



Uncovering
Sacramento's
Chinese
Pioneers



PRESERVING A PIECE OF OUR NATION'S HISTORY

Indiana Jones aside, most archaeologists don't decide to excavate a site solely because of what they might learn from it. More often, they are called in because the site is about to undergo a change, usually a construction project.

Archeologists are frequently approached by individuals or firms who are working under state or federal laws that require an archeological study as part of the environmental review process. If a project will affect an important archeological site, the owner brings in archaeologists to study and excavate the site in order to extract the information that it contains.

In this case, a new U.S. Courthouse was being built in Sacramento on a site that, a century and a half earlier, had been the heart of the city's earliest Chinese district. As its residents moved to other nearby blocks, this site was converted to other uses. For many years the traces of the Chinese settlement lay buried beneath a parking lot connected to the Southern Pacific railroad yards.

The building of the Courthouse provided the opportunity to learn more about an important pioneer community. As the planning and design of the Courthouse proceeded, its builder—the U.S. General Services (GSA)—sponsored research into historic documents to determine whether important remains might exist on the site. Historians confirmed that the site had lain undisturbed since this part of the neighborhood was razed in 1855 and could contain significant artifacts.

The federal government's policy is to protect and preserve our nation's historical and cultural resources for the inspiration and benefit of present and future generations. To assist in the preservation of our rich and varied heritage is part of GSA's mission.





Guided by the National Historic Preservation Act and in cooperation with the California Office of Historic Preservation, GSA authorized a full-scale investigation of the Courthouse site.

And so it was that a crew of archaeologists from Sonoma State University came to spend much of November and December 1995, two of the wettest months in recent history, frantically working to uncover a remarkable piece of Sacramento history. To save time—construction was scheduled to begin soon after they quit the site—the excavators bagged over six tons of artifact-rich soil and trucked them back to Sonoma State University's Archaeology Lab to be sorted later. The artifacts found—buttons, coins, bones from food animals, fragments of porcelain dishes and glass bottles, among other items—hint at the daily lives of the people who once lived on this very spot.

Like a good mystery novel, this booklet interweaves two tales—one is about the finding of clues, and the other describes what the clues reveal. Here you will read about the history of the Chinese community that occupied the Courthouse site, and also about the detective work that helped us discover their story—the field work of historical archaeologists.

In tribute to the Chinese pioneers, a permanent exhibit on the history of the Chinese community in Sacramento, including some of the artifacts found on this site, has been set up near the entrance rotunda of the Courthouse.

China Slough, 1878.
Sacramento City
Library.

Uncovering Sacramento's Chinese Pioneers

It's the summer of 1855.

On the south bank of murky China Lake, organizations from Guangdong Province in southern China have built boardinghouses for workers on their way to and from the mines. Food, a safe place to stay, and even a hospital were provided to the immigrants who worked to pay off their passage hoping to return home with money in their pockets. Tragically, the heat of a Sacramento summer combined with the wood and canvas of pioneer architecture to create a fire that swept the Chinese District, destroying Chinese shops, homes, as well as the rickety boardinghouses.

But this is not the end. For in the ruins of these burned buildings were ceramic pots from China, food bones from pigs, turtles, and Chinese fish, as well as small, personal items that mingled to create a layer of artifacts that is a unique source of information about the time and place. Protected by several feet of earthen fill, the remains of the Chinese boardinghouses lay unsuspected for 140 years until they were uncovered by archaeologists before the construction of the Sacramento Courthouse building.

It has become fashionable in recent years for historians to give a nod to California's Chinese pioneers as railroad and levee builders. Historical archaeology can take us further by combining artifacts with the history of a particular place and time—to make the past approachable by looking at it on a human scale. The archaeology of this site brings alive a forgotten way of life that is one part of the multi-faceted story of the California Gold Rush and the people who experienced it.



HISTORICAL ARCHAEOLOGY — HISTORY WITH DIRT ON IT

People have lived in California for at least 12,000 years. Since we know so little about California's ancient past, almost every discovery can add something new.

Historical archaeology involves more than simply plucking interesting artifacts out of the ground. For without an understanding of how the items were actually used in the past we will never get a coherent story from them nor understand what they have to reveal. To reconstruct this historical context we use a variety of sources: the archaeological features and layers of soil themselves, the artifacts, historic records, anthropologists' observations, and interviews with elders from the community. Taken together, all these materials help us construct a more authentic and complex view of the past as it was lived by these pioneers.

