

SG-1799



United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in National Register Bulletin, *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form*. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions.

1. Name of Property

Historic name On Leong Tong House
Other names/site number Truax Laundry, DO09:0127-013
Name of related multiple property listing N/A

2. Location

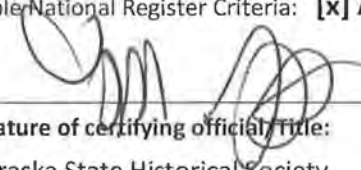
Street & Number 1518 Cass Street
City or town Omaha State Nebraska County Douglas
Not for publication Vicinity

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60.

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant at the following level(s) of significance: national statewide local

Applicable National Register Criteria: A B C D



Signature of certifying official/Title: _____ Date 9/13/17
Nebraska State Historical Society
State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of Commenting Official _____ Date _____
Title _____ State of Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government _____

4. National Park Service Certification

- I, hereby certify that this property is:
- entered in the National Register.
 - determined eligible for the National Register.
 - determined not eligible for the National Register.
 - removed from the National Register.
 - other, (explain): _____


Signature of Keeper _____ Date of Action 11-9-2017

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5. Classification

Ownership of Property (Check as many boxes as apply)

- Private
- Public-local
- Public-state
- Public-federal

Category of Property (Check only **one** box)

- Building(s)
- District
- Site
- Structure
- Object

Number of Resources within Property (Do not include previously listed resources in the count.)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
<u>1</u>	<u>0</u>	Buildings
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	Sites
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	Structures
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	Objects
<u>1</u>	<u>0</u>	Total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register 0

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions (Enter categories from instructions.)

Commerce/Trade: business
Social: meeting hall

Current Functions (Enter categories from instructions.)

Vacant/Not in Use

7. Description

Architectural Classification (Enter categories from instructions.)

Late 19th and early 20th Century American Movements: Commercial Style

Materials (enter categories from instructions.)
Principal exterior materials of the property:

Walls: Brick (glazed and unglazed)
Roof: Synthetic (rubber membrane)
Sills: Concrete or stone

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Description

Summary Paragraph

The On Leong Tong building is an early 20th century commercial-style brick building located on the north side of Cass Street between 15th and 16th Streets, approximately half a mile north-northeast of downtown Omaha, Douglas County, Nebraska. The approximately 4,800 square foot, rectangular two-story building was constructed by Norman E. Truax in 1911 as a commercial laundry, from a design by Omaha architectural firm Nippell & Bellas (Figure 1). The brick building, featuring a white glazed brick façade facing south to Cass Street, is supported by a brick basement foundation and has a flat roof. The building retains its original footprint and many of its original architectural features, such as its fenestration pattern, its glazed brick façade with brick corbels and vertical rectangular panels delineated by light blue glazed bricks (Figure 2). All three levels of the building currently have open floor plans. The front section, 50' x 33', is two stories, descending to a single-story rear section that is 56' x 28'.

Laundry: 2 sty. & bas. 33x105. \$6,000. 1516 Cass st. Architects Nippell & Bellas, Paxton blk. Owner N. E. Truax, 1514 Yates st. Owner will do work by day labor. Excavating. Brick.

Figure 1: Detail from *The American Contractor*, May 27, 1911: 63, announcing the construction of the building. Note the address indicated as 1516 Cass Street.



Figure 2: Front (south) facade of the On Leong Tong House, looking north/northeast, circa 1985. Photograph courtesy of the Omaha City Planning Department.

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Name of Property**County and State****Narrative Description****Site**

The On Leong Tong House is in the northeast part of downtown Omaha, Nebraska, and is part of the original plat of "City Lots" laid out circa 1855. It is more specifically on lot 6, block 24. This block originally formed the northern boundary of Jefferson Square, a block-sized area platted as a public park by the city in 1854.¹ For years after the city's founding, Jefferson Square served as one of only two public parks available to the citizens of Omaha. The area started out mostly residential, but by the 1880s North 16th Street had become a commercial corridor. The Chicago, St. Paul, Minneapolis & Omaha Railroad had erected a large rail yard northeast of Jefferson Square circa 1890 and this changed the overall character of the area from one of a mixed residential and commercial to more of a commercial and semi-industrial district. Historic maps indicate that 15th and 16th Streets had electric trolley lines extending north-south by the 1900s. The area changed greatly in the late 1960s, when the blocks between Cass and Chicago Streets west to 30th Street, including Jefferson Square, were razed to construct elevated Interstate 480. After this, the neighborhood entered a period of decline, and several commercial buildings in the neighborhood were razed for surface parking lots or for new development. Today, the building is surrounded on each side by extant historic buildings, with only one vacant lot east of the property, on the northeast corner of Cass and 15th Streets. The north side of the block is almost completely vacant, except for a modern commercial building. Other, surrounding blocks are partially or completely redeveloped and/or vacant. To the south across Cass Street, the elevated interstate highway and its access ramps extend east-west across the former Jefferson Square.

Exterior

The On Leong building has a rectangular, two story front section with a rectangular single-story extension on the rear, both with load-bearing brick exterior walls and a brick basement foundation. The basement has a poured concrete floor, with the ground and second floors having wood flooring. The building faces south and the front (south) elevation is divided into five bays at the main level, and three bays on the second floor. The front elevation is covered in white glazed brick with light blue accent bricks. Two street-level entries are located on the west and east sides of the front façade. A set of concrete stairs, parallel to the front façade, descends to a basement entry (Photographs 1-2). There are two windows, enclosed with wood, adjacent to the basement entry as the stairs descend to the basement entry, which is filled with a modern replacement door.

The two street-level entries are filled with modern commercial aluminum-framed glass doors. The transoms are enclosed with wood panels. The main and second floors have a large central "picture" or display window, flanked on each side by smaller windows with transoms. An historic postcard (Figure 3) indicates these smaller windows were originally filled with single-light, double-hung wood sashes. On the southwest corner of the building, one of these windows is aligned with the top of the street-level entry door. On the southeast corner of the building, the window is aligned with the bottom of the large display window. Rowlock courses of white glazed bricks form the sills of the windows. Several windows on the front facade have been resized, and other windows and transoms are enclosed with wood.

Above the two entry doors on the main façade, two rectangular panels are delineated by blue glazed bricks, culminating with decorative flourish that resembles a "T" in the center tops and bottoms of the panels. On each side of the main façade, two white glazed brick corbels extend downward from the cornice, terminating near the tops of the two entries (Photograph 3). A cornice of blue glazed brick corbels or stylized brackets extends across the top of the façade. Neither the east nor west sides of the two-story section of the building contain windows, and do not appear to have historic had windows. The single-story rear section has windows at regular intervals along the west side (Photograph 4) and the rear contains similar windows and an entry filled with double-leaf doors leading onto what may have been a loading dock. Similar windows and doors are located at

¹ Savage 1894:435

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the basement level (Photograph 5). The rear of the second floor of the front section contains four windows and an entry leading onto the roof of the single-story rear extension (Photograph 6). At least two of these windows, previously enclosed on both the exterior and interior, are filled with historic six-light, double hung wood sashes. The entry is filled with a modern, single-light steel door. A series of brick corbels extend at regular intervals along the top of the rear of the second floor (Photograph 7).

