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Behind the Scenes in New York
Assignment 4
May 5, 2022

Nom Wah Tea Parlor: The Oldest Establishment on Chinatown's Iconic Doyers Street

Nom Wah Tea Parlor, established as a tea room / bakery and now a dim sum restaurant, is the oldest continually operating business on curving Doyers Street in Manhattan's Chinatown. A two-story commercial style building, the structure's brick facade and marble lintels lend a traditional storefront appearance, yet the vibrant yellow and red signage establishes the restaurant as uniquely a product of one of Chinatown's most iconic historic streets.

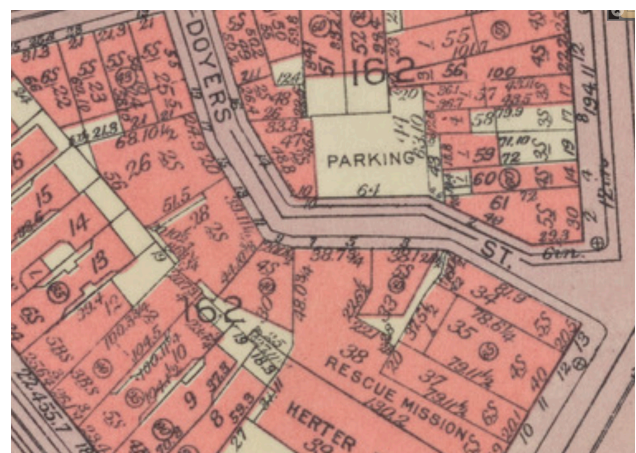
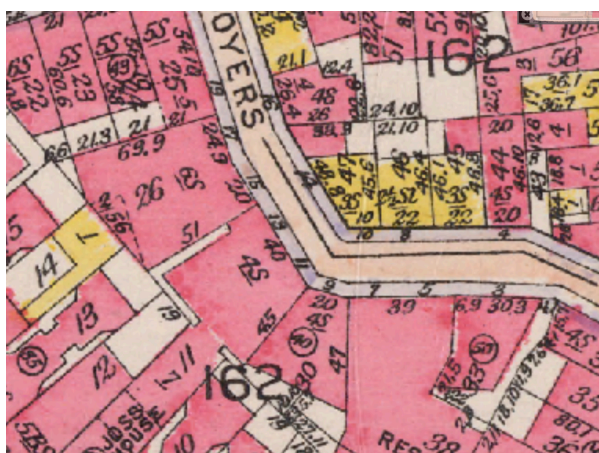


Built in 1920¹ and located directly in Doyers Street's curve, the building has been somewhat altered from its appearance in early photography and its 1940 tax photo². Awnings, lighting, and security gates have been added, and the projecting signage has been replaced with a painted sign band directly on the facade. The second-floor business has added signage that partially covers the lintels, and there is obvious damage to the original lintels and brick. Nom Wah's storefront opening and infill have been altered as well, replacing the window to the left of the door with three panes to create a splayed return light. Painted lettering on the transom and display window

recall the original storefront design. Nevertheless, much of the original fabric remains intact.

Nom Wah Tea Parlor is named as a point of interest in the Chinatown and Little Italy Historic District, declared a single historic district on the National Register of Historic Places in 2010. The application specifically calls out the building, which “typifies the utilitarian commercial style,” and notes that “commercial or loft buildings of the late nineteenth century were not lacking in detail, though typically they were less extravagant than the tenements.”³

The importance of commercial buildings within the rich fabric of Chinatown cannot be overstated. By examining fire insurance maps over a century, from 1857 to 1956, one sees a great deal of change in the curve of Doyers Street. The earliest fire insurance map in 1857 shows that Block 162, Lot 28 is vacant⁴, yet by 1894, the area had already developed significantly, driven in large part by the now demolished Third Avenue “El” train line, which appears in this plate. The nearby Chatham Square stop served the businesses and homes of Doyers and surrounding streets. A lumber yard is present on half of the (notably misnumbered) lot, with a brick structure on the other half and the neighboring Chinese Theater indicated at 5 Doyers Street.⁵ Jump to 1916, and the street shows almost entirely brick buildings. All hazardous use buildings have been removed, 11-13 Doyers is at this time a four-story brick structure, and the iconic Chinese Theater is labeled “Rescue Mission.”⁶ A final plate in 1956 finally shows the two-story structure we know today, with the “El” erased from the Bowery.⁷



