

Village of Cumberland Statement of Significance

The Big Store

John-Cliff Dry Goods

2706 Dunsmuir Avenue, Cumberland B.C.

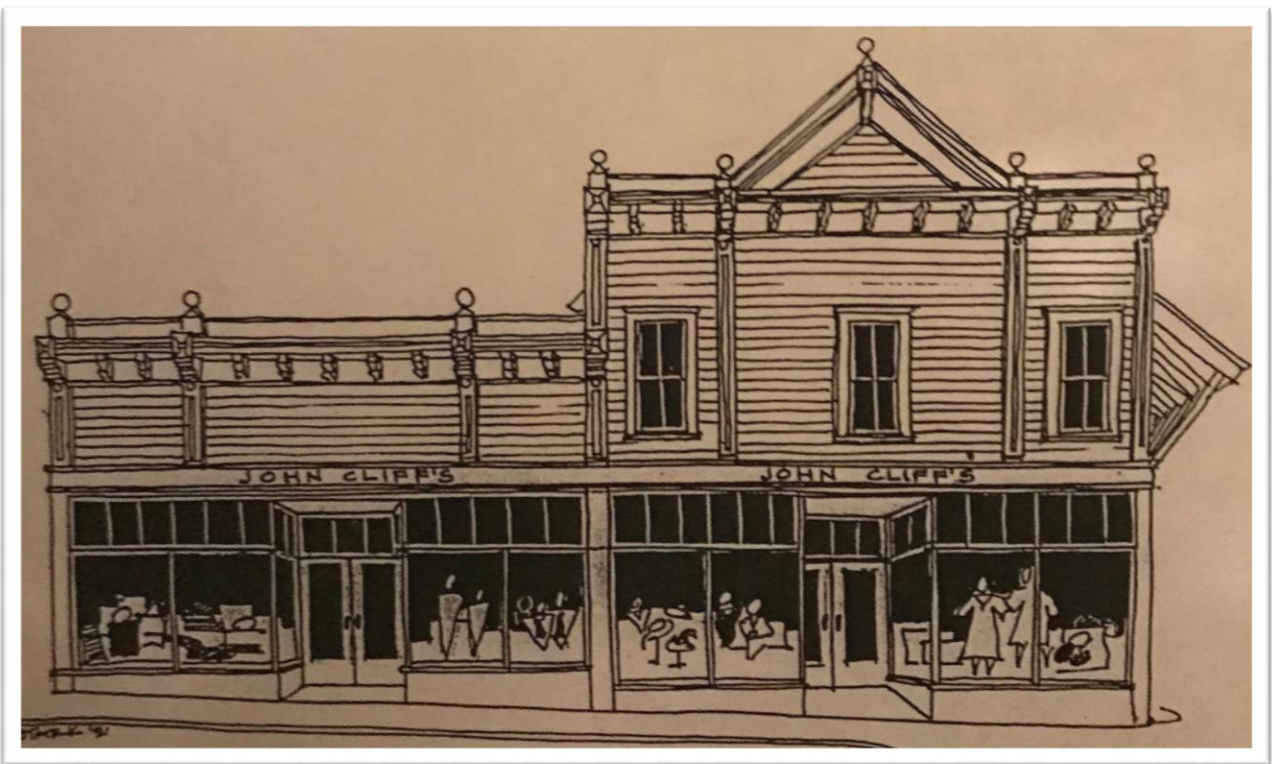
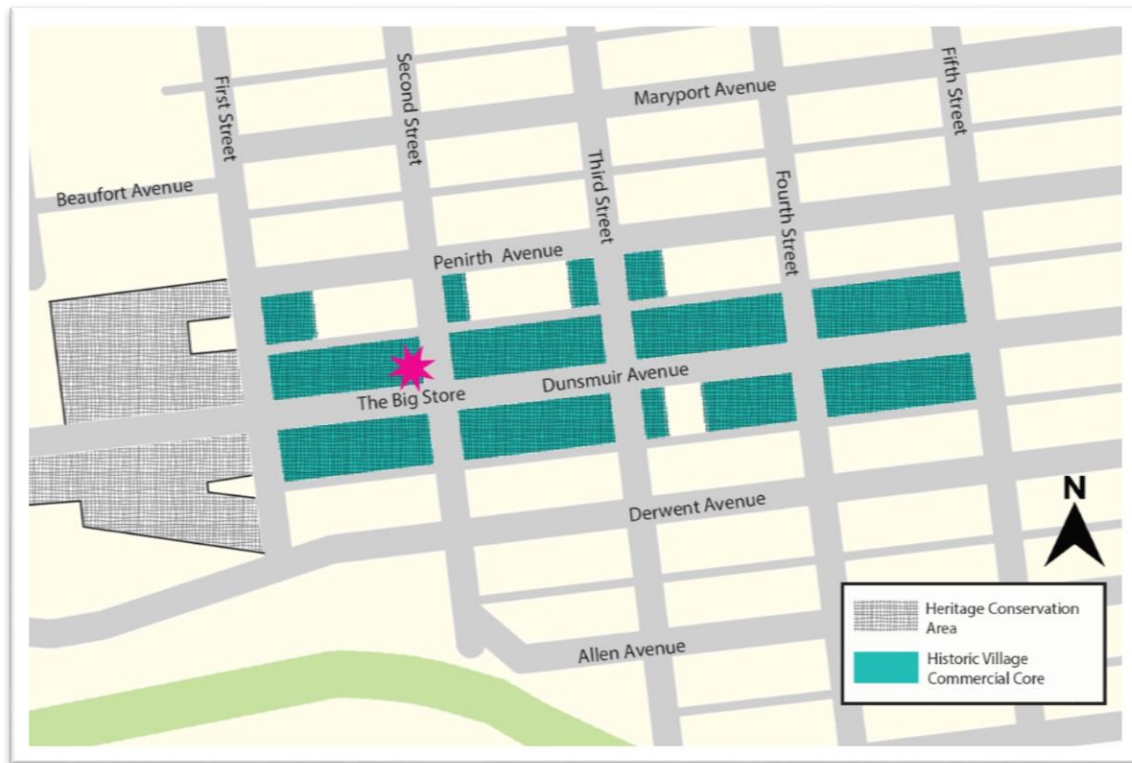