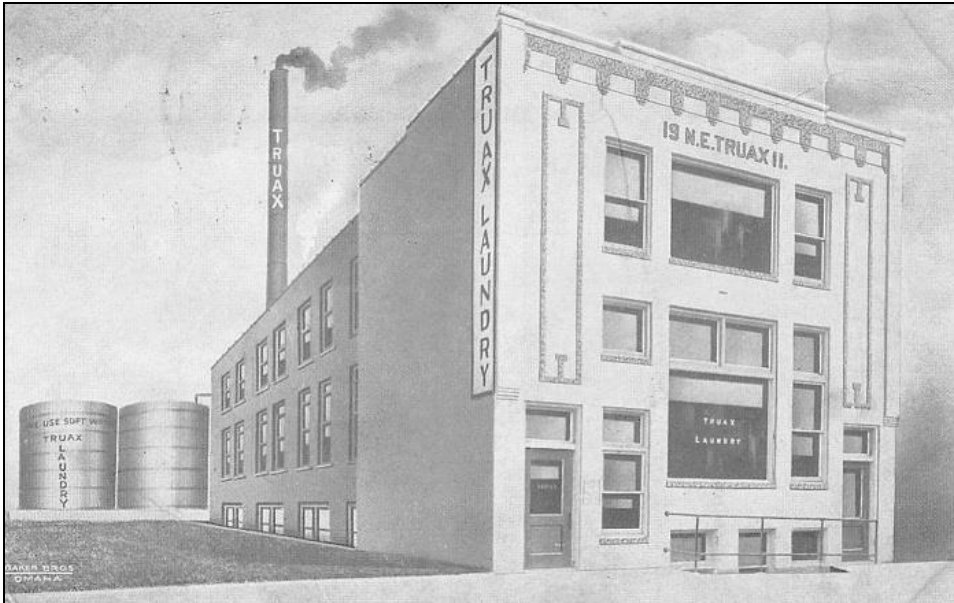


Figure 3: Detail of a circa 1920 postcard showing a stylized depiction of the building after it was constructed as the Truax Laundry. The second floor of the rear section and the date below the cornice (“19 N.E. TRUAX II”) were not constructed. If other elements, such as the smokestack and the water tanks, were part of the original design, they have been removed. Image from the personal collection of Chris McClellan.

The single-story rear extension is set back approximately five feet from the rear of the adjacent property (northeast corner of Cass and 16th Streets) to create a light well for the laundry and access to the rear of the adjacent property. The northeast corner of the main floor of the two-story section contains a window filled with multi-light steel sashes that looks out onto this light well area. The windows have upper “awning” sashes and lower “hopper” sashes. Similar windows, only wider, are found on the west and north elevations of the rear extension. Similar windows are also found at the basement level along the west side, but have been removed and enclosed with concrete block on the rear (north) elevation. An entry in the northeast corner of the rear wall of the main level is filled with double-leaf wood doors, and may have led to a small loading dock. What may have been a transom above the loading-dock entry is enclosed with wood. It is possible this was a former window resized to create the loading-dock entry. An entry filled with double-leaf metal doors leads into the basement from the rear of the property down a concrete ramp that is adjacent to the former loading dock. The existing, short concrete wall, approximately 3 feet x 1 foot may have supported this loading dock. The roofs of both the two- and single-story sections are flat, pitched to the rear (north). The parapet brick walls along the roof were originally crowned by wide, glazed drainage tiles, and where these have been broken or fell off, the walls are currently crowned with modern floor tiles (Photograph 8).

Interior

The interior of the building is accessible from four entries. The basement has a door in the front (south) end at the bottom of the concrete stairs, and in the rear (north) at the bottom of a short concrete ramp. The front, street-level façade has two entries, one each near the southwest and southeast corners. The southeast entry provides direct access to the second floor up a flight of stairs with a single landing along the east-side exterior

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wall. A door high in the west wall of the stairway (near southeast corner of the main level) provides secondary access between that area and the stairway to the second floor. The southwest entry on the front façade appears to have provided primary access to the main floor. The floor level is higher than this entry, suggesting it opened onto a small street-level office or entry landing, and a short flight of stairs along the west interior wall led to the main floor itself. A straight flight of wood stairs along the east wall of the main floor, below the stairs leading to the second floor, leads to the basement level.

The ground floor is divided into two main spaces. The south section in the southern, two-story part of the building (Photographs 9 and 10) contains the street-level entry in the southwest corner (Photograph 11). The stairs from this entry to the main floor have been removed. It is a large, square room with a high ceiling, supported by a series of wood posts extending north-south down the center of the room. The ceiling is partially covered with historic, pressed-tin decorative metal (Photograph 12). The enclosed stairway up to the second-floor projects into the room along the eastern wall. The windows adjacent to the east and west entries are enclosed, and the large display window has been resized for a smaller window. A multi-light steel case window is in the northwest corner of the room (Photograph 13), where the building is set back approximately five feet from the western property line to create the light well. A large, rectangular brick structural support rises from the basement, delineating the “front” and “rear” spaces from each other. The west wall of the rear, single-story section contains a series of windows filled with multi-light steel sashes at regular intervals (Photograph 14). The north end of the room features three large windows filled with multi-light, steel sashes. An entry in the northwest corner is filled with two-leaf wooden doors leading out to the former loading dock. A transom above this door is enclosed (Photograph 15). The rear section of the main floor is a large, rectangular open space with no roof support posts as in the front section. (Photograph 16). The roof support structure is exposed, showing the ceiling joists and cross bracing.

A set of stairs in the approximate middle of the east side of the building leads to the basement (Photograph 17). The full basement contains only a few partitions, such as the framed enclosure around the stairway descending from the main floor (Photograph 18), and the exposed wood framing supporting the “entry” area immediately inside the southwest entrance to the main floor above (Photograph 19) in that corner of the basement. The basement is otherwise mostly open (Photographs 20 and 21), except for a small rectangular room with concrete walls in the northeast (rear) corner (Photograph 22). The basement ceiling is approximately seven feet in height. A series of wood posts supports large beams extending north-south down the length of the space, supporting the floor above. The rectangular brick structural support is centered in the north end of the two-story section of the building as it is on the ground floor. The basement contains mechanical systems for the building but currently serves as storage. Windows that are enclosed with wood on the exterior are painted over, but filled with multi-light steel sashes like those found on the main floor.

The stairs leading to the second floor along the east exterior wall contains a small storage area under the stairs opening into the main ground-floor room (Photograph 23). From the entry in the southeast corner of the building, a set of wood stairs lead to a flat landing approximately halfway to the second floor (Photograph 24), with another set of wood stairs continuing to the second floor. The frame partition wall enclosing the stairway from the main floor retains an original or historic coat of plaster, and the stairs are trimmed with wood baseboards. The second floor is currently a single, large square room (Photographs 25 and 26). The stairs from the street-level entrance extend along the east wall opening onto the open room. A series of wood posts extending north-south support a roof beam above. The south end of the room has three windows: a large, central window, filled with two single-light fixed replacement sashes. The windows flanking the central window have been resized and are filled with aluminum replacement sashes (Photograph 27). The east and west sides of the second floor contain no fenestration. Parts of the ceiling are covered in remnants of decorative pressed-tin panels like those found on the ground floor. The north end of the room has a door near the northwest corner, filled with a modern replacement door. The four windows on this wall are enclosed on the exterior with wood.

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At least two of the windows retain historic multi-light wood sashes (Photograph 28). The entry opens onto the roof of the rear, single-story section of the main floor.

Integrity

The building retains its original footprint, and its original exterior design has not been substantially altered. The building retains its original glazed brick main façade exterior and fenestration pattern. While some windows have been resized and filled with modern replacement sashes, others, particularly those in the basement and on the rear and west side, retain historic wood or steel sashes. Much of the interior exhibits exposed brick walls. The tongue-and-groove wood flooring appears to be historic if not original. The stairwell leading from the street to the second floor retains original or historic materials.

The On Leong building retains its integrity of location, remaining in its original location on the north side of the former Jefferson Square, and its integrity of design, materials, and workmanship. The original fenestration pattern on the main façade could be restored during a future rehabilitation of the building. The building's setting has been negatively impacted by the changes in the neighborhood (construction of the interstate), but it retains sufficient integrity of location, design, materials, workmanship, association and feeling to adequately support the building's listing on the NRHP.

The building is structurally sound despite only intermittent maintenance during the last 20-25 years. It is unknown exactly what changes have been made to the property and when they were made. No laundry equipment remains, and at least one newspaper article refers to a renovation after a 1935 fire, after which the building ceased being a commercial laundry. The exterior, at least, appears to remain largely unchanged from its original appearance, aside from the few windows that were resized and/or currently enclosed with wood.

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8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "X" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- A** Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "X" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- A** Owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B** Removed from its original location.
- C** A birthplace or a grave.
- D** A cemetery.
A reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- E** A commemorative property.
- G** Less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions.)

A: Ethnic Heritage - Asian

Period of Significance

A: Ethnic Heritage – Asian: 1938 – 1959

Significant Dates

1938

Significant Person

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above.)

