

## "Sweet and Clean": The Chinatown Fire of 1886

Richard A. Greer

On the afternoon of Sunday, April 18, 1886, Honolulu lay becalmed. A stillness hung over the island capital on that drowsy spring day as a somnolent Sabbath waned toward evening.<sup>1</sup> In that third of the city called Chinatown, exotic and squalid, Orientals filtered along their narrow alleys and through "... dark and unwholesome courts and hovels."<sup>2</sup> Their section, which harbored an estimated 6,000–8,000 souls, was not then cherished as a cultural asset by other Honoluluans. Nor did the kingdom's few tourists spend time rummaging through the area's picturesque if sordid byways. Their attention was carefully directed to more worthy scenes. As the *Daily Bulletin* remarked, "It was always a source of gratification to residents who had any respect for themselves or their surroundings, that the wretched jumbles of architecture . . . were outside the usual lines of observation by transient visitors."<sup>3</sup> Indeed, this most populous part of Honolulu was densely built over with an aggregation of wooden shacks and "pestilential slums" that among them defied every sanitary law and municipal regulation on the books.<sup>4</sup> Here were "... immense traffic, on large and small scales, legitimate and otherwise [and] social institutions, of good and bad repute. . . ."<sup>5</sup> Now, as clocks swung toward four, something of supremely bad repute was about to escalate traffic to new heights.

Shortly before the hour struck, several excited Chinese bolted down Meek St. toward the police station on King St., yelling "Fire!" at the top of their lungs. Officer Sam McKeague, the station house keeper, had the bell rung at once, and a general alarm from the Union St. tower and all engine houses followed. Meanwhile, vertical plumes of smoke rose from a Chinese cook-house (eatery) at the northeast corner of Smith and Hotel Streets, where the owner had tried, only too successfully, to start a fire under the evening's victuals.<sup>6</sup> Later, it was generally agreed that the blaze could have been controlled at its beginning. But two policemen nearby couldn't get water, and flames soon drove them away. Chinese residents and shopkeepers paid little attention to the fire itself; almost immediately they blocked the streets in a tightly-packed throng, struggling to empty their shops and tenements of

movables. Soon Smith St. was choked its whole length. Some carried bedding, furniture and trunks. Others shoved wheel-barrows and handcarts.<sup>7</sup>

Although not a breath of wind stirred . . . quicker than can be told the fire was leaping from roof to roof, gliding along verandahs, entwining itself about pillars and posts, festooning doors and windows. . . . In the calm the smoke rose in a vast volume. . . . Both [Smith and Hotel] were soon lanes of fire.<sup>8</sup>

A few doors from the cook-house was a Chinese livery stable housing some twenty horses. These were got out safely. But on Hotel, flames moved so fast that little could be saved.<sup>9</sup> Appropriately (but unfortunately, said some), the China Engine Co. No. 5, confused and ineffective, got to the scene first; the *Advertiser* opined that any other company would have been able to douse the blaze.<sup>10</sup> And so the fire demon, long dreaded and predicted, clutched Chinatown.<sup>11</sup> Everywhere, jammed-together buildings left hardly a square foot of open ground from which to fight the inferno.\*

Along *Smith Street*, the fire worked up as far as the government school house, which it left standing.<sup>12</sup> *Meek Street*, running seaward from Hotel, was cleaned out. By five o'clock it was blazing in both directions, with flames about halfway down to King.

Shortly after the fire's start, a two-story building makai across *Hotel Street* from the point of origin was burning. From there, the fire gnawed both east and west. Engine Co. No. 2 fought at the intersection of Hotel and Nuuanu Streets, and just beyond that corner, the blaze was stopped between two saloons, the Empire and the Bay Horse. No. 2 got valuable help from British sailors and marines. Two of Her Majesty's ships, *Satellite* and *Heroine*, occupied Honolulu harbor. Many crewmen were ashore on leave. They pitched in with a will. Then, some fifteen minutes after the fire began, Capt. Blackburne of the *Heroine* sent a detachment of sailors and marines ashore and put them at the disposal of Hawaiian authorities. Meantime, another party from the *Satellite* hurried into town with all necessary equipment, and these men were the ones set to work at Hotel and Nuuanu, shoulder to shoulder with Engine Co. No. 2. Throughout the fire, the Britishers labored coolly and under strict discipline, at times putting themselves in great danger. Their enthusiasm and energy earned high praise. A few got minor injuries; the chief casualty was the clothing of those who had been ashore, dressed in their best, when the fire broke out. After it was all over, the king sent letters of thanks to Capt. Allington and Blackburne.<sup>13</sup>

Moving westward along Hotel St., the fire at five o'clock had eaten its way to Maunakea St. By then the fine, three-story building of the Sun Hang Far Co. on the corner was ablaze. This ignited the Hop Chong Market and the Hing Kee Laundry across the street.

*Maunakea Street* and the area to the "river" were now to be sacrificed. By

\* Six volunteer outfits composed the fire department. They were: Honolulu Engine Co. No. 1, steam; Mechanic Engine Co. No. 2; Hawaiian Engine Co. No. 4; China Engine Co. No. 5; Pacific Hose Co. No. 1 (originally Engine Co. No. 3); Protection Hook and Ladder Co. No. 1 (Frederick Bagot, ed., McKenney's Hawaiian Directory . . . (San Francisco: L. M. McKenney & Co., 1884), pp. 80j, 80k).

5:20 the American House was a red hell. Then the fire ran in opposite directions, toward both King and Beretania. At Maunakea and King, Engine Co. No. 1 and hose reels of Nos. 1 and 5 made their stand. Across from the American House a couple of warehouses were being consumed. Loud explosions rocked firefighters as oil and other flammables fed the blaze. Kaumakapili Church on Beretania faced destruction. *Daily Bulletin* reporters and other spectators urged demolition of a few small buildings by the riverside; this would make a gap ahead of the fire and give room to prevent burning of a long row of two-story buildings on the Waikiki side of Maunakea, extending to Beretania opposite the church. But the bigwigs appealed to said they lacked power to act. At this point, the king (Kalakaua) and Capt. Hayley of the mounted police walked around the corner, took in the situation, and at once gave orders to tear down the buildings referred to. This done, another half hour brought the climax. Men atop and inside the building at the end of the row already mentioned were tearing it to pieces, while hosemen opposite, bathed in blistering heat, played water on the fire. Thus, its progress was checked here. His Majesty, personally directing the action and exerting himself to the utmost, caught a nasty cold that left him "seriously indisposed."<sup>14</sup> In worse shape was Frank May, working a hose of Co. No. 2, who had the misfortune to be on the second story of a Maunakea St. house when the floor collapsed. With bruised body and burned head, he was dragged out unconscious and took a spell to mend.<sup>15</sup>

The blaze had jumped Maunakea within three houses of Beretania; as it roared toward Waikalulu Stream, swarms of Hawaiians and Chinese choked the bank, dashing among piles of household goods. Below in the water, men, women and children waded or swam back and forth in ripples that the fire's glare turned to blood, pushing all kinds of floats—overturned tables, rafts of boxes or trunks—whatever they could make do. As they struggled, they ducked an avalanche of furniture and utensils hurled from above. On the marshy ground across the stream groups huddled around piles of belongings. The fire marched on relentlessly. Down toward Oahu jail, between King St. and the harbor, it drove out a dense population whose unsanitary environment had only recently got the unflattering attention of several local newspapers. On the sandbar and flats, glinting in the light of blazing houses, eyes stared at the advancing ruin. Here too canoes and rafts ferried away what could be saved; a reporter noted one pile of three trunks, with a rocking chair on top, standing right out of the water. By the time all was done Maunakea was, excepting a few buildings at either end, a smoking waste.

