

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICE



HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD
APPLICATION FOR HISTORIC LANDMARK OR HISTORIC DISTRICT DESIGNATION

New Designation _____

Amendment of a previous designation x

Please summarize any amendment(s) Additional documentation; addition of a period of significance

Property name On Leong Chinese Merchants Association

*If any part of the interior is being nominated, the "interior" or portion(s) of the interior must be specifically identified above and identified and described in the narrative statements. ***Please include a boundary map of the property with your nomination form.*

Address 618-620 H Street NW

Square and lot number(s) Square 454, Lot 50

Affected Advisory Neighborhood Commission _____

Date of construction c. 1852-1857 Date of major alteration(s) 1932, 1997

Architect(s) Marcus T. Hallett Architectural style(s) Chinese eclectic

Original use Rowhouses, stores, restaurant, association hall/office Present use Restaurant

Property owner 618 Partnership LLC

Legal address of property owner 618 H Street NW, Washington, D.C. 20001-3732

Legal address of property owner 801 Pennsylvania Avenue NW, Suite 1024, Washington, D.C. 20004

NAME OF APPLICANT(S) DC Preservation League

Address/Telephone of applicant(s) 641 S Street, NW, Suite 300, Washington, DC 20001

Name and title of authorized representative Rebecca Miller, Executive Director

Signature of representative  Date February 5, 2024

Name and telephone of author of application Timothy Dennee, 202-442-8847

Date received 2/5/2024
Case No. 24-07

United States Department of the Interior
 National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

1. Name of Property

Historic name: On Leong Chinese Merchants Association

Other names/site number: On Leong Tong of the District of Columbia

Name of related multiple property listing: N/A

2. Location

Street & number: 618-620 H Street NW

City or town: Washington State: _____ County: _____

Not For Publication: Vicinity:

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended,

I hereby certify that this ___ nomination ___ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60.

In my opinion, the property ___ meets ___ does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant at the following level(s) of significance:

___ national ___ statewide ___ local

Applicable National Register Criteria:

___A ___B ___C ___D

_____ Signature of certifying official/Title:	_____ Date
_____ State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government	

In my opinion, the property ___ meets ___ does not meet the National Register criteria.	
_____ Signature of commenting official:	_____ Date
_____ Title :	
_____ State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government	

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4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:

- entered in the National Register
- determined eligible for the National Register
- determined not eligible for the National Register
- removed from the National Register
- other (explain:) _____

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

5. Classification

Ownership of Property

(Check as many boxes as apply.)

- Private:
- Public – Local
- Public – State
- Public – Federal

Category of Property

- Building(s)
- District
- Site
- Structure
- Object

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Number of Resources within Property

Contributing	Noncontributing	
<u>0</u>	<u> </u>	buildings
<u> </u>	<u> </u>	sites
<u> </u>	<u> </u>	structures
<u> </u>	<u> </u>	objects
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	Total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register 1

6. Function or Use
Historic Functions

- Commerce/Trade- business
- Commerce/Trade- organizational
- Commerce/Trade- restaurant
- Social- meeting hall

Current Functions

- Commerce/Trade- restaurant

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7. Description

Architectural Classification

Late 19th- and Early 20th-century revivals/Chinese eclectic

Materials: (enter categories from instructions.)

Principal exterior materials of the property: brick, wood, terracotta, metal

Narrative Description

Summary Paragraph

The On Leong Merchant Association Building is a three-story, six-bay brick building with a rectangular plan located at 618-620 H Street NW in Washington, D.C. Its two street numbers are reflective of the fact that a 1932 renovation to accommodate the On Leong Tong incorporated two three-bay-wide, mid-nineteenth-century, brick row buildings, and that there were often multiple tenants, but the number 620 is not presently in use. The building occupies Lot 50 of Square 454, and its façade faces H Street to the north. Standing about 38 feet tall, its low-pitched, principal roof slopes downward to the rear (south end) of the main block. Two-story wings extend still further south. A wholly decorative secondary roof tops the façade, Tang-dynasty-inspired with upturned hip rafters and terra cotta S tiles. The north elevation is six bays wide on a high basement, reflecting the building's origin as two rowhouses. Its symmetrical façade features a central entry accessed by steps and recessed between projecting storefront bays that occupy nearly the remainder of the first-floor front. These are capped with another S-tiled pagoda roof. The second story has evenly spaced six-over-six windows under applied, upturned wooden heads meant to echo the pagoda roofs. Above each of these is a third-story arched opening containing a five-light fanlight transom over a pair of sixteen-light casements opening onto an open steel balcony in a Chinese fretwork pattern. The interior was much altered in the 1932 renovation to create the association headquarters and retail spaces, and it has been further altered since, retaining little integrity. The exterior, however, is little changed since 1932.

Narrative Description

Site

The On Leong Merchant Association Building is located at 618-620 H Street NW in the Chinatown neighborhood of Washington, D.C. The building is located in the 600 block of H Street among a

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mixture of nineteenth-, twentieth- and twenty-first-century buildings of varying heights. An eight-story portion of the million-square-foot Galley Place mixed-use development, completed in 2004, abuts the east wall and wraps around the rear of the On Leong lot, leaving no rear yard. Its prominent parking garage entrance is nearest the historic building. The lot immediately to the west of On Leong is presently vacant, a development site that had been the site of the Tai Tung/Tai Shan Chinese restaurant, demolished in 2018.

The On Leong building occupies the entirety of its lot, built up to each property line.

Plan

The overall plan is that of twin pre-1857 brick rowhouses, 618 and 620 H Street, the middle units of a former row of four, eventually connected internally by the removal of much of the common party wall and by a single, replace wing at rear. Originally the houses had stair halls along west walls, the corridors leading to narrower two-story dogleg kitchen ells with roofs shedding into narrow courts on the east sides of the ells. These ells were replaced by the single, concrete-block wing in 1997-1998. When the On Leong Tong acquired the properties, the interiors were first connected by an opening made in the party wall on the first floor, forward of the stairs. Two more openings were subsequently made rearward of this to accommodate the restaurant spaces, leaving piers as the central structural support for the building. The stair within 618 was not removed until 1946.¹

Façade (north elevation)

The north elevation is six bays wide on a high basement, reflecting the building's origin as two rowhouses that have been unified by the addition of a variety of elements during a 1932 renovation. Between corner piers, a wholly decorative secondary roof tops the façade, Tang-dynasty-inspired with upturned hip ridges and terra cotta S tiles. This roof projects over a deep, sheet-metal cornice supported by eleven modillions, centered between which are suspended globe light fixtures. The second story has evenly spaced six-over-six wood windows under applied, upturned wooden heads meant to echo the pagoda roofs. Above each of these is a third-story arched opening containing a five-light fanlight transom over a pair of sixteen-light casements or French doors opening onto an open steel balcony in a Chinese fretwork pattern on supporting brackets. The windows and trim are painted red, with window arches and heads picked out in a contrasting green.

At the first floor, a projecting storefront occupies nearly all the frontage. Dating to the 1932 renovation, it is framed with chamfered posts. It has a green-S-tile hip-on-hip roof echoing the roof above, surmounted by a pyramidal cupola or pagoda gable at center over an additional projection that shelters the recessed central entrance. This roof is supported by mortised Arts-and-Crafts wood brackets and bird's-beak rafter tails that recall elements of the Chinese *dougong* (鬥拱) rafter system.² It has the same red-painted sheet-metal ridge boards and curled hip-ridge ends.

¹ District of Columbia Building Permits, repair permit no. 280250, September 21, 1945.

² Traditional Chinese characters, rather than the People's Republic of China's simplified system, are employed in this document, because they are the ones that were used by the early Cantonese immigrants to Washington.

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The same color scheme is carried down to the tripartite display windows that flank the entrance and rest upon a base clad in a geometric pattern of tiles in varied earth tones. These windows are double-glazed, aluminum-framed units, having been replaced within the storefront's wood structure. Narrow, vertical, single-light windows occupy the returns of the ends of the show-window bays. Because the original first floor framing was retained from the rowhouses, twin, full-light entry doors under transoms are reached through an open vestibule over five steps up from the sidewalk, four of these of concrete clad with red terra cotta tile. Decorative steel pipe rails run up both sides of these stairs. The walls of the vestibule are clad with tile matching that of the storefront base. A third door recessed into the west side of the vestibule offers access to that side of the building, the former 620 H. The multiple doors reflect the 1932 plan of the building, offering access to the upstairs and to two first-floor retail spaces.

The façade and display windows are covered by a variety of signage advertising the restaurant tenants. The largest sign is a three-sided, internally illuminated plastic-faced aluminum-framed projecting box sign reading "CHINATOWN GARDEN RESTAURANT," the English name for the first-floor establishment, and the Chinese characters 龍之味飯店 (or "Dragon's Taste"). The same characters, gilt and in deep relief on green-painted circular plaques, are arranged left to right, spaced and centered between the arches of the third-floor openings, having replaced the original, larger plaques identifying the tong headquarters. Various vinyl applique signs appear in the display windows, along with a faux-neon "OPEN" sign suspended behind the glass of the east bay. The street number "618" is painted in white, flanked by yellow dragons, on the steel housing of a steel-mesh security gate at the outer extreme of the entrance.

East elevation, main block

The common-brick east elevation of the building, a former party wall with 616 H Street, remains obscured, abutting the eight-story masonry west wall of 616 H Street.

West elevation, main block

Previously abutting a rowhouse/restaurant at 622 H and expected again to be obscured by new construction, the west elevation of the main block has been exposed since the 2018 raze of 622. It is blank, lacking openings other than joist pockets in the party wall left from 622 H. That building's remnant side wall is partially parged and wholly painted white, with ragged brick edges at the front corner where its façade was demolished. The wall's mid-nineteenth-century common brick is more visible higher up, beneath the deep roof flashing.

Rear elevation, main block

Only the third floor of the rear elevation of the main block is exposed. It is common brick, with four window openings and two doors under segmental arches permitting access to the roof decks atop the ell behind.

Rear ell

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The rear wing, completed in 1998, is constructed of exposed concrete masonry units. Built up to the side and rear property lines, it is presently exposed to view on each of the three exterior sides because of previous demolition on adjacent lots. The west and south (rear) elevations are wrapped by the Gallery Place garage space but can be viewed from within that space. The wing is roughly the same depth as that of the building's main block, but its eastern half is 4.5 feet shallower, reflecting a jog in the historic rear lot line along an alley that terminated behind 618 H Street.

Each of the two original houses had its own ell wing of roughly the same depth as the main blocks, with a narrow court on the east side of each and possibly porches. These ells were replaced by the present wing during the development of Gallery Place behind the property, whose excavation presumably destabilized neglected and old brick masonry. The roof of the wing is almost entirely covered by a wooden deck. Abutting the side property lines, the east and west walls are blank.

Roof

The main block has a low-pitched roof shedding to the rear. The rear wings are also low pitched, shedding to the east. Open, pressure-treated-pine decks cover nearly the entire ell roof. The roofs also support ventilation and air-conditioning equipment.

Interior

The interior of the On Leong Merchants Association Building has been greatly altered for restaurant use, leaving little integrity of design, materials, workmanship and feeling, but it has been associated with Chinese restaurant tenants since the 1932 renovation. All the first-floor finishes dating to the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have been removed or covered. The former party wall between 618 and 620 H has been reduced to a series of piers which, like the rest of the walls, have been covered with drywall, fabric, wainscot and trim. Lighting is mostly recessed in a dropped acoustical ceiling and HVAC-duct bulkheads, supplemented by wall sconces. Additional piers and steel columns mark the transition between the original front and rear rooms of the rowhouse main blocks. The eastern ell is occupied by the rear of the dining room, plus a coatroom and restrooms. The western ell is the kitchen.

The second and third floors, the On Leong headquarters proper, have been completely renovated and, in some areas, stripped down to the structure, for restaurant uses.

