

SAN FRANCISCO Chinatown

**A Guide to Its History
and Architecture**

Philip P. Choy

Architectural Photographs
by Brian W. Choy

City
Lights



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CONTENTS

- Preface 9
Acknowledgments 12
Introduction 13

HISTORY 21

- Spanish Period 23
Mexican Period 24
American Period 25
Chinatown Beginnings 29
Anti-Chinese Politics 35
Earthquake 40
Chinatown Post-Quake 43
Politics of China in Chinatown 46
Born American of Chinese Descent 50

PORTSMOUTH PLAZA 61

- Chinese Culture Center 67
Manilatown and I-Hotel 69
Walter U. Lum Place 72
Wing Sang Mortuary 73
Everybody's Bookstore 73
Chinese for Affirmative Action 76
Chinese Congregational Church 78

SACRAMENTO STREET 83

- Chy Lung Bazaar 86
Chung Sai Yat Po 88
Chinese Chamber of Commerce 91
Yeong Wo Benevolent Association 93
Nam Kue School 95
Chinese Daily Post 97

Chinese Young Men's Christian Association
(YMCA) 99

Willie "Woo Woo" Wong Playground 102

Chinese Baptist Church 104

GRANT AVENUE 107

SOUTHERN GRANT AVENUE 111

Sing Chong and Sing Fat 113

Old St. Mary's Church 116

St. Mary's Square 118

CENTRAL GRANT AVENUE 120

Sidewalk Stalls 123

Streetlamps 124

Chinatown Squad 125

Cathay Band 127

Jop Faw Poh (General Merchandise) 128

Food Facts and Fables 130

Herb Shops and Herb Doctors 134

The Chinese World 136

Soo Yuen Benevolent Association 138

Loong Kong Tien Yee Association 140

Chinese Telephone Exchange 142

Sam Yup Benevolent Association 145

Yan Wo Benevolent Association 147

NORTHERN GRANT AVENUE 149

The Mandarin Theatre 150

City Lights Bookstore 152

Pacific Avenue 153

STOCKTON STREET 155

Chinese Hospital 158

Chinese American Citizens Alliance 161

Chinese Episcopal Methodist Church 164

Gordon J. Lau Elementary School 166
Gum Moon Residence 171
Chinese Presbyterian Church 173
Hop Wo Benevolent Association 175
St. Mary's Chinese Mission 176
The Chinese YWCA and YWCA Residence
Club 179
Donaldina Cameron House 184
Chinese Central High School (a.k.a. Victory
Hall) 187
Chinese Consolidation Benevolent
Association (a.k.a. Chinese Six
Companies) 189
Kong Chow Benevolent Association 193
Kuomintang (KMT) 196

**ROSS AND SPOFFORD ALLEYS AND
WAVERLY PLACE** 197

Golden Gate Fortune Cookies Co. 201
Chee Kung Tong 204
Tien Hou Temple and Sue Hing Benevolent
Association 207
Ning Yung Benevolent Association 210

WALKING TOURS 213

Works Cited 218
Selected Bibliography 219

PREFACE

From the time of the Gold Rush of 1849 to the present, Chinatown has been a “must-see” in every guidebook on San Francisco. Chinatown in the 19th century was singled out as a blight on the urban landscape of the city, its infamous reputation spreading to the far corners of the nation. Visitors were warned not to wander alone but were advised instead to hire licensed guides for safety. Only the guides could take you through the maze of secret underground tunnels into the bowels of the earth, where you could witness a “peculiar” race dwelling in darkness.

Descriptions of a mysterious Chinese quarter were so compelling that John W. Wilson, a young man from a small village east of Indianapolis who joined the army during the Boxer Rebellion, returned home via San Francisco, determined to see Chinatown. In an oral history taken in 1969 by Thomas Krasean of the Indiana Historical Society, Wilson recalled his experience.

JW: And I come over to Frisco and we all wanted to see Chinatown, there was ten of us. So Chinatown was underground at that time, you know . . . City underneath. Did you never read about that? Boy, beat anything you ever saw in your life.

