

# TUNNEY LEE HOME

5 OXFORD PLACE



2-3 Oxford Place, 1921 (Digital Commonwealth)

## Early Settlement

Oxford Place, along with the surrounding streets Ping On Alley and Harrison Avenue, hold significance as the earliest sites of Chinese settlement in Boston. Working-class Irish, Italian, Jewish, Syrian, and Chinese immigrants were initially attracted to this area for its low rents, which had weakened due to the combined effects of numerous waves of immigration, nearby railway yards, and growing industry forces. The area also served as a practical point of entry for these immigrants due to its proximity to South Station and the Pearl Street Telephone Exchange, which facilitated transportation and job opportunities. The streets surrounding Oxford Place contain many of Chinatown's earliest Chinese-owned businesses, the majority of which were laundries and restaurants. In 1877, Chinese laundry owners Sing Lee and Tong Kee were documented on Harrison Avenue, and owners Yue Lee and E. Wah were recorded on Beach Street. The 1878 *City Directory* lists the addition of Wah Yuree and Company at 32 Harrison Ave. and Mrs. J. Young at 145 Harrison Ave. Hong Far Low Restaurant was documented as early as 1894 on Harrison Avenue.

## Demographic Changes

5 Oxford Place shifted from early Bostonian owners to Irish owners between 1856 and 1874. John Flynn, of Irish descent, is noted as one of the first owners on record at 5 Oxford Place in 1874. Oxford Place underwent a dramatic demographic shift to Chinese residents in the early twentieth century. Lee Goon was listed as a Chinese resident at 5 Oxford Place in an article from *The Boston Post* as early as 1903. However, the first Chinese resident who appears in official government documents at 5 Oxford Place is Moy Fook, who lived in the unit from 1905 to 1910. On the other hand, the first Chinese property owners on Oxford Place did not arrive until later, including Yee Wah at 11 Oxford Place in 1912, and Goon Fong at 6 Oxford Place in 1914. At 5 Oxford Place specifically, the first Chinese property owner was Wong Yen in 1963.



Map of Oxford Place, 1902 (Atlascope)



4-11 Oxford Place, 1997 (Massachusetts Historical Commission)

## Architectural History

The units at Oxford Place were constructed in 1843 by housewright Adijah Johnson and designed by Gridley James Fox Bryant, a prominent Boston architect who was also responsible for Chinatown's Quincy Grammar School and the Old City Hall. The building was originally designed for Irish immigrants who faced prejudice as a community at the time. This sentiment is reflected in the plain, unadorned exterior of the units that are inexpensive to build. The building was designed in the Greek Revival style, which is evident in its symmetry, low-pitched, front-gabled roof, and cornice lines. The building is similar to other mid-nineteenth century working-class row houses constructed in the area, on the neighboring Beach St., Hudson St., Harrison Ave., and Oxford St. While many of these buildings are no longer standing, Oxford Place preserved the few remaining examples that are remarkably intact with their original granite basements, inset entries, and box dormers.

# IMMIGRANT HISTORY TRAIL

Boston's Chinatown  
波士頓華埠 移民歷史徑

Mae Carroll  
Sophia Comparato  
Maddie Cunniff  
Chelsea Lee

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Fet Lee, Fourteenth Census of the US, 1920. (The United States Census Bureau)

## Lee Family History

The immigration of the Lee family to the US was noncontinuous, and reflected broader Chinese immigration patterns at the time. While Tunney Lee was a first-generation immigrant born in Taishan, China, his grandfather, Fet Lee, was born in California, whose father had worked on the Transcontinental Railroad in the 1860s. Fet Lee was self-employed, operating a business as a retail grocery buyer following his migration to Massachusetts from the West Coast. In 1938, Tunney Lee emigrated with his father from southern China to Boston at the age of seven to escape the Second Sino-Japanese War. He was then placed under the care of his grandparents while his father went to work in Washington as a lawyer. His mother and their younger sisters stayed behind in China because of the Chinese revolution and America's strict immigration quotas in the early twentieth century.

5 Oxford Place, 2024. (Sophia Comparato)

## Occupants

Chin Gawk, a Chinese laundryman, resided at 5 Oxford Place before Tunney Lee's family. After the Lee family moved out, Chinese manager Frank Goon became the next occupant in 1947. The occupancy of Oxford Place have been marked by a consistent fluidity in functionality. While the building was converted to meet the needs of different inhabitants over time, it also often served different functions at once. Lower levels of the buildings were typically used to house businesses while the upper levels served as living quarters.

## The Lee Family at 5 Oxford Place

Between 1940 and 1946, Tunney Lee lived at 5 Oxford Place with his grandfather, Fet Lee, grandmother, Chin Shee, and their sons, Kim Pay Lee and Gen Hoo Lee. In addition to his immediate family, Tunney Lee noted that relatives who worked nearby as laundrymen would often stay in the unit over the weekend, intensifying the already cramped conditions of the space. At the time when the Lee family occupied the apartment, it was a one-bedroom, cold-water flat which they rented for just fifteen dollars a month with a kerosene stove for heat. The unit was not fit to function as a residential space, let alone meet the needs of a family of the Lees size. According to Tunney Lee, there were no separate bedrooms in the apartment, but rather "one big room where everybody slept at the same time."

## Tunney Lee

Tunney Lee was one of the most influential occupants of 5 Oxford Place due to his significant contributions to Boston's Chinatown community. Lee attributed his career development to his experiences growing up in this close-knit community. These experiences inspired him to pursue a career in community-based urban planning and activism. Before his time as a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), Lee worked for the Boston Redevelopment Authority, where he successfully worked to stop gentrification and demolition in certain historic areas of Boston's Chinatown. Lee is also recognized for his involvement in the "Chinatown Atlas" project, a guide to the historical timeline of Boston's Chinatown from 1875 to the present day. Furthermore, this guide is a reminder that Chinatown is a living community as well as a place of vast history. Throughout his lifetime, Lee worked relentlessly to educate the public on the history of Boston's Chinatown, focusing mostly on community-based design.

Tunney Lee, 2020. (MIT News)

Ralph Chin and sister, Russell Wong, Tunney Lee on Oxford St, 1940s. (Chinatown Atlas)