

SUMMARY OF STATE HERITAGE PLACE

Entry in the South Australian Heritage Register in accordance with s14(1)(a) of the *Heritage Places Act 1993*

NAME: Former American River Methodist Church **PLACE NO.:** 26585

ADDRESS: Ngarrindjeri, Ramindjeri, Kurna and Narungga Country
24 Ryberg Road, American River
CT 5701/547 A235 FP181077 Hundred of Haines

STATEMENT OF HERITAGE SIGNIFICANCE

The former American River Methodist Church, built in 1965-1966, is an outstanding example of late twentieth-century ecclesiastical Modern Movement architecture in South Australia. Drawing on vernacular traditions while remaining architecturally minimalist, South Australian architect Eric von Schramek's innovative and economical design employed a distinctive splayed pyramidal roof to set the building apart as a place of worship, while the selection of familiar, domestic materials and construction systems grounded the church into its local context.

RELEVANT CRITERIA (under section 16 of the Heritage Places Act 1993)

(e) it demonstrates a high degree of creative, aesthetic or technical accomplishment or is an outstanding representative of particular construction techniques or design characteristics

The former American River Methodist Church is an outstanding, highly innovative example of late twentieth-century ecclesiastical Modern Movement architecture in South Australia. Distinctive yet minimalist, Eric von Schramek's economical design drew upon varied vernacular architectural traditions, employing a distinctive, splayed pyramidal roof to set the building apart from surrounding secular buildings and to connote a religious function. To ground the church in its rural setting, von Schramek employed familiar, 'humble' materials and construction systems not dissimilar from those used in nearby buildings, most notably studwork walls; asbestos cement and fibrous plaster sheet cladding, with contrasting battens nailed over seams; and an asbestos-cement shingle roof.

The former American River Methodist Church articulates many key attributes of late-twentieth century ecclesiastical architecture, namely:

- a radical plan-shape, in this instance, a square plan, with implied aisles under an exterior verandah, breaking down traditional boundaries between interior and exterior space,
- architectural 'distinctiveness' employed to set the church apart from secular buildings and connote a religious function through its large, splayed pyramidal roof,
- integration into community expressed through familiar, 'humble' materials with domestic associations, such as brick, concrete, and asbestos shingles and cement sheeting, the latter reflecting the materials predominating in nearby holiday houses,
- windows with accentuated mullions,
- windows with vertically proportioned openings, notably on the eastern and western sides,
- plain wall surfaces achieved through the use of asbestos-cement sheet and fibrous plaster,
- a skylight window admitting light from an unexpected source to create a special mood,
- unbroken straight lines emphasising verticality, notably contrasting jarrah battens applied over seams in asbestos cement and fibrous plaster sheet, externally and internally.

In c.1966, the former American River Methodist Church received a merit award from the Timber Development Association of South Australia, Incorporated 'for the graceful, practical and beautiful use of timber.' Subsequently in c.1980, the former American River Methodist Church was recognised by the Royal Australian Institute of Architects South Australia Chapter, as a significant example of twentieth-century South Australian architecture. The Chapter considered that the former American River Methodist Church 'successfully combine[d] an accepted idea of church form with the Australian rural vernacular, making it most appropriate in its country town setting.'

While a number of minor changes have occurred to the church, such as the addition of studwork rooms under the verandah on the eastern and western side, most are considered to be reversible. These changes have not diminished the place's architectural integrity to the point that its values can no longer be understood and appreciated.

SITE PLAN, PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION & ELEMENTS OF SIGNIFICANCE

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Former American River Methodist Church

PLACE NO.: 26585

Ryberg Road, American River



Former American River Methodist Church (CT 5701/547 A235 FP181077 Hundred of Haines)

Elements of heritage significance include (but are not necessarily limited to):

- Church building,
- Original exterior and interior materials and material finishes, including timber, concrete and brick,
- Plain internal and external wall surfaces,
- Form and detail of roof,
- Original fittings including porch pendant light fittings,
- Concrete path leading from street to church.

