

CHINESE LABOUR ON THE CANADIAN PACIFIC RAILWAY

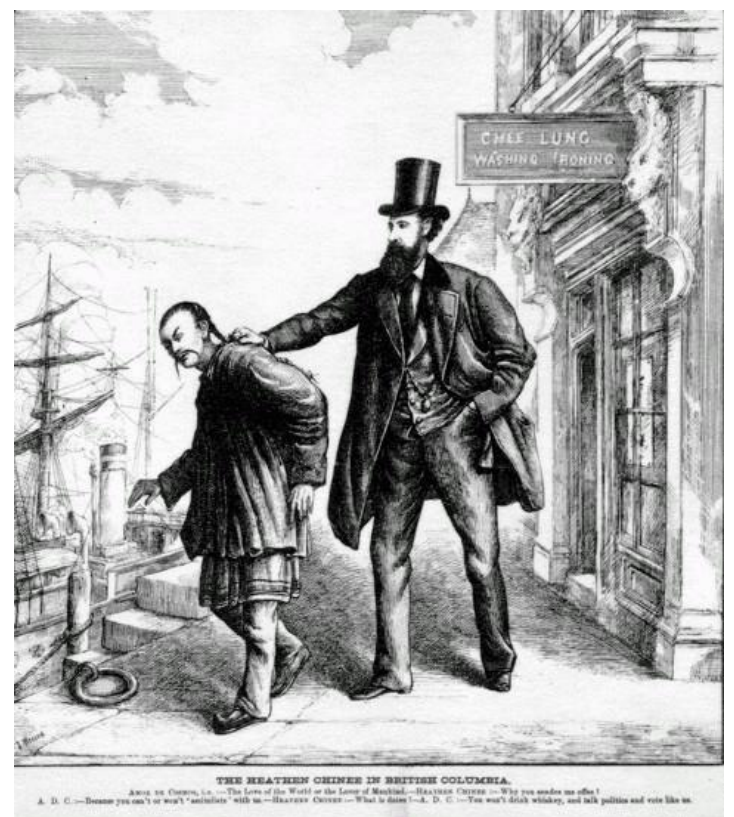


Chinese men at work on the Canadian Pacific Railway (1884)
Credit: Boorne & May / Library and Archives Canada

Anti-Chinese Sentiment Rising

In 1871, British Columbia joined Confederation as Canada's 6th province. Its population at the time was comprised of about 26,000 First Nations people; 11,000 of European origin; and 3,500 Chinese, whose numbers had declined since the Gold Rush days.

Before Confederation, the *Aliens Act* of 1861 had ensured that any resident who had resided in B.C. for at least three years could take an oath of allegiance and enjoy full legal rights, but the mining industry's decline had caused a great deal of tension. Negative feelings about Chinese immigration arose because of fears that jobs that rightfully belonged to whites would be "stolen." Confederation coincided with a growing sense of European identity among British Columbians. In the minds of many members of the public, the national and provincial identity was defined by skin colour. Just one year after Confederation, B.C. passed a law prohibiting First Nations and Chinese people from voting in provincial elections.



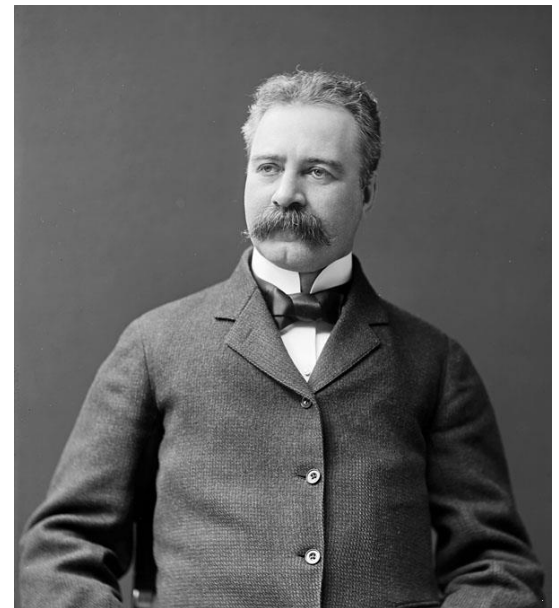
"The Heathen Chinee in British Columbia"
- Political cartoonist James Weston, 1879

More discriminatory legislation followed. Because a surge of Chinese arrivals to Victoria in 1878 alarmed some members of the public, a law was passed forbidding anyone Chinese from working on B.C.'s public projects. Chinese workers were also ordered to pay \$10 to the province every three months—a law struck down after the protests of fish cannery operators dependent upon on Chinese labour.