As the fire swept near the waterfront, all vessels moored between the fish market and Brewer's Wharf were moved into the stream—a fortunately needless precaution. The wharf just named, and that of the old customs house, were loaded with furniture and other movables. All night a community of watchers stood by.

*King Street* was a disaster, a rampant purgatory by 6:00. Flames had pushed down in three solid double columns by way of Maunakea, Meek and Nuuanu. Fire raged on both sides of the street from Maunakea to Mossman's Corner

(at Nuuanu) as great balloons of pink, purple, orange, black and yellow smoke billowed up. Pillars of flame and showers of sparks shed a lurid glare. Cinders from the heart of the cauldron fell out beyond Thomas Square and far up Nuuanu Valley. Here as elsewhere as the fire advanced, occupants of threatened tenements and shops broke their way through the crowd, many behind the familiar wheelbarrows and handcarts. More used doors, blinds, reversed tables, and so forth. Drays forged away heavy laden. Household goods were tossed from windows and verandahs, often to the accompanying crash of glass. And above all was the roar of the flames, punctuated by a fusillade of loud reports and sharp volleys from exploding ammunition, kerosene and Chinese fireworks.

The gluttonous blaze chewed inexorably eastward. British Vice Consul Theo. H. Davies and Capt. F. R. Blackburne of the *Heroine* got permission from the Minister of the Interior, C. T. Gulick, to pull down or blow up buildings as necessary. At Meek and King, sailors stationed there began wrecking. They had rope and tackle, but no powder, which had to be sent for. But nothing could check the fire. It ate on and on toward Nuuanu. At the intersection of that street and King the Widemann Block perished. On the same corner men tried desperately to demolish Wolfe and Edwards' grocery store as across the way a thick cloud of gray smoke covered the roof of the Chinese store there. In a few moments it was a mass of flame. Wolfe's caught fire at once, and the axemen and others tearing it down were driven off. Next door was a fine brick building, the Merchants' Exchange, part of which was a saloon. Windows, doors, and all other removable woodwork were torn out and flung into the road. Thus, the building was "saved"; it and an adjoining unoccupied brick structure stopped the fire, so that Castle and Cooke's store on King got only a little water damage.

The gutted Merchants' Exchange Saloon was one of several such establishments dried up that night. Companions in disaster were the Empire, the Anchor, and the Cosmopolitan—all burned to the ground. As the fire neared each in turn, solicitous spectators removed the stock with a consequent, if temporary, circulation of drink. Results of *that* were a general increase in the noise level, some desultory rioting, and thirteen arrests for drunkenness.

Destruction along King St. included the old police station and court. This was one of the evening's spectaculars, flaming from ground to cupola. Early in the fire prisoners and records had been moved to the new, but not yet occupied, station on Merchant St., leaving behind only a store of confiscated opium. The abandoned and blazing headquarters expired at exactly 6:57, when cupola and bell dropped into the debris. Just after noon photographer J. Williams had snapped the police force lined up in front of the old station. Twenty-four hours later he took a picture of its ruins.<sup>16</sup> Incinerated also were the Chinese Engine Co. No. 5 and the fine new Chinese Society club house, formally opened February 2. After the fire its basement smoldered for days beneath grotesquely twisted, heavy iron shutters.<sup>17</sup> John Colburn's shop was only four walls; it and several other buildings on King, outside the fire circle, were badly wrecked. British tars helped save the businesses of J. Johnson

(saddler), Robert More and Co. (machinist), and George W. Lincoln (contractor).

As the rioting fire threatened Castle and Cooke, Capt. Allington of the *Satellite* stood on a table across the street, giving orders. When done, he ran through a sea of flame behind the Seamen's Bethel, followed by his men with their equipment. There they pulled down a shed on the lower side of Wing Wo Chan's store. Several sailors climbed on the roof and wouldn't come down until the shanty's collapse forced an impromptu descent.<sup>18</sup>

This action opened a crucial battle on *Bethel Street*. When the Anchor Saloon on King St. caught, it was plain that nothing could save the Seamen's Bethel on the corner. Movables, including a new piano and a small reed organ, were taken out. Soon flames shot up from the vestry. It was now about 8:00, and by 8:30 only the bare stone walls of the Bethel's lower half remained. On the corner of Bethel and King, S. M. Johnson's harness and saddlery shop was torn down, as was C. C. Coleman's blacksmith and machine shop on the opposite side of King. Luckily, flames didn't reach it; if they had, apparently no effort could have spared the buildings leading to Fort St. From the Anchor Saloon, fire entered the three-story brick building of Wing Wo Chan and the brick and cement store of Wing Wo Tai. A crisis was reached with the destruction of the Bethel and these two Chinese businesses. Merchant and Fort Streets faced imminent danger—a half hour might decide whether the fire could be confined to Chinatown. Fortunately, the almost perfect calm gave way to a light southerly breeze, turning the flames back upon themselves. But to resume: The burning of the Bethel jeopardized the Sailors' Home, a wooden building on the mauka-ewa corner of Bethel and Merchant, and the Post Office, across Bethel from it. British sailors with axes and hawsers tore down sheds adjacent to two-story structures behind the Post Office and the Sailors' Home. Wing Wo Chan's, loaded with ships' stores, was already an erupting crater, its exploding kerosene tins sounding like artillery. Firemen and the Royal Household Troops, marched to the scene under Col. Purvis, joined the fight here.

A quick parley brought a decision to blow up the Sailors' Home. Two 100-pound bags of powder were carried in. Word came to touch them off at 8:05, and Gunner G. W. Spry of the *Satellite*, carrying a 16-inch fuse, entered the middle room on the ground floor. Hundreds watched from the Post Office corner. The fuse was lighted; Spry retreated; the crowd shrank back. Five minutes passed. The fire drew closer. Rags in a mauka room burst into flame. Why blow up the Sailors' Home if it was to burn anyhow? Save that powder. A bucket brigade of British officers put out the rags, separated by only twenty feet and a wooden partition from the powder. Now the question: Was that fuse still burning? An officer asked Spry if he dared go after it. "Aye, aye, sir," said the sailor; putting his hand before his face, he momentarily disappeared—then came out with an inch of live fuse. And the Sailors' Home didn't go after all. Although much battered it survived, shielded by trees between it and the torching Bethel. Nor did the fire leap Bethel St. Fort, Merchant and Queen streets were saved. Police had quickly moved to

their new quarters on Merchant St. without confusion. But on that same street, between it and the waterfront, and along Fort, every business house was ready for a hasty evacuation. Postmaster J. L. Kaulukou took the entire contents of the Post Office to his home and put them under guard. As soon as the danger passed all was returned, and the office was in business as usual Monday morning.

