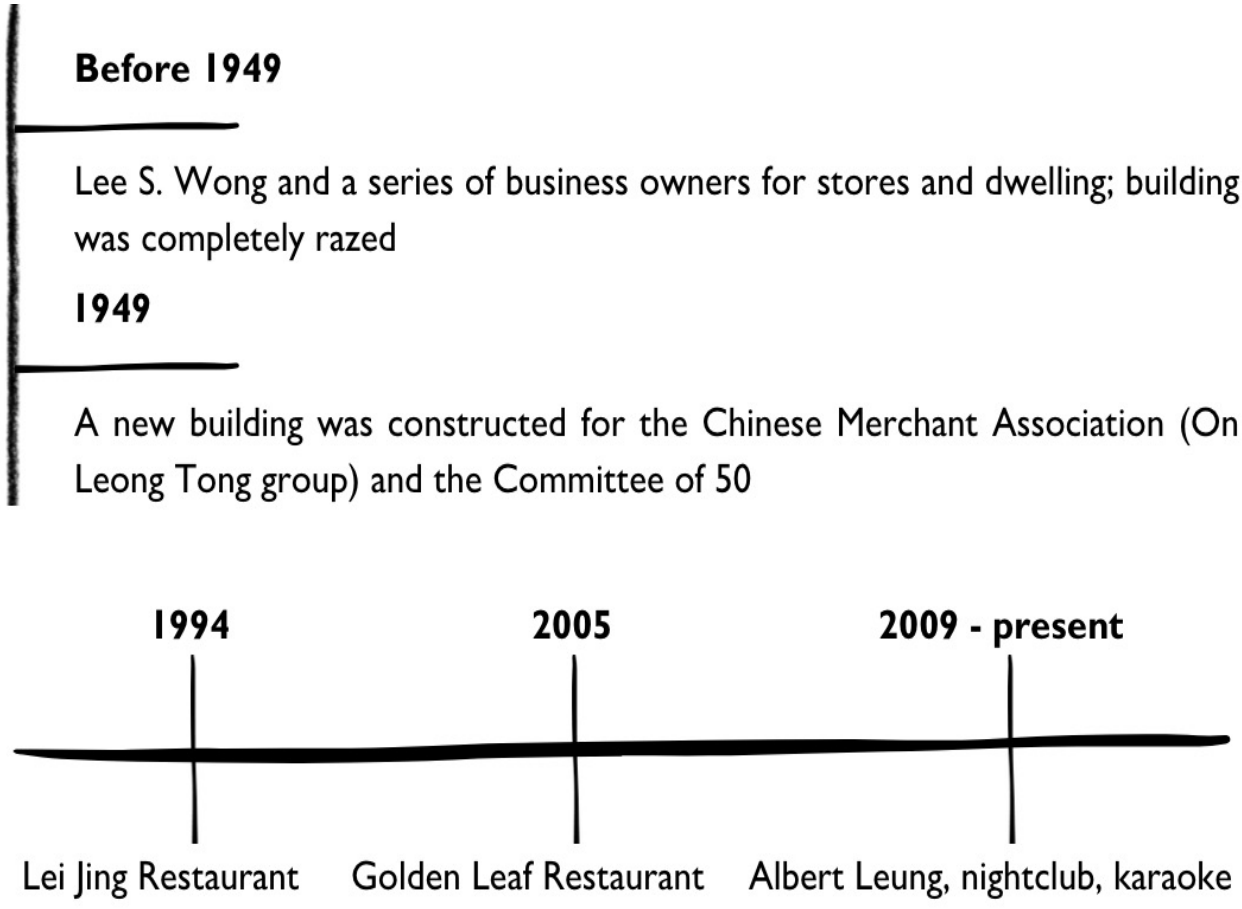


# CHINESE MERCHANTS ASSOCIATION BUILDING

## 20 HUDSON STREET



Chinese Merchants Association Building, 1951  
(Chinese Historical Society of New England)



