## **BC** Register of Historic Places

### **Columbia Street**

**Unique FPT Identifier** 

Other Name Type

The Miracle Mile

#### LOCATION

Address # Street Community Postal Cadastral

400-800 Columbia Street New Westminster

Description of boundaries

Downtown

### **DESCRIPTION**

#### Description

Columbia Street is the downtown core of the City of New Westminster, and is the city's earliest, most historic commercial area. The Columbia Street Historic Area is located between Fourth and Tenth Streets, on a south-facing hillside overlooking the Fraser River. The majority of the building stock within the area was constructed between 1887 and 1914, when New Westminster was the major centre of commerce and industry for the booming Fraser Valley. Other significant buildings date from the 1930s to the 1960s, when Columbia Street was known as the "Miracle Mile." The historic buildings that front onto Columbia Street are characterized by masonry construction, generally clad in brick and built to the property lines. Their height varies between one and eight stories, resulting in a characteristic "sawtooth" pattern.

#### Heritage value

The Columbia Street Historic Area retains a consistent and distinctive built form that is a manifestation of successive waves of economic forces that followed New Westminster's founding as the capital of the Mainland colony of British Columbia. As an historic railway terminus, maritime trans-shipment point and commercial district, Columbia Street represents the city's evolving dominance in industry, commerce and finance at the high point of the western economic boom. Columbia Street retains the City of New Westminster's largest collection of historic commercial structures, that illustrates the rapid transformation of a remote military outpost into a major centre of commercial activity. As one of Western Canada's original urban cores and as a regional centre in Metro Vancouver, Columbia Street conveys a sense of time and place related to the City's history at a formative period in Canada's economic development. Columbia Street has also witnessed civic celebrations, cultural events and ceremonial gatherings throughout New Westminster's history.

As the commercial core of British Columbia's original capital, Columbia Street played a pivotal role in the history and development of New Westminster and the province of British Columbia. The City's origins date to the Fraser River Gold Rush of 1858, and the arrival of Colonel Moody and the Royal Engineers in 1859, sent from England to establish law and order and to survey the area for settlement. For defensive reasons, Moody chose this hillside site on the north side of the Fraser River as his new capital, and proclaimed New Westminster as a city in 1860, the first such recognized settlement west of the Great Lakes. The Royal Engineers laid out a town plan based on British models, with broad streets, public squares and areas of dedicated uses. Having been named by Queen Victoria, the settlement was dubbed "The Royal City". Within the first year over a hundred buildings were built, and a permanent community began to emerge. New Westminster became a major outfitting point for prospectors travelling to the Cariboo goldfields, and by 1864 boasted a population of 1,800, with Columbia Street as its main thoroughfare. In 1866, New Westminster was announced as the first capital city of the united colony of British Columbia, an honour that would be passed on to Victoria just two years later.

Columbia Street consolidated its role as a mercantile centre during this formative period in B.C.'s resource-based economy. The city was bustling with excitement over the Canadian Pacific Railway's impending arrival, and Columbia Street developed as its economic and social hub. New Westminster became the centre of the fresh fish and fish processing industry and was the location of many canneries. Several large sawmills were located nearby, and a steady trade in agricultural goods enriched the local merchants, a status further solidified with the opening of a farmer's market in 1892. With the commencement

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of regular ferry service to the agricultural areas of south bank of the Fraser River in 1883, a branch line connecting the city to the transcontinental railway in Port Moody in 1886, the establishment of the Interurban Railway to Vancouver in 1891 and regular steamship service to Victoria, New Westminster become a major transportation hub. The Fraser River's shoreline was filled in to allow room for the growing industrial activity on the waterfront, creating Front Street.

