



Early Chinese History in New Brunswick



Chinese-Canadians are known for their early history as labourers on the Western portion of the Canadian Pacific Railway. Less well known is that after its completion, a number of Chinese railway workers settled in New Brunswick, the first of them arriving in the mid-1880s.

Most resided in Saint John, where they usually worked in hand laundries and, later, in restaurants and grocery stores. Newcomers were often related to those already established in the community. Chinese-run businesses tended to change hands every few years, typically when their owners returned to China for marriage. Because Anti-Asian legislation restricted the number of Chinese women admitted to Canada, new immigrants became part of “bachelor societies” with very limited population growth; consequently, later waves of Chinese immigrants had few connections to these early pioneers.

Chinese Laundry and Restaurant Businesses

Many of New Brunswick’s early Chinese immigrants resided in Saint John’s Wellington ward, a blue-collar area with many Lebanese and other non-British settlers. Although the province’s Chinese population was never large enough to sustain a Chinatown, the Chinese laundry was an important cultural institution of the time. Chinese newcomers often lived where they worked, so the buildings that housed them served as informal centres for social gatherings, dinner parties, and games.

Racism against the Chinese was less pronounced than elsewhere, but as the advertisement to the right demonstrates, they were negatively portrayed in local newspapers. The Chinese laundry has since disappeared from the province, but Chinese restaurants can be found in nearly every New Brunswick community. Chinese-owned cafés and restaurants served Western food at first, but soon began to offer Western-influenced Chinese foods. “Chop Suey” helped our Chinese restaurants flourish.

Fredericton’s Sun Grill Restaurant, Regent and King (where the MOCO Downtown now stands), was opened by the first person of Chinese origin to be born in New Brunswick, Percy Hem. A thriving restaurant in the 1950s, it was especially popular with local university students.



1884: The advertisement below, which runs every day for a week, appears in Moncton's *Daily Times*:

**NOW IS YOUR TIME
GET your WASHING DONE
-----at the-----
CHINESE LAUNDRY
--all work warranted to suit--
Geo. T. Harrop
Robinson Street, near Main**

The newspaper delivers the following edict (April 4, 1884):

Chinese Laundry
Attention is directed to the advertisement of Mr. Geo. T. Harrop in another column. Mr. Harrop has secured the services of a genuine Chinaman, and is prepared to warrant all work. His enterprise i(n) providing a laundry for Moncton should be encouraged and doubtless he will be largely patronized.

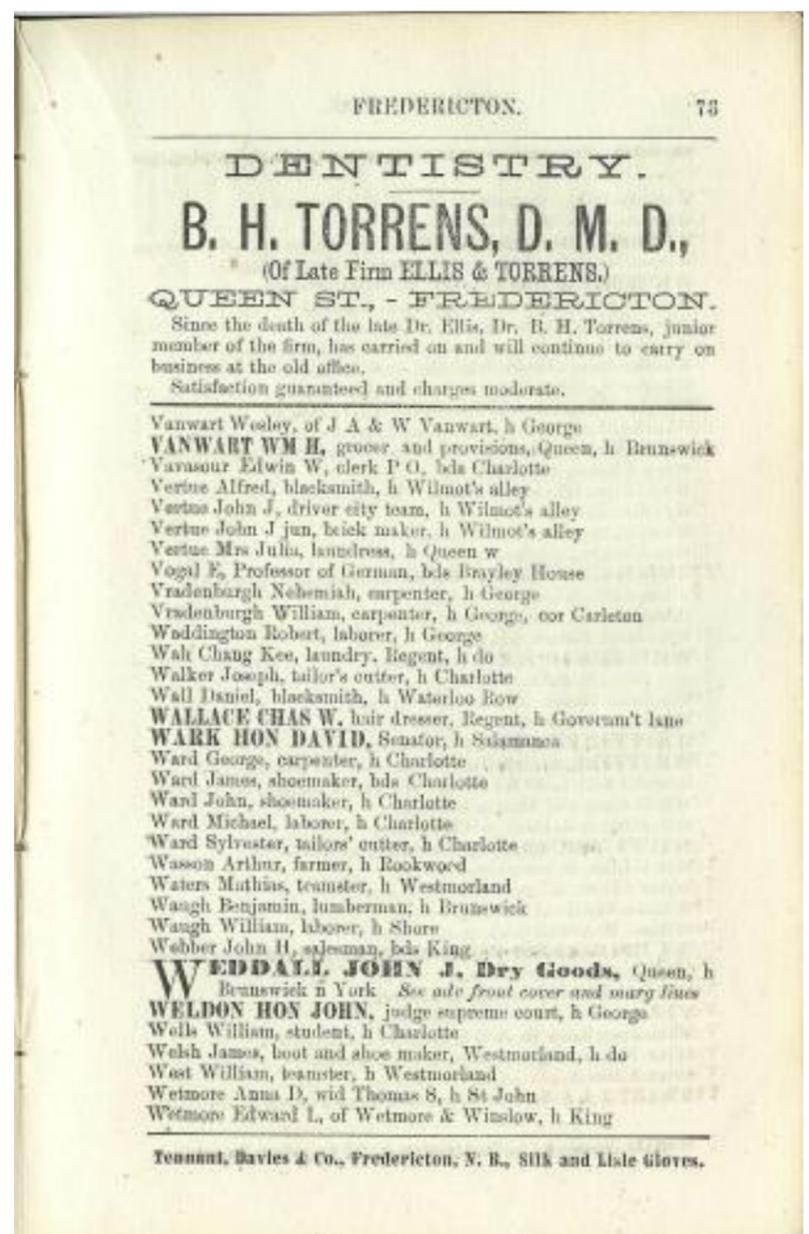
A mere two weeks later (April 19, 1884),
Moncton's *Daily Times* proclaims:

CHINESE MUST GO
The Wah Chang Kee Laundry, opened by two Chinamen on Regent Street last winter, is to be closed on Saturday. The proprietors of this establishment have not found our soil and climate congenial. They return to warmer skies... Fredericton Capital.

Wah Chang Kee, one of the earliest known Chinese immigrants to New Brunswick, is listed with his laundry business in the 1884-1885 Directory for York and Carleton Counties (right).

1890s: The first real wave of Chinese settlement in NB begins, comprised mainly of individuals from Southern China who have relocated from Central Canada. Most had been CPR workers. Most settled in Saint John, which had 83 Chinese residents by the early 1890s. Smaller numbers settled in Moncton (2 by 1891) and Fredericton.

1901: Saint John's *Semi-Weekly Telegraph* reports on its first Chinese immigrants, said to have "arrived as sojourners, running laundries until they could amass sufficient capital to return home." Later that year, a local paper runs a story on the baptism of Chinese laundry worker Lee Johnson at Brussels Street Baptist Church.



1903: Four Chinese laundrymen are recorded as living in Moncton: Wing-Sing Fong, Lee Hing, Tom Lee, and Sing Yep.

1906: A Saint John newspaper publishes a racist letter warning of “filth and wretchedness” that would result from increased Chinese immigration to the city.

1908: Hum Yee Tommy marries Mary Lavigne in Woodstock. Interracial marriage was rare at the time. The couple’s eldest son, Andy Tommy, goes on to become a pro football player with the Ottawa Rough Riders. Andy’s three sons also become professional athletes, all joining Canada’s Alpine Ski Team.

1909: Twenty-seven Chinese men are arrested at a laundry owned by Saint John’s Sam Wah. Though charged with gambling, the men claim they’d simply gathered to read Chinese newspapers. Police testify to finding dice, dominoes, and cash. A judge deems the men “not guilty,” noting that white “society ladies” played friendly games of bridge without being arrested.

1911: The Moncton census lists only 1 Chinese resident.

1914: Percy Hem, son of Wing Hem—a laundry and shop owner in the Fairville area of Saint John—becomes the first Chinese-Canadian to be born in NB. Percy’s mother, one of the few Chinese women in New Brunswick, had arrived two years earlier. Percy went on to graduate from Saint John Vocational School, serve in World War II, and operate Fredericton’s Sun Grill restaurant.

1915: Police raids of Saint John’s Chinese-owned laundries and grocery stores have become frequent, resulting in convictions and heavy fines for opium use. Until 1908, opium was legal in Canada and was used by both whites and Chinese. Long hours, the mundane tasks of the laundry and grocery business, and the lack of Chinese women and family led many Chinese men to spend their leisure hours gambling and smoking. The Saint John raids created much negative publicity for the Chinese community.

