

Locke Boarding House



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Locke Boarding House

13916 Main Street

Walnut Grove, CA 95690

Lat: 38.250556 Long: -121.509444

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Locke Boarding House, formerly called "Sam's Rooms," interprets the history of Locke and its residents—the Sacramento River delta's major workforce.



Locke, the last remaining rural Chinese town in the United States, lies along a peaceful bend on a bank of the Sacramento River. The river, once teeming with ships carrying produce bound across the country, is now more likely to be dotted with excursion boats, fishing skiffs, and an occasional houseboat.

At the north end of this one-of-a-kind town, the two-story Locke Boarding House stands against the levee. The building once housed farm workers who picked and processed the asparagus and pears that grew in the peat-rich delta soils. California State Parks honors 100 years of Locke's Asian cultural history in this interpretive center and its exhibits.

LOCKE HISTORY

Plains Miwok

Before the 1848 gold discovery, the traditional lands of the Plains Miwok covered the lower Mokelumne and Cosumnes Rivers, and the Sacramento River from Rio Vista to Freeport. No evidence has been found of Native California Indians having lived precisely in the Locke area.

The Plains Miwok lived in conical bark dwellings in higher elevations; in lower areas of the central Sierra, they lived in homes covered with tule (bulrush).

After California's statehood, some Miwok were moved to Central Valley locations. Some worked on ranches and as farm laborers. Many Miwok descendants still

occupy communities in the surrounding areas, reviving their languages and maintaining their cultural identities.

Chinese Migration to Gold Mountain

After James Marshall's 1848 gold discovery on the American River, rumors reached China that gold nuggets could be picked for the taking at California's *Gum Saan* or "Gold Mountain." War- and famine-weary Chinese left home, hoping to make a quick fortune in gold here and return to support their families. In reality, many of these men never again laid eyes on China. After fruitless stints digging gold mines, the industrious Chinese were pressed into service to build railroads and to labor on farms.

The Delta Levees

The Swamp and Overflow Act, passed in 1861, encouraged construction of levees in the Sacramento



Building the delta levees

River delta—converting its marshes to farm land. Many Chinese immigrants had come from Chungshan in the Guangdong (formerly Canton) province on the Pearl River delta in China, so their farming expertise fit them to this task.

Between 1860 and 1880, Chinese workers drained and reclaimed 88,000 acres of rich river-bottom peat soil—ideal for agriculture. Many of the levee builders stayed to work the farms.

