

Statement of Significance

Meanskinisht Cemetery at Cedarvale



Description

The Meanskinisht cemetery is a 1.0 hectare level plot of land on a bench above the Skeena River in the community of Cedarvale, about 70 km north of Terrace and 18 km west of Kitwanga, in northwestern British Columbia. Marked and unmarked graves, some enclosed by decorative fences, are surrounded by a mixed forest of poplar, birch, hemlock, cedar and spruce. The property is legally described as Lot 1, District Lot 7, Plan 1319, Cassiar Land District.

Heritage Values

Located on a high bench on the south bank of the Skeena River, Meanskinisht Cemetery is valued for its spiritual, cultural and historical significance, particularly as the historical burial site of the founders and members of Meanskinisht Mission.

The Meanskinisht cemetery is significant for its connection to the Meanskinisht Mission, a utopian, cooperative, Christian community. Originally a Gitksan First Nation settlement, Meanskinisht (meaning under the pitch pines) was founded in 1888 on opposite banks of the Skeena River by Robert Tomlinson Sr. Tomlinson, a medical missionary with the Anglican Church Missionary Society, arrived on the Skeena with his family after serving at various missions in northwest BC including Metlakatla with his mentor William Duncan. Though he would resign from the Church due to conflicts with Church leadership, the experience inspired Tomlinson to model Meanskinisht after those missions.

Tomlinson's vision of self-sufficiency and adherence to religious values attracted some First Nation people from surrounding villages to join the mission and follow its rules: attend church, send their children to school and renounce First Nation traditions. Community members farmed, sold garden produce, operated a general store and held the government contract to deliver the mail. A primary source of income for the mission was its sawmill on the north bank of the Skeena. This was the first sawmill in the area, supplying timber for many buildings in the region.

In 1913 the construction of Grand Trunk Pacific Railway (GTP) required the removal of the sawmill, which resulted in the loss of the community's economic base. The GTP brought an influx of settlers and a change to the community's name – Cedarvale. Tomlinson's death that year, combined with these events, changed the community's spiritual nature and communal structure.

Meanskinisht Cemetery is significant as being representative of the missionary movement across Canada, while at the same time the mission was unique in its resistance to the concept of the Indian reserve. Tomlinson was against reserve status for land adjacent to his mission and for

many years unsuccessfully petitioned the provincial government to allow First Nation mission members to pre-empt and own land. He finally resolved to lease 5-acre parcels of his own District Lot 7 to First Nation community members for 999 years. Without legal status, the leases were cancelled after Tomlinson's death. Some leaseholders were able to buy the properties from the Tomlinson estate and several are still owned by descendants of the mission's First Nation pioneers.

The cemetery is significant for its association with the community's two mission churches, an 1891 pioneer-style log structure and its 1907 replacement, a community-built, Carpenter Gothic-style church constructed from lumber milled at the community's sawmill and with stained glass windows from England. The churches' prominent position on the high bench next to the cemetery made each, in turn, a landmark of Tomlinson's "Holy City" until a fire destroyed the latter building in the 1950s.

Meanskinisht Cemetery is significant for its illustration of ways First Nation peoples renegotiated their identities and traditions after contact. The cemetery reflects changes in First Nation burial rituals, including granite headstones and fences within a maintained landscape. Traditionally, a burial was accompanied by a death feast, or potlatch. When the potlatch was outlawed in 1884, some First Nation people circumvented the law by adopting European-style memorials.

Today, only direct descendants of the mission's original inhabitants can be buried in the cemetery. The Meanskinisht Historical Society, which operates a museum, also maintains the cemetery and consults on all burials that occur there. This connection between spiritual and historical values is significant to both the past and future of the cemetery, and reinforces the faith-based history of the community.

