

As Chinatown changes, community leaders push to preserve its historic legacy as a bastion for immigrants

By [Deanna Pan](#) Globe Staff, Updated August 24, 2021, 7:44 p.m.



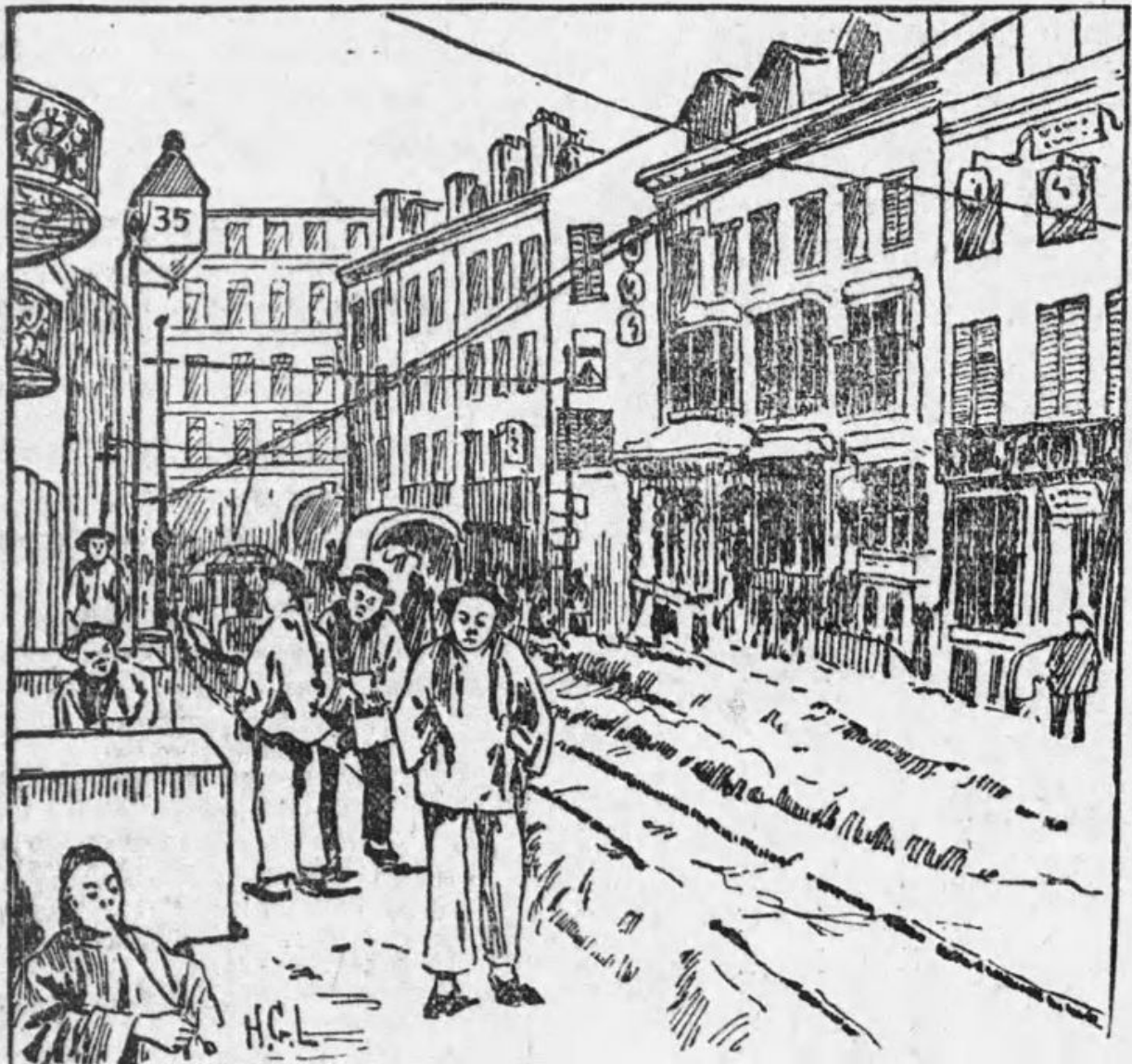
The nonprofit Chinatown Community Land Trust is launching a public arts project this fall to commemorate Chinatown's history with a self-guided immigrant history trail. CHRISTIANA BOTIC FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

At the turn of the 20th century, Boston's Chinatown was an undesirable place to live. Built on reclaimed tidal flats, the South Cove neighborhood was filthy and congested. Raw sewage coursed through the adjacent Fort Point Channel and dumped into South Bay. Chinese laborers — fleeing white violence and vigilantism in the American West — crowded narrow brick row houses, and toiled for long hours and meager pay in small, dank laundries, washing soiled clothes by hand.

They were almost exclusively young and male, with origins in the Pearl River Delta of southeastern China, a region plagued by poverty, famine, and civil unrest. Theirs was often a lonely existence, separated by continents from their wives and children who were prohibited entry into the United States. But Chinatown was their home, their sanctuary from an increasingly hostile society determined to drive them away.

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In a city defined by its rich history, the story of Boston's Chinatown is less known. While other small and mid-sized Chinatowns have vanished — including those in Providence, Baltimore, New Orleans, and Detroit — Boston's has persevered. The neighborhood's survival is a testament to the tenacity of its inhabitants, locked in constant battle with forces of gentrification and displacement.

But in the face of continued encroachment by developers, the desire to preserve Chinatown's historic legacy has gained renewed urgency. The nonprofit Chinatown Community Land Trust is leading the charge, launching an ambitious public arts project this fall to commemorate Chinatown's history as a bastion for working-class families. The project will highlight landmarks throughout the neighborhood with a self-guided immigrant history trail.