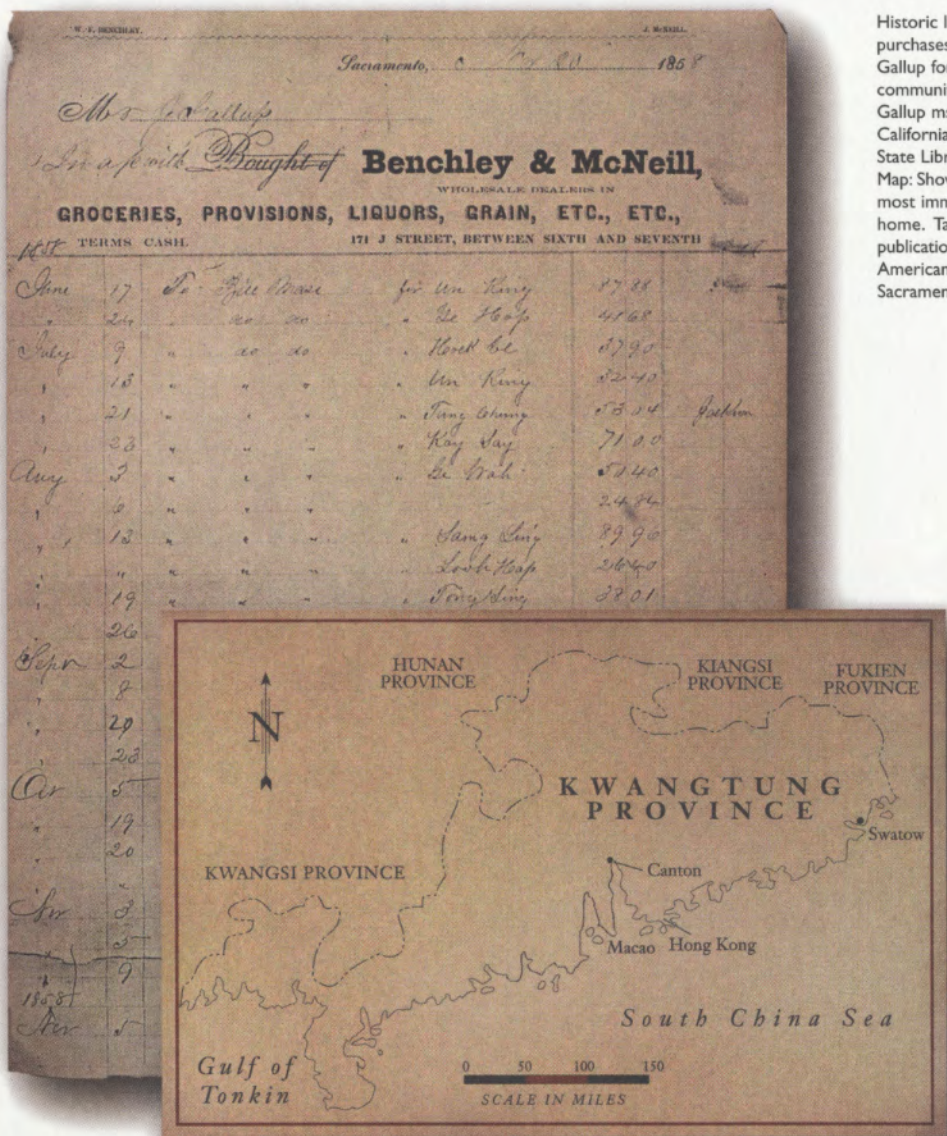


Detail of a historic ledger showing purchases. Gallup ms. Collection, California Room, California State Library.

THE CHINESE IN GOLD MOUNTAIN

Who were the Chinese who came to Gold Rush California?

The southern Chinese province of Guangdong (Canton) was home to most of the immigrants. Driven to leave their homeland by social unrest and a series of natural disasters, they made the arduous 3-month voyage to Sacramento. By 1852, there were over 800 Chinese participating in the community not only as laborers, but as shopkeepers, actors, butchers, priests, doctors and farmers, as well as miners and musicians.

