The site of "Little Dog" in Nanaimo Harbour

Snuneymuxw
petroglyphs

Snuneymuxw First Nation

Explore First Nations Heritage

Ancient First Nations Drums Heard Along Nanaimo's Shores for Thousands of Years

Nanaimo, and the eastern stretch of Vancouver Island, is the ancestral home of a migratory Coast Salish people, the Snuneymuxw (pronounced Sna-nay-mo). The Hul'qumi'num language—lived in several waterfront villages along Nanaimo's shores, from Departure Bay to Newcastle Island, where they found abundant food, fresh water and winter shelter. Accomplished tool makers, wood workers, spinners and artists, they gathered shellfish, fished and hunted in the Nanaimo area in the winter and spring before migrating to the Fraser River to follow the annual sockeye salmon run. It is estimated that before European contact, the Snuneymuxw population in Nanaimo varied from 2,000 to 5,000.

Port Place and Front Street

The Xwsol'exwel, the highest ranked of the five local Snuneymuxw groups, wintered at Nanaimo Harbour on a narrow neck of land between today's Port Place Mall and Cameron Island off Front Street. The village housed an estimated 250 people living in about 10 shed-roofed houses. The village was named Sqawmi, meaning "little dog."

Great longhouses, arising from giant log beam skeletons, were the first architectural structures to be built in Nanaimo. Each longhouse housed several families, providing a communal place for sleeping, cooking and celebrating. Inside, dirt floors were swept smooth and clean. Small long-haired dogs were kept and cherished like children. Their hair was woven into blankets on huge looms. Families cooked and kept warm around small open fires in the centre of the structures.

Archaeologists have found as many as 10 ancient burial sites at Maffeo Sutton Park. After they were found, the bodies were carefully moved by members of the Snuneymuxw First Nation community to the Snuneymuxw cemetery where they remain at peace.

Maffeo Sutton Park

Archaeological studies at Maffeo Sutton Park, and at the nearby former Nanaimo Foundry site, uncovered the ancient remains of a Snuneymuxw village. Tests on bone harpoon and shell samples found at the site date the village to between AD 360 and AD 610, about the same time as the collapse of the Roman Empire. Although its history goes back more than 1,500 years, this Snuneymuxw village site was still occupied up until 1854.

Departure Bay

For several thousand years, Departure Bay or Stit'les, (meaning "at the base of the mountain"), was the site of a Snuneymuxw winter village and burial ground. Three rows of cedar-planked longhouses were built along the stretch of beach. Another set of longhouses was situated close to the present day Pacific Biological Station.

According to Snuneymuxw elders, there were four families that wintered at this site from December to March, while a fifth family wintered in Nanaimo Harbour. At Stit'les, they performed winter dances and bathed in nearby creeks. The annual cycle of food gathering also began here with the arrival in March of huge runs of herring. (One legend told by the elders is that the first man at Departure Bay created herring by stirring the water with a paddle.) Other wild fare included duck, spring salmon and halibut. Deer and elk were also plentiful.

In spring, the families spread out and moved to Gabriola Island where they fished and gathered shellfish. In the late summer, they returned to Departure Bay to pick berries before setting out by canoe to the Fraser River for the sockeye salmon season. They returned to the Nanaimo area in the fall for the local salmon runs, before completing the cycle, heading back to Departure Bay for the winter.

Newcastle Island Marine Provincial Park

Visitors to Newcastle Island Marine Provincial Park are welcomed by two Snuneymuxw First Nation totem poles, reminders that the island was once home to two thriving villages of these Coast Salish people more than 2,000 years ago. Recovered artifacts on the island revealed the site of a Saysutsen village, abandoned by the Snuneymuxw some time before coal was discovered in 1849. Further archaeological evidence of village life on Newcastle has since been found in shell middens, cave burial sites and culturally modified trees.

