University of New Orleans Press

Chapter Title: Chinatown, New Orleans

Book Title: Geographies of New Orleans

Book Subtitle: Urban Fabrics Before the Storm

Book Author(s): Richard Campanella

Published by: University of New Orleans Press

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1n2tx87.26

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Chinatown, New Orleans

For six decades straddling the turn of the twentieth century, a tiny Chinatown at the edge of downtown New Orleans anchored members of the Chinese American community scattered throughout the Crescent City. As one of the very few genuine Chinatowns in the nineteenth-century South,[515] New Orleans' Asian enclave, and the few thousand Chinese-Americans who have called New Orleans home ever since, attest not only to this port city's international nature but also its position at the apogee of the Caribbean region. For it was the Greater Antilles island of Cuba, during the new world order following the demise of slavery, that supplied early groups of Chinese workers to the banks of the lower Mississippi. The New Orleans region shared sundry aspects with Caribbean societies—to this day, the city's Caribbean aesthetic is palpable—but one in particular set the stage for the arrival of a few hundred Chinese in the years after the Civil War: the sugar cane industry and its post-emancipation labor shortage. That need for field hands would lead Southern planters and New Orleans merchants to look eventually beyond Cuba and the Caribbean to California and the ports of China itself. The effort failed within five years but succeeded in enriching New Orleans with an Asian presence, which in turn created a little-known downtown enclave within the city's complex turn-of-the-century ethnic cityscape. New Orleans' Chinatown is extinct in both form and function today, but recounting its story sheds light on the cultural geography of the Caribbean region, New Orleans' role in the world network of port cities, and the sense of place that aggregates, dissipates, and yet persists in the streets of the Crescent City today.

Antebellum Chinese and the Caribbean Connection

Little is known of the few Asians who lived in the New Orleans region prior to the Civil War. The Quong Sun Company is said to have constructed a shrimp-drying platform on Bayou Defond (Du Fon) as far back as 1840, and one Chin Su Lee was recorded in St. Bernard Parish marriage records in 1857—this in a region where, it is believed, the first Asian (that is, Filipino "Manilamen") settlement in the present-day United States was founded, near the shores of Lake Borgne in the 1760s.[516] One rare mention of a tiny Chinese colony in antebellum New Orleans comes from an 1843 *Daily Picayune* article entitled "A Kaleidoscopic View of New Orleans:"

> The natives of China are located in the neighborhood of Congo Square, where you may see, any day that the wind is high enough, Hong-Kong, Choo-Loo, Pom-Poo, and several other Celestials, flying pretty, parti-colored paper kites.[517]

A bit more can be gleaned from the 1860 census schedules for New Orleans, which recorded around thirty people of Chinese birth residing in the city. Some worked as cigar makers, stewards, kite makers, cotton mill workers, merchants, and mariners; others may have been guests escorted by Christian missionaries. Still others represented intermediary companies trying (unsuccessfully) to contract Chinese laborers from Gold Rush-era California and the Caribbean to work in Louisiana. Some anglicized their names to the likes of "John Robinson" or "John Young;" others (particularly the cigar makers) hispanicized them to "Will Dias" or "José Martín," indicating a prior stint in Cuba or other Spanish-speaking countries. Most were family men; some married Caucasians and started their families in northeastern cities before moving to New Orleans; all were classified as white.[518]

This tiny Chinese community in antebellum New Orleans was separated from its homeland by half-a-planet of maritime travel, but other brethren resided not quite so far away. Countries and colonies of the Caribbean Basin, which, like Louisiana, depended on sugar production almost as much as sugar production depended on slavery, grappled with new sources of labor as the prospect of emancipation loomed throughout the region. Starting in 1845, Chinese indentures by the shipload arrived to Cuba, Peru, Hawaii, Trinidad, Sumatra, Jamaica, and elsewhere in the plantation tropics. Eight hundred Chinese "coolies" entered Cuba in 1847, followed by 124,835 more from 1853 to 1874, destined for the island's vast sugar cane fields. One contemporary observer suggested that up to 200,000 Chinese were imported to Cuba between 1853 and 1860 alone. Most came from the Portuguese colony of Macao; others were from Canton, Hong Kong, and elsewhere. The English, who oversaw colonies both on the demand side and supply side of labor, also exploited this labor pool: in the eighty years after the 1833 abolition of slavery throughout the British Empire, 13,533 Chinese and 238,909 South Asian Indians were brought to British Guiana (present-day Guyana) alone. Conditions under the indentured labor system were so close to traditional African bondage, in its economics as well as its brutality, that many plantations in Cuba smoothly transitioned from one system to the other.[519] "I find it to be the universal impression," wrote abolitionist traveler John S.C. Abbott in 1859, "that in Cuba the Coolie trade is merely a Chinese slave-trade under the most fraudulent and cruel circumstances."[520] American observers took note of the phenomena in the 1850s, and pondered its

[515] A study in the 1940s listed New Orleans as the only city in the heart of the South (excluding places such as San Antonio and Baltimore) with an established Chinatown. Rose Hum Lee, "The Decline of Chinatowns in the United States," *American Journal of Sociology* 54 (March 1949): 423.

[516] Betsy Swanson, *Historic Jefferson Parish, From Shore to Shore* (Gretna, 1975), 138; Center for the Pacific Rim, University of New Orleans, *The Asian Peoples of Southern Louisiana: An Ethnohistory* (New Orleans, 1990), 37; Moon-Ho Jung, "Coolies and Cane: Race Labor, and Sugar Production in Louisiana, 1852-1877" (Ph.D. dissertation, Cornell University, 2000), xxi.

[517] "A Kaleidoscopic View of New Orleans," *Daily Picayune*, September 23, 1843, p. 2, col. 3.

[518] As analyzed by Lucy M. Cohen, *Chinese in the Post-Civil War South: A People Without a History* (Baton Rouge, 1984), 20, and other sources.

[519] Franklin W. Knight, *Slave Society in Cuba During the Nineteenth Century* (Madison, Milwaukee and London, 1970), 117-19; Gary Y. Okihiro, *The Columbia Guide to Asian American History* (New York, 2001), 69.

[520] John S.C. Abbott, *South and North; or Impressions Received During a trip to Cuba and the South* (New York, 1860), 50.

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extension into the American South as a way to supplant costly slave labor with relatively cheaper contract workers. But such a policy could undermine slavery—and the investment it represented for Southern planters—at a time when "the peculiar institution" ranked as one of the most divisive issues in the nation. Advocacy of the recruitment and importation of Chinese laborers was not only muted in favor of the *status quo*, but "overshadowed by arguments in favor of re-opening the slave trade."[521] A traumatic decade later, the defeat of the Confederacy in the Civil War and the emancipation of slaves deprived the Southern planter elite of the luxury of the choice. Freedmen, more often than not, turned their backs on further toil on plantations and emigrated to cities and towns, leaving their former masters scrambling to fill the labor void.

Louisiana sugar planters, reeling from the devastation of their industry, looked to their British, French, and Spanish peers throughout the Caribbean Basin for guidance. "Southerners formulated and implemented their original plans for the recruitment of Chinese by drawing heavily on their ideological and cultural bonds with the West Indian societies," wrote anthropologist Lucy M. Cohen, granddaughter of a Chinese immigrant in Central America and a pioneering researcher on Chinese immigration to the South. "They compared their experiences in a reorganized post-emancipation period with similar past events in the British and French Antilles"[522] Particularly they looked to Cuba, the world's greatest sugar producer, which had done well with contracted Chinese laborers. Prominent planters and journalists with connections in both Louisiana and Cuba encouraged the idea through articles in regional newspapers. In its 1866 "After the War" reports, the influential New Orleans-based business journal *De Bow's Review* furthered the concept in an article entitled "Coolies as a Substitute for Negroes." The piece described the importation of primarily South Asian Indians to the English colonies of Guiana and Trinidad, with statistical evidence that post-emancipation sugar harvests were "much more than in the years of slavery," illustrating "the advantages of the coolie system...a system that has raised [these colonies] from almost entirely ruined to highly flourishing dependencies."[523] A similar article in the *Daily Picayune* in the fall of that year, entitled "The Cooly Question: A Mongolian Invasion," reviewed the Caribbean experiences of the English and French and the contemporary situation in California, but assumed an ambivalent stance on Chinese immigration to the South. It coldly concluded that "however hideous and revolting this population may be[,] we cannot, by legal discriminations, drive them away, [thus] it would be well to consider the best means of making the most of their industrial powers and incurring the least mischief from their social vices."[524]

First Arrivals, 1867

In 1866, a few laborers from the Philippine Islands were brought to Louisiana by one T. Edmonston. The next year, Jules H. Normand, a planter with Cuban connections, brought fifteen Chinese laborers from Havana and Matanzas, with names such as Francisco, Migel, Castro, and Seraphine, through New Orleans and delivered them to two cotton growers in Natchitoches Parish. Other Chinese laborers whose contracts had expired in Cuba were offered arrangements to come to Louisiana and fill the plantation labor void. They would be paid around $12 to $14 per month plus subsistence rations for a period of eighteen to twenty-four months. Normand and planter Benjamin W. Bullitt brought approximately fifty-five more Chinese to New Orleans by March 1867, of which twenty were destined for Natchitoches cotton fields and the rest for Mississippi River sugar plantations. The two agents started a company in New Orleans to ship in more Chinese, and advertised regionally to appeal to labor-starved planters. In competition was another Louisiana planter with Cuban connections, Edward T. Wyches, who, using a fill-in-the-blank contract form printed in Spanish and English, imported fifty Chinese to the Bayou Lafourche region in the spring and summer of 1867. "A cargo of twenty-three coolies arrived at New Orleans on July 25," reported a national magazine, possibly in reference to Wyches' group, "and several others, who had arrived previously, were already at work on the plantations."[525] A local journalist visiting one such plantation was privy to a remarkable Bayou State ethnic amalgamation. Here in the heart of Acadian Louisiana, a Spanish-speaking Creole oversaw Spanish-speaking Chinese laborers brought to Cuba from the Portuguese colony of Macao and thence to the United States to replace recently emancipated African American slaves.[526] That summer, *Harper's Weekly* reported that 2,000 "coolies...whose terms of service have expired in Cuba, are to be introduced into Louisiana, and it is a matter to which public attention should be intelligently directed."[527]

The importations were briefly interrupted in late 1867, when the federal government, fresh from waging four years of civil war, intervened on the basis that the shipments violated an 1862 law against the "coolie trade" and came disturbingly close to re-instituting a form of slavery. The shipments resumed when the government grudgingly agreed that the Chinese were coming voluntarily as free agents and not as "coolies," but the State Department continued to keep a disapproving eye on the operation for the next few years.

[521] Cohen, *Chinese in the Post-Civil War South*, 26-30.
[522] Lucy M. Cohen, "Entry of Chinese to the Lower South from 1865 to 1870: Policy Dilemmas," *Southern Studies* 17 (1978): 7.
[523] "Coolies as a Substitute for Negroes," *De Bow's Review*, After the War Series 2 (August 1866): 217.
[524] "The Cooly Question: A Mongolian Invasion," *Daily Picayune*, October 28, 1866.
[525] "Domestic Intelligence: News Items," *Harper's Weekly*, August 10, 1867, p. 499, col. 3.
[526] Cohen, *Chinese in the Post-Civil War South*, 50-58.
[527] "The Cooly Importation," *Harper's Weekly*, August 31, 1867, p. 546, col. 4.

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Wyches shipped twenty-three more Cuban Chinese to New Orleans in August 1867 and an additional twelve in November, accompanied by an ordained minister named Tye Kim Orr, a Christian Chinese missionary and maverick with connections throughout the Caribbean and East Asian.

