

Plaque to recognize ABQ Chinatown and Chinese Contribution
to building of the American southwest and Albuquerque

BACKGROUND

The building of the frontier in the American southwest was accomplished by a diversity of people of color. The story of the Chinese American contributions to the building of Albuquerque and the rest of New Mexico is often neglected. In fact, if the story of this country does not include the Chinese and other people of color, then the history of this nation is incomplete and inaccurate. By documenting and conserving these stories, the historic legacy of the Asian people will not be forgotten. Documentation of the Chinese, the first Asian group in Albuquerque, dates to 1883* and with the Albuquerque Chinatown first referenced in 1898**.

With the advent of the arrival of the railroad to Albuquerque in 1880, the frontier landscape began to change and to prosper. A burgeoning Chinatown* was started, adjacent to the railroad tracks, which was populated by Chinese pioneers attracted by mining, railroad and other service business opportunities. The Chinese were laborers and businessmen, starting restaurants, stores and laundries which contributed to the economic and social fabric of the community.

In 1900, 75% of the laundries in Albuquerque were Chinese owned and provided a needed and useful service in a high desert community where water was a precious commodity. In 1900, the New Steam laundry, located on this site, was purchased and renamed the Imperial Laundry by its three white owners, Edger, Munson and Semple. The laundry employed whites and one 'culled gemmen' (colored gentleman)***. It is interesting to question why the laundry was given an Asian sounding business name but only employed whites (with one exception).

The 19th and 20th centuries were a dark and hostile period for the Chinese in the United States.. Across the United States, the late 1800's was an era of intolerable racism where the Chinese did not have any rights, which were guaranteed to others in the United States Constitution. By the late 1800s, there were numerous laws that excluded Chinese from immigrating to United States. The Chinese Exclusion Law of 1882 is the only law ever passed by Congress that prevented immigration and naturalization based on race. However, this belied the often stated fact that Chinese labor was indispensable to the growth and economic prosperity of the West.****

In the 1940's, many of these social and legal injustices were overturned, such as the Magnuson Act of 1942 which repealed the Chinese Exclusion Law of 1882. Chinese and Asian Americans are often elevated to be the "model" minority with education, income, social standing to be emulated by all Americans although as recent as 2013, there are still some two million Asians living in poverty.***** However, over this long journey, the brave and hard-working Chinese who overcame many hardships and difficult adversities, many have achieved the American dream. A very positive thought for all of us to remember.

REQUEST

The ABQ Asian and Chinese communities request a plaque be placed on the exterior surface of the Imperial Building recognizing this area as the historic ABQ Chinatown with the text outlining the history and the contributions the Chinese made to the building of this City and State. The plaque would be of a material that could be engraved, with an appropriate image and text, and be easily visible to the ABQ citizens.

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*DeMark, Judith Boyce, Immigrant Experience in Albuquerque 1880-1920, PhD dissertation, University of New Mexico

**Sanborn maps 1891-1913

***Albuquerque Daily Citizen, June 12, 1900 and Oct 12, 1902

****Wikipedia, Chinese Exclusion Laws

*****National coalition for Asian Pacific American Community Development, June 17, 2013 posting