

Dangerous Places?

Mapping Chinatown & its crowded spaces in 1891 Victoria, BC



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Patrick A. Dunae

Department of History - Vancouver Island University

Donald J. Lafreniere

Department of Geography - University of Western Ontario

John S. Lutz

Department of History - University of Victoria

Jason A. Gilliland

Department of Geography - University of Western Ontario



Chinatowns were **dangerous places** in the late 19th century

- Deplorable places of **moral** danger
 - re: gambling clubs, opium dens, brothels
- Insidious places of **economic** danger
 - havens for immigrants who undermined white working men
 - “a man who must have beef and bread cannot work alongside a man who can live on rice”
- Unsanitary places that **endangered public health** in the larger community
 - decrepit, poorly drained, unventilated premises were incubators of miasma and contagious diseases (smallpox, bubonic plague)

Dangerous places because of overcrowding



An overcrowded Chinatown = a civic nuisance

Nuisance not a benign term, as first defined by San Francisco Board of Health

Nuisance law trumped liberal laws that privileged private property

- “intrinsic purity” of private property corrupted by use
- Chinatown properties corrupted by “unnatural overcrowding”

“Nuisance law allowed government intervention to reshape human conduct in the use and habitation of property”

Shah (2001), 51.

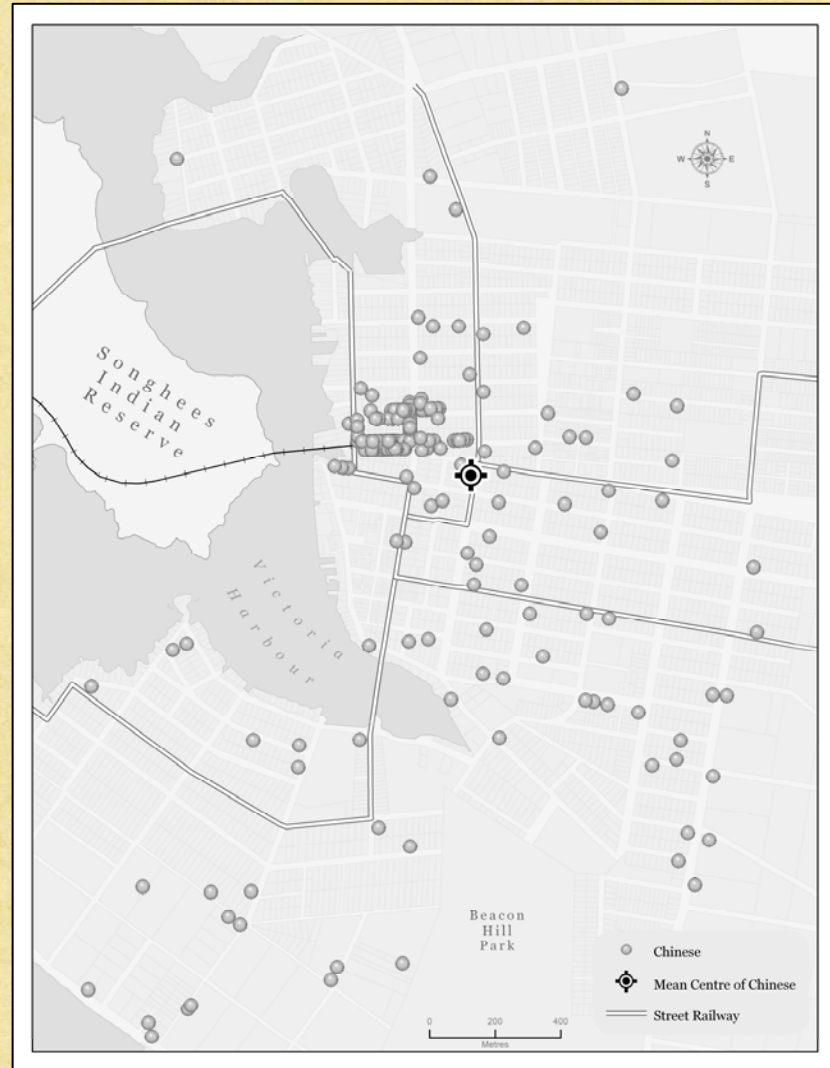


Focus: **Dangerous space** in Victoria, 1891



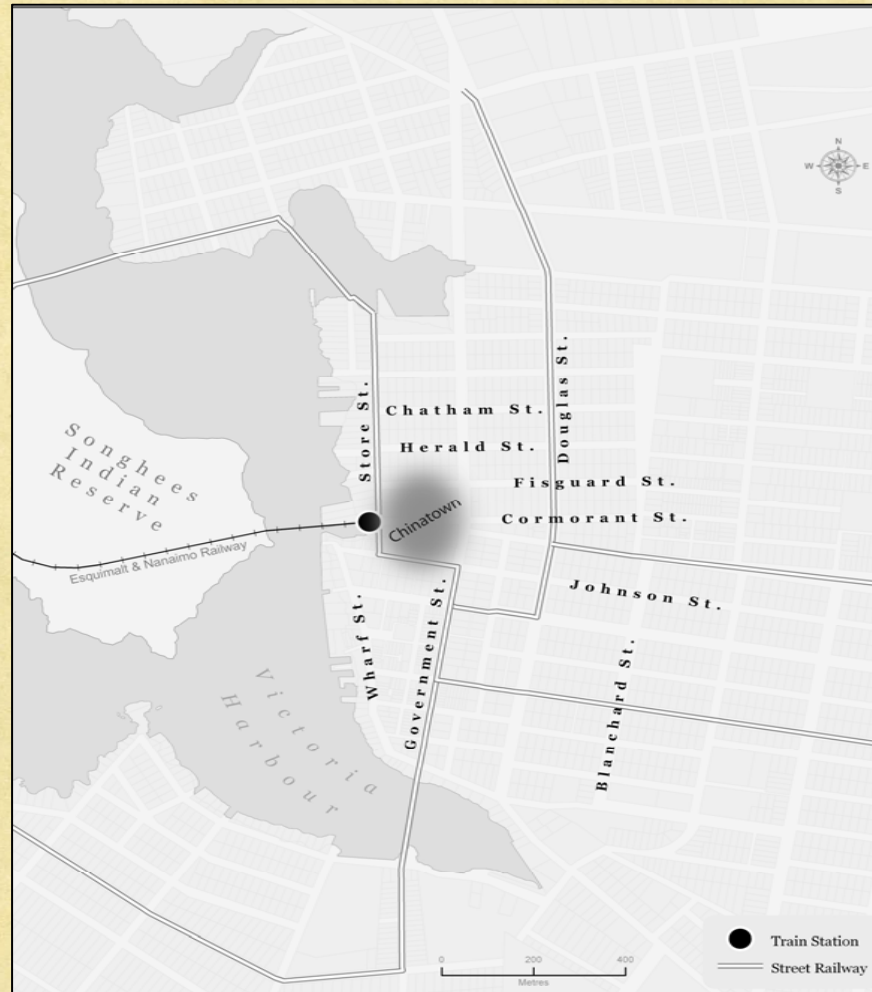
Chinese population in Victoria, 1891

GIS reveals
indicates
concentration
and dispersal



Map created by Don Lafreniere

Chinatown, Victoria, BC, 1891



Map created by Don Lafreniere

Chinatown area properties, 1891

GIS indicates
occupation and
ownership

Source: 1891 lot map
and tax assessment
rolls



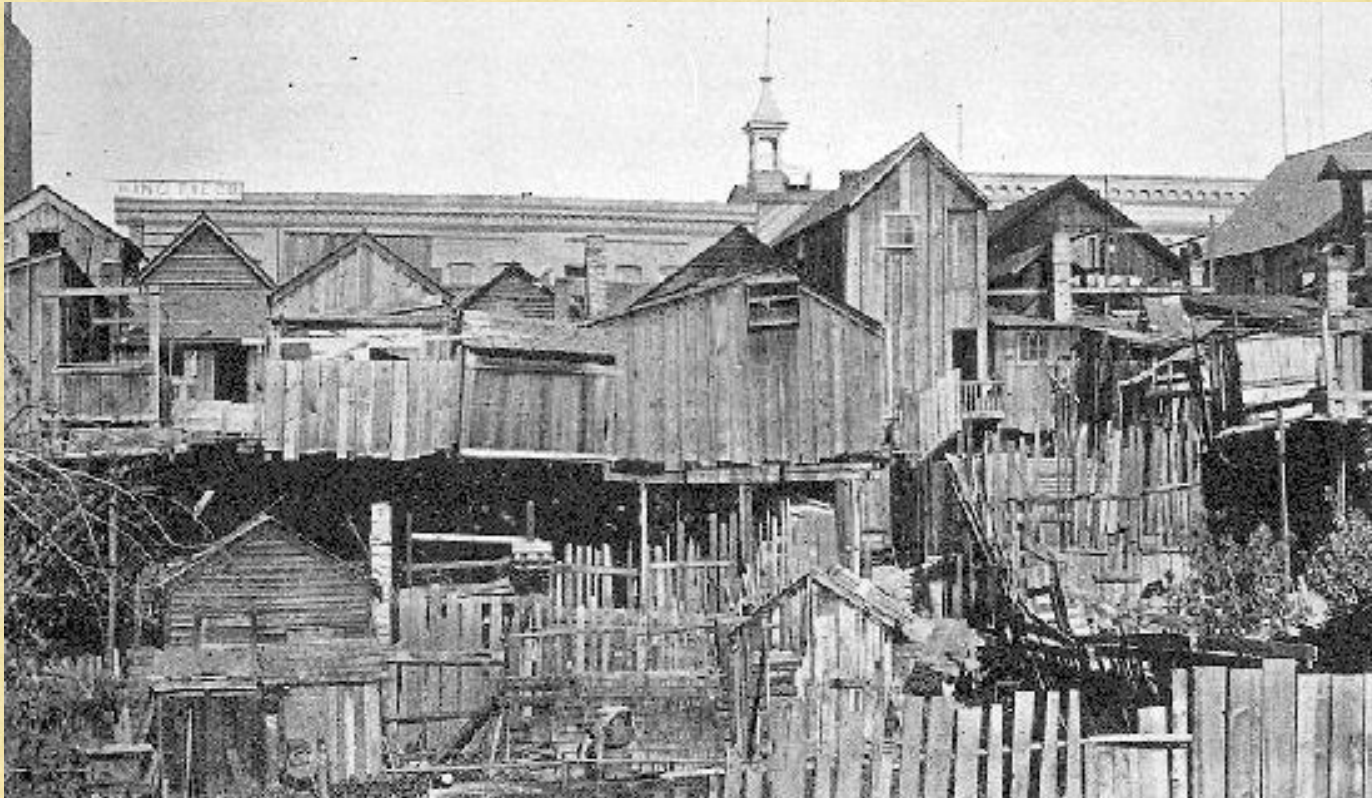