Elements not considered to contribute to significance of place include (but are not necessarily limited to):

- Studwork additions under verandah on eastern and western sides,
- Trees, shrubs and landscaping.

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LEGEND

-  Parcel boundaries (Indicates extent of Listing)
-  Outline of Elements of Significance for State Heritage Place

*Red outline is indicative of elements of significance, noting imperfect alignment of aerial imagery with parcel cadastre.

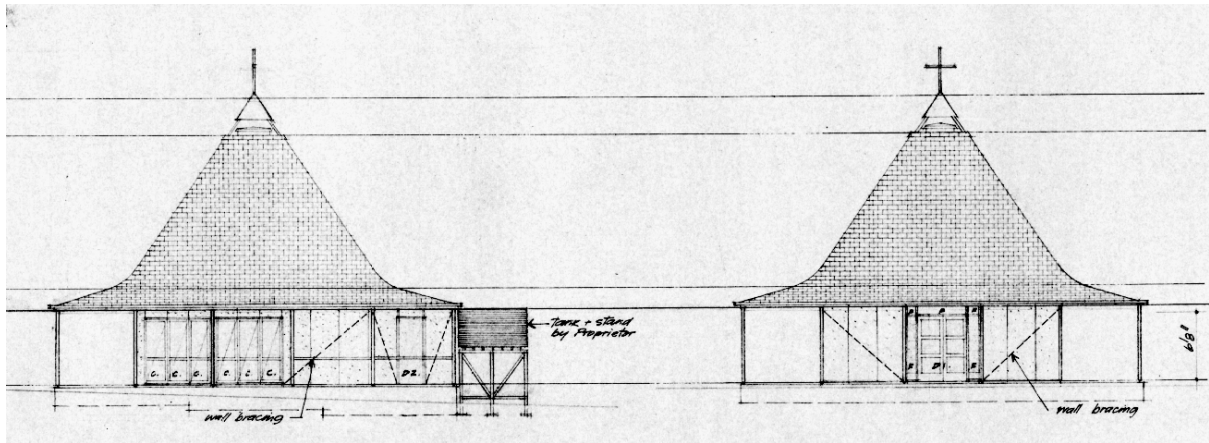
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Confirmed by the South Australian Heritage Council on 10 April 2025

Physical Description



Former American River Methodist Church, western (left) and northern (right) elevations

Source: S207/4/6/19/CH.6.5 Architecture Museum

The former American River Methodist Church is a single-storey, timber-framed church with a square floor-plan and a pyramidal roof. The roof is splayed to form a wide verandah on three sides, supported by jarrah posts.

Additional external features include:

- concrete slab floor to church and verandah,
- doormat inset in verandah floor by main entrance,
- verandah posts mounted on steel stanchions,
- asbestos cement sheet cladding to walls,
- main entrance in centre of northern side, comprising timber-framed double doors, with side and transom lights,
- beaten copper fields to entry doors,
- rows of outward-opening doors on eastern and western sides, 6 each side,
- beaten copper lower fields and glazed upper fields to side doors,
- timber-framed sash windows on the southern side,
- jarrah battens and beading to cladding seams and edges,
- creosote stain finish to external timber,
- pendant light fittings under verandah,
- autoclaved Asbestoslite shingles covering roof, with Alcor hip capping,
- acrylic Marvelcraft skylight at peak of roof,
- skylight surmounted by sheet copper pyramidion and cross,
- exposed timber frame between peak and pyramidion,
- studwork extensions under verandah on eastern and western sides,
- tank and tank stand to rear.

