



Chinatown, New Orleans

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In this early-1920s aerial view, the heart of Chinatown appears on either side of the streetcar on Tulane Avenue (left center), across from the Criminal Courthouse. The Chinese Mission and former Presbyterian Church are visible at upper right center, and Canal Street appears at extreme lower right. Courtesy Southeastern Architectural Archive, Special Collections, Tulane University Howard-Tilton Library

NEW ORLEANS ONCE had a Chinatown. The enclave, which endured for 60 years in its original location and in a derivative form for another 40 years, attested not only to this port city's ties to the Pacific Rim, but also to its position at the apogee of the Caribbean Basin. New Orleans shared many traits with that region, but one in particular spawned a local Chinatown: the sugar cane industry and its post-emancipation labor shortage.

As emancipation spread throughout the Caribbean, planters looked to the East for alternatives to enslaved labor, and from the 1830s to the early 1900s, they recruited hundreds of thousands of East Asian and South Asian laborers into the island colonies. When freedom came to the sugar cane fields of Louisiana, planters sought guidance from their Caribbean peers on how to replace "their" labor force. The influential *De Bow's Review*, in an 1866 article titled "Coolies as a Substitute for Negroes," reported that West Indian sugar harvests by South Asians were "much more than in the years of slavery," illustrating "the advantages of the coolie system, [which] has raised [these colonies] from almost entirely ruined to highly flourishing dependencies."

The Louisiana experiment began in 1867 when agents recruited a few hundred Chinese workers out of Cuba and into the sugar parishes, but the effort

was interrupted by war on the island colony. The agents instead targeted the Pacific Rim, and in 1870 the Mississippi Valley Immigration Labor Company recruited 1,600 Chinese out of California, and from China proper, into the lower Mississippi delta.

Recruitment faced numerous obstacles, including from the U.S. Government, which viewed it as a dangerously close substitute for slavery. New legal restrictions on Hong Kong importations and better pay in California also made hard labor in the South a tough sell on the recruits. Planters themselves were displeased to discover that the allegedly "docile" Chinese were in fact willing and able to fight for what was rightfully theirs. Withheld wages, disparate pay and ill treatment were met with confrontation, work stoppage and lawsuits. Louisiana planters by the early 1870s began to look elsewhere for contract labor — to Spain, Portugal, Greece, and finally Sicily. Chinese recruitment to the agrarian South flopped, and the new Chinese-Americans responded by resettling once again, this time to the urban South.

It was in 1871 that people of Asian descent achieved sufficient numbers to become a noticeable presence in the streets of New Orleans. Also in that year arrived the first shipments of Chinese merchandise directly from China. Fou Loy and Company had opened a store on Chartres Street, an oddity described by the *New Orleans Times* as "a centre of attraction for hundreds who delight to gaze upon the curious manufactures of China, and the pig-tail of John himself." A similar operation run by Yut Sing was located on Royal, while a Chinese laundry opened on Carondelet. "The Celestials have a real tact for business," commented the Bee, "and the merchants of the Flowery Kingdom are among the keenest in the world. A year ago we had no Chinese among us; we now see them everywhere... This looks, indeed, like business." Contemporary newspaper articles considering the newcomers (referred to generically as "the Celestials," "John Chinaman," "John," or derisively as "Coolies" or "Chinks") divulged feelings ranging from curiosity and admiration to condescension and disdain. The census at the end of the decade recorded 95 Chinese living in New Orleans and 489 in Louisiana (both probably undercounts), primarily comprising single men residing in boarding houses and apartments, employed in occupations such as laundering, cooking, and making or selling cigars.

In 1881, a Northern missionary named Lena Saunders began offering classes to five Chinese immigrants in downtown New Orleans. The effort intrigued leaders of the Canal Street Presbyterian Church, and in 1882 they incorporated Saunders' mission into their outreach effort and acquired for it a building at 215 South Liberty Street, next to the main church. The Chinese Mission served over 200 Chinese and other Asians (the first convert was "Corean") in the mid-1880s, as a place to feel welcome, be among brethren, and learn English. The institution unwittingly helped make this Third Ward neighborhood a hub for the city's Chinese population. Chinese-owned businesses opened nearby, joining the Loung Sing



Map of Chinatown circa 1917, by Richard Campanella.

Laundry, which had been at present-day 160 South Rampart since 1874. In the early 1890s, the loose cluster began to develop a core on the 1100 block of Tulane Avenue, and by the new century, seven Chinese markets, groceries, and merchandise shops filled that short block, while up to 175 Chinese, representing a third of entire local population, received instruction at the Mission. New Orleans' Chinatown, traceable to the 1870s, was now in its heyday.

Although street-level photographs of Chinatown are rare, the enclave was well-known locally and appeared regularly in the local press, usually in tones of exoticism and cultural otherness. "In the heart of New Orleans," wrote a wide-eyed *Picayune* journalist in 1906 of the Chinese Republican Association meeting hall, "stands a small two-story brick dwelling, within the walls of which the Orient has crowded out the Occident and only the things suggestive of the mysterious Far East are to be found." The magnificently appointed temple upstairs, he continued, was "constructed along the lines of barbaric picturesqueness" and "dedicated to the worship of heathen dieties." Along 1100 Tulane, recalled the *Times-Picayune* years later, "congregated nightly Chinese merchants, laundrymen and philosophers to discuss, in their sing-song Cantonese, everything of moment in China from the time of Sun Yat-Sen's attempts to make China a republic to Chiang Kai-Shek's attempts to keep it one." Chinatown also had merchant's associations, fraternal organizations and clubs, and even a cremation society.

