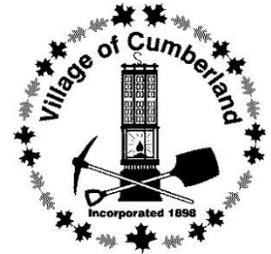


# Village of Cumberland Statement of Significance Saito House



2203 Comox Lake Road, Cumberland B.C.  
Established 1925



Prepared by Denise Cook Design + Elana Zysblat, Ance Building Services and  
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## Saito House - 2203 Comox Lake Road, Cumberland BC



### Description of Historic Place

The building, known as Saito House, is a side-gabled, single-storey wood-frame house with a projecting entry at its northwest corner. It is situated in Coal Creek Historic Park in a forest clearing about 1 km west of the intersection of Dunsmuir Avenue and Comox Lake Road in Cumberland BC.

### Heritage Values of the Historic Place

The Saito House has historical, cultural, social and aesthetic value as an enduring record of the Japanese Canadian community of Cumberland.

Built in 1925, the Saito House is important as the last standing building of the former No. 1 Japanese Town Site, one of two lost historic Japanese neighbourhoods in Cumberland which had the largest Japanese Canadian community on Vancouver Island prior to their forced removal in 1942. The No. 1 Town Site comprised at its peak of three dozen single-family houses, two general stores, a town hall, a bath house, a language school, a baseball diamond and community vegetable gardens. Once the Japanese community was removed, it was taken over by mining companies who initially rented out the vacated Japanese houses to miners, but allowed other non-miner families to settle as well. Once the last local mines closed in the 1950s and 1960s, all the Town Site buildings, with the exception of the Saito House, were demolished, dismantled or relocated<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> In 1954 there were 14 buildings left standing in No. 1 Town Site, 2 of which were vacant and 2 boarded up. Source: April 20, 1954 Property Assessments. Cumberland Museum & Archives 986.96.2

The building's location is valued for representing the siting and context for the No. 1 Japanese Town Site near the former site of Mine No.1. Built on sloped terrain riddled with creeks, the site is a testament to the industry of Japanese Canadians, alongside the Chinese Canadian and Black Canadian communities, who settled and built their towns and gardens on less than desirable terrain. The foundation structure of the Saito House, comprised of old growth wood pilings perched on a creek bed, accommodates the cyclical movement of water below the building, an indication of the unique topography and landscape on which Cumberland's surrounding townsites were built.

The Saito House marks the geographical separation of the ethnic minority group townsites from the dominantly European village of Cumberland (formerly Union Camp). This illustrates the racial segregation of living and working life in early BC's industries and communities, an indicator of the multi-cultural and often racist history of the community, province and country.

The building and property are further valued for their association with the Saito family, Japanese immigrants Masakichi and Chise, and their eight children, all born in Cumberland, whose social, cultural and economic story represents those of many Japanese Canadian families in the Comox Valley from the turn of the 20th century up until their removal during World War II.

Japanese immigrants first came to the Comox Valley in the early 1890s to work in the local coal mines, where they were paid half the wages of Caucasian workers. In the early 1920s, new provincial legislation prohibited Asian people from working underground and most Japanese men moved into the logging industry while others started their own businesses running grocery, hardware and tailor shops. Masakichi and Chise Saito came to Cumberland in 1914 and encouraged Masakichi's brother, Yusuke Saito and family to settle there as well. Both Saito brothers worked in the local coal mines and initially settled in rudimentary mine company houses in No. 1 Town Site. Masakichi Saito later worked for Japanese Canadian lumber companies, including the Royston Sawmill Co. and Kagetsu Yama Logging Co. He died in a logging accident in 1936.

The Saito families were active in local community groups and events and their children were honour roll students at school. Along with the entire Cumberland Japanese community, they were forcefully removed from the BC Coast as part of the 1942 War Measures Act. No Cumberland Japanese families ever returned to live in the community.

The Saito House is important as a rare surviving representative of the dozens of vernacular, rural miner cottages which once filled Cumberland's Japanese, Chinese and Black town sites from the 1890s to the 1960s. An employee of the Japanese Canadian Royston Sawmill Co., Masakichi Saito built the subject house with lumber he obtained at work, resulting in a building of informal quality with sometimes inconsistent finishes and treatments.

The Saito house is valued as a continuous single-family home to only three families since 1925. The Saito family lived here until 1942, after which it was home to coal miner George Kelly's family, and since 1983 it has been home to Jan Hellerud and David Kydd. In 2002, the property was transferred from the forestry company Weldwood of Canada Inc. to the Village of Cumberland for use as an interpretive historic park.

