

From Bachelor Enclave to Urban Village:

The Evolution of Early Chinatown

BY KATHRYN E. WILSON

In 1876, Philadelphia's press matter-of-factly noted the recent influx of Chinese into the city: "We do not know the actual facts respecting the movements of Chinese emigrants from the Pacific coast to the Atlantic States," reported the business-minded *North American*, "but if we may judge by what we see every day in the streets of Philadelphia, it must have been considerable. These Chinese are so common a sight that no notice is taken of them."

they all appear to be working at something. Their laundry enterprises have been quite successful, and they follow up that line of business so pertinaciously that it would not be at all surprising to see them get control of it. As they have not thus far engaged in any large industrial establishment in a body as operatives, there has been no trouble about them on the labor question. Nor can we discover that there is any distinct Chinese quarter. They seem to scatter, and all are neat and clean in attire and person.

It was only a matter of a few years, however, until Philadelphians would become aware of the presence and growing size of a new Chinatown in their midst, a community that emerged at the same moment the federal government passed legislation effectively barring new immigration from China to the United States. For over 150 years, subsequent generations of Chinese and Chinese Americans have created and maintained a community and sense of place in this neighborhood.

Philadelphia's Chinatown, like many in the eastern United States, had its roots in the driving out of Chinese from the western states that followed the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869 and culminated in the Exclusion Act of 1882. Throughout the 1870s, violence and intimidation against Chinese laborers in California, Washington, and Oregon sent many east to cities such as Chicago, St. Louis, New York, Boston, and Philadelphia. According to Stewart Culin, a University

of Pennsylvania anthropologist who studied the Chinese community in Philadelphia during the 1880s and '90s, in about 1869 a Mr. Thomas of Belleville, New Jersey, brought 50 Chinese laundrymen from San Francisco to work in laundries around the area. The first documented laundry in Chinatown was in 1870 at 913 Race Street, owned by Lee Fong. Fong, described by Culin as "an angular hollow-cheeked man," "doleful," but "very kind-hearted," also acted as a distributor of opium, Chinese tea, and incense. Later a restaurant was opened on the second floor above the laundry, "where the vender of tea and incense divided his time between his scales and his flat-iron." This place soon became the acknowledged center of the Chinese in Philadelphia: "On Sundays and Mondays it would be packed with Chinamen, and the strains of the Chinese fiddle could be heard over the never-ending click of the dominoes, from midday to midnight."

The 900 block of Race provided refuge to the Chinese in part due to its adjacency to the warehouse and central commercial district of Philadelphia. By the 1880s the area had long been a home for a diverse population of working people. At the turn of the century, 10th, 9th, Winter, and Spring Streets were dominated by row houses—many of them boardinghouses—that provided housing for skilled laborers of various ethnic backgrounds: Irish, German, Italian, Greek, Lithuanian, Russian, Ukrainian, and Mexican. Chinese merchants found a home among this diversity, concentrating on the 900 block of Race, where multiple generations of the same extended family or kin

(OPPOSITE) Far East Restaurant, 907 Race Street, in 1923, painting by Frank Hamilton Taylor.



CHINESE RESTAURANT

FAR EAST

907

CHINESE

Frank H. Taylor
1923



Race Street in Chinatown, 1933.
Philadelphia Record Photograph Morgue.

network—mostly single men aged 25–60, since women were barred from entry—lived in tightly shared quarters. In the early 1900s, 925 Race was occupied primarily by Lees, 915 Race by Foongs, 931 by Mocks, while 929 Race was home to Junges, and 906 provided a base for Youngs. This pattern had roots in the legal need of Chinese immigrants, under exclusion, to establish partnerships in some merchant concern to remain in the country and travel back and forth to China.