Figure 1 Drawing of John-Cliff Dry Goods, Village of Cumberland Commercial Area Design Guidelines, 1991

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Description of Historic Place

The Big Store is the two-storey false fronted frontier style commercial building located at the corner of Second Street at 2706 Dunsmuir in Cumberland, BC. It is situated at the heart of the historic downtown Cumberland within a Heritage Conservation Area. For 97 continuous years under various management and ownership it operated as a dry goods general store.

Heritage Values

The Big Store has historical, cultural, social, heritage and aesthetic value that characterise the ebbs and flows of the economic life in Cumberland. For almost 100 consecutive years this building served this historic mining community through the booms and the busts of the decades. Hard-working men and women kept this store a destination for dry goods with a vibrancy and community spirit that is warmly remembered by many.

The Big Store has gone through many iterations of its physical structure, ownership, management and name changes. Currently it stands tall, brightly coloured and vacant; nonetheless, it commemorates those important days gone by. Despite the changes, two names have stuck – *The Big Store* and *John-Cliff's*.

The beginnings of *The Big Store* started in 1894, built by JB Holmes known as the *JB Holmes General Store*; however, it wasn't until several years later that it got its colloquially known name coined by Simon Leiser as *The Big Store*. At the time of purchase in 1900, Leiser was

already known for his entrepreneurship; he was from Victoria and operating several stores in other Dunsmuir coal mining settlements on Vancouver Island.

In 1901, an addition was made on the west side, while the original building was remodelled. The façade has ornate cornices supported by heavy brackets and topped by balls. It was a grand store for a grand time.