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8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

- A. Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B. Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C. Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D. Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

- A. Owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes
- B. Removed from its original location
- C. A birthplace or grave
- D. A cemetery
- E. A reconstructed building, object, or structure
- F. A commemorative property
- G. Less than 50 years old or achieving significance within the past 50 years

Areas of Significance

Ethnic Heritage - Asian

Architecture

Social History

Commerce

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Period of Significance

1932-1974

Significant Dates

1932

1997

Significant Person

Cultural Affiliation

Architect/Builder

Marcus T. Hallett

Statement of Significance Summary Paragraph

The On Leong Chinese Merchants Association building at 618-620 H Street NW is significant for its association with the District of Columbia chapter of the On Leong Tong from 1932 until 1997. A District of Columbia landmark since 1996, it is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion A for its association with the On Leong Chinese Merchants Association, one of the most important Chinese societies in North America during the first half of the twentieth century. The association was founded to provide economic, social, legal, and political support to Chinese immigrant communities. It served primarily as a board of trade, regulating locational decisions and pricing for Chinese-owned businesses, as well as dabbling in illicit activities to finance its operation. It assumed functions of trade unions, building and loan associations, and benevolent and fraternal societies, lending money, handling job placements and labor relations, offering translation and legal representation to assist the immigrant community in dealings with outsiders, providing burial services, organizing charity, and sponsoring community celebrations. Within the District of Columbia, the association was pivotal in negotiating relationships among Chinese workers and businesses, District of Columbia government officials, the police and community members, to protect the interests of Chinese residents, especially those in Chinatown.

The On Leong Merchants Association has played a vital role in the District of Columbia's history. On Leong was the prime mover in the re-establishment of Washington's Chinatown along H Street NW when the first Chinatown was displaced the Federal Triangle Project in 1930 to 1932. Partly through straw buyers, On Leong acquired nearly a dozen properties in the vicinity by purchase and lease, creating a core around which the community coalesced. The association's new headquarters was a community nerve center and an exuberant visual landmark at the center of the neighborhood. Serving as the association's business offices and assembly hall during some of its most active and

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influential years, the building replaced a demolished headquarters occupied less than two decades. The ground floor has accommodated a succession of Chinese shops and restaurants, most of which have been operated by members of the association, helping sustain and perpetuate an authentic Chinatown.

The On Leong Merchants Association building also merits listing under Criterion C as one of Washington's best examples of Chinese-influenced architecture, of special significance for being bankrolled and occupied by a Chinese community organization. The building is a rare survivor of its type from the early twentieth century, and its exterior retains high integrity to the period of its renovation by the association. Although the United States experienced considerable Chinese immigration during the late nineteenth century and early twentieth, few trained architects were among them, and there was relatively little call for traditional Chinese architecture in the generally smaller Asian communities of the East Coast. Immigrants generally adapted pre-existing buildings, and Chinese flourishes on the buildings of Washington's Chinatowns had been more superficial, but the On Leong Merchants Association considered it important to have its new headquarters visibly reflect its cultural background. The building has one of the most significant and best-preserved period storefronts in Washington.

Narrative Statement of Significance

Chinese Americans in the District of Columbia

The efforts of the Western powers to increase trade with China, by force if necessary, opened a path for emigration, as well as disrupting commercial networks especially in the southern province of Canton or Guangdong. The discovery of California gold and the construction of the first transcontinental railroad across the United States were major events that attracted Chinese laborers and merchants to America. Nativist reaction to the newcomers, from fear of competition and of difference, forced the immigrants to build their own communities for protection and to maintain their own social and economic networks. But these settlements also offered imported goods, laundering services, and prepared foods to Westerners. Hostility to these communities on the West Coast induced many immigrants to find their way east.

Washington, D.C.'s first recorded Chinese resident, Chiang Kai, arrived in 1851.³ Records from the 1870 and 1880 censuses indicate that the Chinese population in the city increased from only three to thirteen individuals over that decade, several of these being university students. But there were scores of Chinese by 1885, sufficient numbers and concentration around the 300 and 400 blocks of Pennsylvania to create there the seed of the city's original Chinatown.

During this time period, federal legislation targeted the immigration of Chinese workers. The Page Act of 1875 barred most Chinese women from entering the United States, preventing the arrival of many families, and the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 banned Chinese laborers, excepting

³ Wendy Lim, *Chinatown, D.C.: A Photographic Journal* (Washington, D.C.: Asian American Arts and Media, Inc., 1991), 25.

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merchants, students, travelers, and diplomats. The Immigration Act of 1924 would set strict quotas on arrivals from Asia. When the laws were finally loosened in 1964, most of China was under the rule of a totalitarian communist party that permitted little emigration.

The restrictions on peasant-laborers meant that many early immigrants were merchants, whether they had come from a peasant background or from established merchant families. The newcomers focused in three industries: laundries, restaurants, and the importation of Chinese goods, including everything from decorative arts to fireworks to foodstuffs to medicines for the use of the Chinese and the native-born. Despite restrictions, the Chinese population continued to grow, partly because of arrivals from elsewhere in the United States, and partly because of elaborate efforts to circumvent the immigration laws by pretending that new arrivals, known as “paper sons,” were close relatives of established residents. The exclusion of nearly all women meant that most immigrants were single men, many of whom would marry Westerners.

Year	Approx. Chinese Population
1867	0
1870	3
1880	13
1885	62
1888	93
1890	91
1897	339
1900	455
1910	369
1920	461
1930	398
1940	656
1950	1,825
1960	2,632
1970	2,582
1980	2,476
1990	3,144

Chinese self-help associations

“The mountains are high, and the emperor is far away” is a saying attributed to the fourteenth century, when a Mongol khan sat on the Chinese throne. It winks at transgressions of laws promulgated by distant officials, at a time when an emperor’s rule was theoretically absolute. It suggests the reality and even necessity of considerable autonomy at the local level. The attitude was all the more relevant by the mid nineteenth century, when another foreign dynasty, Manchu in origin, kept a tenuous hold on a continental empire of which large portions were in open

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rebellion, and whose coasts increasingly fell under the influence of Western imperialists. The aphorism was especially pertinent to a multitude of emigrants dispersed among strangers overseas.

As Alexis de Tocqueville had observed of Americans, the Chinese, too, were inveterate organizers of associations. Like most people, they were born into their first societies—the family and the village—entities that would retain a considerable pull over even the overseas diaspora. When emigrating during the nineteenth century, the Chinese typically expected to return home, at least for burial. Like other immigrants to America, they frequently arrived accompanied by family members and friends, or sent back word of favorable conditions for others to follow.

In a strange land, it was important to keep links to the familiar. Immigrants maintained networks of mutual moral and financial support, forwarding intelligence about jobs, pooling money for investments, accepting loans for the trans-Pacific passage and for business start-ups, and sending home remittances and the remains of the dead. As soon as enough immigrants had arrived, the clan, village, commercial, fraternal, and religious associations could reconstitute themselves, and new support groups emerged. Unfortunately, there was also an imperative to organize for communal protection in an environment that was typically hostile and sometimes violent to the newcomers.

Geographically based communal organizations were known as *huiguan* (會館, “halls”) and ranged in scale from the village level to encompassing much of the province of Canton or Guangdong, the origin of most immigrants. The earliest huiguan in the United States were founded in San Francisco in 1851 and known as the Sanyi (or Sam Yup in Cantonese) for the “three counties” of its members’ birth, and the Siyi (Sze Yup) representing four other neighboring counties.⁴ The organizations’ duties included regulating disputes, loaning money, managing debts, and acting as a spokesperson on behalf of members. Like American trade associations, they assisted with the proper burial of the members, but in the case of the Chinese, this often meant shipping the deceased to their home country.⁵ Collectively known as the “Six Companies,” they were deeply involved in tracking and facilitating, even profiting from, Chinese immigration.

Formally established as the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association (or “Chinese Association,” 中華會館) in 1882 and incorporating two decades later, the Six Companies had a board of wealthy merchants, acting as a primary representative and virtual government of the Chinese American diaspora, a sort of parallel and ally of the Chinese Legation, dealing with all levels of American government on matters of immigration and law enforcement.⁶ In addition to resolving community disputes, it lodged protests of outrages perpetrated against the Chinese. Most active in a handful of major cities in North and South America, it did not have an official chapter in Washington until decades later. A similar organization, called Zhong Hua Gong Suo (中華公所,

⁴ Him Mark Lai, “Historical Development of the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association/*Huiguan* System,” in *Chinese America: History and Perspectives, 1987* (San Francisco: Chinese Historical Society of America, 1987), 16.

⁵ Junchuan Zhang, “The transition of the Chinese Immigrant Communities in Great Washington Metropolitan Area,” master of arts thesis (Taipei: National Taiwan Normal University, 2015), 31.

⁶ Lai, 24.

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“China Office”), was established by the Lee family in Washington in 1895, and it performed the duties of the CCBA locally, until a formal CCBA branch opened in the late 1940s.⁷

Another system of self-help and association was the family or clan. Maintaining lineage halls in their hometowns and expecting to someday return there, clans provided loans and welfare services and organized cultural and education activities for family members. Like other groups, they were typically led by members of the merchant class.⁸ Foremost in numbers and influence in Washington were the Lee and Moy families, but there were clan organizations of the Wongs, Engs, Yees, Tams and Laus, etc., plus the societies of related families, the Gee How Oak Tin Association (Chin, Woo and Yuen), the Chew Lun Lin Yee Association (Tan, Soo and Der) and the Lung Kong Tin Yee Association (Lew, Quan, Jung and Chew).

Tongs

Membership in local and family organizations overlapped that of special-purpose and fraternal organizations, and prominent figures in one type of group tended to lead the others. But many immigrants found themselves separated from families or villages with little representation or influence and sought company and mutual assistance in other societies. Chinatowns contained many “paper sons” who had avoided American entry restrictions by falsely claiming to be members of established families. Similar to the huiguan representing localities—themselves frequently referred to as tongs or fongs—were the *tongs* (堂 “[meeting] halls”) established as fraternal organizations or merchants’ and workers’ benevolent societies not requiring family ties or geographic ones beyond a Cantonese origin.⁹ Some of these had had their origins in political and religious anti-Manchu movements in China, but they were typically established in America, rather than branches from the homeland. Tongs were all-male organizations, although female family members participated in some social activities.

The earliest known tong representation in the United States was an importation of the Tiandihui (天地會, “Heaven and Earth Society”) or Hongmen (洪門, “Floodgate” or Vast Family) movements, all-male secret fraternities that originated near the Fujian-Guangdong border about 1760. The Hongmen was evident in San Francisco by 1853.¹⁰ A mutual-aid society formed for protection and often illicit activities, it was proscribed by law in China. It defiantly and quickly spread there, defining itself in opposition to the Qing, initially favoring a restoration of the indigenous Ming dynasty, but later closely identified with nationalist politics and democracy. The Hongmen led the Red Turban Rebellion of 1854-1856 in Guangdong, with some of the revolutionaries going north to join the Taiping rebels, and others crossing the oceans.

⁷ King S. Der, *A History of Chinatown in Washington, D.C.*, 1994, 16; Zhang, 41.

⁸ Lai, 13.

⁹ Fengang Yang, *Chinese Christians in America: Conversion, Assimilation, and Adhesive Identities* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), 37.

¹⁰ Chuimei Ho and Bennet Bronson, “The Chee Kung Tong: A Chinese Secret Society in Tucson, 1880-1940” in *The Journal of Arizona History*, Vol. 59, No. 1, 4.

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In San Francisco, Hongmen groups coalesced into a new Gee (or Chee) Kung Tong (致公堂, roughly “Hall of Universal Justice”) by 1879. Gee Kung met in shrine-halls dedicated to the deified general of the Three Kingdoms period, Guan Yu, a personification of bravery, righteousness, and protection of the people. These fraternal meeting halls, to which the uninitiated were not admitted, inspired the Gee Kung’s English nickname, the Chinese Freemasons.¹¹ The tong had a hierarchical rank structure that delegated economic, social and ritual functions.¹²

By the turn of the twentieth century, at least fifteen tongs were present in San Francisco.¹³ By that time, the Gee Kung had spread to the East Coast, with a “lodge” on the third floor of 314 Pennsylvania Avenue, Washington, D.C. before the end of 1895.¹⁴ A 1901 sale of their building may have displaced the local branch, which opened a new hall at 318 Pennsylvania by 1904. It remained there until the federal condemnation of Chinatown around 1931.¹⁵ The tong leadership was drawn largely from the merchant class, and one measure of its early influence is the fact that, in 1908, Quong Kee, one of its leaders, was referred to as the “mayor of Chinatown,” one of the first men so honored.¹⁶ The founding of the Republic of China undercut the Gee Kung’s rationale and, while it carried on in Washington’s new Chinatown and in several other cities, it was soon eclipsed by the younger business tongs.