Each building was anchored by a first-floor business—a laundry, grocery, imported goods shop, or, later, restaurant—that provided a livelihood and a focus of public commercial activity. The second, third, and attic floors were devoted to living quarters as well as a variety of social functions. Yee Wah, at 915 Race Street, for example, dealt in Chinese merchandise, Chinese and Japanese art goods, and drugs on the first floor and stored stock on the second floor of the building. While some of the partners lived in quarters on the third floor, the fourth-floor attic was rented to Chinese men for sleeping quarters. In 1906 Tom Leing, a

teacher and former laundryman who had come to Philadelphia in 1881, taught Sunday School classes over Yee Wah. By 1900, the neighborhood spreading from 8th to 10th and Race to Winter was predominately Chinese and firmly established in the public mind as Chinatown.

Although many of Philadelphia's Chinese, especially laundrymen, lived and worked at locations around the metropolitan area, Chinatown was the center of Chinese life in the city, serving a multitude of social, cultural, political, and economic functions. Chinatown's spaces were especially animated on Sundays, as men from around the region gathered on their one day off. Social life in this bachelor society, like commercial life, revolved around various kin, regional, and trade relationships. Much socializing took place in the many "Fongs" rented by small groups of Chinese immigrants sharing the same surname. These common rooms served multiple functions: club room or recreational space, sleeping quarters for visitors or those unemployed, even an isolation hospital or sick room for those who were ill. Tea was traditionally served at

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11 AM–12 PM on Sunday, accompanied by dim sum. Communal drinking of tea and spirits and games of chance such as mahjong and fan tan, usually for money, were common pastimes. Men traded gossip and conversation dominated by news from China. George Moy, longtime activist and community developer, recalls his father, a laundryman, taking him to the neighborhood in the 1930s and '40s to a grocery store or family association to hang out, “shoot the bull,” and drink tea from a collective cup: “you come to Chinatown for your groceries and you converse and you want to get the gossip and what’s happening to whose family, and parents always looking out to marry my son to some girl . . . you know . . . the thing of matching people up.” These family and extended kin associations also supported the practice of ancestor worship, and many meeting rooms accommodated altars for this purpose.

For those out of work or coming from or going to China, the neighborhood was an important way station. Laundrymen routinely sold their laundries before departing for China, and the association common room provided temporary living quarters while their paperwork was being processed. Men transacted business in the common rooms or temporary sleeping rooms; in many cases the resident store also acted as bank. Chinatown was home to the emerging institutions of the Chinese community, such as the Chinese Consolidated Beneficial Association, Chung-Hua-Kung-So, which functioned to maintain order, protest abuse of “treaty rights,” arbitrate disputes, certify documents and deeds, maintain a cemetery, do charitable work, and serve as a reception committee for foreign dignitaries.

Chinatown became a cultural attraction to non-Chinese in the early 20th century. Restaurants such as the Far East, at 907–909 Race (one of the most famous and flamboyant Chinatown establishments of the period), served non-Chinese diners. Fueled by orientalist ideas of Chinese culture as mysterious and exotic, Chinatown became a destination for thrill seekers and a target for law enforcement officers. Tales of white slavery and violent “tong wars” circulated in the public press throughout the 1910s and '20s, and the Philadelphia police routinely raided the back rooms of Chinatown shops to arrest occupants on gambling and drug charges.

Although the population of Chinatown declined during the Great Depression (many returned to China as economic opportunity in the United States dried up), by the end of the 1930s world events brought China and, by extension, Chinatown into greater public visibility. The 1937 invasion of China by Japan sent the local media into Chinatown to highlight Chinese Americans' campaign for China war relief. In January 1938 community leaders cancelled the Chinese New Year parade and celebration so that the saved expenses could be sent to



One of Chinatown's oldest and one of its youngest residents read war bulletins posted by the local branch of United China Relief at Ninth and Race Streets. Philadelphia Record Photograph Morgue.

the Chinese Defense Fund. When the United States entered World War II, China's position as an ally engendered a more positive image of Chinese Americans and their contribution to the war effort. Young residents of Chinatown joined the armed services, such as Henry Wong, a 20-year-old Wharton student and the son of merchant and “mayor” of Chinatown, Wong Wah Ding. The elder Wong noted the contradiction inherent in his son's service in the face of continued Chinese exclusion: “I cannot become a citizen myself because of the law,” the older Wong said, “but I am happy that my only son is giving his services to the country I love best.”