TK: Actually underground, you mean?

JW: Actually underground, business houses . . . opium dens and everything else down in under there. Well, we were standing in front of this agency waiting for a guide . . . there

was a Chinaman walked up . . . and said, “I am a guide. . . .” Well we hired him. We got underground and we went in a saloon . . . down a stairway and then . . . he says, “Now, you are underground. . . .”

The remainder of the interview tells how the guide, who held the only torchlight, vanished and left them wandering in the dark. While desperately searching for a way out, Wilson’s friend nearly stepped through a trap door and if he had fallen through, he might never have been heard from again. According to Wilson, this was the way people were robbed. After their horrifying experience, he and his friend finally found their way out in the morning. The rest didn’t get out until later that evening.

John Wilson continued:

But everybody had a different experience from the other fellow . . . wandering around, told they get into . . . opium dens and everything else, you know. Underground . . . that was underground before the earthquake. When the earthquake . . . thousands of people died under there that nobody ever known about.

These images of an infamous Chinatown began to change after the 1906 Earthquake. Guides applying for licenses issued by the police commission were warned not to refabricate and promote the evil spectacle of an underground Chinatown, lest their licenses be revoked. Public opinion began to improve, aided by a series of positive articles run by the *San Francisco Chronicle*. The Chinese also

promoted this improvement by planning a new Oriental City.

Today, inspired by the Civil Rights Movement of the '60s and '70s, the social pendulum has swung toward the appreciation of ethnic and cultural diversity. Chinatown is now singled out as an asset to the urban landscape of the city. Thousands come to visit the same 19th century "exotic heathen temples" with neither disdain nor contempt but with intellectual curiosity, to dine with the locals where once no white man dared to eat the strange odoriferous food. Case in point: when the *San Francisco Chronicle* on April 20th reported the closing of Sam Wo's Restaurant, a dirty, rickety, narrow, three-story, one-hundred-year-old hole in the wall condemned by Public Health for conditions unsuitable for the preparation and storage of food, a block-long line of old-time Chinese and non-Chinese customers waited to enjoy a final meal there. Each spring when the parade dragon rears its magnificent golden head, thousands of visitors pack into Chinatown, fascinated with the appearance of a nonassimilated foreign community complete with exotic cultural traditions.

The treatment of Chinatown both in the past and in the present obscures the reality of history. Few realize that the existence of the community is intimately interwoven with the history of the city. The intent of this guidebook is to place the evolution of the Chinese community in the context of the U.S./China relationship and reclaim our rightful place in the annals of America.

INTRODUCTION

The arrival of the Chinese in the United States toward the end of the 1840s was part of an intricate political and economic relationship between Asia and America.

From its birth as a nation, the United States sought to establish itself as a new power among old nations. Many Americans believed in the concept of “Manifest Destiny,” which held that the United States had the right to expand westward across the continent to the Pacific Ocean. The West Coast would be the gateway through which America would acquire and hold the positions of power in Asia.

On the West Coast, in California, San Francisco became not only a major commercial port but also the main port of entry for Chinese immigrants, who were recruited as a source of mass labor for the economic development of the western frontier. Initially, white Americans welcomed Chinese participation in San Francisco’s civic events, such as the celebration, at Portsmouth Square, of California’s admission into the Union in 1850. At the time, the Square was the heart of San Francisco. However, while the City expanded, the Chinese stayed in the area. For over a century and a half, Chinatown has remained in this same location.

The interaction between Chinatown and the community at large has not always been one of mutual understanding. Caught in the struggle between the white laboring class fighting for better working conditions and the industrial capitalists seeking to

maintain the status quo, the Chinese became scapegoats for the growing pains of the American labor movement in the West. Sinophobia in the 19th century echoed into the 20th century with the cry “The Chinese must go!” The question of Chinese labor competition occupied a central place in the Nation’s politics for over 30 years, until the passage of the Exclusion Act of May 1882, which in effect closed the door to Chinese immigration.

