

INDY Community

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Historic St. James gave early Anglicans a home



By Nancy Silcox

Close your eyes and travel back in time with me. The place? The southern reaches of Wilmot Township, part of the so-called German Tract. The era? Early 1820's — a full generation before Canadian Confederation.

Amish and German immigrants seeking freedom to practice their faith without persecution, and land to farm have settled the northern and central areas of the area — the future settlements of Wellesley, Heidelberg, St. Clements and St. Jacobs.

In the British Isles, thousands of English, Scots and Irish are also preparing to leave the grinding poverty of their native soil. Many find their way to the German Tract. But finding the language predominantly German, the religion Lutheran or Mennonite, a number stake their claim to the southern areas of Wilmot.

With surnames of Puddicombe, Tye, Hays, Walker and Kerr, families settle along the Huron Road, which winds and turns towards settlements along the Lake Huron shore.

Legend records that one Englishman, James Gordon Smith walked on snowshoes from Prince Edward County in the eastern reaches of Upper Canada to secure Wilmot land.

With more settlers arriving weekly, the Huron Road then little more than a "bridle path" for horses was upgraded to a "corduroy" (log) road. A four-horse stagecoach travelled the route between Hamilton and Goderich, delivering mail and passengers between the two centres.

It stopped for rest and refreshment in Haysville, a growing "boom town" along the Huron Road. Haysville boasted a post office, grist (flour) mill, sawmill, harness shop, blacksmith and carriage shop. Even a furniture factory called bustling Haysville home.

But for the British Isles expatriates, there was one sorry lacking. There was no Anglican house of worship, inviting their congregations to give thanks to God for the new life they had found in Upper Canada.

In Haysville, the faithful had been holding Anglican services in each other's homes. It was standing-room only when the horseback-riding, itinerant Reverend William Betteridge of Woodstock put in a guest appearance.

Later services were moved to the Haysville school house, S.S. #6. It became known as Christ Church Anglican Parish.

The Haysville faithful were led by Irish-born Reverend James Hickey. Reports painted the garrulous Reverend, as "a sociable individual" who "drank no longer water."

Anglicans along the western reaches of the Huron Road were also looking for a home. Since 1838, like their Haysville neighbours, they'd been worshipping in each other's homes. In 1842, they took up residence at S.S.#6, schoolhouse on the Huron Road.

By 1853, with immigration to the area brisk, St. George Anglican Parish was founded in the village of New Hamburg.

All three Anglican parishes in Wilmot would be served by Dutch-born Reverend Peter van Linge. He too had notoriety. The reverend liked to walk...and walk...and walk.

Each Sunday morning, this man of God set out from home, a simple log cabin on Bleams Road. Then he proceeded to walk the dusty (or snow-covered) roads between each of his three parishes. The Reverend van Linge slept soundly on Sunday nights.

But the times, they were a-changing. With the arrival of the railway, with its station in New Hamburg, the Huron Road



SCOTT MILLER CRESSMAN, INDEPENDENT STAFF

Reverend Margaret Walker presides over the congregation at St. James Anglican Church and St. George Anglican Church in New Hamburg. St. James' storied history intrigued writer Nancy Silcox after she visited the church and cemetery during Doors Open Waterloo Region in 2013. BELOW Detail of one of the stained glass windows in the church.



stagecoach became obsolete. In the blink of an eye, Haysville's population, as well as its economic importance dwindled.

Attendance at Christ Church was affected by Haysville's "death."

By 1890, the modest frame church that had served as the parish was sold to a local farmer. He converted it into a chicken house. The few faithful who remained relocated to an abandoned former Methodist Church.

The fates were kinder, for a time, to little St. James. In 1854, construction of a permanent house of worship, across from the school house began.

A fundraising blitz had enriched the church's coffers by \$475. This paid for the addition of a porch and chancel. Several years later, leaded stained glass windows were installed. A fine pump organ followed.

And the prize was yet to come. A bequest from one faithful parishioner, Samuel Mark paid for the building of St. James' impressive bell tower. Price tag: \$850.

A team of sturdy workhorses pulled the 3000-pound bronze bell to the tower's belfry.

Tragedy struck St. James when parishioners Annie and Margaret Smith, serving as missionaries in China died during the country's Boxer Rebellion. The unfortunate Margaret was burned; Annie later died of Typhus.