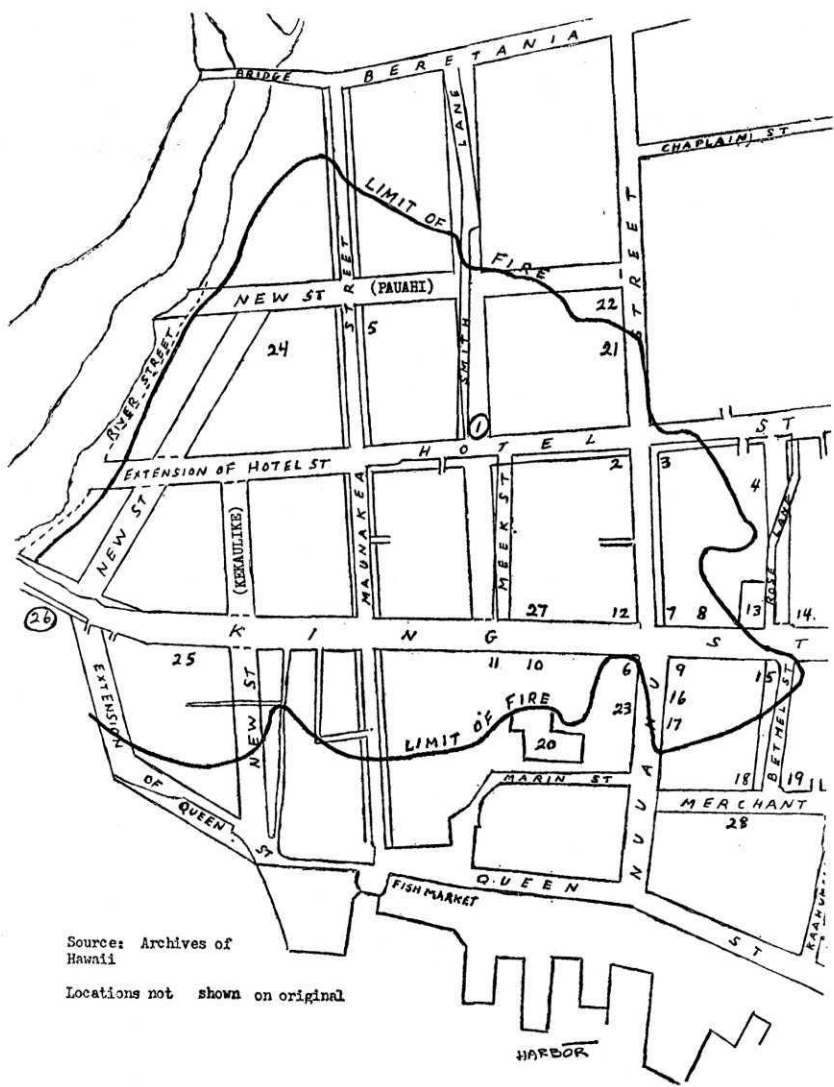
Off to the west, and down on *Marin Street*, a hard, three-hour struggle went on behind the Honolulu Iron Works. Engine Co. No. 1 took up a position on the dock near the limekiln; with the Pacific Ocean to draw from, there was no lack of water. These firefighters had dedicated help. With their jobs at stake foundry employees, working under President Theo. H. Davies and Manager Young, joined the battle, and successfully. A shed filled with iron pipes (safely removed) burned down; the roof of the pattern shop ignited. But this was controlled, and the iron works saved.

*Nuuanu Street*, with *Rose Lane* and Bethel, was at the fire's eastern limit. A group from the *Satellite* set to work at the corner of Nuuanu and Hotel, while a block mauka at the Beretania corner, Engine Co. No. 4—with 1,500

#### MAP LOCATIONS:

- 1 Start of fire
- 2 Cosmopolitan Liquors
- 3 Empire Liquors
- 4 Bay Horse (saloon)
- 5 American House
- 6 Mossman Store (crocery & glassware)
- 7 Wolfe & Edwards (grocers)
- 8 Merchants' Exchange (saloon)
- 9 Anchor (saloon)
- 10 Old Police station and court
- 11 Chinese Steam Fire Engine Co. No. 5
- 12 Widemann Block
- 13 Castle & Cooke
- 14 C. C. Coleman (blacksmith & machine shop)
- 15 Seamen's Bethel
- 16 Wing Wo Tai
- 17 Wing Wo Chan
- 18 Sailors' Home
- 19 Post Office
- 20 Honolulu Iron Works
- 21 Hollister & Co. (drugs, tobacco, sundries)
- 22 Love's bakery & confectionery
- 23 Freeth & Peacock (liquors)
- 24 District of small dwellings between Maunakea St. and the stream
- 25 District of Chinese lodging houses
- 26 End of fire
- 27 Chinese Society Club House (Chinese Union)
- 28 New Police Station

SOURCE: Fire Insurance Map of Honolulu  
 San Francisco: Dakin Publishing Co.  
 July, 1885  
 Population of Honolulu: 20,500  
 Archives of Hawaii



Source: Archives of Hawaii  
 Locations not shown on original

feet of hose out and not a single drunk among the crew—and Hose Reel No. 1 played a couple of streams on a gaggle of wooden buildings behind Love's Bakery.<sup>19</sup> Their efforts kept fire from spreading to Beretania. Mossman and Co. (crocery and glassware) on the ewa side of Nuuanu and King escaped, but a pile of valuable furniture behind it was destroyed. Flames advanced to the brick and cement building formerly occupied by Hollister and Co. druggist. This quickly became a churning firepit, with flames bursting out around its iron shutters. Next above was a vacant lot, and beyond this gap Mrs. Fannie Love's bakery, which was not touched, at the fire's mauka limit.

Seaward, the conflagration swept down as far as Wing Wo Tai's new brick warehouse which, as we know, was burned out, part of the back wall falling in. Sailors had pulled down a wooden building mauka of Wing Wo Chan next door, but fruitlessly. Quon On Chong, Ah Swan, and the gutted Paiko Block were sacrificed, while kerosene flowed in streams down the gutters. Makai, C. Afong (sugar merchant), Freeth and Peacock (liquors) and Chulan and Co. (sugar and rice agents) remained whole. Had the fire gone beyond Wing Wo Tai, it would very likely have crossed Merchant to the harbor and to the businesses along Fort.

But nothing lasts forever, and after a seven-hour ordeal—about half of it in darkness—the walls of the last building to collapse fell in. It was exactly 11:20, and the place was the makai side of the King Street bridge leading across to the Palama district. Oddly, two houses near this point survived to stand in grim isolation at the wasteland's edge. It had been a bad night, but it could have been worse. There could have been no British sailors around to help. Or, much more serious, strong trade winds could have whipped the fire entirely out of control.

As the embers cooled, tempers flared. Hawaiians of Chinatown, especially around the ewa side of Maunakea street, where they had been the greatest losers, were bitter. Here was the handiwork of the Chinese—the culmination of their wickedness. By midnight a mob of perhaps 3,000 crowded around the King St. bridge and back to the Chinese theater. As Hawaiians itched for a fight, things began to get nasty. Fortunately, some haoles interfered and, talking to the crowd, were able—but not easily—to pacify the excited natives. Strong feeling remained for some time, however. On the nineteenth a Hawaiian on horseback dragged a Chinese by his queue along Palama Road. The victim got timely help from a fellow Celestial working in a wayside vegetable garden. This samaritan tossed a spade over the fence, and the Chinese was able to beat off his tormentor.<sup>20</sup>