From time to time, San Francisco attempted to destroy Chinatown and remove the Chinese through both legal and extralegal means. The Chinese responded strategically. When the Board of Supervisors attempted to remove Chinatown after the Earthquake of 1906, for example, the Chinese strove to earn the goodwill of the City by creating a new positive image, retaining architects to transform the neighborhood slums into an “Oriental City.” This new trend of a Sino-architectural vernacular, created specifically as a response to the threat of relocation after the quake, shaped the present skyline of Chinatown.

But Chinatown has always been a tourist attraction. What was sensationalized in the 19th century as a haven for racial peculiarities and cultural oddities is perceived today as an ethnic enclave where cultural habits and traditions are preserved. In either case, the stereotypical image of Chinatown as an unassimilated foreign community remains unchanged. But the significance of Chinatown lies not in cultural exotics. Beneath the Oriental façade is a history rooted in the political past of the City, the State, and the Nation.

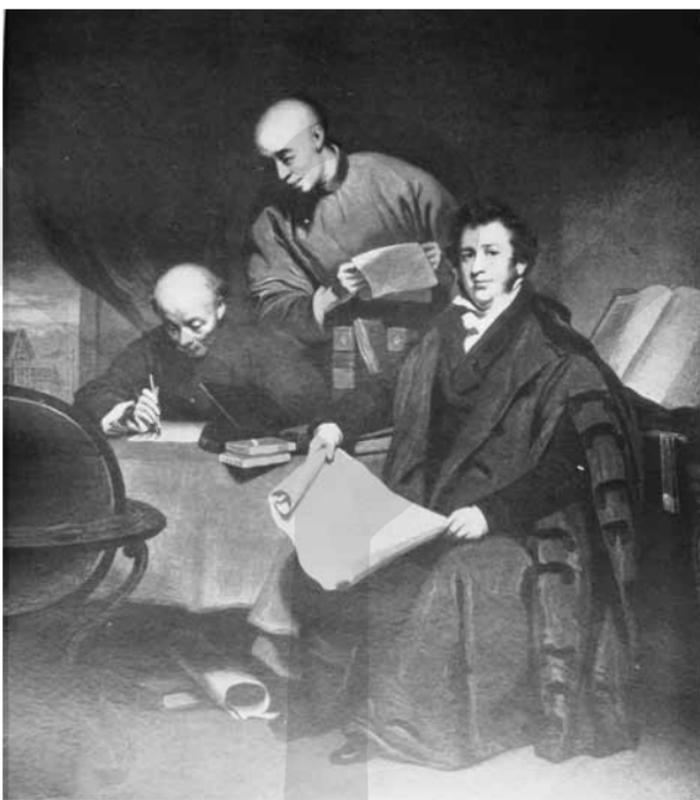
That history began following our War for Independence in 1776. The evidence is before our eyes and under our noses if we know what to look for as we tour Chinatown. Tea, ginseng, and the churches take us back to when two peoples of diverse cultures first met, traded, and interacted. In 1784, when Samuel Shaw sailed the first American ship, the *Empress of China*, into Bocca Tigrus, he traded twenty-eight tons of ginseng and 20,000 Spanish dollars for tea, silk, porcelain, and other treasures. In his journal, Shaw wrote: “The inhabitants of America must have tea . . . that useless produce [ginseng] of her mountains and forest will supply her with this elegant luxury . . . such are the advantages which America derives from her ginseng” (Quincy 1847, 231). That historic voyage began our interest in the Far East and subsequently led to frontiersmen’s hunting and trapping off the California coast for the pelts of sea otters for the Canton market. When gold was discovered, the transpacific commerce between California and Canton (now called “Guangzhou”) continued, not only with the importation of Chinese goods for the Gold Rush population but also with the arrival of Chinese laborers from the Pearl River Delta, centered on the City of Canton in Guangdong Province.

