NPS Form 10-900
(Oct.1990)

OMB No. 1024-0018

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NAT. REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

203

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name Ah Louis Store

other names/site number

2. Location

street & number 800 Palm Street ☐ N/A ☐ not for publication

city or town San Luis Obispo ☐ N/A ☐ vicinity

state California code CA county San Luis Obispo code 079 zip code 93401

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1986, as amended, I hereby certify that this ☒ nomination ☐ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property ☒ meets ☐ does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant ☐ nationally ☐ statewide ☒ locally. (☐ See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Stephen D. Mikesell DSHP 2/8/08
Signature of certifying official/Title Date

California Office of Historic Preservation
State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property ☐ meets ☐ does not meet the National Register criteria. (☐ See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of commenting or other official Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:

☒ entered in the National Register
☐ See continuation sheet.
☐ determined eligible for the National Register
☐ See continuation sheet.
☐ determined not eligible for the National Register
☐ removed from the National Register
☐ other (explain): _____

for Edson H. Beall
Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action
3-26-08

5. Classification

Ownership of Property
(Check as many boxes as apply)

- ☒ private
- ☐ public-local
- ☐ public-State
- ☐ public-Federal

Category of Property
(Check only one box)

- ☒ building(s)
- ☐ district
- ☐ site
- ☐ structure
- ☐ object

Number of Resources within Property
(Do not include previously listed resources in the count.)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1	2	buildings
		sites
		structures
1		objects
1	3	Total

Name of related multiple property listing
(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

N/A

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

N/A

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions
(Enter categories from instructions)

Commerce/Trade/General Store
Domestic/Single Dwelling

Current Functions
(Enter categories from instructions)

Commerce/Trade/Specialty Store

7. Description

Architectural Classification
(Enter categories from instructions)

Late Victorian/Italianate

Materials
(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation Brick
roof Asphalt
walls Brick
other Plaster, Window Shutters and Balcony Railing are iron

Narrative Description
(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria
(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing)

- ☒ A Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- ☒ B Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- ☐ C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- ☐ D Property has yielded, or is likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations
(Mark "X" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- ☐ A owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- ☐ B removed from its original location.
- ☐ C a birthplace or a grave.
- ☐ D a cemetery.
- ☐ E a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- ☐ F a commemorative property.
- ☐ G less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Areas of Significance
(Enter categories from instructions)

Ethnic Heritage/Asian

Commerce

Period of Significance

1885 to 1903

1885-1936

Significant Dates

Significant Person
(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

On, Wong (Louis, Ah)

Cultural Affiliation

Architect/Builder

Walker, Alfred

Narrative Statement of Significance
(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

9. Major Bibliographical References

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- ☒ preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- ☐ previously listed in the National Register
- ☐ previously determined eligible by the National Register
- ☐ designated a National Historic Landmark
- ☐ recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # _____
- ☐ recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____

Primary Location of Additional Data

- ☒ State Historic Preservation Office
- ☐ Other State agency
- ☐ Federal agency
- ☐ Local government
- ☐ University
- ☒ Other

Name of repository:

San Luis Obispo County Historical Society Museum

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property Less than 1 acre

UTM References
(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet)

	Zone	Easting	Northing		Zone	Easting	Northing
1	10	712480	3906700	3			
2				4			

☐ See continuation sheet.

Verbal Boundary Description
(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

Boundary Justification
(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Willaim J. Watson, M.d.

organization Owner and Great Grandson of Ah Louis date 10/20/07

street & number 1035 Peach Street, Suite 201 telephone 805-545-5665

city or town San Luis Obispo state CA zip code 93401

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps

A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.

A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs

Representative **black and white photographs** of the property.

Additional items
(Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

Property Owner

(Complete this item at the request of the SHPO or FPO.)