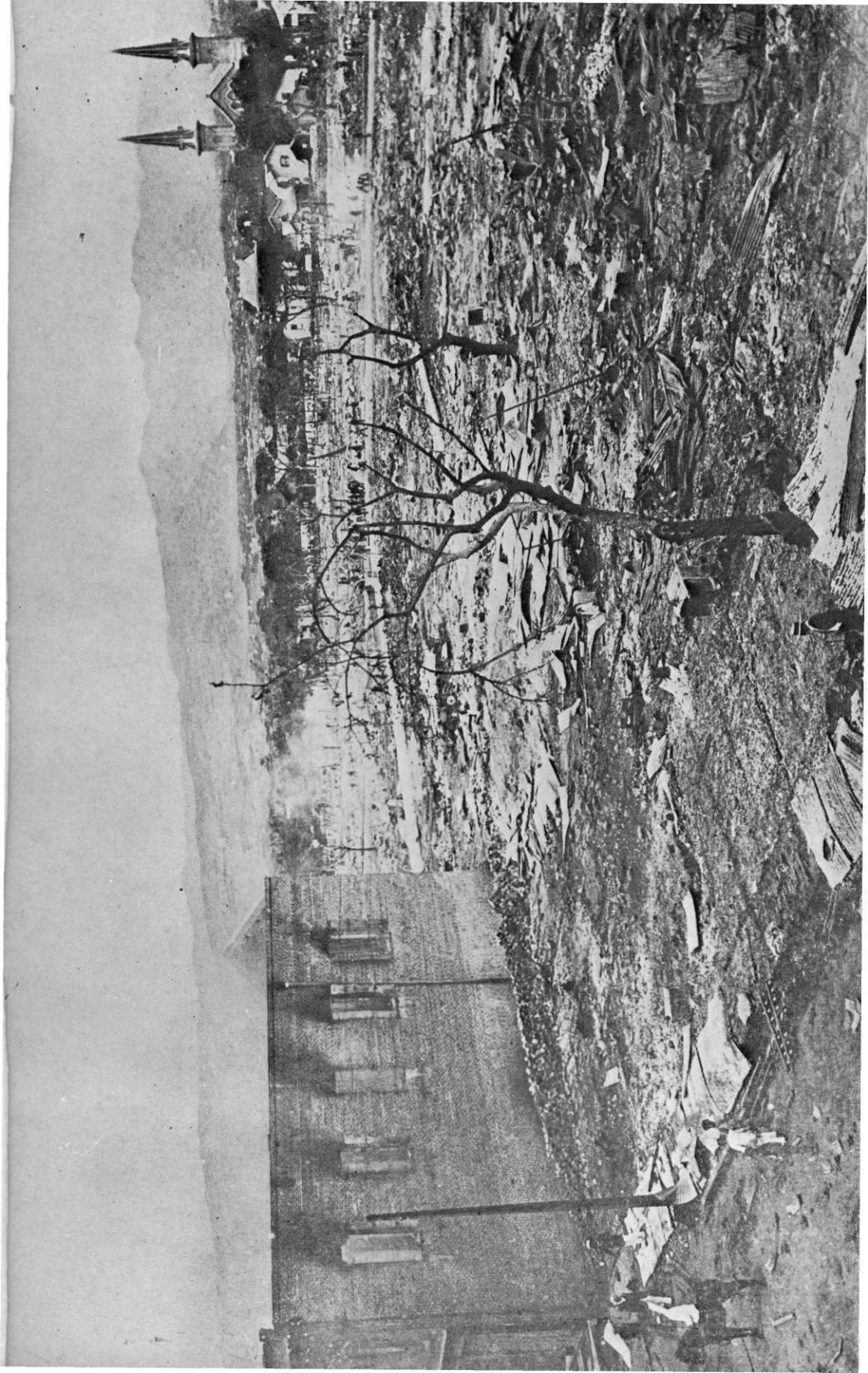
Although the fire intensified anti-Chinese feeling, this group had long been under attack. During the 1880's, spurred by what was considered an alarming influx, the Hawaiian government had limited—and for a time halted—their coming. The year before the fire, massive Japanese immigration started. It had been conceived and encouraged not only to man plantation fields, but also to provide a counterbalance to the Chinese.

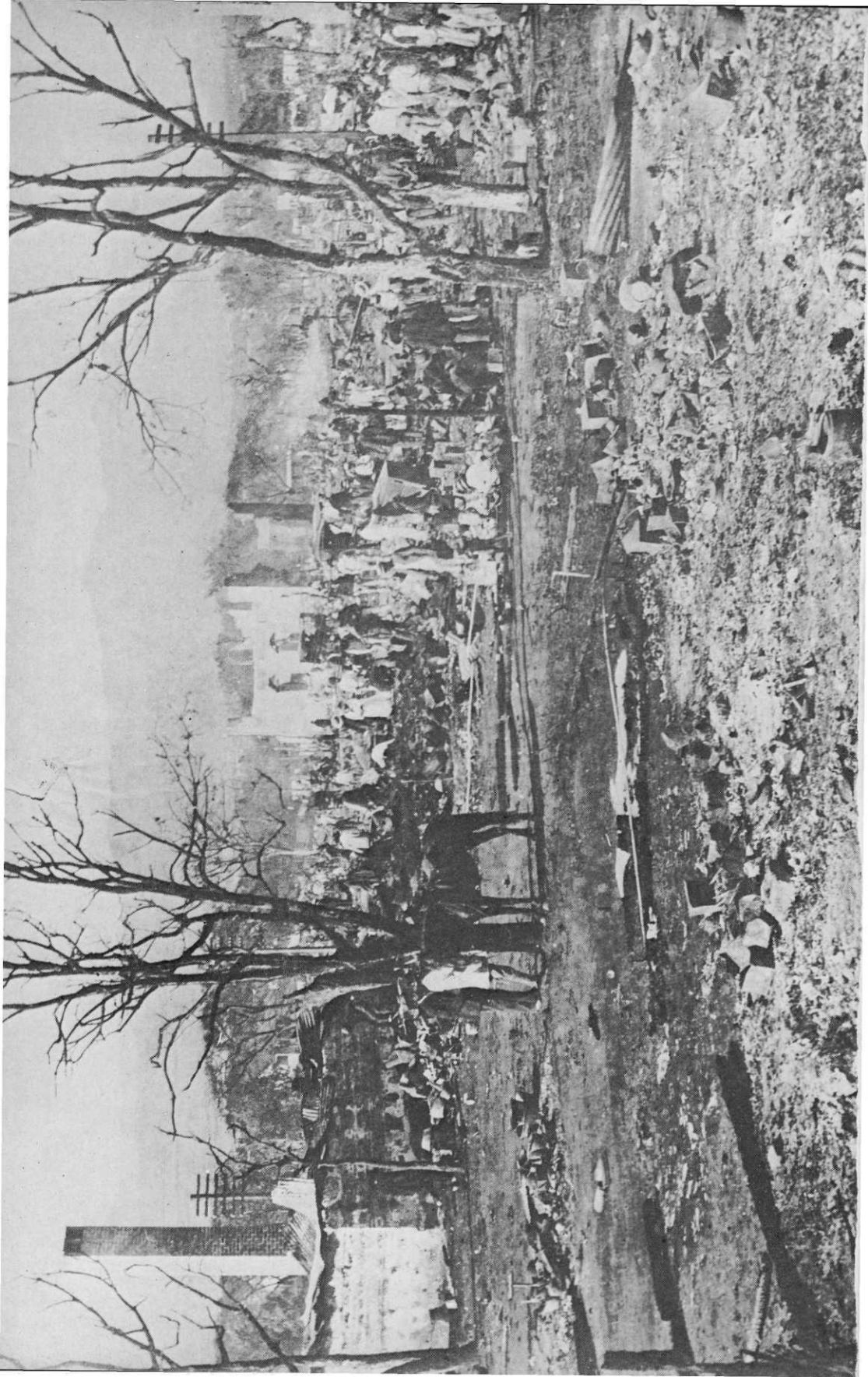
Understandably, Honolulu magnified their misfortunes at first. They considerably overestimated the number of homeless. Certain newspaper reports added more than twenty mythical acres to the size of Chinatown,