1916: Five Chinese laundrymen are listed for Moncton: Harry Fong, Sam Fong, Fong Lee, Song Lee, and F.S. Shing.

1921: The New Brunswick census lists 113 Chinese residents, the majority of whom live in Saint John; 21 live in Moncton, mostly as a result of its railroad. Nineteen-year-old Leo Lam arrives on a student visa after having paid the \$500 Chinese head tax. Eight Chinese live in Fredericton; in Perth-Andover, Charles Hum Johnson is the only Chinese person on record—his surname taken from Johnson’s Hotel, where he worked as a cook. Between 1921 and 1931, only one other Chinese person moves to Perth-Andover.

Through the 1920s and 30s, their New Brunswick numbers both grew and diminished. Chinese settlement began to decline in Saint John County, but increase on the North Shore, in the upper St. John River Valley, and in the Miramichi area.

New Brunswick Chinese fluent in English took advantage of educational opportunities. Younger generations, including many of the Canadian born, adopt Christianity—perhaps as a result of outreach from local churches.

Chinese immigrants sometimes entered Canada by means of identity fraud. *The Chinese Experience in New Brunswick*, by Larry Shyu, highlights the experience of a Chinese immigrant who came to Moncton in 1922 with false certification:

I came to Canada through the black market system. I had to pay for a false name. Someone in Vancouver arranged for a place in a family to fit my age... It cost \$1,000 for me to come to Canada, \$500.00 for the Head Tax and \$500.00 for the black market name. When the government had an amnesty for people who came to Canada illegally, I had my name changed to its original.

1923: Canada passes the Chinese Exclusion Act, which outlaws Chinese immigration. From this point until after the Act is repealed in 1947, no Chinese passing through on vessels are permitted to go ashore in Saint John or any other Canadian port.

1926: Tom Wong operates the Frisco Café in Moncton.

1928: Six of 17 laundries operating in Moncton are Chinese-owned; 4 Chinese-owned restaurants are open in the city: Charlie Wing's Canton and Paris Cafés, the Club Café (owned by Jack Sou), and the King Café.

1930: Chinese-owned apartments are found at 842 Main Street, Moncton. The city now has 7 Chinese laundries.

1931: The census reports 61 Chinese in Saint John, 12 in Woodstock, 13 in Edmundston, 15 in Newcastle, 8 in Chatham and 6 in Grand Falls—almost all working in the laundry or restaurant business. By this time, several Chinese-owned restaurants have opened in the Miramichi area: the Tea Garden Restaurant, Radio Café, King Café, the Premier Café Grange, and Happy Joe's.

A Chinese-Canadian resident of Saint John is accused of shipping opium to Nova Scotia. The trial, covered in the press extensively, contributes to anti-Chinese feeling.

Andy Tommy Jr., son of Woodstock's Hum Yee Tommy, who has been playing for the Ottawa Rangers, joins the Rough Riders (1933). He scores a record-setting 120-yard touchdown run, and in 1940 is named team captain.



Andy Tommy
Source:

<http://www.cfhof.ca/pages/andytommy>

1939: Moncton's Palace Grill restaurant is opened by Mr. Fong, two of his relatives, and Duncan Wong. The restaurant would remain open for the next 52 years.

Chinese Students in the 1950s and 1960s

The Chinese Exclusion Act had a devastating effect on Canada's Chinese population. By 1941, Saint John's Chinese numbers had dwindled to 30. By 1945, economic depression further reduced their numbers, and in Fredericton only 3 remained. In 1951, Saint John—once the centre of Chinese-Canadian life in the province—was home to only 21 Chinese and of these, only one was female.

Change began in the mid-1950s when Chinese students from Hong Kong, China, Malaysia, and Singapore registered at UNB Fredericton. Much of the information on these early students has been documented by Dr. Anthony Lister, once faculty advisor to the Overseas Chinese Student Association. In his work on the history of early Chinese students, Lister quotes early 60s student Dr. Wah-Chun Chan:

At that time, UNB had about six thousand students. I remember Fredericton was a very quiet town. The major activity for the students from Hong Kong was gathering together at Benny Lam's apartment to have a pot luck dinner during the vacations, such as Xmas and summer times. I still remember that it only cost one dollar for a whole lobster from the Dominion store. The people in Fredericton were very friendly. During the winter time when the snow was very heavy, people would usually stop to offer a ride....