N/A

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

Max Nippell and Charles Bellas

(as "Nippell & Bellas")

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Statement of Significance Summary Paragraph

The On Leong Tong House is eligible for the National Register of Historic Places under **Criterion A: Ethnic Heritage – Asian**. The building is locally significant as the location of the On Leong Tong, a Chinese-American merchants' association, and as such is the last known building associated with the tong and its history as very visible part of Omaha's early "Chinatown" which was originally centered around 12th and Douglas Streets until circa 1940. The tong served in many ways as the business, social, and cultural center of the Chinese-American community in Omaha during the early- to mid-20th century. During the time it occupied the building, the tong, as a Chinese-American "chamber of commerce," served as an all-male organization composed of the city's Chinese businessmen – farmers, restaurateurs, shopkeepers, laundrymen, and others. The organization supported newly-arrived immigrants, who arrived with letters of introduction from friends, associates, and family members in China. The tong supported the immigrants until they got jobs, often at On Leong member businesses. The On Leong was like a benevolent society that assisted member and sometimes non-member Chinese-Americans with short-term financial or other assistance.

The tong was a focal point of celebration for Chinese holidays and other days of cultural importance. The On Leong headquarters were also used as a meeting place for the local Gee How Oak Tin Association, an unrelated Chinese family association that included the locally-prominent Chin family. Unknown numbers of Chinese-Americans, new immigrants or those already established, may have lived in the On Leong building. During traditional Chinese holidays, the tong headquarters was the scene of multiple-day feasts, the payment of debts, the negotiation of contracts, and conducting other business that was part of larger social-cultural celebrations. The tong flew the Nationalist Chinese flag below that of the United States from a flagpole on the roof, and a sign with Chinese characters was displayed along the cornice (Figure 4). The tong house served as the commercial, cultural, and social center of Chinese-American life during the years of World War II and the early Cold War. The period of significance for **Criterion A: Ethnic Heritage – Asian** begins in 1938, when the tong moved into the building, to 1959 when the tong died out after the death of Chin Ming Yuet (also known as George Hay), the head of the association and one of the last active members.

Narrative Statement of Significance

Criterion A: ETHNIC HERITAGE – ASIAN

The On Leong Tong building is eligible for the NRHP at the local level of significance under **Criterion A: Ethnic Heritage – Asian** as the last extant location, from circa 1938 to circa 1959, of Omaha's On Leong Tong, the local Chinese merchants' association, serving as a commercial, social, and cultural center for the local Chinese-American population during this period. Serving as a mutual aid society for its members specifically, and the local Chinese-American community more generally, the tong and its leadership were instrumental in welcoming many newly-arrived Chinese to Omaha, providing them with support, such as a place to live, or their first job in the United States until they could become self-sufficient. The tong also served as the focal point of celebration for various Chinese holidays for the city's Chinese, during which there were elaborate, multiple-course dinners over several days, during which debts were paid, new contracts negotiated, and business and family affairs were discussed.

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Figure 4: (Top) Detail of a circa 1969 photograph of the On Leong Tong House building, on the north side of Jefferson Square, Omaha, Nebraska. Note the sign above the central, second-floor window that features Chinese characters, partially-obscured by tree branches. Photograph courtesy of The Durham Museum Photograph Collection. (Bottom) Detail of a circa 1980 photograph of the On Leong building in Washington, D.C., showing a sign with Chinese characters below the cornice and a sign in English along above the second-floor windows reading “On Leong Chinese Merchants Association.” Photograph courtesy of the National Park Service. The characters “會商工良安” – read from right to left in traditional Chinese – translate literally to “An Liang [On Leong] Chamber of Commerce and Industry.”

The Chinese probably first arrived in Omaha from California soon after the completion of the trans-continental railroad in 1869;² a review of the Omaha city directories shows that in the 1870 directory, there did not appear to be any Chinese names listed, but by 1872, two men are listed with what are likely attempted phonetic spellings of Chinese surnames: “Yingyang” and “Yingalongjinh.” These men operated the “Mongolian Laundry” on 10th Street, between Harney and Farnam.³ The Chinese population of Omaha grew throughout the last quarter

² “The People Who Make Up Omaha,” *Omaha World-Herald* Dec 3, 1961: 2-B

³ Ancestry.com. *U.S. City Directories, 1822-1995* – Omaha 1872: 232

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of the 19th century. By the early 20th century, it is estimated “several hundred” Chinese lived in Omaha’s Chinatown, which encompassed a four-block area northeast of 12th and Douglas Streets.⁴

In the first half of the 19th century, many Chinese and Chinese-Americans organized themselves into tongs. A tong was a multi-faceted, semi-secret organization that existed in many American cities with significant Chinese populations. Only a minority of a given city’s Chinese population belonged to a given tong (usually business- and tradesmen) and the tongs were not fully representative of the Chinese population of the cities in which they operated. Larger cities had several tongs seeking supremacy over the others; it is estimated that San Francisco – the city with the largest concentration of Chinese in the United States – had 30 such organizations by 1900.⁵

Omaha developed only one dominant tong, the On Leong, established circa 1916. According to Scott Seligman, author of Tong Wars: The Untold Story of Vice, Money, and Murder in New York’s Chinatown, the On Leong tong formed in New York in the 1890s. At the time, some Chinese there ran lucrative gambling houses, which were periodically shut down by the police. The gambling bosses eventually got together and accepted a tax on the proceeds of the gaming tables, with the intent of using some of that money to bribe the police to leave their establishments alone. This group eventually became the On Leong.⁶ Huping Ling suggests the name “On Leong” is a Cantonese derivation of the Chinese phrase “Chu Bao An Liang” or “eliminating despots and bringing peace to the people.” As a suspect ethnic group unable to “eliminate despots” completely on their own, the Chinese formed social organizations to protect their interests and their fellow Chinese immigrants and “maintain peace” (“An Liang”) in their own communities.⁷ The national On Leong tong grew to be one of the largest and most powerful of the Chinese tongs, especially along the East Coast and throughout the cities of the Midwest (Chicago and St. Louis). The branch of the tong in Chicago probably organized Omaha’s branch, and anecdotal evidence in Omaha’s newspaper archives suggest the local Chinese took general cues from Chicago’s Chinese population.

Tongs were often viewed as criminal enterprises by many urban authorities throughout the United States during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In 1916, the leader of the Omaha On Leong Merchants Association, Leo Wing, was arrested after federal authorities learned of an alleged plot, on orders from the Chicago On Leong leadership, to murder two Omaha Chinese merchants who were not members of the Omaha On Leong. As one of the would-be victims indicated, the threat was implied and not direct or explicit as this was “not the Chinese way.”⁸ In October 1924, the On Leong and its main rival, the Hip Sing Tong, were at war again in Detroit and Milwaukee.⁹ Just days later, the headline in the evening edition of the Omaha World-Herald read “Chinese Slain Despite Tong Vigil;” a cook in a local Chinese restaurant was shot and killed in the kitchen, and a waiter in the same restaurant was arrested. Many local Chinese, when asked about the case, simply stated the murder wasn’t tong related, but likely a personal vendetta.¹⁰ Three years later, the tong wars flared again. The Omaha On Leong were given permission to arm two of their members by the police, and with two police detectives, these men patrolled the city looking for members of the Hip Sing Tong. Charlie Huey, leader of the On Leong Tong in Omaha at that time, explained that most Chinese in the city were members of the On Leong, and that if any members of the Hip Sing were found, “we will turn them over to the police to avert trouble.” Huey added that while the Hip Sing Tong was devoted to gambling and similar illegal activities, the On Leong members, by contrast, ran legitimate businesses such as laundries, stores, and restaurants.¹¹

⁴ “The People Who Make Up Omaha,” *Omaha World-Herald* Dec 3, 1961: 1-B

⁵ Daniels 1988: 23

⁶ Seligman, 2016

⁷ Ling, 2004

⁸ “President of Chinese Body Is Out on Bond,” *Omaha World-Herald* 6 Dec. 1916: 2

⁹ “Chinese in Fear as Tong Deaths Increase,” *Omaha World-Herald* 22 Oct. 1924: 2

¹⁰ “Chinese Slain Despite Tong Vigil,” *Omaha World-Herald* 27 Oct. 1924: 1

¹¹ “Omaha’s On Leong Tong Arms Against Hip Sing,” *Omaha World-Herald* 24 Mar. 1927: 1