Map created by Don Lafreniere

Chinatown I



Architect-designed buildings on Fiskard Street for wealthy Chinese merchants

Chinatown II



Shacks on Johnson Street ravine occupied by pork butchers and labourers

Royal Commission on Chinese Immigration – evidence in Victoria, 1884

“A typical tenement...forty-three Chinamen were sleeping on the floor, lying side by side, the only window being closed and the air in the room stifling.”

“Their mode of living is contrary to all civilized teachings in respect of cleanliness of their dwellings and sufficiency of pure air and is thus injurious to the public health.”

“Chinese have a habit of huddling together in very limited quarters, and the surroundings of their habitations are dirty and disgusting. Their mode of living is certainly not conducive to public health.”

Victoria City Council (1886) by-law: *For the Preservation of Public Health, and the Prevention and Removal of Nuisances*

No person shall let or occupy, or suffer to be occupied, as a dwelling or lodging, any room which

(a) Does not contain at all times at least 384 cubic feet of space for each person occupying the same.

(b) Has not a window made to open in a manner approved by the Medical Health Officer or the Sanitary Inspector, or

(c) Has not appurtenant to it the use of a water-closet, earth-closet, or privy constructed in accordance with the by-laws and regulations of the City;

(d) Every room in which a person passes the night, or is found between midnight and five o'clock in the forenoon, shall be deemed to be occupied as a dwelling or lodging within the meaning of this section.

Consolidated Health Bylaw, section 71



Victoria's Chinatown

Allegedly overcrowded; apparently a nuisance

Just how crowded was Chinatown?

A preliminary assessment



