

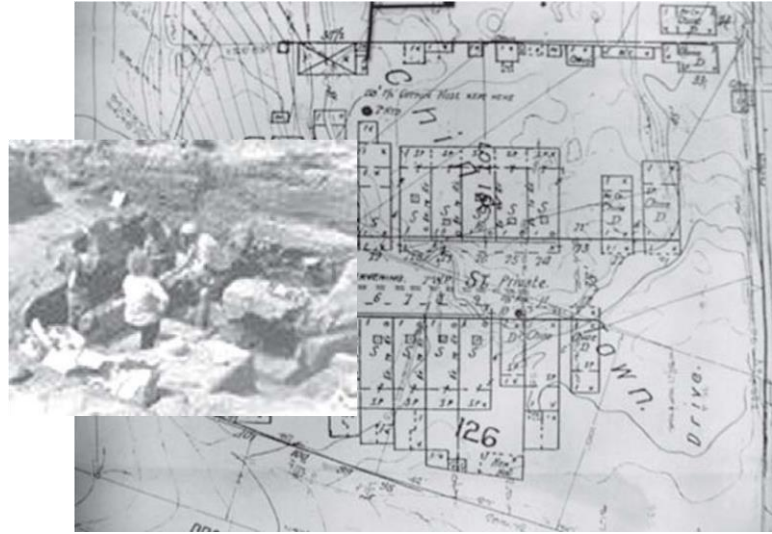
FEATURE

artifact of disposal

The Historic Riverside Chinatown
Archaeological Site is Under Assault

By Scott L. Fedick

Riverside, California, the self-proclaimed “City of Arts and Culture” is about to lose one of its greatest cultural treasures, the historic Riverside Chinatown archaeological site. The Chinese community, which had been in Riverside since 1871, was forced to relocate to what was, at the time, the outskirts of Riverside in 1885 after ordinances outlawed Chinese businesses in downtown areas. The Community thrived at that location into the early 1900s, with a population that varied seasonally from about 450 to over 2,500 during the harvest season. The immigrants, nearly all males from Guangdong Province, had fled the dangerous political turmoil that plagued China at the time, seeking employment and a means to support their impoverished families left behind. Bringing with them 2,000 years of Chinese knowledge about citrus cultivation, they enabled the development and success of Riverside’s renowned citrus industry, which transformed the city into the most prosperous in the nation during the early years of the twentieth century. The Chinese also provided the residents of Riverside with nearly all of their fresh vegetables through truck-garden operations. Because of the Exclusion Act and anti-Chinese sentiment, Riverside’s Chinatown slowly declined after the turn of the century, with only a



few old men remaining by the 1930s. The last resident of Chinatown, George Wong (Wong Ho Leun), always dreamed of reviving the settlement. As the remains of the abandoned town fell into ruin or burned down, he invited construction projects to bury the architectural remains of the site under a thick layer of protective fill. Mr. Wong died in 1974, and the last remaining buildings of Chinatown were torn down in 1977.

Today, the Riverside Chinatown archaeological site “represents the only known complete Chinese village site in California,” as described in the successful 1990 nomination of the site to the National Register of Historic Places. The site is also officially recognized as a City Landmark, a County Landmark, and a State Point of Historical Interest. The site contains the remains of a business district, permanent residential buildings, a Joss House, and probably areas of temporary tent housing. The site represents the history of the Chinese in Riverside, Riverside’s early heritage, and the development of California’s citrus industry and agriculture.

Small-scale archaeological excavations at the site in 1984-85 demonstrated the excellent preservation of building foundations, filled-in

basements, and artifact-rich trash pits. The excavations, which were mainly limited to portions of the site that had not been deeply buried by protective construction fill under



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George Wong's direction, produced over three tons of artifacts which are currently stored in the Riverside Metropolitan Museum. The excavations and associated historical research resulted in a two-volume report of 960 pages entitled *Wong Ho Leun, An American Chinatown*, published in 1987 by the Great Basin Foundation. A 1988 documentary film about the site, *When They All Still Lived*, was produced by James T. Brown of the University of California Riverside and Peter Lang. The Riverside Chinatown site is currently featured in a widely used textbook, *Archaeology, The Science of the Human Past*, as an example of an historic site that can tell us much of the unwritten and generally forgotten story about the Chinese contributions to the economic and social history of Riverside and the western United States.

The property containing the Riverside Chinatown site has been owned since 1980 by the Riverside County Office of Education. A 1990 Minute Order issued by the Riverside County Board of Education stated that the Chinatown site would be preserved for its cultural, historical, and archaeological values. The Office of Education had expressed interest in selling the property, and between 1990 and 1993 a series of negotiations were held between the Office of Education, the City of Riverside, and other interested parties including the Riverside Chinatown Advisory Committee and members of the Chinese Historical Society of Southern California. One goal of the negotiations was to preserve as much of the site as possible in place, in perpetuity, and to have an interpretive center dedicated to the site and to the Chinese cultural heritage of Riverside. There is a general consensus among archaeologists that unique and important

archaeological sites should be preserved to the greatest extent possible for future generations, when excavation and analytical methods will be far more advanced than those of today. Negotiations to sell the portion of the property containing the National Register of Historic Places archaeological site to the City of Riverside failed, and the property remained a vacant lot.