Name William Joseph and Donna Lee Watson

street & number 1035 Peach Street, Suite 201 telephone 805-545-5665

city or town San Luis Obispo state CA zip code 93401

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 *et seq.*).
Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including the time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Project (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

Ah Louis Store
San Luis Obispo, CA

Narrative Description

The Ah Louis Store is a two story, brick, Victorian Italianate-style building in a rectangular plan which was built in 1885 and is approximately 2000 square feet in size. The store is on the northwest corner of Palm and Chorro Streets in the periphery of the downtown commercial core of San Luis Obispo, diagonally across the street from Mission San Luis Obispo de Tolosa, which was built in 1776. It is located in the center of the old Chinatown area of San Luis Obispo which dates back to the 1870s. The store is surrounded by an asphalt covered parking lot with 20 spaces dedicated for downtown parking. On the same lot, a detached modern single story two car garage made of masonry block and dating from the 1960s sits diagonally across from the store on the opposite corner. An attached corrugated metal shed carport is attached to the back of the store dating from the 1940s. A bronze bell, made in China in 2002, sits in its temporary wooden stand just to the right of the store as you are facing the front on Palm Street.

The foundation and walls of the Ah Louis Store are made of brick made from Ah Louis's own brickworks. The building has a composition asphalt sloped roof, hidden by a parapet. The storefront facade is made of plaster which covers the underlying bricks. The top of the facade is graced with a projecting cornice and four plaster finials. Also on the front is a second story projecting balcony made of wood supported by iron brackets and surrounded with iron railing. It is accessible by an upstairs door. Original heavy iron shutters cover all the windows and doors of the entire building, except for the two upstairs windows and the single upstairs door in the front, and are still functional. One is even scarred by indentations from gunfire from a previous era.

The interior of the downstairs store retains the original built-in wooden shelves and cabinetry from the late 19th century made of painted California redwood. They line three of the four walls inside the store and retain most of the drawers, hardware, and pull out bins located below the shelves where merchandise was stored at one time. A storage room in the back of the store is lined with the original rough timber shelves and racks which stored merchandise and barrels. The walls which are not covered by cabinetry are plastered. The floors and ceilings are wooden planks both upstairs and downstairs. The room dividers both upstairs and downstairs are the original redwood planks. The upstairs interior retains the original room dividers of the living quarters and the walls and ceilings retain the original wallpaper from the late Victorian Era. The upstairs is divided into six

Ah Louis Store
San Luis Obispo, CA

Narrative Description (continued)

rooms including three bedrooms, a sitting room, a kitchen, and a bathroom connected by a central hallway. The door hardware is original throughout the building. The property is in excellent condition and is almost all original since its construction except for minimal visible alterations including the recent earthquake retrofitting, rewiring, and replumbing in 2005. Prior to this, the only alterations since its original construction include placing a small toilet in the downstairs storage room and converting a storage room upstairs into a bathroom during the 1920s. In 1931, as modern storefront facades became fashionable on commercial building, two plate glass windows were installed in front of the building for $250.00. The original counters in the downstairs store were also removed in the 1940s as were the glass doors that covered the herbal section of the shelves. A corrugated metal shed carport was attached to the back of the store in the 1940s, and a modern two car garage built in the 1960s at the opposite end of the lot.

Beginning January of 2005, by mandate of the City of San Luis Obispo, the building was earthquake retrofitted and brought up to code. On the exterior, the earthquake retrofitting included a new roof which was secured to the surrounding walls with steel supports. On the sides and back walls, broken and cracked bricks with missing mortar caused by previous earthquakes were repaired. Two of these cracks had actually caused two inch steps running along the entire length of the cracks caused by movement of the bricks; these steps were eliminated and the walls smoothed. Old, disfiguring repairs made to the outside since the 1950s were removed along with exterior plumbing and electrical lines. The second floor balcony was repaired with new planking and the original iron railing restored. On the interior, a new footing in the foundation was poured shoring up the west wall on the Chorro Street side. Inside the building, the front and west walls above the new footing were reinforced with shotcrete extending to the roof. A steel beam was inserted in the back wall between the first and second floors, hidden in an existing soffit. The floor joists and ceiling rafters were secured to the brick walls to secure them in case of an earthquake. New plywood sheathing was laid across the entire second story floor to gain shear strength. An upstairs existing room divider wall was reinforced to make it a load bearing shear wall. The damaged plaster on the entire west wall including the portion overlying the new shotcrete was restored. Other upstairs wall surfaces which were previously water damaged from a leaking roof were also replastered. The entire building was rewired and a new junction box installed. The original gas lighting fixture in