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*The gutted Chinese Society Club House, its iron shutters warped, stands among the fire's rubble. King Street accommodates a horse and rider and assorted pedestrians in the lower left foreground. Meek Street parallels the far side of the club house and is partially hidden by it. In the middle distance, a crowd has gathered at the corner of Meek Street and Hotel Street. The fire started on the mauka side of Hotel Street, at a spot shown in the center of the photograph, which appears to have been taken from the second story of the Mossman building on the makai-ewa corner of King and Nuuanu Streets. Archives of Hawaii photo.*







mentioning up to sixty acres of devastation. The true area of the Beretania-Nuanu-Queen-River Street trapezium totals about thirty-seven.<sup>21</sup>

Hack drivers beguiled innocent travelers with tall tales while erstwhile residents yet sifted the rubble of their vanished homes and businesses.<sup>22</sup> Hawaiians seemed to have weathered their adversity better than others. While Chinese and haoles showed worry, the “natives”—a word which suffered a lingering death in the island vocabulary—were remarkably buoyant and nonchalant, smiling and shrugging in cheerful conversation.<sup>23</sup>

Politics surfaced as the *Hawaiian Gazette* vilified the king's ministers; blundering incompetence headed the list of their virtues, and from that high point their qualifications receded to awesome depths.<sup>24</sup> Meanwhile, curious crowds gawked at Chinatown's new profile. Some fire still burned inside brick buildings. The Royal Household Troops guarded Wing Wo Tai's high walls, and the Chinese club-house got similar attention.<sup>25</sup> Smoke from the ruins gagged spectators on Monday the nineteenth, but rain fell that night; this, and the application of fire hoses, settled things.<sup>26</sup> Workmen had already begun pulling down walls of gutted brick structures, while other gangs removed safes and assorted junk. The safes had generally proved themselves to be just that. Wing Wo Chan's, for example, had been in fire for more than sixty hours without the slightest damage to contents.<sup>27</sup>

During the fire there had been a good deal of stealing. Mr. and Mrs. Macneill lost numerous articles from carpenter Burgess' King St. office. The Sailors' Home missed a lot of new towels and bed linens, plus three boxes of chickens, and trunks in the baggage room were forced. Capt. Nowlein parted unwillingly with a fancy lady's lapboard. A reckless miscreant tried an axe on the Quong On Kee Co.'s combination safe lock, but was frustrated. Mr. Herrick, woodworker, advertised for the return of a set of turning tools, and somebody even stole the *Haleakala's* surfboat—supposedly to take other plunder to a hideaway.<sup>28</sup> Deputy Marshal Dayton asked anyone having property saved by mistake or otherwise from the blaze to leave word at the police station. It was all he could do.<sup>29</sup> Ten had been arrested for larceny at the fire, but only five had to face court judgment.<sup>30</sup>

Now, in the aftermath, Chinese burrowed among the rubbish, carrying off intact or slightly-damaged goods, and especially favoring old iron.<sup>31</sup> A number of those with money sought out vacant business stands, with the result that houses long advertised in vain suddenly became desirable.<sup>32</sup> Chinese merchants pioneered new frontiers. By the middle of May, the *Hawaiian Gazette* complained that they were gradually encroaching on the “more respectable parts of town”—specifically, along King St. diagonally across from the king's palace.<sup>33</sup> One gets the impression that this strongly reinforced the *Gazette's* earlier contention that the fire had been the worst calamity in the history of Honolulu. Others, however, professed to see a silver lining: Actually, the

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*While embers smolder in the distance, sightseers and former residents comb the ruins of Chinatown. Apparently that safe near the middle of the photo has cooled down enough to handle. The telephone poles have a new look; they are equipped with insulators, but the wire hasn't been strung yet. Archives of Hawaii photo.*

holocaust had been a great mercy, sparing the city from an epidemic more hideous than the fire itself—an epidemic proceeding, by implication, from the former unsanitary horrors of what was now that big, clean space at the west end of town.<sup>34</sup>

Editors might philosophize; John Cassidy, superintendent of the Bell Telephone Co., had strictly practical motives. Even while the flames raged, he worked like a Trojan to save his poles. Idlers jeered his efforts, but he did not sleep until his supervision was no longer needed.<sup>35</sup> Before the ashes had cooled, Cassidy and his counterpart of the Mutual Telephone Co. had gangs at work, replacing burned poles and stringing wire. Within a week, service was close to normal.<sup>36</sup>

While telephone crews labored, the Honolulu press haggled over issues with strong political overtones. The *Gazette* kept up its offensive against the ministry, giving special attention to the Interior Department's Gulick. The *Advertiser* rebutted fiercely.<sup>37</sup> The same journals squabbled about whether enough water had been available to fight the fire.<sup>38</sup>

In the absence of television, visual representations of the havoc wrought depended upon the efforts of artists, draftsmen and photographers. J. Williams spent Monday taking photographs from various vantage points, and Mr. C. Furneaux worked up a realistic sketch of the Bethel's death by fire.<sup>39</sup> Detailed maps of the burned district were turned out. On the nineteenth, Prof. W. D. Alexander, surveyor-general, got orders to drop everything else and produce a chart of the devastated Chinatown.<sup>40</sup> This was done within two days.<sup>41</sup> Oat and Co. (stationers) generated a map for sale, and so did surveyor M. D. Monsarrat.<sup>42</sup>

While some newspapermen were filing accounts of the late blaze, others were totting up losses. Assessed valuation of property in the eight blocks incinerated was \$1,355,000, with insurance coverage of about \$230,000. Actual value was probably at least \$1,750,000; thus, approximately one-eighth of the missing real estate was insured—a proportion considered to be a safe margin in a wooden town. Only a few policy-holders had more than fifty per cent coverage; twenty per cent was the limit for most. And many Chinese carried no insurance at all. They had relied, alas, on their vigilance and constant presence. Among the nineteen insurance companies involved, a couple—Hartford and Firemen's Fund—are still with us. All were solvent and paid off on proof of loss.<sup>43</sup>

Those barren acres in Chinatown represented human tragedy, too. During the fire and in the hectic days after came scattered reports of lives lost: A young Hawaiian woman had perished when she reentered a burning house to rescue her clothes; a sick Chinaman (to use the common term of the day) was carried out of a dwelling on King St. but died in the road; a Chinese corpse had been discovered on King near Maunakea on the night of calamity; Dr. Emerson reported a body charred beyond recognition under a building; Lo Ting and his wife were missing; workers had dug for several hours on Maunakea St. for the body of an old, crippled Chinese, without result.<sup>44</sup> Still, the *Gazette* maintained on the twenty-seventh that no one had died in the fire.

