

## From the Ending Racism Task Force

### **A Brief History of Chinatown's Long Struggle to Survive**

By Henry Pashkow

The proposed construction of a sports arena is not Chinatown's first struggle with development. What follows is a condensed history of a neighborhood that—for 150 years—has been a refuge from racism for Chinese immigrants.

1871: Lee Fong opens a laundry at 913 Race Street in the heart of Philadelphia's "red light" district. Fong is one of many who fled to eastern U.S. cities to escape the virulent anti-Chinese sentiment in the West. They live in small, squalid apartments in the only part of the city that will have them. These are men without families, without mates, restricted to menial employment at barely subsistence wages, fated to live out their lives that way.

1941: The Holy Redeemer Catholic Church and School opens at 915 Vine Street. It will become an anchor for Chinese families, Catholics and non-Catholics alike.

1950s: Liberalized immigration policies open the door to a new wave of immigrants, who transform Chinatown into a family-oriented community. New businesses crop up. Social and cultural organizations improve life, preserve Chinese culture, and offer services.

1966: PennDOT unveils a plan for the Vine Street Expressway that includes razing Holy Redeemer under eminent domain. Cecilia Moy Yep, a young widow with three small children, leads the successful fight to save the church.

1969-1970s: The newly formed Philadelphia Chinatown Development Corporation (PCDC) lobbies against projects encroaching upon Chinatown. Among them: Market Street East, Gallery I and II, a commuter terminal, and the Convention Center. The organization mitigates the negative impact of six public projects and blocks construction of a bus terminal and conversion of a warehouse into a federal prison. Still, residents are displaced and the community is boxed in. Rising real estate prices make the community unaffordable for many Chinese people.

1975: Following PCDC recommendations, the city commits to funding housing in Chinatown for low- and moderate-income residents displaced by government action. Three affordable housing projects are built in three years.

1982-1984: A trade mission to China results in an agreement with Philadelphia's sister-city, Tianjin, to provide materials and technical assistance for construction of the Friendship Gate.

Late 1980s: As construction of the Convention Center looms, the PCDC organizes businesses located on the site to demand that the city honor its promise to replace the lost units. The result is seven new commercial structures on 9<sup>th</sup> Street.

1991: The Vine Street Expressway is completed. It cleaves Chinatown into north and south sections, cutting off many in the community from—among other places—Holy Redeemer and a food bank.

1994: The community rises up against a plan to build a federal prison on the site of a proposed mixed-income housing development that would herald Chinatown's northward expansion. The prison is relocated closer to the Federal Court. The development, Hing Wah Yuen, opens in 1997.

2000: The city proposes building a baseball stadium at 12<sup>th</sup> and Vine Streets. That project threatens to paralyze the neighborhood with traffic and block further growth. Residents rally, and the stadium moves south.

2008-2009: Residents successfully protest plans to locate a Foxwoods Casino at the Gallery.

2023: Residents and supporters of Chinatown mobilize, once again, against a project that threatens the community: a proposed arena for the Philadelphia 76ers.

Against the backdrop of a surge in anti-Asian racism, Philadelphia's Chinatown sits at the crossroads of a struggle for land in Center City. The outcome will determine whether Chinatown persists as a dynamic haven for social and cultural traditions that might otherwise be lost to gentrification.

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