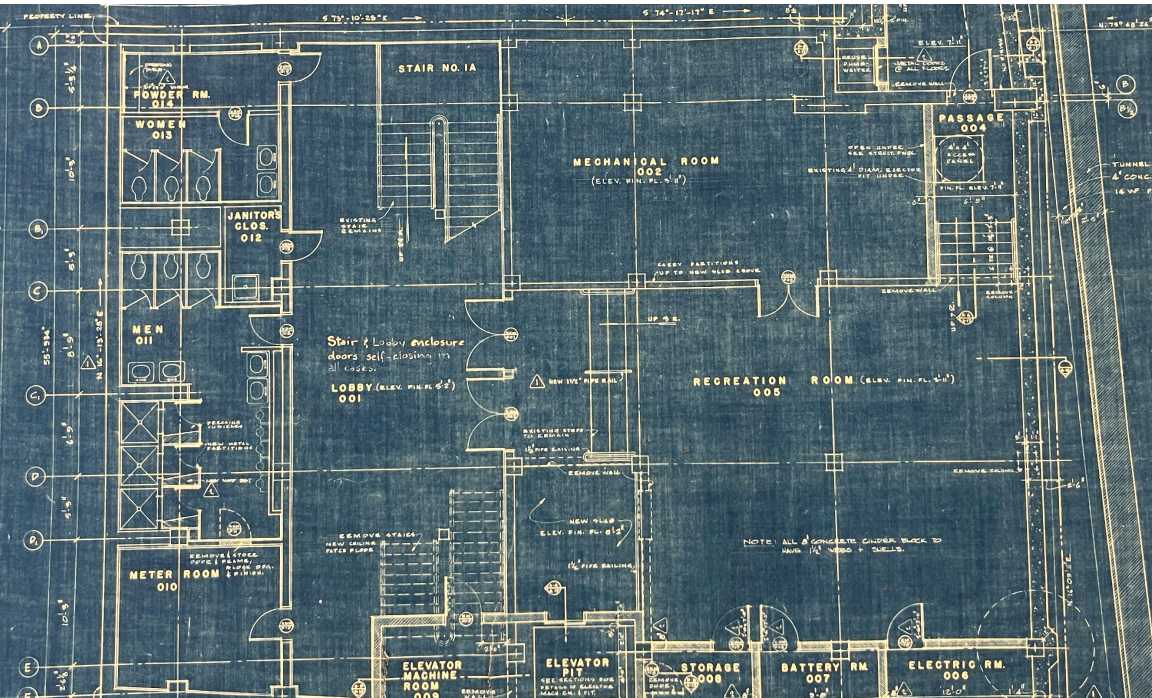
Chinese Merchants Association Building, 2020  
(Shutterstock)

### Architectural Style and Building History

The association building on 20 Hudson Street was designed by Edward Chin-Park, Mathew and Son Cummings, and Andrew Yuen, among others. This building is a unique occurrence as it marks one of the first buildings designed by Asian American architects in Boston. First established in 1914 on Harrison Avenue, the On Leong Association moved to Tyler Street in 1919. It eventually settled on Hudson Street in 1947 due to the need for a large-scale auditorium to house its cultural events and formal corporate meetings. Due to the Fitzgerald Expressway (Central Artery), part of the building was razed in 1956 and subsequently remodeled by the Sheply, Bulfinch, Richardson, and Abbott of Boston. The facade and loggia with aluminum screens and recessed balconies were all replaced. The rear-end section of the headquarters on Albany Street was also demolished. Nonetheless, parts of the original construction remained, including the landmark roof pagoda, the six bronze facade panels of Chinese religious figures, and the Chinese characters of “On Leong Goon Shan Weh” [Safe Good Manufacturers Business Association]. In addition to features of the Chinese Revival Style, the building displays postwar Modern International Style through its bronze plaques, steel frame, geometric metal grillwork, rigid rectangular and concrete exterior, and distinct horizontal proportions.