Fatalities, if any, had been mercifully few. But the homeless abounded. First estimates put their number between 5,000 and 8,000. In the fire's ruddy glare unfortunates choked all roads leading out of town. They crowded the Armory, the docks and Kawaiahao churchyard. A colony settled on the Y.M.C.A. steps and nearby grass plots. All garden lots up Nuuanu, as far as the first bridge, were filled. Refugees overflowed from every Chinese house and yard in all parts of the city. Street corners became campsites. And wherever people collected, so did piles of belongings. Fortunately, the night of the eighteenth was mild and dry.<sup>45</sup>

Since nearly all Chinese had lived at their places of business, they packed the ranks of the homeless. The Hawaiian population of Chinatown, though substantial, was much less numerous. Least represented was the white community. Only a handful of such families—the Henry Drysdales, a couple of German households, the William and George Wonds, the Hon. Jesse Amara—required help. The Germans were put up in the Reformatory School's hospital, while Mrs. Emma Beckley succored the Wonds and Amaras.<sup>46</sup>

Institutions reacted quickly. The Immigration Depot made hasty preparations to accommodate Chinese women and children. The Catholic Cathedral, the Chinese Church and the Fort St. Church were thrown open. Men of the latter had served coffee to firemen; ladies provided lunches to all who came, and on the morning of the nineteenth readied a free, and eagerly patronized, breakfast—again for all comers.<sup>47</sup> The Rev. J. A. Cruzan, Pastor of the Fort St. Church, invited any homeless whites to apply for relief at his residence. The Catholic mission hosted many destitute Hawaiians. Kaumakapili Church offered its quarters, while women of the burned-out Bethel spread free lunch and hot coffee.<sup>48</sup> But when things settled somewhat, estimates of the number of homeless had to be revised downward. A goodly number of those without shelter were from other islands or from country districts of Oahu. Their departure eased the situation.<sup>49</sup>

Church efforts helped to meet the immediate crisis, but long-range relief demanded other resources. About six a.m. on the nineteenth, King Kalakaua called Walter Murray Gibson, who then conferred with fellow ministers Gulick and Neumann. This cabinet council agreed on measures which were later in the day submitted to a Privy Council meeting convened by His Majesty.<sup>50</sup> Noting the destruction of (as it asserted) 500 houses and the existence of many thousands of homeless, the council considered itself faced with a "disaster" within the meaning of the constitution. It therefore approved the recommended \$10,000 relief fund.<sup>51</sup> Gibson and Gulick were named a special cabinet committee in charge; they appointed Frank H. Austin as their operating agent.<sup>52</sup>

Austin, after making a quick survey, found burned-out Hawaiians in great need of roofs. Some were camping out; others crowded in with friends. Occasionally houses held as many as fifty or sixty men, women and children.<sup>53</sup> Many were at Kaumakapili Church, with enough food for a few days. The Chinese needed food, but not much shelter, and since there were few women among them, crowding caused little inconvenience.

Gibson told Austin to send those in distress to the Immigration Depot, and to give housing and necessary food. Actually, Gulick had already started operations with the aid of the Rev. Frank Damon and Chinese merchants Alee and Goo Kim. Austin set up headquarters in the Minister of the Interior's office, and advertised government aid by posters in Chinese and Hawaiian. He hired a Hawaiian and a Chinese to act as caterers to their respective races. Each day, on their requisition, written orders for supplies were made, and a record of meals furnished kept. Austin visited the Depot morning and evening to oversee food distribution.<sup>54</sup>

Few Chinese came the first couple of days—probably because the idea of public assistance was new to them.<sup>55</sup> But meal attendance went from two on April 19 to 220 on the twenty-third. Thereafter it fell off gradually, and by May 14, job calls for rice harvesters had thinned aid recipients to seven men too old and feeble to work. These stayed on until books were closed on May 29. During the forty days, the Chinese ate 2,743 meals of rice and beef at an average cost of just over ten cents per meal, excluding the caterer's pay.<sup>56</sup>

It was hard to persuade Hawaiians to take shelter at the Depot. Six applied on the twenty-second; the number had reached forty-three men, women and children by the twenty-eighth. On May 2, S. G. Wilder asked for twenty-five Hawaiian laborers. Food was then stopped for all able-bodied men and their families because the former wouldn't take the offered jobs. But shelter continued to be provided. Eleven old men and women were fed until May 29. In all, Hawaiians got 2,052 meals of poi and beef at an average of just under five cents per meal, again excluding the caterer's pay.<sup>57</sup>

The few whites fed ate at the Cosmopolitan Restaurant, consuming a total of ninety-four meals at an average cost of twenty-one cents each. Uncooked food given to Chinese and Hawaiians furnished 791 meals at five cents each, or \$39.55.

The outlay at the Depot included the pay of cooks (fifty cents a day) and caterers, and expenses for wood, oil, blankets, soap and carriage hire. The Chinese caterer got \$2.00 a day, while his Hawaiian opposite, Joe Kanai, the Depot's regular messenger, got an extra \$20.00. The whole bill for the Depot: \$212.50. In all, 5,679 meals had been provided at an average of just over eleven cents each.<sup>58</sup> Not bad; the daily ration had been about two pounds of rice or four pounds of poi, and at its height the relief kitchen was using some 120 pounds of beef a day.<sup>59</sup>

Clothing posed another problem. On April 26 a relief office opened in Fowler's Yard, at the new government dispensary. Hours were 9:00 to 4:00 daily except Sunday.<sup>60</sup> To prevent fraud, each applicant got a blank request which had to be signed by a responsible person. If the signature wasn't satisfactory (and this happened often), another was required. Each petitioner was questioned, and Austin made many personal investigations. There was some attempted hanky-panky: in one case, six Chinese who had arrived in Hawaii on May 10 found a company to sponsor them. Two Chinese and a Hawaiian duo had recourse to forgery. All were promptly locked up for several days, then released at Austin's request.<sup>61</sup> More than 1,450 blanks were issued;

960 came back properly endorsed. Their holders got orders on Mr. Goo Kim's store; the stub of each order was kept at the relief office, and the application pasted to it (the same system had been used in issuing uncooked food).

At Goo Kim's, the "customer" could choose any three of these five: pants, shirt, hat, blanket, shoes. Costs to the government were: (per dozen) durable woolen shirts, \$6.00; best quality denim pants, \$9.00; blankets, \$9.60; shoes, \$12.00; hats, \$9.00. A total of 910 people got clothes at an average expenditure of \$2.02 each.<sup>62</sup>

Some families got cash, when there seemed to be no other way of giving help. A. M. Canaverro received \$105.00 to be distributed among nine Portuguese families who had lost everything. Three other families asked for only a little cash aid. Under this head came mechanics' tools bought, and passages paid to other islands. Only five people needed medical assistance.

Lumber went to thirty-six large families with enough land to build on. It was issued in \$50-\$100 lots.<sup>63</sup> Temporary shelters were a must; rain was falling, and people were jammed onto verandahs, in outhouses, and in improvised huts.<sup>64</sup> The Honolulu press reported on Tuesday, April 20 that the government would spend \$3,000 to build model frame houses under the supervision of the Board of Health for the 350 Hawaiians burned out.<sup>65</sup>

Austin's final report listed a total of 1,948 people helped in some way. The bill amounted to \$6,336.09, or an average of \$3.40 a person. The special agent got good marks from the press for his efforts.<sup>66</sup>

Private citizens also came forward with offers of aid. Frank Damon's knowledge of Chinese not only helped unmask chisellers, but positively benefited the needy.<sup>67</sup> And Theo. H. Davies, saying that this was no time for race prejudice, proposed a mass meeting to seek ways of helping Chinese.<sup>68</sup> This group, to whom mutual aid was nothing new, pitched in to care for its own. Leading Chinese merchants appointed C. Afong and C. Alee to take donations for fire victims. Afong headed the subscription with a gift of \$500, gave part of his office for a rival firm's use, and set up twenty or thirty beds with mosquito nets in his warehouse. Eventually the relief fund amounted to \$3,890—most of it contributed by whites or white-owned businesses. Half, or \$1,945, was reported spent on hospital patients, two funerals, and eighty-six passages to Hong Kong at \$21.00 each. The remainder was to be refunded *pro rata*.<sup>69</sup>

Chinatown on the evening of April 18 was a nightmare. On the morning of the nineteenth it was a city planner's dream: some thirty acres of nothing, on which to exercise imagination, artistry, and the financial muscle of the taxpayer. This exhilarating emptiness was not infrequently achieved via conflagration in the nineteenth century, when wooden construction and primitive firefighting apparatus combined to produce sudden vistas. It was a simpler age; today a similar effect demands lavish administration of ball, bulldozer and blast—that baleful trinity of urban renewal.