Character Defining Elements

Site, Setting and Landscape

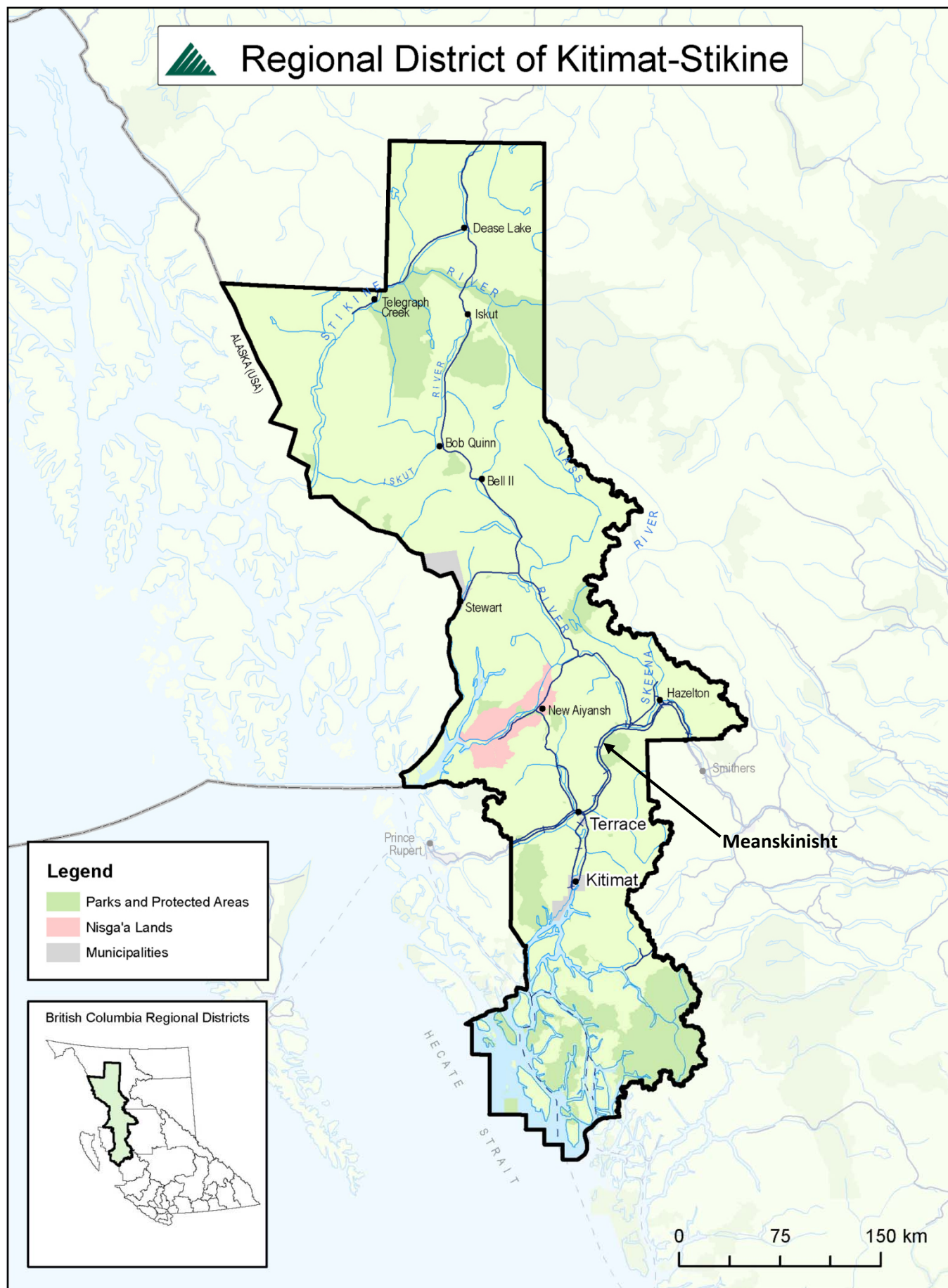
- Location of the cemetery on a bench above the Skeena River
- Mixed native forest vegetation surrounding the land
- Flat topography
- Maintained lawn
- Rustic access trail

