# Olympia's Historic Chinese Community

*By Edward Echtle*

## Origins and Early Arrivals

Beginning in the 1840s, immigrants seeking a new start have made the Puget Sound Region their home. While the lives of Olympia's Euro American founders are well known, fewer are aware of the immigrants from southeast China living and working in the new town. While most Chinese pioneers remain nameless to history, these men and women played a critical part in constructing towns in the region, including Olympia.

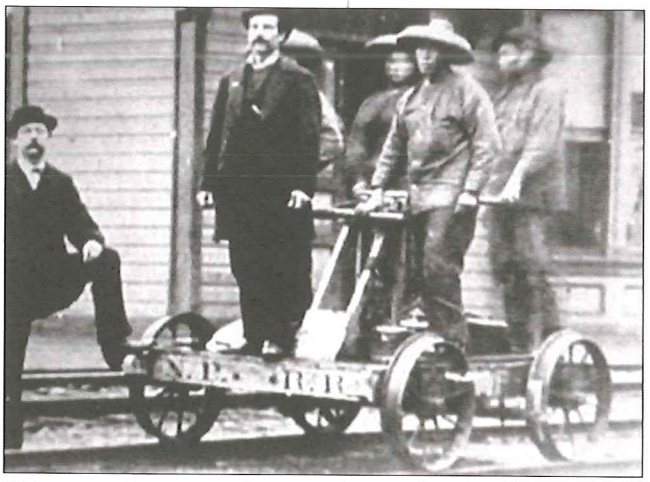
Chinese began arriving in Olympia long before the railroads. In 1852, the *Columbian* (the first newspaper published on Puget Sound) advertised Edmund Sylvester's Hotel, highlighting an "accomplished Chinese cook, who comes highly recommended by the American Consul at Canton." By the early

Domestic servant for the Peterfield Turpin Family, Olympia. *Courtesy University of Washington Libraries, Special Collections, UW528.*

1860s, the celebration of Lunar New Year by Chinese in Olympia received regular mention in the local press.

Before the arrival of Chinese labor, most of Olympia's streets existed only on paper. Hired as contract laborers, they built bridges and graded downtown streets. Chinese also worked in local manufacturing, at lumber camps and in the oyster industry.

Many became cooks or house servants. Chinese men operated laundries while others cultivated vegetables in gardens near town and delivered them door to door, providing the first locally grown commercial produce and filling an invaluable niche in early Olympia.



Chinese section crew at Tenino with town founder Stephen Hodgden, 1880s. *Courtesy Private Collection.*

## Community Life

In the early decades of immigration, nearly all Chinese immigrants were male. Chinese with the same surname often congregated in the same towns, drawn by relatives and friends who preceded them. Many immigrants to Olympia were Lockes, and Chinese elsewhere referred to Olympia as a "Locke town." According to Hugh Locke, born in Olympia in 1916, "In the old days, Olympia was all Lockes."

Generally, those sharing the same surname were from the same vicinity in China. The Locke clan originated in the Toisan region of Guangdong Province, southeast China.

In the absence of Chinese women, the men relied on "Family Associations" to secure a place to live, socialize, and find employment. In turn, Chinese immigrants paid yearly dues to the Association.

## Railroads and Riots

Construction of the Northern Pacific Railroad in western Washington in the 1870s brought Chinese laborers to Olympia which many expected to be the rail terminus on Puget Sound. When the NPRR bypassed Olympia in 1873, residents began work on their own spur line to connect to the main line at Tenino. Initially a volunteer effort, work soon stalled. After a time, project managers hired Chinese labor contractor *Jimmia* who employed 40 laborers to finish the project in a few months. Completed in 1878, the little railroad allowed Olympia to survive. Nevertheless, few early historians acknowledged the role of Chinese labor in the project.

Meanwhile, labor unions fomented anti-Chinese sentiment to unite white workers in a common cause. Subsequently, the U.S. Congress passed the first Chinese exclusion law in 1882 to stem the immigration of unskilled Chinese labor.

Almost immediately, Chinese immigrants found loopholes in the law. There were exemptions for merchants so Chinese mercantiles began taking on many "business partners"—laborers who bought part interest to claim merchant status. U.S. Customs began requiring Chinese arriving from overseas to undergo detailed questionings to determine whether they might be entering with falsified documents. These interrogations took place into the 1940s.

The inability of authorities to stop Chinese from entering spurred some white workers to become violent. In 1885, white miners at Rock Springs, Wyoming drove Chinese miners out of town, and killed many in the process. This incident emboldened anti-Chinese agitators in the Puget Sound and culminated in November, when a white mob expelled the entire Chinese population of Tacoma. Seattle attempted to follow suit, but Territorial Governor Watson

Squire called in federal troops to keep the peace.

Outbreaks of aggression against Chinese persisted throughout the winter. In Tenino, vigilantes burned Chinese railroad workers out of their homes on Christmas Eve 1885. Newspapers reported the men escaped only with their blankets.

