

# HERITAGE ASSESSMENT

## STAR SHIPYARD

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# STAR SHIPYARDS HERITAGE ASSESSMENT

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**Mercer Shipyards [BC Archives 97912-38, Box 1. #86030-89]**

# STAR SHIPYARDS HERITAGE ASSESSMENT

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This site is currently undergoing a rezoning application to allow residential development. At the same time, it is being assessed as part of an initiative by the City of New Westminster that is identifying industrial heritage sites in the Queensborough neighbourhood. The location of an extant shipyard and the home of the historic Star Shipyards site established in 1908, this site has been identified as a site of interest in the Queensborough Heritage Inventory, being conducted by consultants Donald Luxton & Associates Inc.

The site is not currently listed on the City of New Westminster Heritage Inventory or Register, and there are no legal restrictions or heritage conservation obligations. The identification of heritage value may present some opportunities that the owner can explore with the City as part of the rezoning negotiations. At a minimum, it is anticipated that the rich history of the site will be celebrated in any new public spaces.

This assessment has been undertaken to provide a more detailed understanding of the heritage value of the site, including:

- Further detailed research into Star Shipyards Company records
- Evaluation of the heritage potential of the industrial structures and artifacts
- An exploration of realistic options for retaining and incorporating heritage and historical values into the proposed redevelopment

This investigation does not provide any structural assessment of the structures but does provide some overall comments on condition. There is no comment on environmental conditions or any necessary remediation of hazardous materials.

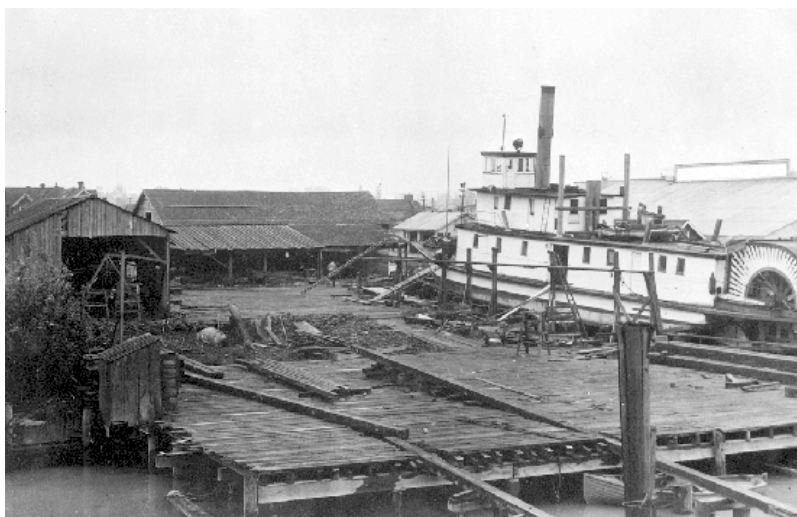
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## 2. SITE HISTORY

Star Shipyard (Mercer's) Ltd. was founded in 1908 by Edward and William Mercer, who were originally from Harbour Grace, Newfoundland. The business continued as a partnership between the two brothers until 1927 when it was reorganized on a limited liability basis, after Edward Mercer's sons Arthur and Gordon purchased their uncle's share. Mercer competed with Samuel Dawes whose shipyard was on the adjacent (eastern) property. Dawe's Shipyards, also known as Westminster Marine Railway Co., is listed in directories as early as 1912. By the mid-1910s, both shipyards had constructed a number of buildings along the waterfront.



1913 (Goad's Atlas)



Star Shipyards, SS Scowlitz on the Ways, circa 1915 (BC Archives E-06842)

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In 1925, Mercer constructed new buildings, and continued to prosper, surviving through the years of the Depression. Star Shipyard constructed wooden and steel vessels up to approximately 170 feet (52 meters) in length, specializing in fishing boats, sternwheelers, tugs and scows for the coastal trade. These new buildings included a large, heavy-timber frame Carpenter's Shop, and several ancillary office and storage structures.