This journey through Sanborn map plates reveals a flourishing commercial area, yet although the “EI” supported the expansion of business and entertainment, photography from the time shows a dark, shadowy streetscape along the Bowery. The 2011 LPC designation report for the nearby individually landmarked Citizens’ Savings Bank at 58 Bowery describes the impact of the transit line: “With the opening of the Third Avenue Elevated along the Bowery in 1878, the street was cast into permanent shadow, and pedestrians were showered with hot cinders from the steam trains running above... The elevated railway line, reconstructed in the middle of the Bowery in 1916 and finally demolished in 1955, helped to deter the redevelopment of this area for decades.”⁸ A 1936 image from the NYPL Archives brings this description to life, showing pedestrians below the looming tracks at the entry to Doyers Street, cast largely in shadow with only slivers of sunlight hitting the street.⁹



In the midst of this significant infrastructure expansion to Doyers Street, much greater world events were also influencing the lives of Chinatown’s residents. A 1994 *New York Times* obituary of a prominent Chinatown resident describes the time period: “It was a world created not just by Chinese culture, but American racism. Poor farmers were recruited from Canton in the mid-19th century for the mines and railroads in the West. But by the 1870s, scapegoated for economic depression, pitted against white workers and union organizers, the Chinese were being lynched and murdered. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, barring importation of Chinese laborers, shaped the future; Chinese could not become citizens until 1943. Some fled the violence to Mott and Pell Streets in the 1890s.”¹⁰ It was in this cultural landscape that Doyers Street developed into a destination for entertainment, tourism, and commerce, anchored by the Chinese Theater from 1893 to 1911¹¹, yet the area and its residents were portrayed in the press through an extremely racist lens.



While I have omitted the most offensive language, a 1912 article in *The Sun*, titled “No More Bowery Thrills for Sightseers,” reports a “fake opium joint” at 13 Doyers, which was an attraction for out of town “haywagons” who visited the establishment and “went away happy in the thought that they had seen the depths of vice” after a “lecture delivered by the megaphone man.”¹² The primary attraction or “depth of vice” at the establishment where Nom Wah now stands was reportedly the opportunity to see a white woman smoking opium with a Chinese man — a form of entertainment that clearly plays up racist stereotypes for the “thrills” of white tourists. Similarly, an ad by the Cafe Mandarin, a previous establishment at 11-13 Doyers Street, advertises “reliable guides furnished to see the interesting sights of Chinatown.” This advertisement was presumably placed by an actual business owner in Chinatown, in direct competition against such companies as the

“haywagon” tours that would bring in outside tourists to gawk at the neighborhood for higher rates.⁹ Clearly, business owners were employing various opposing techniques to capture revenue from the booming tourist industry.

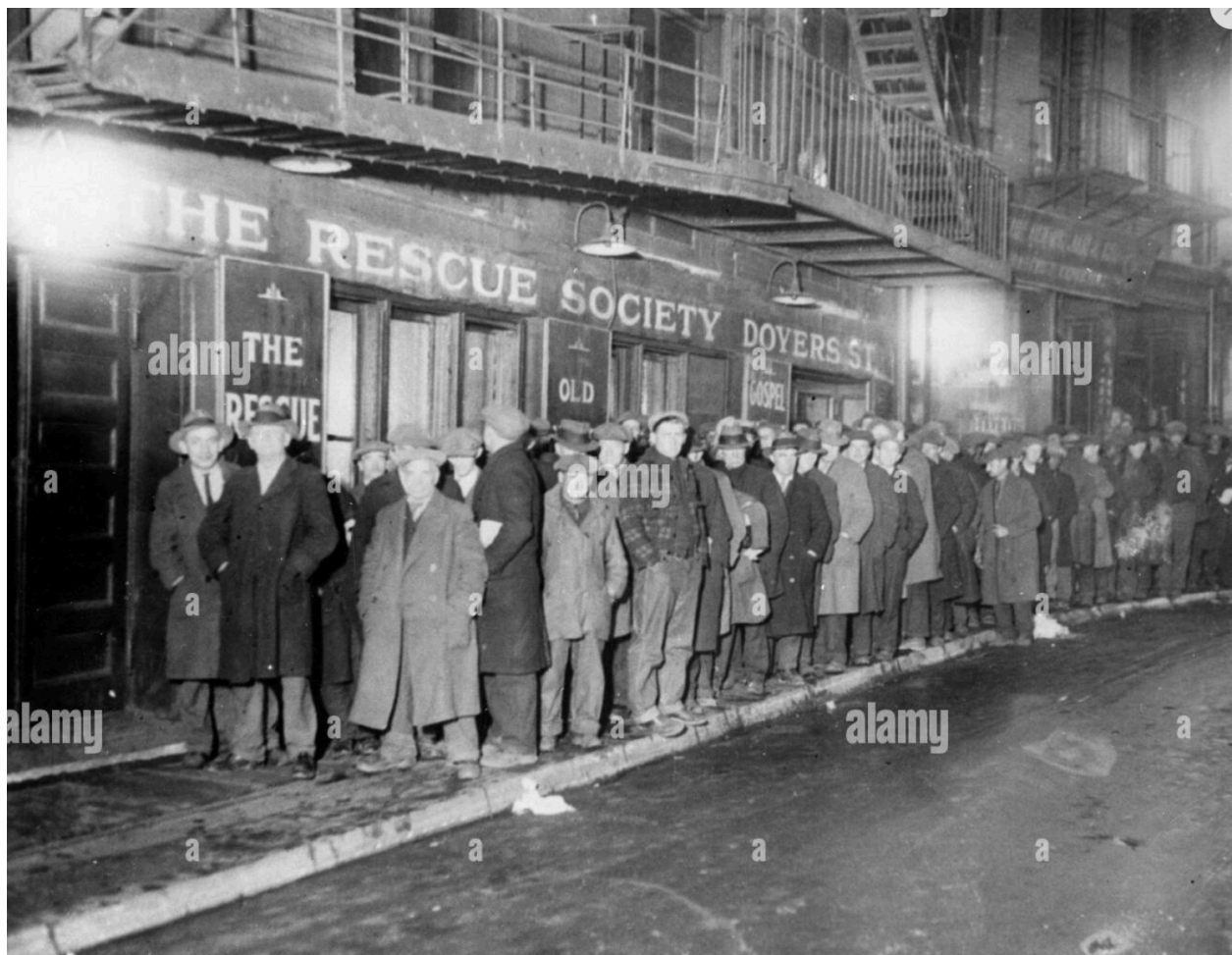
Other coverage at the time seems only to portray the violence of the Tong gangs in the area, earning Doyers Street the nickname “the bloody angle” for the street’s curve and the murders that took place there. The NRHP report explains that “a violent and protracted war between the On Leong and Hip Sing tongs during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries provided sensational fodder for the New York press. Street shootouts, shakedowns, and murders were widely reported in gory detail.”¹¹