After federal troops left Seattle in February of 1886, citizens herded the Chinese population onto a steamer for San Francisco. Soon after, on February 9, 1886, agitators in Olympia converged on the Chinese dwellings and demanded they depart immediately.

The resolution drafted at a town meeting the previous November reflects the ambivalence of the white community over the issue. While the majority approved of Chinese expulsion, they were also determined to uphold the rule of law:

> Be It Resolved: [...] while we fully realize the fact that we have too much of the Chinese element in our midst, we as clearly recognize the fact that they are here in and by the virtue of law and treaty stipulations, and that we are decidedly opposed to their expulsion by force or by intimidation, or by any other unlawful means, but we will at all times give our aid and support to any measures looking to a peaceable and lawful riddance of that element and a final solution of the 'Chinese question' (Olympia: *Washington Standard*, 13 November 1885)

During the riot, Sheriff William Billings deputized many Olympia residents to maintain order. Although the Chinese were harassed, apparently none were forced to leave. The deputies then arrested the leaders of the "riot" who were sentenced to prison at McNeil Island.

Afterwards, Chinese in Olympia kept their homes and businesses. Years later, Sherriff Billings' daughter recalled the Chinese community gave their family gifts each Lunar New Year in gratitude for Billings' protection, even long after he retired as sheriff.

## Olympia's Chinatowns

It is somewhat generous to call Olympia's Chinese districts "Chinatowns" due to their small size. Yet over the years they were home to hundreds of men, as well as a few women and children.

Olympia's main Chinese quarters relocated at least twice. The first "Chinatown" was located on Fourth Avenue, between Columbia Street and Capitol Way. Chinatown contained at least one laundry and two small mercantiles. As downtown expanded in the 1880s, the Hong Yek Kee Company, the Quong Yuen Sang Company and the Hong Hai Company relocated to Fifth Avenue and Columbia Streets.

Around 1913, the Chinese moved a second time, relocating to Water Street, between Fourth and Fifth. This was the third and final location of Olympia's Chinatown.

The Chinese store provided many services. Inside, Chinese laborers found lodging, meals, received mail, purchased supplies and socialized. For these men, leisure time was often boisterous, with drinking and gambling the favorite pastimes. Merchants who operated these stores usually gained prominence as representatives of the community, serving as liaisons to the white population in business and government transactions.

By the late 1800s, merchant Sam Fun Locke had become an important leader. As senior partner of the Hong Yek Kee Company, he was banker for the laborers.

Interior of Hong Yek, a Chinese building on Fifth Avenue, 1905. *Courtesy National Archives.*

Sam Fun Locke kept the funds in a metal box in his home above Hong Yek Kee and used them to finance Chinese-owned businesses throughout southwest Washington.

Goings on in Chinatown often attracted the curiosity of whites. The funeral for *Su He* in 1880 prompted this account in the *Washington Standard*:

> ... Previous to being placed in the hearse, the coffin was carried into the street and deposited upon supports about three feet from the ground. As soon as the jolly [*sic*] Celestials had 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. Other ceremonies... occurred at the cemetary, [*sic*] after which, the coffin was lowered, covered from mortal ken, and the would-be mourners shambled back to town.

Olympia's Chinese cemetery, located in Forest Memorial Gardens on Pacific Avenue, was in use as late as the 1930s. There, the community gathered for the traditional memorial ceremony each spring where they made offerings of food, burned incense and set off fireworks to ward off malevolent spirits.

The Family Association was charged with returning the bones of the deceased to China so that family members could honor them properly. After several years, the deceased was exhumed for return to China. A traveling monk, or "bone gatherer" visited every few years to prepare the remains for the voyage home. This practice persisted until the Chinese Communist Revolution.

The Chinese community managed their burial ground as a separate cemetery within a cemetery. The Locke Family Association maintained the burial records until they were destroyed by fire in the 1970s. As of 2009, there is one marker remaining, that of Locke My Tuck who died in 1914. It is not known if the remains of any Olympia Chinese pioneers remain in Forest Cemetery awaiting return to China.

## Opportunities in Olympia

Most Chinese immigrants wanted to become business owners. The most common enterprises were laundries, restaurants, and market gardening because these jobs did not compete with white male labor.

Several Chinese laundries existed in Olympia over the years. The 1870 Census listed three laundries in Olympia, one of which was the home of the only female Chinese resident, Kow Kow, age 16 in 1870, along with several male residents. Kow Kow's status remains a mystery as census takers did not record any other details.

When Chinatown relocated to Fifth Street, the Kwong Hong Yick Laundry opened at the southeast corner of Fifth and Columbia and employed several men. Established around 1889, Kwong Hong Yick operated until at least 1913.

Many Chinese pioneers first found employment as cooks for affluent families, at lumber camps and in hotels and rooming houses before starting their own restaurants. During the 1890s, Jim Ah Toone operated the Gold Bar Restaurant on Capital Way in the building that hosted Washington's first territorial legislature in 1853.

