

WINCHESTER'S FIRST CONNECTIONS WITH CHINA

By Ellen Knight¹

Through the time of the Second World War, China probably seemed a remote part of the world to most residents of Winchester. With immigration severely limited from 1882 to 1943 by the Chinese Exclusion Act, there was no Chinese community in town, and the number of townspeople with ties to China was apparently very small.

Until the later part of the 20th century, the only Chinese with homes or businesses in town were those who ran Chinese laundries. The first known was Sam Lee who operated a laundry from about 1889 to at least 1905 on Mt. Vernon Street. By 1897 there were two others, and through the 1940s one to three Chinese laundries operated in town.



The number and location of the laundries were controlled by the Chinese merchants associations. In April 1916, for example, Harry Wong announced a new laundry to open at 564 Main St. It did, and he got customers, but that August *The Winchester Star* reported that he was essentially run out of town “under threat of death.” Reportedly, the existing laundryman was aggrieved at the success of the new business and appealed to the Tong “with the result that Wong received notice to shut up his shop and leave town.”² Fearing for his life, he did so.

Should the tale seem fanciful, it may be noted that in 1933 Harry Dong, proprietor of laundries in Cambridge, Roxbury, and Winchester, who declined not to join the Chinese merchants organizations and (in Roxbury) defied the rule that “no Chinese shall open a laundry within 40 numbers of one already operating,” received numerous threatening letters and a bounty was placed on his head (according to a *Boston Globe* report on investigations into the Tong murder of Dong’s brother in Boston’s Chinatown³).

Since Dong resided in Cambridge, this drama was not played out in Winchester but may explain why, when Winchester had three Chinese laundries, they were spaced out on different streets, Vine (or Church), Main, and Mt. Vernon. The owners sometimes lived on the premises but were not integrated into the community.

AMERICAN INTERESTS IN CHINA

Failing a local population, how could people in Winchester relate to Chinese culture? For a few residents, the nation’s political, economic, and missionary interests in China led them to live there.

John Fowler (1857-1923), who received his youthful education in Winchester, spent 25 years in China. He arrived there in 1890, entering the Consular Service at Ningpo, and was transferred to Chefoo (Yantai) in 1896. During the Boxer Rebellion of 1900, he saved the lives of over 150 missionaries by personally securing a vessel to evacuate them out of the interior of Shantung and by sending warnings to others. In 1904, he was appointed Consul General. By 1920, after a brief consulship in Quebec, he was back in Winchester and died at his son's home on Chestnut Street.



Fowler was quoted in the *Globe* in 1903, in reference to the Chinese market, that "there is a great field for American young men in China." His son Marcus Cook Fowler (1892-1945), born and raised in China, realized this. After completing his education in the U.S., he returned to China as the far eastern representative of the Ingersoll Watch Company (makers of the famous Ingersoll Dollar Watch).

A proposal of marriage induced Lillian Knapp to leave her native Winchester to join Marcus Fowler in the Far East. In 1918, they were married in Yokohama. After three years in Shanghai, they returned to Winchester, safe from the conflicts in China during the 1920s and 1930s.

SURVIVING THE WAR

Romance took another young Winchester woman to China, though not as safely as Knapp. Ernestine Eason was working as a switchboard operator at the Winchester Telephone Exchange when she met George Swan at his brother's wedding. After he returned to his job with the British Exporting Company in China, he sent a one-word telegram saying, "Come."

Married in 1938, they lived in southeastern China with two children. When the Japanese invaded and placed all foreigners in concentration camps, Ernestine and the children went to one while George was sent to another.

In December 1943, it was revealed locally that Ernestine and the children were among 1,200 interned Americans who were recently exchanged. Little was reported about her experience, but according to the *Globe* she said "before their internment the Chinese were so confident of victory they gave the British 'thumbs up' sign of victory whenever they met a British or American national."⁴

After visiting Winchester and Woburn, Ernestine went to California, where she drove a cab to support the family while George was held, nearly starving, for another seven months.

NURSING IN WAR-TORN CHINA

Missionary work also took Americans to China. Lydia Jane “Jennie” Crawford (1883-1967), who grew up in Winchester, journeyed there to work as a nurse for the Women’s Baptist Foreign Missionary Society. Living in China from 1909 to 1945, she experienced their wars first hand.

First assigned to Hanyang, Sichuan, when a new hospital was built in Suifu in 1916 she moved there to be head nurse and manage a small nurses’ training school.

After civil war broke out in 1927, Winchester received word that she was safe. “The Mission’s group with which she is associated was thrice warned by the American Consul to move to safer territory and letters from Miss Crawford state that she moved to Shanghai on Feb. 14. Cablegrams to the New York headquarters of the Missionary Society seem to guarantee her safety.”

She returned to Suifu and, excepting occasional furloughs, stayed there through her retirement in 1945. On her return to Massachusetts, she was a guest speaker in Winchester, relating experiences about mission work during the war in China, her talks unfortunately not reported in the newspaper, though one of her wartime letters was printed in 1941 (see below).

After the United States declared war on Japan, it might have had a Chinese among its soldiers or sailors; however, when the son of the current laundryman was called up he was determined to be 4F. Apparently he was the only young Chinese man living in the town, a situation which did not vary much until the end of the century.

LETTER FROM CHINA



*Lady with a Lantern,
Jennie Crawford*

“During my recent furlough in America I thought of air raids and air raid alarms with dread and I had visions of them upsetting all our regular work. After returning to Suifu, West China, I was amazed at the way life went on, improvements made and signs of progress in spite of air raids and air raid alarms.

“Remembering China of old, I had visions, during an air raid, of wounded being left, wherever they fell, to suffer and perhaps die, until the all clear signal came. A surprise was in store for me one bright moonlight night when Japanese bombers visited our north suburb. Within 16 minutes after the bombing started, first aid helpers had brought the wounded on stretchers to our two mission hospitals. As the wounded arrived we quickly brought in small oil lanterns so as to see to give first aid treatment, prepared to blow them out as soon as we heard bombers overhead.

“One Sunday, just before Pastor Shu had finished his sermon, an air raid alarm was given. Before I went on furlough such an alarm would have emptied the church. Again I saw a change. A few people left the church but Pastor Shu went on with his sermon and ended the services in a dignified way. Then the rest of the people were dismissed. All had plenty of time to get to places of safety before the bombers arrived.

“One day one of the city officials called at our hospital on business. While there he remarked to some of the Chinese, ‘Everyone will have to pray hard that nothing happens to these two mission hospitals (men’s and women’s) for they are all we have to depend on for the civilians in this city.’”⁵

¹ This article © 2018 is a revision of an earlier article by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on August 10, 2017. This revision supersedes all previous articles.

² *The Winchester Star*, Aug. 8, 1916.

³ *Boston Globe*, July 22, 1933.

⁴ *Boston Globe*, Dec. 5, 1943.