### Initial Construction in 1948

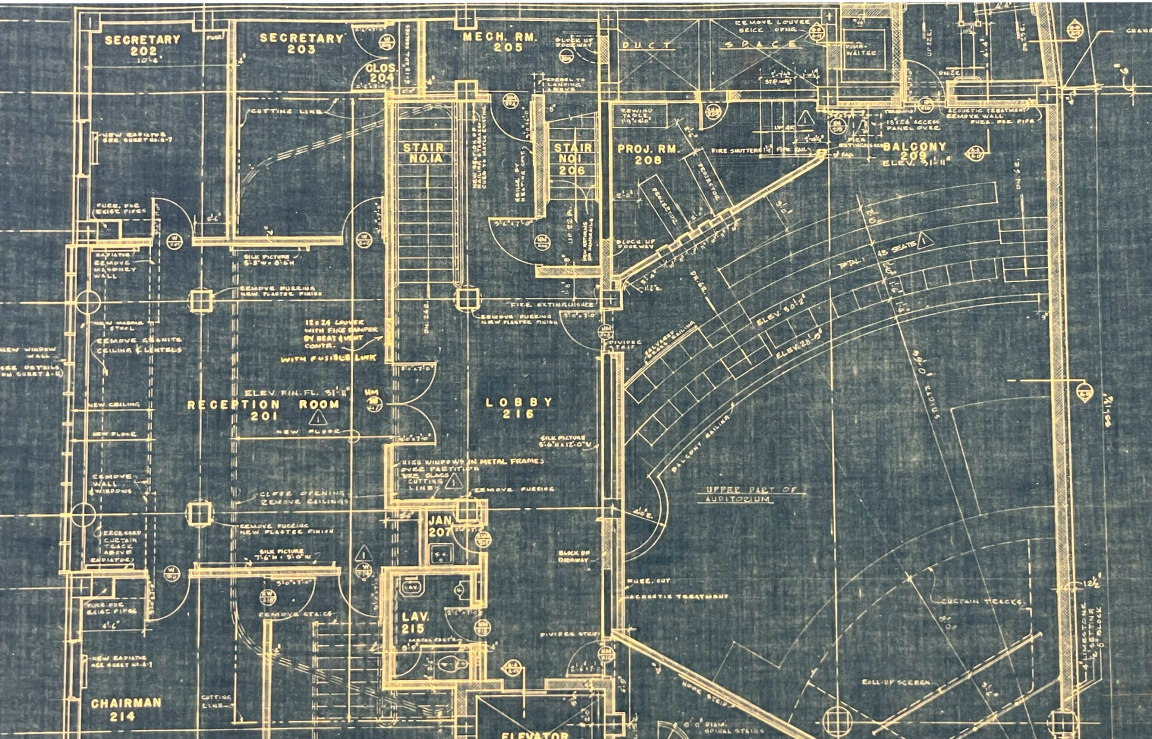
- The basement, a place of cherished memories, once hosted a recreational area and a ping-pong room (later removed in 1956) for leisure and social gatherings, marking a significant era of community bonding and fun.
- The first floor was home to a 600-seat auditorium. This versatile space was later modified and made smaller to accommodate the expressway construction, a testament to its adaptability. The auditorium hosted many events, from cultural performances and exhibitions to weddings, corporate events, and meetings, continually transforming to meet the community’s needs.
- The second floor had a reception room that exuded elegance and history. Adorned with antique hand-carved black teakwood chairs, marble-topped tables with wooden pegs ornamented with Mother-of-Pearl, and four-foot porcelain statues of characters in the Confucian precepts, it was a sight to behold. The room also housed the lobby with the altar of Guan Yu, also known as Guan Gong, the God of Wealth, adding a spiritual touch to the space.
- The third floor hosted the conference room decorated with murals, conveying a sense of grandeur.
- The fourth floor had a club room, museum, and shrine to the Chinese temple, which was filled with cultural heritage and richness.
- The pagoda is situated on the rooftop, an iconic symbol of the oriental architecture of Chinatowns.



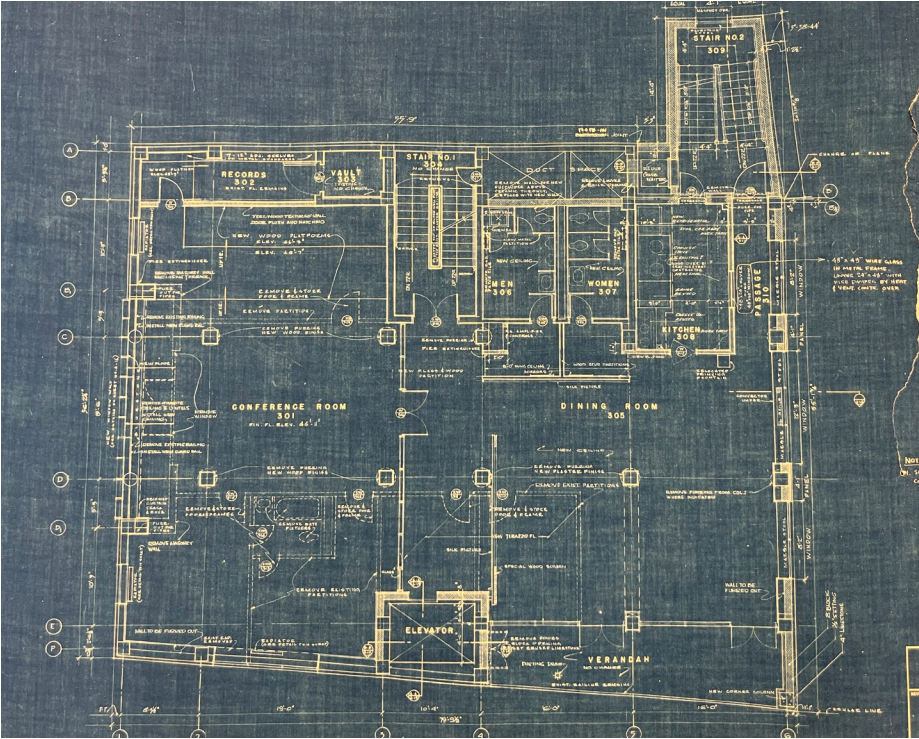
Basement plan of the Chinese Merchants Association Building, 1956  
(The City of Boston Archives)



