

HISTORIC OTTERBEIN

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Chinese-owned Laundries in the Neighborhood

by David Safier

When the west side of South Sharp Street between Hill and Conway was excavated to prepare for building the Federal Reserve, they dug up an old drainage pipe clogged with a variety of items from a commercial laundry. The items came from Wysing Lung's Chinese Laundry located at 518 S. Sharp Street in the 1920s. It was one of many Chinese-owned laundries in the general neighborhood.

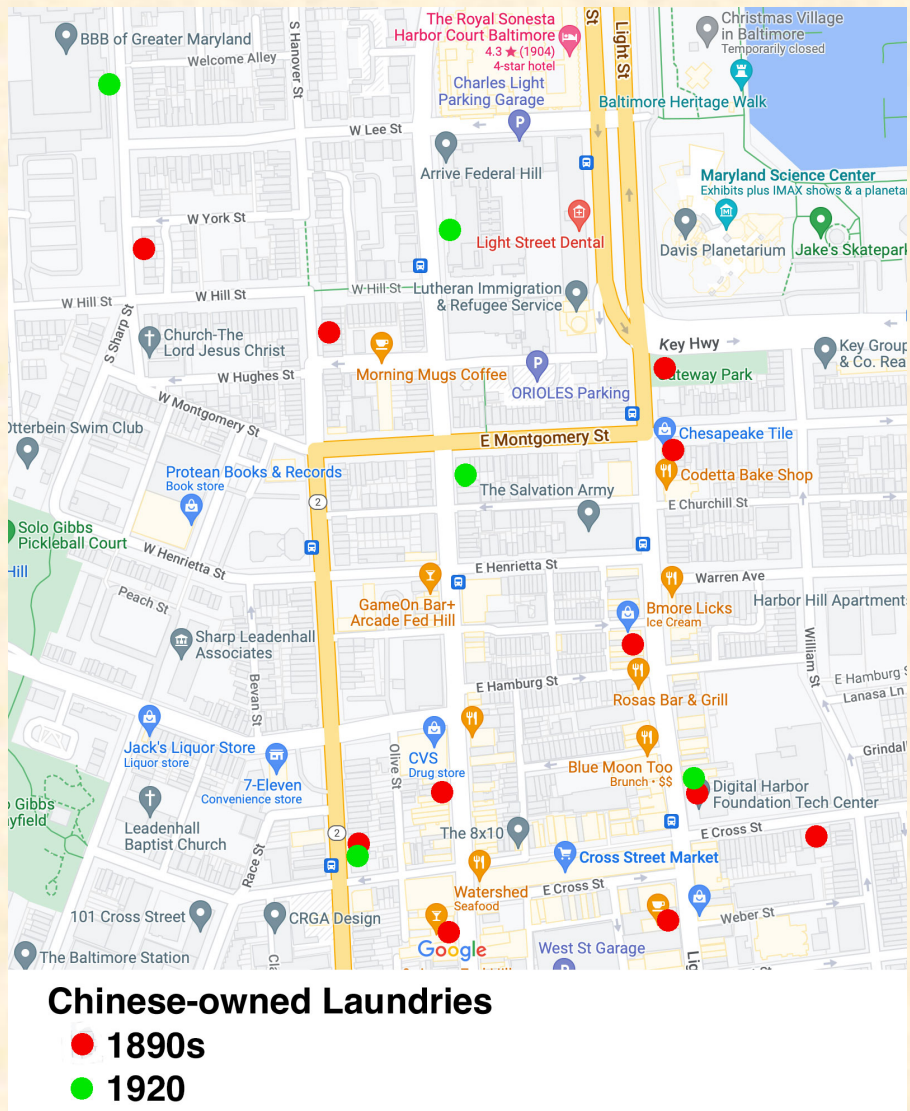
The map shows where the laundries were located, based on information from maps and directories from the 1890s and 1920s.

Here are their addresses.

402 Sharp	1018 Charles
518 Sharp	1110 Charles
617 Sharp	703 Light
315 Hanover	704 Light
711 Hanover	801 Light
1035 Hanover	926 Light
1043 Hanover	1033 Light
627 Charles	1116 Light
803 Charles	138 Cross

A number of articles and studies have been written about the Chinese community in Baltimore. (You can find links to some of them at the end.) The early Chinese settlers began arriving in Baltimore and other eastern cities from the west coast in the 1870s. Many had worked on the transcontinental railroad, which was finished in 1869. They were looking for work and escaping the anti-Chinese discrimination which had made their lives increasingly difficult.

Baltimore's Chinese community was small. According to the census, its population was 178 in 1890, increasing to 477 in 1900, then decreasing to 314 in 1910. The city's original



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Chinatown was on Marion Street between Park and Howard. In 1902, Dr. Sun Yat Sen, known as the father of the Republic of China, lived on Marion Street for some months, using Baltimore as his headquarters as he gained support from the American Chinese Community. In 1911 he was elected the first President of the Republic of China.

After World War I when the Marion Street buildings were replaced by large department stores, the city's Chinatown moved to a few blocks north along Park near Mulberry.

Unlike most large cities, Baltimore's Chinatown wasn't so much a residential area for the city's Chinese population as a place with shops and religious centers. The population worked and lived in a number of neighborhoods around the city.

Chinese-owned laundries were common places of work, one reason being that most businesses did not hire Chinese workers. It was labor intensive, with long hours and small profit margins. Generally the laundries were divided into four sections: a customer counter in front, then a clothes drying area, then living quarters, and the clothes washing area in the rear. Recently arrived Chinese residents often worked in their relatives' laundries until they had the skills and funds needed to establish their own businesses.

Sources:

[Baltimore Chinatown Project](#)

[Baltimore's Chinatown](#)

[Chinese Americans in Early Twentieth-Century Baltimore](#)

[Race, Space, and Gender: Re-mapping Chinese America from the Margins, 1875-1943](#)