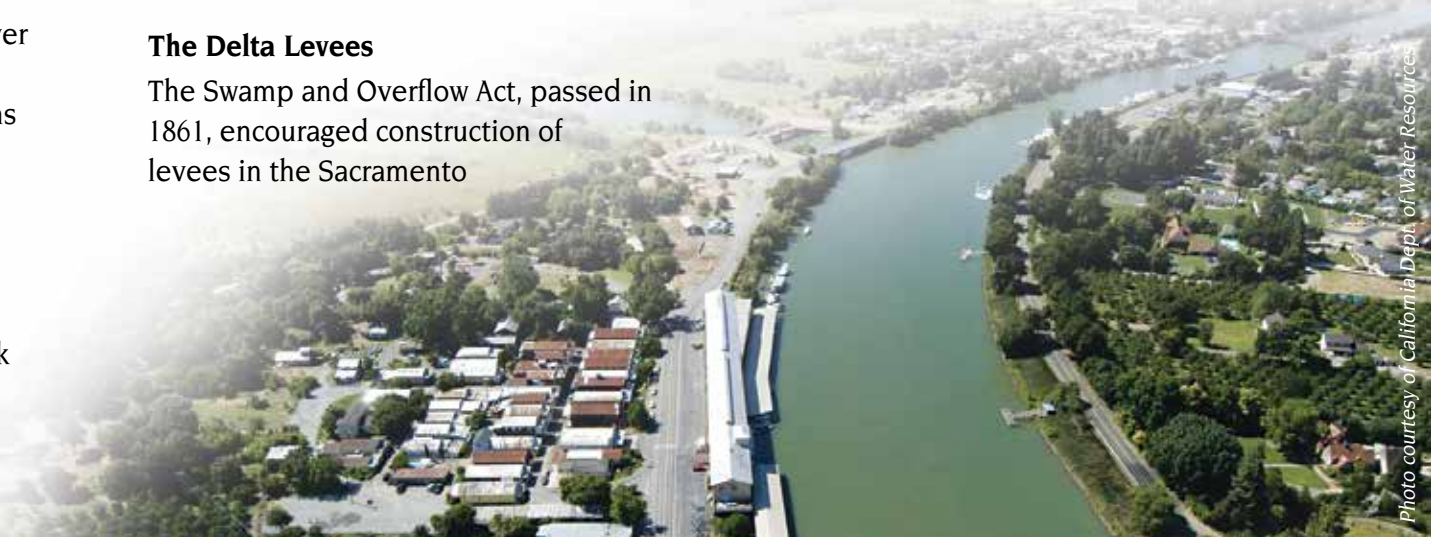


Photo courtesy of California Dept. of Water Resources



Lee Bing and family

Walnut Grove

By the mid-1880s, delta towns had concentrated areas where farm workers lived. Asian immigrants stayed close to their own countrymen. Often called “Chinatowns” because of their predominantly Chinese population or *nihonmachi* for Japanese groups, these places often developed within or outside diversely populated cities.

Sentiment against Chinese immigrants grew. Unfortunately, angry European-Americans blamed Chinese laborers for a lack of available jobs. In 1882 the federal Chinese Exclusion Act was passed, banning further Chinese immigration. Then, in 1913 the State of California enacted its Alien Land Law, preventing all foreign-born aliens—including the Chinese—from owning land.

In October 1915, a fire in the delta town of Walnut Grove almost completely destroyed its Chinese settlement and a portion of its Japantown, sending some people to seek shelter in surrounding areas. The Japanese and a group of Sze Yup Chinese stayed and rebuilt in Walnut Grove, even though they could not own the land.

Chinese farm workers from Chungshan province had occupied an area called Lockeport, a mile up the road from Walnut Grove. Lockeport was named for its landowner, pear grower George Locke.

A committee of Chungshan merchants headed by Lee Bing, owner of the Dai Loy Gambling Hall, approached Locke’s heir, George Locke, Jr. The Chinese men asked if they could lease some of his land to construct a new town, rather than trying to rebuild Walnut Grove. Locke agreed to allow the committee to use nine acres of his land to build homes and businesses, so construction in Lockeport (later renamed Locke) began.

Building the Town of Locke

Locke’s Chungshan Chinese immigrants paid “ground rent” of \$5 monthly for



Main Street

residential lots and \$10 for commercial lots. Some lots combined both commercial and residential uses.

Forty-five one- and two-story wood frame buildings went up in Locke between 1915 and 1917. The residents did not consider using more expensive, longer-lasting materials because they were merely renting the ground—and because many still held onto the dream of returning to China. Most buildings featured a “boomtown false front.” They were left unpainted and were topped with corrugated metal roofs. No new buildings have been erected for nearly a century.



JOE SHOONG CHINESE SCHOOL

RESIDENCE

ALLEYWAY

YUEN CHONG MARKET

ALLEYWAY

COMMERCIAL-RESIDENTIAL BUILDING

ALLEYWAY

COMMERCIAL BUILDING



Nobu Kuhara Kuramoto

THE LOCKE BOARDING HOUSE

The boarding house at the north end of Main Street was thought to have been built in 1909 to house Southern Pacific railroad workers. After Locke was developed, the Kuramoto family bought it in 1921. Mr. Kuramoto liked the name Sam, so he called the boarding house “Sam’s Rooms.” The Kuramotos and their five children lived on the first floor and ran the boarding house from 1921 to 1942, renting tiny upstairs rooms primarily to non-Chinese Locke residents—laborers of Japanese, Filipino, and other descent—during planting and harvest seasons.