Native-born Americans would increasingly associate tongs with crime, but most of the societies had originated as trade guilds, such as the seamen’s Hoy On Tong. The Cantonese had sometimes found themselves on the wrong side of the emperor’s laws, not only in rebellion, but engaged in the British-promoted trade in opium and “coolie” labor. They brought their own experiences with opium and gambling to the gold fields and railroad construction camps of the West, where they met hard-drinking Euro-Americans with a taste for prostitution and their own games of chance. They were forced to organize for self-defense against attacks from racist Whites, and they policed their own people to forestall unwelcome intrusion by outsiders. Soon, tongs employed their own enforcers, called “highbinders” by Americans, and they engaged both in legitimate business and in the opium and alcohol trades, gambling, pandering, loansharking, and the protection racket. It was not long before violence ensued between tongs competing for members and revenue sources, although it was inevitably sensationalized by an American press often interested in dispossessing the foreigners.

¹¹ Chow, 191; “Chinese Freemasons Dine,” *The Washington Post*, September 7, 1896.

¹² Huping Ling, “‘Hop Alley’: On Leong Chinese Merchants and Laborers Association, 1906-1966,” *Journal of American Ethnic History*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (2004), 54.

¹³ C.N. Reynolds, “The Chinese Tongs,” *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 40., No. 5, 620.

¹⁴ “Where They Mostly Congregate,” *The Morning Times*, July 29, 1895; “Chinese Free Masons,” *The Evening Star*, September 4, 1896, mentions a “meeting of the members of the Gee Kong Hong” at 314 Pennsylvania.

¹⁵ *The Evening Star*, December 2, 1901; “The Absence of Joss House,” *The Evening Star*, February 2, 1904; R.L. Polk & Co., *Boyd’s Directory of the District of Columbia for 1922* (Washington, D.C.: R.L. Polk & Co. 1922), 1929; “Chinese to Fete New Year in D.C. Freed of Debts,” *The Evening Star*, February 9, 1929.

¹⁶ “The Chinese New Year,” *The Evening Times*, January 26, 1897; “Through Washington’s ‘Chinatown,’” *The Evening Star*, September 6, 1908.

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Perhaps the oldest of the American tongs was the Hip Sing Tong (協勝堂, or Hip Sing Labor and Commercial Association), also founded in San Francisco, about 1870.¹⁷ It had aspects of the fraternal tongs, but it principally settled disputes between Chinese businesses and laborers and helped members secure employment.¹⁸ It spread through the West and then, in the 1880s, to New York, where it tried to monopolize fantan gambling.¹⁹ Hip Sing's first appearance in the District of Columbia came at the request of laundry owner Ah Sing, who had had the audacity to lower the price of cleaning a shirt to half the going rate. He seems to have been visited by representatives of the Gee Kung Tong, many of whom were laundrymen themselves, and he was encouraged not to defect from the washermen's cartel. In response, two Hip Sing highbinders arrived from the New York area and, staying at Ah Sing's on 4½ Street, commenced issuing threats to the Gee Kung-affiliated merchants. In the end, although he had armed himself, it was Ah Sing who was shot under the cover of Independence Day fireworks.²⁰

The first solid reference to the Hip Sing settling in Washington may be the mention of a 1911 anti-Qing meeting in Chinatown.²¹ The tong established itself at 325 Pennsylvania Avenue NW. Composed also of restaurant workers, sailors and other laborers, it would be only a slight exaggeration to say that Washington's Hip Sing was a laundryman's union in opposition to the bigger merchants, "champion [of] the poor Chinamen..." in gaining a foothold in business.²² This may have been making a virtue of necessity as the tong gradually lost ground to its principal rival. The group had formally incorporated in New York in 1896 and, after a peace treaty with the larger On Leong Tong, incorporated in Washington in 1925.²³ This followed years of conflict with the other so-called "fighting tongs" in Chinatowns across the nation and marked the beginning of Hip Sing's decline, accelerated by the end of Prohibition, the onset of the Great Depression, and Chinatown's move to H Street. Still, in 1943 Hip Sing hosted 50 delegates from across the country at its hall at 507 H Street.²⁴ The tong moved next door to 503 (now 505) H Street sometime after the 1942 purchase of that property by laundry owner Ah Wong, one of the founders of the chapter and said to be among the last of them.²⁵ Just as in the first Chinatown, Hip Sing's was a lesser

¹⁷ Reynolds, 621. It may have been an offshoot of that city's Hip Yee Tong. Louis J. Beck, *New York's Chinatown: An Historical Presentation of Its People and Places* (New York: Bohemia Publishing Co., 1898), 124.

¹⁸ King Ho Chue, "The Education of Chinese Children in Washington, D.C.," M.A. thesis, George Washington University, 1939, 5. Translation by Mengshu Ye.

¹⁹ "Fan-Tan Games to Reopen," *The New York Times*, February 24, 1892: Beck, 96.

²⁰ "Is Still A Mystery," *The Evening Star*, July 9, 1895; "Ah Sing Saw His Foe," *The Washington Post*, July 10, 1895; "A Chinese War," *The Evening Star*, July 19, 1895; "Chinamen Out On Bail," *The Morning Times*, July 21, 1895; "For Ways That Are Dark," *The Morning Times*, July 26, 1895; "The Chinese Conspiracy," *The Evening Star*, July 31, 1895; "Hip Sing Tong Trial," *The Washington Post*, July 31, 1895.

²¹ "Chinamen in Washington Clamoring for War with Homemade Implements," *The Washington Herald*, November 19, 1911.

²² "6 D.C. Chinese Marked for Death," *The Washington Times*, October 16, 1924; Harry Hites, "Averting a Chinese 'Tong' War," *The Washington Post*, September 27, 1925.

²³ "Chinamen in a Fight," *The New York Times*, December 4, 1896; District of Columbia Corporation Records.

²⁴ "D.C. Chinese to Greet New Envoy After Festival Tomorrow," *The Evening Star*, October 10, 1942; "50 Hip Sing Delegates Convene in District," *The Evening Star*, September 11, 1943.

²⁵ Art Ping Lee; Lim, 44; "D.C. Chinese to Greet New Envoy After Festival Tomorrow," *The Evening Star*, October 10, 1942; District of Columbia Land Records; "Ah Wong, Owned Laundry in SE," *The Evening Star*, January 4, 1973; "Old Chinatown Years for Lost Glamour," *The Evening Star*, April 26, 1959.

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headquarters than that of the On Leong Tong. A larger Hip Sing convention, perhaps the branch's final, took place there in 1957.²⁶

As the strength of Hip Sing waned, the tong occasionally sought from the local or federal authorities protection from the On Leong Tong.²⁷ In Washington, the Hip Sings may have entered an alliance with the sympathetic Gee Kung Tong in 1928, because the former were sometimes said to be at 318 Pennsylvania, the Freemasons' hall, putting the avenue between them and the On Leong.²⁸ But despite its revolutionary beginnings, the Gee Kung eschewed open violence. In other cities, Hip Sing had made common cause with another prominent fighting tong, the Four Brothers, founded as the Lung Kong Tin Yee Association representing four clans. The Four Brothers, also known as the Ming Gai Hong, were little heard from in Washington during the turbulent period of the "tong wars," however, and kept a low profile at its headquarters, 819 6th Street, during the mid twentieth century.²⁹

On Leong Tong

Accounts differ as to the origin of the On Leong Tong, but the claims for the earliest dates appear to be the most credible, based on corroborating newspaper evidence. A 1949 item about the association's national convention called it a "sixty-year-old society."³⁰ Attested as active in San Francisco by 1892, it branched out to New York by the beginning of 1897, setting up at 14 Mott Street already with 200 members from the major neighborhood businesses.³¹ state charter, It was granted a state charter, and New York quickly became its national headquarters. Branches soon followed along the East Coast and in the Midwest. It became the largest tong in the East and retains thirteen branches the U.S. today.³² The moves provided new fields of opportunity for businesses and for the organization as a whole, as well as a defense for locals against the protection demands of its also-expanding rival, Hip Sing.

The Washington branch was established by 1912 and incorporated as "On Leong Tong of the District of Columbia" in 1919, taking up residence at 335 Pennsylvania Avenue, just five doors from the Hip Sings.³³ It was already prominent enough to host a "conclave" of representatives

²⁶ "Hip Singers Open Convention Here," *The Washington Post*, September 11, 1957.

²⁷ The leader of the New York Hip Sing allied with the Four Brothers against On Leong during the 1909-1910 tong war. The New York branch had also regularly informed to the Christian reformer Rev. Charles Parkhurst, resulting in numerous police raids on On Leong properties there.

²⁸ "Tongmen Is Held In Chinese Deaths," *The Evening Star*, October 16, 1928; "Tong War Threat Here," *The Washington Times*, October 27, 1923;

²⁹ "Chinatown is Small, But Area Buzzes With Activity," *The Evening Star*, May 21, 1951; District of Columbia Land Records.

³⁰ "National Convention of On Leong Tong Opens Here Monday," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, April 1, 1949.

³¹ "Who Is Responsible?" *The Sunday Inter Ocean*, February 21, 1892; "Mott Street's New Club," *The Sun*, February 18, 1897.

³² Art Ping Lee; Ling, 51.

³³ David Hathaway and Stephanie Ho, "Small but Resilient: Washington's Chinatown over the Years," *Washington History*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (2003), 45; District of Columbia Corporation Records.

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from across the country in 1924.³⁴ *On Leong* (or *An Liang*, 安良) means to promote peace, indicative of the organization's desire for stable commerce and community relations in America's Chinatowns—somewhat ironic in light of the occasions when that stability would be threatened by violence.³⁵ 安良工商會—the title hung on sign plaques on its headquarters' façade in the traditional right-to-left order—means approximately “peaceful commerce and industry association.”

Like other tongs, *On Leong* was a fraternal society with its own secret rituals and operations, but its social and economic prominence and its public acts, like incorporation, defy its classification as a secret society. Although women and children often contributed to their family businesses, they kept a low profile, and men were the titular owners and the only ones admitted to tong membership. *On Leong*'s organization was that of a business corporation, with elected officers and boards of directors. The Washington chapter's first president was probably Charles Lee Soo (1869-1938), a resident since 1883, an importer and restaurateur, and said to be the wealthiest Chinese in Washington. Although the organization's records have not come to light, a partial list of officers may be compiled from newspaper items, but the dates of office are incomplete:

Charles Lee Soo (importer/restaurateur), president, c. 1918, 1922-1924, pre-1926, 1927-1928, 1931-1932, 1937-1938 (death); treasurer, 1927-1931

Hoy Nai On, vice president, 1924-1925

George Yick Wen (restaurateur), secretary, 1924-1926, 1928-1936; vice president, 1926-1927; president 1927-1928; advisor, 1937-1938

Lim-Nai “Charlie” Moy (importer/restaurateur), president, 1926-1927, c. 1934; secretary 1927-1928; vice president, 1928-1929; advisor, 1937 (death)

Lee Sing Nom (importer/restaurateur), financial secretary, 1927; president, pre-1939

Tom Lee (laundry owner), secretary, 1928-1929

Lee Sing Shu (printer), president, 1929-1930; treasurer, 1931-1932

Moy Sheuck (apothecary), vice president, 1930-1932, 1937-1938

Frank Fong (restaurateur), president/secretary, 1932-1933, 1938-early 1940s, 1944-1945, 1946-1948; American secretary, 1937-1938; secretary, 1948-1949

Lee Y. Nahme (restaurateur), associate secretary, 1932-1933

Jung Wan Lee (importer), co-president, c. 1934

Ou Fong, treasurer, 1935-1936

Shew Moy (restaurateur), Chinese secretary, 1937-1938

Kung Shang, treasurer, 1937-1938

George Lee (restaurateur), secretary, 1929-1930; advisor, 1937-1938

F.S. Moy (importer), president, 1939-1940

Lee Toy (importer/restaurateur), president, 1944?-1949 (death)³⁶

George Moy (restaurateur, son of Charlie Moy), secretary/president, 1948-1954, 1958-1959

Sam J. Chan (restaurateur), president, pre-1957³⁷

³⁴ “Chinese Open D.C. Business Conclave,” *The Washington Times*, September 1, 1924.

