

Statement of Significance

Nikkei No Haka Japanese Cemetery, Cumberland BC :: 1891



March 2025

Description of Historic Place

The Nikkei No Haka Japanese Cemetery is located adjacent to the Chinese Cemetery on Union Road, about 1 km east of the Village of Cumberland and about 2 km west of the Cumberland Municipal Cemetery, in the Vancouver Island community of Cumberland, British Columbia. All three of the Village's cemeteries were designated as protected Heritage Cemeteries in 2007 and retain active cemetery status.

Heritage Values

The Nikkei No Haka Japanese Cemetery is valued as the final resting place of approximately 198 Japanese-Canadian miners, mill workers, loggers, tailors, entrepreneurs and their family members who lived in Cumberland and the Comox Valley until 1942. Although the earliest recorded burials are from 1891, the earliest surviving headstones date from 1901, interring the 9 Japanese miners killed in the disastrous February 15, 1901 explosion at the No. 6 Mine, and the most recent interments date from 2005.

This segregated Asian cemetery, like many others on the West Coast of BC, represents the historic discriminatory policies and attitudes against residents of Asian heritage and the tragic interruption in the history of the Japanese-Canadian community in BC and Canada. Almost all of the Japanese Canadian graves in this cemetery pre-date 1942, when their forced relocation and incarceration in internment camps away from the coast occurred. It was not until April 1, 1949, that Japanese-Canadians were allowed to return to the BC Coast, although the vast majority did not go back to the communities where they came from - as over the seven years of displacement - their land, homes, possessions, and employment had been lost or forcibly sold.

This historic place provides a tangible link to the living Japanese-Canadians who can trace family history back to those relatives who were the fabric of a thriving Japanese-Canadian community in the Cumberland area, once the largest on Vancouver Island, and suffered the complete loss of home, community and place. The cemetery provides the most crucial physical testimony to the historic Japanese-Canadian community of Cumberland, as the historic Japanese neighbourhoods of Cumberland and the surrounding area were all but demolished. This historic place provides an opportunity for descendants of the Comox Valley's Japanese-Canadian community, who regard the cemetery as the symbolic cornerstone of the survival of their heritage, to visit, participate in annual ceremonies and practices, and to thank previous generations of ancestors.

The cemetery is further valued for representing the perseverance of the Japanese-Canadian families who did choose to return to BC, albeit not always to their community of origin, and for its evidence of reconciliatory gestures and projects, the first of which was initiated by the Kiwani Club of Courtenay, (in consultation with the Buddhist Church of Vancouver and funded by donations from Japanese across Canada), which in 1967 oversaw the reclamation of the

cemetery. The 59 surviving headstones that had not been desecrated or removed by anti-Japanese vandalism during WWII, were gathered together and set in a circular concrete memorial. This place, as well as the engagement opportunities in its subsequent commemoration projects and traditions, offers a space of continuity, acknowledgement and perpetuation for a segment of the Cumberland community that was persecuted, ousted and wronged. Its legal protection by the Village of Cumberland in 2007 was intended to "acknowledge the contribution made by the Japanese and to honour those who lived and worked in Cumberland from the late 1800s".

This sacred site has spiritual value, not just for the Japanese-Canadian community but for all who visit this poignant and spiritual place. This is expressed in its "good feng shui, which refers to the power of the natural environment and composite influences of natural processes. It is believed that the fortunes of a man depend, among other things, on how well his ancestors are buried with respect to geomancy (the art of divining the future for good or ill fortune)"¹. The spirituality of the site is also perceived in the wooded character of the Japanese site, which has reportedly evolved since the site was active. Retention of the native trees, moss and islands of native shrubs has created a "Japanese landscape effect" evocative of the Japanese concept of wabi-sabi². Its serenity and beauty has been noted by one of the last descendants of the Japanese community still resident in the area.