From the time of their first encounter in the 16th century, Western nations were determined to open China’s ports to trade. Equally stubborn, China called herself the “Middle Kingdom” (i.e., the center of the world) and attempted to close her doors to the “uncivilized, meddling, barbarians.” By the time of Shaw’s arrival, China had been con-

quered by the Manchu from Manchuria, who ruled under the title “Ching” (brilliance) from 1644 to 1911. The Manchu adopted Chinese ways and appointed collaborators in government posts to maintain control over the population. After two and a half centuries, the Manchu had been absorbed into Chinese culture, except for the Manchu style of dress and the shaven head with the queue (pigtail), which were forced upon the Chinese as symbols of subjugation.

In 1757, the Manchu Emperor Chien Lung (1736-1796) restricted all foreign trade to one port, the City of Canton. Trading between the Chinese and Europeans was controlled and regulated by Chinese merchants known as Hong, authorized by the Imperial government. Unfair practices, import and export taxes, and the demand for silver in payment for goods created trade deficits among foreign nations doing business in China. To offset the deficits, these nations smuggled opium into China in large quantities. The British, whose merchants had control of the supply from India, dominated the trade. American merchants obtained their supply from Smyrna, Turkey. China’s attempts to stop the smuggling resulted in war with Great Britain (1839-1842). The British easily defeated China and forced its government to open the ports of Canton, Shanghai, Ningpo, Amoy, and Foochow. In addition, the territory of Hong Kong was ceded to England for 100 years.

In the last quarter of the 18th century, glowing accounts published on the exploration and adventures in the South Seas, India, and Africa, not only



Dr. Morrison translating the Bible with Chinese converts, 1820.

fired the imagination and curiosity of the public but also aroused the evangelical impulse of Protestant leaders, who founded missionary boards and societies to recruit and send missionaries into the heathen world. While British and American merchants opened the doors to the treasures of “Cathay” (China), European and American missionaries envisioned opening the door to the Kingdom of God for China’s three hundred million “heathens.” This missionary enterprise was a part of the Christian revivalist movement known as the “Second Great Awakening.”

At the beginning of the 19th century, this Protestant religious movement led to the founding of

the London Missionary Society (LMS), followed by the founding of the American Board of Commissions of Foreign Missions (ABCFM). In 1807, the LMS sent The Reverend Robert Morrison to China and, in 1830, the ABCFM sent The Reverend David Abeel and The Reverend Elijah Bridgman. Canton became the staging area for Protestant missionary activities. These religious activities, together with the long period of commerce with China, promoted knowledge of the West in China, and linked Canton to California. To the Westerner, the Chinese from Canton were known as “Cantonese.” These were the Chinese who would set foot in California when gold was discovered.

Leaders of the evangelical movement quickly realized the strategic importance of California lay not only in the fact that it fronted the Pacific, but also in the unique missionary opportunity the presence of thousands of Chinese afforded; if converted, these Cantonese people could return home to spread the gospel to the teeming millions in China who had never heard the revelation of God. Thus, the many churches in Chinatown today are the result of the efforts of the early Christian pioneers begun in Canton, Macau, and Hong Kong. In San Francisco, the first official evangelical effort took place in a public ceremony on August 28, 1850, when Mayor John Geary and The Reverend Albert Williams invited the Chinese residents to Portsmouth Square to receive religious tracts that were printed in Chinese and published in Canton.

But the fascination with which the West viewed China in the 18th century deteriorated to disre-