Internal features include:

- square worship space,
- glossy-face off steel trowel finish to concrete floor (under carpet),

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- exposed Oregon timber structural frame with steel gusset plates at joints,
- fibrous plaster walls, with jarrah battens to seams and jarrah beading and skirtings to edges,
- lens-shaped sanctuary plan, with curved step to sanctuary floor and curved, studwork reredos behind,
- red brick sanctuary floor paved in herringbone pattern,
- narrow fibrous plaster sheets forming reredos surface, with jarrah side and top rails, skirting, and battens to seams,
- fibrous plaster soffit and timber pelmet to junction of walls and ceiling,
- pine matchboard ceiling,
- fluorescent light fittings around skylight opening,
- kitchen and vestries, accessed through doors behind reredos on both sides.¹

Elements of Significance:

Elements of heritage significance include (but are not necessarily limited to):

- Church building,
- Original exterior and interior materials and material finishes, including timber, concrete and brick,
- Plain internal and external wall surfaces,
- Form and detail of roof,
- Original fittings including porch pendant light fittings,
- Concrete path leading from street to church.

Elements not considered to contribute to significance of place include (but are not necessarily limited to):

- Studwork additions under verandah on eastern and western sides,
- Trees, shrubs and landscaping.

HISTORY, CHRONOLOGY, SITE DETAILS & PHOTOGRAPHS

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History of the Place

Please refer to the Assessment Report for the full history.

In March 1963, population growth in and around American River, Kangaroo Island and the seasonal influx of holidaymakers encouraged the establishment of a church trust and the acquisition of land to erect a purpose-built church at American River.² The American River Methodist Church was designed by Eric von Schramek of Bruer, von Schramek and Dawes, Adelaide-based architects, engineers and town planners. By the early 1960s, von Schramek was already an experienced church architect and was most likely engaged on the project due to his successful design for the new Maughan Methodist Church in Franklin Street, Adelaide, completed in 1965 (demolished 2016).

Distinctive yet architecturally minimalist when compared with contemporary 1960s churches, von Schramek's design for the American River Methodist Church featured a tall, pyramidal roof, splayed downwards to form a wide verandah. This approach reflects von Schramek's first-hand experience of vernacular architecture in the Pacific region, where he travelled extensively from 1958 onwards, including work trips to Fiji, Singapore and Papua New Guinea. Notably the former American River Methodist Church resembles a chapel, designed by von Schramek around the same time, for the Martin Luther Seminary at Lae, Papua New Guinea.³



The Martin Luther Seminary Chapel at Lae, Papua New Guinea, also designed by Eric von Schramek (designed c.mid-1960s)

Source: <https://pngmissionsociety.org/>

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Von Schramek designed the American River Methodist Church to accommodate a regular congregation of 80, with provision to seat holiday overflow congregations outside, under the wide verandah. To facilitate a clear view of the sanctuary from the verandah, von Schramek provided rows of external doors between verandah and nave along the eastern and western sides.⁴ These doors also enabled effective cross-ventilation of the nave.

Von Schramek employed light, timber-framed construction, clad in asbestos-cement sheet, instead of brick or concrete blockwork. The choice of design and materials reduced the need to import heavy materials by sea and helped to integrate the church into its local community by employing the same 'humble' materials and construction systems used to build nearby holiday houses and shacks. Externally, he specified timberwork to be treated with Samuel Cabot Inc's Creosote Shingle Stain, a product advertised to enhance natural grain while also protecting timber from insect damage and decay.⁵

Built by Kingscote-based W. K. Zealand & Co, the American River Methodist Church was considered to be an 'economical building' at the time of its completion, costing only \$12,000.⁶ The church opened on 9 January 1966.⁷ News reports described the church roof and verandah as resembling 'early pioneers' houses,' while the natural white colour of the Asbestoslite shingles and the copper cross were said to make the church a landmark 'visible from far away on land and sea.'⁸ In c.1966, the American River Methodist Church received a merit award from the Timber Development Association of South Australia, Incorporated 'for the graceful, practical and beautiful use of timber.'⁹



American River Methodist Church, pictured soon after completion, c.1966, note collapsible seating arranged under verandah to serve a holiday overflow congregation.

Source: *Building and Architecture* August 1966 p. 2

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Prior to 1980, fundraising by the American River Methodist Ladies Guild allowed the enclosure of the verandah on the eastern and western sides creating additional rooms.¹⁰ The American River Methodist Church became the American River Uniting Church in 1977.