Since 2002, the Village of Cumberland, the Cumberland Chinatown-No. 1 Japanese Ad Hoc Group, the Cumberland Museum & Archives and Coal Creek Historic Park Advisory Committee have all been involved in plans and efforts to commemorate Cumberland's Japanese and Chinese Canadian communities through the designation of these former townsites as parkland with significant cultural value.

The Saito House within Coal Creek Historic Park has lasting importance as part of the identity of Cumberland, which today honours the Japanese community that once flourished here and that continues to be an integral part in Cumberland's continuing story.

### **Character Defining Elements**

- Original location in the former No. 1 Japanese Town Site, now Coal Creek Historic Park
- Siting on a creek bed in a forest clearing, surrounded by natural forest on three sides and fruit trees along the south edge of the clearing.
- Residential form, scale and massing as expressed by its one storey plus crawlspace height and rectangular plan with projecting side entry (likely an enclosed front porch)
- Side-gabled roof with projecting eaves
- Wood-frame construction with wood drop siding, wood window trim and cornerboards
- Asymmetrical, inconsistent fenestration, including double-hung, divided-light casement and fixed wood windows from various decades, some with projecting sills
- Wood piling foundation (now reinforced in places with concrete pads) built into the sloped terrain and accommodating creek water movement in and out of the west portion of the unfinished, open crawlspace.
- Internal brick chimney

