

June 27, 2024

# Statement of Significance

SAM KEE LAUNDRY, 1885 Government Street, Victoria, BC

## Description of the Historic Place

The Sam Kee Laundry is a two-storey, Edwardian-era, masonry building located on the periphery of Victoria's historic Chinatown neighbourhood. The building is distinguishable by its flat roof with decorative dentil brick cornice, arched brick lintels, and recessed off-centrefront entryway accessed by a Norman arch opening.

## Heritage Value of Historic Place

Constructed in 1908, Sam Kee Laundry is valued as part of a grouping of early buildings that contribute to the historic character and urban pattern of Victoria's Chinatown, the seminal and oldest intact Chinatown in Canada. In 1858, the Fraser Gold Rush spurred the movement of Chinese people into Canada and Victoria became the primary point of entry into the country.

A prominent Chinatown was established in the city, centered around Fisgard Street. This property was originally home to a wood-frame structure that was destroyed in a devastating fire in 1907 that wiped out numerous city blocks in the vicinity. The subsequent year, original owner Peter Levelle commissioned the construction of this replacement building on Chatham Street. The building was originally used as a residence with eleven interior rooms. Levelle emigrated from

Scotland in the 1880s and worked locally as a carpenter, however he passed away just a year following the construction of the building. Owing to its location at the periphery of Chinatown, the building would subsequently house members of the Chinese Canadian community before its 1935 conversion to a laundry as part of the Sam Kee Company.

The Sam Kee Laundry is significant for its association with long-term tenant, the Sam Kee Company. Prominent businessman Chang Toy, known sometimes as Sam Kee due to the name of his well-known business, was born in 1857 in Cheong Pan village, Panyu county, Guangdong province, China. In 1874, Chang Toy came to Victoria before settling in New Westminster, where he worked in a sawmill. In the late 1870s, Chang Toy relocated to Vancouver where he started his first Sam Kee Laundry business, which would grow to multiple locations in several cities over time, including Victoria. In subsequent years, Chang Toy gradually expanded his business into imports and exports, retail sales, charcoal and fuel sales, labour contracting in the timber, fishing and sugar industries, steamship ticket sales, and real estate development.

The Sam Kee enterprises, including the Sam Kee Laundry, emerged as an important gathering place for Chinese immigrants who came to use the services, purchase goods, and look for work. Wealthier Chinese community members, like Chang Toy and those who came after him, provided essential services to their fellow emigrants and acted as critical links between the Chinese community and the often hostile and racist white community. Chang Toy died in 1921, but his businesses lived on well beyond this time. The Sam Kee Company converted this building to its

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needs for use as a laundry in 1935 and the company remained in the building for more than three decades. In 1967, the laundry was converted to offices and a workshop, with two dwelling units above. The commercial use of the property continued through the turn of the twenty-first century.

The Sam Kee Laundry building is additionally valued as an example of Edwardian-era architecture within the cultural landscape of Victoria's Chinatown. The commercial façade displays Classical Edwardian details, such as its brick construction with flat roof with brick dentils and its arched brick lintels and openings. The building is also significant as an example of the work of the Parfitt Bros., who were active in Victoria through the early twentieth century. Aaron and Jim Parfitt founded Parfitt Bros. in 1907 and were soon joined by brothers Fred, Mark, and Albert. Though the firm had only been operating for one year when this building was constructed, they would go on to construct a number of prominent structures in Victoria, including the St. John's Church, the Bay Street Armoury, a wing of the Royal Jubilee Hospital, the James Bay Inn, the Memorial Hall and nave of the Christ Church Cathedral, as well as numerous other institutional, industrial, and commercial structures.

### **Character-Defining Elements**

The elements that define the heritage character of the Sam Kee Laundry building are its:

- location as part of a Government Street site, fronting Chatham Street, in the historic Chinatown neighbourhood of Victoria;
- significant setbacks from both Government and Chatham Streets;
- continuous use since 1908;
- commercial form, scale and massing as expressed by its two-storey height, rectangular plan and flat roof;
- masonry construction with a combination of buff and red brick;
- Edwardian-era architectural features, including brick cornice with brick dentils, arched red brick lintels, and off-centre Norman arch red brick opening at grade; and
- fenestration, including original arched window openings.

Written by: Donald Luxton & Associates, April 2024, Conservation Plan