A provincial marine park since 1961, Newcastle Island is lush with native arbutus trees, camas lilies, ferns, cattails and wild berries, all once used as food or medicinal by the Snuneymuxw in their ancestral territory. During the summer months, Snuneymuxw First Nation cultural interpreters bring their people's past alive with traditional storytelling, salmon barbecues and entertaining interpretive tours of the island.

photo: Dustin Wawryk

A WALK THROUGH TIME

THREE SHORT TOURS TELL NANAIMO'S HISTORIC TALES

Hear the echoes of the old railway and mine whistles, where the sounds of coal miners' hobnailed boots still reverberate through time. Step back to where history's ghosts roam, from ancient First Nations village sites to the last wooden Hudson's Bay Company bastion still standing in North America.

HARBOUR CONNECTION

During the Victorian era when coal fuelled settlement at Nanaimo, barques, square-rigged schooners and colliers plied the local waters. In 1854, 24 English mining families disembarked after a six-month voyage around Cape Horn aboard the Princess Royal. They were welcomed by the few settlers already here and ushered to their new homes, square-hewn log cabins that lined Front Street.

When the harbour was named a point of entry in 1863, influential merchant John Hirst built a stone warehouse that is still standing next to the Bastion. Below the warehouse, Hirst's Wharf was one of many jutting into the harbour to accommodate ships from around the world trading coal and goods. The stone warehouse remains underneath all the later stucco.

In the 1930s, Canadian Pacific Railway cruise ships ferried luxury travellers from Vancouver to Newcastle Island for picnics and tea dances. In 2011, the new Nanaimo Cruise Ship Terminal opened and the city is again welcoming cruise ship visitors to its harbour.

RAILROAD CONNECTION

Nanaimo's Fitzwilliam Street was named for Charles Wentworth-Fitzwilliam, the son of an earl and a stakeholder in the local coal company. The area developed slowly until a bridge was built across the ravine in 1875, allowing many residents to cross to their churches on the other side.

The Fitzwilliam Street area truly began to flourish when the Esquimalt & Nanaimo Railway station opened nearby in 1886. New hotels and restaurants were built to accommodate visitors arriving by train. Unfortunately, the economic boom ended when Nanaimo backed an unpopular side in a labour dispute and the E & N Railway's owners punished the city by offering free trips to Victoria for trainloads of shoppers.

Today, Fitzwilliam Street's beautifully preserved turn-of-the-century buildings are part of the revitalized Old City Quarter shopping district.

COAL CONNECTION

The Mark Bate and Coal Tyee bronze busts–by artist Dorothea E. Kennedy at Mark Bate Memorial Tree Plaza on the waterfront–commemorate both European and First Nations roles in Nanaimo's coal mining past. Mark Bate was Nanaimo's first mayor and "Coal Tyee," as he was called, was the member of the Snuneymuxw who historians say first mentioned the abundance of "black stones" in the area, catching the attention of the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) already mining coal in Fort Rupert.

By 1852, the HBC had established a settlement here. As Nanaimo rose to become the largest coal-producing centre on Canada's West Coast, it was aptly nicknamed the "Black Diamond City."

The City of Nanaimo was officially incorporated in 1874 at a time when coal reigned supreme. Its 1,645 citizens had arrived here by ship and rail from far flung corners of the globe–from England, Scotland, Wales, Italy and China - bringing their music, food and culture, which continue to enrich the city to this day.

*all historical images courtesy Nanaimo Museum and Nanaimo Community Archives

Vancouver Island REGION

SUPER, NATURAL BRITISH COLUMBIA CANADA

THE RAILWAY CONNECTION WALK

1 BC TELEPHONE EXCHANGE
70-76 Bastion Street

The first private telephone system in BC ran from a coal mine in Wellington to a dock in Departure Bay. The Exchange operated from this vernacular Edwardian building from 1908 to 1960. The busy signal was introduced here in 1955 and direct dialing in 1957.