This hand-drawn map depicts a street scene in Shanghai, 1945. The map is oriented with a north arrow pointing towards the top right. The street layout is shown with dashed lines, and buildings are represented by solid lines with internal details. The map includes the following features:

- Top Section:** A large building labeled "CHINESE THEATRE" with "6 SKYLIGHTS" and "STAGE". To its right is a building labeled "WHSE 1ST" and "MASONIC JOSS HSE 3".
- Middle Section:** A building labeled "CHINESE CIGAR FAC. 2ND" with "IRON SHUTTERS". To its right is a building labeled "OPIMUM FAC." with "VENTS" and "WOOD 2ND".
- Bottom Section:** A row of buildings labeled "CHINESE 1ST", "CHINESE 2ND", "CHINESE 3RD", "CHINESE 4TH", and "CHINESE 5TH".
- Other Features:** A "STORAGE" area, a "CASES FILED" area, a "VENT" (ventilator), and a "WOOD 2ND" (wooden second floor) are also marked.
- Dimensions and Measurements:** Various measurements are noted, such as "12' 8\"

Detail of 1891 fire insurance plan of Fisgard Street, Victoria

Chinatown in Johnson Street Ward, B-2 [JSW, B2]

JSB-B2	
Total population	2,500
Chinese population	1,600
Total census households	400
Chinese census households	250

Chinatown boarding houses and large census families

Fam #	Type	Rms/ floors	Residents	Head's occupation	Comments
183	Brick	1/24	32	Boarding housekeeper	Sawmill labourers
104	Brick	2/12	25	Grocer	General labourers
111	Brick	2/12	21	Boarding housekeeper	General labourers
298	Brick	2/5	21	Grocer	Cannery workers; firewood cutters
186	Brick	2/10	20	Boarding housekeeper	General labourers
103	Brick	2/4	18	Clothier	Tailors
278	Brick	2/5	17	Grocer	Boot makers
341	Wood	1/5	16	Launderer	Washmen, ironers
91	Brick	2/10	14	Pawn broker	Various; joss house keeper
335	Wood	2/5	12	Grocer	Railway labourers
295	Wood	1/2	12	Not known	Brick mason's labourers
153	Wood	1/3	11	Charcoal dealer	Charcoal burners
329	Wood	2/6	10	Clothier	Tailors
331	Wood	1/3	10	Barber	Gardeners

JSW-B2: A rough part of town: foundries, breweries, sawmills, warehouses, brothels, working-men's hotels and cabins