Ah Louis Store
San Luis Obispo, CA

Narrative Description (continued)

the center of the store was left in place as a decoration. A new gas furnace was installed for heating. The entire downstairs was repainted in its original Victorian colors. An overhead fire sprinkler system was installed throughout the building according to the building code. The San Luis Obispo County Historical Society was consulted before the planned work was begun. Essentially all work done, except for the exterior brick repair, was hidden inside the walls and attic areas and thus there was no effect on the property's historic integrity.

Statement of Significance

The Ah Louis Store is significant not only as a surviving building from the historic Chinese-American community in San Luis Obispo but also through its identification with the Chinese-American pioneer Ah Louis, or On Wong. It was the center of Chinatown in San Luis Obispo from 1874 to 1930 and the home of Ah Louis and his family of eight children from 1885 to 1936. Originally built as a wooden structure in 1874, in 1885, it was replaced on the same site with the brick building that stands today. During that time, it served the Chinese and Asian community in San Luis Obispo as its general store, post office, bank, employment office, and gathering place. Chinese workers hired there helped to build the railroads of the Pacific Coast Railway and the Southern Pacific Railroad from 1874 to 1894. During this time, Ah Louis also contracted to build many roads throughout the county and the wharf at Port San Luis. His men also worked in agriculture and domestic work throughout San Luis Obispo County. Ah Louis was a prosperous businessman who, besides becoming a successful employer and labor organizer, was a merchant and farmer who pioneered the flower and vegetable seed business in San Luis Obispo County. He also built the first brick yard in the area, and many of today's historical buildings in San Luis Obispo were built out of the bricks he made. He often served as a bridge between the Asian and white communities.

Historical background and significance:

In 1861, 21 year old Wong On left his village near the city of Canton, China, in order to avoid the Taiping Rebellion and to search for gold in America. At first, he prospected in

Ah Louis Store
San Luis Obispo, CA

Statement of Significance (continued)

the Washington and Oregon areas and by 1867, he arrived in San Luis Obispo attracted by the climate which was favorable for his chronic asthma. He found work as a cook but within several years, he formed a series of partnerships that made him the principal Chinese labor contractor of the San Luis Obispo region. In 1868, Captain John Harford, the "father" of Port San Luis, recognized him as enterprising, and gave him the name, Ah Louis. He encouraged Ah Louis to become an employment agent to the Chinese laborers, or coolies, as they were called, which were needed in the area. Using Ah Louis' Chinese laborers, Harford and Ah Louis went on to build the first wharf in Port San Luis in 1873, known today as Avila Beach. Around this time, he brought in 160 Chinese laborers from San Francisco by schooner to fill in these and other positions. In 1875, Ah Louis' men helped John Harford build a longer wharf, which is still in use today. In 1874, Ah Louis also served as foreman and employment agent for the construction crew in helping to build the Pacific Coast Railway, a three-foot narrow gauge railroad that ran from the shipping wharves at Port Harford, ten miles to the south end of San Luis Obispo, which was completed in 1876. It was the first narrow gauge railroad in Southern California. Ah Louis was paid 10 cents per day for each man and provided them with food and lodging and also served as spokesman for the group. In August of 1881, with the help of Ah Louis' coolies, the railroad began its extension south to Arroyo Grande and in 1882, extended to Santa Maria and then ultimately reached Los Alamos.