Character-Defining Elements

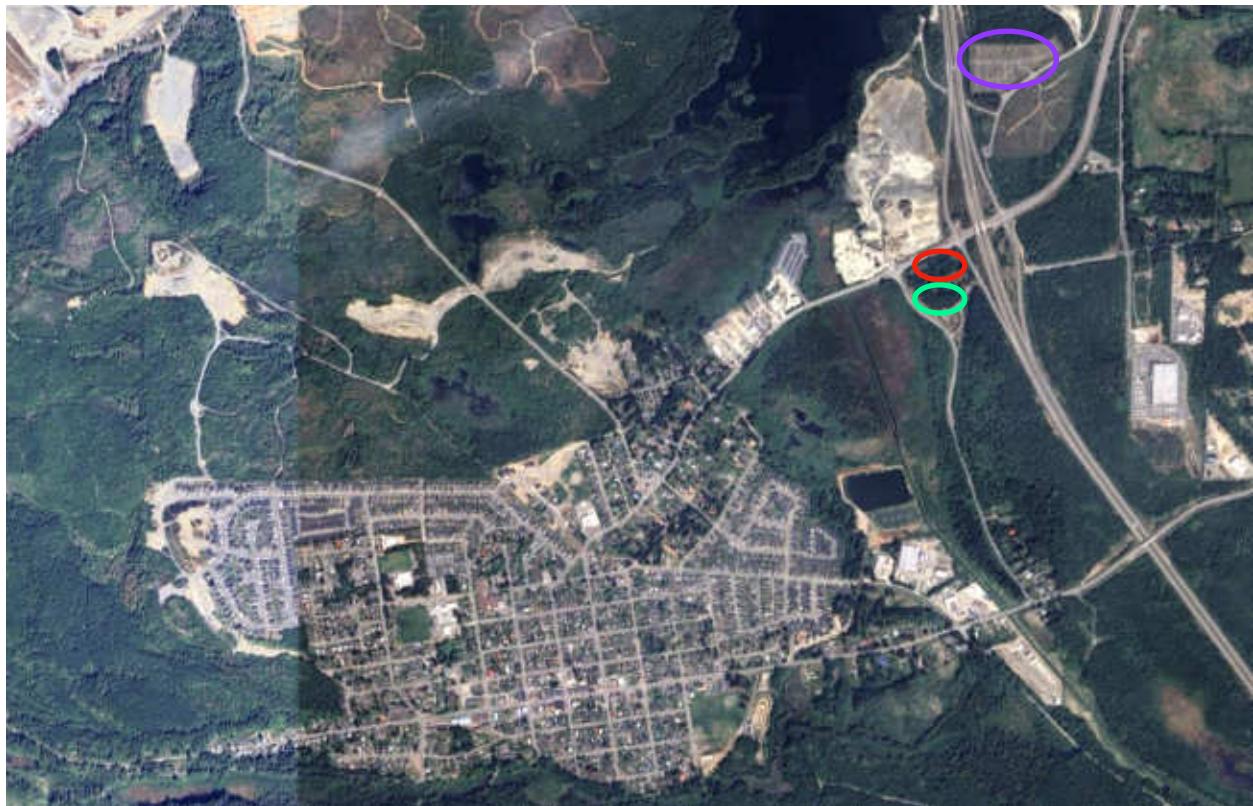
- Historic location on Union Road, segregated (along with adjacent Chinese Cemetery) from the municipal Cumberland Cemetery.
- Continuous burial grounds for Japanese-Canadian residents of the Comox Valley since 1891
- Signs on the highway that guide to the "Japanese and Chinese Cemeteries" as opposed to previous, removed signage marked 'oriental cemetery'
- Painted wood picket fence around the cemetery (restored & expanded initially in 1967 and renewed in 1986 and 2003 - reinforcing a "sense of place" and "sacredness" as per the historic fence seen in 1940s photographs)

¹ Quote from Bylaw No. 833, the heritage designation of the Japanese cemetery in 2007

² The Japanese aesthetic centred on the acceptance of transience and imperfection, which reveres the beauty of weathering, aging and "flawed beauty." <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wabi-sabi>

