

CHINATOWN & THE 1906 QUAKE

The 1906 San Francisco Earthquake is one of the most well-known disasters in California history. What is less known is how differently racial minority groups fared as the city recovered.

On the morning of April 18, 1906, a 7.9 earthquake shook San Francisco. The quake and subsequent fires left 225,000 people homeless. Many of the city's 15,000 Chinese residents fled to nearby towns; Oakland alone gained 1,500 Chinese residents in 1906. Those who stayed intending to rebuild had difficulty securing relief and returning home.

After the disaster, affected residents were ordered to a military-managed relief area. There, the Chinatown community faced discrimination from neighbors and other refugees. Military personnel moved Chinese residents multiple times. Eventually, the remaining 183 people ended up in a segregated camp in a remote, windy corner of the Presidio. The establishment of this camp reinforced existing racialized boundaries and affected relief efforts. Of



Children in front of tents in the Chinese Camp, probably Camp 3 near Fort Scott. Courtesy Western Neighborhoods Project - wnp37.10116. Photographer Unknown (Marilyn Blaisdell Collection / Private Collector).

the millions of dollars set aside for disaster relief, sources estimate that only \$10,000 made it to the Chinese population. San Francisco leaders took advantage of this, attempting to block Chinatown's redevelopment. However, the Chinese community mobilized. Ng Poon Chew, editor of San Francisco's Chinese Newspaper *Chung Sai Yat Po*, published



Articles like this one revealed intentions to relocate the Chinese community even before the earthquake. Merchants Association Review, February 1905, San Francisco Public Library, History Center.

three actions to keep Chinatown intact: 1) hire famous lawyers to protect Chinese interests, 2) rebuild Chinese-owned buildings immediately without waiting for city permissions, and 3) renew leases with white landlords as soon as possible.

Many tenants swiftly renewed their leases.

Businessmen like Look Tin Eli and Tong Bong also devised a plan to rebuild a romanticized version of Chinatown to attract tourists and protect the area from white developers. Chinatown soon became a main attraction. Through their swift actions, the Chinese community successfully contended with both natural and manmade disasters.

“WHY SHOULD [THE CHINESE] BE SINGLED OUT? THE MAYOR HAS NO POWER TO ISOLATE THE CHINESE...WE ARE OBJECTING TO THE REMOVAL OF CHINATOWN ON THE GROUNDS THAT IT IS THE CHINESE RIGHT TO REMAIN WHERE THEY OWN LAND.”

– **Pastor Gee Gam** of Berkeley's First Congregational Church and interpreter for Alameda County Courts