Ah Louis also realized a need for a labor force in the county and used his laborers to construct public works projects, work in agriculture in planting and harvesting, serve as household cooks, laundrymen, and handymen, and work in hotels, restaurants, private homes, and hospitals. By 1876, Ah Louis won labor contracts for road building including a county road from Paso Robles to Cambria, and from Arroyo Grande to Nipomo. In 1877, he also contracted with the county to build a stage coach road over Cuesta Grade to Santa Margarita. In 1882, with a contract for $1,100, Ah Louis' Chinese laborers were used to drain a swamp in the Laguna land reclamation and drainage project.

In 1871, Ah Louis established the first brick yard in the area, on the north side of Cerro San Luis Obispo, using time-honored Chinese methods to make them. It inspired local builders to construct many downtown buildings of brick rather than wood. Bricks made

Ah Louis Store
San Luis Obispo, CA

Statement of Significance (continued)

by Ah Louis were used to build some of the county's most historic buildings still standing today including the Andrews block, the Sinsheimer building, the Hall of Records, a wing of the San Luis Obispo de Tolosa Mission, and a railroad roundhouse. They were also used to build a three-story Courthouse in 1873.

The original Ah Louis Store was constructed out of wood in 1874 on its present site. In 1875, ads began to appear in the Tribune advertising to sell goods and offering "Chinese labor contracted for on short notice." As his business expanded, Ah Louis outgrew it and in 1885, contracted with Alfred Walker to build the larger brick building that exists today using bricks that Ah Louis had made. The Tribune called it, "an ornament to the city, and shows the proprietor to be an enterprising, competent businessman." It was the first Chinese store in the county, selling general merchandise and food, and serving as a bank, post office, gathering point, and employment office for the Chinese community. He imported and sold Chinese and Japanese merchandise and food including curious and exotic items such as herbs, salted duck eggs, sea cucumbers, dried abalone, peanut oil, and various teas, besides selling sacks of grain, coffee, beans, Levis, and whiskey. The store became the hub of Chinatown in San Luis Obispo, a two block area on the edge of downtown San Luis Obispo, across the street from the Mission San Luis Obispo de Tolosa. Ah Louis was its "unofficial mayor." The Ah Louis Store was the center of celebration on holidays such as the Chinese New Year. Large fireworks displays were common during these times until around 1930, by which time most of the Chinese had left San Luis Obispo County.

Up until 1892, the Southern Pacific Railroad was planning to connect their Southern California and Northern California railways thereby allowing uninterrupted transportation across the state by rail. However, they were cut off from each other by a large mountain range, the Santa Lucia Mountains, commonly known as Cuesta Grade, which stood in their way approximately five miles north of San Luis Obispo. Between 1892 and 1894, the Southern Pacific Railroad undertook the formidable task of digging a series of eight tunnels through the mountains which would allow the railroads to connect the northern and southern parts of the state. Ah Louis served as a labor organizer for this project and by April of 1892, had workers under contract to help in the construction. Finally, on May 4, 1894, the first the train arrived with much fanfare in the San Luis Obispo train station

Ah Louis Store
San Luis Obispo, CA

Statement of Significance (continued)

from northern California. Thus, Ah Louis was involved with railroad construction from 1874 to 1894. Today, the Southern Pacific Railroad still uses five of the original tunnels. For some years during the end of the 19th century, Ah Louis contracted for work in the flower fields of the Aggeler-Musser Seed Company. He eventually leased his own farms and pioneered the vegetable and flower seed business in the county on six farms near Oceano, Santa Maria, Pismo Beach and Nipomo. Much of his business was derived from World War I government contracts between 1915 and 1919. The seeds were shipped all over the United States.

