

# Mouth of the Fraser

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## THE ABERCROMBIE HOUSE BY LAND AND SEA

Heritage preservation is never easy. Often it takes a combination of loving care, compromise, and cash, not to mention several doses of good luck. This is certainly true of the Abercrombie House, which now resides at Dyke Road in Steveston.

The Abercrombie House was first occupied by the Vermilyea family prior to 1900. Somewhat later, but again before the turn of the century, the Abercrombie family moved in. Both families have pioneer roots in Richmond.

The house itself (often mistaken for the similar Thompson House) represents the styles and tastes of a different era, one in which the stuffiness of the Victorian era was being replaced by more modern middle class family values. The clean lines and interior spaces of the Abercrombie House emphasize skilled craftsmanship, but without the fussiness of the classic Victorian home. It is well worth preserving as part of our heritage.

A commitment to save the house coincided with a proposal to develop some new neo-traditional houses on Dyke Road. A complex series of negotiations permitted the developer to add space for the old house using land from a road end. The Abercrombie House would be re-located from River Road to Dyke Road. The house would be restored and recycled as a bed and breakfast establishment. The owners will add a

replica of the original porch and hope to re-decorate the interior in keeping with the popular Arts & Craft style of the era in which the house was built.

Implementing a “good idea”, however, requires some serious risk taking. The most practical way to move the house from its location on River Road in Terra Nova to Dyke Road in Steveston was to lift it up, put it on wheels, drive to an embarkation point on the

dyke and load it onto a barge. The barge would haul it around Gary Point and up the Fraser River where it would be off-loaded and driven a hundred meters west to its new address. It sounded simple, but it required tremendous skill and no small amount of good luck.

The house left its lot on River Road in the middle of the night, October 22, 2001. The only mishap of the adventure was cloaked in darkness: when the telephone crew unhooked the wires to let the house pass by, a rotten telephone pole fell over, crushing a neighbour’s car. Luckily there were no injuries.

By morning the house was “on the road”, heading for a meeting with the barge at high tide. Owner Dana Westermarck paced back and forth while the Nickel Brothers house moving crews jockeyed the frame structure onto the grass and pulled it towards the barge.

The technical mastermind of the move was Murray Nickel, seen here gingerly guiding the placement of ramps to bridge the gap between shoreline and barge.

There was a moment of truth as the house boarded the barge and prepared to set sail for Steveston.

In windy, stormy weather a tug boat and its small helper boat pushed and pulled the barge around Richmond and up the mouth of the Fraser. By late morning on October 23rd, the house was being pushed towards a small boat launch on Dyke Road. Nickel Brothers crews were waiting. The off loading was timed to coincide with high tide at 1 pm.

The next manoeuvres were complex. The house had to be pulled up onto the dyke and then backed down the road to allow the extraction of the Nickel Bros. ramps for relocation at the development site. At one point the house began to wobble. Had it fallen over, we would have only a pile of heritage matchsticks, not a B & B.

Meanwhile preparations were underway to move the house onto the site. Phone lines had to be dropped and buried (the house would roll over them). Two layers of ramps were laid down to reduce the angle of descent from the dyke to the site. If the path were too steep the brakes of the tow truck might fail or the house might slide off the truck bed.

It was almost four o’clock when the most perilous part of the journey took place. The truck had to manipulate its two and a half story burden on a sharp right angle turn, down a steep ramp, and then onto the site. The possibility for error and disaster were very great. This phase was composed of a series of tiny steps.

Bogey wheels underneath the rails supporting the house on the truck, permitted a sharp turn with just inches to spare. At every step the movers crawled underneath the house to check the alignments. Once again the house tipped dangerously. Spectators held their breath, but the truck inched onto the ramp and straightened out. Finally, around 5 p.m. the house found its new home beside the Oris Development homes.

This kind of heritage work is not for the faint hearted. The Abercrombie House transfer went remarkably well. For an account of an even more complex move, readers are encouraged to obtain Curtis Eystone’s account of the moving of the McKinney house to Steveston by a land route.

The Abercrombie House is destined to become part of Richmond’s growing inventory of protected buildings. It has a new location, and a new use, but will be a striking reminder of our past.