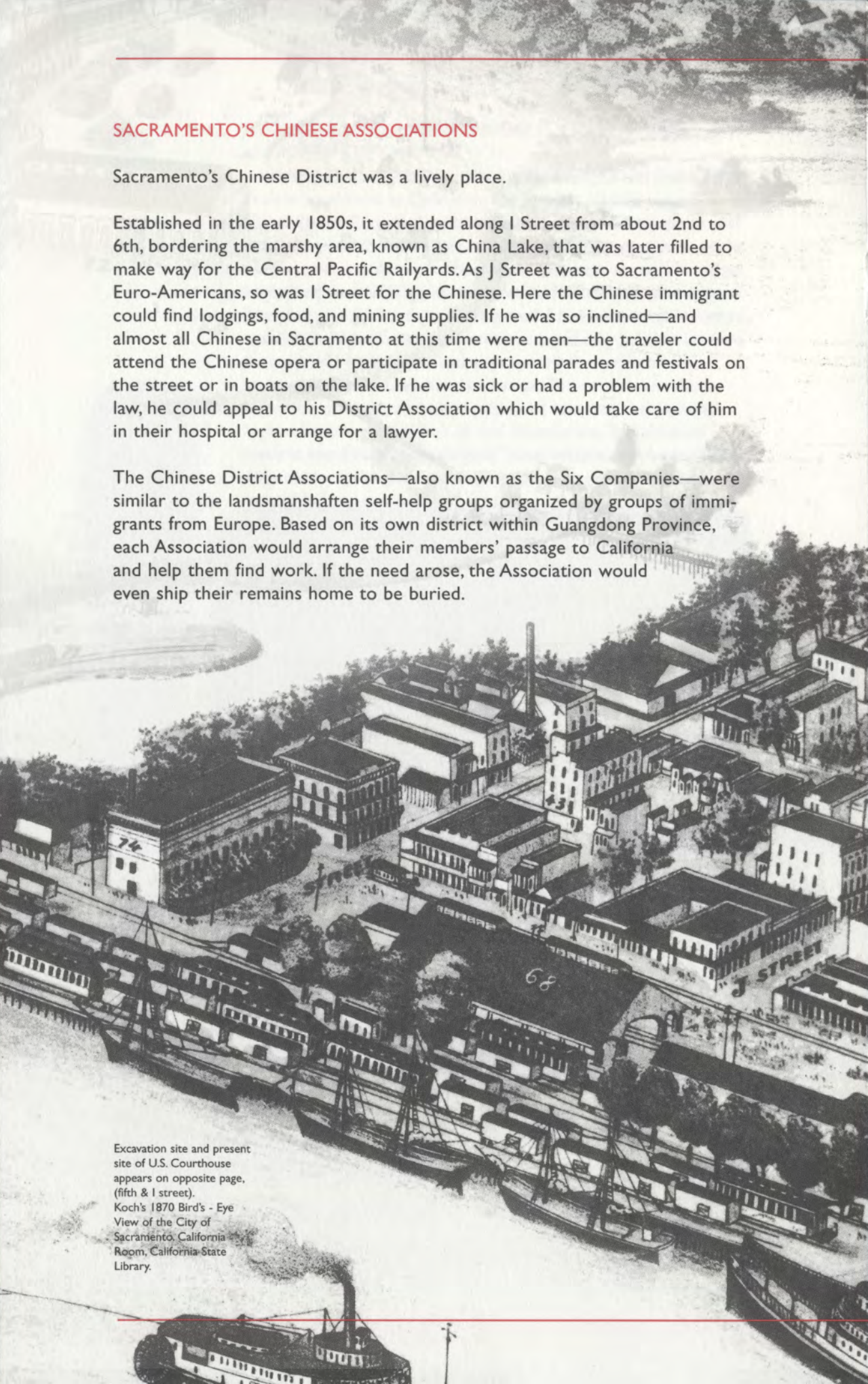


SACRAMENTO'S CHINESE ASSOCIATIONS

Sacramento's Chinese District was a lively place.

Established in the early 1850s, it extended along I Street from about 2nd to 6th, bordering the marshy area, known as China Lake, that was later filled to make way for the Central Pacific Railyards. As J Street was to Sacramento's Euro-Americans, so was I Street for the Chinese. Here the Chinese immigrant could find lodgings, food, and mining supplies. If he was so inclined—and almost all Chinese in Sacramento at this time were men—the traveler could attend the Chinese opera or participate in traditional parades and festivals on the street or in boats on the lake. If he was sick or had a problem with the law, he could appeal to his District Association which would take care of him in their hospital or arrange for a lawyer.

The Chinese District Associations—also known as the Six Companies—were similar to the landsmanshaften self-help groups organized by groups of immigrants from Europe. Based on its own district within Guangdong Province, each Association would arrange their members' passage to California and help them find work. If the need arose, the Association would even ship their remains home to be buried.



Excavation site and present site of U.S. Courthouse appears on opposite page, (fifth & I street).
Koch's 1870 Bird's - Eye View of the City of Sacramento. California Room, California State Library.

JOSIAH GALLUP: CHINESE BUSINESS AGENT

By the time of his death in 1859 during one of early Sacramento's cholera epidemics, Josiah Gallup had been an attorney, commission agent, City Alderman, and the respected business representative for several Chinese District Associations.