Ah Louis also constructed rooming houses and other buildings next door to the Ah Louis Store which he rented to Chinatown residents. These were torn down in the 1950s. In 1870, a census noted 4,567 white and 59 Chinese living in the county. At its peak, in the early 1890s during the construction of the Southern Pacific Railroad over Cuesta Grade, the estimated Chinese population was 2000, and one in ten San Luis Obispo residents was Chinese. At the turn of the century, estimates are that the Chinese population had dropped back to 700 to 800. By 1930, almost all of the Chinese had left San Luis Obispo for Los Angeles, San Francisco, or to return home to China. Eventually, the buildings of Chinatown slowly disappeared and today, the Ah Louis Store is one of only four buildings still surviving from the original Chinatown, the other three being built in the early 20th century. The Ah Louis Store is the earliest surviving land deed in the County records and is currently one of the oldest buildings in California still owned by the family of the original builder.

Ah Louis passed away December 16, 1936 at the age of 96.

On August 21, 1975, the Ah Louis Store was dedicated by the State of California as State Historical Landmark No. 802. A plaque resides on the front of the store reads:

Site of Ah Louis Store

> Here in 1874 was established Ah Louis's store. The first Chinese store in the county, it sold general merchandise and herbs and served as a bank, counting house, and post office for the numerous Chinese coolies who dug the eight

Ah Louis Store
San Luis Obispo, CA

Statement of Significance (continued)

tunnels through the mountains of Cuesta for the Southern Pacific Railroad, 1884 to 1894.

California Registered Historical Landmark No. 802

Plaque placed by the California State Park Commission in cooperation with the San Luis Obispo County Historical Society...and the sons and daughters of Ah Louis, August 21, 1975.

Bibliography

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Nicholson, Loren. Rails Across the Ranchos. Fresno: Fresno Valley Publishers, 1980.

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Ah Louis Store
San Luis Obispo, CA

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Stewart, Susan. "The Louis Family." San Luis Obispo Magazine June, 1996: 20-25.

Tritenbach, Paul. San Luis Obispo Discoveries. San Luis Obispo: Excellence Press, 1989.