2 COMMERCIAL HOTEL
121 Bastion Street

Hotels, and their restaurants and saloons, served as social centres for transient, often single, coal miners. This intact Edwardian structure, with its original metal cornices and storefront piers, was built in 1913. It's the second Commercial Hotel near this location; the first was built in 1875.

3 EAGLES HALL
133-141 Bastion Street

Architects McCarter & Nairne, (best known for Vancouver's Marine Building), designed this striking Art Deco commercial building, dance hall and lodge for the Fraternal Order of Eagles. A cast concrete eagle sculpture still guards the entrance, while the interior 1934 Art Deco light fixtures, staircase, balustrade and wooden dance floor are all original.

4 WILLARD SERVICE STATION
299 Wallace Street

Built around 1910, and marking the eastern entrance to the "Old City," this simple vernacular commercial building has had many lives as a service station, tire and battery shop, fish and chip restaurant, art gallery showcase and, in 1922, home of Nanaimo's first radio station, CFDC.

5 RANGERS SHOES
310 Fitzwilliam Street

Ernest Ranger first established his shoe repair business in this simple Boomtown or False-Front commercial structure built in 1920. Part of the Old City Quarter's historic streetscape, the building has been home to an auto upholstery business, a neon sign shop and, recently, an art gallery showcase.

6 ST. ANDREWS UNITED CHURCH
315 Fitzwilliam Street

Voices still soar during church services, concerts and festivals in this late-Victorian style church built in 1893 and designed by American architect Warren H. Hayes. Built in the Victorian Picturesque style, with a Romanesque influence, the tall belfry tower and steep roof line make this a prominent landmark on Nanaimo's skyline.

7 S & W APARTMENTS
403-409 Fitzwilliam Street

Nanaimo's first known apartment block was built in 1910 in the restrained Edwardian style that dominated the neighbourhood in that era. Nanaimo architect William Arthur Owen designed the building of self-contained units that replaced other housing options like hotels, dormitories and boarding houses. The apartments and ground level shops are still in use today.

8 MITCHELL'S MARKET
411 Fitzwilliam Street

This one-storey former market and meat shop, built by Thomas B. Mitchell in 1922, is as functional today as it was then. Although some renovations have modified the building's original appearance, it remains largely intact with large front windows still showcasing merchandise as they did in the Roaring Twenties.

9 T & B APARTMENTS
413-417 Fitzwilliam Street

Part of the historic cluster of commercial apartment buildings in the Old City Quarter, this apartment block was built in 1920. Although the original plans have been lost, the square projecting bays and small gable over the central window suggest the Swiss Chalet style that was popular at the time.

10 ANGELL'S TRADING
426 Fitzwilliam Street

Scottish-born contractor and designer Alexander Forester came to Nanaimo in 1891 and was soon engrossed in civic affairs as an alderman and school trustee. He built this functional 1926 commercial shop for local merchant Hyman Angell in the practical interwar style predominate at the time.

11 OCCIDENTAL HOTEL
432 Fitzwilliam Street

The "Oxy" has been in continuous use for more than 100 years. Prolific Victoria architect John Teague designed its imposing vertical proportions and tall rounded windows and doors in the Victorian Italianate style in 1886 at a time of prosperity when the E & N Railway was completed and the coal mining industry expanding.

12 RAWLINSON & GLAHOLM GROCERS
437 Fitzwilliam Street

Built in 1916 and designed by architect E.J. Bresemann, this modest Edwardian era commercial building serves as a corner gateway to the Old City Quarter, signaling entry into an elegant historic neighbourhood and modern shopping district.

13 ESQUIMALT & NANAIMO RAILWAY STATION
321 Selby Street

Built by the Canadian Pacific Railway in 1920, this station replaced the one built by the E & N Railway in 1886 when the railway first opened. The terminal, with its distinctive square central tower, was damaged by fire in 2007, but has recently been faithfully rehabilitated and restored.