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The extent to which Omaha's On Leong Tong was part of a larger, national Chinese criminal enterprise is unknown, but older Omahans familiar with the tong during its tenure at 12th and Douglas Streets in the early 1900s recalled that gambling and the smoking of opium allegedly took place there.¹² Seligman indicates that despite whatever illegal activities the On Leong may have operated, it was always considered the "chamber of commerce" of the Chinese business community, and was considered a mutual aid society that helped members in need and the larger Chinese-American community as necessary. This benevolent side of the On Leong distinguished it from the Hip Sing tong, which Seligman said was more brutal and self-interested by comparison.¹³ Other scholars have indicated that while tongs had positive and negative aspects, they couldn't be "simply regarded as a Chinese version of Mafia existing merely for pursuing organized crime."¹⁴ While direct evidence of criminal activity of the On Leong in Omaha has not been identified, other cities' tongs certainly were. In the late 1980s, the On Leong Merchants Association in Chicago was raided by federal authorities, and its building seized by the U.S. Government. Several members of the Chicago On Leong were eventually indicted on charges of tax evasion and racketeering.¹⁵

It is clear that Omaha's On Leong early headquarters at 111 North 12th Street was the social center of the city's Chinese population for much of the early 20th century: Chinese New Year's celebrations and other important cultural events were celebrated there.¹⁶ Later, after the tong headquarters moved to the Truax Laundry building, other parts of the building may have been subdivided for residential quarters for Chinese-Americans during the 1940s: in March, 1945, an announcement in the newspaper described the military service of T4 Tommy F. Lew, son of Shing Lew, giving his address as 1518 Cass Street (Figure 5).



Figure 5: Detail from Omaha World-Herald, Mar 25, 1945: 4-B, indicating that Tommy F. Lew's family lived at 1518 Cass Street.

Dennis Chin, grandson of the founder of the King Fong restaurant in Omaha, Chin Ah Gin, stated that his father, Carl, recalled that the On Leong Tong, at least as it developed in Omaha, represented a group of "family members," like a social fraternity, made up exclusively of male businessmen in the Chinese-American community.¹⁷ Chu Huey, one of the last surviving members of Omaha's Chinese-American community from the mid-20th century, recalled the On Leong building at 1518 Cass Street as a social hall, among other things: younger

¹² "Its Days Passed Long Ago – Tong Building Will Rumble Down," *Omaha World-Herald* 30 Dec. 1962: 5-B

¹³ Seligman, 2016

¹⁴ Ling, 2004

¹⁵ Chicago History Museum, 2010

¹⁶ "The People Who Make Up Omaha," *Omaha World-Herald* Dec 3, 1961: 2-B

¹⁷ Chin, 2016

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men such as himself played mahjong, a game of chance like “rummy” that is played with tiles instead of cards, in the mornings. The older men came to play in the afternoons as the young men went off to their jobs in the local restaurants and other Chinese-run businesses.¹⁸ It was also a place where the community celebrated important holidays, such as the Chinese or Lunar New Year (usually in late January or early February). This holiday is characterized by the payment of old debts, cleaning of buildings to remove the misfortune of the previous year, multi-day feasts, and lighting strings of firecrackers (to frighten away evil spirits and bad luck, and make room for fortune and good energy). The community also celebrated the Dragon Boat Festival (usually in June), commemorating the death by drowning of an ancient poet-hero; this festival was known for cooked sweet rice wrapped in leaves to resemble a dragon-shaped boat. The community Mid-Autumn Festival, celebrated in late August or early September, originated in China as a thanksgiving feast to celebrate a successful harvest. The community also observed other, lesser-known holidays throughout the year, as well as more local events such as the births, marriages, or deaths of the family members of the tong members and/or the local Chinese community.

As an indication of the obligation felt by tong members to help new immigrants, Dennis Chin indicated that his grandfather, Chin Ah Gin, opened King Fong (and earlier restaurants) to provide jobs for these Chinese immigrants who provided adequate letters of introduction. Chin Ah Gin (Figure 6) was the patriarch of the city’s Chinese-American community and was an active member of the On Leong and the separate Gee How Oak Tin Association, a fraternal group made up of descendants of an ancient Chinese king, including the extended Chin family (Figure 7). Dennis Chin was kept away from the historic “Chinatown” as a child due to safety concerns (the area, full of recently-arrived immigrants, was considered rough and generally unsafe), but he recalled that as a child, his grandfather lived with his family, and that a room was always reserved for newly-arrived immigrants, who might arrive at any hour of the day or night. These new immigrants would live in the Chin house until they got a job, and afterwards, would move into apartments around Cass Street. When Chin’s grandfather retired from the King Fong restaurant in 1954, he did not sell but gave the business to the Huey family, on the condition the family continue to provide jobs for new immigrants.¹⁹

¹⁸ Huey, 2017

¹⁹ Chin, 2016

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Figure 6: Chin Ah Gin, undated family photograph, courtesy of Dennis Chin.

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Figure 7: Omaha meeting, Gee How Oak Tin Association, 1927. Chin Ah Gin is seated in the second row, second from right. Photograph courtesy of Dennis Chin.

Although generally successful despite earlier overt racism and other barriers, Omaha's Chinese community continued to dwindle into the mid-20th century as decreased racism and new opportunities opened for them elsewhere. As early as 1943, their numbers were estimated at around 50 adults, down from an estimated 500 earlier in the 20th century.²⁰ The tong moved out of the original building on 12th Street, perhaps seeking smaller and/or less-expensive space, and starting in 1938, it rented the second floor of the Truax Laundry building at 1518 ½ Cass Street.²¹ The On Leong continued to refer to itself as a merchants association; it was, in fact, often listed as such in city directories through its final listing in 1958.

Despite their dwindling numbers, Chinese culture in Omaha continued to fascinate non-Chinese Omahans. The local newspaper contained articles about the community periodically, especially during the Chinese New Year. A 1944 newspaper article, for example, described the subdued Chinese New Year celebration that year as World War II raged throughout the Chinese mainland and starvation ravaged extended families back in China; the Chinese (Nationalist) flag, nonetheless, flew proudly below that of the United States from the flagpole on the roof of the tong house at 1518 Cass Street.²² The tong – and the local Chinese population – continued to decline throughout the 1950s, and the tong ceased operating after the death of its last leader, Chin Ming Yuet, Dec. 23, 1959. A newspaper article from December 1961 indicated that while the tong had already vacated its rooms at

²⁰ "Kung Hsi' Is Chinese Wish for You Today," *Omaha World-Herald* Feb 4, 1943: 1

²¹ "On Leong to Dedicate New Tonghouse; 'Big Chief' Here," *Omaha World-Herald* Jul 16, 1938: 2

²² "New Year May Be Mockery, But Chinese Wish You Well," *Omaha World-Herald* Jan 25, 1944: 1

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1518 ½ Cass Street, the building, used at the time as a “distribution center by the Volunteers of America,” still retained “Chinese characters across its top.”²³

Although the On Leong Merchants Association, Omaha’s only Chinese tong, operated from 1518 Cass Street for a relatively brief period (circa 1938 to circa 1959), the building is locally significant because no other historic buildings or sites associated with the tong are extant and is one of only two extant buildings (along with King Fong’s on South 16th Street) tied to the city’s earlier Chinese-American population. The On Leong building serves as the only surviving link to the tong during the last decades during which it operated, including the crucial years of World War II, when the building served as the local focus among the Chinese-American community of the fight against the Japanese invasion of China. The earlier tong house, at 111 North. 12th Street, was razed in 1962.²⁴ In the post-war years, the tong celebrated the post-war restoration of the Republic of China, which allowed local Chinese-Americans to contact surviving family back in China and the early rebuilding of the homeland. The tong and local Chinese-Americans likely mourned the overthrow of the Nationalist government by Mao Zedong’ Communists and the proclamation of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, after which local Chinese-Americans were again cut off from their homeland. The building is a direct link to the On Leong and its role as the commercial, social, and cultural center of the Chinese-American population of Omaha, Nebraska: the place where Chinese New Year and other holiday celebrations were held, where an altar was erected to the spirits of departed family and friends (Figure 8), and where the local tong entertained visiting dignitaries, such as the leader of the North American On Leong (Figure 9).