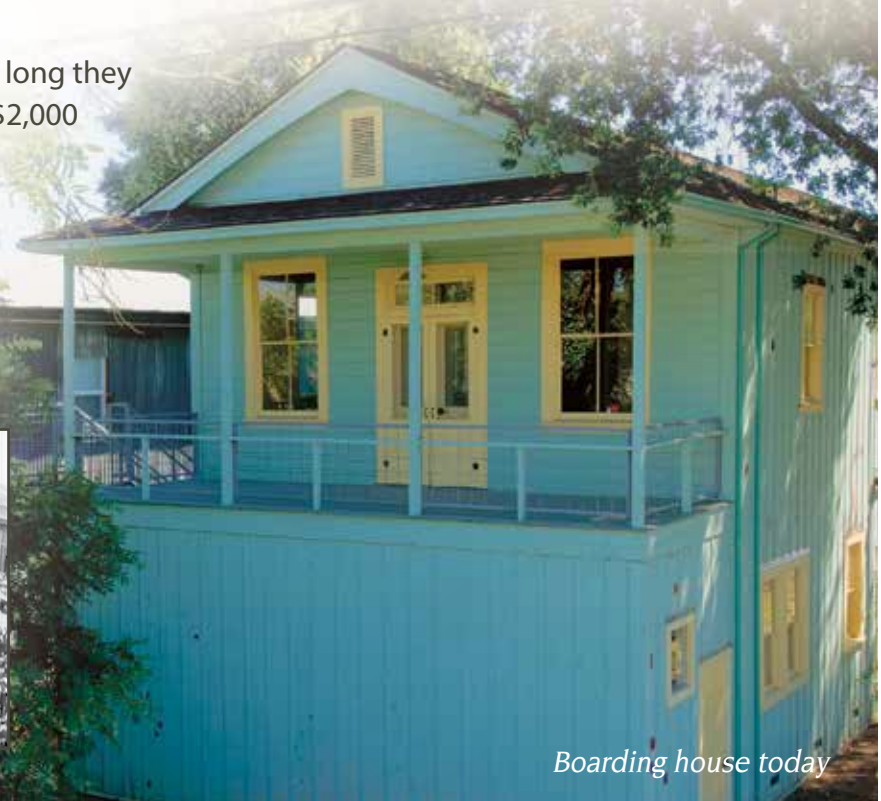
The tenants at Sam’s Rooms came from other parts of Asia, while Chinese boarders stayed at Chinese-owned boarding houses in Locke. Sam Kuramoto, the youngest of the five Kuramoto children, remembered their mostly itinerant boarders as quiet and industrious. One of young Sam’s chores was to show boarders to their rooms and hand over the keys when his mother was away packing fruit for weeks at a time.

The building’s simple design is meant to house as many residents as possible. Individual boarders often shared the 14 small rooms on the second floor with another worker, who would use it in their absence. Each room contained only a bedframe, mattress, bureau, and mirror. Boarders took meals elsewhere offsite; there was no common gathering area.

Shortly after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, federal agents came to the boarding house and searched the Kuramotos’ possessions. In April of 1942, the entire Kuramoto family was taken, with Locke’s other Japanese residents, to the Gila River Relocation Center in Arizona; later, they were split apart and sent to separate camps.

All Japanese property owners lost their property when interned, no matter how long they had owned it. (Ten years later, Mrs. Kuramoto received a compensation check for \$2,000 from the U.S. government for the loss of her boarding house.)

A neighbor took over the boarding house, which then changed owners over subsequent years. It was used as a residential rooming house throughout the delta’s agricultural boom. In 2005, California State Parks acquired the Locke Boarding House. The building has been restored, and today it serves as a museum dedicated to the 100-year Asian history of Locke and its people.



