

Artifacts

CONSERVATION CENTER
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 treatment spotlight:

Conservation on the Frontier



The Kam Wah Chung historic site

Nobody knows exactly why there are bullet holes in the tin-sheathed front door of the Kam Wah Chung & Co. building. But it's a fair guess that it might have something to do with prejudice toward Chinese immigrants trying to make a living on the 19th-century Oregon frontier.

Kam Wah Chung is an authentic time capsule that offers a tantalizing glimpse of frontier life and culture. Now managed by the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department, it is being restored to interpret the role of the Chinese immigrant in shaping the American West.

In early 2005, CCAHA was invited to collaborate on a major wallpaper conservation project at Kam Wah Chung by Susan Filter, a former CCAHA senior conservator and now an independent paper conservator headquartered in San Francisco.

Generally, wallpaper conservation tends to be done in beautiful surroundings such as a governor's mansion, a railroad tycoon's ballroom, or even a reception hall in the White House. This job wasn't like that. There would be no lavish hand-painted Chinese export wallpaper here, or the fashionable hand-blocked French wallpaper that set 19th-century standards for elegance. There would be nothing even remotely like that at Kam Wah Chung.

In the 1860s, Chinese immigrants began arriving in the area around the present-day city of John Day, attracted by the opening of a nearby gold mine. The center of this Chinese settlement was a trading post, known as Kam Wah Chung, which translates as "Golden

Flower of Prosperity." In 1887, the building and business were purchased by Lung On and Ing "Doc" Hay, two entrepreneurial-minded immigrants. Together they ran a successful business catering to virtually every need of the community, from the medical to the spiritual. Doc Hay, the "China Doctor of John Day," would diagnose clients through pulse readings and prescribe herbal remedies that he would cook on the stove. A Buddhist shrine was set up on the premises, and Doc Hay would conduct religious rituals. For travelers, it was a friendly inn, offering protection from the harsh Oregon weather. For the local people, it was their general store. And, for what was at the time a legal recreation, one room even served as an opium den.

Lung On died in 1940, and Doc Hay moved out of the area to a nursing home in 1948, where he died in 1952. The abandoned property was left to his nephew, who donated the building to the city of John Day. Apparently, no one in John Day took notice, and the building remained as it was when Doc Hay left in 1948.

Everything sat there, largely undisturbed, for about 25 years. Slowly, awareness grew of its historical importance and its educational potential. In 1973, Kam Wah Chung was listed in the National Register of Historic Places and in 2005, it was designated a National Historic Landmark and received a *Save America's Treasures* grant, which included funds for the wallpaper conservation.

But how do you conserve a site that was never pristine in its prime? Even when the business was flourishing in the 1890s, the

wallpaper would still have been darkened with accumulated grime from the wood-burning stove used to cook meals and prepare herbal medicines, as well as the omnipresent cigar and opium smoke. You can't just clean it up, without the risk of losing that wonderful sense of authenticity that makes it so special.

To make her initial assessment, Susan Filter found herself wading through December snowdrifts to arrive at a rambling two-story, seven-room trading post that once served as a combination grocery store, Buddhist temple, doctor's office, and opium den. The wallpaper that she found here, brittle with age and covered with grime, was of three types: 1) more than 100 sheets of Chinese epigrams pasted almost randomly across the wooden walls; 2) newspapers pasted across breaks in the planks; and 3) off-the-shelf Sears & Roebuck wallpaper.

Susan prepared a detailed treatment proposal for this challenging job, then called her former colleagues at CCAHA to invite them to work with her on the project. She realized that this project would require a top-notch team of conservators and technicians, open to creative approaches and not afraid of hard work under adverse conditions.

Three weeks were reserved in summer 2005 for the project, with CCAHA sending senior conservators Rolf Kat and Soyeon Choi and conservation assistant Sue Bing. Following the treatment plan, the conservators worked to clean and consolidate all the various kinds of wallpaper, usually keeping them in place rather than attempting to remove them. Although three weeks were reserved, the team worked long hours and weekends, finishing the on-site work ahead of schedule.

Tracing immigrant history is key to understanding the development of American culture and values. On the East Coast, CCAHA has been privileged to work on the paper collections at Ellis Island, illuminating the lives of European immigrants. Now, serving as an appropriate bookend, CCAHA has contributed to the understanding and interpretation of the immigrant stories of the West Coast of the continent, through its work on the wallpaper at Kam Wah Chung.

— Lee Price

How do you conserve a site that was never pristine in its prime?

In the case of the wallpaper in Doc Hay's bedroom, the conservators and the Oregon State Parks staff came up with a mixed approach that balances historical reconstruction with insight into the conservators' craft.

When future visitors look into the bedroom, they will see three walls that have been restored to their appearance when Doc Hay lived here. The conservators stripped these three walls of their wallpaper, and Susan Filter is now working with a specialist in historic wallpaper reproduction to create replacement wallpaper. Offering a faithful reproduction of the old pattern and colors, the new wallpaper will be applied to the three walls. Then Susan will undertake the challenging task of mildly "aging" the new wallpaper so that the room will look lived in, rather than pristine.

The fourth wall will be left with the original wallpaper intact. This wallpaper has been cleaned and stabilized, with repairs to tears and hanging flaps, but without any inserts or cosmetic work. It will offer visitors and researchers an opportunity to experience the original wallpaper, as opposed to the reproductions on the other walls.

And there will be one additional approach to interpreting the site. The CCAHA staff members brought three pieces of the wallpaper back to the conservation laboratory in Philadelphia to get the full conservation treatment. After they are cleaned and repaired, the three pieces will be matted for exhibition and educational use, then returned to Kam Wah Chung.



The discolored wallpaper in Doc Hay's bedroom

Ultimately, interpreters at Kam Wah Chung will be able to show visitors: 1) the original, uncleaned wallpaper on one wall, 2) new wallpaper that offers an idea of how the room looked like a hundred years ago, and 3) a conserved piece of the original wallpaper. Each of the three approaches will offer a different perspective on a rich history.