Then, starting in 1868, Cuba, engaged in what would be called the Ten Years' War, increasingly bound Chinese "coolies" to Cuban plantations, thus restricting their movement across the Gulf of Mexico.[528] Within a year, the flow of Chinese from Cuba to Louisiana ended. Nevertheless, the idea of the Chinese labor solution was planted, borne of the circum-Caribbean sugar world, of which Louisiana was a part. The next step, from the planters' perspective, was to look to the Pacific Rim.

Second Wave, 1869-1871

Interest in Chinese labor rekindled in 1869, when planters discussed and debated the issue at regional meetings throughout the South and at big commercial conventions held in Memphis, New Orleans, and Louisville. Voices concerned about the importation of foreign "heathens" were only slightly outnumbered by those who saw the Chinese as a likely and worthy labor source. The Memphis meeting resulted in the formation of the Mississippi Valley Immigration Labor Company, dedicated to bring "as many Chinese immigrant laborers as possible, in the shortest time,"[529] to the United States. Planters' eyes shifted from Cuba and its restricted pool of Chinese, to California and its larger (but costlier) supply, and then to China itself, with its unlimited supply and wide selection of new workers. George W. Gift of Arkansas was first to make the trip, traveling to California, where the labor market was too competitive, and then to British colonial Hong Kong, where he navigated legal gray zones and suspicious authorities. He eventually persuaded 189 Chinese to board the *Ville de St. Lo*, journey across the Indian Ocean, around the Cape of Good Hope, across the Atlantic, into the Gulf of Mexico, and up the Mississippi River to New Orleans, arriving June 1, 1870. It may well have been the first emigrant ship arriving to New Orleans directly from East Asia. The newcomers were shipped upriver to Mississippi and Arkansas cotton plantations to start their three-year labor contracts; there, many Southerners, both white and black, would encounter Asian peoples for the first time. Four months later, a larger group of 222 Chinese, assembled by Nolan Williams and the missionary Tye Kim Orr, arrived to New Orleans and thence to Louisiana plantations.[530] Asian faces became an increasingly familiar sight in sugar-parish towns such as Donaldsonville, where Chinese sugar workers would congregate in such numbers on Lafourche Street in the early 1870s that the local newspaper referred to it as 'the precincts of "China Town."'[531] Between 1869 and 1870, another 1,200 Chinese were brought in to work on railroads in neighboring states. Many first disembarked at Gretna en route to Texas, and hundreds others would eventually be lured away from railroad construction in Alabama to plantation labor in Louisiana, and in particular, to cotton milling jobs in Baton Rouge. When the Alabama and Chattanooga Railroad folded, this largest group of Chinese in the South, plus new Chinese laborers from California, dispersed to other labor-demanding areas in the region, one of which was the large Millaudon/Merrill sugar plantation in Jefferson Parish. Of the 141 Chinese who arrived there in July 1870, only twenty-five remained in 1872, the rest having departed for various reasons of dissatisfaction.[532] In this manner, the few thousand Chinese laborers initially brought in via Cuba, California, and China circulated from job to job throughout the Deep South and Midwest, in constant turnover. Fewer and fewer new recruits arrived into the 1870s. Planters lost interest in Chinese labor, and looked elsewhere across the globe to replace the replacements of the emancipated slaves.

The Failure of Chinese Recruitments to Louisiana

Reasons on both the supply and demand sides explain the failure of Chinese recruitment to the South. On the supply side, the three major sources of Chinese immigrants all proved problematic. In 1868, Cuba, as previously mentioned, restricted Chinese laborers' freedom of movement in response to revolutionary threats to the sugar industry's dependency on slave and coolie labor. Two years later, British colonials in Hong Kong banned Chinese labor recruitment to non-British colonies. California, the third pool of Chinese labor, offered wages with which Southern planters could not compete. Chinese in California were more likely to emigrate on their own accord to better pay and opportunity in the industrialized Northeast than to be recruited to less of both in the rural South. It was a tough sell, and few Chinese bought it. This restriction of labor supply vis-à-vis high labor demand explains the rampant turnover and relocation among those few Chinese who did come to the South: a laborer on a railroad in Alabama might be a cotton miller in Baton Rouge a few months later; a cotton picker in Natchitoches one season might be a sugar harvester in Houma the next.

On the demand side, planters were displeased to discover that the apparently docile Chinese were in fact perfectly cognizant of the stipulations of their contracts, and ready and willing to fight for what was rightfully theirs. "John Chinaman seems to entertain a very lively sense of his own interest

[528] Jung, "Coolies and Cane: Race, Labor, and Sugar Productions in Louisiana, 1852-1877," 193-201.

[529] As quoted in Cohen, *Chinese in the Post-Civil War South*, 67.

[530] This group included a contingent of seventeen French-speaking Catholic Chinese from the French sugar island of Martinique. Cohen, *Chinese in the Post-Civil War South*, 70-81, 107; and Cohen, "Entry of Chinese to the Lower South from 1865 to 1870," 16-31.

[531] Donaldsonville *Chief*, March 14, 1874, as quoted in Cohen, *Chinese in the Post-Civil War South*, 143.

[532] "Chinese Plantation Hands," *New Orleans Republican*, July 3, 1870; "The Chinese Laborers," *New Orleans Republican*, July 26, 1870; and Wesley Jackson, "Letter Helped Open Door to Christianity for Chinese," *Times-Picayune*, December 23, 1973, sect. 3, 2.

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in any bargain he makes," observed the *New Orleans Republican* of the Millaudan plantation laborers just two weeks after their arrival. "The man of the Flowery Kingdom is not a whit behind the descendants of Canaan's conquerors in business shrewdness."[533] Withheld wages, covert contract changes, convenient mistranslations, disparate pay, altered hours, and ill treatment were met not with cowered compliance but confrontations, work stoppages, walk-offs, lawsuits, rebellion, and self-defense. Planters "attributed their labor problems to the stereotypical Chinese character," wrote Lucy M. Cohen, but the real problem was the contract labor system and its abuses. "When the Chinese protested or rebelled, the qualities of fidelity and exactitude for which they had formerly received praise became cunning and craftiness."[534] In many areas, particularly the cotton country of the interior South, contract labor declined in favor of sharecropping. Planters abandoned "John Chinaman" and vice versa.

Additionally, Southerners were increasingly hostile to the notion of "another" racial group in the tense social landscape of postbellum society, particularly one of a completely different culture. For every opinion extolling the industrious and disciplined Chinese was one condemning them as "heathens," "Mongols," "a demoralizing blight to any community," "filthy, thievish, and infamously vile."[535] *Harper's Weekly* warned that "these people are the lowest and in every way the least desirable portion of nations the most alien to us and our civilization."[536] In his recent dissertation, Moon-Ho Jung saw parallels between the contradictory prejudices from the 1870s and the later representations of Asians in America as either the "model minority" or the "yellow peril."[537] In the postbellum South, it was the "yellow peril" interpretation that predominated. Some Southerners also opposed Chinese labor for fear that it would breath new life into the fallen aristocracy and re-isolate the former Confederacy from its efforts at economic restoration.[538]

Finally, the 1862 Act to Prohibit the Coolie Trade and the experience of the Civil War made the U.S. Government anything but an advocate of what it saw as a dangerously close substitute for slavery. While the government only investigated and temporarily intervened in the South's recruitment of Chinese, never did it actively support or encourage it. Nor did the state of Louisiana lend a hand, as it would in upcoming decades for other immigrant labor groups. The U.S. government would explicitly exclude Chinese immigration in later years, from 1882 to 1965, contributing to the paucity of Asian immigrants to the South and elsewhere.

As sharecropping failed to take hold in sugar country,[539] Louisiana sugar planters in the 1870s continued to experiment with contracted laborers—Spanish, Portuguese, Scandinavian, and others—to fill the void created by emancipation and left open by the Chinese experience. Perhaps they would have also considered South Asian Indians or other Asian-Caribbean peoples, as did the British in Trinidad and Guyana starting in the 1840s, if the colonials allowed it. Satisfactory replacements were eventually found in Sicily, and for the remainder of the nineteenth century, thousands of Sicilians were recruited to Louisiana's plantations, adding yet another ethnic component to the region in the aftermath of the Civil War. Within a few years, Chinese and Sicilian immigrants would graduate from the cane fields, move into cities, and climb the social and economic latter, settling for a while in two particular neighborhoods at opposite ends of downtown New Orleans.

Chinese in Postbellum New Orleans

The few thousand Chinese working and travelling throughout the Southern plantation country, and rapidly losing interest in its scant opportunities, began by 1870 to gravitate toward larger towns and cities. New Orleans attracted the lion's share, in part because it was home to a number of Chinese importing firms, but mostly because it was a big, accessible, opportunity-rich port city to which most Chinese had been exposed upon their arrival. That same year, the first shipments of Chinese merchandise reached the city directly from China. In 1871, Fou Loy and Company opened a popular store at 98 Chartres Street (present-day 408-412 Chartres) while supplying provisions to Chinese in the field and attempting to coordinate more immigration from the West Coast. The store was "a centre of attraction for hundreds who delight to gaze upon the curious manufactures of China, and the pig-tail of John himself."[540] A similar operation run by Yut Sing was located at 40 Royal, while a Chinese laundry operated on Carondelet Street. The *New Orleans Bee*, whose office was located a block from Fou Loy & Company, commented on its new neighbors:

> "*Chinese Merchants*—The Celestials have a real tact for business, 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 in the streets of New Orleans, and they have opened two large stores for the sale of Chinese articles, one in Royal and other in Chartres street. The latter is owned by Fou Loy & Co., who have just effected... an insurance for twenty thousand dollars of their stock. This looks, indeed, like business."[541]

It was in 1871 that people of Asian descent—specifically Chinese—established themselves in the city in sufficient

[533] "How the Chinese Work: Visit to a Plantation," *New Orleans Republican*, July 24, 1870.
[534] Cohen, *Chinese in the Post-Civil War South*, 101, 106-32.
[535] Quoted from a number of sources, including "The Importation of Coolies," 362.
[536] "The Cooly Importation," *Harper's Weekly*, August 31, 1867, p. 547, col. 5.
[537] Jung, "Coolies and Cane: Race, Labor, and Sugar Production in Louisiana, 1852-1877," 333.
[538] Wrote sugar planter Henry J. Hyams on the potential impact of imported Chinese plantation labor, "We will have again a fat and pampered aristocracy, worse than ever it ever was, and far more haughty and overbearing. It will then be 'how many Coolies does he work?' instead of 'how many negroes does he own?' so commonly used *antebellum*." Ibid., 331.
[539] This is the interpretation of ibid., xx.
[540] "John Chinaman," *New Orleans Times*, June 28, 1871.
[541] *New Orleans Bee*, December 5, 1871, "City Intelligence" column.