**Above: Carpenter Shop on right  
Below: Office/Storage on left  
[BC Archives 98105-6, Box 2, Swiftsure IV and V]**

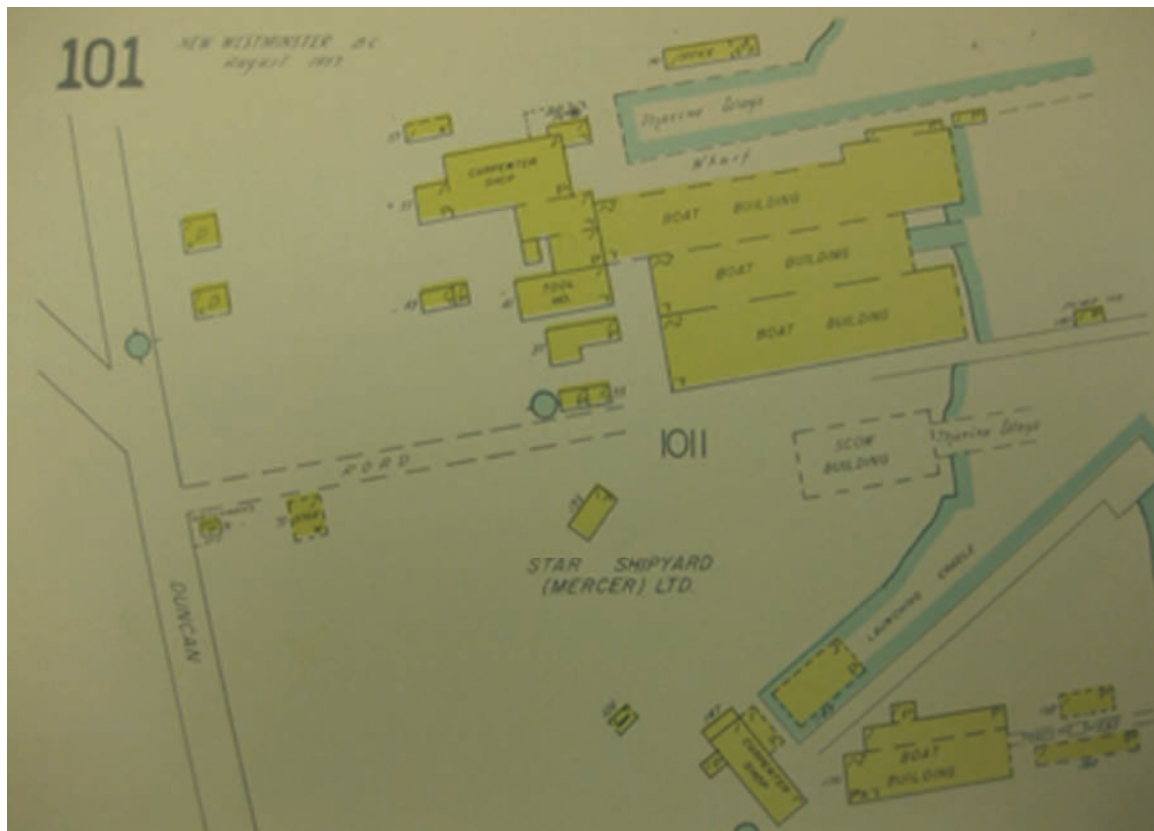


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Sometime in the 1930s, the Mercers acquired Dawe's shipyards. In about 1940, a series of boat buildings were constructed at the water's edge. These appear to have been built over the existing boatways, and were a response to wartime conditions. Throughout the Second World War, warships and other naval craft were constructed for the British, Russian and Canadian Navies.