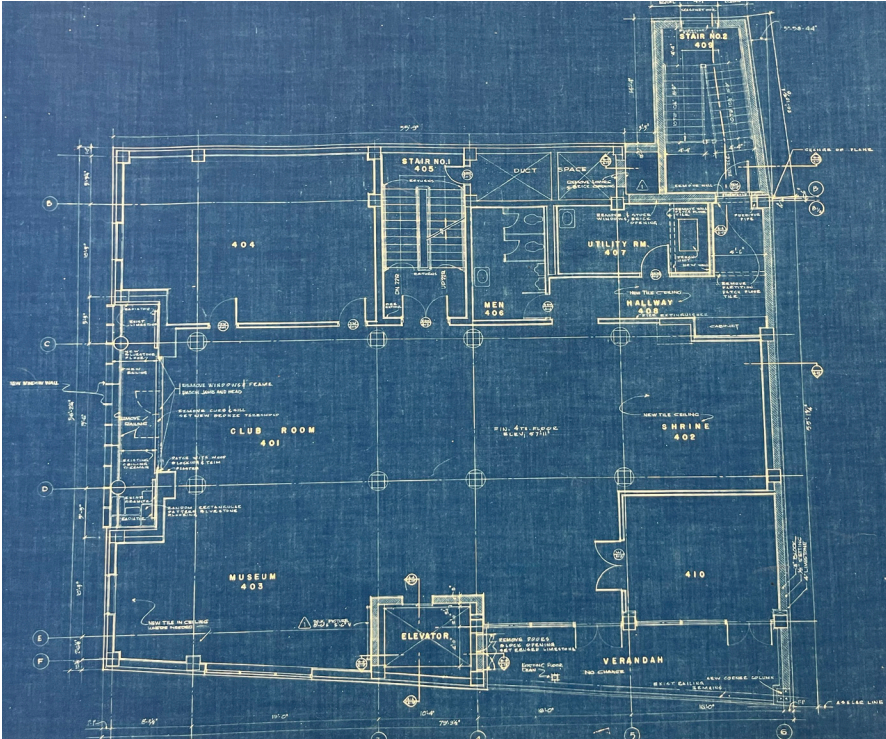
First-floor plan of the Chinese Merchants Association Building, 1956  
(The City of Boston Archives)



Second-floor plan of the Chinese Merchants Association Building, 1956  
(The City of Boston Archives)



Third-floor plan of the Chinese Merchants Association Building, 1956  
(The City of Boston Archives)



Fourth-floor plan of the Chinese Merchants Association Building, 1956  
(The City of Boston Archives)

# IMMIGRANT HISTORY TRAIL

Boston’s Chinatown  
波士頓華埠 移民歷史徑

Maxwell Guan  
Ashton Kao  
Daniel Nguyen  
Tian Ye Ethan Sun



# CHINESE MERCHANTS ASSOCIATION BUILDING

## 20 HUDSON STREET



Bob Lee's Lantern House (20 Tyler Street), 1950s (Photo taken by Edmund L. Mitchell)

### Historical Significance

Considering the Asian immigrant fraternal organizations' influence and support systems, like those provided by the “On Leong Tong” group (later renamed as the Chinese Merchants Association or On Leong Association), Boston's Chinatown served as a hub for Chinese immigrants in the greater New England area. Settled on Hudson Street in 1947, the association's Boston headquarters served as a community center, a political organization, and a mutual aid society for local Chinese immigrants. Constructed following the defeat of the nationalist government in China in 1949, this headquarters symbolizes the prosperity of the Chinese community in postwar Boston. Unfortunately, its prominence as a local landmark did not prevent the removal of its east facade when the expressway was built in 1956. Nevertheless, the building's rooftop pagoda and architectural style dramatically define the Bostonian ethnic enclave's east border. Designed by Asian American architects, the Chinese Merchants Association building reflects a blend of Chinese and Western influences, symbolizing the integration of Chinese immigrants into American society while maintaining their cultural identity. The building's design and ornamentation showcase traditional Chinese motifs, making it a cultural landmark within Boston's Chinatown. A sense of solidarity was found through the building, attracting many businesses to the area. Restaurants like Bob Lee's Lantern House, a Cantonese-style restaurant serving familiar dishes to attract Chinese and non-Chinese patrons to the community, opened on Tyler Street adjacent to the association's headquarters.

