

# Preliminary Findings of the 2011 Archaeological Investigation of Nanaimo's Third Chinatown: Phase I

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This brief article presents initial findings of a small investigative field project conducted in Nanaimo's Chinatown in February 2011. The long standing and re-emerging threats to the site of Nanaimo's Chinatown will be discussed from the viewpoint of the Archaeological Society of B.C.-Nanaimo Branch and our continuing advocacy for protection of archaeological heritage. This is a particularly important role in the face of absent legislation protecting threatened historic sites like Nanaimo's Chinatown. Described below in detail, a plan led by the ASBC-NB was developed in collaboration with community partners to investigate and potentially conserve the significant historic site of Chinatown in Nanaimo. An abridged background of Nanaimo's Chinatowns based upon research and interviews conducted by Daphne Paterson will provide some context for discussion of the project aims, methodology and, most importantly, to share some of the valuable results obtained thus far. Please note research of the excavated material is ongoing and this is not a report of the final results.

ASBC-NB past president Julie Cowie reported in *The Midden* 37(2) in 2005 that two development plans threatened Nanaimo's third Chinatown. The owner of Hecate Lodge intended to (1) develop townhouses and (2) expand a senior's care facility. Both proposals are sited on the remaining undeveloped Chinatown land (Figure 1). In 2006 the townhouse development was approved and construction destroyed a part of the remaining Chinatown site. In late 2009 the City of Nanaimo informed the ASBC-NB that development plans were again moving forward for the second project, a senior's facility, and the development permit application had been received and was under municipal review. Time was again running out for what remained of Chinatown's archaeological record.

The ASBC is the only organization in this province with the mandate to protect and conserve all archaeological sites without prejudice. Given the lack of provincial or federal heritage protection for heritage

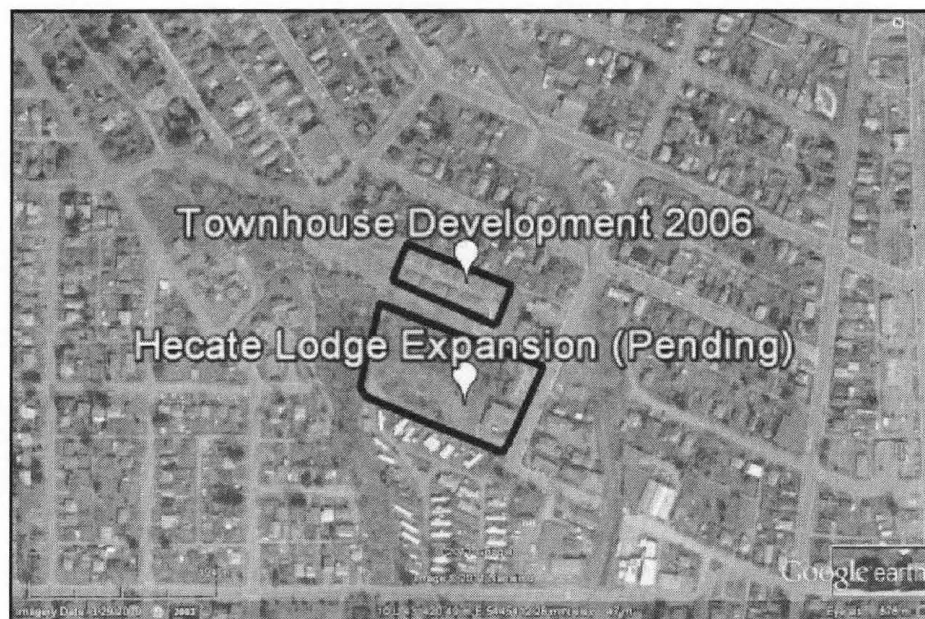


Figure 1. Locations of development where Chinatown site is located.

sites younger than 1846, no one is responsible for investigation or conservation of historic sites. The ASBC-NB values all heritage and does not support the injudicious application of the date 1846 (date of the Oregon Treaty) to protect some of British Columbia's cultural heritage and not others.

