

The Lost History of New Orleans' Two Chinatowns

by Richard Campanella *New Orleans Times-Picayune* InsideOut section, March 6, 2015

New Orleans once had a Chinatown—two, in fact. Both are long gone and barely discernible today, though artist Maria Möller hopes to change that this weekend. More on that in a minute.

First, to understand how Chinatown formed, we have to go back 150 years. The Confederacy had just been defeated, emancipation ensued, and the South's economy had to be rebuilt from the bottom up.

Southern planters scrambled to find a new labor force. Faced with a similar situation earlier, their peers in the Caribbean responded by importing thousands of East Asian and South Asian laborers. The influential New Orleans business journal *De Bow's Review* reported in 1866 that West Indian sugar harvests by South Asian workers were "much more than in the years of slavery," illustrating how "the advantages" of importing the laborers made plantations "highly flourishing" again.

Louisiana planters adopted the idea, and in 1867 dispatched agents to recruit a few hundred Chinese workers living in Cuba. That effort was interrupted by war, so the agents instead hired 1,600 Chinese people out of California, and later China, into lower Louisiana.

Recruitment faced obstacles. The U.S. government viewed it askance as a surrogate for slavery, and restrictions in Hong Kong and better pay in California made the Louisiana sugar fields a tough sell. Those who took the jobs held out for better pay and conditions, aggravating their bosses. By the early 1870s, planters began to look elsewhere for contract labor, and the Chinese workers migrated to the hope of the city.

It was in 1871 that people of Asian descent became a noticeable presence in the streets of New Orleans. Fou Loy had opened a store at 400 Chartres St., which the *New Orleans Times* described as "a centre of attraction for hundreds who delight to gaze upon the curious manufactures of China...." Yut Sing's curio shop operated on Royal Street, while a Chinese laundry opened on Carondelet. "A year ago we had no Chinese among us," commented the *New Orleans Bee*, "we now see them everywhere... This looks, indeed, like business."

The 1880 Census recorded 95 Chinese living in New Orleans and 489 in Louisiana; most were young men residing in boarding houses and apartments, employed in laundering, cooking and cigar-making, a skill learned in Cuba. Region-wide, other people of Asian ancestry worked on railroads or in shrimp-drying, a coastal industry that would survive into modern times.



Chinese-Americans who had operated small shops in New Orleans' Chinatown for many decades learned on Aug. 20, 1937 that their small enclave was doomed to make way for a parking lot. Pictured in this 1937 photo, in front of one of the shops on Tulane Avenue between Elk Place and Rampart Street, are Big Gee, seated, and Lee Sing, standing. (Photo from the NOLA.com/The Times-Picayune archive)

In 1881, a Northern missionary named Lena Saunders began offering classes for local Chinese immigrants. Her effort intrigued leaders of the Canal Street Presbyterian Church, who in 1882 incorporated it into their mission at 215 South Liberty St.

In short time, the Chinese Mission would serve more than 200 Chinese workers and other Asian immigrants (the first convert was Korean), and in the process made this Third Ward neighborhood -- specifically 1100 Tulane Ave. at South Rampart Street -- a hub for the city's Chinese population. By the 1900s, seven Chinese markets, groceries and merchandise shops filled 1100 Tulane, and an equal number operated nearby.

Despite its small size, Chinatown was well known citywide and perceived as an exotic element to the cosmopolitan city. One Picayune journalist in 1906 described the Chinese Republican Association building as "suggestive of the mysterious Far East." Chinatown also had merchants' associations, fraternal organizations, clubs, even a cremation society.

Those workers who came of age in China wore traditional garb and spoke their native tongue, while those locally born strove to Americanize. As is often the case in cultural assimilation, food customs proved tenacious. Reported the Picayune in 1910, "Most of the Chinese cling to their native dishes, even when they discard Oriental costume. Rice is their staple food [and] fish, birds and other delicacies are imported from China. They drink tea as Americans do water."

Chinatown was mostly commercial; while some Chinese families lived there, most resided in or near the neighborhood laundries they operated citywide, and shopped at Chinatown.

New Orleanians of all backgrounds also patronized Chinatown. The Yee Wah Sen Restaurant, according to the Picayune in 1911, catered to both the "toughest specimens of the underworld" and "polite society," and served both blacks and whites in segregated seating. Curio shops sold linen, ivory, silk kimonos and mandarin coats popular with Uptown debutantes, not to mention musical instruments -- and narcotics -- for nearby Storyville.