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numbers to become a noticeable presence in the streets. Contemporary newspaper articles considering the newcomers (whom the local press referred to generically as "the Celestials," "John Chinaman," or simply "John," or derisively as "Coolies" or "Chinks") divulged feelings ranging from condescension to curiosity to admiration. These excerpts, taken from an article entitled "John Chinaman" in the *New Orleans Times* of June 28, 1871, reveal certain aspects of Chinese life in New Orleans interpreted by one not-quite-worldly local journalist:

> ...John has come to be looked upon as a well-behaved member of society in our city.
>
> The *outre* style of dress worn by the *heathen* attracts notice wherever he appears on the street, and truth to tell, his long white blouse, shaved poll and extended pigtail, together with the extraordinary shoes worn, present him in an aspect decidedly opposed to one's ideas of elegance. Still he holds on the "even tenor of his way"...and we conclude, from observation, that he has learned that most difficult of all accomplishments—the minding of his own business.
>
> One wise-looking old chap [running the Fou Loy & Co. shop on Chartres Street] is constantly engaged in pretending to write in a large ledger-like book, with a view no doubt to delude himself and the public into the belief that business is heavy.
>
> An interview with John's family fails to reveal the presence of any of the female portion of Chinese humanity, and we doubt much if any lovely woman have yet made their appearance in our Southern country. However, the "heathen" is so thoroughly a domestic animal that housekeeping suffers none per consequence of the absence of the fair ones.
>
> In New York, where certain Chinese engage in the selling of cigars on the banquettes in front of the city parks, the street Arabs have contracted a vicious habit of playing jokes upon them; one of which consists in a party slipping behind the iron fence, and tying the Chinaman's pig tail thereto, thus entailing the most unpleasant consequences when he attempts to change his spot. Let the New Orleans John take warning. However we wish the Celestials all success, and have no doubt that in the course of time they will contribute much to the prosperity of our city. Good-bye John.[542]

Lucy M. Cohen, citing 1880 census data, characterized the ninety-five Chinese living in New Orleans that year (there were 489 in Louisiana) as a segment of the city's white immigrant society, primarily comprising single men residing in boarding houses and apartments. Less than a dozen were married at one point or another, and only two wedded Chinese women; the others chose spouses representative of New Orleans' ethnic mix. The most common occupations related to laundering, making or selling cigars, and cooking, but many other vocations were listed and no one predominated. At this time, "there was no tightly knit 'Chinatown' in New Orleans such as existed in the urban centers of San Francisco and New York," noted Cohen. "The stores and other business establishments owned by the Chinese were not close to their residences."[543] The lack of geographical cohesion derived from the small size of the Chinese community, its highly transient nature, and the extreme lack of Chinese women. Nevertheless, by the mid-1870s, we see early evidence of a Chinese presence in the Third Ward neighborhood that would eventually flourish as New Orleans' Chinatown for the next half-century. It came in the form of the Loung Sing Laundry at 41 South Rampart (present-day 160 South Rampart, recently demolished), recorded in the *Soard's City Directory* of 1874 and depicted in the Sanborn Insurance Map of 1876. Two other Chinese laundries operated nearby, at 117 and 153 Carondelet. The 1880 census for the area bounded by Canal, Baronne, Julia, and South Liberty lists four Chinese-born males in their twenties, possibly brothers, working in the aforementioned laundry at 41 South Rampart. A few blocks away lived a shoemaker named Chee Wo Sing, a bookkeeper named John Ali, and a laundryman named Wing Sing, all born in China, all twenty-five to thirty years old, and all living in ethnically mixed blocks. Unlike earlier censuses, which listed Asians as whites, these immigrants were racially categorized as Chinese. Their white neighbors were mostly American-born, though some hailed from Ireland, Germany, and England. Their neighbors of African ancestry were listed as either mulattos or black.[544] By 1882, there were thirteen new Chinese-owned laundries in the city, of which two were located in the general confines of future Chinatown, another two nearby in what we now call the Central Business District, and the remaining nine across Canal Street, in the French Quarter.[545]

The Emergence of Chinatown

In 1881-1882, a Maine-born missionary from Boston named Lena Saunders, recently arrived to New Orleans and teaching at the Freedmen's School, began offering classes in English, American culture, and Christianity in her home to a group of five Chinese immigrants. The popularity of the classes caught the attention of the Canal Street Presbyterian Church, which in 1882 incorporated the effort as part of its mission to foreigners. As the costs of sponsoring the charitable effort grew, the Presbytery of New Orleans took over responsibility for the mission, funding it at $600 a year. Miss Saunder's Chinese Sunday school had become an officially sponsored Chinese Mission in New Orleans.[546] At this time, the Canal Street Presbyterian Church worshipped in a circa-1872 edifice at the corner of Canal and Derbigny, but its previous home—when it was known as the Fourth Presbyterian Church—was a much grander church on the corner of South Liberty and Gasquet (present-day Cleveland, between Canal Street and Tulane Avenue), built in 1860.[547] It was next to

[542] "John Chinaman."
[543] Cohen, *Chinese in the Post-Civil War South*, 137.
[544] 1880 census, enumeration districts 19 and 20, as transcribed by Patricia Ann Fenerty and Patricia White Fernandez, *1880 Cencus of New Orleans*, vol. 3 (New Orleans, 1993), 3:93-239, esp. 93, 108, 112, 116.
[545] Sanborn Insurance Maps of 1876; *Soard's City Directory of 1874, 1876, and 1882*. Chinese businesses were identified by name in earlier directories; the entries were not categorized under "Chinese" as they would be in later years.
[546] February 12, 1882, is the founding date of the Chinese Mission, according to the modern-day Chinese Presbyterian Church.
[547] Canal Street Presbyterian Church, *100 Years Canal Street Pesbyterian Church New Orleans, La., 1847-1947* (New Orleans, 1947), 10-15.

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This early-1900s detail of the Chinatown area (at center, looking up Tulane Avenue) captures the Presbyterian Church (steeple at upper right center) and the Chinese Mission to its immediate left. *Southeastern Architectural Archive, Special Collections, Howard-Tilton Library, Tulane University.*

this building that Miss Saunders rented a property for the Chinese Mission, a large, 77x120-foot American-style center-hall raised cottage with an airy gallery and twin domestic quarters, numbered as 40 South Liberty according to the old address system and later 215 South Liberty. It was a "roomy old house ideal for teaching purposes, with its large rooms offering adequate space for classes of any size, and for entertaining of groups large and small. There were rooms where the scholars could have [a] 'home away from home....'"[548] The Presbytery of New Orleans later purchased the house and three lots for $2520, making it the permanent home of the Chinese Mission.[549] The pier-supported structure was later raised even higher for the installation of a ground-floor room used as a chapel, giving it an imposing street elevation.

Lena Saunder's mission served over 200 Chinese and other Asians (the first convert was "Corean") in the mid-1880s and became the hub of the transient Chinese community in the Crescent City—a place to feel welcome, learn English, and be among friends. "Find the school at 40 Liberty Street," advised a returned Chinese immigrant to his New Orleans-bound brother in 1887, "and go every week;" he listened, "having attended every session since his arrival."[550] Visitors included Chinese merchants en route from California and cities in the South and Caribbean, field laborers returning to New Orleans, and Chinese New Orleanians setting down roots in their adopted home. Some students even formed a Chinese Society of the King's Sons, a benevolent organization to help brethren in need. (One Chinese Mission student was ten-year-old Lee Bing, brought to New Orleans by his father in 1913. The Lee family would later open a laundry in Algiers and then at 1132 Carondelet Street, where the parents and six children "lived in the back room that barely held two double beds and a single canvas cot." One of those children would become one of the most popular public figures in the region today. Jefferson Parish Sheriff Harry Lee, born in 1932, recalls visiting Chinatown many times as a child, and even lived there briefly in 1941, after the merchants had left for Bourbon Street.[551])

Lena Saunders' tireless work in establishing the Chinese Mission in New Orleans was matched by her vocal opposition against the Chinese exclusion laws of 1882-1892, which not only severely restricted immigration of persons of Chinese descent but curtailed the rights of those already arrived. The laws also started a thriving trade in smuggling Chinese immigrants into the country, particularly to the labyrinthine Louisiana coast.[552] Passage of the exclusion laws crushed Miss Saunders; she fell into ill health, died in a mental hospital in 1896, and was mourned by over one hundred Chinese as she was laid to rest in Metairie Cemetery.[553]

In establishing the Chinese Mission, Miss Saunders unwittingly helped make the Third Ward neighborhood near 215 South Liberty, at the fringes of the business district immediately upriver from Canal Street, the geographical hub of the Chinese community. In 1900, the *Times-Democrat* estimated that 150-175 Chinese, representing roughly 25 to 30 percent of New Orleans' Chinese community, received

[548] Walter Dale Langtry, *Chinese Presbyterian Church of New Orleans, 1882-1982* (1982), 50-51.
[549] Ibid., 15.
[550] *Southwestern Presbyterian*, October 20, 1887, as quoted by ibid., 24.
[551] Personal communication, Sheriff Harry Lee, June 16, 2004, and June 14, 2005; Betsy Peterson, "Inside the Chinese Community," *The Courier*, November 8-14, 1973.
[552] Will A. Branan, "The Dual Life of Chinatown," *Daily Picayune*, August 14, 1910.
[553] Cohen, *Chinese in the Post-Civil War South*, 137-40.

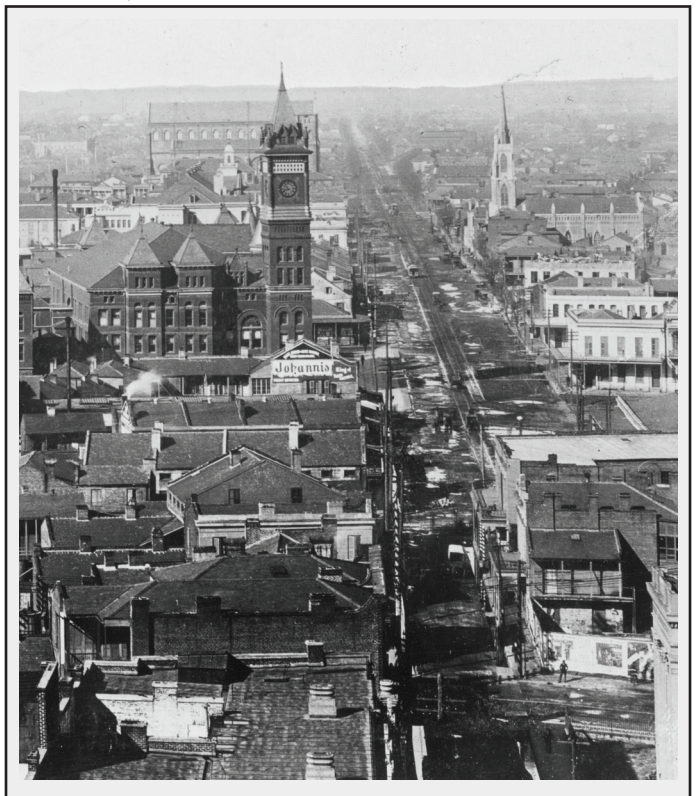
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instruction at the Chinese Mission.[554] Others not enrolled in classes nevertheless visited the mission as a kind of community social center. Newspaper articles of the day referred to the "Chinese colony" of the South Liberty Street/Tulane Avenue area, a reference not just to the Chinese Mission but the Chinese community growing up around it. Other churches sponsored classes and evangelism for the New Orleans Chinese community, including the Coliseum Baptist Church, Lafayette Presbyterian Church, Methodist missions on St. Charles and on Carondelet, and the First Baptist Church.[555] But the Presbyterians' operations on South Liberty Street was the original and biggest, and attracted the largest number of Chinese newcomers to its neighborhood.

An institutional hub is one factor that helps form ethnic enclaves; families are another. A woman named E.P. Radford, who took over the Chinese Mission in 1894 after Saunder's incapacitation, helped transform a transient group of Chinese males into a permanent community of residents when she escorted a Chinese woman from San Francisco to be a bride in the Chinese Mission's first marriage. "This was the beginning of the trend that made the [Chinese Presbyterian Church] possible, the permanence of the Chinese presence in New Orleans."[556] Earlier years had seen primarily young men arriving to make money and return to the homeland, an instinct so strong that the bodies of those who died here were shipped back to China. "But when families began to be established, the end of that custom was bound to come. [New Orleans] now would eventually be 'home.'"[557] Because of the Chinese exclusion laws, women of Chinese descent usually came to New Orleans from other American cities, primarily San Francisco.