After World War II, liberalized immigration policies and the newly acquired citizenship of Chinese American servicemen transformed Chinatown into a family community. At midcentury, a few merchant families formed the core of Chinatown families: the Junges, Lees, Marks, Moys, and Louies. As more Chinese American men were able to marry and bring wives to America, the population of Chinatown burgeoned and the community increasingly took on the character of an urban village. Sundays continued to be important days for Chinatown as Chinese from

Basketball: Chinatown's "Sport of Survival"

BY KATHRYN E. WILSON

The basketball season is in full swing. Three teams, consisting of a Junior and Senior Boys teams and a Girls team. All three groups are doing fine in the strong competition that has been their [sic]. The Juniors has won practically all their games thus far this season. They have handed defeats to such teams as King of Peace, St. Athanasius, Valley Park Juniors, St. Madelines, St. Mary of the Eternal, and have had one tie with Cathedral.

The Seniors have had tough teams to handle and have seen victory quite a bit in the past few weeks. They have defeated the 8th District, King of Peace, Fairmount Civic, St. Joseph's Hawks and many other teams. We must always remember that very often the teams are six footers and the going is rather rough at times. They have shown splendid spirit and we know that as the season progresses that defeat will not show on their record.

The girls are going the best ever. They have won all their games with the exception of one from St. Gabriel's. They have defeated Cathedral twice and St. Madeline's once. The team is working in unison and we can see the result of last year's workouts. Keep up the good work...

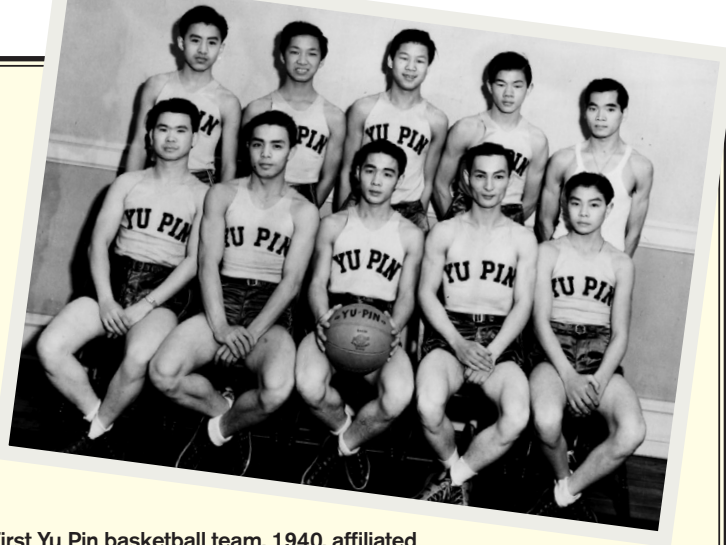
Chinese Lantern, Jan. 1949.

Holy Redeemer Chinese Catholic Church Records.

Every Friday night, Joe Lowe and his friends gather at Holy Redeemer Chinese Catholic Church to play basketball in the basement gymnasium. Sometimes they relax after the game with beer, burgers, and memories. For these men who grew up in Chinatown, basketball is an important tradition that embodies both their childhood memories and their continuing commitment to the Chinatown community.

