celebrations such as Lunar New Year. From the *Washington Daily Standard* of February 21, 1863:

Chinese New Year - The Chinese Residents of our town kept up a continual popping of firecrackers on Tuesday last, in honor of the commencement of new year. [The Chinese are] about ten months ahead of us in this anniversary and celebrates in a much more becoming way. His firecrackers and strong tea take the place of firearms and strong whiskey sometimes used by his more civilized brethren; and their hospitality on such occasions is immense.

Other goings-on in "Chinatown" also attracted onlookers. Funerals in particular captured the interest of non-Chinese and were described in local papers. From the *Washington Standard*, April 30, 1880:

... Previous to being placed in the hearse, the coffin was carried into the street and deposited upon supports about three feet from the ground. [After they] decked themselves in red and blue sashes, they began to prostrate themselves, two by two, upon a mat spread on the ground at the foot of the coffin, at the same time, going through sundry gesticulations, the import of which was known only to themselves. Before rising, each man received a little cup from an attendant and emptied its contents upon the

ground... It added not a little to the vanity of the performance to see the Chinamen approach the mat, kneel, pour out their libations, and gesticulate without ever taking their cigars or cigarettes from their mouths. Spectators were divided as to whether the little cup contained tea or brandy.

In the 1880s anti-Chinese sentiment among whites erupted into violence in the west. In Tacoma and Seattle, mobs forced the Chinese populations to leave at gunpoint. These events generated negative press in eastern United States newspapers and made local community leaders wary of

allowing a repeat in Olympia. On February 12, 1886, anti-Chinese rioters in Olympia converged on the Chinese dwellings and businesses and demanded their departure. Fortunately, Olympia's Sheriff William Billings intervened. While the rioters harassed and ridiculed the Chinese, the Sheriff deputized a number of local businessmen and kept watch, preventing the forced removal of the Chinese population of Olympia. Subsequently, the instigators of the riot were arrested, fined, and jailed.

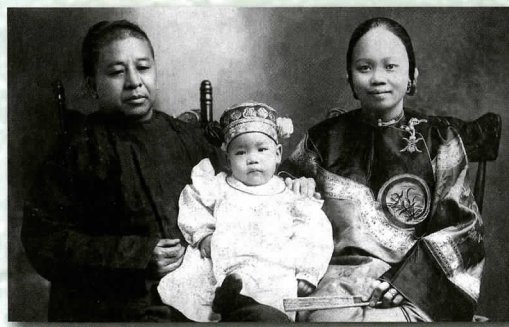


Advertisement for Hong Hai and Company, 1890s. Olympia newspaper, date n/a.

4 Fifth Avenue Chinatown

After the riots of the 1880s, Chinatown relocated to the southeast corner of Columbia Street and Fifth Avenue. Several Chinese stores operated here, built on pilings above the as yet unfilled tideland. In this era laundries transformed into stores as federal Chinese exclusion laws left loopholes for the immigration of merchants. These mercantiles stocked imported goods usually purchased by Chinese residents, although non-Chinese also patronized these stores for tea, rice, and even fireworks for 4th of July celebrations. Often Chinese mercantiles had numerous "co-owners" allowing immigrant laborers to utilize the merchant exemption to gain entry to the US.

In this era, Locke Sam Fun emerged as the most prominent merchant in the Chinese community. Arriving in 1874 as a railroad laborer, by 1877 Locke was a partner in the Hong Yek Kee and Co. store. He served as banker for the Chinese, as well as community spokesperson. The local press often referred



Locke Sam Fun and Family. Photograph courtesy of Hugh Locke.

members of the Olympia Area Chinese Fellowship, a group formed in the 1980s to help new generations of immigrants arriving from China. The celebration included a traditional "lion dance" and the OACF youth string orchestra and took place in Heritage Park. Placed near the location of Olympia's last Chinatown, the marker serves as a permanent reminder to park visitors of its role not only as a place to enjoy the present, but also as a place for community reflection on its diverse history.

