

Village of Cumberland



Statement of Significance

Church of St. John the Evangelist (now the Abbey Studio)
2687 Penrith Avenue, Cumberland BC ~ 1895, 1911, 1941



Prepared by Elana Zysblat, CAHP :: Ance Building Services :: July 2025



Description

The Church of St. John the Evangelist, completed in 1895, is a one storey front-gabled building with gothic windows built in two stages: 1895 and 1911. Attached to the east elevation is a one-storey side-gabled hall built in 1941. These wood-framed buildings are located on the corner of Penrith Avenue and First Street in Cumberland, British Columbia.

Heritage Values

Completed and consecrated in 1895, the Church of St. John the Evangelist (now known as the Abbey Studio) has historic value as an important component of Cumberland's 'Church Row' which was established between 1894 and 1895 along Penrith Avenue. Lots were donated to congregations of the community by the mine owners, Union Colliery Co., for the purpose of building churches. Together and individually, these church buildings represent the initial settlement of Union townsite in the 1890s, to be renamed Cumberland in 1893; the predominance of the Christian faith amongst its early European settlers; and the location of the first townsite lots to be developed between Allen and Ulverston Avenues and First and Third Streets.

This historic place is valued for its association with the Anderton brothers of Comox (known for building the 1885 St. John the Baptist Catholic Church in Comox) who constructed the church in August 1894. Their sister, Mary Paul, was the first church organist. It is further valued for its association with the women of the Catholic congregation, their leadership and mobilization, through which they fundraised for the construction of the expansion of the church in 1911 and for their organization as an Altar Society in 1925 and as part of the Catholic Women's League in 1944.

Abbey Studio has aesthetic value for its Gothic Revival architectural style, which was popular amongst the 1890s churches in Cumberland, as it was implemented in different iterations in all four original local churches. Although the Catholic Church building was the smallest and lost its character-defining bell-tower after a 1946 earthquake, its tall, gothic windows (with pointed arch tops) and its steep-pitched gable roofs are indicative of this architectural style.

This historic place has social and cultural value for its transformation from sacred site to a cherished cultural venue in the 1990s, as a general dwindling in membership and attendance led the Bishop to amalgamate all Comox Valley Catholic parishes into one Catholic community in 1985, leaving the Catholic church and hall to be increasingly underused. The last ever Sunday and Christmas Eve masses at the Church of St. John the Evangelist were held in 1984, and the last weekday mass was held in 1990. In 1994 the property was sold to private ownership and under a series of passionate owner-entrepreneurs, the site was rebranded as "The Abbey" in 2004 and ultimately became known as Abbey Studio - a cultural venue housing art shows, concerts, movies, and workshops. Like the Waverley Hotel, the Abbey became a renowned BC live music and performance venue with local and international artists gracing the stage. This legacy has been consistently maintained since 2003 under owner and on-site seasonal resident Cathy Stoyko who has additionally converted the hall space into a long-term residential rental.

Character-Defining Elements

- Church use from 1895 to 1990 (105 years)
- Institutional and community use in Hall (including summer school) from 1941-1990 (49 years)

- Cultural use since 1994
- Partial residential use (sacristy attic and attached 1941 hall building) since 2003
- Original corner location at Penrith and First, along Cumberland's 'Church Row'
- Wood frame construction
- Institutional design and form as expressed in its formal facade and public entrance with double doors and pointed-arch church-sized windows on Penrith and First elevations.
- Gothic Revival style, as expressed in its tall, pointed arch wood-sash windows and its steeply pitched gable roof.
- Evidence of three phases of construction, with two distinct attached church buildings and a side-gabled hall attached to the east side of the church.
- Interior Elements: large, open sanctuary space; stained, wood-clad, coved ceiling; painted wood-clad walls; wood trim around windows and doors.

Appendix A – Current Photographs



Front view
(Penrith Ave)



Side view
(First Street)



Former United and Catholic Churches in the snow. Source: Gesa Ward via Abbey Studio Facebook page



Current view of the interior, looking towards the entrance doors

Three views of cultural events at the Abbey Studio.