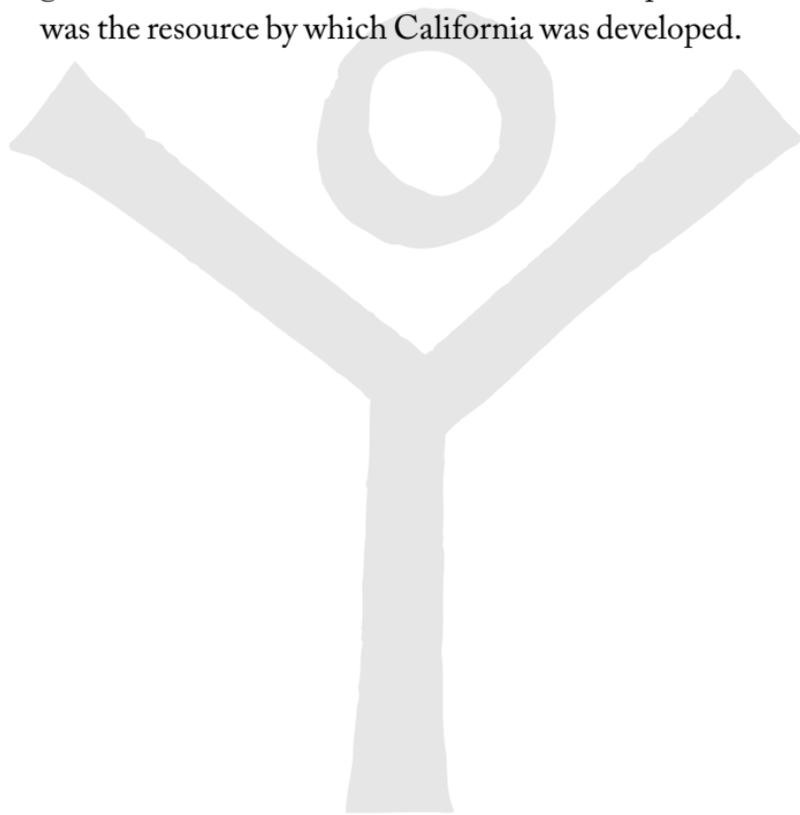


American tea clipper Nightingale, breaking through the China coast.

spect and disdain by the 19th century. Following its defeat in the Opium War with England, China under the Manchu rulers was on the verge of collapse. Unable to deal with the belligerent demands of Western powers, the government adopted a foreign policy of appeasement, granting concession after concession. Foreign exploitation, internal rebellion, and overpopulation accelerated the decline of China's economy and the deterioration of social conditions.

At the same time, the efforts of the Second Great Awakening that had brought Protestant evangelists to China also hastened the end of the African slave trade, creating a worldwide shortage of cheap labor. The Chinese from Guangdong Province filled this void. American and British ships carried human cargo under wretched conditions throughout Southeast Asia, Cuba, Hawaii, the

Chincha Islands in Peru, and Mauritius and Madagascar off the coast of Africa. This same cheap labor was the resource by which California was developed.



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Present-day Chinatown overlays significant sites from different periods of San Francisco's history: the Spanish period, the Mexican period, and the American period.

Spanish Period (1776-1821)

In 1769, the Spanish government sent Don Gaspar Portola and Father Junipera Serra to claim California for Spain by establishing a system of missions intended to prevent British and Russian intrusion. British and Russian interest in California had been triggered by the successful voyage of Captain James Cook into the South Seas, when the crew discovered the tremendous profits to be made from selling fur in Canton. Along the Pacific Coast, sea otter was found in abundance, and the skin of a mature otter brought a price as high as three hundred dollars. In the late 18th century, when New England merchants learned of this lucrative market, American interest in California began.

On June 17, 1776, Lt. Jose Joaquin Moraga of Spain led an expedition of soldiers and their families to the San Francisco Bay Area. They established the Presidio on September 17th and the Mission Dolores on October 9th. Lt. Moraga took charge of the Presidio and Father Francisco Palou and Father Cambon were responsible for the Mission. For decades the only social life was between families at the Mission and Presidio, together known as "Yerba Buena" from the herb of that name that grew along the road between the settlements. Except for occasional sailors from ships anchored on the bay for supplies, there was little connection to the outside world.

