BAS 197 Chin Chun Hock Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

When Chin Chun Hock visited Butte in October 1898, the Butte Miner headlined its report “The King of the Chinamen Will Construct a Building.”

While he wasn’t actually king of anything, Hock, whose name is sometimes given as Chun Ching Hock, was certainly the most prominent Chinese businessman in Seattle. He had arrived there in 1860 at age 16, the first Chinese immigrant when Seattle’s King County counted a total population of 302. Within eight years he had established the beginnings of a major merchandise company, the Wa Chong Co.

Chin Chun Hock eventually even signed his letters with the company name, Wa Chong, and he was called that at the time he came to Butte. He was expanding his business throughout the northwest, including Portland and Helena in addition to Butte. He had established a Butte operation, the Wah Chong Tai Co., in 1893-94 at 49 West Galena Street, then the heart of Butte’s Chinatown.

The success of the Wah Chong Tai in Butte led Wa Chong to invest in the construction of a new brick building on Mercury Street at China Alley. “Butte is a great city and I always like to come here,” he was quoted as saying during his 1898 visit. The building was finished in 1899 and still stands today, housing part of the Mai Wah Museum.

It appears that the new business wasn’t so much a branch office of the Seattle Wa Chong Company as a franchise, or perhaps a partnership for a time. While the Seattle investor probably bought the land and paid for the building, the Butte Wah Chong Tai business was probably completely owned by local Chinese businessmen led by Chin Hin Doon and his son Chin Yee Fong, who would change his name to Albert Chinn and become the patriarch of the Chinn family that eventually established deep roots in Butte with connections to the Mai Wah Society to this day.

In 1910 the Wah Chong Tai company was owned by nine locals with a total investment of $16,000 among them. Chin Chun Hock (Wa Chong) had sold his ownership in the building in 1905, and he died in 1927.

Even though Chin is a common Chinese name, it’s likely that Chin Chun Hock and the Chinn family of Butte were related, at least distantly. They all ultimately immigrated from the Taishan District of Guangdong Province in southeastern China.

As writer Edwin Dobb has said, "Like Concord, Gettysburg, and Wounded Knee, Butte is one of the places America came from." Join us next time for more of Butte, America’s Story.