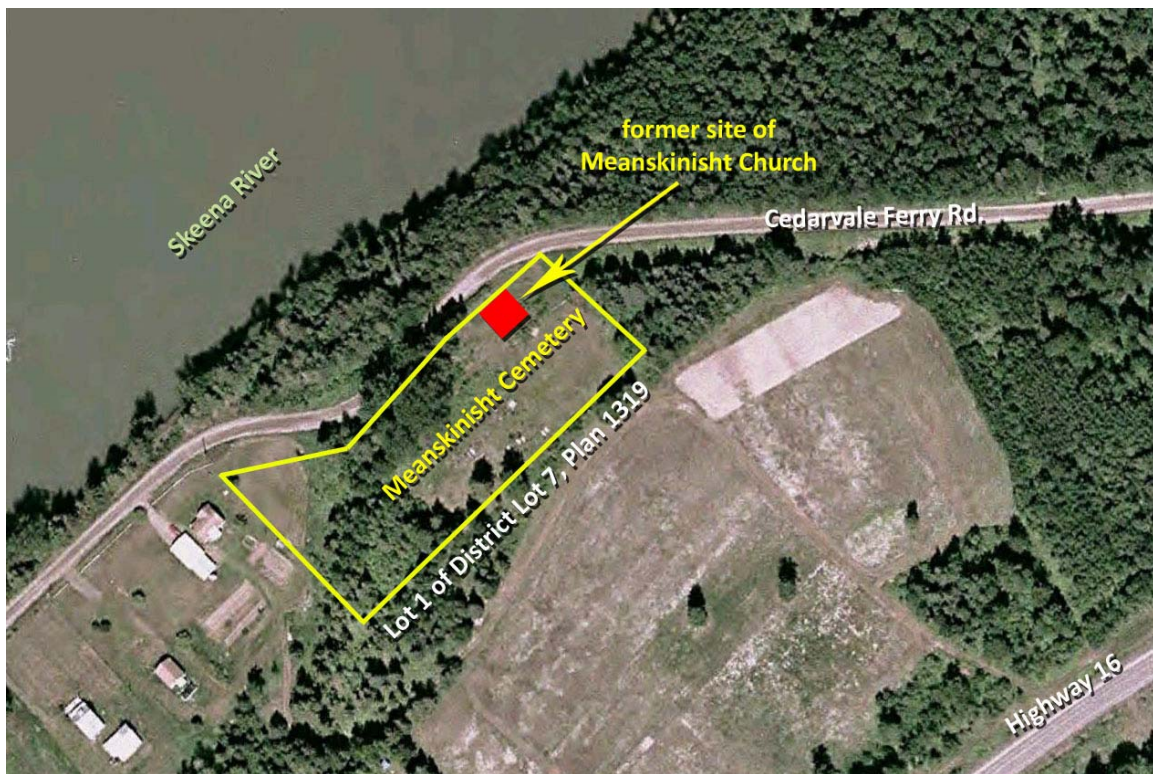
Design Features

- Entry sign identifying private burials
- Decorative wooden and metal enclosures around some of the burial sites
- Mix of freshly painted and weathered enclosures
- In-ground and vertical granite grave markings including those of the Tomlinson family

Selected Sources

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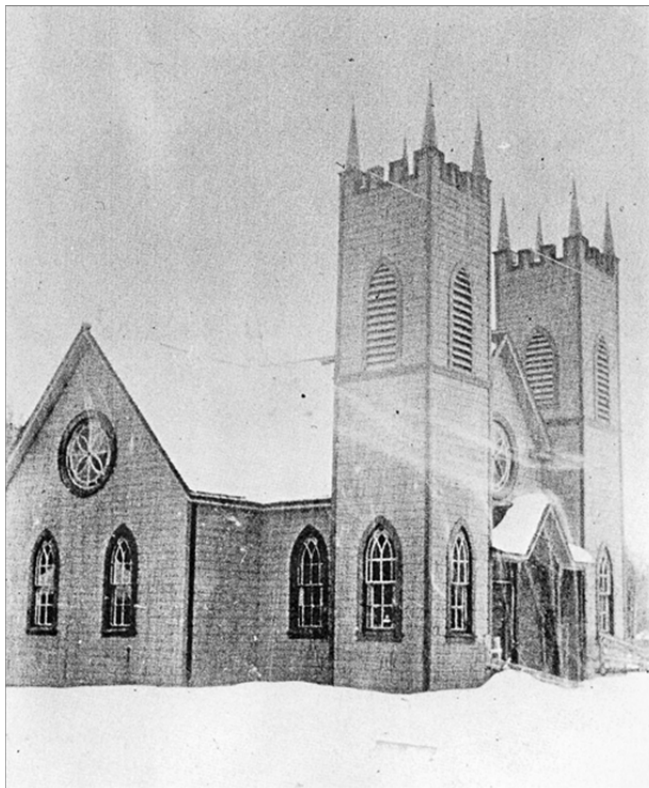
Aerial photograph showing the Meanskinisht Cemetery adjacent community of Cedarvale.