In c.1980, the former American River Methodist Church was identified by the Royal Australian Institute of Architects South Australia Chapter as a significant example of twentieth-century South Australian architecture. The Chapter considered that the former American River Methodist Church 'successfully combine[d] an accepted idea of church form with the Australian rural vernacular, making it most appropriate in its country town setting.'¹¹



Former American River Methodist Church

Source: DEW Files, 4 October 2024

Chronology

Year	Event
14,000 BCE	First Nations people inhabit the landmass now known as Kangaroo Island.
c.1600	First Nations people no longer access Kangaroo Island on a regular basis.
1739	Methodist founder John Wesley establishes the first Methodist Society in England.
c.1795	Emergence of Methodism as a distinct denomination.

- 1802 20 March, Captain Matthew Flinders sails the sloop *Investigator* into Eastern Cove, adjacent to the site of present-day American River.
French cartographers and naturalists Nicholas Thomas Baudin and Louis-Claude Desaulses De Freycinet visit Kangaroo Island.
- 1803 Baudin and De Freycinet return to circumnavigate Kangaroo Island.
- 1804 American sealers from the brig *Union* launch the schooner *Independence* from the shores of Pelican Lagoon, south of present-day American River.
Europeans begin to visit Kangaroo Island on a regular basis to hunt seals, kangaroos and extract salt from dry lagoons to cure seal skins.
- c.1806 Whalers, sealers and others begin to settle on Kangaroo Island, with abducted First Nations women from Tasmania and South Australia, who are held captive as slaves.
- 1834 British Parliament passes the *South Australian Colonization Act*, enabling the establishment of a British province in southern Australia.
- 1835 Wealthy merchants including George Fife Angas form the South Australian Company to facilitate the colonisation of South Australia.
- 1836 February, ships owned by the South Australian Company depart Britain for Kangaroo Island.
The first recorded Methodist worship in South Australia occurs when Captain Robert Clark Morgan holds a short thanksgiving service following the safe arrival of the *Duke of York*.
July, the South Australian Company establishes the township of Kingscote.
August, Colonel William Light arrives in South Australia and rejects Nepean Bay as a site for a proposed provincial capital.
- 1838 The South Australian Company relocates its headquarters to Adelaide, with most of the population of Kingscote following.
- 1845 Local Congregational, Wesleyan Methodist and Episcopalian congregations build a stone chapel in Houghton, to be shared between the three congregations (Houghton Union Chapel SHP 26493).
- 1854 John Buick settles in the area now known as American River.
- 1870s Four Methodist denominations exist in South Australia. Most South Australian communities possess at least one Methodist chapel.
- 1875 The Hundreds of Menzies, Dudley and Haines are gazetted on Kangaroo Island.
- 1881 The township of Penneshaw is laid out.
- 1883 The township of Kingscote is laid out.
A Wesleyan chapel is built at Penneshaw.

- 1885 A Wesleyan chapel is built at Cygnet River.
- c.1895 American River emerges as a holiday destination due to the popularity of boating on Pelican Lagoon. The first guest house, Ryberg House, is built by Swedish migrant Nils Ryberg.
- 1896 The Cygnet River Methodist Chapel is moved to Kingscote and later closes.
- c.1900 Four families live in the American River district.
Short-lived industries flourish at American River including fish canning, cray fishing and salt harvesting.
- c.1905 The introduction of superphosphate leads to a moderate land boom on Kangaroo Island.
- 1906 The Kingscote Methodist Church reopens.
- 1907 The Kingscote Methodist Church is replaced with a new stone chapel.
- 1909 A private jetty is opened at American River.
- 1918 A government jetty is opened at American River.
- 1922 Methodist services in American River move from private homes to the Government School.
- 1924 Kangaroo Island Methodist mission is split into separate Kingscote and Penneshaw missions.
- 1945 The *War Service Land Settlement Agreement Act* is enacted.
- c.1946 Holiday shacks are established on former Crown Land close to the American River waterfront.
- 1946 Kangaroo Island becomes a Methodist circuit, with worship places at Kingscote, American River, Penneshaw, Parndana, Pioneer Bend and Karatta.
- 1951 The inland Kangaroo Island township of Parndana is created to service soldier settlements.
- 1953 January, the end of post-Second World War building restrictions heralds the beginning of a post-war church-building boom in South Australia, driven by post-war migration and the baby boom.
- 1958 Eric von Schramek embarks on his first round-the-world trip, including visits to Singapore and Fiji.
- 1960s A sheet-pile wharf is built at American River.
Eric von Schramek designs the Martin Luther Seminary at Lae, Papua New Guinea.
- 1963 March, population growth at American River and the seasonal influx of holidaymakers encourages the establishment of a church trust at American**