Mexican Period (1821-1848)

In 1821, General Augustin de Iturbide declared Mexico's independence from Spain and California entered a period of Mexican rule. A year later, the British whaler *Orion* sailed into San Francisco Bay. While on shore, members of the crew enjoyed the hospitality of Ignazio Martinez and the families at the Presidio. When the *Orion* sailed off, Chief Mate William A. Richardson remained behind. Whether Richardson deserted the ship because of Maria Antonia, whom he met during the festivities, is not known, but three years later they were married. Richardson became a Mexican citizen and, because of his knowledge of navigation, he was appointed harbormaster and granted a plot of land. In 1832, he built an adobe house for his family, fronting the west side of Calle de la Fundacion (now 823 Grant Avenue). One year later, in December 1833, Jacob Leese, an American who came to California from Ohio, built a house on the same road, two hundred feet south of Richardson (now the southwest corner of Clay and Grant). Like Richardson, Leese became a Mexican citizen and married a Spanish lady, the sister of Salvador Vallejo.

The families of Richardson and Leese were the only households between the Mission and Presidio. Reminiscing on his trip entering the Bay, Richard Henry Dana, Jr., the author of *Two Years Before the Mast* wrote: "It was in the winter of 1835-36 that the ship *Alert* in prosecution of her voyage for hides on the remote and almost unknown coast of California, floated into the vast solitude of the bay of San Francisco; all around was stillness of nature."

That “stillness of nature” would be interrupted forever in the next decade when America became interested in annexation of California and when gold was discovered on the American River.

American Period (1846-Present)

A half-century of contact with California—originating with the sea otter trade among Boston, California, and Canton, and followed by the New England hide and tallow trade—laid the foundation for American interest in California and sparked American expansion westward as her Manifest Destiny. Both President Andrew Jackson and President John Tyler saw the importance of annexing California, not only for its desirable ports for whaling vessels but also for the potential dominance of trade across the Pacific.

When President James K. Polk assumed office in March 1845, he was determined to annex California either by purchase, by encouraging California to revolt against Mexican rule, or as a last resort, by war with Mexico. War it was! On July 7, 1846 Commodore John D. Sloat raised the United States flag at Montgomery and proclaimed California part of the United States. No one was there to surrender. A message was sent to Captain Montgomery in San Francisco and on July 9, 1846, the American flag was hoisted on the square. John Henry Brown gave this eyewitness account:

On the following day, shortly before noon, we heard the fife and the beating of the drum.

There was great rejoicing by the few who were



San Francisco, November 1848.

in the city, and the small and faithful band were as united as brothers, and their hearts swelled with pure pride and patriotism at the thoughts of being under the protection of the flag of their country. The first person who made his appearance was Captain Watson of the marines, with his company of soldiers. The next in command was the First Lieutenant of the Portsmouth. He was followed by Lieutenant Revere's two Mid-shipmen, and about a dozen sailors. They all marched up Clay Street to Kearny, and thence to the Old Mexican flag pole in front of the Adobe House, used as a Custom House. This being an important event in the History of San Francisco, I will give the names of those who witnessed the hoisting of the American Flag: Captain Leidsoff, John Finch, Joseph Thompson, Mrs. Robert T. Ridley, Mrs. Andrew Hepner, Mrs. Captain Voight, Richard the Third, and John H. Brown.



San Francisco, November 1849.

The war ended on February 2, 1848, with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. The terms of the treaty called for the United States to annex the territories of California and Texas in exchange for a \$15-million payment to Mexico. Nine days earlier, on January 24, 1848, James Wilson Marshall had discovered gold on the American River, but California now belonged to the United States.

Marshall had contracted with John A. Sutter to build a sawmill at Coloma and while inspecting the work, discovered particles of gold in the riverbed. After ascertaining the specimens were actually gold, Marshall and Sutter agreed to keep the discovery a secret. But their efforts to keep the news from spreading proved impossible. When Samuel Brannan, who ran a general store at Sutter Fort, learned of the discovery, he quietly cornered the market on every type of mining equipment and then on May 12, 1848, appeared excitedly at Portsmouth Square shouting: “Gold! gold! from the American River!” The secret was out and the world rushed in.