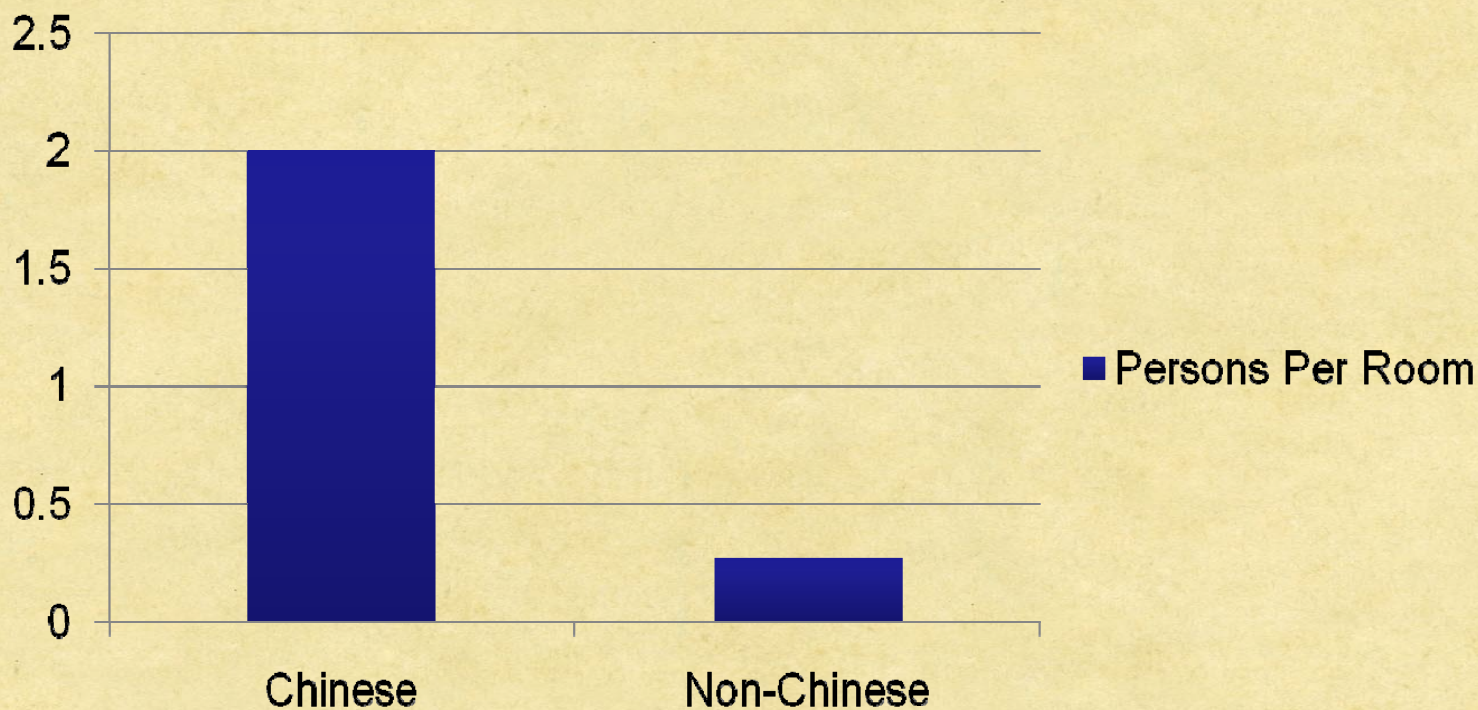
Relative density of working men's hotels *may* not have been significantly different from Chinese tenements.



Albion Iron Works employees with boiler outside workers' boarding house

Overall, density of Chinatown premises *was* higher than non-Chinese premises in the JSW-B2 census tract