By 1898, New Westminster was the heart of the Fraser Valley, and Columbia Street boasted many impressive Victorian-style hotels, offices, boarding houses, bars and other commercial buildings, many with elaborate brick and terra cotta facades that amply demonstrated the new-found prosperity of this now-established community. The summer of 1898 was particularly frantic as the City's merchants toiled to outfit many Klondike gold seekers. In the middle of this boom, in September 1898, a devastating fire consumed much of New Westminster, and overnight virtually destroyed the downtown core. Businesses scrambled to set up again so as not to lose out on the gold seekers' business, and the brick buildings of Columbia Street were substantially rebuilt by the following year, often reusing the foundations of the destroyed buildings.

Between 1902 and 1912, New Westminster experienced another period of substantial economic growth, signaled by the completion of a bridge in 1904 that created a rail link to the south side of the Fraser River. New Westminster was also established as the centre for the B.C. Electric Railway's expanded service throughout the Fraser Valley. Evidence of the area's prosperity can be seen in the grand buildings constructed at this time, including early skyscrapers such as the Westminster Trust Block, the Dominion Block and the Cliff Block, all clad in local Clayburn tan brick. While the construction of these elaborate buildings ceased with the outbreak of the First World War and the subsequent Great Depression, New Westminster's economy was not affected as severely as in some other areas. This can be attributed in large part to the construction of the Pattullo Bridge, which opened in 1937 as part of a regional road network that connected the Fraser Valley to the American border. Columbia Street was widely dubbed as the "Miracle Mile". If a business was located on "The Mile," it was virtually guaranteed success.

Over time, shifting economics have changed the commercial focus of Columbia Street. Regional shopping malls, the development of Uptown and explosive growth in the Fraser Valley have contributed to Columbia Street's decline from its once prominent position, but it remains as a regionally-significant historic area that illustrates and celebrates British Columbia's growth at a pivotal time in Western Canadian history.

## Character-Defining elements

Key elements that define the heritage character of the Columbia Street Historic Area include its:

- location as the historic core of downtown, at the confluence of the railway and the working harbour, uphill from the north bank of the Fraser River
- collection of late nineteenth and twentieth century masonry buildings with a characteristic "sawtooth" profile created by historic development patterns; some buildings are low and narrow, others are high and wide
- surviving elements of the original regional transportation network, including the adjacent railway tracks, the Canadian Pacific Railway Station and the B.C. Electric Railway Interurban Station
- public open spaces such as Hyack Square
- sophisticated Late Victorian and Edwardian-era commercial vernacular that illustrates the area's main development period of 1887 to 1914, including buildings built to their property lines and typified by architectural features such as cubic massing, dense site coverage, elaborate streetfront facades, punched window openings, and projecting roofline sheet metal cornices
- examples of modern architecture from Columbia Street's heyday as the "Miracle Mile", including examples of Art Deco, Streamline Moderne and early International Style structures
- continuation of some buildings through to Front and Clarkson Streets, with additional streetfront facades at the rear
- common building materials including a variety of masonry elements such as sandstone, granite and local brick, with authentic colour schemes, wooden-sash windows and sheet metal cornices
- authentic interior elements of individual buildings, including examples of interior features and finishes (such as stairways, tile floors, etc.) and interior structural elements (such as

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exposed brick walls and heavy timber frames, etc.)

Functional Type Contributing Resources

Type Era # Type

Office or Office Building Historic 1 Landscape(s) or Landscape Feature(s)

Office or Office Building Current

Themes Category of Property

Name Category Private

Trade and Commerce Developing Economies

Architect or builder Associated dates

From Type То Construction 1887 1914 Significant 1898 1898 Significant 1883 1892 Significant 1902 1912 Significant 1937 1937

**FORMAL RECOGNITION** 

StatuteEnactmentDateCommunity Heritage RegisterCouncil ResolutionApril 27, 20

**IMAGES** 

Name Type Description Caption

Contemporary Ph Columbia St looking west Street View Contemporary Ph Columbia St looking east Street View

**LINKS** 

Type Description URL

Local government web site www.newwestcity.ca

**COMMENTS and INFORMATION (not used by registrar)**