As the Chinese Mission welcomed immigrants to its door, it also exposed them to its neighborhood, playing a critical role in the development of Chinatown. In 1886, for example, when there were fifty-seven laundries with Chinese names operating in the city, ten operated in the vicinity of the Chinese Mission and another eight were nearby—despite the fact that laundries were usually dispersed citywide for the convenience of their clientele.[558] Starting around 1892, the cluster known as Chinatown began to develop a core. In that year, On Yick & Co. and Yee Lee & Co. opened two grocery stores in what was then enumerated as 249 and 253 Tulane Avenue, next to where a Chinese laundry had operated a few years earlier.[559] (The modern address system was adopted in 1894, turning the 200 block of Tulane Avenue into the 1100 block. It was and remains a very short block, barely 150 feet between South Rampart Street and the Saratoga/Basin/Elk Place corridor on the odd-numbered downtown side, and twice that length on the even-numbered uptown side. Some street locations and names in this area have since been changed.) By 1895, the Soong Wolee merchandise store set up shop nearby at 1009 Tulane, and by 1898, three additional Chinese shops opened on the 1100 block, while the Jung Sing Long Co. relocated from the corner of Tulane and South Claiborne to 1112 Tulane. The Underwriters Inspection Bureau recorded fifty-eight Chinese-owned businesses in all of New Orleans in 1898 (forty-five laundries, twelve merchandisers, and one restaurant), of which fully sixteen were located on or within a block of 1100 Tulane. In 1900, seven Chinese markets, groceries, and merchandise shops filled the short block in its entirety.[560]

What did Chinatown look like? Period photographs of 1100 Tulane Avenue are exceedingly rare. I have found only a circa-1930s image in a *New Orleans States and Item* article, a 1911 interior shot of a Chinatown curio shop, some photographs of adjoining streets which partially cover Chi-



This circa-1902 detail, looking up Common Street as it widens into Tulane Avenue, captures Chinatown at center, on both sides of the first wide block of the avenue. The towering Criminal Courts Building (1893) overlooked the bustling intersection. *Southeastern Architectural Archive, Special Collections, Howard-Tilton Library, Tulane University.*

[554] "Chinese Missions: Curiously Interesting Branch of Local Religious Work," *Times-Democrat*, February 15, 1900, p. 3, col. 5.
[555] Ibid.
[556] Langtry, *Chinese Presbyterian Church of New Orleans, 1882-1982*, 36.
[557] Ibid., 36.
[558] *Soard's City Directory of 1886*. One of New Orleans' first Chinese restaurants, Kee Sing, was located on the present-day 200 block of Dauphine in this year. This may have been the eatery that Lafcadio Hearn wrote about in 1883: "There is still in the oldest portion of the oldest quarter of New Orleans a certain Manila restaurant hidden away in a court, and supported [by] Spanish West Indian sailors.... The *menu* is printed in Spanish and English; the fare is cheap and good. Now it is kept by Chinese..." Hearn lived near the Chinese Mission and once tried to learn Chinese from a local restaurant owner; he would later achieve worldwide fame for his writings explaining Japanese culture to the West. S. Frederick Starr, *Inventing New Orleans: Writings of Lafcadio Hearn* (Jackson, 2001), xiv and 89.
[559] *Soard's City Directory of 1893*; Sanborn Insurance Maps of 1885-1886.
[560] Based on analysis of Underwriters Inspection Bureau of New Orleans street rate slips (1897) and *Soard's City Directories of 1880, 1883, 1887, 1890, 1893, 1895, 1898*, and *1903*, under sections for Fancy and Variety Stores, Grocers, Laundries, and other categories. Chinese shops were identified by name and by specific mention in ancillary sources of the era.

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natown, a sketch in a 1950 Coca-Cola ad, and some low-elevation aerial photographs taken in the 1920s.[561] They show, on the downriver side of the block, a one-story, seven-unit, market-like structure with a low hip roof and an oversized parapet adorned with dentils. According to the Coca-Cola ad—admittedly not a particularly reliable record—the word CHINATOWN was spelled out on the roof, visible to shoppers on Tulane Avenue. Its most distinctive feature was its wrap-around permanent awning, which gave the block the pavilion-like appearance of a market. Inside was a solid line of Chinese grocers specializing in their unique foodstuffs and merchandise. It was not, however, a municipal stall market. The upriver side of 1100 Tulane was a bit less cohesive, comprising about ten units in seven irregularly shaped storehouses of one to two stories. Most structures on the block appeared to date from the late antebellum age or from the decade following the war. Chinatown at the turn of the century thus comprised a small but dense core along 1100 Tulane Avenue—the only place where a genuine wall-to-wall Chinese streetscape prevailed—adjoined by a lower-density cluster of Chinese-related institutions, businesses, and upper-story residences in the blocks embraced by Tulane, South Rampart, Canal, and South Liberty. There were, of course, no hard boundaries to the district; one modern source described the district as "amoeba-shaped," for its sundry components scattered between the markets of 1100 Tulane and the Chinese Mission of 215 South Liberty.[562] Others, such as the *Times-Picayune* in 1920, restricted it to the core zone: "Squatting dingily along Tulane Avenue, between South Rampart and Saratoga streets, Chinatown extends on both sides of its one block of existence," although the article later acknowledged the influence of the nearby Chinese Mission.[563] One *Daily Picayune* article in 1910 alluded to the amorphous shape of the enclave as well as its residential perimeter:

> Chinatown, as it is commonly called, is clustered at the foot of Elk's Place, in the vicinity of police headquarters [present-day site of the New Orleans Public Library], and a round-up would reveal there types of the Oriental as "peculiar" as any ever dreamed of..., from the rich Tulane Avenue merchant, who has waxed prosperous through the bondage system [payments to sponsors by immigrants smuggled in illegally], to the most efficient gun-man of the largest tong [a clan of families]. And just down the avenue, and around the corner in South Franklin Street, lives little Mrs. Fung John and her brood of five children....[564]

According to the Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps of 1908-1909 and city directories of that time, the Chinese colony in this thoroughly interracial neighborhood included a Chinese Club House (home at times to the Chinese Mission House as well as the anti-Manchu Dynasty Chee Gung Tong organization[565]) at 145 Elk Place; a Chinese restaurant directly across the street at 156-158 Elk Place, another at 164 South Rampart, and a "Chinese and American Restaurant" around the corner at 1204 Canal; a Chinese laundry at the corner of South Villere and Canal; and the aforementioned merchants of 1100 Tulane. These businesses were scattered within two to three blocks of the Chinese Mission and School at 215 South Liberty.[566] The year 1916 stands out as one of the peak years of New Orleans' Chinatown, when fifteen institutions and businesses were recorded in various sections of the *Soard's City Directory* of the following year:[567]

- Chinese Mission Presbyterian Church, 215 South Liberty
- Chinese Mission Presbyterian School, 215 South Liberty
- Chinese National League, 207 South Rampart
- Chinese Republican Association, 145 South Basin
- Gu Hen & Young Co., Grocer, 1113 Gasquet (Cleveland) Street
- Jung Sing Long & Co., Grocer, 1112 Tulane Avenue
- Kee Nau Him & Co., Grocer, 1113 Tulane Avenue
- Ben Hong Low, Chinese Restaurant, 156 South Basin Street (Elk Place)
- On Yick & Co. Grocer, 1107 Tulane
- Quan Chang & Co., Grocer, 1108 Tulane Avenue

[561] Herman Drezinski, "Rubble All that Remains of Old N.O. Chinatown," *New Orleans States and Item*, December 13, 1958, p. 9; "New Orleans' Chinese Captains of Industry," *Daily Picayune*, July 2, 1911, p. 14; and Coca-Cola advertisement, *Times-Picayune/New Orleans States*, October 15, 1950, sec. 7, 12.

[562] New Orleans Jazz Commission, *New Orleans Jazz History Walking Tours: Business District/Back O'Town* (2000), pamphlet.

[563] "Chinatown of New Orleans Fast Becoming Americanized," *Times-Picayune*, January 11, 1920, p. 16.

[564] Branan, "The Dual Life of Chinatown."

[565] "Only Chinese Temple Here Is Rich in Decorations," *Daily Picayune*, June 25, 1906, p. 8. I thank Mark Tullis for bringing this article to my attention.

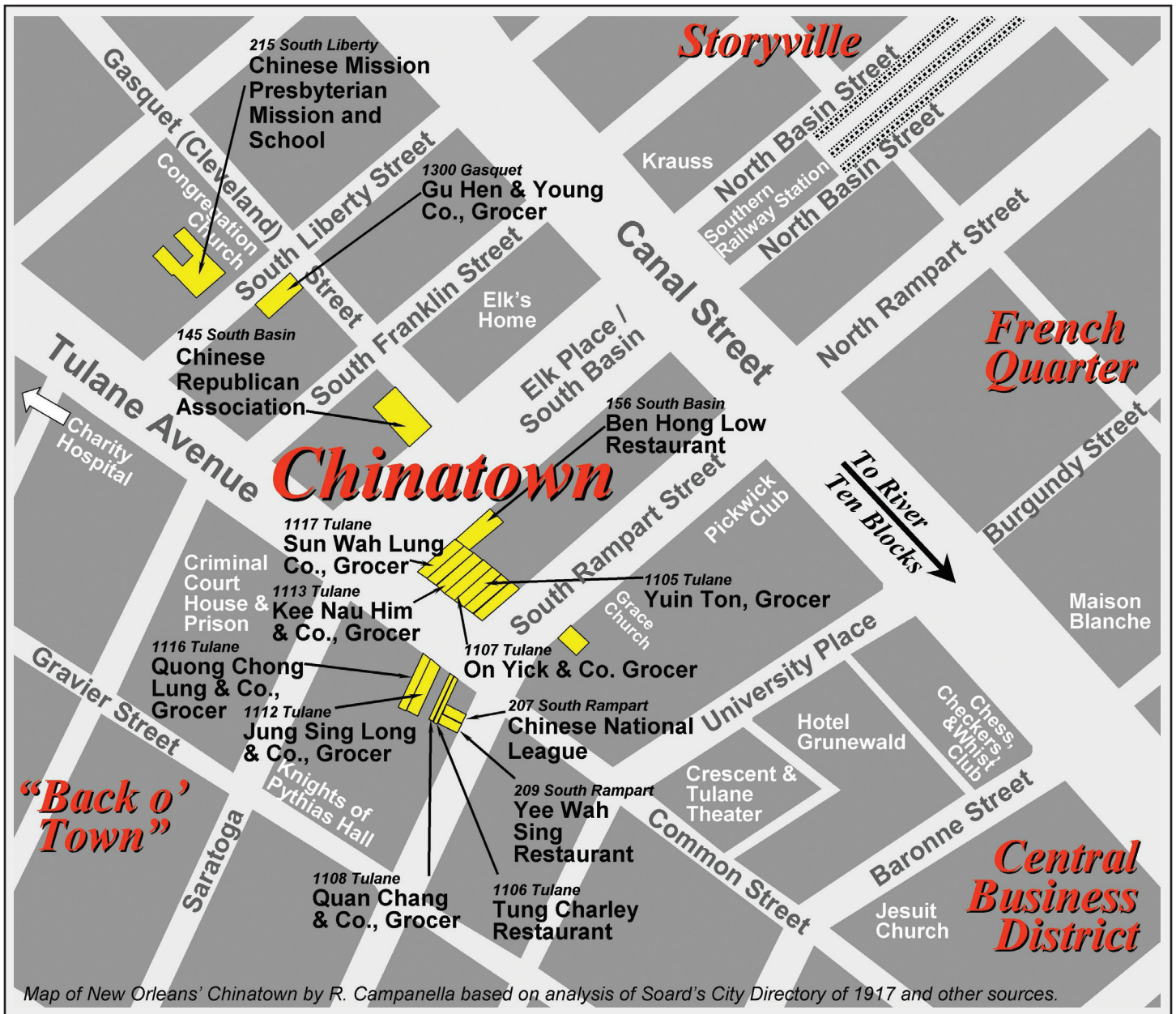
[566] Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, 1908-1909; and *Soard's City Directory of 1910*.

