

Chinatown's Roots in the City of Boston

By Stephanie Fan

A question that the Chinese Historical Society of NE has fielded over the years is how Boston's Chinatown came to occupy its coveted downtown location. Situated within walking distance of the city's theater district, financial center, harbor, downtown shopping area, and all of the T's rapid transit lines as well as South Station, the neighborhood certainly finds itself in an increasingly valuable area of the city.

Its location speaks to Chinatown's long and early history in Boston. Like Chinatowns in the major cities of San Francisco, Chicago and New York, Boston's Chinatown was formed at a time when the host city itself was much smaller. Housing that was affordable to immigrants looking for work was generally located on the outskirts of the city, in neighborhoods that were undesirable to the established residents. The South Cove area, home to Irish, Italian, Jewish, Greek, and Syrian immigrants before Chinese began settling there in 1872, was built on landfill over tidal flats. Its low-rent housing stock was made up of plain row houses that had none of the architectural details gracing homes on



Old Tyler Street. c. 1920s

Beacon Hill or in the Back Bay. It was close to the railroad yards. It contained factories for manufacturing clothing and shoes. In the late 19th century and through out most of the 20th, it was definitely not a neighborhood of choice.

As the wave of European immigrants who arrived in Boston in the mid-1800s gained economic success and moved to places like South Boston, Dorchester, Roslindale and West Roxbury, their residential units were freed up for the incoming Chinese immigrants. Meanwhile, the population of Boston continued to grow rapidly, giving rise to more towns forming around the core of the city. Eventually, Chinatown, once at the fringe of the city, found itself in the center of the city, though still in a district

that was considered unfit for the wealthy. In fact, the city later zoned abutting streets to contain the adult entertainment district and keep unsavory activities from infiltrating other neighborhoods.

Why didn't the Chinese move out to the suburbs as well? The first Chinese immigrants were predominantly male. Women and children were initially left behind in China as the sojourners worked to earn money here in America. But over time, those who wanted or decided to stay found that they were not allowed to have their families join them. The bachelor-like nature of the early Chinatowns thus discouraged the Chinese immigrants from wanting to move out in the manner of the European immigrants who had arrived as family units.

Furthermore, discrimination often prevented them from buying property in other neighborhoods.

By the 1950s and 1960s, widespread car ownership and middle class housing development in the suburbs resulted in an abandonment of the inner city. Businesses moved or closed and storefronts were boarded up. The Tufts Medical Center, then known as the Tufts-New England Medical Center, faced the choice of expanding in the suburbs or staying and expanding in the city. It opted to stay, with consequences for the neighboring Chinatown. The hospital and Tufts University expansion eliminated more housing and restricted the growth of Chinatown.

It was not until after the immigration laws, which were extremely restrictive of Chinese immigrants, were changed in 1965 to allow for family reunification, that the Chinese began to migrate to the suburbs. Further

spurring this change of residence was the construction of a highway that cut through the heart of Chinatown and demolished residential streets. At the same time, however, many of the new immigrants who came in the late 1960s and during the 1970s needed a transition point, and China-

town continued to thrive in this role, offering entry level jobs, social services, educational services and health care for the newcomers, whether or not they lived in the Chinatown area.

In the 1960's, urban renewal began and gradually led to the revival of the downtown area. New construction of housing, hotels and office towers followed. The one glaring exception was the adult entertainment district, an area known as the "Combat Zone." The city adopted the strategy of fostering high end development in the area to discourage the formation and sustenance of adult entertainment businesses, figuring that higher rents would work to diminish the presence of such businesses. It succeeded, but it also increased the property values in neighboring Chinatown, adding pressure on its ability to maintain the community for low income workers.

The commercial core of Chinatown, consisting of its restaurants, has served as the economic underpinning of the Chinatown community for over 100 years. It has persisted because of the popularity and affordability of Chinese food. Changing trends and tastes over the years have forced the restaurant trade to adapt, by nomenclature and by food offerings, in order to succeed. But the food's

reputation as being affordable makes it difficult to raise prices and to match the surrounding luxury properties in style and reputation. As property values in the area soar, the Chinese community and its restaurant trade are scrambling once again to find a way to continue to survive.

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Chinese Diaspora. Digital Chinese Diaspora is conceived by Professor Shirley Tang and her students in this class.

During the special exhibition in the afternoon, students from the Asian American Literacy Course made their voices heard — Silence is no longer the stereotype of Asians/Asian Americans. They made their stories heard through digital instrument or some even published the stories on the Internet. They wanted to reach out to a larger audience by telling their stories that show their struggles on this free land.

Time passes by. The sky is still blue; the air

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