14 FRANKLYN STREET GYMNASIUM
421 Franklyn Street

The visually conservative style of Vancouver architectural firm Gardiner and Mercer (1912-1940) can be seen in the boxy utilitarian design of this institutional building that was built for the Nanaimo Board of School Trustees and has been in continuous use as a gymnasium and auditorium since 1922.

15 HARRIS RESIDENCE
375 Franklyn Street

Built for miner Morgan Harris and his wife Harriet around 1898, the Harris Residence is one of the only surviving examples in Nanaimo of the elaborate Queen Anne Revival style. Rich, but simple, ornamentation is still intact on this charming heritage house that remains in near original condition.

16 CITY HALL
455 Wallace Street

Completed in 1951, the Nanaimo City Hall, built in the International style, conveys to this day the image of progress and modernity intended by prominent Nanaimo architect Thomas B. McArravy. The attractive front and side rock gardens, designed at the same time as the building, soften its formal architecture.

17 BRUMPTON BLOCK
481-489 Wallace Street

Built in 1912 by James Green, (who also built Beban House), this landmark commercial block is tied to the well-known Wong family, operators of the Diners' Rendezvous restaurant for several decades, starting in the mid-1950s. In 1956, Thomas McArravy's architectural firm modernized the exterior with colourful mosaic tiles.
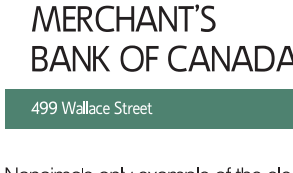
18 MERCHANT'S BANK OF CANADA
499 Wallace Street

Nanaimo's only example of the elegant Free Renaissance style inspired by Italian palaces and churches, the Merchant Bank, built in 1912, was designed by Francis Mawson Rattenbury, BC's premier early 20th century architect. Prominent cornices are still discernable, while inside its ornate cast plaster ceiling remains substantially intact.

19 PROVINCIAL LIQUOR STORE
25 Cavan Street

Horizontally proportioned, built of cast-in-place concrete, featuring glass block walls and curved entry walls, this former liquor store, constructed by the BC government in 1949, is a classic example of Streamline Modern architecture. The design is evidence of post-WWII economic renewal and a move toward modernity in the downtown core.