Source: Abbey Studio Facebook page

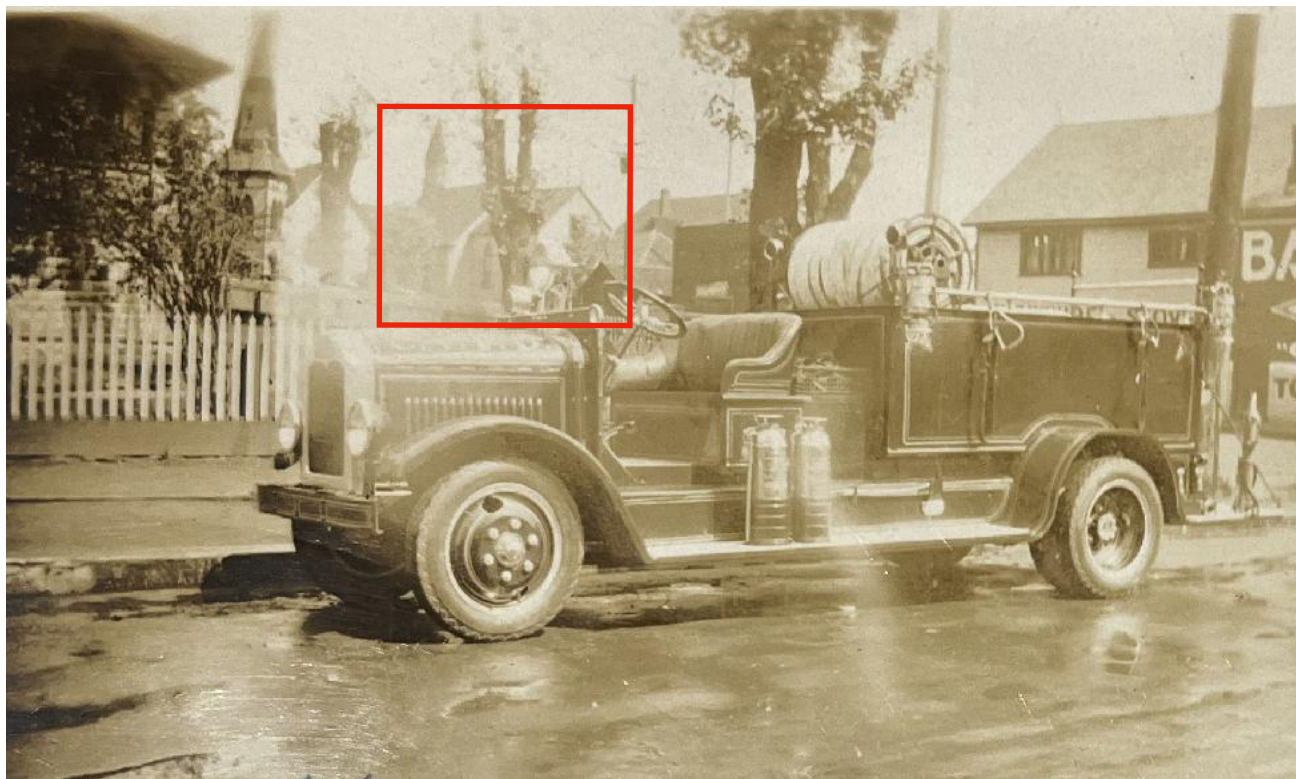
Appendix B – Historic Photographs



Penrith Avenue showing “Church Row” in 1907. And the Cumberland Public School on First Street. The Catholic Church outlined in red (prior to 1911 extension with bell tower). Source: BC Archives B-07600



Cumberland Public School group photo (div. 6, grade 4 & 5) in 1935, showing Catholic Church in background. Source: Cumberland Museum & Archives C240-128



Above: Cumberland's new fire truck with Catholic Church in background, 1932. Source: Cumberland Museum & Archives 2015.208.001 - Banks Family Album 1930s pg128



Left: Photo of Catholic Church. Source: Roman Catholic diocese of Victoria, 1939 or 1940 pamphlet. Page 24 dedicated to Cumberland Church.