The Canadian Pacific Railway

By 1880, anti-Chinese sentiment was rising in British Columbia. The province's first trade union, the Workingmen's Protective Association, had formed in 1878 and had been concentrating on using "all legitimate means" to both expel the Chinese from Canada and intimidate those who employed them. In 1879, the Anti-Chinese Association was formed by Noah Shakespeare, who would later become Mayor of Victoria and a member of the legislative assembly.

It was in this hostile climate that the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) was incorporated. The western portion of the railway (built 1881-1885) was designed to link British Columbia with the rest of the country and improve trade and commerce between Eastern and Western Canada. Andrew Onderdonk, head contractor of the CPR, promised that he would hire white workers for the project and only "with reluctance engage Indians and Chinese"; almost immediately, however, many of the white labourers contracted from San Francisco found the work treacherous and abandoned camp.



Andrew Onderdonk; Head Contractor on CPR
Credit: Topley Studio / Library & Archives Canada

Harsh Conditions

Only a few months after work on the CPR began, Onderdonk was forced to recruit Chinese labourers from San Francisco and Portland, Oregon. Most of them were hired using the services of the Lian Chang Co., which paid travel and maintenance expenses for Chinese workers. Initially, those contracted were experienced U.S. railroad workers, but soon Lian Chang was recruiting inexperienced labourers from China. From 1881 to 1884, more than 17,000 Chinese men arrived in Canada to work on the CPR—10,000 of them arriving on chartered ships straight from China.



Chinese Work Camp (CPR) in Kamloops, BC
Credit: Edouard Deville/ Library & Archives Canada

More Caucasian than Chinese people worked on the Canadian Pacific Railway, but the project could not have been completed without Chinese labour. Several sections of the CPR were contracted entirely to the Chinese, including the 90 miles from Port Moody to Yale and the 70 miles from Lytton to Savona's Ferry. White and Chinese labourers worked together on many other sections of the railroad, but the Chinese were often assigned the most dangerous tasks. White

workers were paid \$1.50 to 2.50 per day and had their camp and cooking gear supplied; Chinese workers, paid \$1.00/day, were compelled to purchase their own supplies.

Conditions on the Canadian Pacific route and its work camps were harsh. Chinese workers were frequently injured or killed. Some died from exhaustion or from exposure during the long journey from their camps to their work sites; some were killed in explosions, or crushed when tunnels collapsed. Although accident and death rates were higher for Chinese workers, accident figures for them were excluded from official company reports. The seeming indifference of white foremen to the safety of the Chinese is said to have, on occasion, resulted in violence; violence also erupted between Chinese and white labourers. In 1883, a fight between Chinese and white workers near Lytton resulted in 9 Chinese being beaten unconscious; 2 died from their injuries. Their work camp was burned to the ground before the perpetrators fled.



Poor living conditions and lack of medical care resulted in many illnesses and deaths, especially from scurvy, which claimed 200 Chinese lives at the Port Moody work camp in 1883. Scurvy became chronic because low wages forced Chinese workers to subsist on a diet of rice and ground salmon without fruits or vegetables.

Chinese Work Camp (CPR) in Kamloops, BC
Credit: Library and Archives Canada / PA-053560

“Here in British Columbia along the line of the railway,” the *Yale Sentinel* reported, “the Chinese workmen are fast disappearing under the ground. No medical attention is furnished nor apparently much interest felt for these poor creatures. We understand that Mr. Onderdonk declines interfering, while the Lee Chuck Co., that brought the Chinamen from their native land, refused, through their agent Lee Soon, who is running the Chinese gang at Emory, to become responsible for doctors and medicine.”

Though some newspapers were sympathetic to the Chinese and their plight, others continued in the vein of ethnocentrism and continued to stir hostility against them:

WARNING: The Chinese are beginning to encroach upon property in Port Moody, which should be kept free from them. If they obtain a foothold in the central part of the city, that neighbourhood will be rendered uninhabitable for white people, and property will decrease in value. Necessity compels us to tolerate a few Mongolians in the community, but let them herd themselves and not attempt to mix in with the whites. There is no affinity between the races, nor ever can be, in spite of all that is preached about the universal brotherhood of man.