Honolulu newspapers embraced the opportunities so dramatically offered: The burned district should be surveyed, improvements planned, streets widened and straightened, construction regulated and sanitary rules enforced.<sup>70</sup>

The *Daily Bulletin* foresaw collisions between government and landowners on whom rules might work a hardship; nevertheless, it stressed the point that without intervention, the same dreary conglomeration of odious shanties would spring from their own ashes.<sup>71</sup> It urged holding off building until there could be guarantees of a "sweeter, healthier . . . town than ever before."<sup>72</sup> The Chinese would just have to be saved from themselves.<sup>73</sup>

Government agreed. Survey crews were busy Monday. On the same day, letters went out to owners of damaged buildings, telling them that the standing walls were dangerous to public safety and that, if these were not removed within twenty-four hours, they would be demolished at the owners' expense.<sup>74</sup> "Outrage!" cried the *Hawaiian Gazette*. One owner, it said, had got the firm of Stirling, Lishman and Lincoln to look over his property, and according to *their* report, the building was better than ever; the fire had settled and consolidated the bricks. Here was another example of Minister Gulick's ignorant arrogance.<sup>75</sup>

The President of the Board of Health called attention to the law of 1880: any building housing lodgers or contract laborers must contain 300 cubic feet per adult, or 900 cubic feet for two adults and two children; yards and grounds were to be well drained and free of rubbish, and a privy furnished for every six adults. Inspectors would be appointed to enforce sanitary rules, and they would demand adherence to such matters as cubic air space, overhanging balconies and other niceties previously ignored by the Chinese.<sup>76</sup>

On what remained of telephone poles, and elsewhere in Chinatown, the government fixed big posters. These warned that permanent repairing or building of wooden structures was prohibited. Only stone, brick, iron or other fireproof material could be used. A dozen feet from one such notice a frame building was in full construction.<sup>77</sup> It could have belonged to John Colburn, who got a letter from the Interior Department holding him responsible for any violation.<sup>78</sup> Colburn, a hay and grain dealer, did put up a temporary shop at the corner of King and Maunakea.<sup>79</sup>

Although all property owners received a circular stating government rules on building, many businessmen, under heavy pressure to set up again as soon as possible, raised temporary sheds.<sup>80</sup> Preventing violations took constant vigilance. J. Armstrong and Chung Wa had to be cautioned against encroaching on the street line; Dr. S. G. Tucker wanted to tack on a wooden lean-to; Aswan and Haong Kim were putting up wooden-frame buildings.<sup>81</sup>

Meanwhile, committees were appointed to forward fire-related activities. Gulick chaired a group to inquire into the origin, progress and extinction of the fire, and all matters connected with it. His members were A. J. Cartwright, S. M. Damon, C. E. Williams and C. O. Berger. Gulick and Gibson were to study relief measures, public welfare and government policy.

Then, on the morning of the twenty-first, Gulick asked Chief Justice A. F. Judd to name a committee to consider extending, widening and creating roads in the burned district. Godfrey Brown was foreman; he was helped by J. T. Waterhouse, Jr., Robert Parker, H. von Holt, H. E. McIntyre and H. F. Bertleman.<sup>82</sup>



This "jury" reported the next day. It recommended:

1. Widening Bethel St. throughout its length to 50 feet, from the ewa side of the Post Office;
2. Widening Rose Lane to 40 feet from the waikiki side of Castle and Cooke's store;
3. Widening Nuuanu St. between King and Hotel to 50 feet from the existing line on the ewa side;
4. Widening and straightening the line of Smith and Meek Sts. to 50 feet from Beretania to King;
5. Widening and straightening Maunakea St. to 50 feet throughout, to an equal distance on each side of the existing street;
6. Opening a new street 50 feet wide from the proposed extension of Hotel St. to the proposed extension of Queen St., parallel with and 180 feet northwest of the new Maunakea St. line;
7. Extending Queen St. from the Fish Market to King St., 50 feet wide;
8. Widening King St. to 50 feet, running south from Haaliliamanu Bridge;
9. Widening and extending Hotel St. to 50 feet, from its existing mauka side, from the ewa side of the Campbell Block to the Nuuanu stream, northwest;
10. Opening a new 50-foot street from the ewa side of Nuuanu St., 250 feet mauka of Hotel, to run northwest, parallel with Hotel St., to within 80 feet of Nuuanu stream, and then in a general way parallel with the stream to King St.<sup>83</sup>

Immediately W. D. Alexander, Surveyor General; Julius H. Smith, Superintendent of Public Works; and C. W. Hart, Road Supervisor, got instructions to move ahead on the recommendations.<sup>84</sup> An amended report at the end of April made certain changes.<sup>85</sup>

All of this had been done within four days, and after consultation with both private and public interests. The *Advertiser* truly said that prompt and decisive action had been taken to ". . . turn a national disaster into an ultimate blessing."<sup>86</sup>

But this meant money—first of all, to settle claims for land needed to make or widen streets. On May 5 Road Supervisor Hart notified all property owners along lines of proposed changes that they should file claims for damages on or before Saturday, May 29.<sup>87</sup> The government had forms printed up, addressed to Police Magistrate R. F. Bickerton. And the claims came. Owners were asked to give the area lost, the asking price per square foot, and the total amount of the claim. "Values" varied dramatically. On Maunakea St., Kanaimaulua wanted forty cents a square foot, while Aswan demanded \$4.00. On Nuuanu St., J. W. Austin requested \$3.50, but Ayet would settle for fifty cents.<sup>88</sup> Not all made the deadline. Chung Young and Co., Win Ing Hook and Lau Sam San filed late, and hired W. R. Castle to press their case.<sup>89</sup>

Bickerton sent his portfolio of claims to the Interior Department on June 21, and on the same day got them right back again when he was appointed chairman of a commission to consider them. Samuel M. Damon and Mark Robinson were members.<sup>90</sup>

Meanwhile Gulick notified J. S. Walker, President of the Legislative Assembly of 1886, of his intention to introduce bills which would guide Chinatown's resurrection.<sup>91</sup> The fruits of this endeavor were six laws passed by the assembly and approved by Kalakaua between May 29 and October 15. They were:

1. An act to regulate erection and repairing of buildings in Honolulu within certain fire limits. Within such limits, all structures had to be fireproof. The limits were: The east side of Maunakea St. from the waterfront to the south side of King St.; along the makai side of King St. to a point intersecting the east side of Konia St. (for a while this was the name given to Smith St.); along the east side of Konia St. to a point eighty feet mauka of Hotel St.; easterly along a line eighty feet mauka of Hotel St. to a point eighty feet east of the east side of Alakea St.; then eighty feet east of Alakea St. to the waterfront. Also included were both sides of Nuuanu and Fort Sts. between Hotel and Beretania, to eighty feet from each side. On all streets having one side only within the fire limits, buildings on the opposite side, if not fireproof, should not exceed one story of sixteen feet. Everywhere, privies were excepted from the rules, thus waiving the need for the brick houses which have found their way into the vernacular;<sup>92</sup>