Lowe, who attended Holy Redeemer (or HR) in the 1960s, muses that basketball was "the sport of choice—or the sport of survival," played at the only gym in the neighborhood: "Most of my activity was done at Holy Redeemer. Holy Redeemer for me was where I went to school, where I played constantly during the summer. HR was always open at all hours. The gym was there, that was always open to us. We like to think it was 24/7 . . . we were in there all the time." Brendan Lee also remembers spending weekends at Holy Redeemer; "from Friday night to Saturday afternoon" he was at HR honing his skills. At HR, Lee and others were schooled by older brothers and friends who taught them a form of tough street ball that emphasized fast footwork, intricate passing, and long outside shots (since players who were often shorter of stature found it difficult to get to the net). They played all comers, including a team composed entirely of waiters who would join them on the court on Saturday mornings.

Formed in the 1940s, the Holy Redeemer basketball team, Yu Pin, played in the city Catholic league and faced teams from other Catholic schools in the region. Later the Chinese Christian Church and Center also formed a team. In addition to local matches, Yu Pin faced off against teams from other Chinatowns along the northeast corridor: New York, Boston, Baltimore, and Washington, DC. Over time, the network became national in scope and basketball formed an important focus for social life and connections between Chinatowns across the country. According to Glenn Hing, "it was a



First Yu Pin basketball team, 1940, affiliated with Holy Redeemer Chinese Catholic Church and School.

Holy Redeemer Chinese Catholic Church Photograph Collection.

great thing, not only to play basketball, but the social aspect of it. There are a lot of marriages, a lot of friendships that have come out of that and will continue to come out of that."

In 1972 when the Chinatown league formed a junior division, a group of younger players, including Brendan Lee and Harry Leong, decided to form their own team, the Philadelphia Suns. Lee recalls, "I distinctly remember sitting in HR in the lunch room before a junior tournament deciding on what we were gonna do with our own identity. Were we still gonna be HR or were we gonna be doing this? We had gone to a few tournaments before that and we saw the teams that broke away from their older teams too." Glenn Hing, another founder remembers "I think about 15 of us and it was a basketball team and these are the guys that I grew up with and am still in touch with you know, the crew so to speak. . . . we fared pretty well and then it just evolved into a youth organization." Harry Leong, currently center director at the Chinese Christian Church and Center, took on leadership of the group and former members stayed involved, eventually forming a nonprofit board and securing 501(c)3 status.

Under Leong's leadership, the Suns draw over 150 Chinese and other Asian American youth from around the area to play competitive basketball and volleyball, engage in community service, and preserve the art of the Lion Dance, performing each Chinese New Year. Both the gym at Holy Redeemer and an outside court at the Chinese Christian Church and Center playground are used depending on the weather. The older generation of players, like Brendan Lee and Joe Lowe, remain involved with the organization, which, according to Lee, "keeps kids off the streets" and reinforces Chinese cultural heritage: "a lot of being part of a Sun is making sure you are doing the right thing. You don't mess up, you come and if you want to play basketball you gotta do the Lion dance, you want to come play volleyball, you gotta do the Lion dance. You want to do this you gotta come out and do a community project with us. Everything is part of a lesson and values and getting something, earning something as opposed to expecting something." The Suns' Lion Dance holds a special place for many in the community since it is performed by the "kids from Chinatown."

Today Chinese American basketball remains as popular as ever. Most city Chinatowns sponsor local Chinese tournaments and leagues throughout the year, which feed into the North American Chinese Basketball Association (NACBA) Invitational Tournament held annually during Memorial Day weekend since 1981.

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around the area came to shop, worship, dine, and socialize. Community developer and longtime resident Cecilia Moy Yep remembers that before her family moved to Chinatown in the 1940s, they would visit the quarter each week: “My father wanted us also to come to Chinatown so that we could learn the culture and the language of Chinese.” Chinatown had few restaurants at that time, and most catered to non-Chinese. A select few, however, appealed to the community’s residents. After attending church at Holy Redeemer each Sunday, Yep’s family “used to run for the booth at South China” because the restaurant would soon be crowded with Chinese diners eager to sample the “the noodles and everyday dishes” that they favored. Activist and educator Debbie Wei remembers driving every Sunday from Upper Darby in the 1960s to visit a little grocery store on Ninth Street: “My mom used to go there faithfully and you know, get the groceries that she would need for the week and stuff like cleavers.” With new settlement came new family businesses, many of them restaurants and gift shops: Magic Fan, Dragon Gate, China Castle, and Lotus Inn were among the best known.