Persons Per Room in Dwelling- Chinatown Excluding Boarding Houses

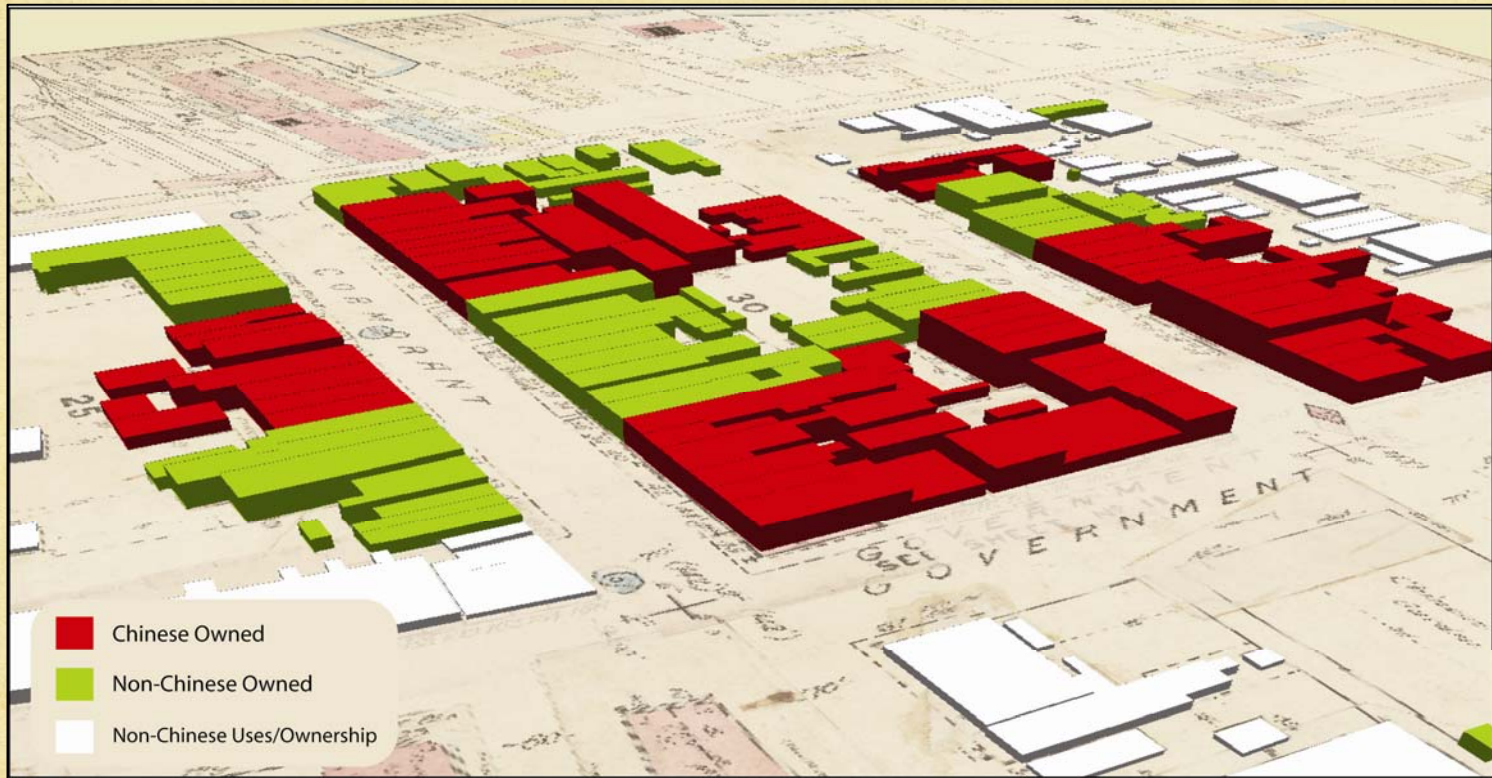


Preliminary conclusions

1. Chinatown streets were more densely populated than adjacent streets
2. Relative to adjacent spaces, Chinatown was overcrowded
3. Chinese may have been public health scapegoats
4. Cubic Space bylaw was *punitive* but not effective



Note - resistance strategy by Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association [CCBA] starts in 1893



Map by Don Lafreniere

CCBA resistance + opposition by white landlords =
repeal of cubic space bylaw

Conclusions

Was Chinatown a densely populated place?

Yes.

Were Chinatown premises more crowded than non-Chinese premises?

Yes.

Were Chinese residents unclean and dangers to public health?

No.



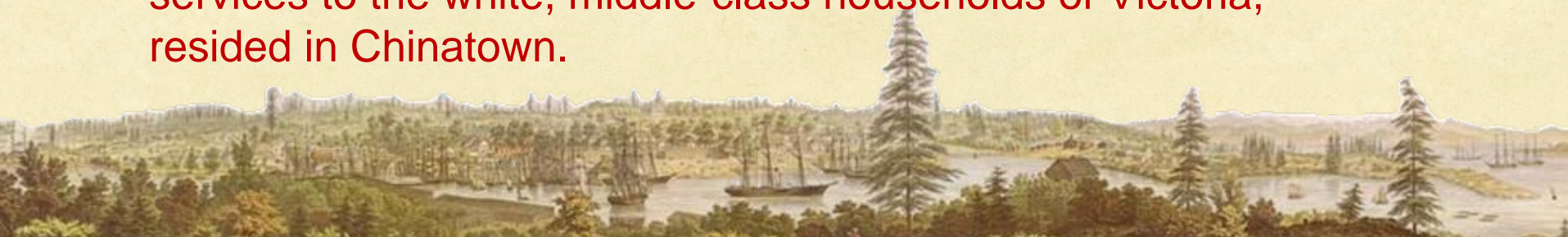
Concluding comments by Sir Matthew Baillie Begbie (1884):

“It is alleged that not only the aggregation of Chinamen in their dwellings is a source of danger to the public health, but that their habits are filthy. This last allegation I take to be mere unfounded abuse, if directed against them as a race.

There are of course dirty Chinamen. Many of them are very poor and are, perhaps, as dirty as poor white people.

The notion that Chinese are, as a race, dirty seems quite incompatible with the fact that they are, as a race, unanimously invested with a virtual monopoly of the two occupations requiring the highest degree of personal cleanliness -- namely, cooking and washing.”

Most of the cooks and launderers who provided their services to the white, middle-class households of Victoria, resided in Chinatown.



Acknowledgements

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Thanks to undergraduate research assistants:

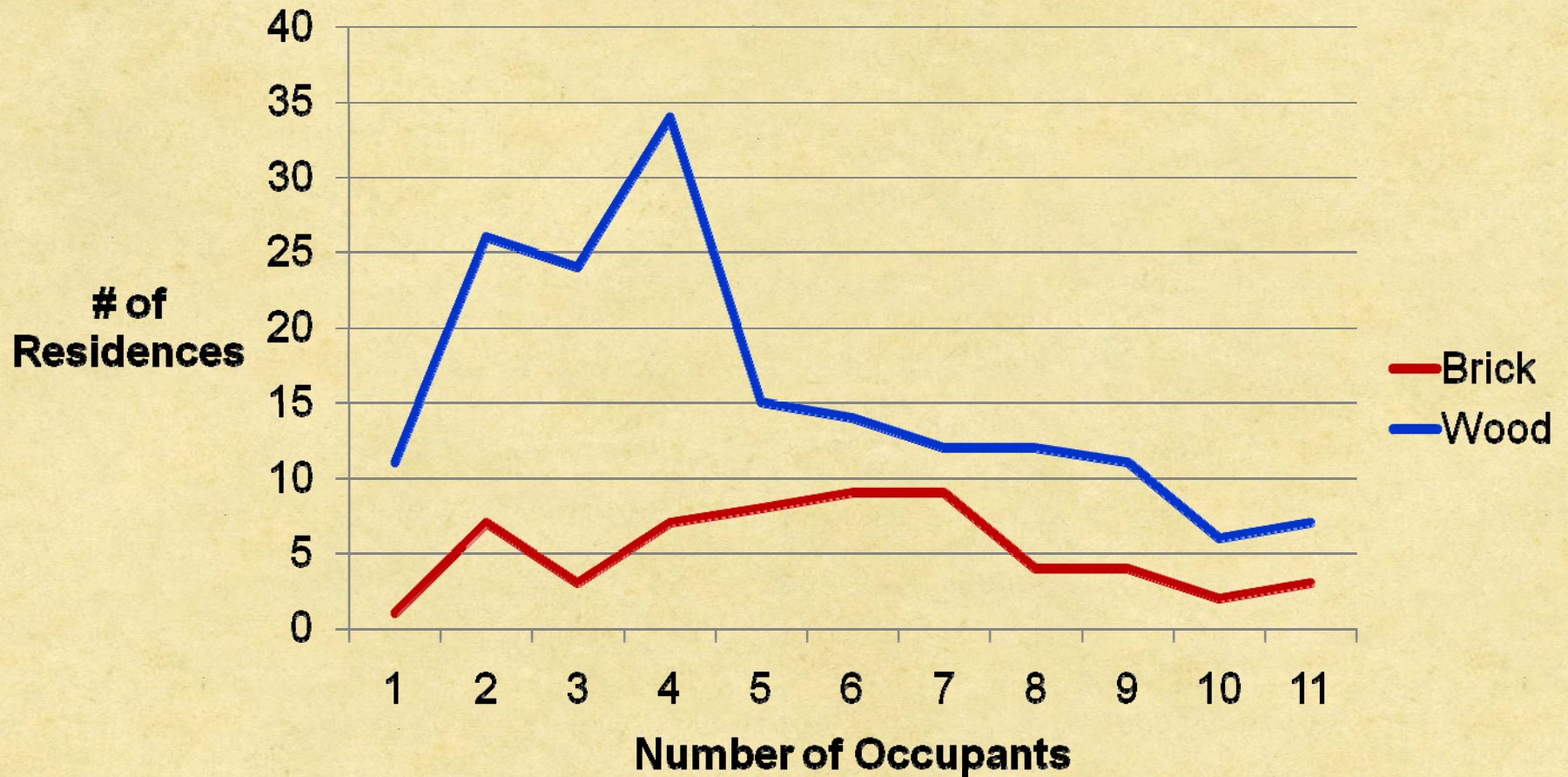
- Ryan Smith and Alan Kilpatrick (Vancouver Island University)
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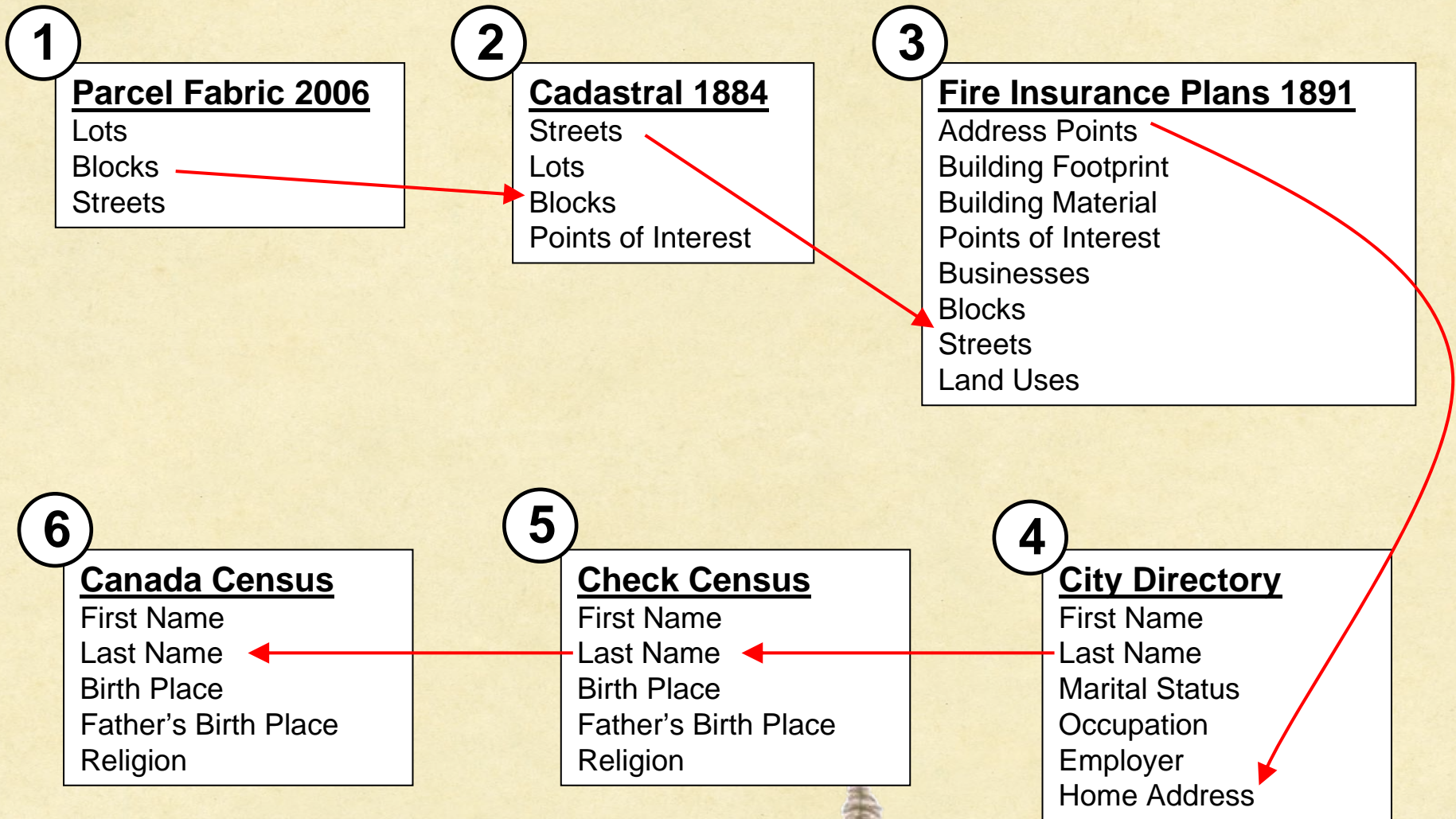
Building Construction- Chinese in Chinatown