**Star Shipyards, 1940s (BC Archives E-06841)**



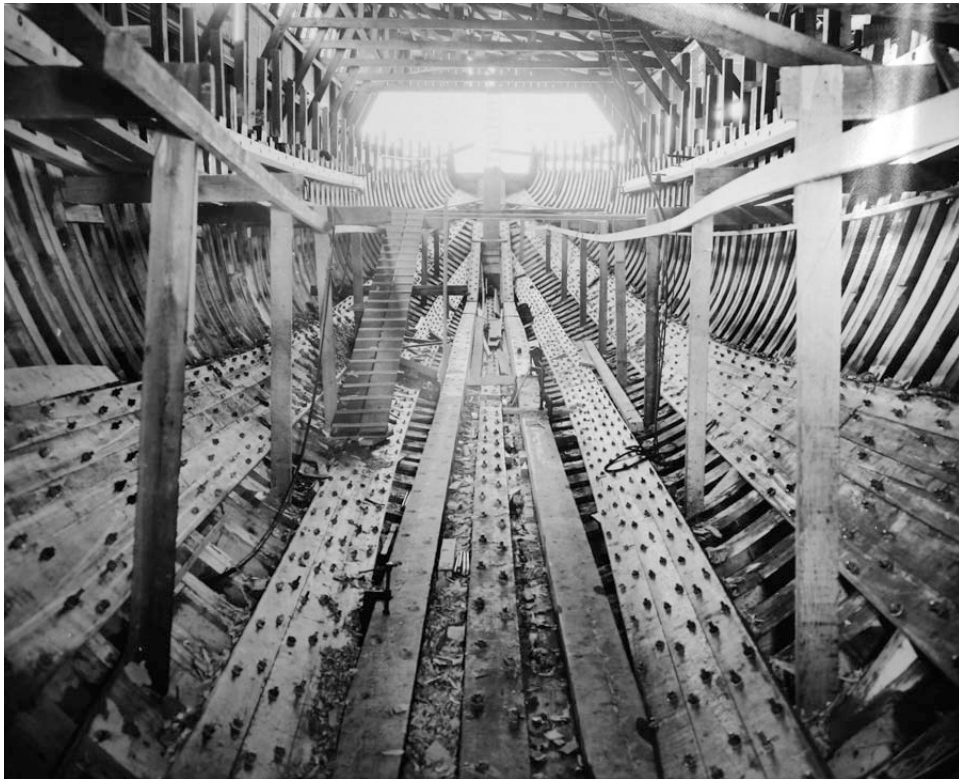
**1957 (BC Underwriters' Assn.)**



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**Boatways [BC Archives 97912-38, Box 1. #86030-89]**



# STAR SHIPYARDS HERITAGE ASSESSMENT

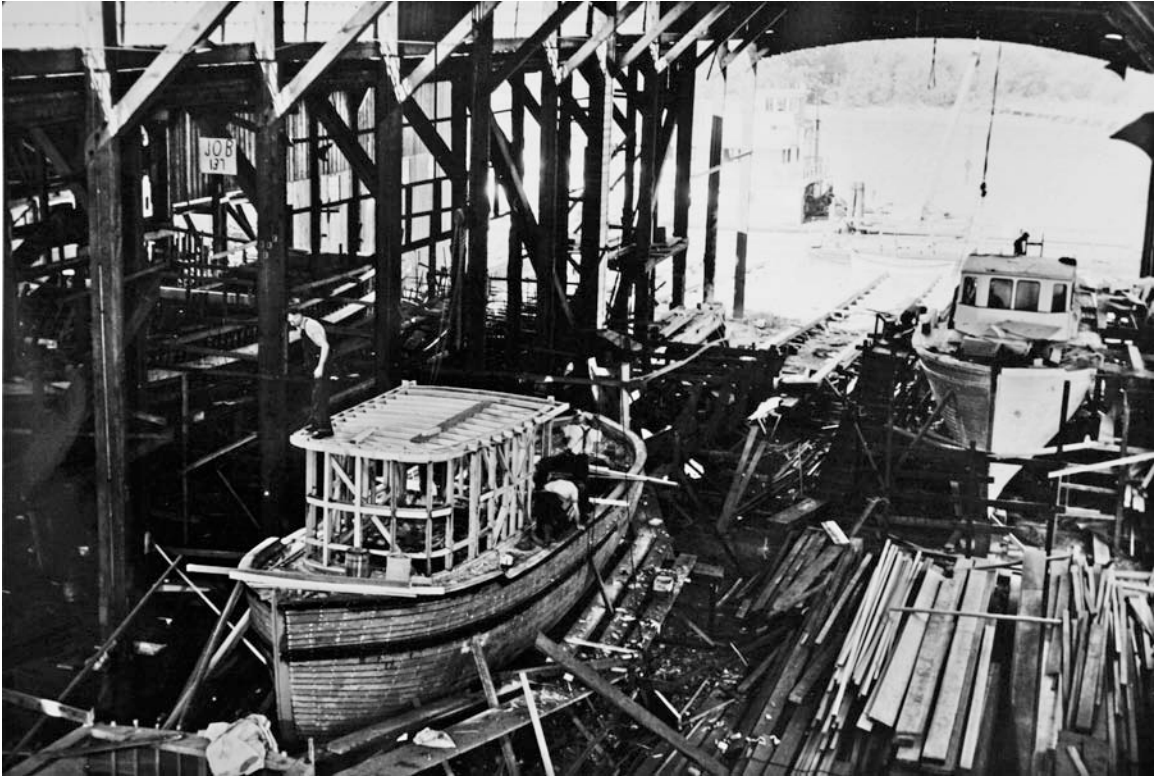


**Two Aerial Views. Above: Croton Studios 1957  
Below: 1950s (BC Archives E-06858)**





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Above: [BC Archives 98105-6, Box 1, Yard]  
Below: [BC Archives 98105-6, Box 1, 1971]



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The yard continued as a family business until 1970 when it was sold to Grant Asplin of Fort Brie, Ontario. Mercer Street is named after the family. The site is currently operating as a shipyard, the Fraser Shipyard & Industrial Centre Ltd, with some additional ancillary businesses on site. Over time, the 1940s boat buildings became unstable and the water-side sections have been dismantled; what remains of the boat buildings is just a fragment of the original, as may be seen below in comparison with the archival image.