By the hungry Depression years of the 1930s, St. James Anglican Parish was in economic trouble. Only four families attended Sunday services, producing barely enough revenue to pay for coal, let alone compensate the pastor.

In 1931, St. James ended regular Sunday services. It was now designated solely as a funeral chapel. Over the years, conditions deteriorated. The church remained virtually abandoned until 1952 when it was upgraded and renovated. Still, it remained a parish without a congregation.

Last February, during Doors Open Waterloo Region, I visited St. James Church and Cemetery. Memories of its beauty and serenity invited me to visit the Church again, this time to tell its story.

There I met with the Reverend Margaret Walker. Her major responsibility is St. George Anglican Church in New Hamburg. St. James falls under her care as well.

Before we enter the church itself, a walk through its well-kept cemetery is calling. It's a journey back through time. A number of headstones, some more than 150 years old, have been elevated on sturdy racks. Many have been worn smooth by weather and the passage of time.

But these markers reveal much more than historical information. A number recognize young women: "Nancy Bauer, 19 years;" "Nora Becker, 25 years"; Mary Jane Bucknell, 24 years.

"I'm guessing that many of these women died during childbirth," I suggest to Reverend Walker. She agrees.

Markers honouring "infant Tye, 24 days", and "infant Cudmore, 24 hours" point to the perils for the newly-born too.

We enter the church from the bell tower entrance. A ladder fixed to one wall leads upwards to a trap door. This gives access to the bell itself. "Have you ever been up to the top?" I ask Reverend Walker. Her answer leaves no doubt about the likelihood of her making the trip any time soon.

St. James' Curator Carol Massel knows

of at least one parishioner's journey to the heights. "He had to deal with the raccoons in the belfry," says Carol.

A cord dangling from the trap door invites me to pull. I'm rewarded with the strong, clear tones of a fine old bell. Reverend Walker recalls the first time she pulled the cord, soon after her arrival in Wilmot.

"All the cows grazing in the field across the road came running up to the fence to see what was going on," she laughs.

We enter the church proper. The sun shining through the stained glass, in tones of blue, gold and crimson, bathes the church in soft light. The sun casts a soft glow too on the fine oak pews and well-crafted furnishings.

The pride of St. James is the reed (pump) organ, manufactured in 1888 by the W. Doherty Company of Clinton. The organ has recently been refurbished by Rodney Jantzi of Baden who also plays during St. James' special services.

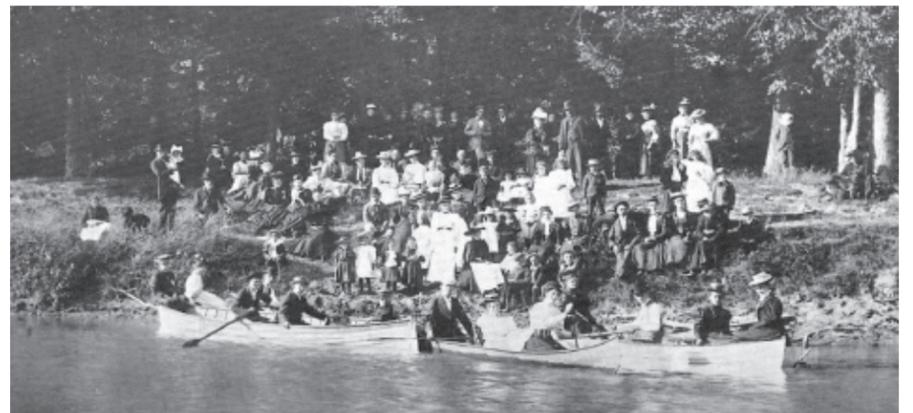
Curator Carol Massel recalls a favourite organ story. "I had driven out to St. James to tend the gardens. A car drove in and an elderly gentleman walked toward me."

"He told me that in his younger days he'd been an organist and had loved playing the instrument during church services.

"So I invited him into the church to play ours and he gladly accepted. He played beautifully. It was wonderful to hear the organ sounds filling the church."

With Thanksgiving around the corner, St. James Anglican Parish on the Huron Road is anticipating its annual Harvest Service on Sunday, October 5. Past services have seen between 50 and 60 people visiting the lovely little church in the valley, along the Huron Road.

Visitors are encouraged to ring the bell. Holsteins may or may not come.



Members of the Haysville Sunday School gather for a picnic on the grove flats at the home of Mrs. H. D. Tye on July 7, 1893