

THE LEE'S BENEVOLENT ASSOCIATION BUILDING 614-614½ FISGARD STREET



Owners: Lee Mong Kow, Lee Dye,
Lee Dan and Lee Wing Yew
Architects: Charles Elwood WatkinS
Date: 1911

Description of Historic Place

The Lee's Benevolent Association building at 614-614½ Fisgard Street is a three-storey plus mezzanine structure, clad with white glazed bricks, in Victoria's Chinatown National Historic Site. The building shares a common party wall with the adjacent building at 612 Fisgard Street. Asymmetrical in massing, the building is distinctive for its upper floor recessed balcony with a tripartite arcade, projecting bracketed pantiled canopy, omega-shaped raised parapet, and its 'cheater' storey with an 'entresole' window.

Heritage Value of Historic Place

The Lee's Benevolent Association building at 614-614 ½ Fisgard Street is valued as part of a grouping of early buildings that contribute to the historic character and urban pattern of Victoria's Chinatown National Historic Site, the seminal and oldest intact Chinatown in Canada. In the 1850s, exacerbated by political and social turmoil in China, thousands of Chinese migrated from a small region in the southern province of Guangdong to frontier gold rush sites in California, setting up a permanent base in San Francisco. In 1858, the Fraser Gold Rush spurred the movement of Chinese into Canada and the significant port town of Victoria was the primary point of entry into the country for the Chinese until the early twentieth century.

The building is further valued for its nearly continuous use by Chinese volunteer associations. These associations, or Tongs, had members with common ancestors and were established to protect the earliest Chinese settlers against Western intolerance and prejudice and opposing Chinese clans. Funding was obtained entirely by membership dues, gambling, opium dens and exiting fees. Volunteer associations usually had their own buildings, typically with meeting halls and offices on the upper floors and leased storefronts on the ground floor.

Merchant Lee Chung was the first Lee to arrive in Victoria, in 1859. By 1880 the Lee's Association was founded as a fraternal association. Six of the founding members were

merchants, who helped less fortunate members of their community. In 1909, Lee Mong Kow, Lee Dye, Lee Dan and Lee Wing Yew, purchased lots 602 and 603 and constructed the building in 1911. Lee's Association occupied the building while Lee Mong Kow used the adjacent smaller structure with the shared common party wall for offices and living quarters.

Victoria's Chinatown is expressive of a duality in architecture and cultural landscape. Commercial building façades were designed by non-Chinese architects to project an image of assimilation to Western culture. In this context, the Lee's Benevolent Association building is unusual for its overtly Chinese flavour. The distinct structure has an altered storefront at the main level, an elegant tripartite arcade and a recessed balcony, a pantiled Chinese-inspired upper bracketed pantiled canopy with upturned corners, and name signage. A partial intermediate floor, known as a 'cheater' storey, and also referred to as a mezzanine, exists between the main and upper floor levels with a lower ceiling than the other levels. The 'cheater' storey also contained a window, referred to as an 'entresole,' that has a greater width than height, and was used to provide light to the intermediate floor.

Western architects were hired to design buildings throughout Chinatown as the Chinese were shunned as professionals in building trades. Charles Elwood Watkins (1875-1942), a prolific Victoria architect, designed the Lee's Benevolent Association building. In addition to commercial, institutional and residential projects elsewhere, he had numerous Chinese clients in Chinatown.

Character-Defining Elements

Key elements that define the heritage character of the Lee's Benevolent Association building include its:

- location on the north side of Fisgard Street, part of a grouping of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century historic masonry buildings in Victoria's Chinatown National Historic District
- continuous commercial and institutional use
- siting on the front and side property lines, with no setbacks
- commercial form, scale and massing as expressed by its three-storey height, with 'cheater' storey and a storefront facing Fisgard Street
- construction materials, including white glazed-brick cladding at front façade, brick side and rear walls, granite thresholds and cast-iron storefront columns
- Chinese features such as: the omega-shaped parapet with decorative triangular metal plaque inscribed with 1911 date; name sign "The Lee's Benevolent Association"; recessed top floor balcony with tripartite arcade and Doric columns; sidewall chimneys; wall of wooden doors and windows in the meeting hall facing the balcony, with coloured glass in door; projecting, pantiled and bracketed canopy with upturned eaves
- windows such as 2-over-2 double-hung wooden sash windows
- internal staircase, with wooden wainscoting, leading to meeting room on the top floor