[567] *Soard's City Directory of 1917*. Some listing appeared under the "Grocers" section; others were under "Restaurants," still others were listed by name in the main alphabetical section. In other years, the "Fancy and Variety Goods" section records some Chinese businesses.



Had the photographer tilted his camera slightly downward, this 1909 panoramic image would have captured Chinatown perfectly. The roof of the main Chinatown market structure is visible at extreme bottom left center, between Basin and South Rampart streets. Storyville appears in the distant upper left. *Courtesy Library of Congress.*

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Map of New Orleans' Chinatown by R. Campanella based on analysis of Soard's City Directory of 1917 and other sources.

New Orleans' Chinatown emerged in the 1870s and rose in earnest in the 1880s, when missionary Lena Saunders started a Chinese Mission at the nearby Canal Street Presbyterian Church. The operation exposed Chinese immigrants to this area, which afforded retail economic opportunities and reasonable rent. Chinatown lasted until 1937, when its core structures were demolished. *Map and analysis by author based on 1917 City Directory.*

- Quong Chong Lung & Co., Grocer, 1116 Tulane Avenue
- Sun Wah Lung Co., Grocer, 1117 Tulane Avenue
- Tung Charley, Chinese Restaurant, 1106 Tulane Avenue
- Yee Wah Sing, Chinese Restaurant, 209 South Rampart Street
- Yuin Ton, Grocer, 1105 Tulane Avenue

Chinatown was also, to a degree, a residential neighborhood, with some households residing above or near the store, and others settling here but working elsewhere. Hing L. King operated a Chinese restaurant at 240 North Franklin in the Faubourg Tremé, but lived at 150 South Basin in Chinatown. Chin Chou Poo managed the well-known Fou Loy & Company Chinese merchandise shop at 339 Chartres, founded in 1871 as the first store of its type in the city, but lived at 1128 Tulane Avenue, in Chinatown's "main drag."[568] Those Chinese who came of age overseas often continued to wear their traditional garb, speak their native tongue, and practice homeland customs, while their locally born offspring adopted the language, dress, and practices of the only environs they knew. Some elders refrained from donning their kimonos in public for the curious attention they drew, and the sight soon disappeared from the streets. So too did the "pig tails," which caused local journalists endless amusement in the early years. As is often the case in cultural assimilation, food preferences proved to be among the most tenacious customs. "Most of the Chinese cling to their native dishes, even when they discard Oriental costume. Rice is their staple food, in season and out, but fish, birds, and other delicacies are imported from China. They drink tea as Americans do water."[569] The growth

[568] *Soard's City Directory of 1917.*
[569] Branan, "The Dual Life of Chinatown."

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The main Chinatown structure at 1100 Tulane Avenue is visible to the left of the turning streetcar at the center left of this 1920s aerial photograph. South Rampart Street, which runs horizontally through the middle of this scene, was lined with Jewish-owned shops catering to an African American clientele. *Southeastern Architectural Archive, Special Collections, Howard-Tilton Library, Tulane University.*

of the community, which totaled around 400 in the city in the early 1900s, was continually held back by a lack of Chinese women: there were only five married Chinese women recorded in New Orleans in 1910. According to one outside observer, "Chinese wives are treated with the utmost consideration, and they are overindulgent in the treatment of their children."[570]

Chinatown's denizens voiced their politics through organizations such as the Chinese National League at 207 South Rampart and the Chinese Republican Association at 145 South Basin. In that latter location convened perhaps the most exotic entity in the district. There, "in the heart of New Orleans," as the *Daily Picayune* proclaimed dramatically in 1906, "the very center of a great modern city, where western civilization has reached its highest development, 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." This was the headquarters of the Chee Gung Tong, the revolutionary organization advocating the philosophy of Sun Yat-Sen, the religion of Ming Chow, and the toppling of the Manchu Dynasty. The upper floor of this building, at the present-day corner of Cleveland and Elk Place, contained a magnificently appointed temple, which the local newspaper described as "dedicated to the worship of heathen dieties" and "constructed along the lines of barbaric picturesqueness."[571] A block and a half away, at South Rampart and Tulane, convened the local branch of the Bow Wung Wei, an organization of Chinese expatriots established in numerous large Western cities and dedicated to spreading reformism in China. Most of New Orleans' Chinese community, including both the Chee Gung Tong and the Bow Wung Wei, supported reform in the homeland, hoping "soon to see the land of their birth take her place among nations as the leading paternal government of the world."[572] In front of the shops on 1100 Tulane, recalled a newspaper many 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."[573] Chinatown also had merchant's associations, fraternal organizations and clubs, and even a cremation society.

As the 1890s witnessed the development of the heart of Chinatown, it also saw Chinese immigrants and migrants citywide rise from the status of boarding-house transients to find their niche in the local society and economy. In other Southern cities, that niche was grocery stores and food preparation, but perhaps because Sicilians and other groups had locks on those markets, Chinese families in New Orleans found their specialization in, according to one observer in 1910, "the fascinating pursuit of other people's clothes for the purpose of cleaning them—for a nominal charge."[574] Hand laundering—the ubiquitous Chinese laundry—was demanded everywhere in this fashion-conscious town, with all its social and business functions; all one needed was the smallest of capital outlays for a specialized iron,[575] a board, washing equipment, and a roof overhead—which could double as a home. Chinese domination of the hand laundering market was predicted as early as 1871, when Chinese first began to settle in the city in significant numbers. "The peculiar *forte* of the Chinaman," wrote the *New Orleans Times*,

> is that of laundryman. In this particular branch of trade he excels to a remarkable degree, and in San Francisco, where Chinamen abound, there are hundreds of laundries, which, through the extreme neatness and scientific attainments of that race, have almost exclusive control of the washing trade of the city.... The versatile talent of the Chinaman is well known, and it would not surprise us to soon see that festive individual... becoming a fixed institution in New Orleans, even as he is in other cities.[576]

The journalist was right: the 1876 city directory recorded two laundries with Chinese names. That number rose to thirteen Chinese laundries in the 1882 directory, fifty-seven in the 1886 directory (which also recorded possibly New Or-

[570] Ibid.
[571] "Only Chinese Temple Here Is Rich In Decorations."
[572] "Chinese for Reform: Local Colony Follows the Example of Other Cities," *Daily Picayune*, January 14, 1907, p. 4, col. 4.
[573] William H. Fitzpatrick, "City Chinatown Shifted as Aged Buildings Razed," *Times-Picayune*, September 21, 1937, p. 1.
[574] Branan, "The Dual Life of Chinatown."
[575] "Instead of a flat iron, [the Chinese use] an implement the exact counterpart of what housekeepers term a "spider," and this, filled with coals, is moved to and fro over the garment, while John ever and anon sprinkles the same by sending a fine spray of water through his teeth, which operation, though strange to the uninitiated, is yet most entertaining to behold." "John Chinaman."
[576] Ibid.

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leans' first Chinese restaurant, Kee Sing, at 29 Dauphine), and seventy-three in the 1892 directory, which listed three Chinese restaurants. By 1898, those numbers more than doubled to eight restaurants and 198 laundries.[577] So well did the Chinese control the laundry business that the 1898 city directory listed them separately as "Chinese" laundries, as opposed to "Steam" laundries. Although steam laundries were larger operations requiring more capital and serving larger institutional clients (the Chalmette Laundry near Charity Hospital was one of the largest in the world), Chinese laundries outnumbered them that year by nearly seventeen-to-one. While eighteen of the 198 Chinese laundries (and four of the eight restaurants) operated in or near the Chinatown area in 1898, the vast majority—91 percent—were scattered throughout residential and commercial neighborhoods of New Orleans. In this pre-automobile age, a laundry had to be located within a convenient distance from its middle- and upper-middle-class clientele, but not too close to other competing laundries. So important was this need to spread out that one family might own a number of laundries distributed evenly along a single street. Early-1900s city directory listings for "Chinese Laundries" are replete with multiple listing of names like "Lee Sam," "Lee Sing," "Wah Sing," and "Hop Lee," each with various addresses. Since family members often lived near, above, or behind the laundry, the laundering industry geographically dispersed the Chinese community throughout New Orleans, particularly in uptown residential areas. For example, there were in excess of three times more Chinese laundries on Magazine Street in 1898 than there were in Chinatown[578] (see map, *Chinese New Orleans, Circa 1900*).

Chinese New Orleanians went to Chinatown for social and institutional functions, for specialty items from the homeland, for laundering supplies and equipment, and for Chinese food, both from the markets and prepared in restaurants. A Tulane Avenue grocer would stock "the queer Chinese wares, the embroideries, the tiny sandals, the dried shrimps, the jars of fiery confections and preserves" over which hung "a sinister atmosphere, to the foreigner."[579] Not so sinister: New Orleanians of all backgrounds regularly visited the district for Chinese merchandise, exotic foodstuffs and lunch plates. The Yee Wah Sen Restaurant on South Basin, for example, catered to both the "toughest specimens of the underworld" and "respectable members of...polite society," serving both blacks and whites (in segregated seating), such that the "aristocrat...rubs elbows with the hoi polloi."[580] The curio shops specialized in linen, ivory, teak wood tables, silk kimonos, and mandarin coats popular with uptown debutants, but also offered "tom-toms, cymbals, [and] gongs"[581] for musicians, and narcotics for the denizens of nearby Storyville. 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 for delivery to Storyville were "opium, heroin, cocaine, laudanum, morphine, etcetera."[582] Opium in particular was offered in cans in a number of Chinese grocery stores, and was the target of occasional raids originating from the police station and ending up in the parish prison, both located diagonally across the intersection from Chinatown. Everyone from jazzmen to journalists knew about Chinatown, and used that moniker to refer to it: a headline in the *Daily Picayune* following the San Francisco earthquake read "CHINATOWN ANXIOUS About the Fate of Fellow Countrymen in Frisco." Others referred to

[577] Counts of laundries with Chinese names were conducted on the *Graham's City Directory of 1870* (when there were no Chinese laundries), and *Soard's City Directory of 1876, 1882, 1886, 1892*, and *1898*.

[578] *Soard's City Directory of 1898*, 968-69. There were twenty-six Chinese laundries with Magazine Street addresses, eight in the Chinatown area, and another ten near Chinatown. Jefferson Parish Sheriff Harry Lee's father, Lee Bing, recalled fifty-three Chinese laundries along the seventy-five or so blocks of Magazine Street, from Canal to Audubon Park, in 1913. Peterson, "Inside the Chinese Community."

[579] "Chinatown of New Orleans Fast Becoming Americanized," *Times-Picayune*, January 11, 1920, p. 16.

[580] "New Orleans' Chinese Captains of Industry," *Daily Picayune*, July 2, 1911, p. 14. I thank Mark Tullis for bringing this article to my attention.

[581] New Orleans Jazz Commission, *New Orleans Jazz History Walking Tours: Business District/Back O'Town* (2000).