²³ “The People Who Make Up Omaha,” *Omaha World-Herald* Dec 3, 1961: 2-B

²⁴ “Its Days Passed Long Ago – Tong Building Will Rumble Down,” *Omaha World-Herald* Dec 30, 1962: 5-B

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Figure 8: Photograph and caption showing the altar erected in the On Leong Tong House for "candles, incense burning, and offerings of sweets and dainties to illustrious ancestors," *Omaha World-Herald*, Feb 4, 1943: 20.

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Figure 9: Newspaper article and photograph announcing the opening of the new On Leong Tong house at 1518 1/2 Cass Street (second floor of the Truax building), Omaha World-Herald Jul 16, 1938: 2.

Additional Historic Context: Property History

The Truax Laundry (Figures 10 and 11) was constructed on the property in 1911 and appears to have been located between two north-south electric streetcar lines. Truax operated his laundry there until approximately 1926. In November 1926, the "Mathieson Family Laundry" took over the building,²⁵ while Truax retained ownership of it. The *Omaha World-Herald* carried two separate advertisements on Jan. 15, 1929: one advertised the sale of certain equipment from the Mathieson Laundry at 1518 Cass Street as the firm prepared to move into their new location;²⁶ the other (Figure 12) advertised the building's sale or lease by its owner, N.E. Truax, at "reasonable terms," touting its "wonderful light and air," and suggesting it was suitable for a "laundry, dry cleaning, creamery, general produce, or small manufacturing business."²⁷

²⁵ Advertisement, *Omaha World-Herald* Nov 30, 1926: 12

²⁶ Advertisement, *Omaha World-Herald* Jan 15, 1929: 23

²⁷ Advertisement, *Omaha World-Herald* Jan 15, 1929: 24

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"1518 Cass Street" next appears in an advertisement four years later, for an announcement of the opening of the "Capitol Snow White Laundry."²⁸ The name of the business sometimes appeared as "Community Laundry" and then reverted to "Capitol Snow White Laundry." In September 1935, a fire in the building destroyed the laundry and damaged the building,²⁹ after which Truax renovated the building³⁰ and again offered it for lease. The building appears to have remained empty (and available for lease) throughout much of 1936 and 1937; the On Leong Tong rented the second floor beginning in 1938 (refer to Figure 10). Lewis Industrial Manufacturing was in the building (ground floor and/or basement) during the World War II period. The 1948 city directory listed a potato chip factory, Nebraska Flake Co., at 1518 Cass Street; in 1949, it was listed as Spudies Co., a confectioner. In 1951, Spudies shares the building with Cross Wholesale Candy Co.³¹

From 1952 through 1963, the Volunteers of America rented the main floor of the building as a retail location (Figure 13); religious "missions" were often co-located in the building, probably due to its proximity to Jefferson Square, which had been well-known to Omahans as "Hobo Park," a haven for the unemployed and "down and out" since the 1930s. The On Leong Chinese Merchants Association closed circa 1959, and the Volunteers of America also vacated the building in 1963. Norman Truax sold the building a few months before his death in December 1963. Home Comfort Engineering, Inc. a heating and air conditioning business operated out of the building from 1964 until circa 1974. The building may have been vacant/for lease until 1978, when Craftsman Window Co. and its wholesale subsidiary, Mid-America Custom Co. are listed in city directories at 1518 Cass Street starting that year. Bliven Draperies (refer to Figure 2) is listed at the address beginning in 1983 through 1990, after which Window Wares is listed at the address until 1995. From the mid to late 1990s the building was intermittently vacant, and in 2002, it was sold to First National Bank of Omaha. First National Bank sold the building to the current owner in October 2009.³²

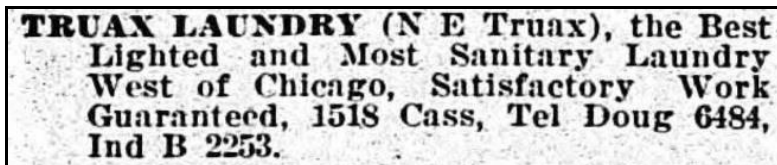


Figure 10 : Detail from the 1911 Omaha city directory.

²⁸ Advertisement, *Omaha World-Herald* Jan 6, 1933: 11

²⁹ "\$22,000 Fire at Laundry," *Omaha World-Herald* Sep 16, 1935: 1

³⁰ "New Building During the Week," *Omaha World-Herald* Oct 13, 1935: 7-D

³¹ McClellan 2016: 5

³² McClellan 2016: 8-9

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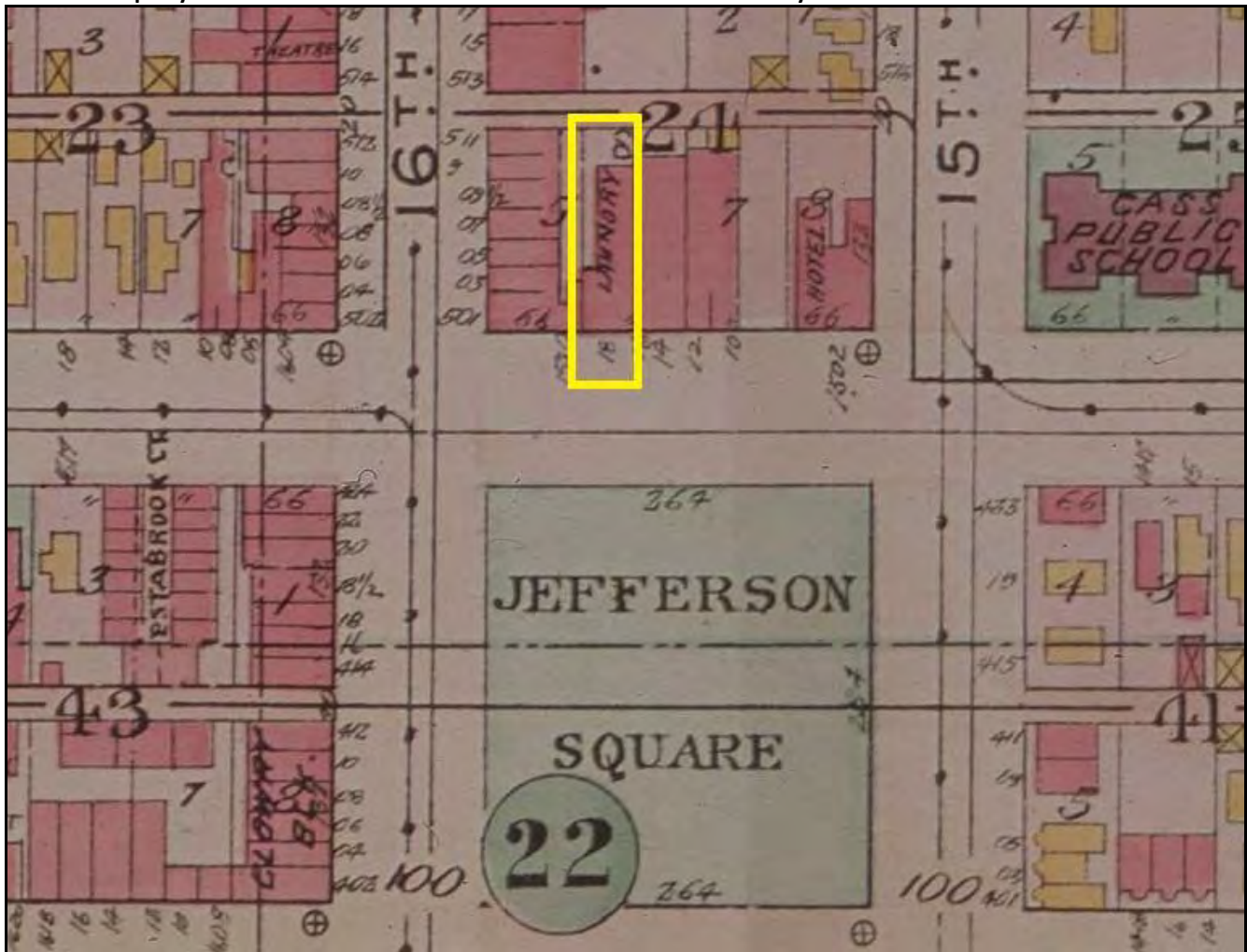


Figure 11: Detail of 1918 Baist Real Estate Atlas, showing what was then the “Truax Laundry” at 1518 Cass Street highlighted in **YELLOW**. North is at the top of the image. Note the electric streetcar lines (black line with black dots) extending north-south along both 15th and 16th Streets (the streets to the right and left of Block 24).