³⁵ “The name *On Leong* is the Cantonese form of *An Liang* and is derived from the Chinese phrase *Chu Bao An Liang*, meaning ‘eliminating despots and bringing peace to people.’” Ling, 51.

³⁶ At his death, Lee was also president of the Lee Family Association.

³⁷ Chan had been president of the Gee How Oak Tin clan association (Chin, Woo and Yuen families).

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Kenneth Lee, president, 1950-1951
Eng Fook, vice president, 1950; president, 1951 (death)
Won Sing Lee, president, 1952-1953
Pon Moy (restaurateur), secretary, early 1950s?; president, 1954-1957³⁸
Chin Toy, co-chairman, 1954-1955; president, 1957-1958
Albert Park Lee (laundryman), co-chairman, 1954-1955 and 195?-195?
Charles Chin (laundryman?), treasurer, ?-1955 (death)³⁹
Robert Moy (restaurateur), president, 1955-1956
Davis Lee (restaurateur), president, 1956-1957
James Dere (restaurateur), president, 1956-1958⁴⁰
Lawrence Tom (restaurateur), president/secretary, 1957-1958
Ying Hong Chin (laundryman/restaurateur), secretary, c. 1950s?⁴¹
Fran Lee (restaurateur), secretary, 1970-1971
Raymond D.E. Lee (restaurateur), president, pre-1974⁴²
Ark Kee Lee (restaurateur), president, 1973-1974
William D. Yee (restaurateur), president, pre-1978

A onetime Washingtonian and restaurateur, King Lai Yee, served a term as On Leong's national president around 1930.

Washington's chapter held annual December elections for leaders, with the change of office apparently taking place at lunar new year. The regular succession of leaders suggests the democratic nature of the organization, although the sometime musical chairs of offices demonstrate that some figures dominated. Numbering as many as 200 at its peak, the membership of the branch must have broadened beyond the most successful of the entrepreneurial and management class, with dues and donations presumably scaled to the size and influence of each of the members.⁴³ Reaching four times the size of the local Hip Sing branch, it was the wealthier for the additional dues collected and its regulation of its broader slices of the economy.

On Leong functioned in two spheres, benefitting first its membership and then the greater Chinese community. It rapidly became the most influential force in that community. Although the tong neither sought nor achieved total control of businesses, a core function was the regulation of business locations. As early Chinese concentrated in trades such as laundering, importing, and restaurants, shops proliferated. Washington had 30 laundries, for instance, by the end of the 1880s. To minimize competition with their countrymen, shop owners acceded to spacing themselves out with the aim of each serving a neighborhood. In other cities, this was referred to as the "one mile one laundry" rule, but here they were more closely packed in practice.⁴⁴ Business owners seeking

³⁸ Moy had been president of the Moy Family Association.

³⁹ Moy had been president of the Gee How Oak Tin clan association.

⁴⁰ Der had been president of the Chew Lung Association.

⁴¹ Chin had been president of the Lee Family Association.

⁴² Lee had been president of the Lee Family Association.

⁴³ Zhang, 44.

⁴⁴ Ling, 56.

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to establish a shop would normally approach the tong first, but if not, they could be warned or more forcefully induced to relocate or close. There were also positive inducements.

Should a Chinese want to open a restaurant outside of Chinatown, his tong decides whether he would be situated too close to another member restaurateur. If the competition would not be too keen, the association gives its blessing and even lends him money, if need be.⁴⁵

Recognizing some economic benefit to concentration in Chinatown itself, the neighborhood was considered “open territory” for Chinese restaurants, and a similar clustering occurred in the 9th Street theater district.

Because hand laundries were comparable in their services, they were the shops most regulated by price, to avoid undercutting that would harm the whole industry. There were limits to price collusion, as Chinese hand laundries were in competition with White-owned steam laundries and Black-owned hand laundries. Price fixing and enforced locational decisions are properly understood as a form of restraint of trade, but they also discouraged monopolies, pushing the most ambitious businessmen into diversification, as evidenced by the number of importers/restaureateurs/laundrymen. The intent was to avoid conflict. “When two members of the same tong have a dispute... the matter is referred to the tong council. In strict secrecy the council, consisting of about 20 members, considers the respective sides and renders its judgment.”⁴⁶

The quasi-judicial function that the On Leong board applied to business disputes extended to other conflicts within the community. The Chinese often could not find justice from White authorities. Having so often been received with hostility in the United States, they tended to keep to themselves and resolve their own issues. On Leong could resolve disputes by applying Chinese customs and providing some measure of policing and social control on the streets.⁴⁷ “The tongs then achieved a measure of extraterritoriality, by holding their own courts and sentencing offenders to pay fines or even suffer banishment.”⁴⁸

Although the tong protected established businesses, it promoted new ones by extending loans which were not forthcoming from White-owned institutions.⁴⁹ It also served as a job-placement service, directing newcomers to member businesses. It provided translation and legal services to members and others, helping them negotiate permitting, taxes and other city regulations, as well as immigration matters and occasional criminal charges.⁵⁰ Like other chapters, the Washington On Leong almost certainly provided food and clothing to unemployed Chinese during the Great Depression.

⁴⁵ Stanley Baitz, “Chinatown: Old New Year’s and Folkways Are Giving Way to a New Age,” *The Evening Star*, January 30, 1949.

⁴⁶ “Chinatown: Old New Year’s and Folkways Are Giving Way to a New Age,” *The Evening Star*, January 30, 1949.

⁴⁷ Tom Fong interview by Karen Yee, May 26, 2022; Ling, 56-57.

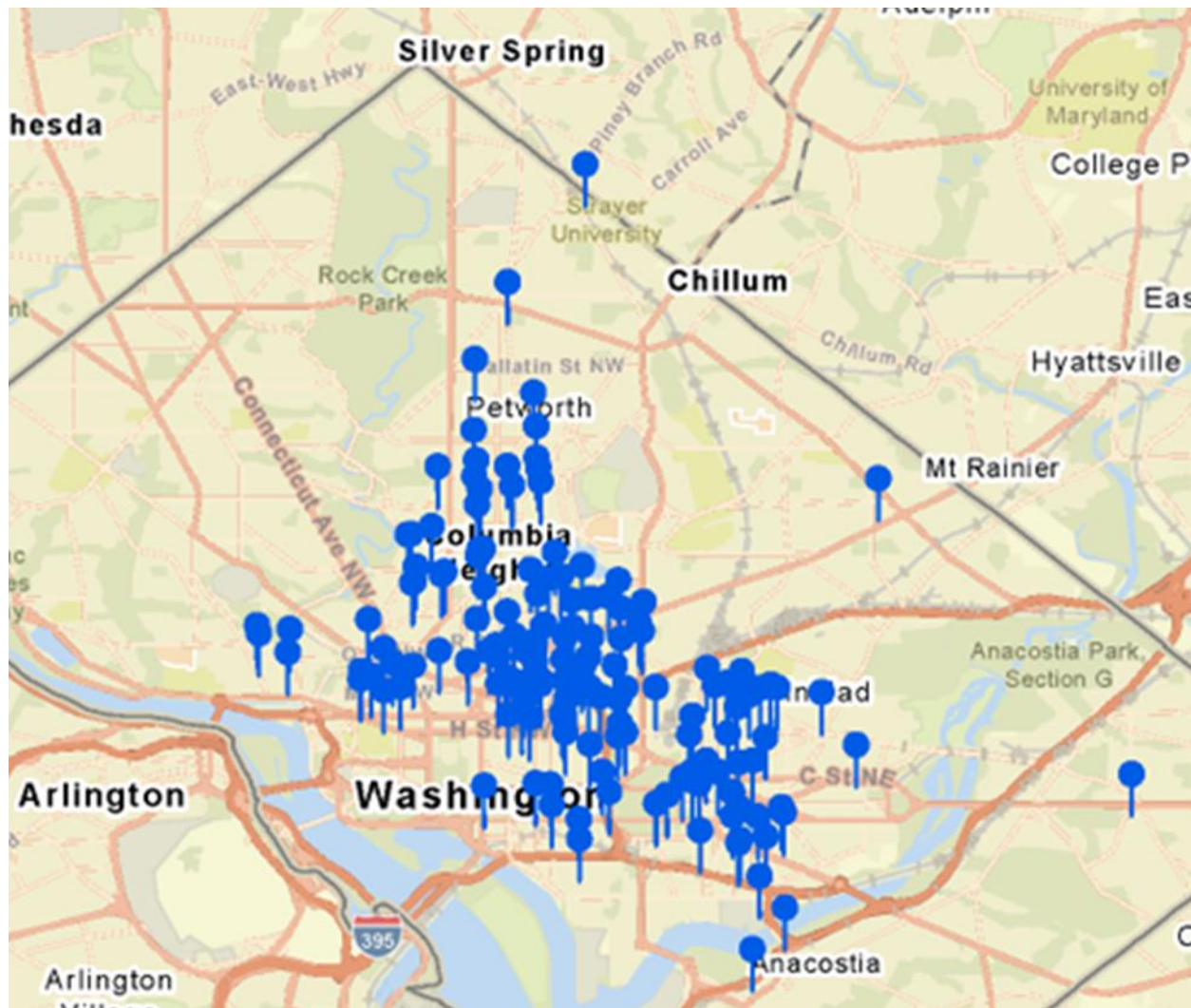
⁴⁸ “Chinatown is Small, But Area Buzzes With Activity,” *The Evening Star*, May 21, 1951.

⁴⁹ Unidentified informant interview by Karen Yee, July 8, 2022.

⁵⁰ Unidentified informant interview, July 8, 2022; Ling, 57.

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Locations of Chinese-owned laundries, 1922-1923.

Without the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association being active in Washington until the 1940s, On Leong took a lead role in burials of members and their families. Unlike with other trade associations, this could entail shipping the deceased to their native country. When Chinese emigrated during the nineteenth century, they typically expected to return home, at least for burial in their ancestral land. In early days, funerals often took place at the shrines of Chinatown, and the Tuck Cheong & Co. grocery store at 324 Pennsylvania Avenue was most instrumental in preparing remains for burial or shipping. Generally, for an adult, there would be a vigil over the dying, a cleansing of the body, an obituary notice to relatives and friends, mourning dress and mourning decorations. A hearse would bear the body to the grave in a procession. In matters of death, a Buddhist priest was most desirable, but in short supply, as Chinatown was not able to support a full-fledged temple. If buried locally, the deceased's families might, after a decade, have the

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remains disinterred to be returned to the place of their nativity, where families could provide essential ancestral rites over the urns. In spring 1927, 66 burials were removed from Congressional Cemetery on behalf of the On Leong Tong. These remains would join those of 700 more burials from the New York area and a couple hundred from other places en route to the passage across the Pacific. "For 10 years there has been no such general removal from this country to China."⁵¹ The Chinese increasingly became both Christians and Americans, and funerals took on Christian characteristics with permanent burials at Congressional and at cemeteries in the suburbs.