Verbal Boundary Description

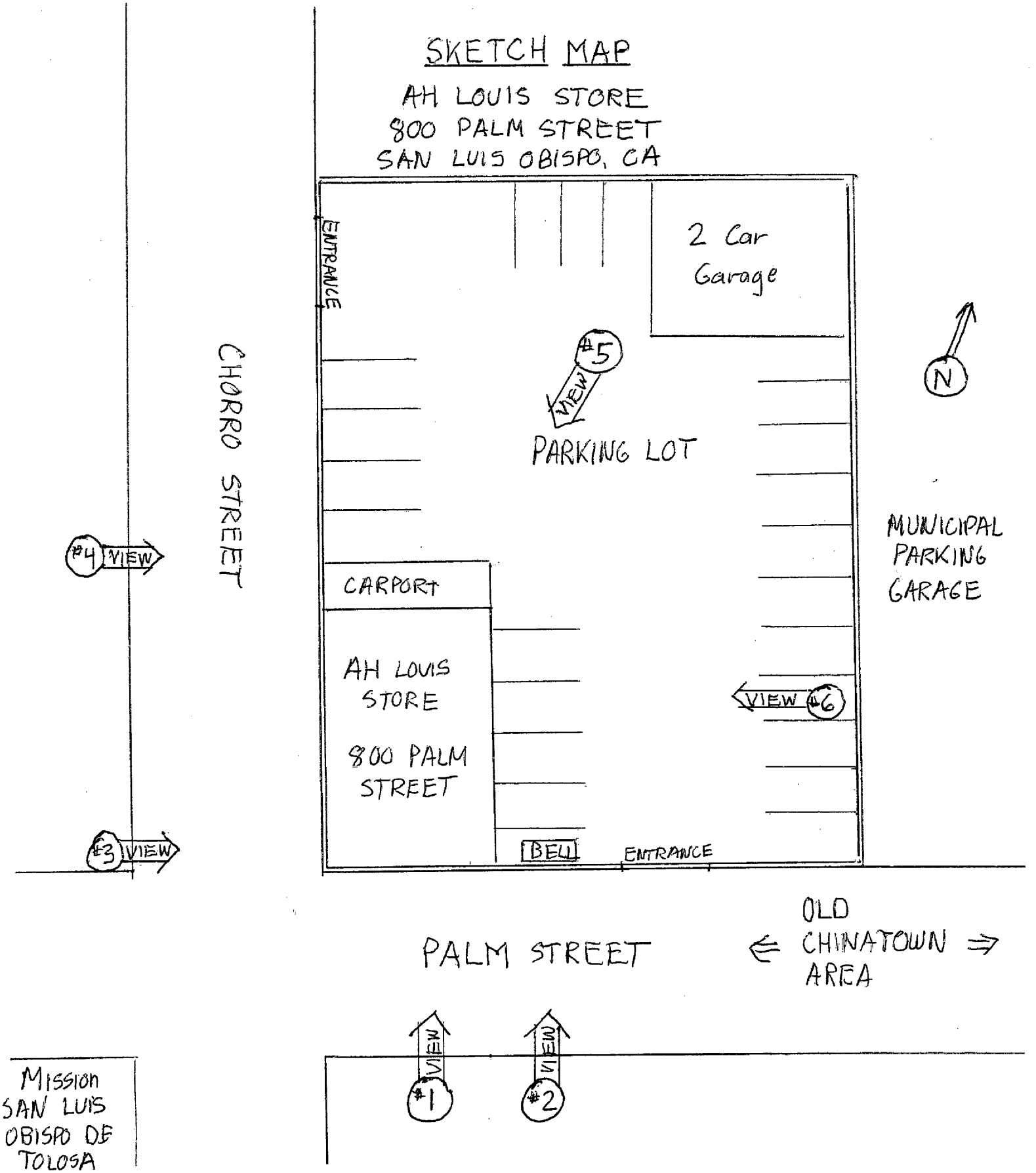
Commencing at the north east corner of Chorro and Palm Streets; and running thence N. 53 degrees 38 minutes E. with the northerly line of Palm Street 128 feet 10 inches; thence at right angles N. thirty six degrees 22 minutes W. 119 feet 3 ½ inches; thence at right angles S. 53 degrees 38 minutes W. 111 feet 1 ½ inches; thence at right angles S. 36 degrees 22 minutes E. 6 feet 3 ½ inches; thence at right angles S. 53 degrees 38 minutes W. 17 feet 8 ½ inches to the easterly line of Chorro Street: thence at right angles S. 36 degrees 22 minutes E. following the easterly line of Chorro Street 113 to the northerly line of Palm Street and point of beginning, the same being part of lot no. 4 in block no. 15, as laid down on Harris and Ward's map of the town of San Luis Obispo, being the same property conveyed to Ah Louis by Mariano Lazcano, by deed dated May 28th, 1881, and recorded in Book N of Deeds, page 77, said San Luis Obispo County Records.

Verbal Boundary Justification

The nominated property includes the entire parcel historically associated with the Ah Louis Store.