Translation of the Poem on the Chinese Marker in Heritage Park

Sojourners
come to
Gold Mountain

We find
Adventure and hardship
fortune and hostility
honor and rejection.

Opportunity

We thank
citizens of Olympia
who befriend us.



City of
OLYMPIA

Funded by the City of Olympia Lodging Tax
and the Olympia Heritage Commission 2006.
Text by Edward Echtle.

Cover Photograph:
Pekin Café, 1920. The Pekin Café was located on Capitol Way
and provided inexpensive meals to lumber mill workers
headed to and from their work on the industrial waterfront.
(Photograph courtesy of Irene Locke.)



to Locke Sam Fun as “the Mayor of Chinatown” and many prominent Olympians patronized Hong Yek Kee and knew Locke Sam Fun well enough to vouch for him on his immigration papers.

As a successful merchant, Locke Sam Fun had the resources to be among the few early Chinese able to bring a wife from China. In 1902 he returned from a visit to China with wife Lee Shee. Together they had nine children, born in their home above the Hong Yek Kee and Co. store.

Around 1913 the land leased to the Chinese on which Chinatown stood was sold and built on by others. In later years, the buildings that now occupy the site were the location of the Shanghai Café, originally financed by Locke Sam Fun. Eventually his family purchased the buildings which remained in the family until 2002.

5 Water Street Chinatown

Around 1913 the Chinese moved the buildings that comprised the Fifth Avenue Chinatown to Fifth and Water St., the final location of Chinatown in Olympia. As alien land laws forbade Chinese immigrants to own land, Locke Sam Fun purchased the lot in his American-born son's name.

By the early 1900s, the Exclusion Laws preventing large numbers of Chinese from immigrating left the community largely comprised of aging single men. By the 1940s, most of the buildings were vacant and the Olympia Fire Department considered them a hazard.

In 1943 the city razed the remaining buildings. That same year, the United States' military alliance with China against Japan made exclusion of Chinese a point of embarrassment to Congress. The US Government began lifting the prohibitions on Chinese immigration the same year.



Marker for Locke My Tuck, who died in 1914. Edward Echtle Photo

6 Forest Memorial Gardens Chinese Cemetery

On the eastern limits of old Olympia is the cemetery where the Chinese community buried its deceased members. Located along Pacific Avenue, it was once part of the original wagon road connecting Olympia to Steilacoom. It was actually a cemetery within a cemetery. The Chinese section is administered independently by the Locke Family Association.

Tradition held that Chinese who died far from home were buried for ten years, then their bones exhumed for return to their family plots in China where descendants could properly honor them. The Locke association periodically paid a travelling Buddhist monk to perform the exhumations until WWII, but the communist revolution in China halted the practice of returning bones to China.

Olympia's Chinatowns 1850s - 1943



In the 1970s, fire destroyed the Locke Family Association records. At present, it is unknown if any Chinese pioneers remain at Forest Grove Cemetery, awaiting return to China. Today there is one marker remaining, discovered when Pacific Avenue was widened in the 1980s. Its original location in the cemetery is unknown.

7 Heritage Park

The election of Gary Locke as Governor in 1996 sparked new interest in Olympia's Chinese heritage. Locke's Grandfather, Suey Gim, came to the United States around 1900 and lived and worked in Olympia as a house servant.

Interested local historians combined efforts with descendants of the community and formed a committee to place this marker. In May 2004, Olympia hosted a ceremony that included descendants of the original Chinese community, city officials, and



Marker Dedication, May 22, 2004. L to R: Bill Kay, Toy Kay, Brian Lock, Jimmy Locke, Mary Pang, City Councilman Doug Mah. Edward Echtle Photo.

members of the Olympia Area Chinese Fellowship, a group formed in the 1980s to help new generations of immigrants arriving from China. The celebration included a traditional “lion dance” and the OACF youth string orchestra and took place in Heritage Park. Placed near the location of Olympia’s last Chinatown, the marker serves as a permanent reminder to park visitors of its role not only as a place to enjoy the present, but also as a place for community reflection on its diverse history.

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