2. An act authorizing the police justice of Honolulu to hear and determine cases arising from violations of the foregoing law;<sup>93</sup>

3. An act requiring building permits from the Superintendent of Public Works for all structures costing \$1,000 or more. Plans and specifications had to be filed, and appeals could be made to three-member boards of arbitration (one appointed by the applicant, one by the Minister of the Interior, and one by both);<sup>94</sup>

4. An act authorizing police or district justices to investigate fires occurring under suspicious circumstances within their jurisdictions;<sup>95</sup>

5. An act to prevent obstruction of streets in Honolulu, Lahaina, Wailuku, Kahului and Hilo;<sup>96</sup>

6. An act to establish grades of streets and highways, and grades and widths of sidewalks in Honolulu.<sup>97</sup>

What did this do for Chinatown? At least, it should have insured an environment that could bear the scrutiny of tourists. Indeed, in 1887 the *Hawaiian Almanac and Annual* noted that Maunakea St. was being rapidly rebuilt in brick, many structures joined in large blocks, thus greatly improving the city's appearance.<sup>98</sup> Yet, when bubonic plague broke out in Chinatown at the end of the century, health and sanitary inspectors combed the district. Their horrified cries echoed those of 1886. And once more—this time by courtesy of a brisk tradewind—an equally efficient but even more extensive holocaust did its work of purification.

Today the fate of Chinatown Number Three is locked in a complicated, years-long wrangle. The wrecking ball hangs poised menacingly. To bulldoze or not to bulldoze, that is the question. Now, however, it is not likely that fire will make the decision.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> DB, April 19, 1886. The year will be omitted hereafter in newspaper citations.
- <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*; PCA, May 1.
- <sup>3</sup> April 21.
- <sup>4</sup> PCA, April 19; DB, April 21.
- <sup>5</sup> DB, April 19.
- <sup>6</sup> DB, PCA, April 19; HG, April 20.
- <sup>7</sup> PCA, April 19.
- <sup>8</sup> DB, April 19.
- <sup>9</sup> PCA, April 19.
- <sup>10</sup> April 21; DB, PCA, April 19.
- <sup>11</sup> HG, April 20; PCA, April 19.
- <sup>12</sup> This account of the fire is compiled from reports in DB and PCA, April 19 and 20, and in HG, April 20.
- <sup>13</sup> PCA, April 22; IDLB, Vol. 27, pp. 610-611.
- <sup>14</sup> HG, April 27.
- <sup>15</sup> DB, April 21.
- <sup>16</sup> PCA, April 21.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>18</sup> DB, April 22.
- <sup>19</sup> DB, April 21.
- <sup>20</sup> DB, April 20.
- <sup>21</sup> *Sunday Star-Bulletin and Advertiser*, April 25, 1976, p. A-1.
- <sup>22</sup> HG, April 27.
- <sup>23</sup> DB, April 20.
- <sup>24</sup> April 20.
- <sup>25</sup> PCA, April 20.
- <sup>26</sup> DB, April 20.
- <sup>27</sup> DB, April 21, 22.
- <sup>28</sup> DB, April 19, 20, 21; PCA, April 22, 24.
- <sup>29</sup> DB, April 22.
- <sup>30</sup> DB, April 20.
- <sup>31</sup> PCA, April 21.
- <sup>32</sup> DB, April 20.
- <sup>33</sup> May 11.
- <sup>34</sup> DB, April 20.
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>36</sup> PCA, April 19, 20; HG, April 27.
- <sup>37</sup> HG, April 27; PCA, April 21.
- <sup>38</sup> PCA, April 19, 21; HG, April 20, 27.
- <sup>39</sup> DB, April 20; IDLB, Vol. 27, p. 644; HG, April 27.
- <sup>40</sup> IDLB, Vol. 27, p. 609.
- <sup>41</sup> PCA, April 22.
- <sup>42</sup> IDLB, Vol. 28, p. 34; HG, April 27.
- <sup>43</sup> DB, April 19; HG, April 20; PCA, April 21.
- <sup>44</sup> PCA, April 19, 22; DB, April 20.

- <sup>45</sup> PCA, DB, April 19; HG, April 20.
- <sup>46</sup> PCA, April 19, 21; DB, April 22.
- <sup>47</sup> PCA, April 19.
- <sup>48</sup> DB, April 19.
- <sup>49</sup> DB, April 20.
- <sup>50</sup> PCA, April 20.
- <sup>51</sup> PCR, Vol. 14, p. 189
- <sup>52</sup> PCA, April 20, 22.
- <sup>53</sup> Department of the Interior, *Final Report of the Special Agent of the Cabinet Relief Committee* (Honolulu: July 27, 1886), p. 2. Hereafter cited as *Report*. Filed in AH.
- <sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 2, 3.
- <sup>55</sup> PCA, April 20.
- <sup>56</sup> PCA, April 26; *Report*, p. 3.
- <sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*; *Report*, p. 4.
- <sup>58</sup> *Report*, p. 4.
- <sup>59</sup> PCA, April 26.
- <sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>61</sup> *Report*, pp. 4-6.
- <sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 6, 7.
- <sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 7, 8.
- <sup>64</sup> PCA, April 22.
- <sup>65</sup> PCA, DB.
- <sup>66</sup> PCA, April 26, May 3.
- <sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>68</sup> PCA, April 23.
- <sup>69</sup> PCA, April 29; HG, May 11; DB, July 31.
- <sup>70</sup> PCA, April 21.
- <sup>71</sup> April 21.
- <sup>72</sup> April 19.
- <sup>73</sup> April 21.
- <sup>74</sup> IDLB, Vol. 27, pp. 614-620.
- <sup>75</sup> HG, May 4.
- <sup>76</sup> PCA, April 20.
- <sup>77</sup> DB, PCA, April 21.
- <sup>78</sup> IDLB, Vol. 27, p. 629.
- <sup>79</sup> PCA, April 22.
- <sup>80</sup> PCA, April 21; HG, April 27.
- <sup>81</sup> IDLB, Vol. 28, pp. 23, 24, 95, 374, 382.
- <sup>82</sup> PCA, April 22; DB, April 23; IDLB, Vol. 27, p. 630.
- <sup>83</sup> IDLB, Vol. 27, pp. 634-636; DB, April 23.
- <sup>84</sup> IDLB, Vol. 27, pp. 631, 632, 642, 643.
- <sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 659.
- <sup>86</sup> April 23.
- <sup>87</sup> IDM, Roads, Oahu, Honolulu, Pauahi St., 1886-1893; J. A. Hassinger to W. R. Castle, July 19, 1886, IDLB, Vol. 28, p. 144.

- <sup>88</sup> Claims filed in IDM, Roads, Oahu, Honolulu, under names of streets alphabetically arranged.
- <sup>89</sup> IDLB, Vol. 28, pp. 141, 144.
- <sup>90</sup> J. A. Hassinger to R. F. Bickerton, IDLB, Vol. 28, pp. 73, 76.
- <sup>91</sup> Letters of May 4, 7, 22 in IDLB, Vol. 27, pp. 666, 675 and Vol. 28, p. 21.
- <sup>92</sup> *Laws of His Majesty Kalakaua I . . . Passed by the Legislative Assembly at Its Session, 1886* (Honolulu: P. C. Advertiser Steam Print, 1886), pp. 3-7.
- <sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.
- <sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 23-25.
- <sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18.
- <sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 116-122.
- <sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 114-115.
- <sup>98</sup> HAA, p. 84.