

## Yick Wo and the Right to Due Process

Yick Wo was born in China. In 1861, he immigrated to San Francisco, Calif. He began a laundry business in a wooden building. He ran it for over 20 years. The city fire wardens (fire chiefs) had always given him a license to run his laundry.

In 1880, the city of San Francisco passed an ordinance (a local law). The ordinance stated that no one could run a laundry in a wooden building without a permit from the city supervisors. The city said the permit was for safety. Anyone without a permit had to pay a fine.

Yick Wo applied for a permit under the new ordinance. He did not receive it. He was not alone. Chinese immigrants ran about 200 laundries in San Francisco. That was 89 percent of the laundries. None of these Chinese laundries received a permit. All but one non-Chinese laundry received the permit.

Yick Wo and others thought this was unjust. He kept running his business. But he refused to pay the fine. He ended up in jail and brought his case to court. In 1886, it made its way to the U.S. Supreme Court, the highest court in the nation.

Yick Wo argued that the way in which the law was carried out violated the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment. Under that amendment, all persons within a state are entitled to due process of law.

The Supreme Court agreed. Yick Wo won his case. The court ruled that the city of San Francisco had deprived Yick Wo of due process of law based on his Chinese national origin. The 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment did not allow such discrimination.



Chinese immigrants to San Francisco concentrated in an area known as Chinatown. (Wikimedia Commons.)