

Archive Package: 1857–1884 (Early Immigration)

Fact Sheet: Key Issues and Events of 1857–1884

- The first group of Chinese immigrants came to BC in 1858 via San Francisco, drawn by the Fraser Valley gold rush. In June 1858, a few wealthy San Francisco merchants arrived at Fort Victoria in response to the Fraser River Gold Rush. Starting in 1859, ships sailed directly from Hong Kong to Victoria. After 1860, they mainly came directly from Hong Kong (Con et al. 17).
- The Chinese called North America *Gum San*, “Gold Mountain.” a land of prosperity.
- As with others who came to the Fraser for the gold rush, they had to deal with indigenous and local communities as outsiders who needs the acceptance of these communities to stay and work on the land. Chinese established many of the service industries that served mining towns.
- Before Confederation, the Chinese had the same rights as the white citizens.
- After Confederation (1867—with BC joining in 1871), some European settlers implemented white supremacy, clearing indigenous peoples from their land into reserves and establishing the residential school system, and using anti-Asian politics and exclusion policies to marginalize all “non-whites” and organize a “white man’s province” (in the words of BC Premier Richard McBride). Chinese Canadians could not vote provincially.
- The colonial government, however, relied on Chinese labour for many of the most difficult tasks to help build the country of Canada, from building trails and wagon roads to draining swamps, and later, building of the railroad.

- By 1865, the gold rush period was mostly over. By 1866, good claims in placer mining were difficult to find, and the Chinese went to work in other industries. At this point, there were Chinese labourers in every industry throughout BC. They worked in salmon canneries, logging, fishing, market gardening, running retail businesses, and working in domestic service. And anti-Chinese sentiment built, as some whites felt the Chinese were unfair competitors for their jobs.
- In Parliament, Sir John A. MacDonald told British Columbia members that they would have to accept Chinese immigration if they wanted the railway complete. The Leader of the Opposition, Alexander MacKenzie, said "...the principle that some classes of human family were not fit to be residents...would be dangerous and contrary to the Law of Nations and the policy which controlled Canada."
- To survive this hostile environment, Chinese in Canada strengthened their communities.
- In 1882, USA passes their federal *Chinese Exclusion Act*.
- At the close of this period, the CPR railway connecting BC to Eastern Canada was complete. The Chinese had taken on the most dangerous tasks, under poor conditions and treatment, and the cost was high. For every mile of track built in the 350 miles to connect BC to the rest of Canada, two Chinese people died.