

Walter Ngon Fong

Chinese-American Pioneer and Special Census Agent

The U.S. Census Bureau has always highlighted American diversity through its decennial snapshots of the population. As the United States grew and the population became more diverse, the Census Bureau's workforce adapted to represent the country's people and needs. As immigration from non-European countries increased in the 19th century, the Census Bureau tried to hire enumerators that lived in the neighborhoods and spoke the language. Others became a part of the operations in Washington, DC. From the first surges of Chinese immigration into California in the 19th century, immigrants of Asian and Pacific Islander heritage have long contributed to the Census Bureau's mission, both at headquarters and in the field.

Walter Ngon Fong was born on April 1, 1866, in Guangdong Province, China. In 1881, Walter emigrated to the United States and worked in a store while he received his education from Methodist missionary schools, and beginning in 1889, he attended the University of the Pacific, then located in San Jose, CA. Walter



Walter Fong, c. 1889.

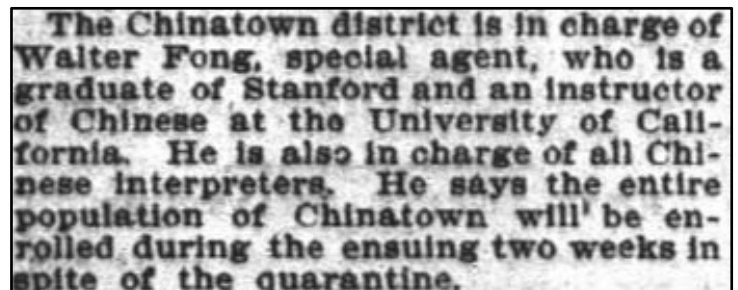
Walter and Emma Fong Collection (SC0994). Dept. of Special Collections and University Archives, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, Calif.

A scan of a 1900 U.S. Census form, Schedule No. 1 - Population. The form is filled out with handwritten information. A red box highlights a section of the table with the following text: "Historic census records are maintained and released by the National Archives and Records Administration, not the U.S. Census Bureau. Visit <http://www.archives.gov> for more information about publicly available records like the one shown here." The table columns include Name, Sex, Age, Race, Birthplace, and Occupation.

Walter and Emma's 1900 Census.

also worked as an assistant in the San Jose Methodist mission, where he taught and preached. Following his work at the University of the Pacific, he became an ordained minister. Despite his later successes as a lawyer, educator and businessman, Walter continued to work as a clergyman—the occupation he listed for the 1900 Census.

Around 1893, Walter began his studies at Stanford University, where he graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in Economics and Sociology in 1896— becoming the first person of Chinese ancestry to graduate from that school. While at Stanford, Walter also studied law, participated in the Nestorian Debate Society, received high grades, and met his future wife, Emma Howse. The new couple, however, encountered some difficulties—California law prohibited interracial marriage at the time, so the couple travelled to Denver, Colorado, where they married on June 19, 1897. The couple settled in the San Francisco Bay Area, and Walter worked as a lawyer, a minister at the Oakland Chinese Methodist Episcopal Mission, and as a Chinese teacher at the University of California (UC) Berkeley, which he also attended as a graduate student.



San Francisco Chronicle (San Francisco, CA), June 2, 1900.



Walter Fong, c. 1903.

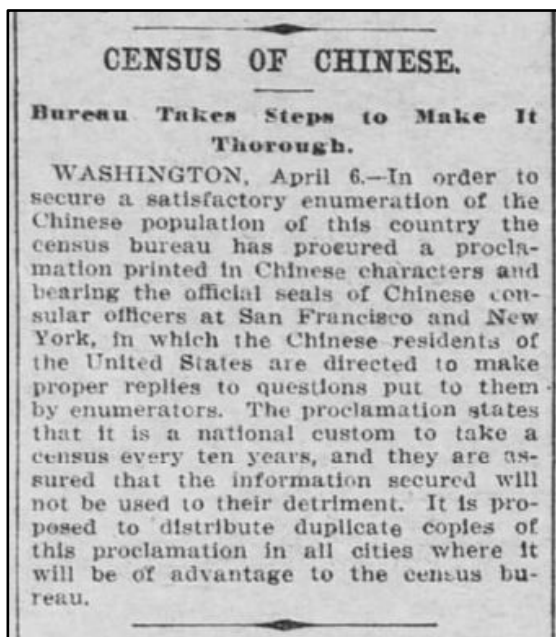
Walter and Emma Fong Collection (SC0994). Dept. of Special Collections and University Archives, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, Calif.

At the turn of the century, Walter had achieved a reputation as one of the most respected members of the Chinese community in San Francisco. As a man who could easily navigate between cultures, Walter represented the perfect candidate to be a census supervisor in 1900. Yet, as an un-naturalized resident he could not officially hold the position of supervisor or enumerator, so he received the title of special agent. This setback was only minor, however, compared to another obstacle to the taking of the Twelfth Census of the United States—an outbreak of bubonic plague which placed parts of San Francisco under quarantine, including Chinatown.

Luckily, Waldemar Haffkine had developed an effective vaccine against the plague in 1897, and the brave enumerators received inoculations before crossing the “dead line” into the quarantine zone. Out of the 307 enumerators required for San Francisco, Walter supervised ten, with a Chinese interpreter accompanying each enumerator. Due to the quarantine, and the necessity of

having themselves and their schedules disinfected each time they left the quarantine zone, many of the enumerators found themselves immersed in Chinese culture as they spent their entire days, including meals, in Chinatown. Enumeration began on June 1, and ended no later than June 15, during which time Walter’s enumerators counted the vast majority of San Francisco’s 13,954 Chinese residents.

Following the successful completion of his work with the census, Walter continued his legal, educational, and ministerial work. Walter consistently used his education and social capital to help bridge cultural gaps. He presented speeches and papers on topics such as Chinese labor unions in America, Chinese life in San Francisco, Chinese religion and customs, Sino-American politics, and educational problems in mainland China. In one instance he helped professors who wanted to study the vegetarian nature of the Chinese diet by making introductions to Chinese diners that had previously given them the cold shoulder. In 1903, after teaching and studying since 1897, Walter received his Master of Arts from UC Berkeley’s College of Letters.



The St. Paul Globe (St. Paul, MN), April 7, 1900.



Walter Fong and Family, c. 1905.

Walter and Emma Fong Collection (SC0994). Dept. of Special Collections and University Archives, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, Calif.

Walter also cared deeply about his home country. In the 1890s, he helped establish the American branches of the Hsing Chung Hui Society, also known as the Revive China Society, for which he served as president. Sun Yat-sen, the overall president and founder of the Revive China Society would later become the first leader of Republican China after the fall of the monarchy. Sadly, Walter did not live to see his dreams of reform in China come to fruition. After graduating from UC Berkeley, he accepted a post as president of the Li Sing Scientific College in Hong Kong, to help educate and spread reform in his home country. While there, he fell sick and passed away on May 9, 1906. His wife, Emma, returned to the United States with their two children, Arthur and Chester, and later married Walter’s friend and fellow linguistic instructor at Berkeley, Japanese professor Yoshi Saburo Kuno. The Census Bureau is proud of Walter’s dedication and contributions to both his birth country and his adopted home.