These reports specifically mention the address of Nom Wah, which inhabited 13-15 Doyers from 1920 to 1968 until the owner lost his lease on 15 and moved the kitchen to present day 11 Doyers Street.¹³ In August of 1925, a *New York Evening Sun* piece reports that a cook in the basement kitchen of Nom Wah was murdered¹⁴, and a 1924 article references a near-total lockdown for all Chinese residents (but seemingly no one else in the area): “Orders were issued, effective immediately, forbidding any Chinese in the vicinity of Chinatown, embracing Pell, Mott, Doyers, and Third streets and the thoroughfares radiating from them, to appear on the street except on urgent business, which must be explained satisfactorily. Any Chinese walking at more than an ordinary pace will be arrested immediately.”¹⁵ The racism that pervades in the media coverage of this time period is unfortunately not in our past, as we have learned all too well during the COVID-19 pandemic and from the violent targeting of Chinese Americans in recent years.

In another 1924 *New York Evening Post* article, a murder is described at 15-17 Doyers Street from which the “murderer vanished” using the architecture of the street as an aid: “From 15-17 Doyers Street, there are many means of egress. One may slip through the house over roofs and scurry down into some convenient black hole and emerge many doors away. Or it is convenient to patter briskly through the big arcade

that cuts the block there and come into the daylight in Mott Street - a point from which it is easy to reach both Tong headquarters.”¹⁶ Here the street’s layout as well as the architecture itself is reportedly being used to the advantage of criminals, whose maneuverings are recounted as if they are the opening sequence of an action film, or perhaps a description of the same area of Manhattan during its earlier days known as “Five Points” when warring gangs were likewise notorious in the area. During both time periods, the non-grid, curvilinear streets are an essential element of the story — making the architecture and city plan of the area a significant actor in the cultural and historical narrative of the place.

Positive coverage of Chinatown and Doyers Street seems to have rarely reached the masses. For instance, the work of the Rescue Society, a mutual aid group that supported the homeless and unemployed from 1893¹⁷ through the Great Depression and beyond, and which occupied the “Old Chinese Theater” at 5-7 Doyers, was cited in ads¹⁸ or photos¹⁹ but rarely made headlines. Similarly, Nom Wah Tea Parlor, while ever-present in historic photography of Doyers Street, is hardly ever mentioned by name in newspaper coverage until the 1970s, despite being a neighborhood staple for over 100 years.²⁰





A 1976 *New York Times* article asks “What do celebrities do on Saturday afternoons?” and reports (after sharing the answers of Andy Warhol and Mayor Beame) that opera singer Beverly Sills takes her family to Nom Wah Tea Parlor. A 1975 *Times* article about the newly popularized concept of brunch suggests, “If you're bored with eggs and bloody marys, take yourself to a dumpling house in Chinatown... The Nom Wah Tea Parlor at 13 Doyers Street in the oldest (over 40 years) of the shops, has a bathroom-tile floor and no décor to speak of. The tables, crowded with family groups, make it look like a vast church supper.