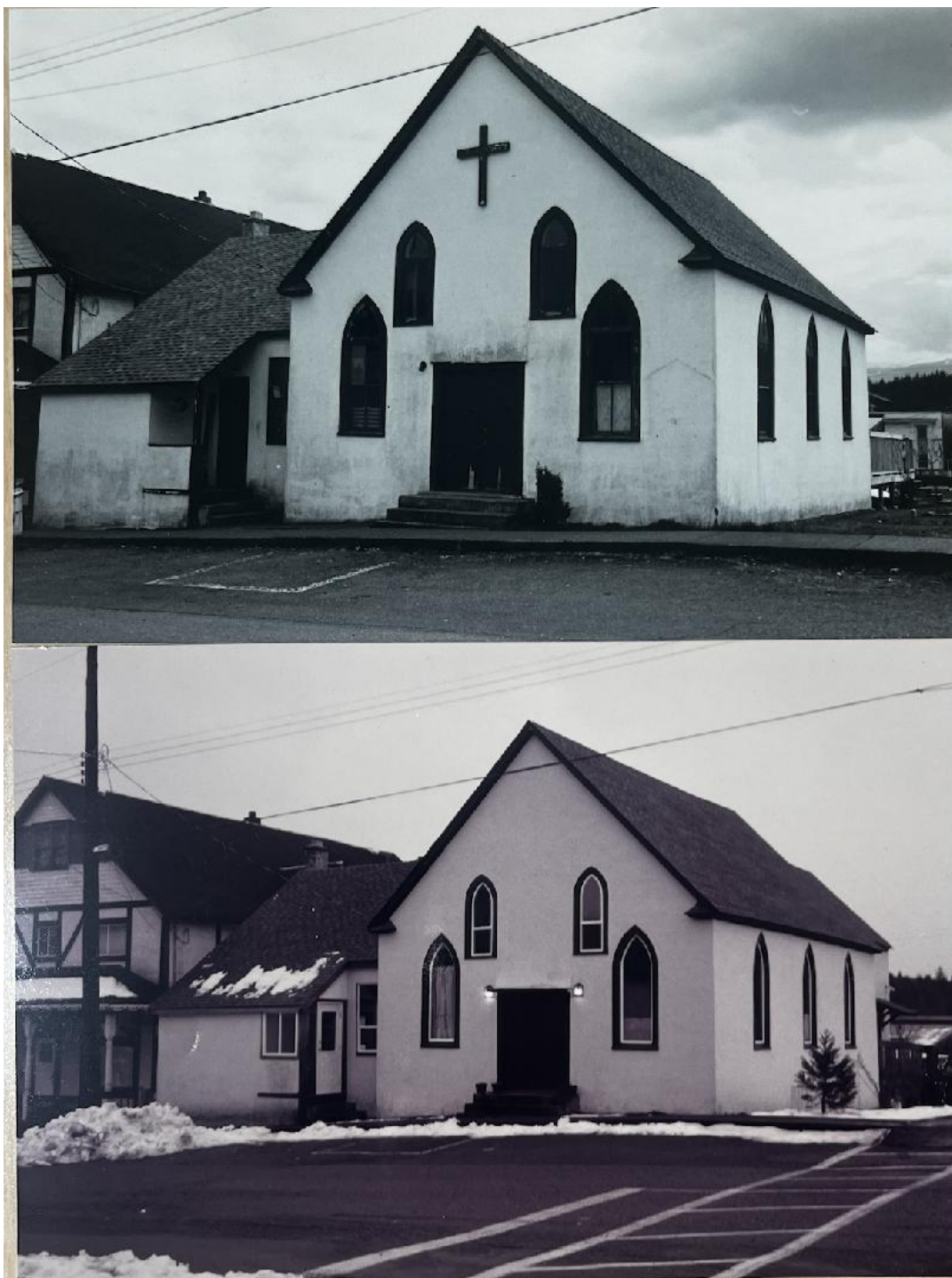
Left: Pipe band marching in may 1960s. Catholic Church now without bell tower. Note the third small rear gable, to be demolished this same decade. Source: Cumberland Museum & Archives C080-028

Below: Photo of Catholic Church in 1983. Source: Cumberland Museum & Archives C050-015