## Current Photographs



Front view from northeast corner



Rear view from southeast corner



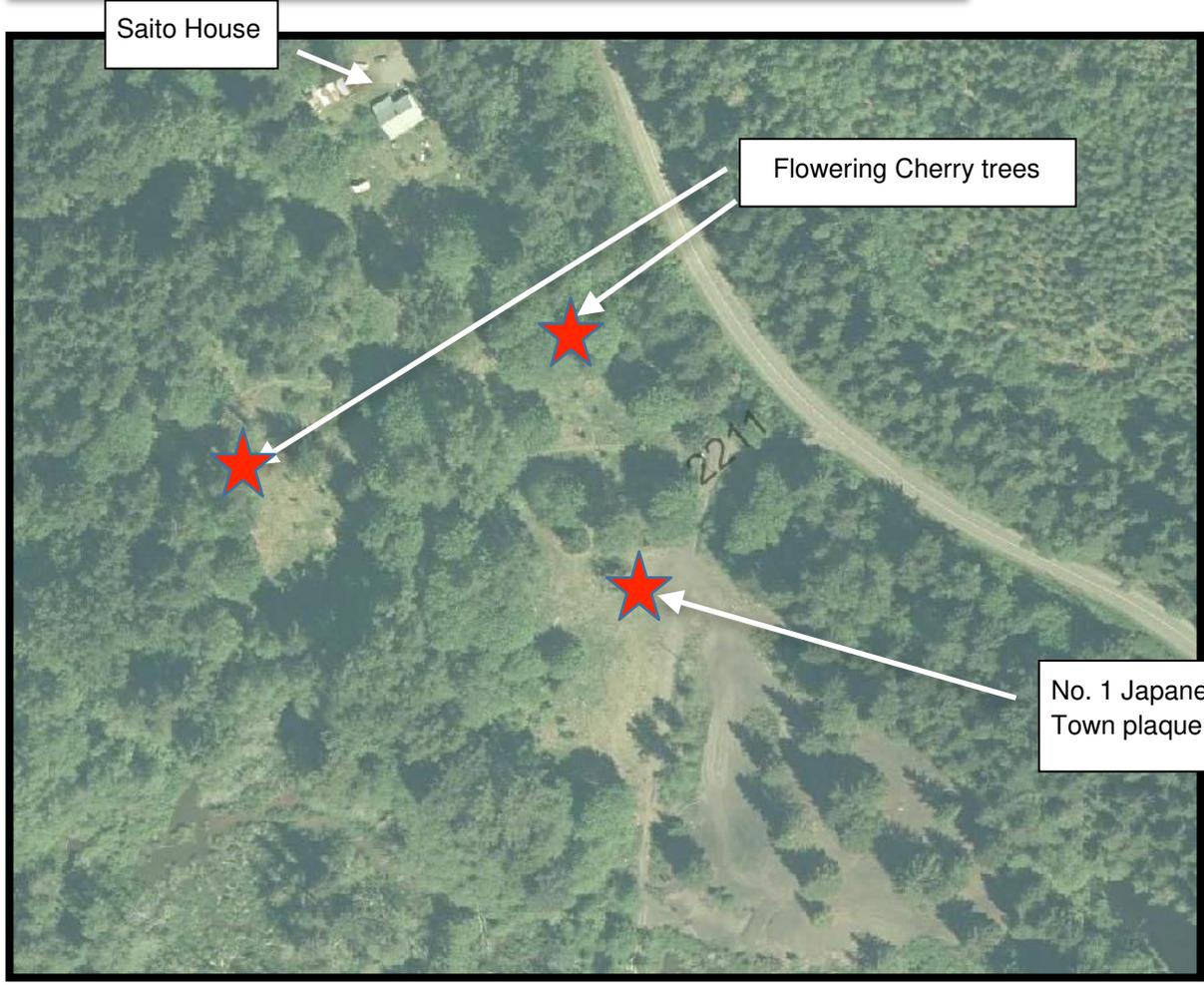
Rear view from southwest corner



Side view - west Creek bed



Fruit trees and green house along southern edge of property clearing



Saito House

Flowering Cherry trees

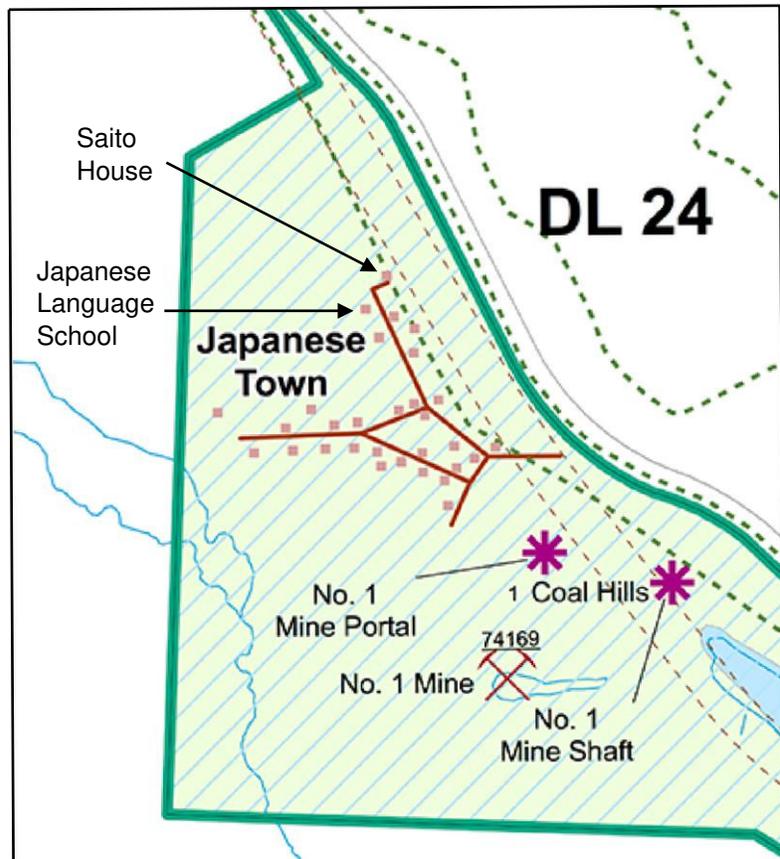
No. 1 Japanese Town plaque

## Context



(top) Aerial view  
(2012) of Saito House  
with Comox Lake Road visible

(right) map of former location of  
streets, houses, and mines in No.  
1 Japanese Town Site area.



## Archival Photographs



The southern elevation of the Saito House during the Kelly family residency 1946-1983. source: George and Hazel Kelly private collection



The eastern elevation of the Saito House during the Kelly family residency 1946-1983. source: George and Hazel Kelly private collection



Four views of the Saito House in the snow, during the Kelly family residency 1946-1983. source: George and Hazel Kelly private collection





C140-510 - No. 1 Fujinkai (Women's Association). Cumberland Museum & Archives. Mrs. Saito was part of this association and is noted as being in this photo.



2017.046.002- Beauty Queens of No.1 Townsite Japanese Town. c. 1940. Cumberland Museum & Archives. Fujie Saito, the family's daughter is on the far right.

## Research Resources

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Barr, Jennifer. 1997. *Cumberland Heritage: A selected History of People, Buildings, Institutions and Sites 1888-1950*. Corporation of the Village of Cumberland.