Another On Leong community service was its many cash and in-kind donations to good causes. Its H Street headquarters hosted Chinese language classes for American-born children during the first half of the 1930s.⁵² Like other tongs, On Leong raised money for the Nationalist cause, redoubling its efforts after the Japanese invasion, contributing to refugee aid, and welcoming the Chinese ambassador and Nationalist generals to its hall. On Leong members served in both World Wars and made generous contributions to the American War Fund in the 1940s. On Leong officers and members also served as wartime auxiliary police and air-raid wardens in Chinatown.⁵³ The association kept the Chinatown community informed on the course of the war, included navigating the military draft.⁵⁴ On Leong lawyers provided legal services to Chinese mistaken for Japanese agents and sympathizers.⁵⁵

Notable fundraising efforts included that for a memorial honoring the District of Columbia's World War I dead, for the local Boys' Clubs, and for Red Cross flood relief in the Midwest.⁵⁶ Perhaps most important was a 1957 donation of \$5,000 to help build the Chinese Community Church on L Street.⁵⁷ But it was On Leong's sponsorship of the Chinese New Year celebration—with its feasting, fireworks, parades and lion dances—that brought the most approbation from outsiders. As the tong gradually became less insular after its move to H Street, it hosted annual open houses. Celebrations were more subdued during the war, with the parade canceled in 1939, but the Great Depression had not put a crimp in the festivities. In 1937,

...Chinese merchants entertained each other and their American friends with a nine-piece native orchestra, eats, drinks and filled them with the pungent odor of burning josh sticks and Oriental tid-bits. All night long high Government officials, members of the diplomatic corps, police officials and their best customers jammed into the smoky hall, plopped down in creaking chairs and heard plaintive strains of Chinese melodies and the clanking of gongs. Chinatown was a bedlam of merrymaking....⁵⁸

⁵¹ "Bodies of 66 Chinese Disinterred Here For Removal to Land of Their Ancestors," *The Evening Star*, March 15, 1927.

⁵² "Chinese School Teacher Aims At Sun Yat Sen University Post" *The Evening Star*, July 17, 1935.

⁵³ "War Fund Workers Urged to Do Utmost As Drive Is Extended," *The Evening Star*, November 9, 1944; "Chinese Auxiliary Police Detail," *The Evening Star*, July 2, 1942; Der, 69.

⁵⁴ Unidentified informant interview, July 8, 2022.

⁵⁵ Unidentified informant interview, July 8, 2022.

⁵⁶ "On Leong Officials Indorse Gift to War Memorial," *The Evening Star*, May 7, 1927; "D.C. Area Donations For Flood Sufferers in Midwest Hit \$12,718," *The Evening Star*, August 3, 1951; "Police Boy's Club Drive Winds Up with \$325,000." *The Evening Star*. February 6, 1951.

⁵⁷ "\$5,000 Gift Advances to Chinese Church Fund." *The Evening Star*. June 5, 1957.

⁵⁸ "Chinese Start New Year 'Clean'," *The Washington Times*, February 15, 1937.

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On Leong was the center of the celebration, with firecrackers outside and free food and cigars inside.⁵⁹ The move to Chinatown had provided a clean break with the past tong rivalries.

The tongs have become more benevolent than bothersome. Gradually, the “protection” came to mean aid to the old and needy. It is the tong that lends money to a businessman who has gone broke. The tong has a standing order with the restaurants to set up a table at dinner time for the old men to come and eat—with no questions asked, so that no one need “lose face.”⁶⁰

The prominence of On Leong, and its eclipse of the other tongs in Washington, conferred upon the On Leong president (and occasionally the secretary) the informal title of “mayor of Chinatown,” characterized as “the liaison officer between the Chinese community and all Occidental officials, District and Federal. He also acts as public relations counsel, welfare officer and furnishes interpreters when needed.”⁶¹ The moniker was applied to Charley Lee Soo by 1918, as successor to the honorary mayors who had been heads of the fading Gee Kung Tong.⁶² On Leong leaders would continue to be acknowledged “mayors” until the end of the 1950s.

Illicit activities and the “Tong Wars”

Native-born Whites were ambivalent about the presence of the Chinese. Immigrants had faced a firestorm of hatred and violence on the West Coast, one of the factors encouraging migration to the East. Whites perceived Chinese immigrants as both exotic and insular, the differences evoking suspicions and a certain fascination. The press both ridiculed the Chinese and portrayed them as a “Yellow Peril,” hyping the fact that some groups were involved in crime. Yet, it was the Nativist intimidation and theft of Chinese property that had first encouraged self-defense efforts.

There is no avoiding the inconvenient fact the On Leong Tong and its rivals were involved in illicit activities during their first few decades of existence. The American press had already played up a shady reputation of opium peddling and prostitution in San Francisco before the end of the nineteenth century. By one account, On Leong had grown quickly among businessmen in New York as a defense against the Hip Sing Tong, which was demanding protection money and control of gambling there.⁶³ The Chinese Six Companies, based in San Francisco, were so intimately involved with Chinese immigration that they had been complicit with smuggling and fraud in settling some of the newcomers.⁶⁴ Chinese tongs had also engaged in the opium trade.

⁵⁹ “Washington Chinese Omit Parade on New Year Day,” *The Evening Star*, February 20, 1939.

⁶⁰ “Chinatown Yearns For Lost Glamour,” *The Sunday Star*, April 26, 1959.

⁶¹ “Pon Ousts Moy as ‘Mayor’ Of D.C. Chinese Community,” *The Evening Star*, December 28, 1954.

⁶² “Negotiations for Purchase,” *The Evening Star*, July 7, 1918.

⁶³ Ling, 51.

⁶⁴ See Lawrence Douglas Taylor Hansen, “The Chinese Six Companies of San Francisco and the Smuggling of Chinese Immigrants across the U.S.-Mexico Border, 1882-1930,” *Journal of the Southwest*, Vol. 48, No. 1 (Spring 2006).

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But decades apart, Washington newspapers would report that the “absence of crime in Washington’s Chinatown has been the subject of much comment,” and “Our Chinese merchants... have not been bad citizens.... They have refrained from too many murders and too much traffic in opium.”⁶⁵ One columnist described the local Chinese as “wonderful people... They are honest and honorable. They pay their bills, and they mind their own business. They never molest white people.”⁶⁶ At the end of the 1950s, a retired police inspector averred that “The Chinese are probably the most law-abiding people in the community... When one of them starts getting out of hand, they straighten him out themselves. You seldom see a Chinese in criminal court.”⁶⁷

It was that minding of their own business that generally kept illegal activities under wraps unless White policemen or White opium smokers sought them out. The tongs represented legitimate businesses, but their policing of shops and their collection of dues could be coercive. And even in the nation’s capital they engaged in gambling and opium peddling.

Gambling was an immensely popular pastime among men in southern China, especially among men. The newcomers to America were probably baffled by law enforcement’s fixation on them, although the Chinese had experienced the same treatment in the West—despite a similar hunger for gaming among Americans and European immigrants alike. The Chinese games were peculiar to their culture, entering the consciousness of Americans through newspaper reports of police raids. *Fantan* (番攤) is a game of pure chance, played by tossing handfuls of chips on a table, dividing them into fours with a croupier stick and betting on what would be the remainder: zero, one, two or three. The bets were laid on one corner of the table representing each of the possible outcomes. In the game *pai gow* (or *paijiu*, 牌九), each player lays a wager before being dealt four dominoes face down. The players arrange the four into two pairs or “hands” whose combination of face values are the highest possible, hoping to beat the dealer’s hand. The Chinese ran lotteries, too, also known as “policy” or “numbers.” One version was similar to today’s lotteries, having bettors select ten out of eighty characters on a ticket, with the ticket seller marking down the selections in a book. It was said there was one central lottery office on the south side of Pennsylvania Avenue in 1896, and perhaps 50 satellite offices, mostly laundries.⁶⁸ The Chinese also adopted craps and a version of the card game also known as *fantan*.

Arrests at White- and Black-run gambling houses were plentiful by the time the first successful raid of such a Chinese establishment in Washington occurred in 1888.⁶⁹ Another raid, eight years later, resulted in the arrest of two at a store downstairs from the Gee Kung Tong, which could hardly have been ignorant of the operation.⁷⁰ In newspapers, at least, there is little evidence directly linking the Washington On Leong to gambling, although there were several busts in tong-controlled properties. This is largely due to the gamblers’ skill at keeping quiet, but also because

⁶⁵ “Through Washington’s Chinatown,” *The Evening Star*, September 6, 1908; “Wiping Out Our Chinatown,” *The Washington Times*, August 14, 1931.

⁶⁶ H.L. Rogers, “Sadness in Old Chinatown,” *The Evening Star*, July 31, 1932.

⁶⁷ “Old Chinatown Yearns for Lost Glamour,” *The Evening Star*, April 26, 1959.

⁶⁸ “They Play Fan Tan,” *The Evening Star*, February 22, 1896.

⁶⁹ “Raid On An Opium Joint,” *The Evening Star*, September 18, 1888; “Tricks That Are Vain,” *The Evening Star*, September 20, 1888.

⁷⁰ “Behind Melican Bars,” *The Morning Times*, June 10, 1896.

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the tongs preferred to rake off protection payments from otherwise independent operators, but also t.⁷¹ Violence between tongs occasionally arose from trying to wrest control of such revenue. One On Leong member was picked up in 1954, amid claims the association was paying police to look the other way.⁷²

Gambling was often associated with the sale of opium, but the first opium dens in Washington precede the first Chinese gaming houses, the first Chinatown, and the first tongs. In fact, one of the earliest opium “joints” may have had no Chinese involvement at all.⁷³ The drug had been among China’s *materia medica* for centuries, but Britain had overruled Qing efforts to restrict its importation, forcing the Middle Kingdom to accept a trade in Indian opium to balance foreign payments for luxury goods purchased in China. It was no wonder then that some Chinese merchants carried on the trade, but the United States had already developed its own problem of addiction—to morphine and laudanum—long before. In fact, the importation of opium to America was not banned until 1909, and patent medicines commonly contained cocaine and opioids until 1914.

It appears that the Washington chapter of On Leong was involved with opium from its start. President Charley Lee Soo himself was charged in 1918 and 1919 sweeps.⁷⁴ On the eve of an On Leong convention in 1930, federal narcotics agents battered down the doors of No. 335 Pennsylvania, the tong hall, and No. 344 Pennsylvania, the temporary headquarters of the national delegation.⁷⁵ After Prohibition, things died down, yet there were opium and heroin busts of individuals associated with both On Leong and Hip Sing in the 1940s and 1950s.⁷⁶

Disputes over revenue from gambling, opium and alcohol—as well as arguments over membership and women—were the proximate causes for the sporadic eruption into open violence of On Leong’s rivalry with the Hip Sing Tong in other cities from the 1890s to 1915 and from the mid 1920s into the 1930s. Dubbed the “tong wars” by the press, the recurring bloodshed was a matter of such importance that the Chinese government sometimes stepped in to make peace. Dr. Sun Yat-sen, the first and former president of China, was involved in a treaty of 1915. Alfred Sao-ke Sze, minister to the United States, helped negotiate a truce of 1924, shortly after an On Leong national convention of 500 delegates in Washington, which might be interpreted as a show of force.⁷⁷ Hip Sing was by then slipping in power and periodically allied with the Four Brothers tong. New York was a main theater of the wars, but they spilled over into the nation’s capital, with periodic reports of members arming themselves in expectation of imminent attack.⁷⁸

⁷¹ “Tong War Threat Here,” *The Washington Times*, October 27, 1923.

⁷² “150 Arrested in Crackdown in Chinatown,” *The Evening Star*, August 1, 1954; “Police Raiders Press Cleanup of Chinatown,” *The Evening Star*, January 1, 1955.

⁷³ “Opium Dens,” *The Evening Critic*, May 23, 1882.

⁷⁴ “Search Chinatown For Opium; Hold 8,” *The Evening Star*, July 7, 1918; “Six Chinamen Pay \$2,500 Fines,” *The Washington Herald*, June 22, 1919.

⁷⁵ “Federal Squad Gets Smoking Outfits,” *The Washington Times*, April 5, 1930.

⁷⁶ “10 Persons Held For Grand Jury After Drug Raids,” *The Evening Star*, November 5, 1945; “Raw Opium Of \$12,000 Value Seized in D.C. Raid,” *The Washington Post*, January 4, 1955.

⁷⁷ “Chinese Factions Agree on Truce,” *Evening Star*, October 17, 1924.