River and the acquisition of land for the purpose of building a purpose-built church.

1965 The American River Methodist Church is designed by Eric von Schramek of Adelaide-based architects Bruer, von Schramek and Dawes.

1966 9 January, the American River Methodist Church opens.

c.1967 The post-war church-building boom ends in South Australia.

1968 Adult Methodist membership reaches its peak in South Australia.

c.1970 Fundraising by the American River Methodist Ladies Guild allows additional rooms to be added by enclosing the verandah on the east and west sides of the church.

1972 The Martin Luther Seminary Chapel at Lae, Papua New Guinea, designed by Eric von Schramek, opens.

1977 The American River Methodist Church becomes the American River Uniting Church.

c.1980 The Royal Australian Institute of Architects South Australia Chapter identifies the former American River Methodist Church as a significant example of twentieth-century South Australian architecture.

1982 Coastal ketches cease calling at the American River town wharf with fuel and general cargo.

References

Books and Chapters

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Erik Gunnar Asplund, Woodland Chapel, Woodland Cemetery, Stockholm, Sweden, MoMA <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/318>

'Shipbuilding in South Australia' in SA Memory <https://www.samemory.sa.gov.au/site/page.cfm?u=636>

'Kangaroo Island Aboriginal History' in *Tour Kangaroo Island* <https://www.tourkangarooisland.com.au/visit/general-information/kangaroo-island-aboriginal-history>

'History, Kangaroo Island Uniting Churches' The Uniting Church in Australia Kangaroo Island Congregations <https://kangarooisland.ucasas.org.au/history/>

'Welcome – American River' The Uniting Church in Australia Kangaroo Island Congregations <https://kangarooisland.ucasas.org.au/welcome-american-river/>

Archival

Bruer, von Schramek and Dawes, Architects, Engineers and Town Planners, Specification for Erection and Completion of New Church at American River, Kangaroo Island for the Trustees of the "American River Methodist Church", April 1965, Job No. 3870, SRG 4/53/20 SLSA

Von Schramek & Dawes, Architects, Engineers and Townplanners, New Church at American River, Kangaroo Island for the Methodist Church of Australasia, Working Drawing, 8 March 1965, 3870.2, S207/4/6/19/CH.6.5 Architecture Museum

Methodist Church of Australasia, South Australian Conference, Kangaroo Island Circuit, SRG 4/53 Series List SLSA https://archival.collections.slsa.sa.gov.au/srg/4/SRG4_53_KangarooIslandCircuit_serieslist.pdf

RAIA Significant 20th Century Architecture Card Index (RAIA Collection S301/2 AM);
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[Timber Development Association of South Australia, Incorporated, Certificate of Merit, held by American River Uniting Church](#)