20 NANAIMO FIREHALL NO.2
34 Nicol Street

With its crenellated fortress-like roofline, Fire Hall No. 2 is a highly visible landmark at a busy downtown intersection. Built in 1893 in the Victorian Italianate style, it served as a symbol of protection in its day. In 1914, a concrete hose tower was added to aid in drying fire hoses efficiently.
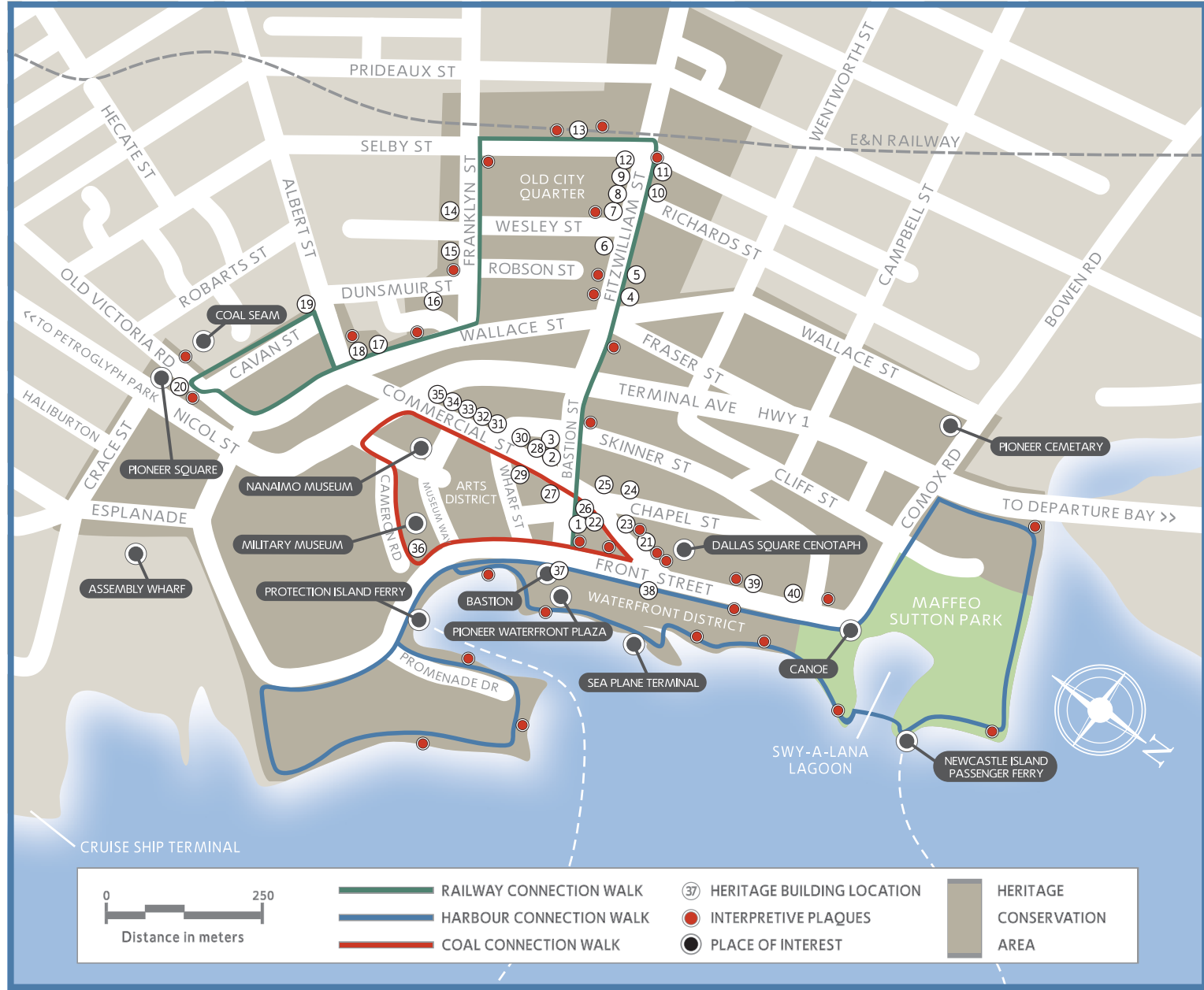
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37 THE HARBOUR CONNECTION WALK
THE BASTION
98 Front Street

The Nanaimo Bastion is the only known Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) wooden bastion still standing in North America. Nanaimo's most recognizable landmark, the octagonal black and white Bastion, was constructed from 16-inch square timbers fitted together with wooden pegs. The Bastion served mainly as a symbol of community security and its basement was used as the town jail. This unique structure has safeguarded the inner harbour since 1853.

Relocated from its original position in 1891, the Bastion has been in continuous use since as a heritage attraction and museum. Today, visitors can tour the museum's three floors of exhibits, photographs and costumes to explore life as it was in Nanaimo more than 150 years ago. Each day at noon in the summer, the Bastion's cannons are fired in a lively ceremonial re-enactment in Pioneer Waterfront Plaza.

[Map of downtown Nanaimo with street names: PRIDEAUX ST, SELBY ST, WESLEY ST, ROBSON ST, WALLACE ST, DUNSMUIR ST, FRANKLYN ST, FITZWILLIAM ST, RICHARDS ST, CAMPBELL ST, ROBARTS ST, ALBERT ST, HECATE ST, CAVAN ST, NICOL ST, CRACE ST, COMMERCIAL ST, TERMINAL AVE, SKINNER ST, FRASER ST, CHAPEL ST, FRONT STREET, CLIFF ST, COMOX RD, BOWEN RD, HWY 1, E&N RAILWAY, etc. Legend:]