Ultimately, the ASBC-NB hopes one day to have a community park established on the site of Chinatown as a gesture of respect and acknowledgement of the contributions that the Chinese community made to help develop Nanaimo and surrounding areas. This idea was first presented in 2006 as a solution to the threat of development. A key function of the park would be to provide protection for any remaining historic deposits and, after vegetative clearing, the increased visibility would deter pot-hunters. Other benefits include rehabilitation of a portion of a vital stream, removal of invasive species, and addition of much needed green space and park land to a neighbourhood lacking such amenities. The proposal was not supported at the time; however, the ASBC-NB has continued to raise the idea and this was the impetus for the city to approach the ASBC-NB as a community stakeholder in late 2009 when the second development

permit was received.

The ASBC-NB recognized that archaeological data could assist in making a case for advancing the site as an important place in Nanaimo's cultural history, worthy of formal recognition and possibly protection. Given the renewed development threats, the ASBC-NB decided to take steps to investigate the site and advance the proposal for a Chinese Heritage Park.

The prospect of the ASBC-NB taking on a field project was daunting given our declining membership and lack of resources, so we approached the Anthropology department at Vancouver Island University to discuss potential opportunities for a joint historic archaeological investigation. Meetings were held with the city, Anthropology professors at VIU and the landowner, and an agreement was reached between all parties to conduct a small preliminary archaeological investigation. The ASBC-NB and Anthropology department developed a phased archaeological plan. VIU adjusted their course calendar to accommodate and offer ANTH 461: Historic Archaeology: Method and Theory taught by Dr. Imogene Lim, a well-recognized authority for her work in Canadian-Asian studies and in particular the study of Chi-



Figure 2. Location of Nanaimo's Chinatowns.

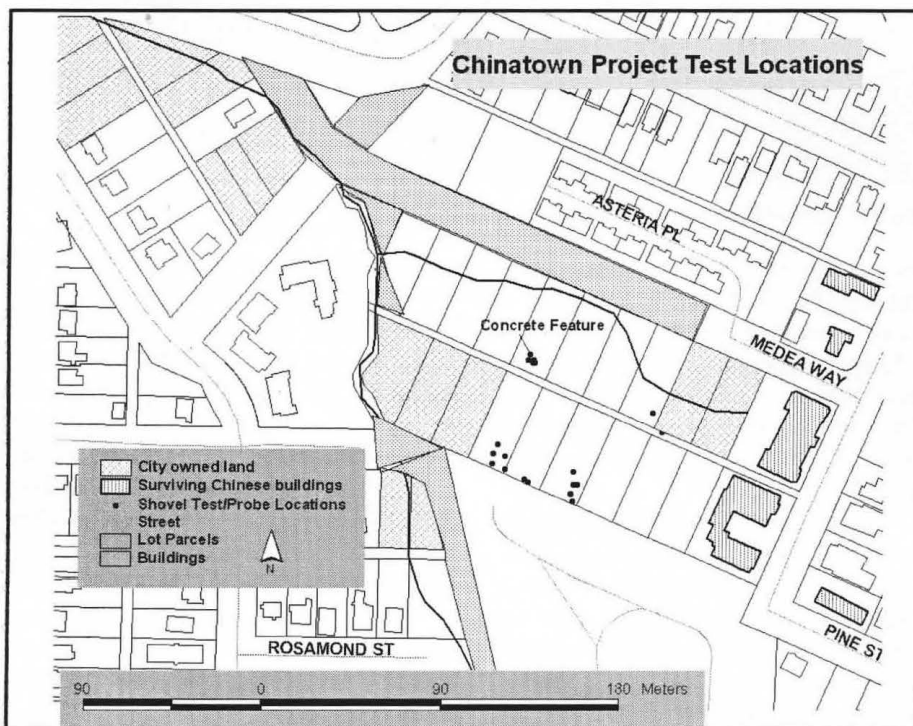


Figure 3. Test and surface collection locations, Chinatown#3 Project, 2011.

natowns. The City of Nanaimo supported the project and the landowner agreed to accommodate the project provided no interference with the construction schedule occurred. Colleen Parsley, president of ASBC-NB, provided coordination and management for the project in addition to fulfilling role of field director. Dr. Lim and Colleen Parsley co-supervised over 20 VIU students, many having their first archaeological field experience. Valerie Hannan, secretary of ASBC-NB, provided field support and Daphne Patterson, ASBC-NB director, provided research and

support.