Boarding house today



The Kuramoto children

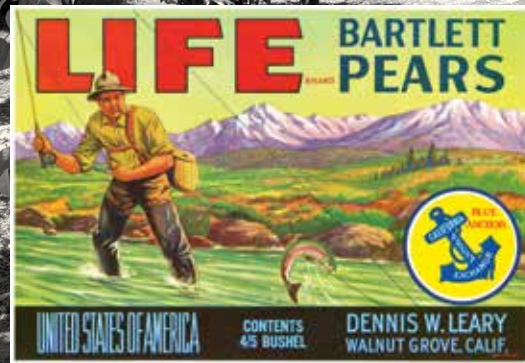
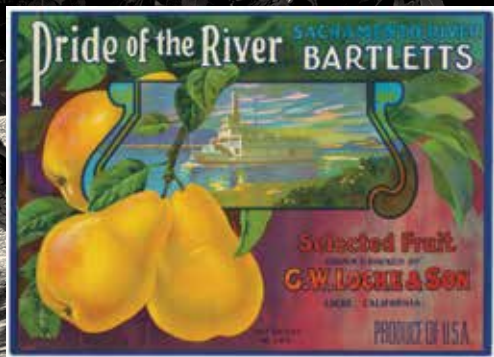
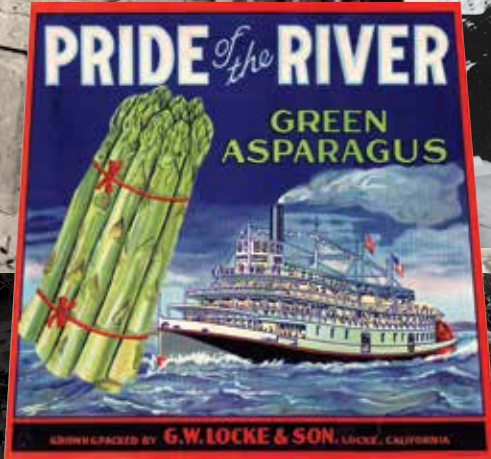
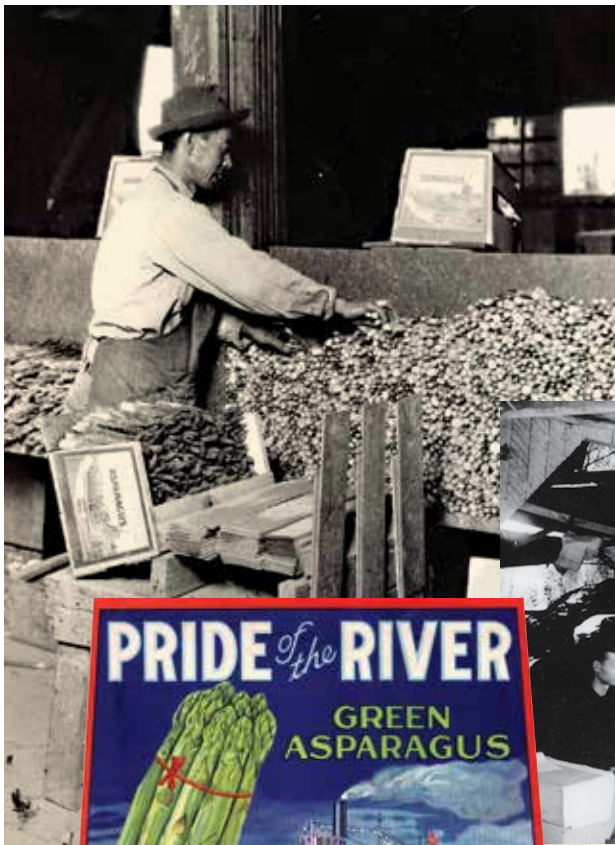


Boarding house, ca. 1925

WORKING THE DELTA FARMS

Fruit tree and vineyard growers of the delta valued Chungshan Chinese laborers because of their experience in pruning, harvesting, and packing. By the time Locke construction was finished, farm workers were in high demand. The Sacramento delta region focused on asparagus and fruit orchards. Chinese farm laborers continued to build miles of irrigation canals through waist-deep, muddy water. By 1930, local land reclamation efforts had converted 477,000 acres of river delta land into one of the world's most productive agricultural areas.

Those who did not work in the fields were employed in packing houses—where they sorted and packed produce for shipment—or in canneries, where they sorted, cut, peeled, canned, and cooked vegetables and fruit. In the early 1900s, family members were allowed to immigrate from China, so some men were able to save and send for their families; the newly arrived wives then joined the ranks of agricultural laborers.



Life in Locke

Children living in Locke walked the mile to school in Walnut Grove, where its elementary schools were segregated into Asian and Caucasian classes. After school and on Saturdays, most children attended Kwok Min Dong Chinese School for calligraphy and Chinese-language lessons. Children's chores included caring for other family members when their parents were working out of town.



