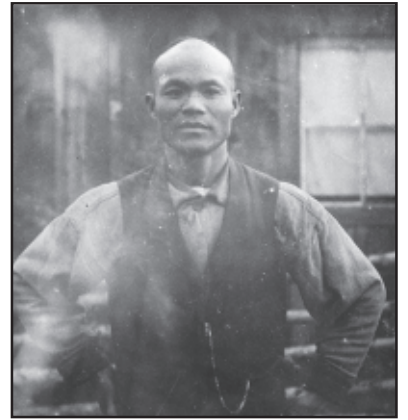


Ebey's Landing

National Historical Reserve
Washington
U.S. Department of the Interior
National Park Service

Traces of the Chinese in the Reserve

Between the 1880s and the 1920s, Whidbey Island was home to a Chinese community centered on Ebey's Prairie farmlands. For many years, the area's Chinese history has been neglected or misunderstood, but as the experiences of these Asian immigrants of Whidbey Island are uncovered, they bring to light a fascinating—if sometimes troubling—element of the island's heritage.



Arrival

Escaping unrest in China and pursuing opportunities abroad, Chinese merchants and laborers emigrated in the nineteenth century to many countries around the world. They arrived in the Northwest by way of the immigration station at Port Townsend, where Chinese merchants established a small settlement on the waterfront. Just across Admiralty Inlet, Whidbey Island became an important destination for Chinese laborers, for farm work was available there.

Daily life

On Ebey's Prairie, a cluster of several small, one room frame structures with sleeping lofts became home to Chinese laborers on the property of Ernest J. Hancock, who hired them to plant, weed, and harvest. Limited evidence makes it difficult to reconstruct their daily life in great detail. Immigration policies and census records suggest that they immigrated alone, though some had wives in China. Census records also indicate they lived in relatively crowded

conditions, as Chinese laborers typically bunked with the Chinese tenant farmers who employed them. Surviving chopsticks, rice bowls, ginger jars, and teapots suggest they maintained a traditional diet, largely supplied by Chinese merchants in nearby Port Townsend and Seattle.

Often ostracized by white society, the Chinese men of Whidbey Island relied upon Chinese communities in the larger nearby cities for crucial links to their homeland. While a Chinese farmhand on Ebey's Prairie might occasionally purchase necessities from Coupeville merchants, he typically spent most of his money in the Chinese communities in Seattle and Port Townsend.



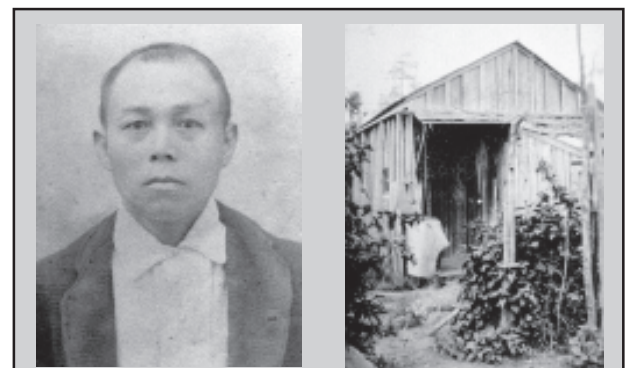
Ginger jars (shown here), rice bowls, tea pots and chopsticks are tangible reminders that Chinese tenant farmers once lived on Ebey's Prairie.

Agricultural contribution

The Chinese became indispensable farmhands for local white families or rented parcels of land to grow their own crops. Lacking horses of their own, the Chinese mainly did handwork like hoeing and weeding potatoes, a common crop. During Whidbey winters, mounds of harvested potatoes covered in protective earth and straw dotted the landscape near the homes of the Chinese, awaiting the best prices at market. Whether selling their own produce or helping white farmers get theirs to market, the Chinese residents of Ebey's Prairie made significant contributions to the island's early economic development.



