

Audio - Chinese gentleman, 1910

First voice:

My name is Ahlee Lee. In 1887, when I was 21 years old, I came to America from China. Eventually I arrived in Rockville, Maryland, and I've now taken over the laundry across the street from the courthouse. My cousin, Wong You, is living with me and helping me with the business. It is nice to have another Chinese person in town, especially since today, in 1910, there are only three of us in the whole county: myself, my cousin, and Charlie Foo, who runs a laundry in Gaithersburg.

Second voice:

Unfortunately, we know very little about early Chinese immigrants, like Mr. Lee, in Montgomery County. Although their vital statistics appear in documents like the Federal Census and immigration records, such information tells only a tiny part of their story. In addition, these records were created by white Americans, who may not have correctly understood the culture and language of the people they were documenting; it's not even clear whether the names in the census are written in the Chinese way (with the family name first) or the western way (with the family name last). The 1910 census tells us that Mr. Lee was born in 1856 in China, came to America in 1887, and was married... but not much else. Where was his wife? Where did he live before moving to Rockville? He does not appear in the 1920 county census – where did he go after leaving Montgomery County? What was his relationship - if any - with the other gentlemen named Lee who operated the Rockville laundry in the 1920s and 1930s?

The first Chinese immigrants known to have lived and worked in Montgomery County appear ten years before Ahlee Lee, in the 1900 census. Four gentlemen born in China were recorded that year; all four were described as “laundrymen,” one in Gaithersburg, one in Kensington, and two in Rockville. The laundry in Rockville was run by several different men over the years, but the location stayed the same; in 1900 it was run by Moy Toy and Charles Hoy, in 1910 by Ahlee Lee and Wong Foo, in 1920 by Frank Lee, and in 1930 by Hen Lee. Although this Rockville laundry appears to have been a successful and long-running business, the owners themselves do not seem to have figured in the city's social life. So far we have not found any references to these gentlemen in contemporary histories of Rockville (except for a possibly inaccurate description of a 1910 photo as including “Mr. Soo's laundry”). A 1978 history of Gaithersburg describes Charlie Foo, who in the 1910 census runs a laundry in that city, only as a man “...who many can still remember as a rather small man with his hair plaited down his back.”

Washington D.C. had a Chinese community along Pennsylvania Avenue, so these men in what was then rural Montgomery County were not totally isolated from their culture. But for day to day life they may have kept much to themselves. Each year the census shows a few Chinese men in Montgomery County, but never the same names, so it seems likely that Montgomery County was not the final home of these people. It was not until the mid 20th century that Asian immigrants begin moving to the county to stay. To learn more about Asian immigration in Montgomery County and the importance of census records in historical research visit www.montgomeryconnections.org.