**Above: East elevation of the Boat Building on far right  
Below: East elevation of Boat Building on far left [BC Archives 98105-6, Box 1, Yard]**



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## 3. SITE INVESTIGATION

There are approximately one dozen wooden buildings of varying ages, condition and dimensions on the site. Cross-referencing the early fire insurance maps with archival images, in combination with on-site investigation, it is possible to identify the early and historically significant buildings remaining on site.

There are large boat buildings featuring open floor plans, exposed rafters and open facades facing the riverfront; an open long sloping boat hoist of timber and steel construction, ancillary offices, shops and storage. Although the collection of buildings has value in telling the story of the industry and how it has adapted over the years for survival, the boat buildings themselves are in extremely compromised condition.



**Star Shipyards Carpenter Shop, September 2009**

The most intact structure is the Carpenter Shop, as it is named on the 1957 fire insurance map. This dates from about 1925 and is approximately 80' long and 45' wide (36,00 sq ft on 2 levels = 7,200 sq ft). Aside from the replaced roof covering, it is almost intact on the interior and exterior and consists of heavy wood frame with 8"x2" roof timbers and 12"x3" floor joists supported on 6"x6" posts, situated midspan. The building is clad in board and batten, the boards being 12"x¾" with original wood sash windows and some original doors. Two additions have been made to the sides of the building, but the original core remains intact, and is comprised of first growth timbers that appear to be in exceptional condition. The structure itself appears sound; the fenestration and cladding are in disrepair in places but overall in moderate (and functioning) condition. The extent and condition of the foundations is unknown.

Three other minor structures, that appear to have had an office and storage function, are also extant. Their condition is fair, with later alterations.

## 4. OPTIONS FOR HERITAGE CONSERVATION

This site is not currently listed on the City of New Westminster Heritage Inventory or Register, and there are no legal restrictions or heritage conservation obligations. The identification of heritage value may present some opportunities that the owner can explore with the City as part of the rezoning negotiations.

Although this report does not provide a structural assessment of the buildings, it is obvious that the boat buildings are in very poor condition and cannot be feasibly retained, for the following reasons:

- They are only partially intact; the waterside portions have been demolished
- The foundations are inadequate
- They appear to be located on water lots
- The structural members are inadequate and visibly failing
- The cladding materials and roofing appear to be at the end of their useful lives
- Their height and vernacular construction work against any meaningful preservation
- There is notable environmental contamination in and around the structures

In addition, the ability to provide a feasible adaptive reuse is problematic, and the location on prime waterfront raises questions of conflicting use and public access. There would appear to be many compelling reasons to remove the boat building structures.

There are, however, other structures on the site that date from the earlier shipyard expansion of 1925. This includes:

- The Carpenter Shop: a robust heavy timber structure with some intact board-and batten plank siding
- A small office structure
- Two conjoined structures that may have served storage or ancillary functions

In addition, there are a number of industrial artifacts related to the shipyard operations as well as the docks, slips and boatways themselves that define the industrial nature of the shore edge.

Within the context of rezoning and redevelopment, there may be options for building and artifact retention or commemoration, as follows:

### **Options for Carpenter Shop Building**

#### Option 1. Retain building in situ

- Restore and upgrade the building in original location for commercial/community use. The foundations can be upgraded by raising the entire building during works. There is environmental contamination that requires remediation and access to the soil beneath the building; these costs would have to be factored in as part of any building retention.
- A heritage element can add an interesting cultural layer to a redevelopment, distinguishes it and can be a marketable icon.
- Its restoration could be included as part of the negotiation with the City for an incentives package.
- Would receive maximum amount of LEED credit (Building Reuse & Recycled Content)

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## Option 2. Retain building on site – relocate to another part of site

- Restore and upgrade building within the site for commercial/community use. Entire building moved onto new foundations. Relocation would assist in site remediation.
- A heritage element adds an interesting cultural layer to a redevelopment, distinguishes it and can be a marketable icon.
- Its restoration could be included as part of the negotiation with the City for an incentives package.
- Would receive maximum amount of LEED credit (Building Reuse & Recycled Content)