A local clipping from the *Cumberland News* Dec 13, 1904, describes the value the store had to the community and portrays the wonderful transformation and bustle of the Christmas season in downtown Cumberland - The Big Store playing a significant role in the economic and domestic life of the residents.

“The Big Store presents a busy scene every day, and seems to have gone to special trouble this season to provide for their patrons a stock of endless variety from which to select goods for the Christmastide. Carrying a complete stock, it constitutes more than is comprehended by the name of the store. Aiming at meeting the tastes of the purchasers, the firms also endeavors to meet the popular idea with respect to prices.”

By the time Leiser died in 1917 he had the largest wholesale grocery business in all of British Columbia. *Simon Leiser's Big Store* had 5 departments - dry goods, boots and shoes, hardware and furniture, groceries, and liquor.

From 1920 to 1992, 2706 Dunsmuir changed hands as often as the decades. Store names like *Matt Brown's Grocery*, *Sutherland's Dry Goods*, *Graham's Dry Goods*, *Picard's* have been recorded over time and in 1953 it became *John-Cliff Dry Goods Ltd*, named after the two business partners John Bannermann and Cliff Gardiner. Even though ownership changed at least two times after that, it was the name *John-Cliff Dry Goods Ltd* that stuck and is still used by many long-time residents.

Heart-warming stories are a testament to the cultural and social value of *John-Cliff's*. It was the store that had everything. People came to shop from as far as Nanaimo and Campbell River. Racks were full of women, men and children's clothing. One could purchase a variety of items from winter boots, to wedding and bridesmaid dresses, beautiful gowns, coats, shower gifts, toys, baby items and more. Coal mining families with limited means did not have to travel outside of Cumberland to purchase important items. Even through hard times, *John-Cliff's* supported the community by providing boots to young families who were struggling to make ends meet. Everybody in town had a credit account; one long term resident fondly remembers saving up her babysitting money and paying two bits at a time to buy her winter coat.

Local residents share notable stories of the value *John-Cliff's* had to the community. During the *John-Cliff's* era from the early 1950s to the 1980s, the store had a unique community spirit. There are recollections of children lined up on the street catching glimpses of Santa Claus in the second storey window waiting to go upstairs to have their Christmas visit and candy cane. Families in need received Christmas packages of goods on their doorstep rumoured to be given

by the owners themselves. *John-Cliff's* was more than just a place to purchase goods; the store was known to sponsor local baseball and basketball teams, as well as a fashion show during May Day celebrations. *John-Cliff's* even brought clothing to the senior care homes, so those with limited mobility did not have to travel.

As ownership changed hands, the decor of the frontier-style store front lost its flare and its character was almost destroyed. In 1994, Ross and Mary Hosick took over ownership and restored the building to its documented style and uncovered and reanimated a large painted sign on the East Side that advertised *Simon Leiser's Big Store*.

This revitalisation brought new hope. New businesses were tested, a steak and seafood restaurant, a second-hand hardware store, a music store and a consignment store called *The Patch*. The classic frontier style and prominent location of *The Big Store* has stirred the inspiration and the entrepreneurship of many. Despite this, in the recent decades, a commercial space in *The Big Store* has not been able to establish itself. With the growth Cumberland has experienced over the last few years, it is with high hopes that this building is recognized as a valuable asset not only for its contribution to the former Cumberland community but to carry forth into a new era.

In the centre of Cumberland's commercial area, *The Big Store* continues to contribute to the aesthetics of the historic streetscape.

