

# High-speed rail researchers dig for history in Fresno's Chinatown

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Stacy Schneyder, senior archaeologist with AECOM, shows a sampling of artifacts found in a trench, in background, Monday morning during the high-speed rail archaeological survey. Items included iron relics such as the ring from a bridle (historic maps indicate a stable on lot), pieces of English dinnerware, bottle glass and a slate pencil.

JOHN WALKER — THE FRESNO BEE

Archaeologists tore up the parking lot of an adult bookstore in downtown Fresno on Monday as they began investigating the city's historic Chinatown district.

The Wildcat Enterprises Adult Superstore remained open for business as researchers working for the California High-Speed Rail Authority started their digging. Archaeologists for AECOM, a consultant to the rail agency, hope to assess the potential for high-speed rail construction to affect any culturally or historically significant resources, if or when work on the rail line happens.

"This gives us an idea of whether we might start finding things when construction happens, which would not be ideal," said Dana McGowan, senior cultural resources manager for Parsons Brinckerhoff, a consulting firm that oversees environmental work for the rail authority.

While the adult bookstore at the northwest corner of Fresno and G streets is just across the street from the traditional boundary of Chinatown, senior archaeologist Stacy Schneyder said the site has historical significance that predates its current retail occupant.

"This lot has a lot of rich history," Schneyder said. Maps dating to 1888 show that there were once a handful of small dwellings on the property. Later, a hotel, saloon, stables and barber shop occupied the site. Fresno Street, she said, "is sort of the dividing line of Chinatown, and

this was a Euro-American property. ... It's from the same time period as Chinatown, and it's equally as important even if it doesn't get the same amount of attention."

The old maps can help researchers make educated guesses as to where they may come across old privies or outhouses, where people often disposed of household trash in the years before organized trash collection in the city. Schneyder said such privies or waste pits were typically along the margins of the property, away from inhabited buildings.

A flyer distributed to Chinatown businesses and property owners by the rail agency described the archaeological effort. "Preliminary research ... indicates that the area might have included a general store and other small businesses, a dance hall, several residences, a gambling hall and -- possibly -- an underground network of tunnels."

Researchers believe that "physical evidence of some of these potentially historic features remain buried underground," the flyer added.

Karana Hattersley-Drayton, the city's historic preservation project manager, said the Fresno Historical Society has agreed to collect and curate any significant artifacts found during the digs.

Chinatown representatives say they will be watching the process closely because of worries over the adequacy of earlier archaeological reports prepared by consultants to the rail authority.

"We are very concerned that people within our community who have knowledge of the area, like the Fresno Historical Society or Fresno Chinatown Revitalization, had no input into their report," said Kathy Omachi, founder of Chinatown Revitalization Inc. "They based their report on strange evaluations they had found that supported their premise that the underground tunnels are fake."

Omachi said she's also critical of the process "because it's being done by people outside the area" who focused solely on the Chinese community "and completely ignored the African Americans, Armenians, Mexican-Americans and other cultural communities that called Chinatown home."

City leaders said they have been working with Chinatown Revitalization and the high-speed rail authority for several weeks on the concerns. "City officials worked with (the rail authority) and Chinatown Revitalization officials on outreach materials for the archaeology project," according to a statement released Monday afternoon by City Hall spokesman Michael Lukens. "In addition, city officials attended a community meeting on Sept. 26 and have been working with HSR environmental staff since then."

On Monday, Schneyder said archaeologists plan to excavate trenches on nine parcels in and around the neighborhood, including four within Chinatown, over the next few months. She said she anticipated work to begin by Wednesday at a lot at Tulare Street and China Alley.

The rail agency said that people might see a team of up to six researchers at dig sites. The work is being organized so that businesses can remain open. After the digging is complete, the trenches will be filled in and repaved as needed.

At the adult bookstore, Schneyder and her colleagues -- armed with a backhoe, shovels and hand tools -- started digging the first of several trenches in the adult store's parking lot at about 7:30 a.m. By late Monday afternoon, after digging several three- to four-foot-deep trenches to reach undisturbed native soil, the excavations had revealed no treasure trove of century-old trash or artifacts -- or even an old privy.

But the archaeologists did unearth "a few interesting bits" just under the asphalt, scattered in earth that was likely used to fill and level the lot decades ago. Among the finds: pieces of ceramic and pottery bowls or cups likely dating to the late 19th or early 20th century; a tiny ceramic doll's arm; the neck and top of a hand-blown bottle, perhaps from a turn-of-the-century patent medicine; and an iron ring believed to be from a horse's bridle.

The crew will dig several more trenches Tuesday behind the adult store.

## Archaeology study

The first trenches were dug Monday in the parking lot of the Wildcat Enterprises adult store by archaeologists studying Chinatown for the California High-Speed Rail Authority.



Station site  
HSR alignment  
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