## Option 3. Retain building off site - sell/gift the entire building

- Sell/gift the building to a heritage organization, municipality etc with a requirement for such a building. Removal would not complicate site remediation.
- If the new location is within New Westminster, it may be included as part of the negotiation with the City for an incentives package.
- Receive LEED credit (Construction Waste Management)

## Option 4. Document & Dismantle

- Dismantle and sell wood, metal etc for salvage. These materials have a high re-sale value, making it economically viable to dismantle, rather than demolish.
- Re-use and incorporate some elements into new development – receive LEED credits (Resource Reuse & Recycled Content)
- Sell as whole for salvage

## **Options for Other Buildings**

### Option 1. Retain buildings in situ

For the other three buildings, assess their structural integrity and assess whether or not they have any potential for re-use on site.

- Restore and upgrade one or all of the buildings in their original location for commercial/community use. There is environmental contamination that requires remediation and access to the soil beneath the buildings; these costs would have to be factored in as part of any building retention.
- Restoration could be included as part of the negotiation with the City for an incentives package.
- Would receive maximum amount of LEED credit (Building Reuse & Recycled Content)

### Option 2. Retain building(s) on site – relocate to another part of site

- Restore and upgrade building within the site for commercial/community use. Entire building moved onto new foundations. Relocation would assist in site remediation.
- Restoration could be included as part of the negotiation with the City for an incentives package.
- Would receive maximum amount of LEED credit (Building Reuse & Recycled Content)

### Option 3. Document & Demolish



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## Options for Other Buildings

For the non-heritage buildings, assess the value of their salvage materials.

### Option 1. Document & Dismantle

- Dismantle and sell wood, metal etc for salvage. These materials have a high re-sale value, making it economically viable to dismantle, rather than demolish.
- Re-use and incorporate some elements into new development – receive LEED credits (Resource Reuse & Recycled Content)
- Sell as whole for salvage

### Option 2. Demolish

## Options for Artifacts

### Option 1. Re-use on site as part of Heritage Interpretation

- Retain key artifacts for use as part of new public spaces
- Store on-site or off-site; restore for display and install when site is prepared
- Include interpretation of their function

### Option 2. Allow Salvage by Museum

## 5. OPTIONS FOR HERITAGE INTERPRETATION

In planning for the development of the site, it is important to understand the remaining physical resources, intangible resources and historical context. This is the building-block of a community, new and old. Interpretation in the form of a waterfront walk or display of historic artifacts from the site, is a very visible way for a developer to provide to the local community and City residents a sense of historical continuity and pride. In addition, in the area of Queensborough, the Star Shipyard would be the first to do so, potentially attracting an increased market and included as part of the negotiation with the City for an incentives package. At a minimum, it is anticipated that the rich history of the site will be celebrated in any new public spaces.

Interpretation of the site might include a combination of:

- Waterfront heritage trail with: a number of heritage interpretation panels showing archival images; maps and information about the shipyard; outline of the former buildings marked on the trail; and points of interest.
- Industrial artifacts used as public art, for example in traffic circles or in public areas
- Retaining prime artifacts of interest in situ, such as the boat winches



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The overall urban design of the site could recall aspects of its industrial development, including the articulated shore edges, piers, boatways and footprints of original buildings.



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## APPENDIX A: RESEARCH SOURCES

### Research Overview

- Goad's Fire Insurance maps from 1913 show a number of structures on both the Mercer and Dawes sites, including a dock, what is likely a boat shed, and a 200' water lot projecting into the river. A Photograph from 1915 titled "Westminster Marine Railway Co." shows a complex of operational structures along the water, including two docks, a large boat shed, and other smaller buildings, while a 1925 photograph titled "Star Shipyard" shows a series of docks and boat sheds lined up along the water. A 1918 directory lists "Star Ship Yard, E Mercer mgr, boat builders," while Westminster Marine Railway Co. can be found as early as 1912. A 1957 Fire Insurance Map shows Star Shipyard (Mercer) Ltd .as having approximately twenty-five structures of varying dimensions, including four large boat buildings, a scow building, launching cradle, two carpenters shops, as well as smaller offices and tool shops.
- Star Shipyard (Mercer's) Ltd, 1908-70 Fonds, British Columbia Archives (MS-0448)

### References

- The British Columbia & Yukon Directory. Vancouver, 1934-1948.
- Goad's Atlas of the City of New Westminster. Vancouver: Chas. E. Goad Co., 1913.
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- Pullem, Helen. *Queensborough*. New Westminster, 1975.