Distance in meters 0 — 250

RAILWAY CONNECTION WALK
HARBOUR CONNECTION WALK
COAL CONNECTION WALK
37 HERITAGE BUILDING LOCATION
INTERPRETIVE PLAQUES
PLACE OF INTEREST
HERITAGE CONSERVATION AREA

Map labels: COAL SEAM, OLD CITY QUARTER, PIONEER SQUARE, NANAIMO MUSEUM, ESPLANADE, MILITARY MUSEUM, ASSEMBLY WHARF, PROTECTION ISLAND FERRY, ARTS DISTRICT, BASTION, PIONEER WATERFRONT PLAZA, WATERFRONT DISTRICT, DALLAS SQUARE CENOTAPH, PIONEER CEMETERY, MAFFEO SUTTON PARK, CANOE, PROMENADE DR, SEA PLANE TERMINAL, SWY-A-LANA LAGOON, NEWCASTLE ISLAND PASSENGER FERRY, TO DEPARTURE BAY, TO PETROGLYPH PARK, TO VICTORIA, HALIBURTON ST, CRUISE SHIP TERMINAL

THE HARBOUR CONNECTION WALK

21 ST. PAUL'S ANGLICAN CHURCH
100 Chapel Street

One of the oldest, continuously functioning parishes in BC, this landmark church, built in 1931, is Nanaimo's only example of Gothic Revival architecture. The original stained glass windows, oak pulpit, stone baptismal font and fir organ case are all intact. A 1914 miner's lamp located on the left side of the altar shines a perpetual light.

22 THE EARL BLOCK
2-4 Church Street

Built during a coal and railway-fuelled economic boom in 1888, this block is Nanaimo's best remaining example of 19th century Italianate architecture. The block's ornamental brick facade is detailed with segmental arched windows, brick pilasters and projecting stringcourses. Its original double-hung wooden windows have survived the passage of time.

23 GREAT NATIONAL LAND BUILDING
5-17 Church Street

Built for the Bank of Commerce in 1914 during a coal mining strike, the building's imposing Classical Revival style was meant to convey conservatism, tradition, stability and prosperity during a volatile time. With its four massive columns, and located on a prominent downtown corner, it remains one of Nanaimo's most striking landmarks.

24 FREE PRESS BUILDING
25 Cavan Street

Founded in 1874 by George Norris, the Nanaimo Free Press moved into this brick building in 1893. Damaged by fire in 1930, the building's top storey was removed during a 1956 renovation, and original Victorian Italianate style commercial details were replaced on the building's Commercial Street frontage with a newer, more progressive look.

25 THE MODERN CAFE
221 Commercial Street

With its trademark 1940s neon sign, the Modern Cafe is a perfect example of a building that has evolved stylistically. Built in the Classical Revival style in 1910 as the offices of A.E. Planta, a former eighteenth city mayor, the building was renovated in the 1950s. Today, the stylishly retro Modern Cafe serves signature Nanaimo Bar martinis.

26 THE HALSE BLOCK
200-206 Commercial Street

This Edwardian style commercial building was constructed in 1909 and throughout its life has had a variety of tenants, including the Bank of BC, a men's haberdashery and, since 1983, Senini Graphics.

27 AR. JOHNSON & CO. GROCERS
172-174 Commercial Street

Built in 1898, this simple vernacular building once backed onto the now infilled inner harbour and underlines the historic importance of water transportation to early merchants in Nanaimo. The original owners, A.R. Johnson and Co., also managed Hirst's Wharf, Johnston's Wharf and the Nanaimo Wharf Company. It is one of the few pre-1900 commercial buildings still standing downtown.

28 PARKIN BLOCK
143-155 Commercial Street

Built in 1922 for John Parkin, Nanaimo's fire chief for 40 years, the Parkin Block was designed by local architect Daniel Egdell. The brick detailing on its stucco facade is a twist on the typical Edwardian era style of commercial structures built in downtown Nanaimo between the wars.