Churches and social/cultural organizations established during this period created programs to address community residents’ needs: to improve neighborhood life, preserve Chinese culture, and provide services to new immigrants and growing numbers of Chinese American youth. Holy Redeemer Chinese Catholic Church, at 10th and Vine, had its genesis in a 1939 visit by Bishop Paul Yu Pin, then vicar of Nanking, China. The church formally opened its doors in 1941, the first Chinese Catholic church in the western hemisphere. Holy Redeemer, or “HR” as it is fondly referred to by community members, grew to play a large role in the lives of several generations of young Chinese who grew up in Chinatown from the 1940s through the ’70s. It had the only school in the neighborhood and the only gymnasium. Early on the church hosted a youth group, the Yu Pin Club, which sponsored a variety of activities in the 1940s all aimed at Chinese American youth: football, baseball, men’s and women’s basketball teams, bowling, skating, flute and singing lessons, and Sunday evening dances. The club also published a newsletter, the *Chinese Lantern*, which reported on the successes of athletic teams, various club activities, and social gossip.

Also founded in 1941, first as a mission center and later a church and center, was the Chinese Christian Church and Center. Under the directorship of Mirabelle “Mitzie” MacKenzie, the center at 1006 Race adopted an open-door policy and sponsored Girl and Boy Scout troops, tutoring, and recreation (the center had a billiards and ping pong

table). Later the church created a playground at 10th and Spring Streets. Although not a resident of Chinatown, MacKenzie was a tireless and beloved advocate for the community until her death in 2009. As former resident Kenneth Eng recalls, “you could come in, she’s there, there’s a basement, there’s a ping pong table, pool table, you could do whatever you want and she let you do it, as long as you found a place. And I remember my family had just settled here, if I had a question about school, a question about a job, she always helped.” Other organizations serving the community included the Chinatown Y, at 10th and Arch, founded by Taiwanese immigrant T. T. Chang, as well as youth activities sponsored by the Chinese Benevolent Association. These organizations were critical in providing services to a community neglected by the larger city for generations. They also formed the nexus of a new sense of place in Chinatown, becoming important sites of relationship and memory.

By the 1950s, the Chinatown neighborhood had become blighted. Adjacent to “skid row,” the landscape was punctuated by flophouses and seemed to have a bar on every corner. Aside from the churches, the only place for children to play was neglected Franklin Square, known by all as “Bum Park.” Yet despite blight, Chinatown was a safe haven for its residents, a small village in the heart of the city where they

could settle when other neighborhoods were less welcoming. It was a neighborhood where one grew up “knowing everybody on the block and everybody knowing you whether you liked it or not,” according to Glenn Hing, who now practices law on Ninth Street: “Everybody felt very, very safe growing up as a kid.” Church centers and the watchful eye of residents were important safeguards for children whose parents often worked long hours in restaurants and other family businesses.

Community members—under the radar of city planners—worked to revitalize the area, rehabilitating old buildings in the neighborhood. As George Moy remembers, “there were more votes in the flophouses,” and the community lacked the political clout to undertake larger change—a situation that would change in the 1960s. As Chinatown expanded again with a new wave of immigration from Hong Kong, the community began to feel the squeeze of urban redevelopment, a challenge that activated a new generation of Chinese American leaders. These new leaders would work to change the neighborhood’s relationship to the larger city—and the face of Chinatown as a result. ■

Kate Wilson is associate professor of history at Georgia State University. She is currently at work on a book about Chinatown with the working title, “Ethnic Renewal: Space, Place, and Struggle in Philadelphia’s Chinatown.”



Holy Redeemer Chinese Catholic Church. Courtesy of Tamara Gaskell.