⁷⁸ “Say Tong Planned Machine Gun War,” *The Evening Star*, October 14, 1924; “Ohio Tong War Leaves D.C. Chinese Cold; “Murdering is Not our Business””; *The Washington Post*, August 10, 1939; “Police Guard Against

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The 1927 murder of Lem Chong, a waiter at the Canton Pagoda Restaurant, 1343 E Street NW, was one of the most notorious outrages. In its aftermath, both On Leong and Hip Sing members claimed the victim as a member of their own organizations, and each requested custody of the body for burial.⁷⁹ Leaders of the New York chapters got involved. When Metropolitan Police Department Superintendent Edwin Hesse threatened to expel the Chinese community from Washington, another truce was signed.⁸⁰ But things flared up again two years later when two Hip Sing men were killed and two others were wounded in a raid on its headquarters by an On Leong faction. More threats from the authorities resulted in an ostensible peace and the end to the tong wars in Washington. Although the bad blood lingered, the quarrels never escalated to the level of those in other major cities. In all, seven local deaths were attributed to the years of hostility.⁸¹

The On Leong Chinese Merchants Association and the second coming of Chinatown

On Leong Tong was the organization's official name in Cantonese and, indeed, the name under which it incorporated in Washington in 1919. But just at that time, mindful of the pejorative connotations that "tong" had already taken on in the American consciousness, chapters began styling themselves as the On Leong Chinese Merchants Association. While "Chinese" may not have been a strictly necessary identifier, to native-born Americans, the anodyne name stressed the organization's central function as a trade and benevolent association. It was in this role that On Leong made its most important contribution to the history and development of the District of Columbia.

Washington's original Chinatown had coalesced around the 300 and 400 blocks of Pennsylvania Avenue NW from the mid 1880s. As small as it was, it was an established, productive, diverse, and colorful neighborhood by the time that On Leong settled there three decades later. But even by that date, its destruction seemed ordained. A 1902 report of the United States Senate Park Commission on the subject of beautifying and otherwise improving the District of Columbia had concluded that the Capitol should be surrounded by public buildings, and "the space between Pennsylvania Avenue and the Mall should be occupied by the District building, the Hall of Records, a modern market, an armory for the District militia, and structures of like character." Pennsylvania Avenue, it continued, "spacious as it is in itself considered, is lined by structures entirely unworthy of the conspicuous positions they occupy. The upbuilding of Pennsylvania avenue, therefore, must of necessity have consideration in any comprehensive plan..." The

Flare Up of Tong War in Chinatown Here," *The Washington Times*, March 25, 1927; "Chinese Merchants Association Building (On Leong Tong)," Application for Historic Landmark, D.C. Historic Preservation Review Board, historicsites.D.C.preservation.org/items/show/453. See also, Der, 82-83. For more information about the Tong Wars in general, see Michael Zelenko, "The Tongs of Chinatown: A Conversation with Bill Lee," FoundSF, foundsf.org/index.php?title=The_Tongs_of_Chinatown. See also Richard H. Dillon, *The Hatchet Men: The Story of the Tong Wars in San Francisco's Chinatown* (New York: Van Rees Press, 1962), Scott D. Seligman, *Tong Wars: The Untold Story of Vice, Money, and Murder in New York's Chinatown* (New York: Viking Press, 2016).

⁷⁹ Chang, 47.

⁸⁰ Chang, 43; "Chinese Deporting is Hesse's Threat," *The Evening Star*, March 27, 1927.

⁸¹ William E. Peake, "Cryptic Crimes and Chinatown," *The Washington Post*, July 21, 1929.

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extension of B Street eastward through the avenue (to become Constitution Avenue), “will in part solve the problem.”⁸² Cutting Constitution Avenue through Reservations A, B and 10 was a dagger to the heart of Chinatown. In late 1929, the Commissioners of the District of Columbia authorized the purchase of 321, 323 and 333 Pennsylvania Avenue, a down payment on what would turn out to be a much larger judicial complex. Before the end of 1932, “[m]uch of its former Chinatown environment has already disappeared in the destruction of old buildings for the Municipal Center and the Federal Triangle and Mall development.”⁸³ Today, the National Gallery of Art, the E. Barrett Prettyman United States Courthouse, John Marshall Park, the Canadian Embassy and the pocket parks of Reservation E and Square 533S stand upon the old Chinatown.

The federal government had to pay a modicum of compensation to owners of condemned properties, but most residents and even business owners were renters and faced homelessness and scattered in all directions, at least temporarily. The community’s leading groups saw advantages to preserving their familial, social and economic networks by again concentrating in one neighborhood.

Property owners had petitioned the government to prevent the removal, but their petitions failed.⁸⁴ As demolition began, On Leong appointed secretary George Wen and former secretary George Lee to find a suitable new location, not only for its own hall, but for the principal neighborhood stores.⁸⁵ The men and their attorneys quietly opened negotiations to purchase or lease eleven properties on H Street NW between 5th and 9th streets plus a few on I Street and New York Avenue. On Leong chose the location due to access to public transportation and proximity to downtown.⁸⁶ It offered a mix of commercial and residential building stock of an age comparable to the old Chinatown and thus reasonably priced. Having barely patched up another peace, On Leong and Hip Sing had both expressed interest in building headquarters in the new Chinatown, but separated by more distance.⁸⁷ On Leong bought itself two lots, 618-620 H Street, and Hip Sing would end up little more than a block away, at 507.⁸⁸ The big move took place in 1931.⁸⁹ The first businesses—typically with their owners residing upstairs—were importer Wing Chong at 601 H Street; importer Wah Chung at 603 H; tea dealers Chin Yow at 604 H and Chin Chee “Charles” Moy at 609; and the shops on the ground floor of the On Leong building. The first Chinese eatery was the Guy Sum Restaurant, 610-612 H, owned by On Leong’s Charlie Lee Soo, who also sold groceries and cigars from 606 H.⁹⁰ The venerable Tuck Cheong Company grocery would relocate to 617 H. The Lee Family Association landed in the upper story of 617 H, the Moys at 611 H, and the Gee How Oak Tin at 604. The Gee Kung Tong took up residence in the 500 block. “We now

⁸² Charles Moore, ed., *Improvement of the Park System of the District of Columbia* (MacMillan Plan), (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1902), 28-29, 44, 69.

⁸³ “Auction Speeds New Bus Terminal,” *The Evening Star*, November 21, 1932.

⁸⁴ Lim, 35; Chow, 195.

⁸⁵ “Building Program Drives Chinese To Seek New Center,” *The Washington Post*, August 10, 1931.

⁸⁶ Mau-Thai Chen, *Socio-economic Adaptation and Ethnicity Evolution of the Chinese in Washington, D.C.*, doctoral dissertation, The American University, 1988, 132.

⁸⁷ “Rival Tong Plan to Separate on Leaving Avenue,” *The Evening Star*, August 8, 1929.

⁸⁸ Chen, 132; D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites, Chinese Merchant Association Building, Washington D.C. September 26, 1996.

⁸⁹ Der, 15.

⁹⁰ R.L. Polk & Co., *Boyd’s District of Columbia Directory*, 1933 (Washington, D.C.: R.L. Polk & Co., 1933).

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have a specific location,' said A.D. Wing Moy, an official of the association, 'and it will not be long before the old members come back and gradually take over the neighborhood just as before.'"⁹¹

The area that the Chinese community chose for relocation was already a multiethnic neighborhood. At the time, several businesses on 8th Street and I Street were owned and operated by members of the German Jewish community, and many Black residents lived along 6th Street.⁹² During negotiations for leasing and purchasing properties, the Chinese received assistance from the Jewish community. According to Meta Yee, who grew up in Chinatown:

Most of the D.C. area was shut off. They wouldn't sell to Chinese. The Chinese people had to get together and work with other communities and secretly buy property. My grandfather told me that a Jewish man helped him buy here in Chinatown. And what they did is they brought the property and the Chinese people would pay the Jewish people. And we were very lucky because the Jewish community, they were very honest about it, they took the money and when they were allowed to, they transferred the property over to the Chinese people who had been paying them for years.⁹³

The welcome was far from total, as several neighborhood property owners petitioned to prevent the "invasion": "It is not that we object to their coming because they are Chinese," claimed one, "It is just that we don't feel they will bring any business."⁹⁴ On Leong's counsel, Leonard Block, replied, "It is not Chinatown that is moving, it is just a group of reputable businessmen who have as much right to do business in one section of downtown Washington as in another."⁹⁵

The property selected by On Leong for its headquarters is thought to have been constructed in 1852, and certainly present by 1857.⁹⁶ The row consisting of 616 through 622 H Street had initially been fashionable enough, each house consisting of approximately eleven rooms over three floors and two-story kitchen wings, appointed with modern improvements such as gas lighting and plumbing. Early on, 616 was home to attorney Simon Wolf, then the District of Columbia Recorder of Deeds. The row remained mostly dwellings, but residents would often conduct business from their apartments. As early as 1875, Dr. E.T. Leon, the "Oldest Established and Only Reliable Ladies' Physician in the City," advertised consultations two days a week at 620 H, commuting from his home and office in Baltimore.⁹⁷ No. 618 quickly became a boarding house, its genteel Northern owner offering rooms to Patent Office clerks.⁹⁸ In 1881, Mrs. M.A. French, "Magnetic Healer and Business Medium" saw patients at her quarters there.⁹⁹ And it would be the 1908-1910

⁹¹ "Chinese Celebrate Opening Of \$45,000 Headquarters," *The Washington Post*, October 2, 1932.

⁹² Chen, 132-33.

⁹³ Meta Yee, Chinatown Voices, interview by Penny Lee, 6.

⁹⁴ "Chinese Invasion of H Street Irks Property Owners," *The Washington Post*, October 10, 1931.

⁹⁵ "Chinese Invasion of H-Street Irks Property Owners." *Washington Post*. October 10, 1931.

⁹⁶ "On Leong Chinese Merchants Association," *DC Historic Sites*, accessed January 26, 2024, <https://historicsites.dcpreservation.org/items/show/453>; Albert Boschke, *Map of Washington City, District of Columbia...*, (Washington, D.C.: A. Boschke, 1857).

⁹⁷ *The Evening Star*, May 27, 1876.

⁹⁸ *The Daily Morning Chronicle*, January 6, 1871; *The Evening Star*, March 27, 1873.

⁹⁹ *The Evening Star*, January 12, 1882.

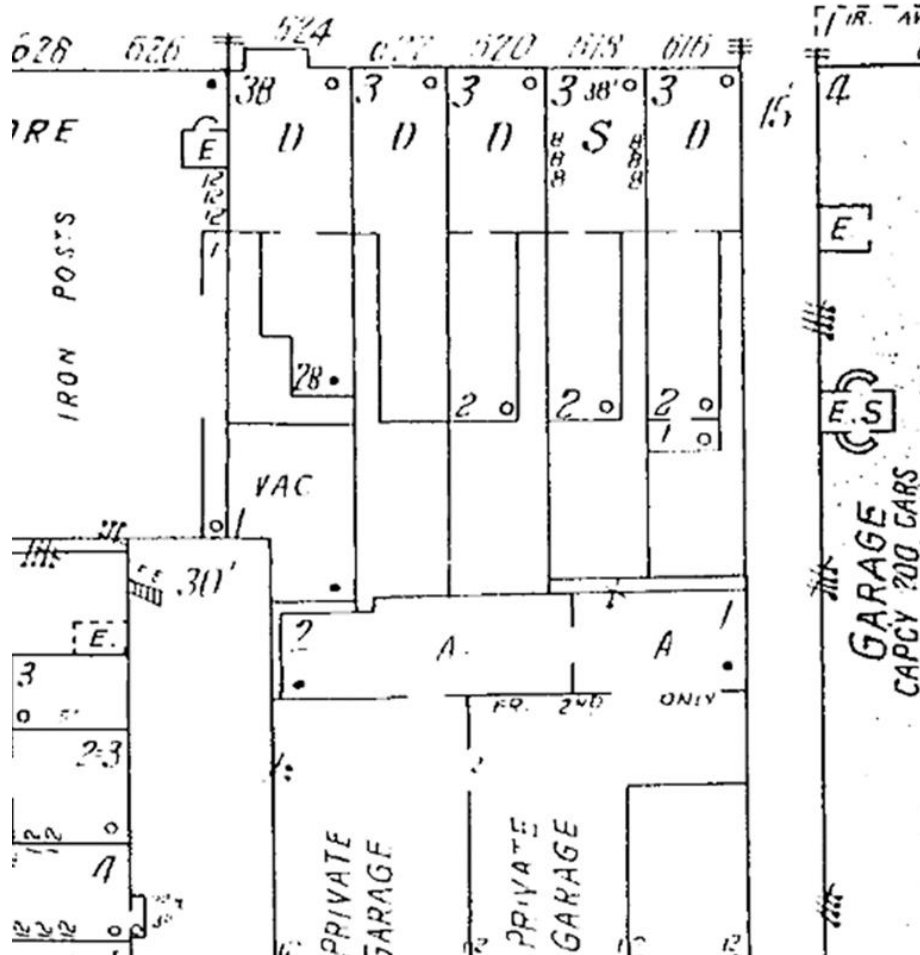
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mailing address of the Wahington Saengerbund, a German singing club, and the residence of the club's secretary.¹⁰⁰ No. 618 would be the first property on the row to become a commercial establishment, housing David Fox's tailor shop by the end of 1921.¹⁰¹ By that time, downtown was no longer a preferred dwelling place, a succession of suburbs having grown up since the time of the District's "territorial" government of the early 1870s. Commercial and light-industrial uses now surrounded the row, including a furniture store, garages, printers, and a steam laundry that competed with Chinese-owned shops.



