

Guide to the Tompkins County Asian Diaspora Research Collection

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See also:

Tang Family Collection V-65-4-9
Southeast Asian Collection V-63-4-4
Send These to Me: Immigration and Ethnicity in Tompkins County

COLLECTION DESCRIPTION

The history of the Asian diaspora in the US has been complicated and in many cases, suppressed, by government-sanctioned racism and ostracism. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, a ban on virtually all Chinese immigration that was renewed until 1943, was the first of many discriminatory policies against Asian immigrants. This ban extended to other countries in Asia and the Middle East with the passage of the Immigration Act of 1917, which lasted until 1952. As a result, demographic trends and data on Asian populations in the US from the late-nineteenth to mid-twentieth century are spotty and often unreflective of the presence and impact Asians and Asian Americans had on a local and national scale.

Despite the official statistics, other historical sources have confirmed that Asian people, documented and undocumented, have been coming to the continental US seeking economic and educational opportunities since the mid-1800s. The first major wave of Asian immigrants came from China in the 1850s, followed by Japanese, Korean, and South Asian immigrants in the next few decades. Though some were only in the US temporarily to earn money or finish their studies, others chose to settle down, building businesses, families, and communities that led to a growing Asian American population.

Though Asian students have attended Cornell University since the 1870s, Tompkins County has had a verifiable non-student Asian population since the 1880s. The earliest Asian-owned businesses in Ithaca were Chinese laundries, the first of which was opened by John and Mahong Lee as early as 1885. They were succeeded by several other Chinese laundries, which were located in downtown Ithaca on the block bounded by North Aurora and East State (now M.L.K.

Jr.) Streets—an area which continued to have a high concentration of Asian and Asian American businesses through the mid-20th century.

The 1920s and 1930s saw a proliferation of Asian (mostly Chinese) businesses, as well as the arrival of the first Japanese families in Ithaca. As a result of the nationwide “chop suey craze,” a number of chop suey restaurants opened in Ithaca in the 1920s, though no Asian restaurant gained a permanent foothold in the community until Wing Quai Tang established the Asiatic Garden in 1931. With several families living in the area for longer stretches of time, this period saw the emergence of multi-generational Asian families and first-generation Asian Americans in Tompkins County.

In the decades post-World War II, as immigration bans and quotas gradually lifted, the US saw new waves of immigrants from East Asian countries. In Tompkins County, Japanese immigrants came to work as chicken sexers at Babcock Farms, while other individuals opened establishments or found jobs at the local colleges. Since the 1970s, the Asian population in Tompkins County has diversified greatly with the arrival of migrants and refugees from Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia, and Burma (now Myanmar), among others. Emigration from East Asian countries has also continued to expand, with Chinese and Korean populations seeing the largest increases.

This collection documents the early history of the Asian diaspora in Tompkins County, focusing on individuals and families who resided in Ithaca between the mid-19th and late-20th centuries. Newspaper articles, advertisements, and images comprise a large portion of the materials, providing insight into the evolution and reception of Asian and Asian-American businesses in Ithaca’s majority-white local community. This collection also contains data and census records that paint a more general picture of the Asian and Asian American population here, as well as documentation of presentations and exhibits at The History Center that grew out of this research in 2021 and 2022.

This collection was expanded in 2023 to accommodate an addition from the South Asian community, *The New Twain – A Magazine for South Asians*, April-December 1996. These celebrate the local communities from India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka.

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