

# Quarantine in British Columbia

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*The CP liner Empress of India, and the ill-fated BCCS Princess Beatrice moored at the William Head Quarantine Station wharf c. 1903. (Metchosin School Museum)*

Prior to the development of vaccines, social distancing was the sole means available to determine the health of strangers. The word quarantine derives from the Italian *quaranta*, meaning forty. During the Black Death of the mid-1300's, Venetians required passengers and crews of visiting ships to remain aboard for 40 days prior to being allowed to disembark.

Robert Patterson Rithet's extension of Victoria's Outer Wharves in the 1880's allowed for the berthing of ocean going vessels and established the city as Canada's first Pacific port of entry. The extended piers soon became a hub of maritime commerce known as Rithet's Piers. Much of today's Canadian Coast Guard Station is supported on those same piers.

Virology was still in its infancy in those days so the old Venetian solution of

quarantine remained the most effective measure to defend against introducing new virus into a country's population. In 1872 the Dominion Government established the Pacific Quarantine Station at Albert Head. The site's water supply and weaknesses in physical security soon proved inadequate for the increasing number of immigrants arriving so neighboring William Head was chosen as its replacement. Forty-two buildings were constructed on the secure 106-acre site to accommodate 120 first-class, 90 second-class passengers. Some 800 third-class passengers could be accommodated under canvas.

The families of the 13 staff members were housed on station with their own segregated school and chapel. The station's hospital could accommodate 49 patients while its cemetery received the mortal remains of travelers from many countries who died of disease during their time in quarantine. The cemetery is carefully tended to this day.

Upon clearance, healthy immigrants were ferried from the station to disembark at Rithet's Piers to cross Dallas Road to the newly built Dominion Immigration Building. There, each was processed before beginning their new lives in Canada. The brick, now painted white, and wrought iron balustrade running along Dallas Road between Erie and Simcoe Streets is all that remains of the immigration building.

### [The Secret Migration](#)

In 1917 85,000 young men from China's famine-stricken Shandong Province were transited through the Station in the largest mass migration in Canadian history. After quarantine, they were transported in batches to Vancouver to board *secret* trains to travel across the country to Halifax. There they embarked across the Atlantic to Marseilles, France to serve on World War One's Western Front as the *Chinese Labour Corps*. The Corps was detailed to perform battlefield support services including digging trenches, driving trucks, preparing and delivering food, medicines, and ammunition. It has been reported they were also detailed to recover both bodies and unexploded shells from no-mans' land. British estimates that some

5,000 were killed. Chinese estimates hover around the 20,000 mark.

### Post World War I Activity

Among the smallest trans-Pacific vessels to clear William Head quarantine was the Chinese junk *Amoy*. Upon her clearance in 1921 she moored in the Inner Harbour, attracting thousands of curious visitors. The largest vessel to clear was *RMS Queen Elizabeth* on her way to the Royal Canadian Navy's Esquimalt naval base where she was reconfigured as a Second World War troop ship. The station's peak year of activity was 1927, during which the passengers of 1,068 ships were processed.

In 1924 the lepers from the D'Arcy Island colony in the Strait of Georgia were transferred to Bentinck Island just off William Head's nearby Rocky Point where their welfare became the responsibility of the quarantine station's medical officer. The work of Venezuelan physician and scientist Jacinto Convit García (1913 –2014) in the treatment of leprosy led to the colony's closure in 1956.

At the end of the Second World War, the station served to quarantine returning Canadian prisoners of war liberated from Japanese prison camps.

William Head Quarantine Station was closed in 1958. It reopened the following year as the William Head Institute, a federal minimum security prison.

### A very short history of Vaccinology

Edward Jenner is considered the founder of Western vaccinology. In 1796 he inoculated a 13 year-old-boy with the cowpox virus that subsequently developed immunity to smallpox. Two years later the first smallpox vaccine was developed. Since then a vast number of vaccines have been developed to serve against a long list of infectious diseases including cholera in 1897, anthrax in 1904, tetanus in 1923, diphtheria in 1928, and polio in 1950.

As we all are painfully aware, the world's medical research is currently focused on developing a vaccine for the COVID-19 virus.

For more information on the William Head Quarantine Station history:

1. *Peter Johnson's excellent Quarantine: Life and Death at William Head Station 1872-1959 published by Heritage House Publishing, ISBN-10 1927527317*
2. *Metchosin Historical Society 4450 Happy Valley Road, open Sundays, except holidays: 11:00 a.m. – 2:00 p.m. [metchosinmuseum.ca](http://metchosinmuseum.ca)*
3. *The Secret Immigration (film): [www.geist.com/blogs/hayward/viff-2015-tricks-on-the-dead/](http://www.geist.com/blogs/hayward/viff-2015-tricks-on-the-dead/)*
4. *[victoriaharbourhistory.com](http://victoriaharbourhistory.com)*