A detail of the 1928 Sanborn insurance atlas

From David and Sarah Fox and S.F. and Louise Soldano, On Leong purchased 618 and 620 H, in the middle of the row, in October 1931.¹⁰² The tong's mortgage totaled \$8,000. With a \$15,000 loan from the Perpetual Building Association, it almost immediately began a renovation, including connecting the two former residences.

¹⁰⁰ "Vereins Calender," *The Washington Journal*, December 26, 1908.

¹⁰¹ R.L. Polk & Co., *Boyd's Directory of the District of Columbia*, 1922 (Washington, D.C.: R.L. Polk & Co., 1922).

¹⁰² District of Columbia Land Records, document no. 1931031662.

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Because permits for complex projects required a locally registered architect of record, On Leong engaged Marcus T. Hallett to plan the renovation and handle permitting. Chinese immigrants were typically peasants and merchants, and while some undoubtedly possessed construction skills, trained Chinese architects were rare and far more in demand in their home country. Hallett (1871-1951), a New York City native, was active as an architect in Richmond before 1910, but he had a few small commissions in Washington before relocating here permanently by 1925, when he designed a warehouse along the railroad line in the Northeast quadrant. Most of his new-construction projects were residential, mostly rowhouses, but he created detached houses, duplexes, apartments, stores, gas stations, small offices, workshops, garages, and one church, while also adding to and renovating existing buildings.¹⁰³ Contractor A.T. Contella, doing business as Atco Construction Company, undertook the work on the On Leong renovation.¹⁰⁴ Much of the exterior work was decorative; it was important to On Leong that its headquarters reflect a wholly new and strongly Chinese flavor. The principal structural challenge was the removal of portions of the party wall between the buildings for circulation and to enlarge the useful area upstairs. The permit was granted at the end of December 1931, and all but finish work was completed in early April.¹⁰⁵ A modest dedication then was followed by a proper bash in October.¹⁰⁶

The total cost of the project was said to have been \$45,000, which must have included the property acquisition, because the construction estimate was only \$6,500.¹⁰⁷ *The Evening Star* described the finished product as “the most conspicuous building in the whole neighborhood” and a “transplanted bit of the Celestial Empire,” something of a new town hall for its “mayor”:

The building in which On Leong headquarters is now located is one of the most extraordinarily decorative in Washington. The three-story double brick structure has been remodeled and redecorated in what is perhaps an American conception of Chinese taste, and the effect is nothing but stimulating. The building presents the gayest of appearances with new coats of vivid yellow, green, red, and gold, and the pagoda-like protuberances above the windows and doors add to the Oriental effect.

Huge golden Chinese characters on the front of the building proclaim the importance of the place, and a modest sign on the door of the stairway leading to the upper floor reads: “On Leong Chinese Merchants’ Association.”¹⁰⁸

That stair led to the tong’s executive offices on the second floor and to an assembly hall and a shrine to Guan Yu (Guan Gong) on the third.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰³ District of Columbia Historic Preservation Office, Historic Building Permits Database.

¹⁰⁴ “Week’s Projects Include 17 Homes,” *The Evening Star*, January 2, 1932.

¹⁰⁵ District of Columbia Building Permits, repair permit no. 149265, December 28, 1931.

¹⁰⁶ “On Leongs Occupy New Home,” *The Evening Star*, April 13, 1932; “Chinese Celebrate Opening Of \$45,000 Headquarters,” *The Washington Post*, October 2, 1932.

¹⁰⁷ “Chinese Celebrate Opening Of \$45,000 Headquarters,” *The Washington Post*, October 2, 1932; District of Columbia Building Permits, repair permit 149265.

¹⁰⁸ Rogers, “Sadness in Old Chinatown,” *The Evening Star*, July 31, 1932.

¹⁰⁹ “On Leongs Occupy New Home,” *The Evening Star*, April 13, 1932; “Chinese Hail Start of New Year,” *The Evening Star*, January 31, 1957.

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*On Leong Chinese Merchants Association building, 1930s.
Theodor Horydczak Collection, Library of Congress.*

The On Leong court of law is conducted in the top floor chapel... It is there at a long table surrounded by high-backed chairs, that the tong's council meets each month to conduct the affairs of the order. At one side of the room is an altar with Chinese idols alongside flowers that symbolize everlasting life. It is the most solemn sanctuary in Chinatown.¹¹⁰

The lower floors are occupied by two well-appointed Chinese stores, the one at No. 618 being conducted by Hong Yick & Co., while that at 620 bears the inscription "Mong Sang" on the window... Inside, one encounters that peculiar odor which to traveled Americans suggests the Orient, and to others connotes Chinatown.¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ "Old Chinatown Years for Lost Glamour," *The Evening Star*, April 26, 1959.

¹¹¹ Rogers, "Sadness in Old Chinatown," *The Evening Star*, July 31, 1932.

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“Mong Sang,” or Mon Seng, was the pharmacy of herbalist and former On Leong vice president Moy Sheuck.¹¹²



Left to right: Building contractor A.T. Contella, Lee Y. Nahme, George Y. Wen and architect Marcus Hallett at the dedication of the new On Leong headquarters. The Evening Star, April 13, 1932. Longtime secretary Wen was probably the first chapter leader born in America. He was often the public face of and spokesperson for the tong and sometimes appeared as translator for community members. Nahme was then associate secretary.

¹¹² See “And In the Spring Come Thoughts of ‘Yarbs’,” *The Evening Star*, March 31, 1935.

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Future tong president F.S. Moy operated the curio shop Hong Yick & Company, described in some detail in the same article:

On display in the windows are attractive collections of Chinese porcelains... and objects of art carved from ivory and coral. There are a number of lamps with intricately carved bases, smoking sets, swords made of Chinese coins string on stout cords... There are also packages of tea of various blends and brands, and some curious Chinese plants... [Inside] are tables and chairs, with numerous Chinese smoking and drinking tea. Behind a long counter are neat shelves containing a multitude of commodities and articles of various size, shape and appearance....¹¹³

The Hong Yick space would be taken over by the Wing Sing Gift Shop by 1953.



“Chinese Hail Start of New Year,” The Evening Star, January 31, 1957. Davis Lee and Jimmy Dere—the outgoing and incoming On Leong presidents—making an offering at the tong’s shrine.

¹¹³ “Sadness in Old Chinatown,” *The Evening Star*, July 31, 1932.

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Supporting the community, 1930s to 1990s

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The 1930s were consumed with re-establishing Chinatown and stabilizing the community in the face of the Great Depression. Some population was lost in a reverse migration of those who could make a better living in China.¹¹⁴ The Japanese invasion put a stop to this, and On Leong joined forces with other groups fundraising for refugees and the Nationalist war effort. There was great overlap between the membership of the local tong chapter and that of the local branch of the Chinese National Salvation Association and of Chinatown's auxiliary police and servicemen.

Over time, and with even sharper restriction of immigration after 1924, a larger proportion of the Chinese American community was native-born. An influx of new immigrants came after World War II, when many bachelor veterans were allowed to bring their wives and families from Asia. This population dispersed beyond Chinatown and into Washington's suburbs. Such movement coincided with a diversification of professions beyond the traditional ones. As American as anyone, the Chinese at mid century were less subject to the influence of the established organizations.¹¹⁵ When immigration was finally loosened again in the mid 1960s, arriving Chinese were increasingly non-Cantonese. These trends reduced the reach and the revenue of the old tongs, and a desire to improve their public relations made them ultimately turn wholly legitimate. Even the old title "Mayor of Chinatown" faded for a time, to be taken up by the presidents of the Washington branch of the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association in the 1970s.¹¹⁶ This postwar umbrella organization quickly assumed a large community role, taking over, for instance, the principal duty for burials.¹¹⁷

In the 1950s, On Leong played a key role in raising money for the construction of a permanent home for the Chinese Christian Church, and it retained a close relationship with the congregation thereafter.

In the wake of Civil Rights-era unrest and urban renewal of the 1960s, the association worked with community organizers and officials to fight further disruption and displacement by a convention center and a sports arena in the 1980s and 1990s.¹¹⁸

Washington's On Leong branch may have hosted its last national convention of the tong in 1951, but it maintained its business focus.¹¹⁹ It acquired at least two more properties. Not long after the 1943 purchase of the four-story boarding house at 606 H Street, the second floor became the office

¹¹⁴ Betty Lee Sung, *Defiant Second Daughter: My First 90 Years* (Charleston: Advantage Media Group, 2015), 23-24. The 1930 census numbers indicate a drop from 1920, almost certainly reflective, too, of the breakup of Chinatown. The numbers increased again by 1940, suggesting a rebound in both the economy and the community, and the arrival of war refugees.

¹¹⁵ Meredith S. Buel, "As American As Hot Dogs: Washington's Chinese," *The Evening Star*, February 12, 1956.

¹¹⁶ "As American As Hot Dogs: Washington's Chinese," *The Evening Star*, February 12, 1956.

¹¹⁷ "Chinatown Is Small, But Area Buzzes With Activity," *The Evening Star*, May 21, 1951.

¹¹⁸ Unidentified informant interview, July 8, 2022; "Wrecker's Ball Threatens Way of Life in Chinatown," *The Washington Post*, April 24, 1981.

¹¹⁹ "How Does Chinatown Feel About Korea?" *The Evening Star*, April 26, 1951.

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of the Kuomintang Club, supporters of the Nationalists on Taiwan.¹²⁰ The upper floors served as a gambling house that came to be operated by restaurateur and “banker” Sam F. Wong in the 1970s.¹²¹ There were narcotics raid there in the 1940s and 1950s.¹²² In the 1980s, a travel agency occupied the ground floor and, more recently, it has been a gift shop. In 1997, the upper part of the building became On Leong’s successor headquarters to 618-620 H. At the end of 2019, the On Leong Tong transferred ownership to a new On Leong Tong D.C. Church Community, Inc., a District corporation established five years earlier, but the façade still bears the association’s golden characters.¹²³

The three-story Victorian building at 719 6th had been built by a German entrepreneur as a meeting hall. On Leong purchased it in 1960, holding it for only a decade before conveying it to the Ruby Restaurant, whose president, Raymond D.E. Lee, was an On Leong officer.¹²⁴

The 1932 headquarters itself was finally sold in 1997, to 618 H Partnership LLC.¹²⁵ The same year, the ground floor was leased to and remodeld for the Chinatown Garden Restaurant (or its Chinese name, 龍之味飯店, Taste of the Dragon Restaurant), still the tenant today.¹²⁶ The upper floors have recently been a cocktail and whiskey lounge but are now occupied by a Mexican/Salvadoran bar and grill. The proposed terminal date for the property’s period of significance is 1974, or 50 years before present, only to observe the National Register’s 50-year rule.