Chinese entered the United States by legal and illegal means; however, the passage of the Exclusion Acts beginning in 1882 made all Chinese immigrants suspect. U.S. Customs Inspectors patrolled the waterways between Victoria, British Columbia and Whidbey Island looking for ships smuggling illegal immigrants and opium into the United States. (*Smuggling Chinese into the United States; cover of West Shore magazine, November 9, 1889. Courtesy of the University of Washington Special Collections, UW #11309.*)



Chin Toy lived in this cabin in San de Fuca (north of Ebey's Prairie) for most of his adult life, helping local white farmers with the difficult work of clearing stumps, weeding rows of lettuce and harvesting potatoes. (*images courtesy of Island County Historical Society.*)

Increasing discrimination

While their labor was welcomed by the farmers with whom they worked, the Chinese on Ebey's Prairie, like elsewhere in the American West, were often treated as unwelcome outsiders by other members of the community. Beginning in the 1880s, largely unfounded fears that Chinese laborers would take jobs from white workers led to a series of political and social movements that targeted Chinese communities like the one on Whidbey Island. Exclusion acts beginning in 1882 prevented most Chinese laborers from entering the country. Even with all the right papers, Chinese merchants and laborers already in the United States faced white hostility which took forms ranging from one-on-one intimidation and violence to the wholesale expulsion of entire Chinese communities from cities, towns, mining districts and farming areas throughout the West.

Although some white farmers maintained warm relationships with Asian tenants and employees, the Chinese of Ebey's Prairie nonetheless were targets of anti-Chinese activities spearheaded by the white business owners of Coupeville in the last decade of the nineteenth century. Frustrated by the slow economic development of the island and bolstered by the anti-Chinese racism so common throughout the West, Coupeville merchants actively recruited white families who would support local businesses while advocating the removal of Chinese residents from Ebey's Prairie and other island communities. Virulent anti-Chinese editorials appeared in the *Island County Times* and the *Sun* (each run by exclusionist merchants), while unidentified vigilantes dynamited the piles of harvested potatoes awaiting sale

Agreement Not to Rent Land to Chinese Tenants.

WE THE UNDERSIGNED, for and in consideration of the pecuniary benefits to ourselves and the welfare of the community at large, each with all the other parties hereto agree by these presents as follows:

1st.—Not to rent land either directly, or by permitting our tenants to sub-let, any land in our possession or under our control to Chinamen for the period of 2 years from date of this instrument; or to employ Chinese labor for farm purposes

PROVIDED, that this agreement shall not be binding unless all of the large land owners comply with this agreement.

Witness our hands this 10th day of October, 1900.

Following a series of anti-Chinese meetings held in the autumn of 1900 at the County Courthouse in Coupeville, exclusionists pressured the white farmers of Ebey's Prairie to refuse to hire Chinese workers or rent their land to Chinese tenants. Not all complied. (*Agreement Not to Rent Land to Chinese Tenants; Island County Times, October 12, 1900.*)

and shot the windows out of Chinese houses under the cover of night.

Whidbey Island's Chinese community reacted to the violence and intimidation in a variety of ways. Some took up arms to defend their homes and livelihood, while others enlisted the vocal support of white neighbors and employers via a petition drive. Still others simply moved on, leaving Ebey's Prairie permanently.

Departure

The decline of the Chinese on Ebey's Prairie was a gradual process. While Chinese communities in urban areas such as Seattle continued to grow during the first decades of the century, by the late 1920s, the last aging Chinese residents of Ebey's Prairie had moved off the island, returned to China, or died. Where two hundred Chinese individuals once made their homes and livings, only scattered evidence remained: a few vacant 'China shacks,' cherished gifts of ginger jars and silk scarves given to white friends, and the sole grave of tenant farmer, Ah Soot, in Sunnyside Cemetery. By sharing their story with visitors, we hope to honor the rich contributions that the Chinese community of Ebey's Prairie made to Whidbey Island's economic development and cultural heritage.



Ah Soot came to the United States from China in 1880 at the age of thirty. He settled on Ebey's Prairie, renting seven and a half acres of land from Ernest J. Hancock, where he grew potatoes and other market crops for more than two decades. During the last years of Ah Soot's life, former employer and close friend John



LeSourd visited him almost daily. When he died in 1925, Ah Soot was buried in the LeSourd family plot in Sunnyside Cemetery, the only known Chinese resident of Whidbey Island who chose not to make the final journey home to China for a traditional burial alongside his ancestors. (Images courtesy of Island County Historical Society.)



All photos from Reserve's oral history program except where noted. For additional information about the Chinese in Ebey's Landing NHR, contact the Trust Board at P.O. Box 774, Coupeville, WA 98239.