In recent years, the Office of Education and the City of Riverside apparently have had a change of heart regarding preservation of the Riverside Chinatown site. In 2007, the Office of Education entered a purchase agreement for the property with Doug Jacobs of Jacobs Development Company. Parties with a long-standing interest in preserving the Riverside Chinatown site remained unaware of actions to sell the property to developers until the summer of 2008. Public concern over the fate of the Chinatown site quickly spread. Citizens groups formed to promote preservation of the site, including the Riverside Chinese Cultural Preservation Committee and the Save Our Chinatown Committee. The Old Riverside Foundation has also provided support for preservation efforts. At an October 7, 2008, meeting of the Riverside City Council, over 40 citizens spoke in opposition to the development plan for the site, and over 1,200 signatures urging preservation of the site were turned in. Despite expressed public opinion, the City Council unanimously approved the development project. On February 10, 2009, the City Council also unanimously approved a Chinatown Archaeological Treatment Plan that many citizens and professional archaeologists found flawed and inadequate. Among other perceived faults, the Archaeological Treatment Plan included an artifact discard policy that allowed any artifact to be disposed of if it failed to meet even one of the nine discard criteria that were

listed. Proper long-term storage of artifacts is expensive, and the approved plan clearly placed priority on discard rather than preservation of artifacts. With unwavering and unanimous support of the Riverside City Council, the process moved forward for removal of the Chinatown site through excavation so the city could have a new medical office building. One of the primary reasons for promoting the medical office building was the perceived need for such offices by the new School of Medicine, planned for the University of California, Riverside. Interestingly, the UCR Dean of the School of Medicine and the School of Medicine Planning Office had never been contacted by developer or the City about the need for medical office space.

Every archaeologist that is familiar with the Riverside Chinatown site has agreed with available evidence that the vast majority of the site, and an incredibly rich variety of artifacts, remains preserved beneath the ground. Everyone, that is, except developer Doug Jacobs and the private environmental consulting firm of ICF Jones & Stokes that produced the Chinatown Archaeological Treatment Plan and has been hired by Jacobs to “fully excavate” the site in preparation for construction of the medical office building. Public records indicate that the full cost of excavating the site, analyzing the artifacts and then properly storing the recovered materials for future reference and interpretation would likely cost up to two million dollars, a price that Jacobs has repeatedly claimed he would have no reservations about paying.

In the continuing efforts to preserve the site in place and intact, a lawyer representing the Save Our Chinatown Committee (SOCC) filed a request for a Temporary Restraining Order on February 13, seeking to prevent irreparable harm to the site by heavy equipment. The SOCC hoped to suspend any construction activity at the site, pending the outcome of a lawsuit filed by the citizens. A hearing on the request for a restraining order was to be held on Tuesday, February 17. The day after the request was filed, promises by the developer of a “state of the art”

scientific excavation of the site were negated. Beginning on Valentine’s Day, a three day earth-moving rampage was begun under the direction of ICF Jones & Stokes. They knowingly and deliberately continued their work against a Riverside City ordinance on Sunday and the President’s Day holiday on Monday, despite police citations that were issued on both days. They even continued their work in the rain and after the sun had set. In an article in the Riverside Press-Enterprise (Work Halts on Office Project, 2/18/09), developer Doug Jacobs is reported to have “said it is important to him to excavate the site ahead of Tuesday’s hearing to prove there is no archaeological ‘treasure trove’ at the site.” The “archaeological excavations” sponsored by Jacobs over that holiday weekend (conducted by at least 10 pieces of heavy equipment including D 11 paddle wheel scrapers, bulldozers, and backhoes) was said to have uncovered only some broken pottery from a small area that would later be dug up. “Other than that,” Jacobs is quoted as saying, “we’re done.” Mr. Jacobs fails to mention that this calculated assault on the site could save him upwards of two million dollars. At least one Riverside City Council member stood by and watched as the heavy equipment ripped into the site.

An emergency court order on February 17th put a stop to further earth moving activities until a Temporary Restraining Order was issued at the hearing that had been rescheduled to February 24th. A public demonstration in protest of the assault on Chinatown was held that same evening in front of Riverside City Hall, and at the City Council meeting that followed, numerous citizens expressed their outrage over Jacobs’ actions and the degree to which the City Council had been duped by the developer’s promises. On March 20th, a Temporary Injunction was issued, assuring protection of the site until the pending lawsuit is settled, the hearing for which is scheduled on June 29, 2009.

Fortunately, there is a strong possibility that much of the Riverside Chinatown archaeological site remains intact below the level

that was torn out by the mechanical earth movers. Action must be taken now to put a stop to the wanton destruction of a site that is so significant to Chinese cultural heritage in America. As the struggle to save the site continues, the Chinese American community is urged to lend their support in any way possible. Ultimately, the goal of the Save our Chinatown Committee is to preserve intact as much of the site as possible and to convert the property into a Chinese Heritage Park and Interpretive Center.

Information on how to help in the preservation efforts can be found on the Save Our Chinatown Committee web site at www.saveourchinatown.org.

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• This article is a revised and expanded version of an Op-Ed piece that appeared in the Riverside Press-Enterprise (Reckless Digging: Stop Defiling Riverside's Historic Chinatown Site, 2/24/2009)