BC Archives Vital Statistics - marriage and death certificates for Masakichi and Chise Saito

BC Archives - Archival photographs of Cumberland

Chandler, Kelsey and Garden, Lise. 2010. *No.1 Japanese Town - Establishing a Context for the Preservation of the Saito House*. Joint project between VIU and Cumberland Museum & Archives.

Comox District Free Press. January 9, 1936. *Logging accident, inquest, resident of Cumberland*

Comox Valley Echo. March 3, 2015. *Cumberland Considering Purchase of Saito House*

Cumberland Islander - various archival editions

Cumberland Museum & Archives - Saito House file, Japanese people and buildings archival photographs

Heritage BC - Japanese Cultural Map of BC. <https://heritagebc.ca/japanese-canadian-location/saito-house/>

Isenor, D. E.; Stephens, E. G.; Watson, D. E. 1988. *One Hundred Spirited Years: A History of Cumberland*. Ptarmigan Press.

Iwaasa-Dobbs, Hanae. March 1, 2006. *The Revised Masakichi-Chise Saito House Presentation* for the Ad Hoc Group.

Lidster, Ian. May 7, 2010. *A Lasting Tribute: Cumberland committee honours Japanese families by turning the No. 1 Townsite into a park*. inFocus Magazine

Vancouver Public Library - historic directories of BC pre-1955

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Village of Cumberland. 2014. Coal Creek Historic Park Master Plan. <https://cumberland.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/Final-Coal-Creek-Master-Plan-July-20141.pdf>

## **Summary of interview with Ray Iwaasa - February 21, 2018**

tel: 1-877-556-2326 # 108 Qualicum Beach

Brother of Hanae Iwaasa-Dobbs who wrote the presentation *The Revised Masakichi-Chise Saito House Presentation* for the Ad Hoc Group. March 1, 2006. Relative of the Iwaasa family who lived in No. 1 Town Site. Former Chair of the Ad Hoc Group in the early 2000s.

*It was Yuri, daughter of Masakichi and Chise Saito, who gave very precise oral history about the house and determined the construction date of 1925 and that the lumber came from Royston Sawmill. Iwaasa and other members of the Ad Hoc group met her several times at the Saito House before she passed. Some of the Saito grandchildren are still in touch and live in the Lethbridge area. After the Japanese community was removed many of the houses were looted, people came and took what they wanted. Also there were artillery practices in the town site and in the houses that caused some damage. Jan and Dave, the current owners, have been amazing hosts and historians of the house. They have kept a log of all the visits from former Japanese residents and have always accommodated them. It is thanks to them that the house has been preserved so well. They conducted lots of work and upgrades.*

## **Summary of interview with George Kelly (Jr.) - February 21, 2018**

George & Hazel Kelly - 4109 Fraser Rd. Royston, BC tel: (250) 334-3453

Son of George and Elizabeth May (nee Carrol) Kelly, the second family to live in the Saito House starting circa 1946-7 until 1983.

*George Kelly Sr. was a coal miner all his life. He worked in mines no. 5, 8 and Tsable River. They first lived in the Nanaimo area, then moved near the lake in the Cumberland area, then moved into Cumberland's Chinatown in 1942 and finally settled in the Saito House when George Jr. was about 8 or 9 years old. He lived there until he got married. The coal mine took over all the 'shacks' in Japtown and miners could put their name down to request housing from them. After a while they let anyone rent the houses, even non-mining families. George Kelly opted to live here so that his children would be closer to the school in Cumberland. When the mines closed, the houses came up for sale and the Kelly family bought the Saito House (with the aid of George Sr.'s brother who 'had money') likely in the late 1960s (Tsable River closed in 1966). The Kelly's were very poor. All the surviving houses in Japtown had outhouses, there were no indoor toilets, including the Saito House. But being built by Masakichi Saito and not a mine-provided shack, it was better built and had milled wood floors rather than crude lumber floors like the other houses. There were no stores in Japtown while the Kellys lived there. George Jr. went into the logging industry and worked at logging camps all over the Comox Valley for 47 years until he retired 20 years ago. George Kelly remembers as a young boy watching soldiers (from Vanier Camp) go into the vacant houses in Japtown and shoot rubber blanks for practice. Once soldier was even accidentally shot in the leg. Also he remembers that a grocery store in Cumberland, Matt Brown's, 'took stuff' from the vacant Japanese houses and sold it in the store. Several houses were moved out of the town site and relocated elsewhere, there is one he knows of in Cumberland (painted yellow, not far from the firehall). The same thing happened in Bevan. After George Sr. died (1981) his mother sold the house.*