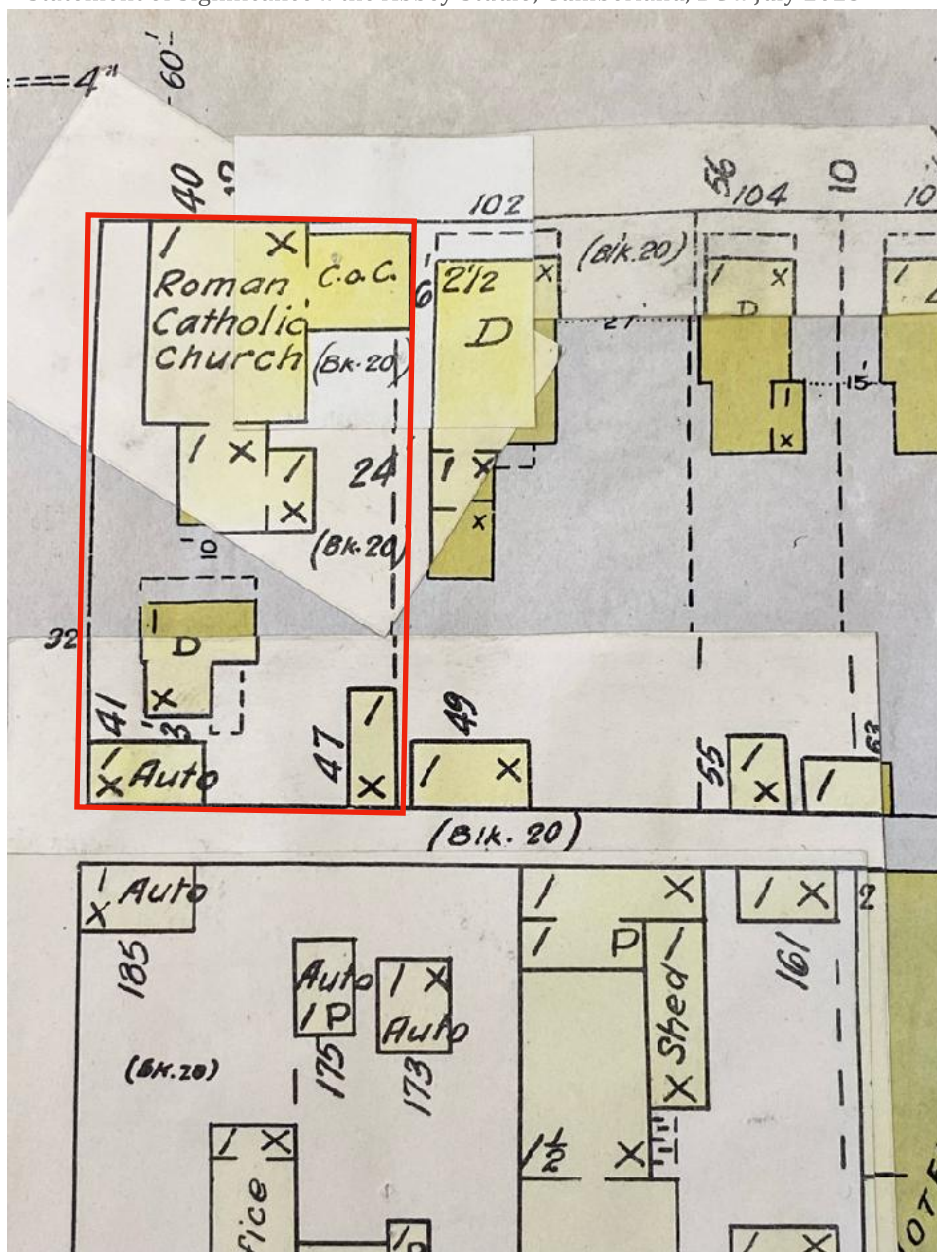


Two images of the Catholic Church in 1994, the year it was sold to private hands. The lower image with boarded up windows. Source: Cumberland Museum & Archives - 2687-89 Penrith Avenue folder.



Top: Catholic Church in 1995. Bottom: Catholic Church in 1996 (note gable cross has been removed)

Source: Cumberland Museum & Archives - 2687-89 Penrith Avenue folder.



1921 Fire Insurance Plan cropped to show the corner of Penrith and First. The subject property is outlined in red. This plan was revised in 1939 and 1941 and thus shows the newly constructed church hall. Also visible is the Priest's House at the rear, deconstructed in 1981.

Source: Courtenay Archives

Appendix C – History Notes

1899 - Priest house (also known as the Glebe House) was built at the rear of the property to accommodate the Catholic priest when he's come from Comox to conduct services every other week. For the majority of its history, this house was actually rented to local residents.

1911- expansion

1938 - Exterior renovated, involving the staining of the shingle cladding in brown and the trim painted white.

1941 - hall built

1946 (June 23rd) - A 7.0 magnitude earthquake demolished 75% of the chimneys in the communities of Cumberland, Union Bay, and Courtenay. The 1911 Bell tower on the Church of St. John the Evangelist collapsed during this event and was never rebuilt. The cross from the bell tower steeple was reinstalled on the church gable.

1960s - Gabled extension at rear removed. Church stuccoed.

1981 - Priest House dismantled and rebuilt at Brown's River Boy Scout Camp.

1996 - The cross, originally on the bell tower and relocated to the gable in 1946, was removed from the gable. This was two years after the deconsecration of the church and its sale to private ownership.

2003 and later - conversion of attached 1941 hall building to private residence (rental) and of space above sacristy for seasonal owner accommodation.

Research Resources

Courtenay Archives:

- Catholic Churches newspaper clippings
- 1954 Courtenay Historical Society paper “Work of the Catholic Church in the Comox Valley”
- Fire insurance plan

Cumberland Archives:

- Roman Catholic diocese of Victoria, 1939 or 1940 pamphlet. Page 24 dedicated to Cumberland Church.
- Archival photos
- Newspaper clippings
- Research notes
- Fire insurance plans

Barr, Jennifer. Cumberland & Heritage: The Beginnings of Cumberland 1892-1899

BC Archives - archival photographs

Cumberland Heritage Commission - oral histories

<https://www.ckparish.ca/history>

<https://www.facebook.com/TheAbbeyStudio/about>

Old Cumberland Facebook Group

Site visit March, 2025