

Our Diverse Community

Cairns Early History

Cairns city was officially formed on 7 October 1876. Settlement and colonization occurred on the traditional lands and seas of Gimuy Walabara Yidinji people and Yirrigandji peoples.

Chinese migrants played an important role in the early development of Cairns' agricultural industries and nearby regions from 1876 to 1920. The early Chinese migrants settled in Sachs St (today: Grafton St). This area became known as Chinatown. In 1886 Chinese residents comprised 30% of the total Cairns population.

From 1860 until the Federation, South Sea Islanders were brought to Australia to work as labourers primarily in the emerging sugar cane industry of Queensland. Several thousand Islanders were brought here around 1880. The recruiting ceased in 1904. Almost all South Sea Islanders came from Melanesia, Vanuatu, The Solomon Islands and the New Hebrides. The exact number of descendants who settled in our area is not known.

The first Sikh people arrived in north Queensland in the end of 19th century. They were among the thousands of migrants who came to clear the land for farms and cattle properties. Many also worked in the sugar industry.

In the decade following the Second World War the Cairns region experienced dramatic changes, largely due to the arrival of thousands of migrants from more than 20 European countries. Among them were Italians, Russians, Germans, Greek, Poles, Hungarians, Lithuanians, Croats, Latvians, Spanish, Serbians, Hungarians, Albanians, Czechs, Austrians and many others. During this time the migrant communities made up more than 25% of the overall residential population and the region became one of the most culturally diverse regions of Australia.

Descendents from these communities continue to contribute to the economic, social and cultural development of the Cairns region. They own businesses and/or work in the community, tourism, development, agricultural, educational, government, cultural, corporate or public services sector. Most communities are still active in maintaining their cultural practices through yearly cultural events and activities; passing on what traditions they can to the newer generations, ensures that the contributions made by their families are recognised by all Queenslanders.



*Chinese procession, Cairns Carnival, 1908
Courtesy Cairns Historical Society*



*Newly arrived migrants at the Cairns Migrant Centre 1952
Courtesy of George Manier*



*European migrant workers helping to develop the Cane Industries circa 1950's
Courtesy of George Manier*

Emerging Communities – A Snap Shot

The Cairns tropical climate has attracted many people from our neighbouring Melanesian and Polynesian Island nations. Cairns has the second highest Papua New Guinean population in the country (only second to Brisbane) and a thriving and rapidly growing Cook Island and Samoan community. Many Polynesians are also known as Pacific Islanders, who have arrived through New Zealand and are often represented in the census as New Zealanders. An increasing number of Pacific Islanders are also migrating from other states or regions. A large percentage of their population comprises of young people, and children, many who are born in Australia. They are committed to maintaining their language, and cultural practices through the regular maintenance of rituals, cultural protocols, celebrations and community gatherings.



Cook Island elders, keeping traditions alive through their weaving.

Although only about 200 people, the East Timorese community are among the earliest settled refugee groups to arrive in our area over 25 years ago.

In 1987 the Hmong community began to settle in our area and are today among the largest refugee communities represented in the Cairns local government area. Those who settled here were mainly from Laos, Vietnam and Northern Thailand.



Young Hmong women from the Cairns community in traditional costume.

Cairns has a diverse and growing African community. Many have arrived as refugees and are from Sierra Leone, Burundi, Sudan, Liberia and Ethiopia. Refugees also arrived from Bosnia, Croatia and West Papua.

Other previously settled African migrants came from Kenya, Nigeria, Ghana, Uganda, Tanzania, Madagascar and Guinea.

The Latin American community includes people from Chile, Uruguay, Argentina, Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru, Columbia, Brazil, Mexico, El Salvador, Honduras, Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic and Cuba. Within each of these groups there are from one to thirty persons. Historically people from Spain comprised the majority of the Spanish speaking population, but later a majority migrated to Mareeba and established farms. A small Spanish community remains in Cairns.



The African community enjoying a community bbq on the Cairns Esplanade Lagoon: Yembeh Forna, Mohammed Sedro, Aster Sedro, Mrs Arwan.

The growing Asian population comprises mainly of people from Japan, Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, Korea and a very small group from Mongolia. Cairns also has a small Sri Lankan community. The Indian community continues to increase and are mainly of Hindu and Sikh backgrounds. Communities from the Middle East are represented by people from Lebanon, Egypt, Iran and Israel.