For cultural context of the project, presented here is a brief overview of Nanaimo's Chinatowns (for locations see figure 2) based primarily on research and interviews conducted by Daphne Paterson (pgs. 9-12 unpublished manuscript available at Nanaimo Community Archives). Nanaimo's first Chinatown (1860's-1884) was located at Victoria and Winfield Crescents, presently downtown Nanaimo. Many Chinese attracted with the promise of jobs were hired mostly as mine labourers but were not permitted underground.

Various Chinese merchants started businesses including laundries, an opium seller, a gaming house, and slaughter house. Anti-Asian sentiment was growing and in 1884 the Vancouver Coal Company 'removed' this Chinatown to an isolated 8 acres outside the main community and business district. The Vancouver Coal Company rented the land to Chinese and designated this new area as the "Chinese Quarter." This became Nanaimo's second Chinatown (1884-1908) located around present day Bayview School on Needham and Princess Streets. In 1908, Bing Kee & Ching Chung (Yung) purchased .13 acres of Chinatown and 30 acres of farmland from Vancouver Coal Mining and Land Co. [Victoria Land Registry Office No.1622]. Bing Kee and Ching Chung (Yung), having bought out the Vancouver Coal Company, raised the rents. This caused widespread dissatisfaction within the Chinese community and Yick Chung, a merchant founded a land co-operative selling shares of ownership at \$5/share to 4000 shareholders across Canada and raised enough capital to purchase 11.25 acres of land just a few hundred metres north of the second Chinatown and as required, outside of city limits.

The land co-operative was registered as "Lum Yick Company" meaning "Together We Prosper." Some buildings from #2 Chinatown were taken down and moved across the tracks to Pine Street, the third and last Chinatown. For further details on Nanaimo's Chinatown see Imogene Lim's online *Nanaimo Chinatowns Project* (<http://chinatown.mala.bc.ca/>) and *Chinatowns: Towns within Cities in Canada* by Chuen-yan David Lai (1988).

From *Nanaimo Retrospective: The First Century* (1979),

Built on Chinese-owned land, and outside the City limits, it was self-governed and completely self-contained—literally a town within a town, with shops of every description. There were general and hardware stores, a herbalist, butchers, bakers, barbers, tailors, laundries, restaurants, and, of course, the ubiquitous gaming house. There was a 400 seat Opera House which regularly featured touring companies from Hong Kong and China. A Christian church and a Chinese temple provided for their spiritual needs (Mar, 93).



Figure 4. Students, supervised by Dr. Lim, probe subsurface deposits (photo by author).

In 1960 a large fire destroyed most of the community and it was never rebuilt or re-occupied with one exception. The Cathay Senior Citizen Housing Society formed to provide senior housing for the elder Chinatown residents displaced by the fire. The Cathay Seniors Home was built on a lot in Chinatown and later redeveloped as the first Hecate Lodge, a predecessor to the present day senior facility now seeking to expand again. The rest of the Chinese residents dispersed throughout Nanaimo and many moved away.

In the massive clean up after the fire, bulldozers cleared away debris and removed remains of damaged structures. Development of former Chinatown land has been limited to the already described Hecate Lodge at the intersection of Pine and Hecate streets on the east side of former Chinatown and the Mountain View Mobile Home Park, built over a portion of Chinatown's south Pine Street. Forming the north border adjacent to Chinatown was the city's dump in use from ca.1920 until at least the 1930s (Williams 1931) and this area has been extensively pot-hunted ever since. The same occurred all around Chinatown following the fire. Pot-hunting Chinatown became an accepted

family pastime in Nanaimo.