FOR SALE OR LEASE REASONABLE.
 Two-story and basement brick and concrete with white enamel front. Wonderful light and air, including 100 horsepower high pressure boiler. Building suitable for laundry, dry cleaning, creamery, general produce or small manufacturing business in center of business district, 3 blocks north of postoffice. Location 1518 Cass St. Call or write owner, N. E. Truax, 5160 Jackson St. Tel. GL 1314, Omaha, Neb.

Figure 12: Classified advertisement from the Omaha World-Herald, Jan 16, 1929: 22.

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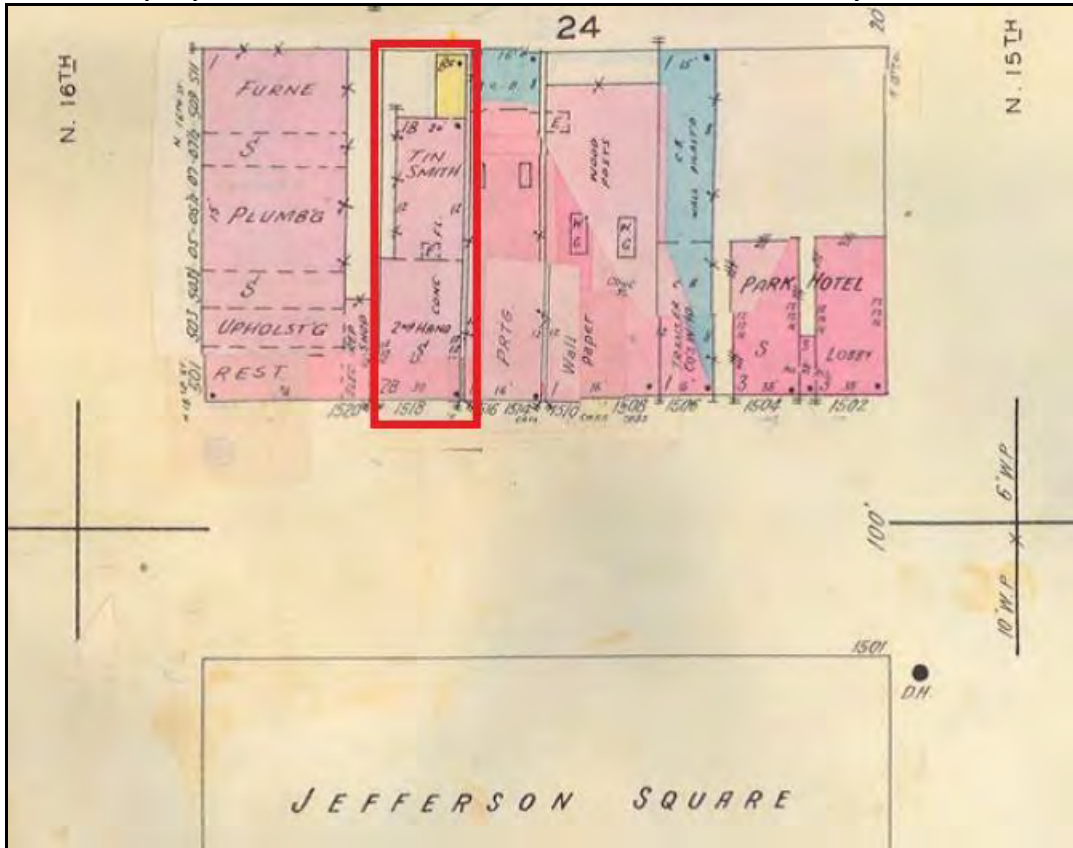


Figure 13: Detail of 1960 Sanborn map, showing the former On Leong Tong building highlighted in red, housing the Volunteers of American store in the front section (“2nd Hand”) and a “tin smith” in the rear. North is at the top of the image. The small rectangular structure (colored yellow) in the northeast (rear) corner is a small wood structure that had an unknown purpose that was removed after 1960.

Architects

The On Leong Tong building was designed as the Truax Laundry by the Omaha firm of Nippell & Bellas, the principals being Max Nippell and Charles Bellas. The firm was short-lived, from 1911 to 1913, but they are known to have designed several Omaha buildings besides the On Leong Tong building: the Dr. H.L. Arnold house at 434 North 38th Avenue,³³ the Steele House at 1338 South 33rd Street (1911), the American-Hungarian Association building at 1623 Cuming Street (1912), and a row house at 2802 Caldwell Street (1913).³⁴ The firm also drew up plans for a frame addition to the Rose Hill School in Benson (now part of Omaha).³⁵

³³ Western Contractor, 1911: 10

³⁴ Nebraska State Historical Society, “Nippell & Bellas, Architects.” 2016

³⁵ “Legal Notices,” *Omaha World-Herald* Jun 12, 1912: 12

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Maps

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--, Vol 21, No. 593, 22 May 1912. Google Books. Accessed Aug 27, 2016.

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Seligman, Scott. 2016. Email correspondence to P. Thompson.

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Previous documentation on file (NPS):

preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67 has been requested)
 previously listed in the National Register
 previously determined eligible by the National Register
 designated a National Historic Landmark
 recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey #
 recorded by Historic American Engineering Record #
 recorded by Historic American Landscape Survey #

Primary location of additional data:

State Historic Preservation Office
 Other State agency
 Federal agency
 Local government
 University
 Other (Name of repository)

Historic Resources Survey Number (if assigned): DO09:0127-013

10. Geographical Data

Acreeage of property Approximately .2 acres USGS Quadrangle Omaha North

Latitude/Longitude Coordinates

Datum if other than WGS84: _____

1. Latitude 41.264023 Longitude -95.936645

Verbal Boundary Description

The west 1/2 of Lot 6, Block 24 in Omaha City Lots.

Boundary Justification

The boundary includes all the property historically associated with the Truax Laundry building.

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Patrick Thompson
organization Restoration Exchange Omaha date July 14, 2017
street & number 3902 Davenport Street telephone (402) 679-5854
city or town Omaha state Nebraska zip code 68131
email info@restorationexchange.org

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Douglas County, Nebraska

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Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

- **Maps:** A USGS map or equivalent (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.

On Leong Tong House
1558 Cass Street
Omaha, Douglas County, Nebraska

Latitude/Longitude Coordinates:

41.264023, -95.936645

Datum WGS84

Legend

 Proposed NRHP boundary




On Leong Tong House
1558 Cass Street
Omaha, Douglas County, Nebraska

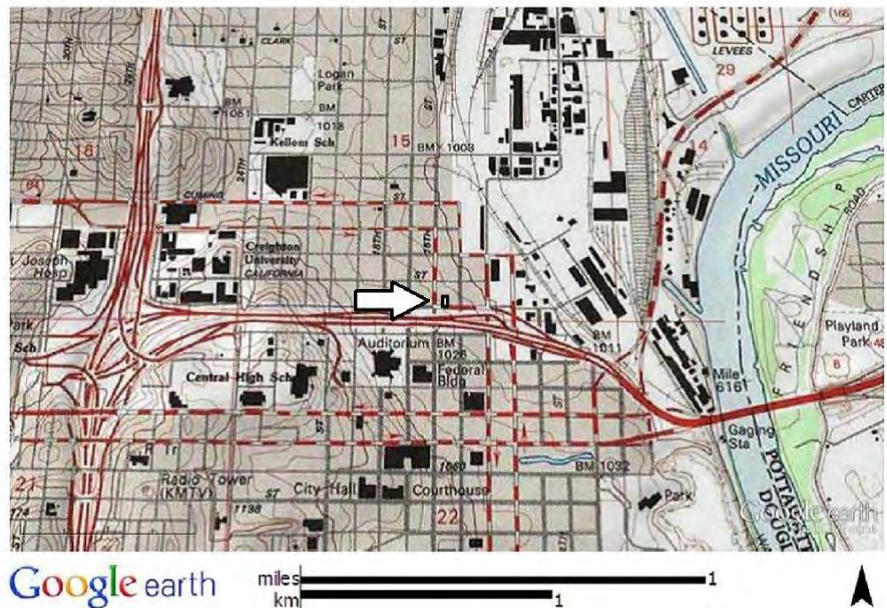
Latitude/Longitude Coordinates:

41.264023, -95.936645

Datum WGS84

Legend

 Proposed NRHP boundary



On Leong Tong House

Douglas County, Nebraska

Name of Property

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Photographs

Submit clear and descriptive photographs. The size of each image must be 1600x1200 pixels (minimum), 3000x2000 preferred, at 300 ppi (pixels per inch) or larger. Key all photographs to the sketch map. Each photograph must be numbered and that number must correspond to the photograph number on the photo log. For simplicity, the name of the photographer, photo date, etc. may be listed once on the photograph log and doesn't need to be labeled on every photograph.