Waitresses go from table to table with enormous trays laden with small dishes—all you do is point.”²¹ The article continues on to note that Nom Wah is less popular with Chinese American residents, who favor a nearby establishment. Gentrification had already begun. Today’s proprietor, Wilson Tang, a second generation resident of Chinatown who took over the business from his uncle in 2010, remembers the restaurant’s origins in a recent profile by *New York Times* author Michael Kimmelman: “Back in the day, Nom Wah was where people in the neighborhood hung out, read the newspaper, picked up their mail. Dim sum chefs would meet after work, smoke, play cards. Chinatown was smaller than it is now.”¹⁹

Nom Wah Tea Parlor, despite its move from its original location at 13-15 Doyers to present day 11-13 Doyers, represents a cultural and commercial institution that is essential to the history of Chinatown. The building that stands today at 11-13 Doyers, while slightly altered, is the embodiment of that history. One only has to travel a few blocks south to find that there is precedent for landmarking a restaurant in Manhattan due to its cultural and architectural significance. In 1996, the LPC designated the Delmonico’s Building at 56 Beaver Street, citing the rich history of the restaurant established by two brothers who were Swiss emigrants: “The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the Delmonico's Building, erected in 1890-91, is the only surviving building associated with the world-famous Delmonico's Restaurant... [which] was one of the first restaurants in the United States to specialize in fine Continental cuisine; that Delmonico's has occupied this site since 1835 when the Delmonico brothers erected an elegant four-story restaurant building that quickly became a favorite gathering place for New York society and visiting dignitaries.”²² While the commercial architecture of 11-13 Doyers Street may be less impressive than the Delmonico’s building at first glance, Nom Wah Tea Parlor could easily be categorized as the equivalent surviving symbol for Chinatown’s working and middle class population. To oppose this claim could, in fact, set a dangerous precedent, implying that a culturally significant restaurant’s patrons must be members of the “New York society and visiting dignitaries” in order to warrant preservation.

When comparing LPC reports from earlier designations to those written today, the increased focus on cultural heritage and equitable landmarking quickly becomes apparent. A website created by the LPC in March of this year guides viewers through the process of “Preserving Significant Places of Black History,” highlighting Tin Pan Alley as one such place, where five row houses were designated due to their significance on the historic street. The website states, “While the period’s prevalence of racist policies and ideology was reflected in offensive caricatures and stereotypes spread through sheet music mass-produced on Tin Pan Alley, African American musicians and publishers were able to create new and unprecedented opportunities for themselves in mainstream music production there, including bringing ragtime music to an international audience, and Tin Pan Alley represents their remarkable achievements despite the climate of the time.”²³

The parallel story of Chinese Americans on Doyers Street has not been given the same focus, a fact the LPC acknowledges. A press release publicizing the June 2021 designation of Kimlau War Memorial confirms, “While there are several New York City landmarks in Chinatown, this is the first that specifically recognizes Chinese American history and culture.”²⁴ That same month, an interview with the *New York Times* quotes Landmarks Commissioner Sarah Carroll: “‘We have been working very hard to ensure that we are telling the story of all New Yorkers and representing the city’s diversity,’” said Carroll, adding that her agency would continue ‘drilling down into history in ways that haven’t been done in the past.’”²⁵ Surely, 11-13 Doyers Street answers this call.



Nom Wah Tea Parlor, 11-13 Doyers Street, has survived over 100 years due to the entrepreneurial ingenuity of multiple owners, but scrappiness and resolve cannot guarantee it will remain as a marker of the Chinese American community's achievements for another 100 years. While there is not a current known threat to the building, the recent rezoning of SoHo/NoHo is a prime example of impending change in the surrounding area. Chinatown was not included in the 2021 rezoning, yet advocates such as Village Preservation continue to question whether the city's claims can be trusted.²⁶ 11-13 Doyers Street deserves designation as an individual landmark — on the basis of the building's contributions to the history of Chinatown, as a longstanding gathering place for the community it serves, and as an emblem of Chinese American culture so beloved that patrons line the curving street on a daily basis for dim sum, even in the midst of a pandemic that prompted a new wave of racism and threatened to devastate Chinatown's businesses.

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