The structure of land ownership for the former Chinatown site is a mixture of public and private lands intersected by branches of the Cat Stream. A number of city owned parcels and some right-of-way land form the remainder of the publicly owned sections. The owners of Hecate Lodge own the remainder of the undeveloped lands formerly occupied by Chinatown. Despite post-fire impacts, Chinese buildings have survived (see figure 1) including the Chinese Free Mason Hall (880 Hecate Street), the Chinese Church (now Islamic Centre) at 905 Hecate Street, the York residence at 908-912 Hecate Street<sup>1</sup> (City of Nanaimo Heritage Register), a rooming house at 997 Hecate Street (pers. comm. C. Meutzner 2010), and, from comparison of the aerial photo based on building style and location, an industrial warehouse style building on Pine Street. These buildings are located on the periphery and in some cases outside the conventional boundary of Chinatown. As the entire Chinese population moved away after the fire, all but two (Cathay's Senior Home and the Chinese Free Mason Hall) were sold to non-Chinese after the fire.

The aim of Phase I was to conduct tests of subsurface deposits by probe and shovel to find whether intact deposits survived post-fire disturbances (pot-hunting, clean-up, etc.) and gauge the integrity of the site overall. Future prospective studies (Phases II and III) would be considered if results of Phase I supplied sufficient evidence warranting further research.

Background research was conducted by students taking ANTH 461 under the supervision of Dr. Lim and Nanaimo Community Archives staff. Maps, property records, assessment rolls, census data and other references were reviewed. ASBC-NB obtained air photos from UBC. Survey was conducted of the entire available area (not occupied by Hecate Lodge or the trailer park to the south) using transects spaced 5 metres apart. Surface coverage was 100%. All cultural material identified on the surface was marked with a blue pin flag. The 1947 aerial photograph aided the field work by allowing investigators to target specific areas and allow for judgemental tests (see figure 4). Shovel testing (n=7), probing (n=13), and combined shovel and probing (n=3) and abandoned (n=1) resulted in 24 subsurface tests (see figure 3). All the subsurface ma-



Figure 5. 1947 Air Photo showing a portion of Chinatown. Intersection of Pine and Hecate streets in upper left centre (Source: UBC Geography Department Air Photo Collection.)

terial excavated by probe and shovel was screened using a 1/8" mesh. Some surface collecting was conducted and a number of photographs were taken.

Discovery of new historic documentation helped in the research and field work planning. A series of aerial photographs from 1947 (Source: UBC Geography Department Air Photo Collection) illuminated new imagery of Chinatown never seen before by researchers, offering new avenues of investigation into community boundaries, Chinese land use, analysis of planning, etc. New evidence was also found by Nanaimo Community Archives staff through examination of assessment rolls and the Official Fire Report. The assessment rolls chart the population of Chinatown as dynamic and shifting as land ownership in Chinatown went through phases of growth and other periods of decline. Previously it was assumed the fire destroyed everything in Chinatown but it was documented (after our field work) that half of the fifty of the buildings in Chinatown were destroyed. Twelve remained on the site after the clean up (it is unclear but likely in addition to buildings cited above) [pers. comm. C. Meutzner 2010]. The limited scope of our study means the new records have generated many new research questions not yet answered and new evidence to be used in possible future field studies.

Cultural material collected from the

tests and the surface collected material has been taken to VIU where analysis is ongoing and final results of the project are pending.

Initial field results are promising. The amount of cultural material found in the probes was unexpected. Investigators held low expectations of finding cultural material due to severity of past impacts; however, an abundance of faunal remains were collected from probes and shovel tests. Species present include fish, clam, and whole barnacle in addition to land mammal and bird.

Other unexpected findings include portions of intact landscape of Chinatown. A surviving mature (>100 years) Bigleaf Maple tree was located according to the 1947 aerial photo, in between two buildings on the north side of Chinatown's Pine street<sup>1</sup>. Other domestic trees present towards the northwest border are also suggestive of naturalized plantings from the Chinatown occupation. The location of Chinatown's Pine Street is visible by remnants of in situ asphalt along the west boundary of the study area, another indication of possibly intact subsurface deposits.