Integrity

The On Leong Merchant Building retains high integrity of location, and design, materials, feeling, and association. It has lost the considerable material of its former and rather typical, residential, rear wings. The building was originally purchased and altered by the On Leong Merchant Association in 1932. It remains a visual landmark of Chinatown. Although the setting has changed with demolition and new construction, at the time of the 1932 renovation, the property was, as now, surrounded by an urban mix of uses and of larger and smaller buildings.

¹²⁰ District of Columbia Land Records, document no. 1943006848; “Chinatown: setting for a poignant tale of paper sons, the Gold Mountain and plastic pagodas,” *The Washington Post*, April 25, 1971. “Father Victor Wong... the associate pastor at St. Mary’s Church... says, ‘The Kuomintang Club does nothing at all. Those people never follow Dr. Sun Yat-sen’s sayings. Even on the birthday of Sun Yat-sen, they keep on playing mah jong. I hate to say it, but actually it’s a gambling hall.’”

¹²¹ “19 Arrested in Gaming Raid,” *The Washington Post*, February 12, 1969; “31 Arrested in Chinatown ‘Fan-Tan’ Raid,” *The Washington Post*, October 24, 1971; “Chinatown Veil on Fan Tan Lifted,” *The Washington Star*, October 9, 1975; “21 Arrested After Investigation Of Gambling Protection Bribe Bid,” *The Washington Post*, September 18, 1977; “4 Chinese ‘Banks’ Fail, Partners Blame Head,” *The Washington Post*, February 26, 1978.

¹²² “D.C. Raids Net Huge Dope Cache,” *The Washington Post*, March 6, 1944; “122 Chinese Seized in New Dope Raids,” *The Washington Post*, November 11, 1945; “Dope Ring Key Figure Seized Here,” *The Washington Post*, August 2, 1954; “Fifteen Chinese Are Named As Sequel to Big Raids Here,” *The Washington Post*, August 17, 1954.

¹²³ District of Columbia Land Records, document no. 2019135348; District of Columbia Corporation Records.

¹²⁴ District of Columbia Land Records, document no. 1970001217.

¹²⁵ District of Columbia Land Records, document no. 9700023961.

¹²⁶ District of Columbia Land Records, document no. 9800001250.

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Although the original two rowhouses that composed of the On Leong Merchant Association building were Victorian rowhouses, their exterior renovation to incorporate Chinese architectural features was thorough. The most defining features are the original S-tiled pagoda roofs, the window heads and the remarkable storefront. While the interior and the storefront glazing have been modified in order to accommodate the building's restaurant use; a historic photograph is instantly recognizable beside the present-day building. The retention of the façade and the high cultural importance of the property should outweigh any diminution of integrity.

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Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # _____
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____
- recorded by Historic American Landscape Survey # _____

Primary location of additional data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
 - Other State agency
 - Federal agency
 - Local government
 - University
 - Other
- Name of repository: _____

Historic Resources Survey Number (if assigned): _____

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10. Geographical Data

Acree of Property 0.1012 acre (4,410 square feet)

Use either the UTM system or latitude/longitude coordinates

Latitude/Longitude Coordinates

Datum if other than WGS84: _____
(enter coordinates to 6 decimal places)

Latitude:

Longitude:

Or

UTM References

Datum (indicated on USGS map):

NAD 1927 or NAD 1983

Zone: 18-S

Easting: 324735

Northing: 4307581

Verbal Boundary Description

The On Leong Chinese Merchants Association occupies Lot 50 in Square 454, which is 40 feet wide. The west property line is 112.5 feet deep, and the east line is 106 feet, with the rear lot line jogging north that 4.5 foot difference for half its length, recalling an alley that formerly terminated behind 618 H Street (see 1997 plat, Map 2).

Boundary Justification

The present lot was created in 1997, but it combines the historic lots of the two constituent former residences dating to the 1850s.

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11. Form Prepared By

name/title: Karen Yee and Timothy Dennee
organization: 1882 Foundation
street & number: 508 I Street NW
city or town: Washington state: District of Columbia zip code: 20001
e-mail: info@1882foundation.org
telephone: 202-442-8847
date: February 3, 2024

Additional Documentation

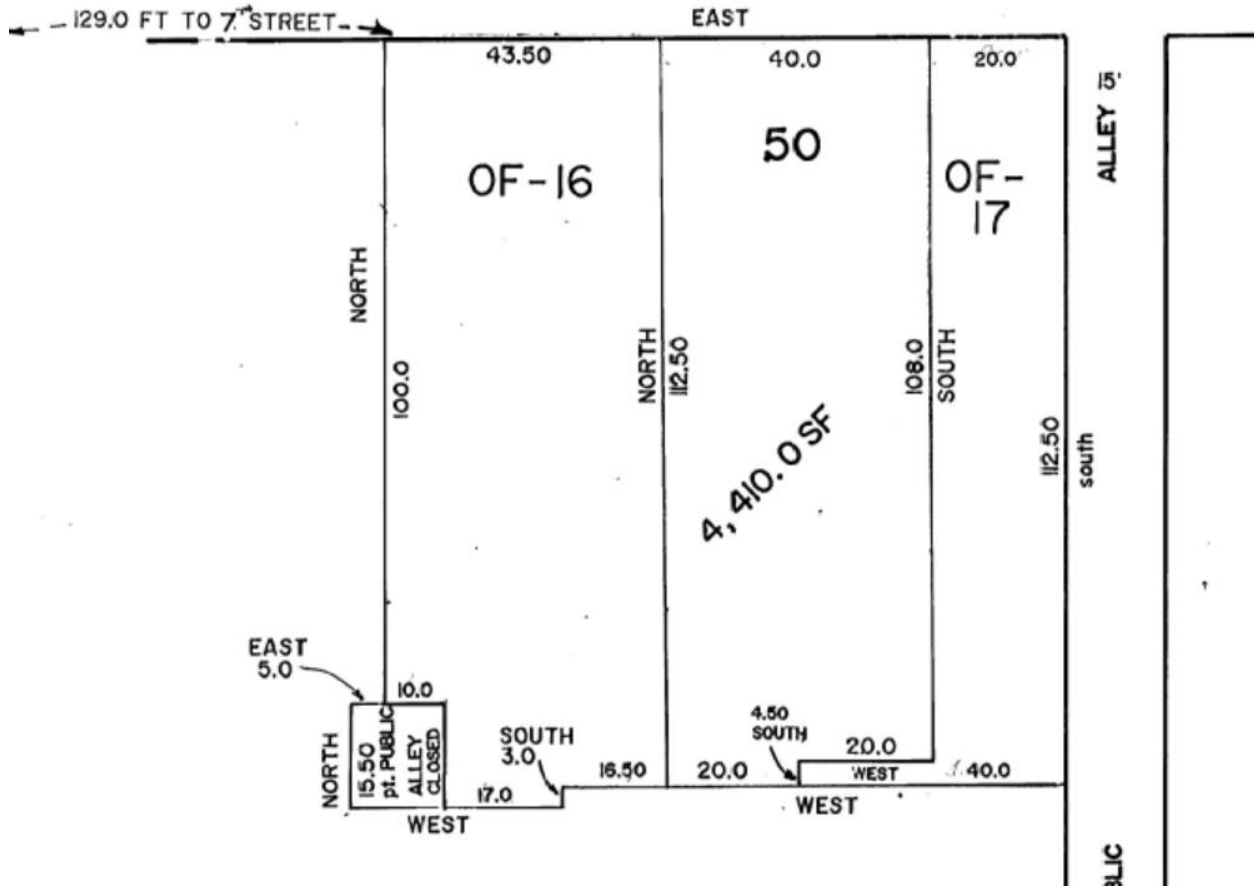
Maps



*Map 1. The location of the On Leong Chinese Merchants Association is indicated by a star.
2019 USGS Topographic Map.*

On Leong Chinese Merchants Association
Name of Property

Washington, D.C.
County and State



Map 2. A 1997 plat of the property depicting the present lot (50) boundaries.

On Leong Chinese Merchants Association
Name of Property

Washington, D.C.
County and State

Photographs

Submit clear and descriptive photographs. The size of each image must be 1600x1200 pixels (minimum), 3000x2000 preferred, at 300 ppi (pixels per inch) or larger. Key all photographs to the sketch map. Each photograph must be numbered and that number must correspond to the photograph number on the photo log. For simplicity, the name of the photographer, photo date, etc. may be listed once on the photograph log and doesn't need to be labeled on every photograph.

Photographs

Name of Property: On Leong Chinese Merchants Association

City and County: Washington, D.C.

Photographer: Karen Yee

Date Photographed: April 1, 2022 and August 22, 2022 except as noted

Number of Photographs: 8

Photograph #1: Front (north) elevation of the On Leong Merchant, looking south.

Photograph #2: Site view of the On Leong Merchant Association building, looking southwest.

Photograph #3: Photo of recessed store entryway, looking south.

Photograph #4: Close-up of roof eaves, looking south.

Photograph #5: Close-up of front façade, looking south.

Photograph #6: The rear of the first-floor interior. Photo by Janice Hunter, Google Streetview, 2019.

Photograph #7: The front of the first-floor interior. Photo by Janice Hunter, Google Streetview, 2019.

Photograph #8: Third floor interior, looking from the main block into the rear wing. Photo by David Lynch, January 2024, Google.

Photograph #9: Rear of building, looking north.

On Leong Chinese Merchants Association
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Photograph #1

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Name of Property

Washington, D.C.
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Photograph #2

On Leong Chinese Merchants Association
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County and State



Photograph #3

On Leong Chinese Merchants Association
Name of Property

Washington, D.C.
County and State



Photograph #4

On Leong Chinese Merchants Association
Name of Property

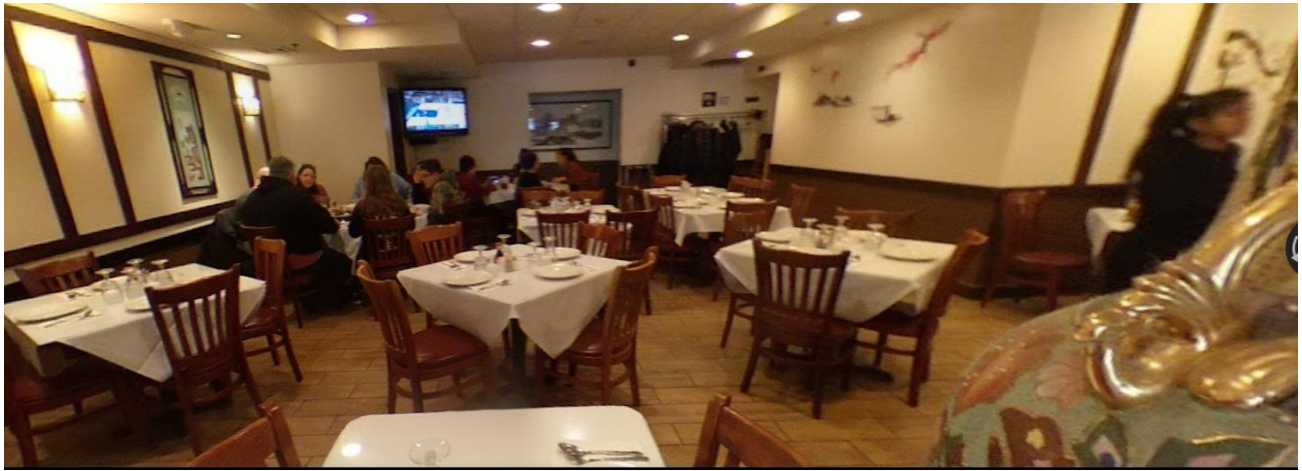
Washington, D.C.
County and State



Photograph #5

On Leong Chinese Merchants Association
Name of Property

Washington, D.C.
County and State



Photograph #6



Photograph #7

On Leong Chinese Merchants Association
Name of Property

Washington, D.C.
County and State



Photograph #8