

Archaeologists unearth brick wall under Fresno's Chinatown

BY TIM SHEEHAN

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Archaeological dig in Fresno's Chinatown Few buried objects were

uncovered from trenches opened during the High Speed Rail archaeological survey in Chinatown at Tulare and F streets, Wednesday morning. [View Full Gallery](#) **JOHN WALKER — THE FRESNO BEE**

Archaeologists digging a 7 1/2-foot-deep trench on a lot in Fresno's historic Chinatown were briefly excited Wednesday morning when they unearthed a section of a wall and two columns that they thought could be "evidence of an interconnected subterranean network" long believed to course under the neighborhood.

But closer examination revealed soot and scorch marks on the bricks, suggesting that the feature was an old basement fireplace instead of a long-plugged tunnel.

The work behind a building at Tulare and F streets is part of a study by consultants for the California High-Speed Rail Authority to determine whether its construction plans could affect cultural or historic resources in Chinatown. Underpasses are planned to carry traffic on Fresno, Tulare and Ventura streets under the future high-speed rail line that is proposed to run on the west side of the Union Pacific Railroad freight tracks between G and H streets.

High-speed rail is the massive public works project to create a train system that would whisk riders from Los Angeles to the Bay Area in several hours. The first part of the system is to be constructed between Madera and Bakersfield.

The wall discovered Wednesday was not unexpected by the archaeologists, since it ran along the north property line of the lot where they had permission to dig.

"The structural footings match up with the historic maps really well," said Stacy Schneyder, a senior archaeologist with AECOM, a consultant to the rail agency. "This is confirming what is already out there in the record."

Workers did not climb into the trench because of safety concerns from loose fill soil caving in.

The digging did turn up a fragment of Chinese brown-glazed pottery, which Schneyder said was typical of 19th-century containers used by Chinese immigrants to store food, soy sauce or wine.

More modern finds included a jug partially filled with a red liquid and a soft drink bottle, both probably from the 1970s when earlier extensive digging took place on the property, and a smattering of broken glass and other debris.

"It just looks like they dumped a lot of fill in here," Schneyder said. "It's really disappointing ... but it's consistent with what the owner told us" about the earlier digs at the site.

By 11 a.m., crews began backfilling the first trench and prepared to dig a second perpendicular trench along the alley between F and G streets to look for artifacts. Archaeologists hoped to come across a privy or waste pit where occupants from the late 19th and early 20th centuries often threw things away.

Earlier this week, archaeologists dug under the nearby parking lot of an adult bookstore at Fresno and G streets. On Tuesday, behind the Wildcat Enterprises Adult Superstore, researchers came across the filled-in remnants of an outside stairway that likely once led to the basement of a building.

"We found a few bricks in a line and it turns out it was a brick staircase that lined up almost exactly with the footprint of a building on the site from before 1909 to the 1940s," Schneyder said.

But archaeologists could only dig down about 31/2 feet before they encountered a trench for an underground power line running diagonally through the parking lot. "We exposed as much of the staircase as we could, removed material by hand and screened it for artifacts," Schneyder said.

Most of what they found was mixed into the dark soil that was used to fill in the basement and stairway before the current parking lot was built.

Among the finds: a smattering of broken plates, glass, bricks and nails, a marble, and a 2-inch long porcelain doll body and its tiny disembodied arms and legs. "That was a child's toy, and since there weren't an abundance of toys at that time, it was probably something that was lost and not thrown away," Schneyder said. "It was a real neat personal item to find."

As workers sifted the soil in screens, they also found a 1920 culinary union pin. "That's interesting because it's something that someone once wore with pride of being a union member," Schneyder said.

Wednesday's digging in Chinatown will wrap up the researchers' work for at least a few weeks or more, until the consultants and the rail authority line up approval from property owners to work on their lots. Archaeologists ultimately hope to dig exploratory trenches on nine different parcels in and around Chinatown, including four within the historic neighborhood.



The reporter can be reached at (559) 441-6319, tsheehan@fresnobee.com or @tsheehan on Twitter.