Those Chinese who came of age overseas often wore traditional garb, spoke their native tongue and practiced old customs, while locally born offspring strove to assimilate. Kimonos and "pig tails" eventually disappeared from the streets, for the curious attention they drew. As is often the case in cultural assimilation, food customs proved to be among the most 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...but fish, birds, and other delicacies are imported from China. They drink tea as Americans do water."

New Orleanians of all backgrounds regularly visited Chinatown. The Yee Wah Sen Restaurant on South Basin, according to the *Picayune* in 1911, catered to both the "toughest specimens of the underworld" and "respectable members of... polite society," serving blacks and whites in segregated seating, such that the "aristocrat...rubs elbows with the hoi polloi." The curio shops specialized in linen, ivory, silk kimonos, and mandarin coats popular with uptown debutants, as well as musical instruments and narcotics for nearby red-light districts. Recalled jazz musician Jelly Roll Morton, "I was personally sent to Chinatown many times with a sealed note and a small amount of money and would bring back [for the prostitutes in Storyville] several cards of hop. There was no slipping and dodging. All you had to do was walk in to be served." Among the drugs available were "opium, heroin, cocaine, laudanum, morphine, etcetera."

Surrounding Chinatown were some of historic New Orleans' most fascinating back-of-town neighborhoods. Along South Rampart Street were tailor shops, clothing stores, jewelers, and other businesses owned by Orthodox Jews and Italians who catered to a predominantly black clientele. One block from Chinatown stood the elegant Knights of Pythias Hall (1907), once the largest black-owned building in the nation and still standing today. Dispersed throughout were landmarks associated with the emergence of jazz, among them the birthplace of Louis Armstrong, who later reminisced about the area, circa 1907:

The neighborhood was consisted of Negroes, Jewish people, and lots of Chinese....The Chinese finally moved into a little section of their own and called it *China Town*, with a few little *beat up* restaurants serving *soul* food on the same menu of their Chinese dishes....My Mother + my *Step* Father used to take *me* + *Mama Lucy* (my sister) down in *China Town* + have a Chinese meal for a change. A kind of *special* occasion.

One *Times-Picayune* journalist noticed in 1920 a cultural assimilation among the Chinese that, as it turned out, foretold the enclave's decline. "The Chinatown of New Orleans is passing," he noted, its denizens having "taken up the language and customs and methods of their adopted country within the last few years." Merchants acquired telephones, cash registers, and account ledgers to replace abacuses. Families learned English at the Chinese Mission, and children huddled around English textbooks in the back of their family's shops. Opium and games



Photographs of New Orleans' Chinatown are exceedingly rare. This 1925 photograph of the circa-1893 Orleans Parish Criminal Courts Building captures an edge of the ethnic enclave at extreme lower left. The main Chinatown buildings were demolished in 1937, and twelve years later, the Courthouse was razed; its site is now occupied in part by the main branch of the New Orleans Public Library as well as a widened Loyola Avenue (formerly Basin and Saratoga). Courtesy The Historic New Orleans Collection, 1974.25.3.234

of chance, once widespread, became as scarce in the district's shops as chopsticks became in the enclave's restaurants. In 1920, "the only atmosphere left [was] the exotic scent of the East that is as inseparable to the Orient life as garlic to the Latin races." Exclusionary immigration laws on the books since 1882 had greatly restricted the flow of new immigrants directly from China, rendering the Chinese-American population of New Orleans decreasingly Chinese and increasingly American. Nevertheless, even as the number of Chinese laundries halved throughout the city from 1898 to 1921 (perhaps due to market saturation), Chinatown remained integral.

In 1926, the Presbytery of New Orleans sold the 215 South Liberty property and moved the Chinese Mission to 223 South Roman Street. At the same time, the Chinese-American population became increasingly economically and geographically mobile and less dependent on its enclave to fulfill retail and social needs. Then, in 1937, the merchants on the downtown side of 1100 Tulane lost their lease and were forced to relocate. "Chinatown is moving lock, stock, and herb barrel from Tulane avenue to the 500 and 600 blocks of Bourbon street," announced the *Times-Picayune*. On September 20, 1937, "Chinese merchants...started moving their pungent bales and barrels of stock, their Chinese clothes, nuts and herbs, dried fruit, firecrackers and noodles...their chestnuts and mushrooms and bamboo shoots from their old headquarters on Tulane avenue...to make way for a parking lot." A few Chinese merchants remained across the street into the early 1940s (where the late Jefferson Parish Sheriff Harry Lee lived for a short while as a child), and in 1958, it too was mostly razed. Relocation, structural demolition, and socio-economic change put an end to New Orleans' Chinatown.

The "new Chinatown" founded in 1937 on the 500-600 blocks of Bourbon Street was a fraction of the size and not nearly as culturally significant as the original, but it nonetheless lasted for over four decades. Tennessee Williams alluded to it in a scene in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, in which Blanche DuBois symbolically shades the glare of a naked light bulb with a Chinese paper lantern — purchased, she explains, "at a Chinese shop on Bourbon." Williams once lived around the corner from the Bourbon Street Chinatown and regularly patronized it.

Today, the original Chinatown ranks as the most utterly obliterated of New Orleans' historic ethnic enclaves. Only one structure from its heyday still stands, an old brick side wall with a gaping-open window at 1118 Tulane Avenue. The second enclave, too, left behind only one relic: a palimpsest of a hand-painted On Leong Chinese Merchants Association sign above a side door at 532 Bourbon.

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