Character-defining Elements

- Stands tall on the corner of Second Street and Dunsmuir in Downtown Cumberland in the Heritage Conservation Area
- 97 continuous years as a dry goods general store
- Ornate false fronted two storey frontier-style construction
- Grade level rises from east to west, yet the cornice above the main floor windows is a continuous line
- Unusual feature is the long extension of the eaves on the east side
- Restored bracket and cornice decoration
- Restored large shop windows
- Painted pink with blue and rose trim

Research Resources

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

Bannerman, Kim. Personal Interview. 14 November, 2019

Brown, Margaret. Personal Interview. 14 November, 2019

Cumberland Islander – various archival editions

Cumberland News – various archival editions

Cumberland Museum & Archives – photos

Cumberland Museum. <http://www.cumberlandmuseum.ca/about-cumberland/>

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

McCliesh, Lena. Personal Interview. 17 October, 2019

Official Community Plan Bylaw No. 990. 2014. Village of Cumberland

The Village of Cumberland. <https://cumberland.ca/history/>

Current Images



Figure 2 2019 image of The Big Store/John-Cliff's

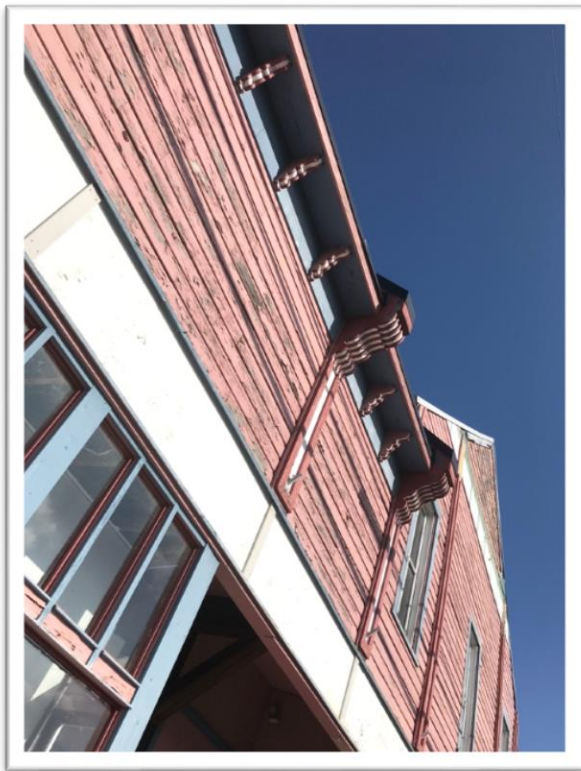


Figure 3 Current image of architectural details



Figure 4 Current image showing close up details of The Big Store/John-Cliff's



Figure 5 1988 advertisement for John-Cliff's

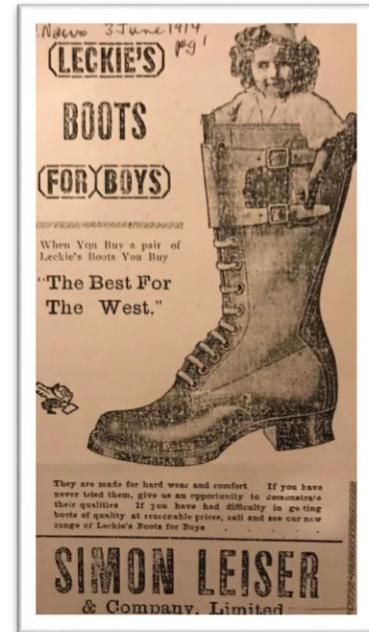


Figure 6 1917 advertisement from the Cumberland News



Figure 7 1917 Advertisement from the Islander



Figure 8 1916 Advertisement from The Cumberland News



Figure 9 1908 advertisement from The Cumberland News



Figure 10 1921 advertisement The Cumberland Islander

Archival Images



Figure 11 Simon Leiser's Big Store with Group of Four Men on Sidewalk, [ca. 192-]. C030-028, Cumberland Museum and Archives.



Figure 12 The Big Store, Storefront, [ca. 1920]. C030-004, Cumberland Museum and Archives.



Figure 13 Simon Leiser Store Interior. C030-042, Cumberland Museum and Archives.



Figure 14 John Cliff's Store, Cumberland B.C. :Photographed by Uldis Araj, [ca. 197-]. 2016.006.002, Cumberland Museum and Archives.



Figure 15 The Big Store, 1998. C270-078, Cumberland Museum and Archives.