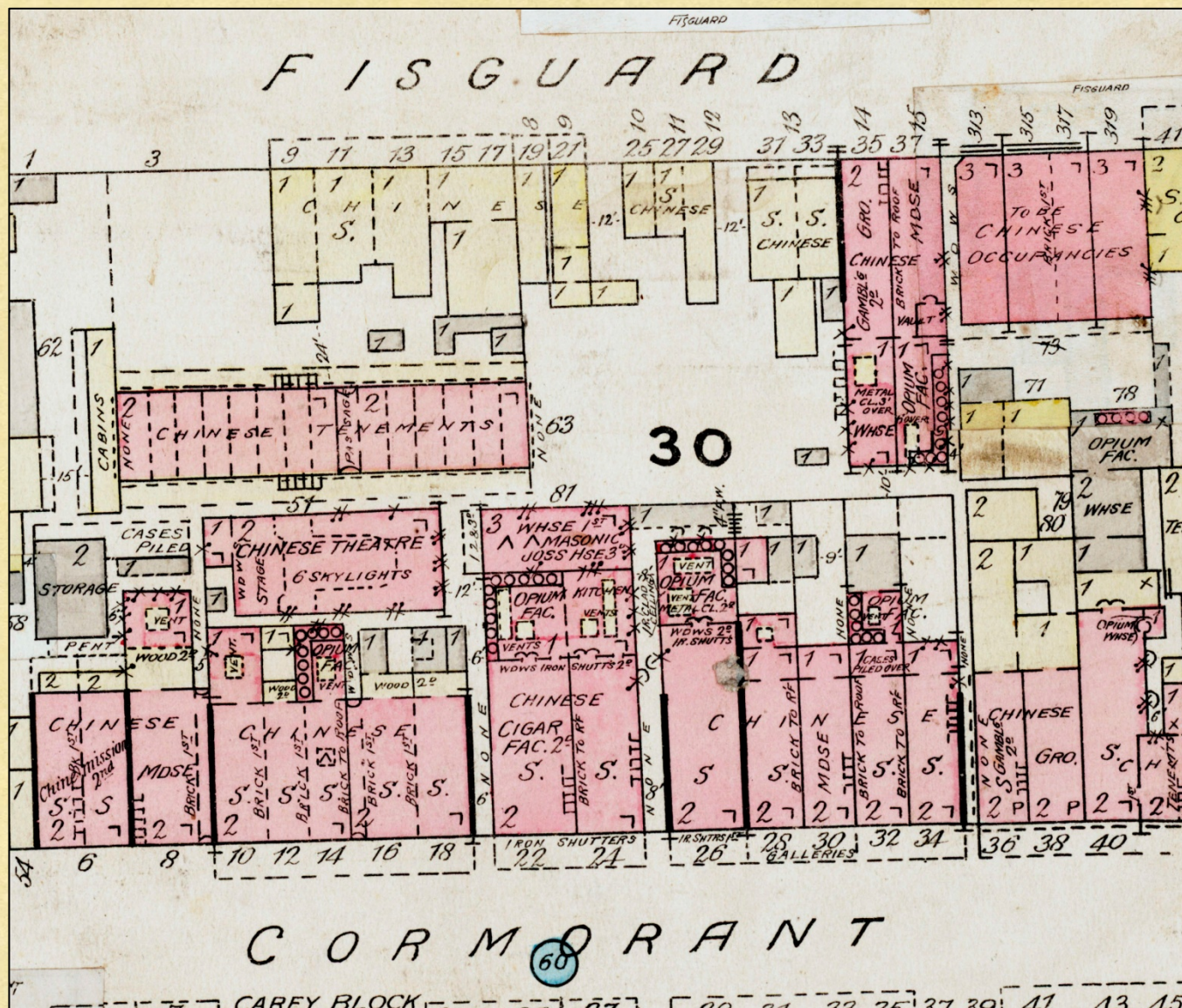


Reserve slides

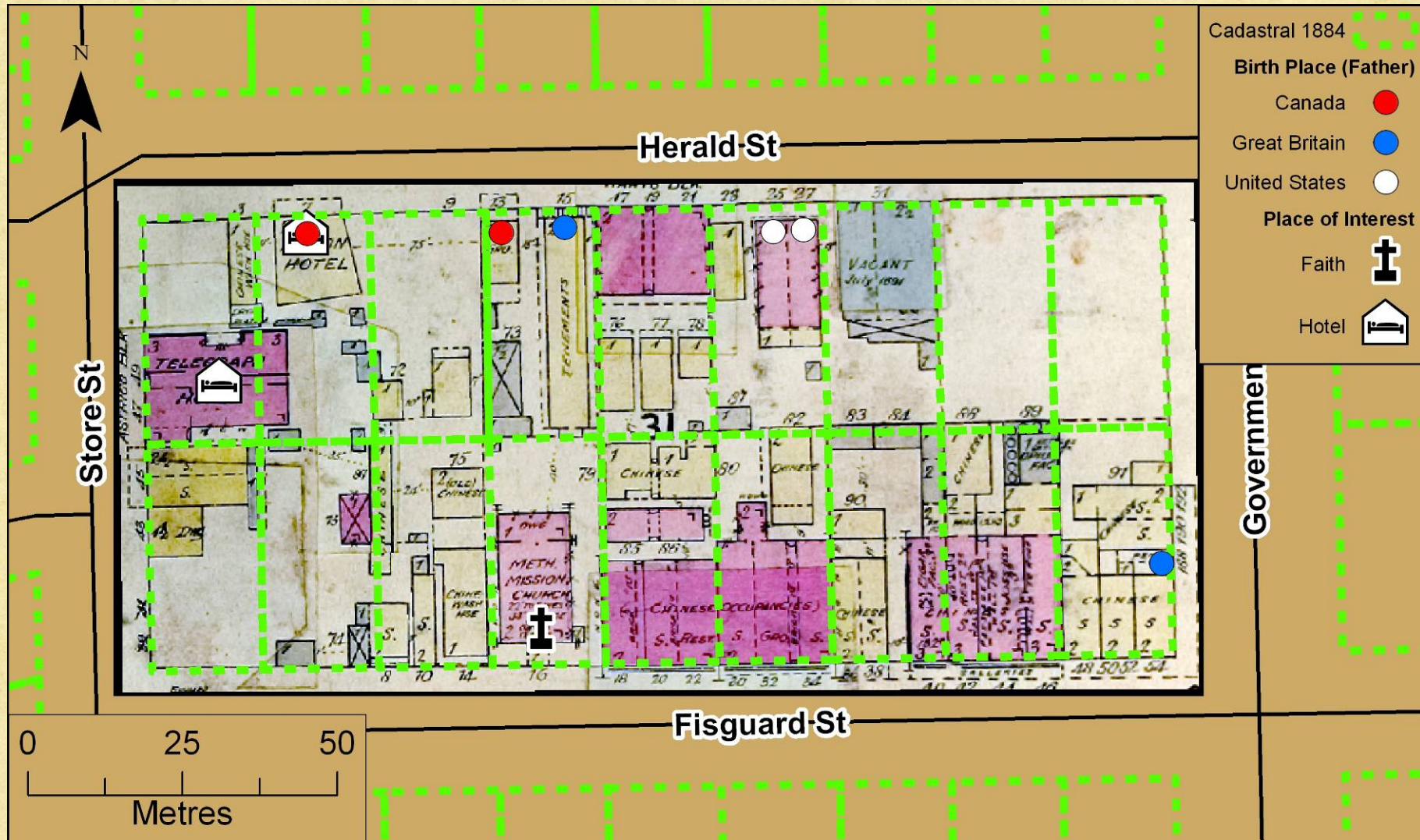


Victoria's Geodatabase





Victoria's Geodatabase



Sample Characteristics

Birth Place	
Canada	923
Great Britain	818
China *	811
Scotland	261
United States	244
Ireland	160
Other	185
Not Given	5

Birth Place (Father)	
Great Britain	1135
Scotland	456
Canada	299
Ireland	295
United States	151
China	6
Other	226
Not given	35

Religion	
Anglican	975
Presbyterian	581
Methodist	402
Roman Catholic	218
Baptist	109
Lutheran	49
Episcopal	38
Other	134
Not Given/N/A	97

Mapping Statistics

Check Census Linked to Canada Census: 2634 / **TOTAL RECORDS (00%)**

Check Census Mapped: 2621 / **TOTAL RECORDS (00%)**

Canada Census Mapped: 2603 / **TOTAL RECORDS (00%)**

* may also contain native americans