CT 2047/37 via SAILIS

SITE DETAILS

Former American River Methodist Church

PLACE NO.: 26585

24 Ryberg Road, American River

FORMER NAME:	American River Methodist Church
DESCRIPTION OF PLACE:	Single-storey timber and fibro-asbestos sheet church
DATE OF CONSTRUCTION:	1965 – 1966
REGISTER STATUS:	Nominated 4 November 2021 Provisionally entered 14 November 2024 Confirmed 10 April 2025
LOCAL HERITAGE STATUS:	N/A
CURRENT USE:	Uniting Church place of worship 1977 – present
PREVIOUS USE(S):	Methodist place of worship 1966 - 1977
ARCHITECT:	Eric von Schramek, von Schramek and Dawes 1965 – 1966
BUILDER:	W. K. Zealand & Co, Kingscote 1965 – 1966
LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA:	Kangaroo Island Council
LOCATION:	Street No.: 24 Street Name: Ryberg Road Town/Suburb: American River Post Code: 5221
LAND DESCRIPTION:	Title CT 5701/547 A235 FP181077 Reference: Hundred: Haines

PHOTOS

Former American River Methodist Church

PLACE NO.: 26585

24 Ryberg Road, American River

All images in this section are from DEW Files and were taken on 4 October 2024, unless otherwise indicated.



Former American River Methodist Church, northern elevation.



Former American River Methodist Church, corner view showing side doors.



Former American River Methodist Church, interior of worship space.



Former American River Methodist Church, worship space ceiling showing lens-shaped sanctuary.



View under verandah showing lined soffit



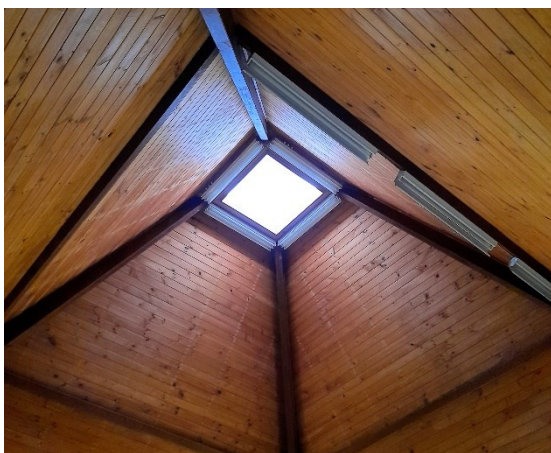
Side doors



Southern elevation showing enclosed verandah



Detail of beaten copper panel in entrance doors



Worship space ceiling showing skylight



Entrance doors

¹ Specific material and product details were verified from Bruer, von Schramek and Dawes, Architects, Engineers and Town Planners, Specification for Erection and Completion of New Church at American River, Kangaroo Island for the Trustees of the "American River Methodist Church", April 1965, Job No. 3870, SRG 4/53/20 SLSA

² CT 2047/37 via SAILIS

³ The chapel roof timbers were left to season under cover 'for as long as possible'; see Eric von Schramek and Helen Gordon, *Reminiscences: Eric von Schramek and his churches* (2007) Adelaide: Lutheran Archives, South Australia p. 86; this chapel is also a square building with a tall, pyramidal roof and a wide verandah, reflecting local vernacular architecture. Lae also features a concrete path leading to the church to both create a sense of arrival and enhance the symmetry of the building by introducing an element of perspective.

⁴ "Timber Adds Charm to Tiny Church" in *Sunday Mail* 8 November 1969, BRG 346/21/22 SLSA

⁵ "Exciting Timber Finishes by Samuel Cabot Inc." (Advertisement) in *Building and Architecture*, August 1966 p. 2

⁶ "Timber Adds Charm to Tiny Church"

⁷ 'Welcome – American River' The Uniting Church in Australia Kangaroo Island Congregations <https://kangarooisland.ucas.org.au/welcome-american-river/>

⁸ "Timber Adds Charm to Tiny Church"

⁹ Timber Development Association of South Australia, Incorporated, Certificate of Merit, held by American River Uniting Church

¹⁰ 'Welcome – American River'; RAIA Significant 20th Century Architecture Card Index (RAIA Collection S301/2 AM);

https://web.archive.org/web/20160304002703if_/http://www.architecture.com.au/docs/default-source/act-notable-buildings/120-notable-buildings.pdf

¹¹ RAIA Significant 20th Century Architecture Card Index