— *Port Moody Gazette* (April 12, 1884)

Many of the Chinese workers were unprepared for B.C.’s harsh winters, especially at Port Moody where ice prevented supply ships from docking and, thus, providing the workers with some relief. It is estimated that more than 600 Chinese workers died during the building of the CPR—more than four for every mile of track. In 1891, a Chinese community association collected over 300 unidentified bodies to be flown back to China for proper burial.

After the CPR

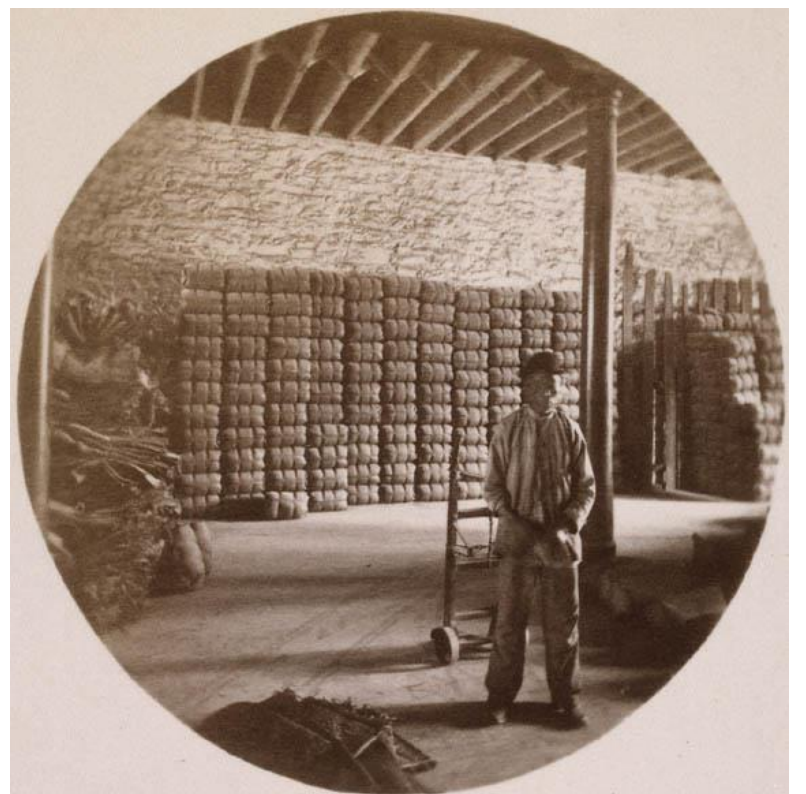
Though most Chinese remained concentrated in Victoria, construction of the railroad redirected settlement from the Fraser Valley and Cariboo region to communities close to the railroad camps of Kamloops, Yale, Lytton, and Savona's Ferry. Whereas Chinese in most B.C. communities were labourers, in Victoria they were employed as servants, cooks, tailors, vegetable-sellers—even cigar makers.

Chinese Tailor, Victoria, BC (1889)

Credit: Robert W. Reford / Library and Archives Canada / PA-118195



After completion of the CPR (1885), many Chinese were among the unemployed. Some returned to China; others moved east to settle in Calgary, Edmonton, Winnipeg, Ontario, Quebec, and to a lesser extent, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Newfoundland. Some started their own businesses or became factory workers. By then, there were more than 10,000 Chinese people in Canada, and many had begun to organize into associations and community groups. The Chinese community was still mainly comprised of single males: only 160 Chinese girls and women were recorded as residing in B.C. that year. There were nonetheless a few married Chinese women in the province, and by 1899 a language and culture school had been established for Chinese-Canadian children. As the Chinese population began to grow, several such schools soon followed.



Chinese worker in Victoria Rice Mills (1889)
Credit: Reford, Robert W. / Library and Archives
Canada / PA-118183

Despite British Columbia's move to disenfranchise the Chinese in 1872 and the hardships they endured during the building of the CPR, another nasty surprise was in store for the Chinese: the Chinese Head Tax of 1885. Legislated after the government no longer needed Chinese labour, it was the beginning of several discriminatory legal measures enacted against the Chinese over the next 38 years.

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