

# HONG FAR LOW

36 1/2–38 1/2 HARRISON AVENUE



Harrison Ave. before widening, 1892 (Courtesy of Boston Athenaeum)



Postcard showing Harrison Ave., and Hong Far Low to the right, 1905 (Historic New England, Chinatown, Harrison Ave., Boston, Mass)

## Historical Significance

When the Chinese community started to immigrate to America in the 1850s, the population was mainly single men and only a few families. Despite the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, Massachusetts' Chinese population increased from 300 in 1880 to about 3000 in 1900, because many immigrants were leaving Western states. During this time, families started immigrating to Massachusetts and started populating Boston's Chinatown. At first, laundries were how Chinese immigrants made most of their income. As Boston's Chinatown became a more prominent ethnic enclave, more Chinese restaurants began to open in the area—in 1889, there were six Chinese restaurants in Boston's Chinatown. Opened in 1879, Hong Far Low is allegedly the oldest Chinese restaurant in the area.

## History of 36 1/2–38 1/2 Harrison Avenue

In 1894, 36 1/2–38 1/2 Harrison Avenue was constructed by architect Joseph Lafield following the widening of Harrison Avenue. The architectural style of the building is Romanesque Revival, constructed out of brick and brownstone with round arches on the exterior of the top floor. The building was originally four stories high with a flat slate roof and six bays. Additionally, the second floor of the building features a recessed balcony and tall rectangular windows. The building became home to Hong Far Low in 1894. While many restaurants were destroyed due to the widening of Harrison Avenue, Hong Far Low was able to re-open its doors on the second floor of 36 1/2–38 1/2 Harrison Avenue. Throughout the building's history, stores operated on the first floor while the third and fourth floors of the building were typically used as residences. Further, Harrison Avenue was one of the earliest commercial centers for Chinese restaurants and businesses. For example, in 1905, the Low Bun Fong Chinese restaurant opened at 32 Harrison Avenue, a building adjacent to 36 1/2–38 1/2 Harrison Avenue.

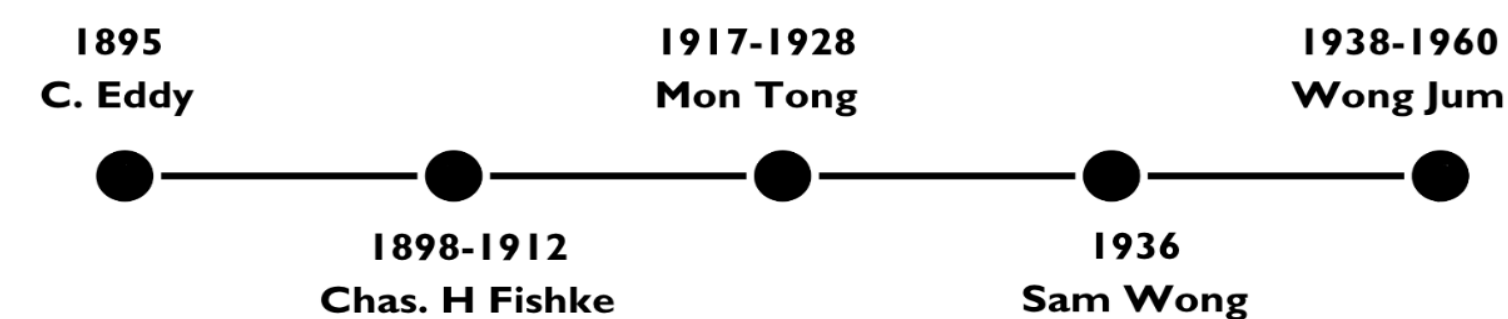


Tile door step made after the reconstruction of the building, 1894 (Courtesy of Chinese Historical Society of New England)



Front cover of menu, early 1900s (Courtesy of Harley Spiller)

## Building Ownership



## History of Hong Far Low

As the earliest known Chinese restaurant in the Boston area, Hong Far Low holds a significant place in the history of the streetscape of Boston's Chinatown and the greater Boston community. With its extravagant menu catering to a wide audience, Hong Far Low attracted both Chinese immigrants and non-Chinese customers. For example, Hong Far Low was the first restaurant in Boston to make chop suey, a dish traditionally catered to non-Chinese individuals. In the years Hong Far Low operated, it brought much joy and satisfaction to customers. The restaurant was mentioned multiple times in newspapers like *The Boston Globe* due to its stories involving both members of the Chinatown community and visitors. Hong Far Low's long history of positive and negative experiences has made the restaurant's impact on Boston's Chinatown undeniable.



Hong Far Low building, 1920 (Courtesy of Chinese Historical Society of New England)

## Current State of 36 1/2–38 1/2 Harrison Avenue

Today, 36 1/2–38 1/2 Harrison Avenue is home to a Japanese and Chinese restaurant, ShoYu Boston, and eight apartment units. ShoYu Boston opened on the first floor of the building on April 2, 2024, after a previous business, the Eldo Cake House, closed in 2022. The building is owned by Mirror Marina LLC, which acquired ownership in 2006. The latest renovations to the building include the addition of two bathrooms and the installation of kitchen equipment on the first floor. These changes were made in order to best suit the opening of ShoYu Boston. As for living spaces, three more apartments were added in 2007 along with two additional floors to the original four-story building. These new floors were used as apartments, and they continue to serve this purpose today. In addition, the round arches on the fourth floor of the building—features of Romanesque Revival architecture—remain intact.