Chinese-owned restaurants such as the Pekin Café on Capital Way were among the few with late and early hours to serve workers coming and going to their shifts on Olympia's waterfront. Menus were not strictly Chinese and the combination of longer hours and low prices enabled the Pekin and other Chinese restaurants to compete in Olympia.

Charley Kay arrived in 1900 and worked for many restaurants, eventually becoming head cook at the

Hotel Olympian. In the 1930s, he opened the Nankin Café on Fourth Avenue, but the Great Depression forced its closure. The family then opened Kay's Cafe in 1941 on Capital Way which operated until 1976. Many locals remember Kay's as the late night place to go after dances and Saturday night cruising.

Some of Olympia's Chinese residents were market gardeners, effectively cornering the local produce market in the early days:

## FAMILIES

**Due to restrictive laws,** the men found it difficult to bring wives to the U.S. Still, a small number of Chinese American families made homes in Olympia from very early on.


The Jim Ah Toone Family in Olympia, 1890s. *Courtesy Washington State Historical Society.*

After the 1889 Seattle fire, Jim Ah Toone and his wife Nettie Chiang relocated to Olympia where they raised five children before moving on to Yakima and then Minneapolis.

In 1902, Sam Fun Locke returned from China with a wife. When their first child, Loy Wing, was born, they presented a photo to Sheriff Billings' family. Eventually they had nine children, all born at Hong Yek.

Charley Kay arrived in Olympia around 1900, and his wife Lam Shee and their first two children arrived in 1915. In 1940 their son, Bill Kay, married Toy Luke of Butte Montana in an arranged marriage. Bill and Toy Kay eventually assumed ownership of Kay's Café until they retired in 1976. The Kays helped form the Olympia Area Chinese Fellowship in the 1970s to assist new immigrants from China.


Charley Kay and son Bill at the Nankin Restaurant, 1930s. *Courtesy Kay Family.*

The Sam Fun Locke Family in the 1930s. *Courtesy Hugh Locke.*

> ...until the arrival of our Chinese gardeners, all our earliest small fruits and vegetables came by steamer from San Francisco, for which we paid exorbitant prices. Now, through the native tact and indomitable energy of Chinamen, these fruits and vegetables are raised from our own soil and brought to our doors, weeks earlier than ever they were produced by white men. (Olympia: *Washington Standard*, June 20, 1879)

Historian George Blankenship recalled a Chinese garden at the base of the bluff below the Capitol grounds, later displaced by the Northern Pacific Railroad depot in the 1890s. The area is now part of Heritage Park.

One of Olympia's early produce growers was Lum Jo. Lum also described himself in records as an herb doctor. His garden was located southeast of what is now Eighth and Plumb Streets. Known as "The Vegetable Man," Lum delivered his produce in baskets he carried on a shoulder pole.

Wong Jong Hang established a garden on Olympia's west side in 1887 at the foot of Madison Street. Evidently he was successful, as plats in 1918 continued to show this site as a "China Garden."

## Rediscovery and Remembrance

In 1934, Sam Fun Locke passed away. Press described his funeral as one of the most elaborate in Olympia history. Many elderly pioneers and Chinese community leaders from the region participated in the large procession to the Masonic Cemetery at Tumwater where Sam Locke was interred alongside other Olympia pioneers.

By the 1930s, few new Chinese immigrants were arriving to replace the aging population in Olympia. Many of Olympia's Chinese retired to larger cities like Seattle or returned to China.

Olympia's Water Street Chinatown was nearly vacant by the early 1940s. In 1943, the Fire Department condemned the Chinese district and razed the buildings. Coincidently, the U.S. Congress repealed Chinese exclusion laws in 1943, embarrassed by Imperial Japanese propaganda that pointed out China's War ally did not allow them to immigrate.

Unveiling of "Chinese Community in Olympia Historical Marker" in Heritage Park, 2004. From left to right: Bill and Toy Kay, Brian Lock, Jimmy Locke, Mary Pang, and Doug Mah. *Courtesy Robin Echtle.*

In recent years, as Pacific Rim trade has become more important to Olympia, interest in the community's economic connections with Asia has grown. But by then, Olympia residents all but forgot that the industries that helped Olympia achieve economic viability would not have been possible without Chinese labor. Most early local historians had written them out of Olympia's story.

In 1996, Gary Locke became Governor of Washington. Locke, the grandson of Suey Gim Locke who came to Olympia in 1900, shared his family's connection to Olympia in his inaugural address: "Although I may be standing less than a mile from where our family started its life in America, we've come a long way."

Locke's story sparked interest among historians and descendants of Olympia's Chinese community to recover that history. In 2004 they unveiled the Olympia Chinese Community Historical Marker in Heritage Park, at the site of Olympia's last Chinatown.

Today, passersby reflect on the Chinese pioneers whose presence made Olympia possible through their hard work, perseverance and dedication. Their commitment enabled them to claim Olympia and the United States as their chosen home.

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