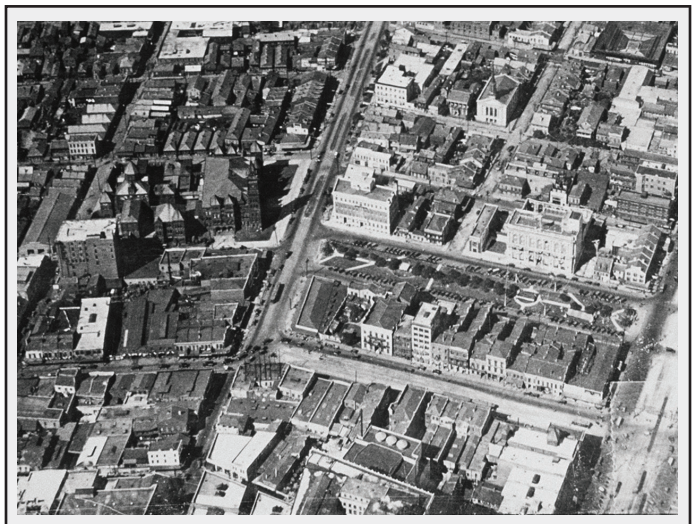
[582] As quoted in Alan Lomax, *Mister Jelly Roll: The Fortunes of Jelly Roll Morton, New Orleans Creole and "Inventor of Jazz"* (New York, 1950), 25.





Street-level photographs of Chinatown are exceedingly rare. This sketch of the main market building at 1100 Tulane Avenue comes from a nostalgic 1950 Coca-Cola ad. An International-style office building was built on the site in 1950; it now houses facilities for Hibernia Bank. *Coca-Cola sketch from the* Times-Picayune/New Orleans States*; photograph by author, 2004.*

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Two aerial perspectives of Chinatown in the 1920s: above, the main structure appears to the right of the streetcar at center; the Chinese Mission and former Presbyterian Church are visible in the upper right. All three structures are visible in the lower image, which also captures the Hibernia Bank cupola under construction. *Southeastern Architectural Archive, Special Collections, Howard-Tilton Library, Tulane University.*

the "Chinese colony" or specifically to "the Chinese shops on Tulane Avenue." [583]

Surrounding Chinatown were some of Victorian-era New Orleans' most fascinating back-of-town neighborhoods, home to working-class folk of all races and ethnicities living and working at the geographical backslope of the Crescent City. Along South Rampart Street, tangent to the heart of Chinatown, was a great number of tailor shops, clothing stores, jewelers, and other businesses owned by Orthodox Jews who catered to a predominantly black clientele. Nearby was the so-called "uptown district" of Storyville, a.k.a. "Black Storyville," a.k.a "the Battleground," counterpart to the much bigger and more famous red-light district located across Canal Street from 1897 to 1917.[584] On the corner of Gravier and Saratoga, only one block from Chinatown, stood the elegant Knights of Pythias Temple (1907), once the largest black-owned building in the nation. (It still stands today, at 234 Loyola, masked by a modern façade.) Dispersed throughout this area were important places associated with the emergence of jazz, particularly around the South Rampart/Perdido intersection, only two blocks from Chinatown.[585] Jazz musicians in their golden years, interviewed in the 1950s and 1960s, commonly recollected this general district, and much of the colorful lore from the early days of jazz are stories of this area. In a city famous for the bustling excitement of its street life, the sights, smells, and sounds of this back-of-town district must have been superlative. Louis Armstrong, born on nearby Jane Alley in 1901, reminisced warmly about the area (circa 1907) in his elder years:

> 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. I used to hear the Negroes braggin about their *Lead Beans* and *Lice*. That's the way a Chinese waiter would order it for you.... 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.[586]

Chinatown by the Numbers: The 1920 Census

A survey of the blocks bounded by Canal, South Rampart, Poydras, and South Liberty in the 1920 census reveals the presence of a clear and distinct Chinatown, but not a substantial Chinese residential neighborhood.[587] Only forty-eight of the 1,903 people living in this area were listed as Chinese "color or race," compared to 644 whites and 1,212 blacks or mulattos. This represents a decline from 1910, when there were eighty-five Chinese-lead households in this same area, most of them comprising single men (median age forty-five) living alone, of whom 89 percent were born in China and the remainder in California.[588] Among whites in 1920, there were significantly more Sicilians and Eastern European Jews than Chinese; the neighborhood as a whole was extraordinarily diverse and intermixed. Judging from the mother tongue of the individual's father, the non-Asian white community was 38 percent Italian (Sicilian), 12 percent Jewish (Yiddish speaking), 5 percent German, and 4 percent Spanish-speaking, with another 5 percent claiming French-, Irish-, British English-, Greek-, Hungarian-, Indian-, and Norwegian-speaking fathers. Only about one-third of the white community comprised English-speaking Americans with no recent immigrant history. The black population, which outnumbered whites two-to-one, lived mostly in

[583] "Chinatown Anxious About the Fate of Fellow Countrymen in Frisco," *Daily Picayune,* April 22, 1906, p. 4. See also May 3, 1906 (page 3) and January 8, 1907 editions of the *Daily Picayune*. A number of Chinese-Americans left homeless by the San Francisco earthquake of 1906 took refuge and eventually resettled in New Orleans' Chinatown. I thank Mark Tullis for bringing these articles to my attention.

[584] The black counterpart to Storyville was established in 1917, the same year Storyville proper was closed. This "Negro District" was bounded by Perdido, Franklin, Gravier, and Locust (Liberty) streets, a few blocks from Chinatown. Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration, *New Orleans City Guide* (Boston, 1938), 216.

[585] Donald M. Marquis, *In Search of Buddy Bolden: First Man of Jazz* (Baton Rouge and London, 1978), 49-52.

[586] Louis Armstrong, *Louis Armstrong in His Own Words: Selected Writings*, ed. Thomas Brothers (Oxford, England), 5-6.

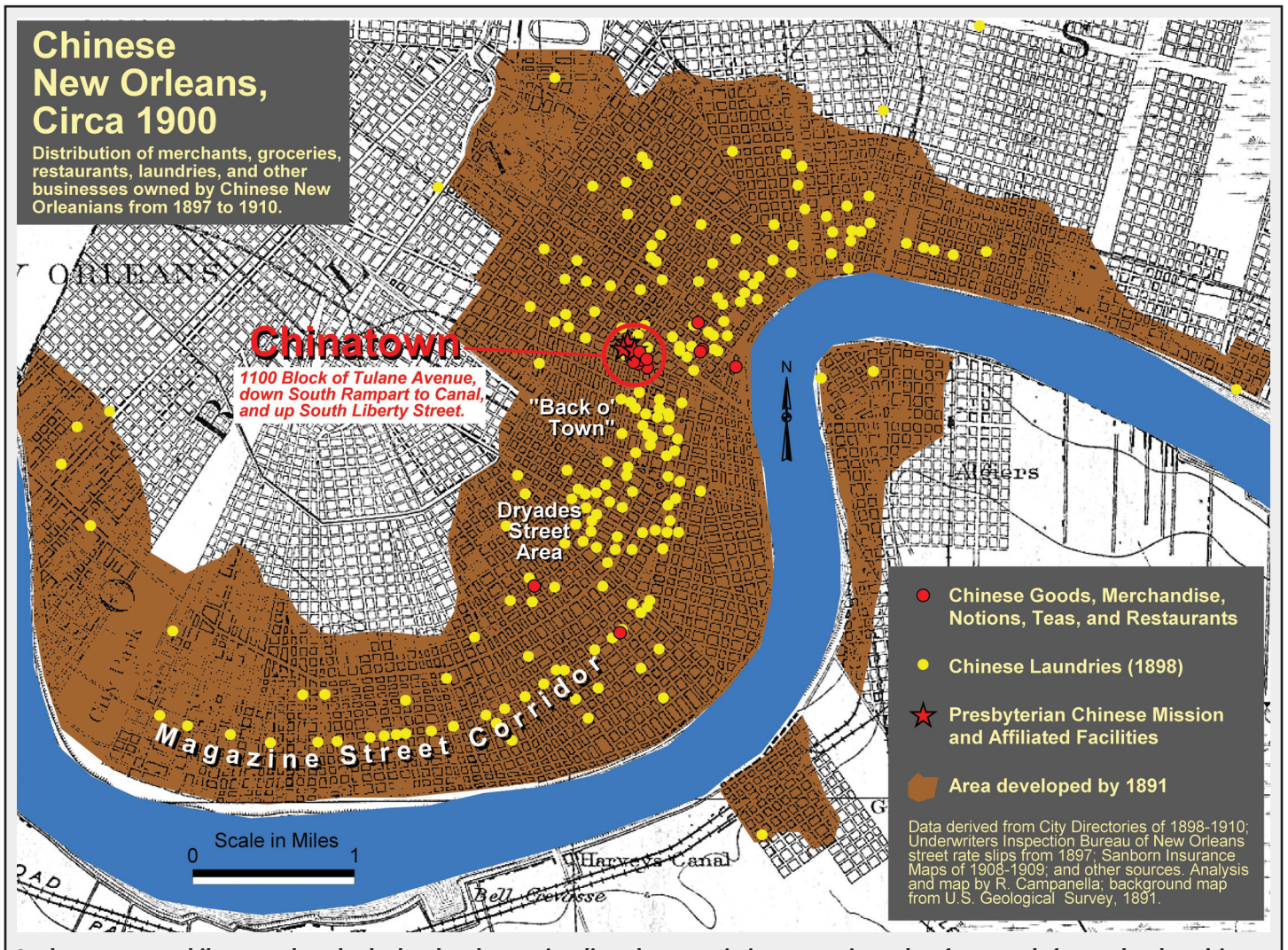
[587] Department of Commerce-Bureau of the Census. *Fourteenth Census of the United States: 1920—Population*, Enumeration Districts 31, 34, and 35. ED 31 was checked only for the river side of South Rampart and lake side of South Liberty; no Chinese residents were found on these streets.

[588] Based on analysis of digitally transcribed 1910 Census population schedules for Enumeration District 31 only, which covered from Canal to South Rampart to Poydras to South Liberty.

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the rear of the district, and was predominantly non-Creole in its ethnicity, with many born out-of-state. Despite their small (and likely undercounted) numbers, the forty-eight Chinese residents were tightly clustered around the 1100 block of Tulane Avenue. The census tells us that this population was:

- Overwhelmingly male and single. Only two adult Chinese women lived in the area, both married to Chinese men, mothers, and probably housewives. One Chinese man had a white wife; their five children were all classified as Chinese. Nineteen of the thirty-five adult men were single or widowed. Indeed, most young Chinese families lived elsewhere in the city, often in association with a laundry business. Chinatown, with its rough reputation and proximity to vice, was not an optimal place for young families.
- Not particularly young. Thirteen residents were in their forties; another twelve were in their fifties and sixties. Eleven were between twenty and thirty-nine, and an equal number were children, including some infants.
- Mostly Chinese-born and Chinese speaking. Only one adult man was born elsewhere, in California. Nine of the eleven children of the community were born in Louisiana; the others were born in China and California, suggesting their parents' recent arrival to New Orleans. Interestingly, there were no Chinese who were born in Cuba, or whose fathers were born in Cuba, indicating that the early post-Civil War waves of Cuban Chinese had departed the Chinatown area.
- Mostly alien in their status. Only two individuals provided to the census enumerator their years of immigration (1910 and 1914), which may reflect tensions involving the Chinese exclusion laws. None except the children could claim status as naturalized citizens. This indicates that the older Chinese population from the late 1880s had moved elsewhere.
- Generally literate. Almost all adults were able to read and write, but none save the children had attended school in the past year.
- Industriously employed. Of the thirty-four Chinese men in the area, all were employed, mostly by Chinese-owned enterprises. Twenty-one retailed Chinese mer-



In the pre-automobile age, a laundry had to be close to its clientele to maximize convenience but far enough from other laundries to minimize competition. Citywide dispersion was the solution. Since family members often lived near, above, or behind the laundry, the laundering industry geographically dispersed younger Chinese families throughout the city. Middle-aged single Chinese males, on the other hand, were more likely to cluster in Chinatown, usually to retail Chinese merchandise and groceries. *Map and analysis by author based on numerous sources.*

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chandise, groceries, or "notions," located mostly in Chinatown. Another seven worked in Chinese restaurants in the area, as owners, cooks, or cashiers. Three were seamen; two were launders (located on the periphery of the Chinatown area), and one worked as a Chinatown watchman.