# IMMIGRANT HISTORY TRAIL

Boston's Chinatown  
波士頓華埠 移民歷史徑

An exhibition by Boston College students in the course "Making American Landscapes: Building and Living in Asian America," curated by Prof. Hongyan Yang. Sponsored by Boston College: Core Curriculum, University Council on Teaching, History Department; Chinatown Community Land Trust.

Shirley Canales  
Kiran Hebert  
Claire Kildahl  
Aina Yamagishi



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36 ½–38 ½ HARRISON AVENUE

## History of Chop Suey

Starting in the late nineteenth century, chop suey houses have had a long presence in the United States and are considered a hallmark of Chinese American cuisine. Although the appeal of chop suey was its exoticism, the dish was a deliberate American invention in response to its widespread popularity among working-class Americans for its exoticism and affordability. The dish gained rapid popularity in New York City's Chinatown in the early 1900s, influencing neighboring cities such as Boston. As Boston's Chinatown became a capitalized ethnic crossroads, competing restaurants began to emerge. Catering to Boston's white population was socially beneficial and essential for the economic survival of the restaurant. As a result, in the early 1920s, Hong Far Low served Americanized dishes like chop suey, chow mein, fried chicken, omelets, fried rice, and sprout soup. Chinese immigrants embraced the dish as the poster child of Chinese cuisine to satisfy white customers. However, when Hong Far Low was first established in 1879, the restaurant sold authentic Chinese food that catered to the Chinese bachelors in Boston. As stated by one white patron, Hong Far Low served "giblets, rice, and oolong tea" during the 1890s.



Grand Dining room, 1903. The restaurant was decorated with traditional marble tables and light fixtures to honor patron deities of the restaurant. (Courtesy of Chinese Historical Society of New England)

## Hong Far Low Signage

When looking at the 1916 architectural drawing of the building's signage, right below the title of "Hong Far Low," there was a large sign that read "Chop Suey." This sign was implemented to attract white customers as chop suey was synonymous with Chinese cuisine to most white Americans. In 1917, an ornamental chain-fastened marquee was constructed over the restaurant's entrance that advertised the name of the restaurant and the dish chop suey. Hong Far Low became a successful business because of its ability to attract customers from different cultures. Chop suey houses like Hong Far Low symbolize Chinese adaptation, illustrating how immigrants negotiated and found belonging in the hostile racial landscape of America. Although chop suey as a concept is a symbol of cultural compromise, chop suey houses provided a key way for marginalized Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans to successfully negotiate greater social acceptance and self-employment opportunities during an era of prevalent xenophobia.



Chop suey houses like Hong Far Low advertised their businesses using flashy signages and promoted the dish in large lettering, 1916 (The City of Boston Archives)

## Hong Far Low and the Community

While the restaurant endured many negative experiences such as that of Carl Demnick, it was also a place where many positive memories were created. Lots of celebrations were held at the restaurant, such as the farewell dinner of businessman Frank Shinn in 1894 featured in *The Boston Herald*. Shinn's farewell party consisted of a 25-course meal of pickled pears, bird's nest soup, boiled rice, preserved bean tarts, Chinese wines, and much more. The decision to have such an extravagant dinner at Hong Far Low shows the value of the restaurant and its ability to bring the community together. Numerous joyous moments like this occurred at Hong Far Low, and throughout its history, it brought many positive memories to Boston's Chinatown community.

### THREW HIM OUT.

Chinamen End Demnick's  
Reign of Terror.

Mad Because Asked to Pay for Food  
in Advance He Got a Gun.

Preparing to Wade in Yellow  
Blood When Arrested.

Article on Carl Demnick and his aggressions (*The Boston Globe*, August 9, 1902)

### FRANK SHINN IS GOING HOME.

Intelligent Boston Chinaman  
Wants to See His Wife.

He Was Given a Farewell Banquet in  
"Chinatown" Saturday Night by  
Admiring Friends and Relatives—  
A Herald Man Attended and Partook of the Dainty Viands.

Article on the farewell party of Frank Shinn (*The Boston Herald*, November 12, 1894)

## Racial Tensions

However, the popularity of chop suey restaurants among white consumers did not fully shelter Chinese immigrant workers from hostile, racist sentiments. On August 7, 1902, a drunken white customer named Carl Demnick entered Hong Far Low, yelling out xenophobic slurs at the workers. After the staff successfully removed him from the restaurant, he returned with a firearm in hand before Boston law enforcement arrested him. Although the restaurant industry offered immigrants a gateway into societal belonging, this example and others like it prove that Chinese-owned businesses still operated against harsh pushback.

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