“[Chinatown] is not just, ‘That’s where you go to look at the ducks in the window,’ ” said Lydia Lowe, executive director of the land trust. “This neighborhood has been an anchor for the immigrant working-class community for generations, and through different waves of immigration.”



Designs by artist Wen-ti Tsen will be made into life-size statues and placed around Chinatown. WEN-TI TSEN

Community organizers started conceptualizing the trail two years ago, as they were updating the neighborhood's 2020 [master plan](#). The Cambridge-based 85-year-old artist Wen-ti Tsen is creating four bronze statues for the trail, depicting various pillars of Chinatown's working-class community: a laundryman, a cook, a garment worker, and a grandmother, caring for a child. Proposed sites for the trail include the city's first Chinese restaurant, Hong Far Low — where Eldo Cake House is now located on Harrison Avenue — which brought chop suey to Boston's masses, and the old row houses at 29 Oak St., which the land trust recently [acquired](#) and turned into affordable housing units.

The sites will be denoted with placards displaying a phone number, said Daphne Xu, who is spearheading the project at the land trust. Xu is working with the Boston Public Library to create a phone system that will allow users to listen to prerecorded audio about each of the locations on the trail. Xu is also envisioning a “guerrilla style” component, in which users can record and contribute their own family stories.

“We’re trying to look at the land that we’re on in a deeper sense than just the emergence of Chinatown as a neighborhood,” Xu said.



Chinatown is one of Boston's fastest-growing neighborhoods. The population ballooned 48.5 percent between 2010 and 2020, according to [an analysis](#) of new census data by the Boston Planning and Development Agency. But the share of Asian and Pacific Islanders living in Chinatown during that period has declined — from 72.8 percent in 2010 to 59.9 percent in 2020 — in the wake of Boston's lucrative building boom that has priced out working-class immigrant families.

"When I was growing up, it was really a close-knit family neighborhood. It was mainly these row houses as far as you can see," said Michael Liu, 72, a historian and one of several advisers helping the land trust develop the trail. "Now, if you walk around Chinatown, it's kind of hard to find the residential area because it's dominated by the [Tufts-New England] Medical Center buildings . . . and the population's changed. It's become less family-oriented and more elderly."



As Liu chronicles in his book, [“Forever Struggle,”](#) on the history of Chinatown, the first Chinese immigrants settled in Boston more than 140 years ago. In the late 1870s, the Chinese were the latest in a string of newcomers to lay down roots in the South Cove. The area attracted successive waves of immigrants, including the Irish, Jewish people, Italians, Syrians, and Lebanese, drawn by low rents and work in the city’s industrial core.

Expelled from California and the Pacific Northwest, where many had worked building the transcontinental railroad, the Chinese in Boston formed their nascent “bachelor society” on the eastern side of upper Harrison Avenue. The federal Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and similar legislation stemmed the tide of Chinese immigration and prevented Chinese women from joining their husbands in the United States. By 1900, 99 percent of all Chinese residents of Massachusetts were men.

Barred from holding many professional jobs, they specialized as laundrymen — a backbreaking, poorly paid occupation that called for 18-hour days with few breaks, and stymied their path to social mobility. While other immigrant groups were able to climb into the middle class and relocate to the suburbs, Boston’s Chinese — facing more discrimination — made the South Cove their permanent home. And over the years, Chinatown expanded, with grocery stores, restaurants, gambling halls, and opium dens, becoming the hub of political, social, and cultural activity for the Chinese throughout New England.

Chinatown was a largely insular community and, at first, was mostly ignored by city authorities. As years passed, the Chinese endured several attempts from Boston’s white ruling class to oust them from the area. As Liu details in “Forever Struggle,” Chinatown was frequently subjected to racially motivated raids and inspections. In 1893, when city officials decided to widen Harrison Avenue between Essex and Beach Streets, they seized the Chinese-owned businesses on the eastern half of the street. A massive police sweep of Chinatown in 1903, following the murder of a local tong, or Chinese gang, member, resulted in the arrest of 234 Chinese men, 50 of whom were deported.



Men read posters informing residents of the "alien registration" regulations in Chinatown on Jan. 6, 1951. HUGH E. O'DONNELL/GLOBE STAFF

“Much of the population overall has a very poor conception of the history and the contributions of the Chinese-American population,” noted Liu, who spent a decade researching and writing his history of the neighborhood. “[There’s] a conception of the

Chinese and other Asians being wildly successful — the so-called ‘model minority’ image — when in fact . . . a lot of them actually come from very disadvantaged backgrounds and had to suffer a lot.”

World War II transformed Chinatown into a family neighborhood. In 1943, Congress repealed the Chinese Exclusion Act, as China had become a wartime ally to the United States. The War Brides Act of 1945 allowed Chinese servicemen to bring back their foreign-born wives and children. The population in Boston’s Chinatown exploded as a result, according to Liu, from 950 residents in 1930 to almost 3,000 residents 20 years later.

Writer Cynthia Yee, 72, grew up in Chinatown against this backdrop. Her father had enlisted in the US Army and after the war, her mother joined him in Boston. Yee, who is volunteering with the land trust, believes the history trail will create a kind of collective of memory of the neighborhood that would otherwise risk being forgotten.

“Your narrative is already broken as an immigrant, coming into a foreign land and landing, say, in Chinatown,” Yee said. “An immigrant trail helps us to pass from generation to generation, from old immigrants to new immigrants, these memory markers that ground the community.”



Chinese and American flags waved along Beach Street in Chinatown. CHRISTIANA BOTIC FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

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