Hands of History "Minskinish" information sign next to Highway 16 in Cedarvale.
c. 2008



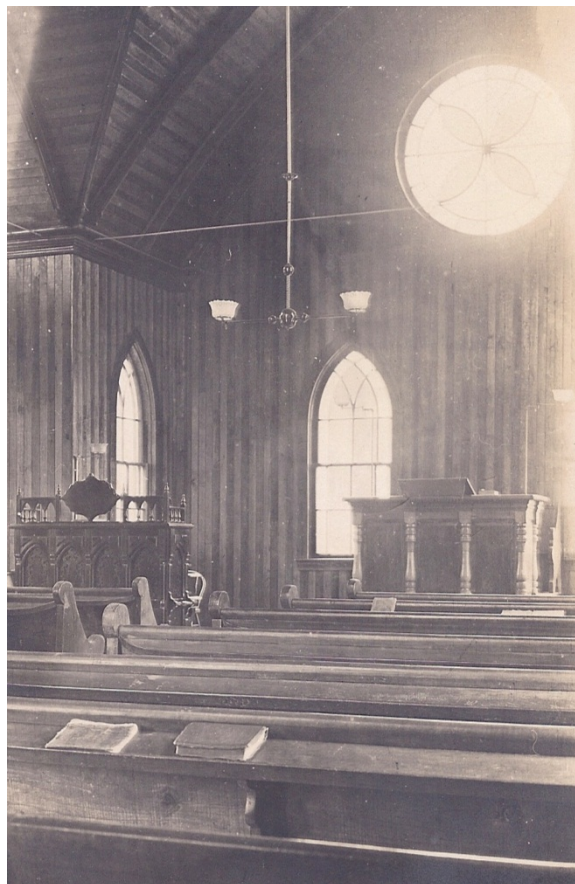
Reverend Robert Tomlinson's first church on the Skeena River at Meanskinisht, c.1906
(BC Archives e-06573)



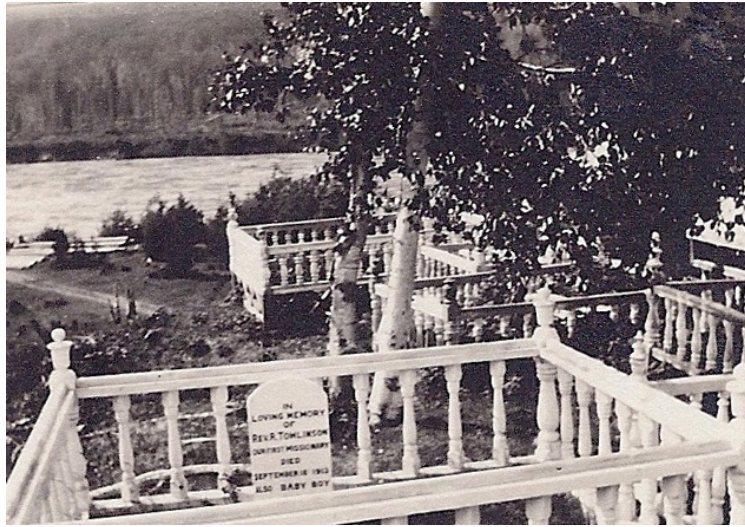
The second church constructed at Meanskinisht in 1907 and destroyed by fire in the 1950s.
(Photo courtesy Mary Dalen)



Gothic-style second church built in 1907 with stained glass windows imported from England.
(Photo courtesy of George Tomlinson Family Collection)



Interior of second church at Meanskinisht
(Photo courtesy of George Tomlinson Family Collection)



Early gravesite of Reverend Robert Tomlinson Sr. at Meanskinisht Cemetery. (date unknown)
(Photo courtesy of George Tomlinson Family Collection)



Reverend Robert and Alice Tomlinson gravesite and second Meanskinisht church. c. 1940's
(Photo courtesy of George Tomlinson Family Collection)



Headstone of Robert and Mary Tomlinson at the Meanskinisht Cemetery
c. 2011



Meanskinisht Village Cemetery sign at the entrance to the cemetery.
c. 2011



Fenced gravesite at Meanskinisht Cemetery
c. 2011



View across cemetery toward the former site of the Meanskinisht church.
c. 2011