Surrounding Chinatown were some of the city's most fascinating neighborhoods. The Fertel family, which would later establish Ruth's Chris Steak House, ran a pawnshop on adjacent South Rampart, a street of integrated shopping where Orthodox Jews, Italians and African Americans owned stores.

One block upriver from Chinatown stood the Knights of Pythias Hall (1907), one of the largest African-American-owned buildings in the nation, and across present-day Loyola Avenue was the ominous Criminal Courthouse (1893), with its medieval-looking turrets and tower.

Louis Armstrong was born nearby in 1901 and would later reminisce how his elders "used to take [us] down in China Town [and] have a Chinese meal for a change. A kind of special occasion."

Chinatown remained stable in size because exclusionary immigration laws had restricted the flow of new Asian immigrants to the United States. By the 1920s, the local Chinese-American population had become increasingly middle class, more mobile and less dependent on its old enclave.



In 1926, the Presbytery moved its Chinese Mission to Mid City, and in 1937, merchants lost their lease on the lower side of 1100 Tulane Ave. "Chinatown is moving lock, stock, and herb barrel," reported the Times-Picayune. Their destination: 500-600 Bourbon St.

Why there? Compatriots had found success previously on Bourbon Street. In 1924, for example, Charles Tung erected the first phase of what would eventually become the 5000-customer-strong Oriental Laundry (where Rick's Cabaret is located today). The French Quarter's rents roughly matched those around the old Chinatown, and Tung's success demonstrated commercial viability for other community members. By the 1940s, about 10 Chinese businesses operated around the 500 block of Bourbon Street, and the new Chinatown became part of the Quarter culture.

During World War II, denizens stockpiled illegal pyrotechnics in anticipation of the defeat of the hated Japanese Empire. Granted a special police dispensation on V-J Day, 200 Chinese-Americans, according to the Times-Picayune, "shot more than \$500 worth of firecrackers, turning [500 Bourbon] into a miniature battlefield."

Among Chinatown's top Bourbon businesses was Dan's International Restaurant, the preferred rendezvous of bohemians and power players alike, and by far the most popular Chinese eatery in the city.

Another favorite was the Oriental Gift Shop at 641 Bourbon St., owned by Honey Gee. Now 95 years old and living in Metairie, Gee recalls a day around 1942 when in walked a glamorous woman who appeared to be silent movie star and famed fan dancer Sally Rand -- and indeed, she was inspecting the folding fans.

As the woman departed, a local man also browsing in the shop whispered to Gee, "I think that was Sally Rand." "Do you think?" Gee responded, and they shared a laugh. The man eventually purchased six Chinese lanterns, and "as he was leaving the store, the streetcar named Desire went by."

A few years later, that man, Tennessee Williams, gained worldwide fame for his Pulitzer Prize-winning play "A Streetcar Named Desire." When in the play Blanche DuBois symbolically shades the glare of a naked light bulb with a Chinese paper lantern, she explains she purchased it "at a Chinese shop on Bourbon" -- likely a reference to Gee's shop, located just a block and a half from Williams' garret.

Bourbon Street's transformation to a modern entertainment strip paralleled the Chinese merchants' gradual departure for Jefferson Parish. Six businesses remained on Bourbon in 1970, five in 1980, three in 1990, and by 1993, only the On Leong Merchants Association remained. Today, its hand-painted sign at 530 1/2 Bourbon is the only visible trace of New Orleans' Chinatowns.

Marie Möller aims to change that -- at least temporarily. The Philadelphia artist was recently awarded a residency at A Studio in the Woods, the West Bank artist retreat affiliated with Tulane University's Center for Bioenvironmental Research. Möller's interest in cultural memory and urban change brought her to my research on the city's historical ethnic geography and specifically to the Chinatown story. In the past five weeks, she has been meeting with Chinatown descendants at the Chinese Presbyterian Church (now in Kenner) and developing a temporary public art piece at the original Chinatown site on Tulane Avenue.

Readers are invited to see Möller's work and hear about Chinatown's descendants on Saturday, March 7, from 1 to 3 p.m. at The Saratoga, 212 Loyola Ave. The free event will feature lectures by Möller and myself as well as a short walking tour.

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