- Living in circumstances of convenience. Many men—brothers, cousins, business partners, employees, employers—shared apartments; others boarded in group houses or with families. Not a single Chinese was a property owner; all were renters, a situation which would not bode well for the future of Chinatown.

Why There?

Younger Chinese with families in early twentieth-century New Orleans were more likely to disperse themselves throughout the city. This pattern can be explained by the nature of the laundering business. Middle-aged single Chinese males, on the other hand, were more likely to cluster in Chinatown, usually to retail Chinese merchandise and groceries. What explains the location of Chinatown? An analogy to seed, soil, and water aids in answering this question.

Chinatown's "seed" was the Chinese Mission. This was the institution that initially drew significant numbers of Chinese to this area, exposing them to a likely neighborhood and an even likelier locale to start a business. The Chinese Mission in turn was so located because its patron, the Canal Street Presbyterian Church, had operated in this general vicinity since 1860. While it is important to note that a few Chinese businesses existed in this area six to eight years *prior* to the founding of the Chinese Mission, a cluster did not really form until after the mission was operating.

Chinatown's "soil" was the abundance of reasonably priced, structurally appropriate commercial real estate in this section of the Third Ward. The area was close enough to downtown to maximize convenience, yet far enough away to remain economical. It was well within walking distance of the commercial, cultural, and political heart of New Orleans, yet close enough to the undesirable back-of-town to keep the rent down. The double lanes of electrified streetcars on South Rampart Street and Tulane Avenue connected it with the rest of the city; in fact, the Tulane Belt streetcar line looped immediately around the Chinese merchants of 1100 Tulane and connected them with all of uptown.[589] Chinese families operating laundries throughout the city could reach Chinatown for foodstuffs and laundry supplies by means of these urban railways. It was as good a place as any for a business-minded immigrant group to get its start—just as long as the "soil" was "watered."

The *water* that helped grow Chinatown was the steady stream of Chinese countrymen who visited the mission, and the greater stream who patronized the shops and institutions once Chinatown was established. When a critical mass was reached, Chinatown became its own "seed," and those Chinese migrants who came afterwards did so simply because other countrymen were already there. Additionally, and perhaps more significantly from an economic perspective, the local black community of the back-of-town, excluded by Jim Crow laws from visiting stores on Canal Street and elsewhere, provided an important customer base for Chinese shops and restaurants. (The WPA *New Orleans City Guide* described South Rampart Street as the "Harlem of New Orleans," and the area bordered by South Rampart, Claiborne, Canal, and Louisiana Avenue, which included Chinatown, as one of the most predominantly black sections of the city in the 1930s.[590]) In this sense, Chinatown shared the same

[589] Louis C. Hennick and E. Harper Charlton, *The Streetcars of New Orleans* (Gretna, 2000), 82-83, 99.
[590] Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration, *New Orleans City Guide*, 44, 343.



Traditional Chinese laundries are mostly gone from the New Orleans cityscape, victims of wash-and-wear clothing and changing tastes in apparel. Many laundry families reinvested in dry-cleaning enterprises and restaurants. Shown here is a laundry still operating in Tremé (left, photographed on Mardi Gras), a closed laundry on Freret Street (center), and a unique former laundry on Bayou Road and North Dorgenois. *Photographs by author, 2004.*

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commercial interface along South Rampart Street, between the predominantly white front-of-town and the mostly black back-of-town, that Jewish tailors and merchants occupied.

In sum, an enclave like Chinatown could have formed anywhere within the "immigrant belt," that medium-density, medium-priced, mixed commercial/residential zone that lay between the city's expensive, high-density commercial core and its residential perimeter.[591] This fascinating zone stretched loosely from the lower French Quarter and the Faubourg Marigny, through the Faubourg Tremé, through the Chinatown/back-of-town area, to Dryades Street, and around to the uptown-riverfront area known loosely as the Irish Channel.

"Strange, Wild, Picturesque:" The Asian Shrimp Dryers of the Louisiana Coast

Orbiting the Chinese community of New Orleans was a network of Asian shrimp dryers living and working in the remote saline marshes of coastal Louisiana. While shrimp canning had been practiced elsewhere for years, it was Louisiana's Asian immigrants in the Barataria Bay and the marshes of St. Bernard, Plaquemines, and Jefferson parishes who introduced the practice of shrimp drying here, producing a much cheaper and thus more popular product than the canned delicacy. The process involved boiling the crustaceans in salty water, then raking them upon a platform under the sun to dry. Members of the community would then wrap their feet in burlap and literally dance upon the thickly stacked shrimp to the rhythm of a chant, creating a motion that removed the heads and shells from the salted, dried catch. The final product was then packed 220 pounds to the barrel and shipped to New Orleans. The industry may date from the 1840s in Louisiana but grew in earnest in the 1870s, with the attention of a rice-plantation investor from San Francisco named Lee Yam and his son, Lee Yat. The son, by the early 1900s, owned over 700 acres of marsh plus platforms, dwellings, and warehouses. He employed as many as eighty people, ran some of the largest shrimp seines in the world, and oversaw his operation like a "feudal landlord."[592] Shrimp drying produced unique built environments—"stilt villages" built on wooden platforms—surrounded by an inhospitable natural world, a sight more reminiscent of southeast Asia than southeast Louisiana. One such community, Saint Maló in the wild eastern marshes of St. Bernard Parish, was described by Lafcadio Hearn in 1883 as "strange, wild, picturesque."[593] Another example was Manila Village, founded by Filipino and Chinese shrimp dryers in 1873 roughly twenty miles south-southeast of Lafitte.[594] This description of an unspecified community was written in 1899:

> Here on these low grass-covered islands, whose surface is scarcely above the sea level, lives this queer colony of Chinese shrimpers in fragile huts curiously constructed of palmetto, bamboo and other light material. Huge platforms are built over the entire surface of the islands about four feet above the water level. Around the outer edge of these structures are arranged the houses of the colonists forming what may be called "grand plazas." On these platforms all the work of the colony is done.... These ingenious mortals from the Flowery Kindgom have [also] made for themselves many fine gardens, which might very appropriately be likened to the "Hanging Gardens of Babylon." These consist of huge boxes filled with earth, elevated above the surface in the same manner as their houses, [in which are raised] Chinese pumpkins and other peculiar vegetables known only to the Celestials.[595]

Chinese predominated at the Bassa Bassa platform, while Filipinos and Chinese together operated at least ten other sites throughout what one ethnographer characterized as the "Asian Coast" of Barataria Bay.[596] While the fresh garden produce grown on the platforms sustained the Asian shrimpers, their dried catch was shipped to New Orleans for sale in Chinatown's grocery stores and for export worldwide. Around the turn of the century, several hundred Asian immigrants subsisted in this manner throughout southeastern Louisiana, roughly equal in size to the New Orleans Chinese population.

The Decline of Chinatown

One *Times-Picayune* journalist noticed in 1920 a cultural assimilation among the Chinese that, as it turned out, foretold Chinatown's decline. "The Chinatown of New Orleans is passing," he noted. "The honored ancestors...in the Flowery Land must stir in their sleep if they know how their descendents who crossed the world have taken up the language and customs and methods of their adopted country within the last few years." Chinese merchants acquired telephones, cash registers, and account ledgers to replace their abacuses. Children and entire families learned English at the Chinese Mission, and huddled around English textbooks while tending their Tulane Avenue shops. Opium and games of chance, once widespread, became as scarce in the district's shops as chopsticks 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."[597] 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

[591] Sociological article in 1949 described Chinatowns in America as "having no independent economic structure but attached symbiotically to the larger economic, political, and social base" of the host city. This relationship, in the era before suburbanization, usually meant a location at the fringes of downtown. Lee, "The Decline of Chinatowns in the United States," 423.

[592] "New Orleans' Chinese Captains of Industry," *Daily Picayune*, July 2, 1911, p. 14.

[593] Starr, *Inventing New Orleans: Writings of Lafcadio Hearn*, 86.

[594] Swanson, *Historic Jefferson Parish, From Shore to Shore*, 137-38.

[595] "A Chinese Colony On the Swampy Lands Bordering the Gulf, That Lives by Drying Shrimp," *Daily States*, November 12, 1899.

[596] Michael Caron, "The Chinese," *Mississippi Delta Ethnographic Overview* (Baton Rouge, 1979), 365.

[597] "Chinatown of New Orleans Fast Becoming Americanized," 16.

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When Chinatown was demolished in 1937, some merchants relocated to the French Quarter. For decades, a few Chinese retailers, restaurants, and laundries operated around the 500 block of Bourbon Street. Today, only the On Leong Chinese Merchants Association sign remains. *Photograph by author, 2004.*

throughout the city from 1898 to 1921 (perhaps due to market saturation), the Chinese merchants of 1100 Tulane Avenue remained integral, so much so that that city directories in the 1920s started to list them separately their own "Chinese goods" category. Many Chinese laundry operators would convene in Chinatown on Sunday mornings—the Sabbath of their Christian clients and thus an off day for them—to stock up on laundry supplies and catch up on news. In 1925, a shopper could browse and buy at Kwong Sang & Co. at 1105 Tulane, On Yick & Co. at 1107 Tulane, or Sun Wah Lung & Co. at 1117 Tulane, while across the street were Quong Wing On & Co. at 1108 Tulane and Lee Min Hing Co. at 1120 Tulane.[598]

In 1926, the Presbytery of New Orleans sold the 215 South Liberty property and moved the Chinese Mission to a double-gallery house at 223 South Roman Street. The new building was criticized by the congregation as an inferior structure in an undesirable location—perhaps reflecting the fact that such a move would extract the operation from the Chinatown area—but the money saved allowed for further investment in the mission. Concurrently, the Chinese American community rose from its status at the margins of New Orleans immigrant society to that of a native, stable middle-class. The citizens were now more mobile—economically, geographically, and literally, in the sense that automobiles increased their access to the suburbs—and less dependent on a downtown district to fulfill social and retail needs. The next few decades saw the easing of Chinese exclusion laws (an effect of the China/U.S. alliance against the common enemy of Japan in World War II), which increased Chinese immigration in general and slowly augmented the local Chinese community. Recent immigrants followed in the steps of the established Chinese American community—steps that led *away* from downtown, and away from Chinatown.

Although exact year-to-year counts are difficult because city directories used inconsistent categorization standards each year, the number of Chinese businesses in Chinatown remained fairly stable into the early 1930s—enough, in 1932, to warrant the local branch of the national On Leong Chinese Merchants Association at 1112 Tulane Avenue. But the aforementioned trends took their toll, and by 1937 only two remained. The final blow came in September 1937, when the main seven-unit section of Chinatown on the downtown side of 1100 Tulane was slated for demolition. Being renters rather than owners, the merchants of Chinatown were at the mercy of their landlords. "Chinatown is moving lock, stock, and herb barrel from Tulane avenue to the 500 and 600 blocks of Bourbon street," announced a front-page article in the *Times-Picayune*. On Monday, 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 between South Rampart street and Elk Place, because the shuttered stores are to be razed soon to make way for a parking lot."[599] After roughly sixty years in the Tulane Avenue area, the last Chinatown merchants relocated to start afresh in, of all places, the heart of Bourbon Street. On Yick & Company, Chinatown's first merchant from forty-five years earlier, moved to 605 Bourbon Street, next door to Tom Yuen's Chinese laundry. By 1938, only one Chinese-related entity, the Kuo Min Tang Association, remained in the former heart of Chinatown, at 1116 Tulane, across from the demolition site. Its neighbors on the block included a pharmacy, a dentist, and a physician—indicative of the growing medical-services industry that would soon encroach upon Chinatown and its surviving structures—not to mention a barber and a restaurant owned by Italians.[600] By the early 1940s, the last Chinese had left old Chinatown, and the district became a memory. Late in 1958, the razing of much of the upriver side of 1100 Tulane was recorded in a nostalgic article entitled "Rubble All that Remains of Old N.O. Chinatown."[601] Relocation, structural demolition, and socio-economic change put an end to New Orleans' Chinatown. It died because—to complete the seed-soil-water analogy—the "seed" (Chinese

[598] *Soard's City Directory of 1925*.

