

Archive Package: 1885–1922 (Head Tax)

Fact Sheet: Key Issues and Events of 1885–1922

- With the completion of the CPR in 1885, thousands of Chinese were out of work. Many moved to the Prairies and further east. A thousand went back to China, but most stayed in BC, finding other work.
- Increasing tension as the political idea of the “Chinese problem” emerged post-railroad.
- 1885: Under pressure from the BC Government, Canada enacts *The Act to Restrict and Regulate Chinese Immigration into Canada*. All Chinese immigrating to Canada required to pay \$50 head tax. Initially, some were exempt: merchants and their families, students (viewed as temporary residents), and Canadian-born children returning from studies in China.
- The head tax was raised to \$100 in 1901, and to \$500 in 1904. \$500 was equivalent to two months’ pay for Chinese workers at the time. Chinese immigration continued, as they were able to earn ten to twenty times the wages offered in China.
- Nearly all Chinese immigration to BC came by ship through Hong Kong. Passengers arrived in Victoria and were detained in prison-like immigration rooms until they passed a medical exam and their head tax was paid. At times, they could wait for weeks until a relative or friend paid the head tax.
- As the gateway for Chinese immigration, Victoria’s Chinatown grew between the 1880s and the 1910s, housing the majority of the City’s Chinese population—about 3000 by the 1910s. This period saw a building boom, replacing many of the wood framed buildings with three-story stone buildings.
- Chinese Canadians were segregated socially and economically. They could not sit on the same floor at the opera house, or swim in the same pool as white settlers, or in some cases, shop at the same time.

- 1907: The Anti-Asian riot in Vancouver was sparked by an anti-immigration rally that overflowed into the streets, leading to physical assaults and property damage in Chinatown and Little Tokyo. Only three people were charged and only one person convicted of any offence.
- World War I: 1914-1918. The British declaration of war automatically brought Canada into the war, because of Canada's legal status as a British dominion. Non-whites weren't allowed to enlist. Blacks from Nova Scotia were turned away. Some segregated units formed, and, in 1915, Canadian First Nations were allowed to enlist.
- 1916: The allies strike a deal with the Chinese government to enlist thousands of Chinese, who formed the Chinese Labour Corps (CLC). They were mainly poor Chinese men from the North who were told they would be in non-combatant roles. The CLC were secretly landed in Victoria, British Columbia, drilled in the old quarantine station at William Head, and then secretly shipped across Canada in cattle-trucks.
- Also 1916: Chinese Labour Association forms to lobby for better treatment in the lumber industry. Some white unions saw the advantage of joining Chinese labourers, and in the 1920s, the Chinese Workers Protective Association was formed.
- 1920: the Federal Government passed a bill to disqualify persons from voting federally if they were not permitted to vote provincially. With this bill, Chinese Canadians in BC lost their right to vote federally.
- Victoria School Segregation 1922–23: Chinese Canadian Club and the Chinese Benevolent Association organize a school strike when the Victoria School Board attempts to segregate Chinese public school students. The segregation is ended for the 1923–24 school year.