Most Chinese students then were “Overseas Chinese” intending to depart after graduation, but a few were from elsewhere in the Maritimes. By all accounts, many were popular and socially active—heavily involved in sports, clubs, and campus activities.

1955: Harold Tam becomes the first Chinese student from Hong Kong to attend the University of New Brunswick, Fredericton. Three more arrived: Howe-Kee Chan, Peter Yiu-Sing Chan, and Ed Wong, a Forestry student from Antigonish, Nova Scotia.

1957: The first Chinese women to attend UNB are Lena Cheuk-Kwan Chung, Kathleen Ka-Long Leung, and Eunice Yuet-Ngan—all from Hong Kong—who take up residence at the Maggie Jean Chestnut complex. Despite her limited English skills, Lena enrolls in the Arts program with a double major in Sociology and Education, quickly mastering the language and making friends all over campus. Described in *The Brunswickan* as a “black-haired Oriental beauty” planning to work in child welfare, an interview and four pictures of Lena appear in the paper while she attends UNB. In 1961, she is elected “Queen of the Arts Department.”

1959: Ed Wong and Bing-Man Jin become the first Chinese-Canadians to receive Bachelor degrees from UNB. Bing-Man, who graduated from high school in St. Stephen, N.B., briefly attended Nova Scotia's Acadia University before transferring to UNB, where he studied History, Sociology and Education.

Dr. Paul C.C. Ting of the Electrical Engineering Department becomes the first Chinese professor at UNB. Several more Chinese would be appointed to the faculty over the next few years, including former UNB graduate and postdoctoral students Ernest Jay, Mary Tong, and K.T. Kan.

1964: Chemistry students Chiu-Ming Wong and Tse-Lok Ho become the first Chinese students to receive PhDs from UNB. In the same year, Chiu-Ming founds The Overseas Chinese Student Association, the first of its kind in Fredericton. By its second year, OCSA has 65 members and has presented the first annual China Night at UNB Fredericton's Memorial Hall.

Many exceptional Chinese students left indelible marks. Head Hall's Harold Tam-Wing Ming Room, named for UNB's first Chinese student, also honours his family's large donation to the University. The Wu Conference Centre is named after Mechanical Engineering student Michael Wu, who graduated in 1964 and went on to become Director of Hong Kong's Wing Lung Bank.

Pock Too Ng and Quee-Wah Cheong graduated with Mechanical Engineering degrees in 1968. Pock Too became a prominent businessman in Singapore and a Member of Parliament and Political Secretary to the Prime Minister; Quee-Wah served as Singapore's Permanent Secretary for the ministries of Defence, Home Affairs, and Environment.

Next Generation

The presence of Chinese graduate and post-graduate students at UNB in the 1960s injected new life into New Brunswick's Chinese-Canadian communities. In addition to students and members of faculty, other people of Chinese descent began to arrive in the province, among them doctors and restaurant-owners who settled in Saint John between the 1950s and 70s.

Demographic change began in earnest after Canada's late 1960s removal of race restrictions and its introduction of the Points System, which encouraged highly educated and skilled people from all over the world to apply for Canadian immigration. By the 70s and 80s, growth was strong enough to warrant the founding of groups such as the Chinese Cultural Association of New Brunswick (CCANB) headquartered in Fredericton (1977), the Moncton Chinese Friendship Association (1981), and the Chinese Cultural Association of Saint John (1984). The Chinese community, which has continued to grow, has since become even more important to the social, cultural, and economic life of the province.

Information Sources:

- Marquis, Greg. *Saint John as an Immigrant City, 1851-1951*. Halifax, NS: Centre Métropolis Atlantique/Atlantic Metropolis Centre, 2009.
- Seto, William and Lawrence N. Shyu. *The Chinese Experience in New Brunswick: A Historical Perspective*. Fredericton, NB: Chinese Cultural Association of New Brunswick, 1986.
- Lister, Anthony. *A Brief History of Chinese Students at the University of New Brunswick, 1955 to 1970* (Parts 1 & 2)

Special thanks to Dr. Chungchi Wen and Mr. Mingkun Gu for their contributions on the early Chinese history of Moncton.