[599] Fitzpatrick, "City Chinatown Shifted as Aged Buildings Razed."

[600] Determined from inspections of various sections of *Soard's* city directories and *Polk's City Directory of 1917, 1922, 1927, 1932, 1938,* and *1942*, as well as earlier years.

[601] Drezinski, "Rubble All that Remains of Old N.O. Chinatown," 9.

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Mission) was relocated, the "soil" was destroyed (demolition of Chinatown structures and exodus of the area's working class), and the "water" (steady stream of local clientele) had evaporated. Reflecting the same geographical patterns of New Orleans' other ethnic communities, the Chinese American community gradually moved from urban New Orleans in general and from its downtown hub in particular, outwardly toward the inner suburbs, and thence to the outer suburbs. This is reflected in the movement of the Chinese Mission: in 1952, it moved from 223 South Roman Street at the residential fringes of downtown, to the Mid-City location of 2525 Bienville, where it built a modern church for $58,000. On February 13, 1957—seventy-five years and one day after its foundation by Lena Saunders—the Chinese Mission formally organized as the Chinese Presbyterian Church.[602] This Mid-City neighborhood deteriorated over the next three decades, forcing the relocation of most members to Jefferson Parish by the 1980s. The church followed them in 1997, moving to its fourth and current home—2901 West Esplanade Avenue in Kenner—in 115 years.

The "new Chinatown" on the 500-600 blocks of Bourbon Street started in late 1937, when Bourbon had its share of bars and jazz clubs but had not yet become the world-famous strip that World War II would make it. Even with the eventual complete dedication of the first nine blocks of Bourbon to nightlife tourism—or perhaps because of it—this tiny Chinatown lasted for a remarkably long time. There were rarely more than a half-dozen Chinese retailers, restaurants, and laundries, plus the On Leong Chinese Merchants Association, operating on or within one block of the 500 block of Bourbon. In a way, the On Leong Association, which "closely [bound] the city's Chinese businessmen together and through its social activities [preserved] some Eastern customs," unified the new Bourbon Street Chinatown as the Chinese Mission once bound together the Chinese in the old Tulane Avenue Chinatown.[603] Also on Bourbon was Dan's International Restaurant, which "helped to introduce Chinese cuisine to the city," started in 1946 by Young M. Gee, a Cantonese-born Chinese American just back from service in the Pacific.[604] There were six Chinese American-owned businesses around 500 Bourbon in 1970, five in 1980, and three in 1990. By 1993, only the On Leong Association remained.[605] It, too, was gone by the end of the 1990s, a decade which saw the folding of scores of local institutions and their replacement by tourism establishments. Though it was a fraction of the size and not nearly as culturally significant as the old Tulane Avenue Chinatown, the Bourbon Street enclave lasted almost the same length of time, about sixty years. The only apparent vestige today is the hand-painted "On Leong Chinese Merchants Association" lettering above a doorway at 530 Bourbon, neighbored by a tourist-oriented Cajun trinket shop and a Creole restaurant. The enclave did not escape the notice of Tennessee Williams, who once lived nearby at 722 Toulouse and probably patronized the shops. In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, 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."[606]



The last remaining structure of Chinatown is the two-story building at center, seen here with a white modern façade, on the uptown side of 1100 Tulane Avenue. Ironically, a Vietnamese-Chinese restaurant operates next to it. *Photograph by author, 2003.*

Shrimp-drying in the south Louisiana's "Asian Coast" also faded away during the early twentieth century, with refrigeration and other technologies sapping the demand for dried shrimp and hurricanes wiping away their stilt villages. Manila Village was probably the last best example of a shrimp-drying community, with its raised wooden shotgun-like houses built upon a network of wooden platforms and planks a few feet above brackish water and marsh grass. It was abandoned after Hurricane Betsy in 1965 and later destroyed by storms and coastal erosion. "The only evidence of the homes, camps and drying platforms [today] are two sets of pilings, rising above the water like bones from a graveyard."[607]

Gone too are the scores of Chinese laundries from the New Orleans streetscape, victims of wash-and-wear clothing and changing tastes in apparel. A few traditional operations still manage to hang on, but more often the only thing still hanging are the colorful old signs, over shuttered storefronts. Many laundry families reinvested in dry-cleaning enterprises and the restaurant business, and carry on successfully today in the suburbs.

Chinatown Today

Chinese American New Orleanians, those with deep roots in the city as well as those who arrived after the repeal of Asian exclusion laws in 1965, now live throughout suburban New Orleans. The 2000 census enumerated 3,581

[602] Langtry, *Chinese Presbyterian Church of New Orleans, 1882-1982*, 93-96.
[603] Elsie Brupbacher, "Kipling Was Wrong: N.O. Chinese Blend East With West," *New Orleans States*, December 12, 1953, p. 14.
[604] "Young M. Gee, Owner of Chinese Restaurants," *Times-Picayune*, Thursday, June 10, 2004, B4.
[605] Based on *Polk's City Directory of 1971, 1981, 1991, 1994,* and *1999*.
[606] Tennessee Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire* (New York, 1947), 55.
[607] Bob Marshall, "Village Lives On, For Now," *Times-Picayune*, May 20, 2005, D8.

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Old Chinatown is today the most utterly obliterated of New Orleans' historic ethnic enclaves. *Photograph by author, 2003.*

people of Chinese ancestry in the seven-parish metropolitan area, mostly dispersed in a pattern generally reflecting the larger white population. They are concentrated most heavily in Jefferson Parish, and particularly in a Metairie census tract (with 154 Chinese residents) near the West Esplanade Avenue/Division Street intersection. Together with 14,863 people of Vietnamese ancestry; 3,800 residents from India; 2,370 Filipinos; 1,204 Koreans; and 707 Japanese, these Chinese New Orleanians form the region's growing and increasingly influential Asian American community.[608] In 2003, plans were even in place for a new Chinatown of thirty stores, a large restaurant, and an Asian Market, at 925 Behrman Highway in Algiers.[609] Old Chinatown, meanwhile, is today the most utterly obliterated of New Orleans' historic ethnic enclaves. The reason: it had the misfortune of being located precisely between modern New Orleans' two most dynamic economic districts. On one side is the Central Business District, which experienced extensive demolition and new construction from the 1950s to the end of the oil boom in the 1980s. On the other side is the expansive "medical district" along Tulane Avenue, consisting of vast research, teaching, and care facilities affiliated with numerous institutions. Add to this the demand for parking space and the lack of historic-district protection for this area and, structurally speaking, Chinatown did not stand a chance. Not only have the original Chinese Mission and the adjacent circa-1860 Presbyterian Church been demolished, but their entire block on South Liberty—street and all—is also gone, subsumed by Tulane University Medical Center. The castle-like Criminal Courts Building that dominated this area since 1893 was demolished in 1949; its site is now partially occupied by the main branch of the New Orleans Public Library. Major arteries have been widened, and street names have been changed.



Lena Saunders' Chinese Mission at 215 South Liberty helped form Chinatown by exposing scores of Chinese immigrants and transients to the area. They walked down this street, past the circa-1860 Presbyterian Church, to attend Miss Saunder's classes. The entire block has since been subsumed by the Tulane University Medical Center. *Photograph by author, 2002.*

Starting in 1957, the Tulane/South Rampart/Loyola/Elk Place intersection was reengineered to accommodate the widened streets and increased traffic, reducing the widths of former Chinatown's broad sidewalks. All but a handful of surviving nineteenth-century buildings have been cleared away, replaced by functional modern medical structures and office buildings. At the obtusely angled corner of South Rampart and Common streets stands, in partial demolition,[610] a series of late nineteenth-century Italianate commercial structures that housed Chinese and Jewish occupants a century ago. A building next to them—160 South Rampart, recently demolished—was the site of the Loung Sing Laundry, recorded in the *Soard's City Directory of 1874* and the Sanborn Insurance Map of 1876 as perhaps the earliest Chinese establishments in what would become Chinatown.[611] The parking lot

[608] Joan Treadway and Coleman Warner, "East Meets West," *Times-Picayune*, August 6, 2001, A1-7. The concentration in the Metairie census tract is partially explained by its proximity to Grace King High School, whose "academic reputation attracts many Chinese."

[609] Joe Mensch, "Chinatown Planned for West Bank," *Times-Picayune*, July 31, 2002, B3; Tina Soong, "Modern Chinatown is Setting Up Shop," *Times-Picayune*, May 22, 2003, Downtown Picayune section, 5A2.



At South Rampart and Common stood this late nineteenth-century Italianate-style commercial building, home to Chinese and Jewish occupants a century ago. It was demolished in 2004. An adjacent building at 160 South Rampart was once the site of the Loung Sing Laundry, possibly the earliest Chinese establishment of Chinatown. *Photograph by author, 2003.*

[610] These buildings were finally destroyed on August 30, 2004.

[611] Proposed demolition of these last structures became a controversial issue in 2000-2001. Asked Shaie-Mei Temple in a brochure by Operation Lotus Roots entitled *Discovering the Forgotten Chinese Quarter*, "Why has it come to this in a city that

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that paved over the lower side of 1100 Tulane in 1937 was replaced in 1950 by the International-style office building of the California Company oil firm. It is now the computer center for Hibernia Bank. Across the street, the high-rise Oil and Gas Building was erected in 1960 on the site of a number of former Chinese establishments. Only one structure from Chinatown days remains on the 1100 block of Tulane; though its façade is modernized, its old brick side wall is still visible.[612] Next to it, in splendid irony, stands a new Chinese-Vietnamese restaurant, its owners and patrons probably oblivious to the history of their location. Strangely, a number of other Chinese lunch spots are scattered throughout the former Chinatown area today: in 2002, seven were located in the blocks between the Canal/Burgundy intersection up to Tulane/Claiborne avenues. By comparison, only one currently serves the entire French Quarter. Granted, some were closed and others served Vietnamese as well as Chinese food; indeed, the cluster surely just reflects the large lunch crowds from nearby hospitals and universities. Probably zero relationship exists between these new establishments and those of "the Celestials" from a century ago. But the gigantic sign reading CHINATOWN above one such spot at 1005 Canal Street, only two blocks from the heart of the old enclave, makes me wonder.



On Canal Street. *Photograph by author, 2002.*

takes so much pride in its rich and diverse heritage? How could this be in a city where preserved historic landmarks form the cornerstones of its vibrant tourism industry, [and] multi-cultural tourism is all the rage? Why the silence in a city with a well-established modern Chinese-American community? Could it be that we have already lost touch with that part of our collective past?" Tragically, Temple died suddenly of meningitis in 2002.

[612] This last structural vestige may also soon disappear: in 2004-2005, the city approved its demolition to make room for the garage of a planned hotel. Bruce Eggler, "Last Vestige of Chinatown May Fall," *Times-Picayune*, October 16, 2004, B1; and "Final Remnant of City's Chinatown Cleared for the Ax," *Times-Picayune*, January 19, 2005, B1.



The Soon On Tong receiving vault in Cypress Grove Cemetery, built in 1904, was used for ceremonies and temporary entombment until remains were ready for shipment back to China. When this old custom faded away, Greenwood Cemetery became the final resting place for many in the local Chinese community, in below-ground graves. *Photograph by author, 2002.*

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