### Social History of the Chinese Merchants Association

The Chinese Merchants Association, a national organization, was founded in New York in 1904. It has played a pivotal role in supporting Chinese immigrants across the United States amidst widespread discrimination, notably during the era of the Chinese Exclusion. Broadening its sphere of influence across the nation, the association has facilitated community organization, economic support, and cultural preservation within numerous Chinese American communities, establishing chapters in major cities like New York, Chicago, and Boston. The association also played an important political role for the Chinese immigrants, organizing and providing legal defense for Chinese immigrants against discriminatory laws. In Boston, the association founded the Kwong Kow Chinese School in 1916. This initiative aimed to preserve Chinese heritage among overseas Chinese and provide an educational foundation for Chinese children in the area.



Tong members arrested after a battle, 1906 (Library of Congress)



Aftermath of gang violence at Confucius Plaza, 1981 (Museum of Chinese in America)

While providing essential support for the community, the Chinese Merchant Association also has a dark history intertwined with criminal activities. The Tong Wars, which were a series of violent disputes in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries between rival Chinese factions, often involved On Leong members, leading to brutal gang warfare in the Chinatowns of major American cities. The association's involvement in illegal gambling operations had also been documented with numerous raids uncovering extensive gambling setups within On Leong-owned properties. Moreover, the association's ties with the Ghost Shadow gang, a notorious Chinese American gang based in New York, also complicated its legacy and impacted its community role. By the mid-1930s, however, the On Leong Tong and its former rival, the Hip Sing Tong, cooperatively raised money to transfer the remains of 120 Chinese individuals to China so they could rest next to their relatives and ancestors. By 1970, the Tongs had lost much of their power within the Chinese American community.

### History of Hudson Street

In the 1920s, there were 1,000 Chinese residents in Chinatown, which grew to 1,600 by 1950. From the 1950s to the 1960s, Hudson Street was the dominant residential street in Chinatown. This transformation was facilitated by the War Brides Act of 1945, which allowed Chinese women to rejoin their husbands in the U.S. Many of these women came from the rural Guangdong Province, especially Taishan County, and occupied Hudson Street after Syrian families moved out. For the first time, the area experienced a significant increase in the American-born generation. However, in 1949, the rise of the Chinese Communist Party jeopardized diplomatic relations between China and the United States. Since the U.S. feared communist influence, America severed ties with China. As a result, many Chinese immigrants were stranded in the U.S. During this period, Boston's Chinatown experienced a shift from a bachelor community to a diverse community with more families, women, and native-born Chinese American citizens. More specifically, Hudson Street transitioned from primarily laundry businesses to a multi-purpose district with more restaurants, gates, and community associations serving the local Chinese population.



Women raising funds for war effort against Japan at 6 Hudson Street, 1940s (Chinese Historical Society of New England)

Beyond its business, this block of Hudson Street also housed associations such as the Chinese Nationalist Party. The Chinese Merchants Association moved from Tyler Street to Hudson Street in 1947, providing a crucial role in helping Chinese merchants in Boston unite, support each other, and service the greater community. During World War II, these associations played critical roles in supporting China against Japan's invasion. For instance, they organized events like parades on Hudson Street to raise funds for Chinese refugees and to encourage boycotting Japanese silk.

*“On Leong” means peaceful. If they have problems and don't know what to do or if there is a dispute about payment of debt, they go to one of the two co-presidents instead of going to a lawyer. The men at the meetings hear the story — like a jury. They consult and the co-presidents hand down a decision. You know, we Chinese like to keep our problems within our community and solve them ourselves.*

— Annie Leong, St. Louis Globe-Democrat, 1962

Throughout its history, the Chinese Merchants Association acted as both a “civic” and “secret” society to ensure the safety of Chinese immigrants who dealt with discrimination. Despite accounts of its involvement with illegal activities such as gambling, the association has greatly served and united the Chinese community as well as created social spaces for entertainment and networking for its members.

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