Arriving in California with the Gold Rush in his early 20s, this son of a Connecticut merchant family sought to make his pile in commerce rather than mining. Gallup's ability to speak Cantonese—the language of most Chinese immigrants at the time—made him a valuable ally for the officials of the District Associations. Where they had business to be transacted with a non-Chinese company or needed representation in the courts or to the City fathers, Gallup acted as intermediary. Gallup's hand was in everything from the purchase of flour and building supplies to arranging a permit to close I Street for the annual Chinese New Year festivities.

We can even see his influence in the archaeological discoveries made on the site.

SETTLERS AND SOJOURNERS

Bonds of tradition, obligations to family, and religion tied these Chinese argonauts to their ancestral villages. Like '49ers from the eastern United States, most saw themselves as sojourners who would make their money in California and return home as soon as they could. Although there were opportunities to prosper in the New World the social climate of the time allowed and even encouraged institutionalized racism. Discriminatory taxes, a legal system that denied Chinese the right to testify in court or become US citizens, and a widespread disregard for what today would be considered basic human rights, discouraged many of these pioneers from putting down roots in California.



Josiah Gallup.
Gallup ms.
Collection,
California
State Library.



Mr. Gallup
In a few with Bought of



DIGGING UP 'CHINADOM'

"How do you know where to dig?" Every experienced archaeologist has been asked the question a thousand times. And it's a good question since, without a carefully formed plan, finding important sites would be like looking for the proverbial needle in a haystack—a haystack buried under a parking lot, that is. Sacramento is fortunate in having a wealth of historic maps, tax records, and other sources that document its past. The Courthouse archaeological project began by piecing these documents together to find out what happened on the site—who lived and worked there—and whether the things that they left behind were likely to have been preserved.

A fire had razed the block in 1855. If the business owners and residents conformed to the practices of the time, archeologists predicted that they left the wreckage where it fell and hurriedly built over it. Yet, what was debris to those early Sacramentans is irreplaceable information to the historical archaeologist. Most importantly, if they survived, the artifacts would have excellent "context"—that is, the researchers would know precisely when the objects were deposited and what kinds of activities they represent. Like any social scientist, archaeologists must have that tightly controlled data in order to be confident in their conclusions. Without context, archaeological artifacts are mere curios that have little to tell us.

Inset:
Excavation site.
Background:
Artifacts in place
at excavation site.
Photographs,
Anthropological
Studies Center,
Sonoma State
University

A HOLE FULL OF TRASH

In the early-1850s, in a dingy courtyard 10 feet below the I Street levee, a tree fell over. The hole left by its root ball was cleaned out, someone installed a wood lining, and for a short time it served as a well or cistern. When the Yeung-Wo Company—one of the largest Chinese District Associations—moved onto the parcel in 1855, Company Agent Tong Ahchick arranged for piped water to serve his office and the Company boardinghouse. The well, now something of a hazard, began to fill with refuse from the boardinghouse and the Company office that fronted on I Street.

Exactly 140 years later, archaeologists found that the pit contained several hundred artifacts that provide interesting glimpses of life into this obscure recess of Sacramento's history.

Food bones from the pit show that, while the city's Anglo-Americans ate the beef and mutton, their Chinese neighbors dined on exotic species of fish including the Chinese Golden Threadfin and Sea Bream. Bones from Chinese turtles were also found in the pit; these may have been used for medicine as well as food. Pork, which was expensive in California at the time and particularly savored by the Chinese, made up nearly half of the mammals represented by bones in the pit. Adding to the variety, the remains of several species of birds—chicken or turkey, pheasant, geese, and ducks—were also discovered.

Fowl, pork, and imported fish and reptiles. These were all expensive items at the time; certainly not the kind of food that the stereotypical "Chinese laborer" could afford. So whose refuse was this? Archaeologists believe that much of it represents the household of the Company Agent, perhaps Tong Ahchick himself.

Inset: Pit containing artifacts. Photo, Anthropological Studies Center, Sonoma State University



UNCOVERING THE REMAINS OF THE GREAT FIRE OF '55

First came the backhoe. Having plotted exactly where the remains of the fire of '55 likely survived, the archaeologists' task was to remove several feet of fill and 19th-century demolition debris. Initially with heavy equipment and then carefully with trowels they revealed exactly what had been hoped for: an 8-inch thick layer of charcoal-blackened soil and wood ash, rich in pottery, food bones, and all the other remains of everyday life in the Chinese District.