Yuen Chong Market



Locke residents

In the 1920s, the town had 600 permanent residents, including many merchant families; as many as 1,500 seasonal farm workers were part of Locke's daily life. A hotel, a movie theater, a tong lodge, a flour mill, two slaughterhouses, bars (speakeasies during Prohibition), restaurants, grocery stores, brothels, several gambling halls, and boarding houses brought prosperity and tourism to the town. Those good times did not last long, however, once Prohibition

ended and the Depression began.

Nevertheless, businesses in Locke catered to the farm workers and residents of this region. In the 1940s, six restaurants, bakeries, herb shops, fish markets, gambling halls, boarding houses, brothels, nine grocery stores, a school, clothing stores, and the Star Theatre still lined the

bustling streets of Locke. Locke's population further dwindled after the California Supreme Court invalidated the Alien Land Law in 1952. Many of its residents and young people—seeking jobs or higher education—had already

moved away to communities where they could own their own ground. The asparagus industry declined, and then increasing mechanization reduced the need for unskilled farm laborers. Among Locke's fewer than 100 current residents, only a handful are Chinese American.

Locke's Heritage is Recognized

In 1977 the Sacramento Housing and Redevelopment Agency (SHRA) acknowledged Locke's importance in California's history. The SHRA began planning to restore the town of Locke as a living Chinese-history museum.

During this process, a Chinese investment group had purchased acreage that included the ten acres where Locke stands. A Chinese cultural village was planned for Main Street. In order to provide local employment and encourage Chinese people to remain in Locke, the cultural village would employ artisans to showcase their old-world craftsmanship.

In response to protests, Sacramento County changed its zoning ordinances to preserve the town's historical features and stop new development. In 1990, the 14-acre Locke Historic District was listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

Although the Alien Land Act law was repealed in 1952, the underlying land had never been subdivided by subsequent owners. As a result, the residents who owned their buildings (many passed down from the original Chinese families) had no opportunity to own the land on which their homes and businesses stood.

Without land ownership, they could not borrow conventional mortgages or qualify for grants to preserve their buildings. In 2000, the SHRA bought the land underlying Locke's buildings from the investor group owners, who recommended the property be subdivided into parcels. SHRA then worked with the seller and Locke residents in a four-year process to return town ownership back to its inhabitants.

Threatened buildings were stabilized, and a new sewer replaced the failing septic system. A nonprofit organization—the

Locke Management Association—was created. A set of restrictions ensured the rights of original settlers' descendants.

On December 14, 2004, the SHRA turned over the now-subdivided land to the buildings' owners. After nearly 100 years, the prejudicial wrongs done to the Chinese citizens of Locke by the Alien Land Act were somewhat righted.

EVENTS AND PROGRAMS

Docent tours for groups of 10 or more persons may be reserved. To schedule student, group or Chinese-language tours, call (916) 776-1661 or email lockeinfo@comcast.net.

For Locke Boarding House hours and an event calendar, visit the Locke Foundation's website at www.locke-foundation.org or call (916) 776-1828.

ACCESSIBLE FEATURES

Locke Boarding House is fully accessible, with a wheelchair lift to the second floor. To enter the accessible restroom at the north end of Locke, request the combination from any open business.

PLEASE REMEMBER








- All natural and cultural features are protected by law and may not be disturbed or removed.
- Except for service animals, pets are not permitted in the boarding house.
- A town walking map and a Chinese-language town brochure are available.

NEARBY STATE PARKS

- Brannan Island SRA
Lat: 38.11059 Long: -121.69845
17645 Hwy. 160, Rio Vista 94571
(916) 777-6671
- Franks Tract SRA
(reachable only by water)
Lat: 38.040706 Long: -121.633136
southeast of Brannan Island between False River and Bethel Island
(916) 988-0205

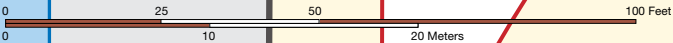


Legend

-  Paved Road
-  Parking Area
-  Park Building
-  Non-Park Building
-  Accessible Feature
-  Parking
-  Restrooms

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Sacramento River



River Road

Locke Road

Main Street

JOE SCHOONG SCHOOL

BOARDING HOUSE

LOCKE BOARDING HOUSE

Locke Boarding House

ORCHARD

Restroom lock combination available at Boarding House or any merchant

to Community Garden, Chinese Association Museum and Dai Loy Gambling Museum