SKETCH MAP

AH LOUIS STORE
800 PALM STREET
SAN LUIS OBISPO, CA



Boundaries of store property

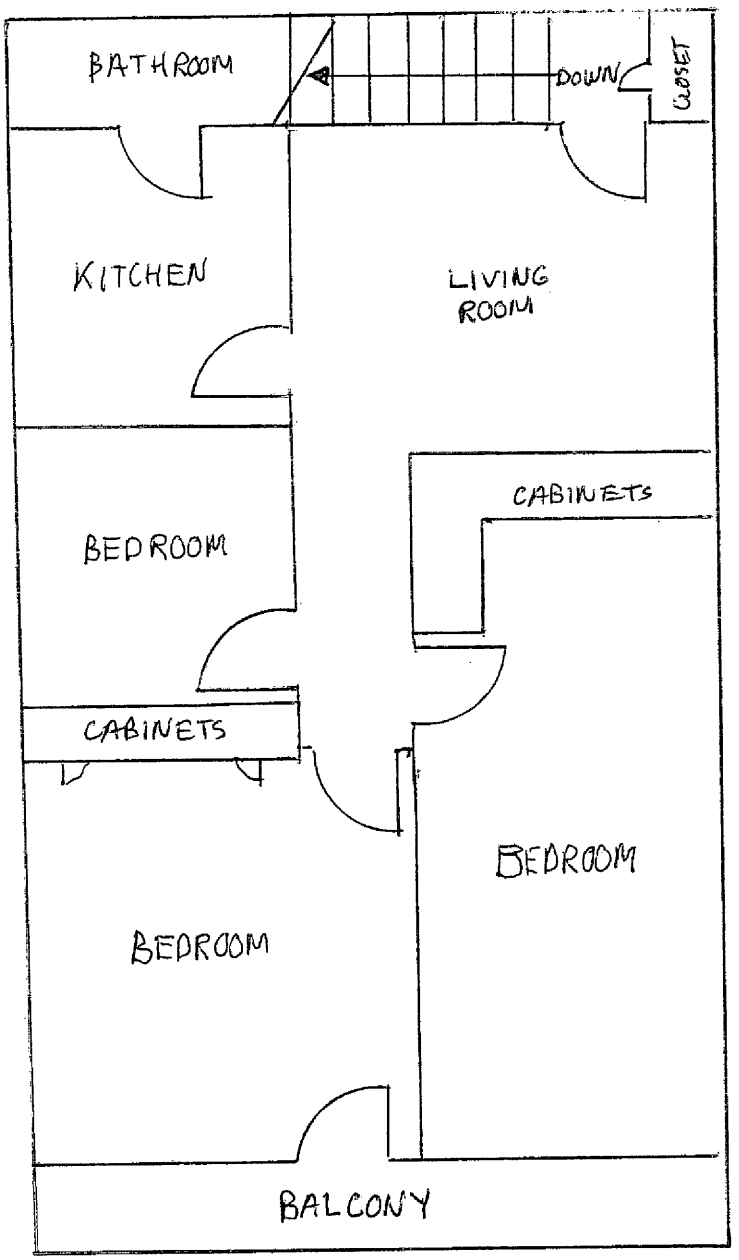
Photograph number and view

$\frac{1}{2}$" = 10 feet

Floor Plan Ah Louis Store

Upper Floor

3/4" = 5 Feet



CHORRO STREET

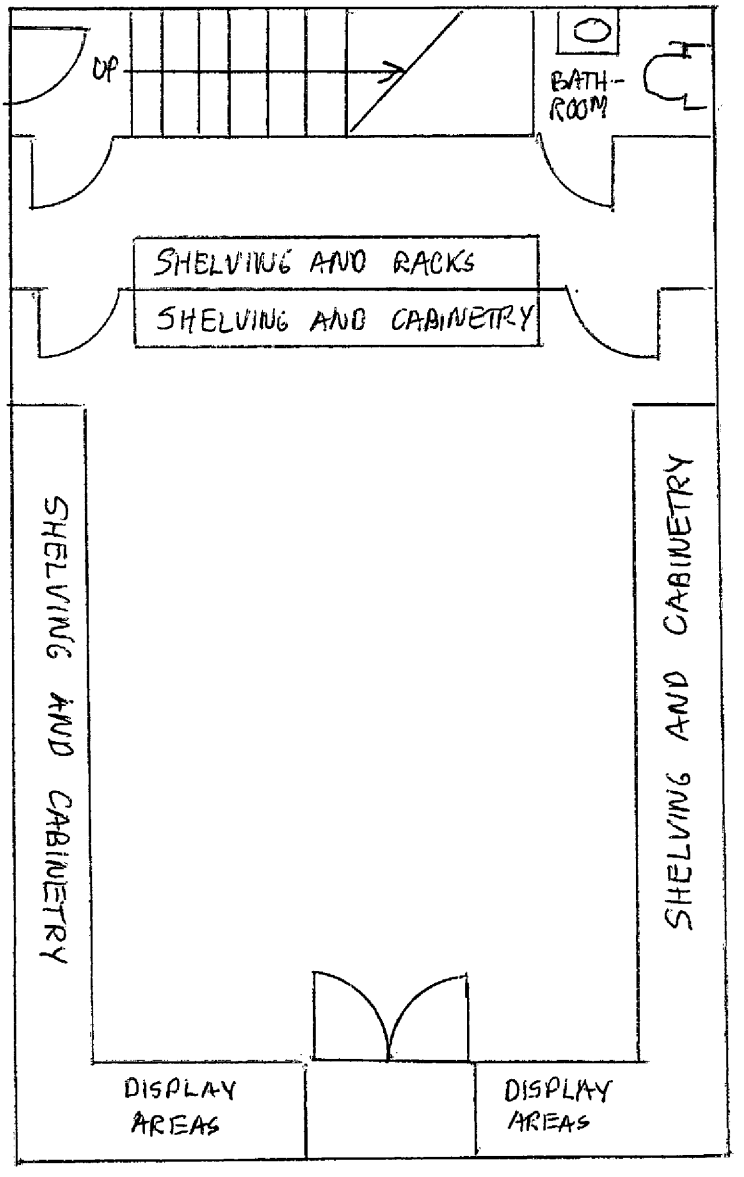
N

PALM STREET

Floor Plan Ah Louis Store

Lower Floor

3/4" = 5 Feet



CHORRO STREET

PALM STREET

AH LOUIS STORE

AH LOUIS STORE 10/17/07 Photograph #2
800 PALM STREET
SAN LUIS OBISPO, CA

WILLIAM J. WATSON, PHOTOGRAPHER Negative located inside store

Description: View Looking north from Palm Street
The storefront on corner, the bronze bell just to the right the parking lot, and the two car garage in back, on the opposite corner as the store. Part of the municipal garage is seen to the far right.

AH LOUIS STORE
800 PALM STREET
SAN LUIS OBISPO, CA

10/17/07

Photograph #3

WILLIAM J. WATSON, PHOTOGRAPHER

Negative located on-site, inside store

Description: VIEW LOOKING EAST from Chorro Street, looking east on Palm Street. Ah Louis Store on left, and remnants of Chinatown on right including two of the four original remaining buildings on that side. The municipal parking garage is next to the Ah Louis Store, on the left side, behind the trees on the sidewalk.

AH LOUIS STORE
800 PALM STREET
SAN LUIS OBISPO, CA