**SEE PHOTOS OF THE  
MOVE INSIDE...**



Jockeying the house onto the grass towards the barge



Dana Westermark watching the move



The moment of truth – boarding the barge bound for Steveston



Transporting the house by barge in Steveston Channel



Technical mastermind of the move – Murray Nickel



Ramps used to bridge the dyke



Negotiating the perilous right angle turn down the ramps



A little horse power!



Backing down the road towards it's new home



And finally, the Ambercrombie House settles into it's new home



## ALL IN THE HERITAGE FAMILY

So far, the news looks good for the future of our favourite Post Office in the Steveston Museum. This symbol of community and personalized service is a much-loved part of Steveston. This was made clear by the public's reaction when we thought we might lose it to a plastic franchise.

Did you know that the Post Office is actually run by the Steveston Historical Society? This small society's first priority is to operate the museum but the innovative idea of having a postal outlet in the museum means that Society staff are on the premises and the museum can be open to the public 6 days a week. The contract with Canada Post provides the Historical Society with a percentage of sales from which to pay the staff and take care of operating expenses. It's not always enough - you could say this really puts the non-profit in non-profit societies! Every stamp sold counts.

While it is true that the pressure is off, and Canada Post has backed off from forcing us to change to a Red, White & Blue plastic Post Office, they would, however, like us to purchase one of their computer systems

which would cost about \$18,000. This is too much for a small non-profit society, which is barely making enough to keep the museum open, and operate the Post Office. We are still negotiating with them and hope to come up with a compromise which will satisfy everyone. Remember we will be open for Christmas and hope that you all will support the Best Post Office in Richmond.

To show our appreciation to our valuable customers, we are holding a Customer Appreciation Day at the Post Office, all day Friday December 7th. There will be Coffee, Tea and donuts for all.

The Society is also celebrating their 25th Anniversary with an Open House in the Steveston Museum on Sunday December 2nd, between 1 & 4pm. There will be entertainment, snacks, Coffee, Tea and a small gift for all. See you all then.

Once again on behalf of the Steveston Historical Society, we would like to thank everyone who voiced support and who use the Post Office.

Graham Turnbull, Chair,  
*Steveston Historical Society*

## Upcoming Events

### Nature Comes To Light

*Richmond Nature Park*

December 8th – January 6th

Weekdays 6-10p.m. - Sat./Sun. 5-10p.m.

Closed December 24th, 25th & 31st

Information: 604-718-6188

### Old Fashioned Christmas Décor

*London Heritage Farm Society*

December 13th – 15th

Information: 604-271-5022

## EDITOR'S NOTE

A Heritage Canada Foundation survey recently found that nine out of ten Canadians think that heritage conservation is either important or very important to Canadian culture and identity. Clearly this expresses support for the intentions of those involved in heritage preservation. The realization of these good intentions often takes an incredible amount of hard work.

This issue the Mouth of the Fraser focuses on a recent example of hard work and co-operation. Generally heritage folk would prefer not to move historic buildings, but sometimes this is necessary to avoid demolition. The patterns of land use in Richmond's urbanized area virtually dictate that this approach will be used from time to time. So far the results have been beneficial. The re-location of the beautiful McKinney House some years ago, has been followed up by Oris Development's re-settlement of the Abercrombie House just up the road. A part of our heritage will be preserved for today's residents and future generations.

The actual move of the Abercrombie House seems to us a historic event and we made a serious effort to record on film. Certainly the event attracted many onlookers. Three very new Canadians asked us if putting houses on barges was a common thing in Richmond. We explained that only when the houses were a 100 years old! Hopefully, the grandchildren of these new members of our community will someday visit the Abercrombie House and learn about how it made a sea voyage back in 2001.

## Mouth of the Fraser



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## Richmond Heritage Recognition Awards Program

The City of Richmond and the Heritage Commission will receive nominations for the Heritage Recognition Award until January 31st. The heritage awards will be presented in recognition of the accomplishments of individuals and organizations who have furthered the goals of heritage conservation in the City. The award will be presented during Heritage Week in February. Please contact the Heritage Planner at 604-276-4212 for further information.



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