29 GUSOLA BLOCK
120 Commercial Street

Built in 1937 on a triangular lot that followed the line of the original inner harbour, (filled in during the 1960s), this late Art Deco style influenced building sits at a prominent downtown intersection and was once the location of a tobacco shop and razor repair service operated by Mr. and Mrs. Alex Gusola.

30 ASHLAR LODGE MASONIC TEMPLE
101 Commercial Street

Purpose-built for the Freemasons in 1923, this Classical Period Revival style commercial building suggests antiquity and permanence. Still used for lodge meetings, the building is on the site of an earlier lodge built in 1873, which was the first Freemasons Lodge in British Columbia.

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38 POST OFFICE AND FEDERAL BUILDING
54-66 Front Street

Built in 1954 in the modern International style, this handsome building replaced an earlier federal building that housed the post and customs offices. The building is notable for its asymmetrical tower and interlocking geometrical forms.

39 NANAIMO COURT HOUSE
31-35 Front Street

Grand and imposing, Nanaimo's Court House was built in 1895-96 in the striking Richardsonian Romanesque style of the late Victorian period. Designed by esteemed BC architect Francis Mawson Rattenbury, the court house was the scene of trials related to the infamous 1912-1914 miner's strike and the notorious Brother XII.

40 GLOBE HOTEL
25 Front Street

Built in 1887 in the Italianate style, the Globe was one of many area hotels that provided affordable housing and social space for single men working in Nanaimo's coal mines. Contractor Alexander Forrester constructed a plain back addition in 1916, while architect Thomas McArravy added multi-coloured Art Deco tilework across the ground floor in a 1936 north side addition.

THE COAL CONNECTION WALK

31 HIRST BLOCK
93-99 Commercial Street

With its tan brickwork, metal cornice and round-arched windows, the Hirst Block (later Dakin Block), built in 1911, is a fine example of local Edwardian style commercial architecture. The Hirst and Dakin families were among Nanaimo's merchant elite; this namesake building was renovated in 1985 as part of a downtown revitalization project.

32 ROGERS BLOCK
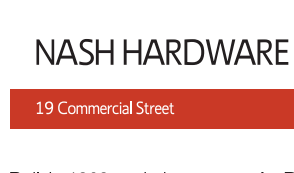83-87 Commercial Street

Part of a continuous line of heritage buildings on the west side of Commercial Street, this block is associated with the Hirst and Rogers families, prominent early merchants. The name of the building and its 1913 date of construction can still be read on its two-storey brick facade.

33 HALL BLOCK
37-45 Commercial Street

Constructed in 1925, the Hall Block retains much of the interwar period's vernacular Edwardian commercial style and is significant because of its historic ties to former mayor Dr. G.A.B. Hall (1930-31), a physician and surgeon for a local coal mining company, an industry with high accident and death rates.

34 NASH HARDWARE
19 Commercial Street

Built in 1909 and given a new Art Deco facade in 1945, the Nash Hardware building represents a design aesthetic popular in post-war Nanaimo. In 1936, Alfred Nash moved his thriving painting, decorating and hardware business to this now historic location on Commercial Streets west side.

35 NANAIMO-DUNCAN UTILITIES BUILDING
13 Commercial Street

You can't pass through downtown Nanaimo without noticing the unusual triangle shape of this striking Art Deco building that straddles the Island Highway and Commercial Street. Built in 1941 by the Nanaimo-Duncan Utilities Company, it marks the west side entrance to the city's historic downtown core.
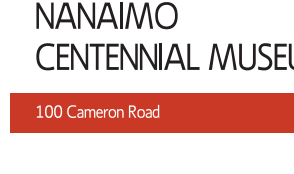
36 NANAIMO CENTENNIAL MUSEUM
100 Cameron Road

Built in 1967 as a legacy project for Canada's 100th anniversary, the unconventional octagonal-shaped museum was designed with a nod to the nearby eight-sided Bastion built in 1853. An example of modern vernacular architecture, it is now the home of the Nanaimo Military Museum.