Identified cultural material located on the surface was marked using a pin flag to assist in providing field crew of a sense of the concentrations of 'positive space' (cultural material) and 'negative space' (voids of cultural material). This overview demonstrated concentrations of

surface cultural material clustered at the 'edges' of the level terrace situated above the tributary drainage of Cat Stream along the north boundary of Chinatown. It is assumed that the clearing action of the bulldozers pushed the material towards the slope indicating the crest and bank towards the stream was not machine impacted from post-fire clean-up efforts. At the top of the slope along the crest is a raised berm of debris with high frequency of old fragmented rough milled wood. Along the slope a scatter of cultural remains such as fragments of footwear, faunal remains, cookware, ceramics, and metal objects was collected from the surface. In addition to cultural material, multiple recent looter pits observed along the bank of the stream possibly indicate a shared awareness of the limited extent of the machine cleared areas. The other reason for looter pits located along the bank is for cover as the bank is thickly vegetated with trees and bush as opposed to the more openly visible higher elevation level terrace.

One of the interesting results of the project was the identification of an unexpected intact feature (a looter pit was located just a few metres north). A small concrete foundation measuring 1.37 x 0.80 metres was located and systematically excavated. Remains of domestic pig mandible (n=3 fragments) were found in direct association inside the foundation. This location was compared to the 1923 Assessment (Nanaimo Community Archives) and was determined to be the immediate back yard/garden of 558 Pine Street, the last building of Chinatown in the northwest corner as shown on the 1947 air photo (see figures 3 and 4). Possible interpretations of the feature include a pig sty, or pig processing space. Through historic research and ethnological information, we know Chinatown residents raised food for their own consumption and for selling outside of the Chinese community. Pork was and continues to be an important staple in the Chinese diet and was certainly found on the menu of the restaurants in Chinatown. The recovery of pig remains reiterates its importance as food source and commodity in the local economy (Lim and Parsley, 2011).

With historic aerial photographs and testing, we could potentially learn more about land use and the community's changing demographics. Will new

information about diet, traditional belief systems, economy, and adaptation to an intolerant society emerge from the collected archaeological material?

Lab analysis is ongoing at VIU supervised by Dr. Lim. At time of submission of this article, the site of Chinatown has not yet been impacted by the proposed development, and is on hold but may proceed at any time.

#### Acknowledgements

The project wouldn't have been possible without Dr. Imogene Lim whose expertise of Chinese-Canadian cultural history provided the foundation required for this successful project. Other community partners include the Nanaimo Community Archives directed by Christine Meutzner who spent countless hours researching and assisting students; David Hill-Turner of the Nanaimo Museum offered support and secure storage; the City of Nanaimo staff were instrumental by facilitating this project through the development application process; and Moni Khan for allowing this project to take place in advance of the development and allowing our group and over twenty VIU students to learn about the past. Last but not least, thanks to the members of the ASBC who continue to

support the discipline of archaeology and our endeavours as a society to protect the past.

#### Notes

1. In the 1947 air photo this residence is under construction.
2. Two small portions of Pine Street are still in use as fragments fringing where Pine Street used to run east/west through Chinatown as the main street.

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**Colleen Parsley has a B.A. in Anthropology and has worked as a heritage consultant since 2001 in Alberta and B.C. Colleen is currently president of the ASBC-NB and has served on the Board since 2003.**

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## BOOK REVIEW: "For a More Human Dialogue between Peoples and Places: Transcending Colonial Boundaries on the Northwest Coast"

### *Landscapes and Social Transformations on the Northwest Coast: Colonial Encounters in the Fraser Valley*

Jeff Oliver. University of Arizona Press, Tucson, AZ. 264 pp., illus., maps, figs., notes, biblio., index, ISBN: 978-0-8165-2787-8 (hardcover). \$55.00 US. 2010.

As we enter the Fraser Valley with Oliver, we are presented with an apt, remarkably holistic and theoretically sound synthesis of geography, cartography, historical ecology, ethnohistory, anthropology and ethnography. Oliver's account cuts across these different disciplines as he transcends the salient divides of landscape as an abstract phenomenon and landscape as part and parcel of lived experience. The latter includes Indigenous perseverance and colonial dominance, the pre- and post-contact boundary, past and present times and vastly different cultural understandings of a region that is now commonly known as the Fraser Valley—emblematic for a dominant, widely accepted and often unchallenged colonial perspective of places and people. Here, the predominant history of the Fraser Valley fully reveals itself as one story, one cultural perspective, one out of many assembled in this deep history of a landscape which many newcomers and Stó:lo people continue to call home. In this accomplished work on social change and landscape transformations in the Stó:lo territory, Oliver