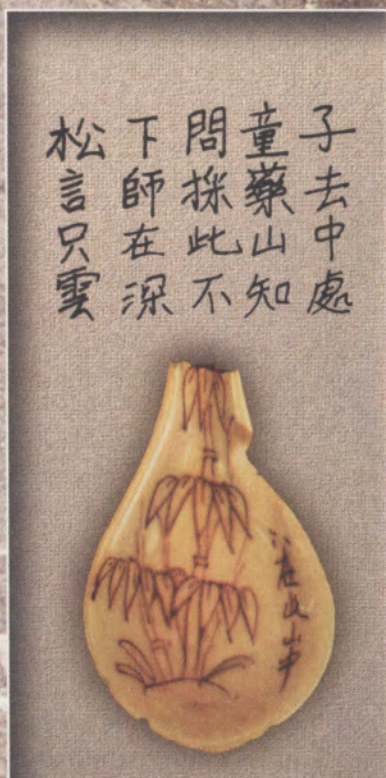
According to historic City records, these materials were from the Yu Chung Company and the boardinghouse that shared its premises. A bonus discovery was an earlier layer, underneath the fire remains, that was also rich in artifacts and represented the Chinese District in the early 1850s. Together these layers yielded thousands of items to be cleaned, cataloged, and analyzed.

Although much is made of the role of the Chinese in the opium trade, only three of the thousands of artifacts from this location relate to the practice of opium smoking: a pipe fragment and two lamp parts.

Some of the finds evoke pioneer conditions and the Gold Rush itself: An iron chest, snugly buried in a small pit, contained a skinning knife, musket balls, and some articulated animal bones as well as samples of gold-bearing quartz and a crucible for extracting the precious metal.

But most of the artifacts from this portion of the site—some burned from the fire—are seemingly mundane. Most numerous are the fish bones, over 4000 in all, representing 15 species from as far away as southeast Asia. Although beef and mutton bones are doubtless from California animals, they were butchered in very non-American ways. Marks on the bones from saws and cleavers suggest that although the Chinese got much of their meat from local Euro-American butchers—often in the form of steaks and roasts—the cuts were re-butchered in the boardinghouse kitchen into the small bite-sized pieces that are favored in Chinese cooking; an interesting combination of Chinese and Euro-American cultures.

Next, in terms of quantity, are shards of ceramic tableware and storage vessels from China and England. The collection of Chinese pots is very heterogeneous with many decorative types and shapes: tiny porcelain cups—one bearing a fragment of an ancient Chinese poem—celadon green bowls, and parts of rough brown stonewares that once contained imported food ranging from rice liquor to preserved vegetables. In contrast to many overseas Chinese sites, this collection has similar proportions of English and Chinese ceramics, summoning up an image of the boardinghouse lodgers eating very Chinese meals from English Willow pattern plates.





I asked a boy
underneath the
pine tree,

He said his
teacher had gone
to pick herbs for
medicine.

"He's only in this
mountain,

But the clouds
are so dense that I
don't know where
he is."

From a famous Tang Dynasty
(618-906 A.D.) Chinese poem.
Characters on spoon recovered
during excavation read,

"only in this mountain"

THE OLD WEST IN A NEW LIGHT

Although many 19th-century Sacramentans considered it exotic and mysterious, the Chinese District was not entirely cut off from mainstream American society nor were its residents all unsophisticated laborers. Chinese merchants and Company agents were worldly and educated businessmen who worked closely with individuals like Josiah Gallup to use California resources in order to achieve Chinese goals.

Archaeology has shown that the merchants established links to a trade network that allowed them to create a traditional way of life in California. However, this would have been impossible without men like Josiah Gallup who acted as a middleman with local authorities and in the day-to-day activities of getting the boardinghouse supplied. The English ceramics—some engraved with Chinese ownership marks—and butchered bones found on the site only hint at Gallup's influence.

Studying primary historical records and archaeological remains has forced us to confront many old stereotypes. Much of what we thought we knew about the past turns out to be either overly simplistic or just plain wrong. Although it can be rather disconcerting to see long-held generalizations begin to fall away, the new view is so much richer and more complex, and involves so many new characters and roles that we are taken up in the grandness of the story. And by getting closer to the reality of the time and place we do honor to the anonymous multitude whose lives built not just the railroad but the very foundation of California's present day success.





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Outside front cover:
Cauldron and Bat image from a blue
porcelain bowl found on site

Outside back cover:
Page from tax assessors ledger.

Inside cover photograph:
Chinese wedding, California Room,
California State Library.

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Imp 300 J. H. Strobridge	Imp 1600 K. D. Goodell
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E. C. A. English

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Jonathan Williams

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