- 59 headstones recovered at the site in 1967 installed on a raised octagonal concrete memorial just inside the entry gate. Some are polished angular pillars with readable inscriptions in Japanese and English. Others are natural stones, faded and coated in moss.
- Remnants of graves throughout the historic cemetery grounds (outside the memorial installation), barely distinguishable from the forest floor, some marked with sinking stone or wood perimeters.
- Stone cairn with bronze plaque installed at the cemetery entrance on the first Miner's Memorial Day in May 1986, "in honour of the Chinese and Japanese who lived and worked in Cumberland from the late 1800's" sponsored by four Canadian industrial, mining and woodworkers' unions.
- 2008 plaque to recognize the contribution of this site to Cumberland's history and culture.
- An accessible paved walkway from the cemetery's parking lot to its 2005 main gate, and from there to the headstones memorial, funded in part by donations from Japanese-Canadian individuals and organizations in 2009 both in Canada and Japan.
- The wooded character of the site, mostly treed by towering Douglas firs and ground covered with moss.
- Nikkei No Haka wood sign with gold leaf lettering both in English and Japanese installed in 2007 (marking the 30th anniversary of the municipally organized resumption of the Obon practice in the cemetery)
- New grave markers installed in recent decades and years (the only post-WWII interments to date took place in 2005 and a new marker was installed on the communal plinth in 2013).
- Association with nearby Chinese Cemetery, another segregated community cemetery and with Coal Creek Historic Park (the former site of No. 1 Japanese Town and of Chinatown)

Location map



Aerial map showing the Village of Cumberland and its three cemeteries circled. The Japanese Cemetery in green, the Chinese Cemetery in red and the Municipal Cemetery in purple. Credit: Google Maps



1930s aerial showing the historic surrounding road network (before the highway was built). Japanese cemetery indicated with a red arrow.

Credit: Village of Cumberland

Current Photographs







Archival Photos



Japanese graveyard taken by Mr. Clinton who was the US consulate. C140-375. Date: 1901.



Gathering at the Japanese cemetery by a monument to miners killed in number 6 explosion. C140-302. Date: 1901.

Source: Cumberland Museum & Archives



Above: Memorial service for Japanese killed in WWI for Canada. C140-003.

Below: Cumberland Japanese cemetery. Baseball team paying last respects to fellow player Hajime Kajiyamac. C140-375. Date: 1922. Source: Cumberland Museum & Archives





Left: C140-160: Japanese funeral - Tsugio Iwasa, pre 1929.

Below: Japanese funeral for Hirose, pre 1929. C140-109. Source: Cumberland Museum & Archives

Source: Cumberland Museum & Archives



Research Resources

Heritage BC - Cumberland Japanese Cemetery nomination on the Japanese Canadian Historic Places Cultural Map. <https://heritagebc.ca/japanese-canadian-location/cumberland-japanese-cemetery/?lang=en>

Village of Cumberland - Coal Creek Historic Park. <https://cumberland.ca/coal-creek-historic-park/>

Village of Cumberland - Cemeteries Master Plan 2014. <https://cumberland.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/Cumberland-Cemeteries-MP-Final.pdf>

Village of Cumberland Japanese Cemetery - clippings and resources file

Websites:

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Obon>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Internment_of_Japanese_Canadians#cite_note-5

<https://iwonderandwander.ca/2020/03/28/cumberland-japanese-cemetery/>

<https://najc.ca/the-story-of-cumberland-and-royston>

<https://thecollectivemags.ca/hidden-treasures/>

More facts about the cemetery

- Renovations, maintenance and added features such as the paved walkway were funded in part by donations from Japanese-Canadian individuals and organizations both in Canada and Japan
- Annual ceremonies and events that occur at the site include the Miner's Memorial Weekend in June and the practice of Japanese Obon - the ancient, Buddhist tradition of caring for ancestor's graves - a family reunion holiday during which people return to visit and clean their ancestors' graves when the spirits of ancestors are supposed to revisit the household altars. At the Cumberland Nikkei No Haka Japanese Cemetery this is practiced annually since 1977 - in mid-August. The Japanese-Canadian community in the Comox Valley area and beyond attends to the cemetery beforehand to clean up the blown down tree branches, sweep and clean the markers.