10/17/07

Photograph #4

WILLIAM J. WATSON, Photographer

Negative located onsite inside store

DESCRIPTION: VIEW LOOKING EAST from Chorro Street, at west wall of building. Side entrance seen and doors and windows with iron shutters. Carport seen behind building. The two car garage is seen on the far left and the municipal garage is seen across the parking lot on the far side.

AH LOUIS STORE
800 PALM STREET
SAN LOUIS OBISPO, CA

10/17/07

Photograph #5

WILLIAM J WATSON, PHOTOGRAPHER

NEGATIVE LOCATED ON SITE IN STORE

Desoription: View looking southwest at northeast corner of building Bronze bell in lower left corner. Carport attached to back of building. Note the shutters on doors and windows. Across the street to the right, you can see an old brick building built as part of Chinatown in 1925.

10/16/07 SLO PHOTOGRAPHS

SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

THE WEST
RESERVED
RESERVED

AH LOUIS STORE 10/17/07 PHOTOGRAPH #6
800 PALM STREET
SAN LUIS OBISPO, CA

William Watson, Photographer Negative located on site, in store

Description: VIEW LOOKING WEST at the east side of the building across parking lot. Bronze bell in lower left corner. Carport seen on right side, in back of store. Mission San Luis Obispo de Tolosa seen across the street on left side. Note the shutters on doors and windows.