

**INSIDE: The
People's Map of
Chinatown!**

Caroline Chang
Post Office Puts
Stamp on History



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People's Map of Chinatown Packs in History, Place

[Adam Smith](#)

When geography professor Joseph Nevins set out to create “A People’s Map of Chinatown,” he thought the project would be pretty straightforward. After all, the Vassar College professor had already co-authored *The People’s Guide to Greater Boston* and put together people’s maps of Lawrence and Lowell.

“When I began thinking about the Chinatown map, I thought it would be relatively easy because it’s so small,” the Dorchester native told Sampan. “It’s not like Lowell or Lawrence; it’s not an entire city. But in some ways, this was the toughest of the three.”



Chinatown, he pointed out, is incredibly dense. Its history is almost as packed with dates and details as its neighborhood streets are with shops, restaurants, nonprofits, and residents.

The guide map, a copy of which can [be downloaded here](#), highlights places and moments that have been critical to the neighborhood.

11. Simon
477 Years Old
Founded by the Dutch-American Christian minister Willem de Vlamingh in 1629, Simon is New England's only long-lived English-Chinese company.

12. Tally-Ho English Medical Center
present site
Founded as *Chilmark Hospital*
The first major hospital after Tally-Ho's acquisition, acquired for the American Cancer Association, which paid \$1 in 1971.

13. Webster's Index Inc.
73 Years Old
As it is perhaps the only thing Webster is known for, Webster and Webster's printing help, unlike most names by Webster.

14. Young Women's Christian Association
121 and 60 Years Old
The first YMCA in the United States. It camped first in Burlington, Vermont from 1840 to 1851, after moving from Chautauque.

This page reprinted from *100 Years of America's Oldest Companies* by Robert L. Kohn, published by the American Management Association, 1515 K Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20005.

“This is a crowded map,” he said. “It tells a lot but at the same time there is a lot that is missing. For it to work aesthetically and functionally, obviously we had to keep things out.”

The map project included contributions by longtime neighborhood leaders such as Lydia Lowe of the Chinatown Land Trust and Suzanne Lee, a former educator and activist. For the images, the team tapped the talents of artist Shaina Lu, who created four main pictures that portray the neighborhood: a woman surrounded by bok choy, white winter radish, cabbages and other vegetables at the Berkeley Community Garden; a man reading the Oxford Street Bulletin Board; a 1990s protest over a real estate project; and volleyball players at the Reggie Wong Memorial Park. Historic moments and addresses are documented, such as 76 Tyler St., which was the home of Lebanese poet Kahlil Gibran; the International Bookshop on Broadway that was likely affiliated with the U.S. Communist Party; the Hong-Far-Low company that opened on Harrison Avenue in 1879; and the spot at Washington and Kneeland streets at which a Boston police detective allegedly beat up Long Guang Huang, a recent immigrant and restaurant worker.

“When we think about a map, it’s a spatial story,” said Nevins. “Like any story, it’s partial. It doesn’t tell you everything. You pick and choose what to include and what to exclude. In that regard, like any story, it’s political. It’s privileging some things and de-emphasizing some things.”

After consulting Lowe, Lee, Michael Liu of UMass-Boston and others, Nevins revised the map several times over several years to get the final version. So far, they have printed about 1,000 copies with funding, in part, from Vassar College, the Chinatown Land Trust, and the Norman B. Leventhal Center.

“The process was fairly collaborative -- Joe and I discussed potential illustration ideas,” said Lu. She said the team then went over the ideas to finally settle on the four images.

“The tricky thing to decide then was whether the illustrations would be historical or modern. For the Oxford Street Bulletin, there was no question about it -- it no longer exists in the present day, but for the rest, we had to make decisions about what point in time we wanted to represent.”

The end result was a mix of pictures representing the past and the present day.

I had previously worked with the Chinese Historical Society of New England on a map project and a number of archival images that they had shared, and I used those, along with the online archival material from Northeastern University's Archives and Special Collections,” said the artist. For the volleyball images, she loosely referenced current-day photographs of games at Reggie Wong Park.

“I didn't want the illustrations to be too sleek and photo-realistic, but I also didn't want them to look cartoony, either,” said Lu. “I had considered collage, but my tests ended up looking a little to cutesy. So, I settled for an illustrative, soft, but colorful pencil style, which felt like a good middle ground... The Chinatown that we know and love was built by people's hands, and I wanted to reflect that in the illustration style.”

The map is an offshoot of Nevin's book published in 2020 called *A People's Guide to Greater Boston* with co-authors Suren Moodliar and Eleni Macrakis. He wanted to create additional "People's Maps" to complement the book. The first map was of Lawrence, Mass. That one focuses on the history of the city, especially on labor struggles – such as the Bread and Roses strike of 1912.

"The next map that we did was on Lowell. The first map that we did for Boston was the Chinatown map."

Starting the project in January of 2023, Nevins thought the map would be quick work, but, he said, "in some ways it was a three-year process."

He likens the map to the book in some ways.

"Like the book itself, we want the map to be suggestive. We're not aiming to be comprehensive, because we can't be. Chinatown's smallness – in a demographic and geographic sense – is a really complicated, rich place that has changed a lot. There was a lot we couldn't include, but we wanted to give a sense of the diversity, and the differences over space and time of the neighborhood. We hope it will push people to think in very different ways about a very important Boston neighborhood."

But, he noted, maps have social, cultural and even legal significance that books don't necessarily.

"A map is a spatial story – that's one way of thinking about it. Another way is a map is a claim – like nation-states, countries, that make maps to say, 'This is our territory.' If you are a property owner, you want a map, you want to know where the boundaries are. In a people's map, you want to privilege the people's perspectives. You want to pick up the stories, the struggles, the hopes of the people on the socioeconomic margins. It's a way of laying claim to what Chinatown was, is, and should be. And Chinatown has historically been a working class and immigrant community and neighborhood. And that's constantly under challenge as the neighborhood becomes developed, gentrified – so that's part of the larger challenge, so that people who have few options because of their socio-economic means, have a place to live."

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Editor's note: Typos in the 5th and the final paragraphs were corrected on Sept. 27.

<https://www.sampan.org/post/people-s-map-of-chinatown-packs-in-history-place>