Photo Log

Name of Property On Leong Tong House

City or Vicinity Omaha County Douglas State Nebraska

Photographer Patrick Thompson & City of Omaha Planning Department Date Photographed August 2016

- Photograph 1. NE_Douglas County_On Leong Tong House_0001. Front (south) façade, looking north across Cass Street.
- Photograph 2. NE_Douglas County_On Leong Tong House_0002. Detail of upper part of front (south) façade, looking north.
- Photograph 3. NE_Douglas County_On Leong Tong House_0003. Detail of the upper part of the front (south) façade above the east entry door, looking north.
- Photograph 4. NE_Douglas County_On Leong Tong House_0004. The side (west) elevation from the rear, looking south.
- Photograph 5. NE_Douglas County_On Leong Tong House_0005. The rear (north) elevation of the ground floor and walk-out basement, looking south.
- Photograph 6. NE_Douglas County_On Leong Tong House_0006. The rear (north) elevation of the second floor, looking south.
- Photograph 7. NE_Douglas County_On Leong Tong House_0007. Detail of brick corbels under the rear eave of the second floor.
- Photograph 8. NE_Douglas County_On Leong Tong House_0008. Detail of coping of parapet wall along west side, looking south.
- Photograph 9. NE_Douglas County_On Leong Tong House_0009. View of the ground floor interior of the two-story section, looking north.
- Photograph 10. NE_Douglas County_On Leong Tong House_0010. View of the ground floor interior of the two-story section, looking southeast.
- Photograph 11. NE_Douglas County_On Leong Tong House_0011. Detail of former stairs connecting ground floor interior of the two-story section with the west front entry door, looking northwest.
- Photograph 12. NE_Douglas County_On Leong Tong House_0012. Detail of original or historic decorative ceiling of ground floor interior of the two-story section.
- Photograph 13. NE_Douglas County_On Leong Tong House_0013. Detail of window in the northwest corner of the ground floor interior of the two-story section, looking north.
- Photograph 14. NE_Douglas County_On Leong Tong House_0014. Detail of side (west) of rear section of ground floor, looking west.

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Photograph 15. NE_Douglas County_ On Leong Tong House _0015. Rear (north) interior wall of the ground floor, looking north.

Photograph 16. NE_Douglas County_ On Leong Tong House _0016. Rear interior of the ground floor, looking south.

Photograph 17. NE_Douglas County_ On Leong Tong House _0017. Looking south down stairs to basement.

Photograph 18. NE_Douglas County_ On Leong Tong House _0018. Looking north/northeast at bottom of basement stairs.

Photograph 19. NE_Douglas County_ On Leong Tong House _0019. Looking southwest at the southwest corner of the basement (the landing inside the west ground floor entry door, and stairs (removed) up to the ground floor).

Photograph 20. NE_Douglas County_ On Leong Tong House _0020. Looking northwest at the northwest corner of the basement (two-story section of the building).

Photograph 21. NE_Douglas County_ On Leong Tong House _0021. Looking northwest at the northwest corner of the basement of the rear (single-story section of the building).

Photograph 22. NE_Douglas County_ On Leong Tong House _0022. Small rectangular room located in the northeast corner of the basement (single-story section of the building), looking south.

Photograph 23. NE_Douglas County_ On Leong Tong House _0023. Detail of small storage area under stairs leading to second floor, looking south.

Photograph 24. NE_Douglas County_ On Leong Tong House _0024. View up the stairs inside the east entry door from the street, looking north.

Photograph 25. NE_Douglas County_ On Leong Tong House _0025. The second floor, looking north/northwest from the southeast corner.

Photograph 26. NE_Douglas County_ On Leong Tong House _0026. The second floor, looking southwest from the northeast corner.

Photograph 27. NE_Douglas County_ On Leong Tong House _0027. Detail of a window in the south end of the second floor, showing that it was resized for smaller sashes.

Photograph 28. NE_Douglas County_ On Leong Tong House _0028. Detail of a window in the north wall of the second floor, showing original double-hung 6 x 6 wood sashes, looking north.

On Leong Tong House

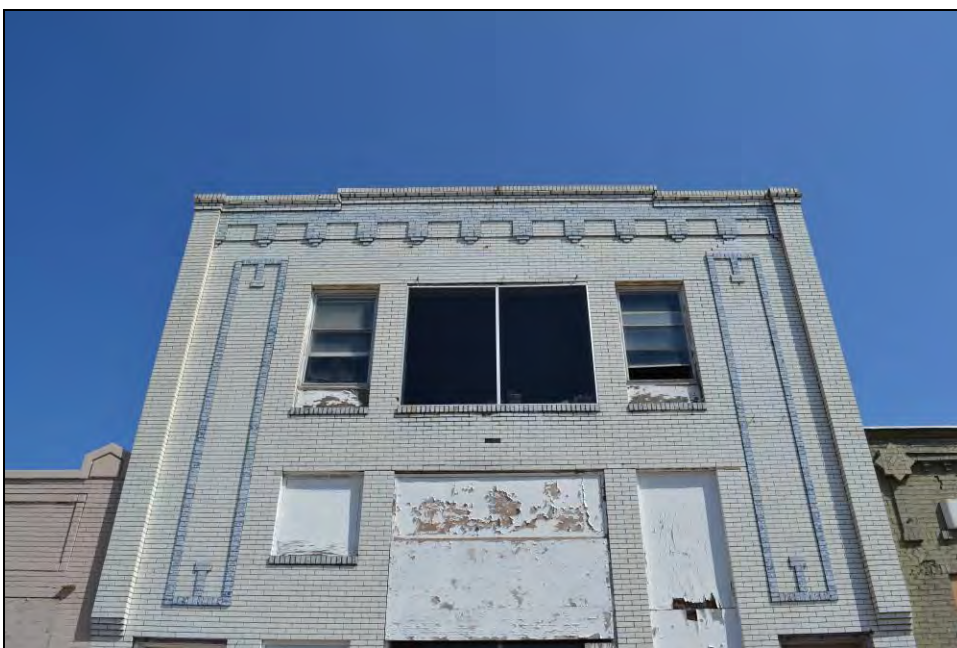
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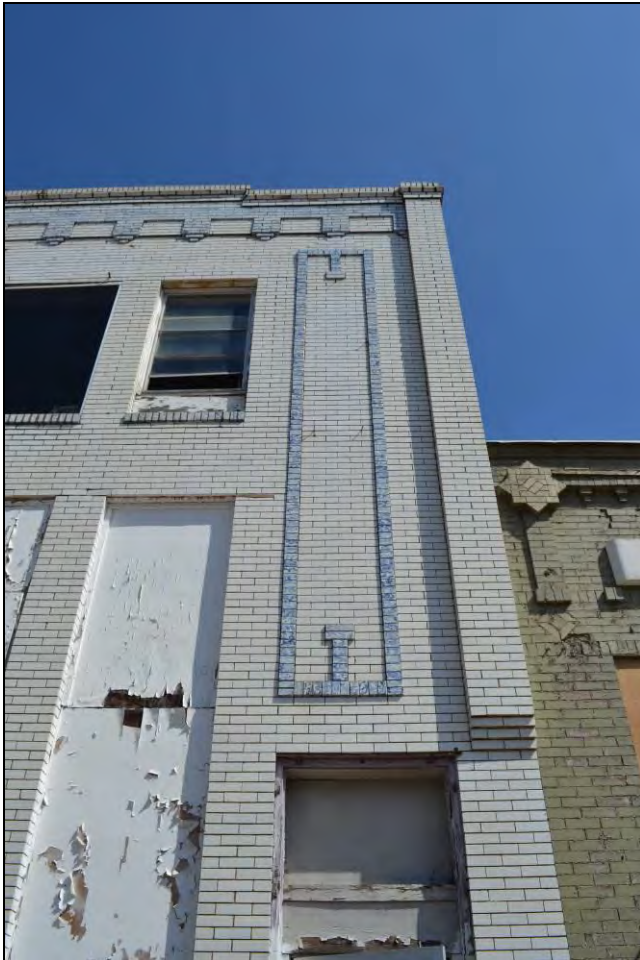
Photograph 2

On Leong Tong House

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Photograph 3

On Leong Tong House

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Photograph 4



Photograph 5

On Leong Tong House

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Photograph 6



Photograph 7

On Leong Tong House

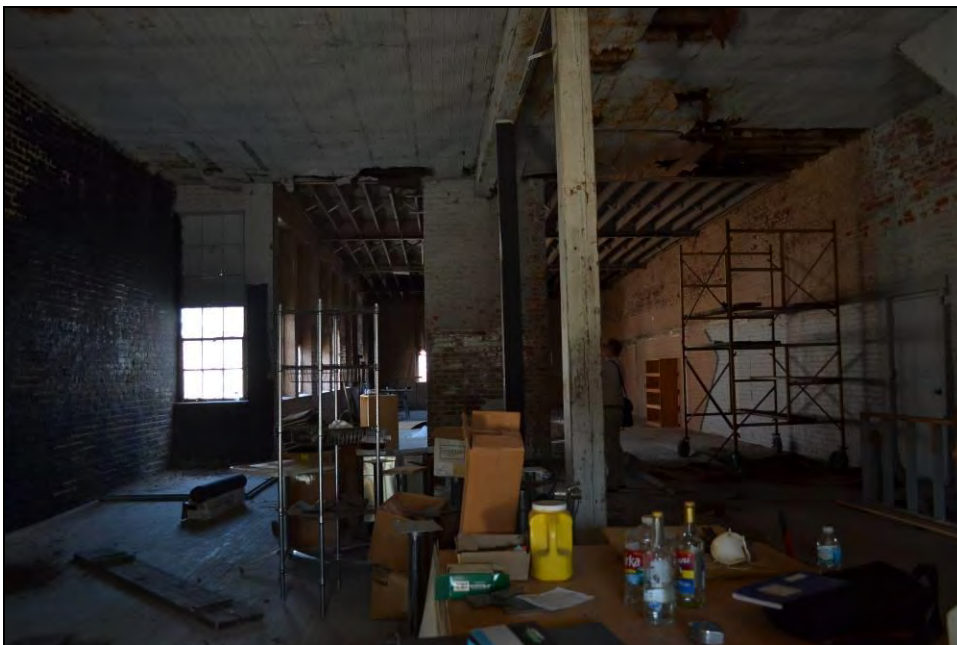
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Photograph 8



Photograph 9

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Photograph 10



Photograph 11

On Leong Tong House

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Photograph 12

On Leong Tong House

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Photograph 13



Photograph 14

Photograph 16



Photograph 15



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On Leong Tong House

Douglas County, Nebraska

Name of Property

County and State



Photograph 17

On Leong Tong House

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Name of Property

County and State



Photograph 18

On Leong Tong House

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Name of Property

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Photograph 19



Photograph 20

On Leong Tong House
Name of Property

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Photograph 21



Photograph 22

Photograph 23

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Photograph 24



Photograph 25

On Leong Tong House

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Photograph 26



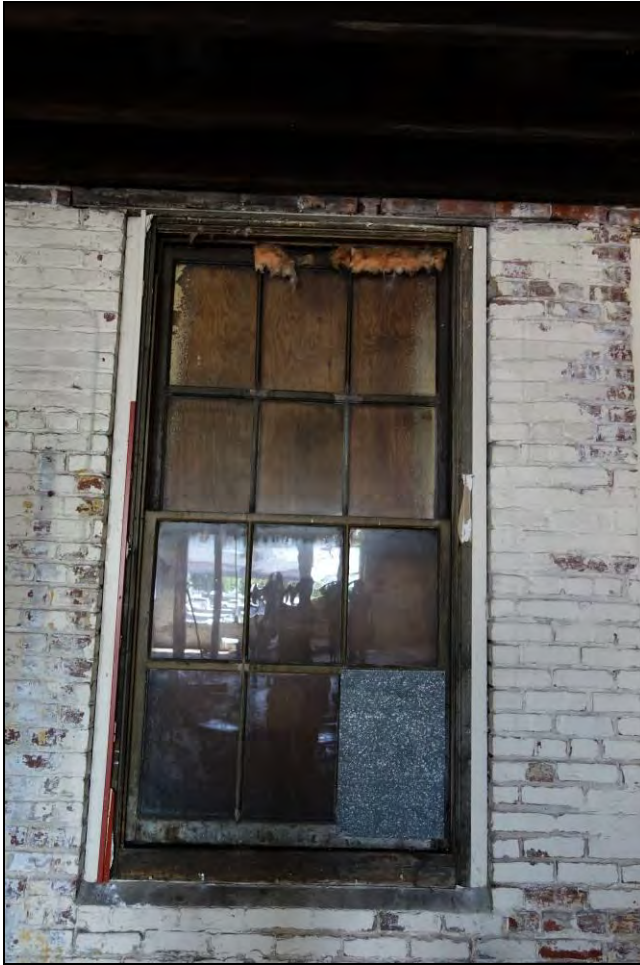
Photograph 27

On Leong Tong House

Douglas County, Nebraska

Name of Property

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Photograph 28

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C.460 et seq.).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 100 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Office of Planning and Performance Management, U.S. Dept. of the Interior, 1849 C. Street, NW, Washington, DC.











WOODMEN

COMFORT TENG
LEAVING DOCK







8

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MAX
PARKING

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 **UP**
**DO NOT LAY
ON THIS SIDE**

PO.NO.: CYS-98269
MODEL NAME: BORISX7
DESCRIPTION: 26"X31" MENS
COLOR: MATT BLACK(Y5-727)
N.W.: 17.50 KG
G.W.: 22.00 KG
CUFT: 11.37















8 MIL CLEAR 10' X 100 FT
MULTI-PURPOSE PLASTIC SHEETING
• Shop Cloth • Paint Spray Shield
• Furniture Cover • Water & Leak Protection
• Ripper Barrier •

GENERAC
6000W









Welded Storage Rack - Estante de Almacenaje Soldado - Support de rangement soudé
A SHELVE KÄRROG
Welded Storage Rack - Estante de Almacenaje Soldado - Support de rangement soudé
A SHELVE KÄRROG



FTW















UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
EVALUATION/RETURN SHEET

Requested Action:

Property Name:

Multiple Name:

State & County:

Date Received: 9/25/2017 Date of Pending List: 10/26/2017 Date of 16th Day: 11/13/2017 Date of 45th Day: 11/9/2017 Date of Weekly List:

Reference number:

Nominator:

Reason For Review:

Accept Return Reject 11/9/2017 Date

Abstract/Summary Comments:

Recommendation/ Criteria

Reviewer Jim Gabbert Discipline Historian

Telephone (202)354-2275 Date _____

DOCUMENTATION: see attached comments : No see attached SLR : No

If a nomination is returned to the nomination authority, the nomination is no longer under consideration by the National Park Service.



September 21, 2017

Jim Gabbert
NPS-National Register of Historic Places
1849 C Street, NW
Mail Stop 7228
Washington, DC 20240

Re: On Leong Tong House, Douglas County, NE

Dear Mr. Gabbert,

Enclosed is the complete nomination packet for the On Leong Tong House in Douglas County, Nebraska. The enclosed contents are as follows:

- The signed first page of the On Leong Tong House nomination.
- One archival disk with the true and correct copy of the nomination for the On Leong Tong House to the National Register of Historic Places in PDF format and:
- PDF of correspondence related to the nomination.
- One (1) disc with the photographs for the On Leong Tong House nomination.

If you have any questions regarding the submitted materials, feel free to contact me at the phone number or email address below.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "David L. Calease".

David L. Calease
National Register and Historic Marker Coordinator
Nebraska State Historic Preservation Office

Phone: 402-471-4775
Fax: 402-471-3100
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Enclosures (3): 1 disk with Nomination
2 disks with National Register Photographs

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