

201 JOHN BLACK AVENUE

KILDONAN PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

City of Winnipeg
Historical Buildings Committee

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The early history of western Canada was not written by kings or queens or prime ministers, but by ordinary men and women struggling to transplant their beliefs, values and institutions in their new home.

The day-to-day reality of this struggle led over generations to the emergence of a unique form: a western Canadian society. During the initial stages of settlement, however, immigrants tended to cling to their traditional lifestyles as a means of lessening the tremendous change in their lives. Religion was probably the most important anchor for life in the new settlements. It was a source of strength, it fostered a cohesive community, and it linked the past with the present.

Among the first European pioneers of the prairies were the Selkirk settlers who were promised quick establishment of their church in the new land. This commitment was one of the deciding factors in their move from Scotland between 1812 and 1815. Many of the original settlers had come from Helmsdale, Sutherlandshire where they were devout members of the Church of Scotland at the Kildonan Presbyterian Church. However, they still had no church or minister when Lord Selkirk visited the colony in 1817. It was then that he named the area Kildonan (present-day West Kildonan) and made land arrangements for a church and school.¹

But the Anglicans of the colony were the first Protestants to receive proper ministering with the arrival in 1820 of Reverend John West. He was followed by other Anglican ministers who not only preached to their own denomination, but also ministered to the Kildonan Presbyterians. It was more than thirty years after West's arrival before the promise of a Presbyterian minister was finally kept and Reverend John Black (1818-1882) arrived from the east to serve the growing number of adherents in and around the Red River Settlement. In response to Rev. Black's appointment, the

¹ M.E. McBeth, The Story of Kildonan Presbyterian Church, 1851-1951 (Winnipeg: 1951), pp. 3-4.

people of Kildonan quickly set out to have a manse ready for his use as a residence and church. That log manse housed the first Presbyterian service west of the Great Lakes, which was held on September 28, 1851, nine days after Rev. Black's arrival. Approximately 300 of the original settlers and their descendants attended the event.² Because the church site designated by Lord Selkirk in 1817 was already occupied by the Anglican denomination, it was decided to take land in an area known as La Grenouillere or Frog Plain. The site originally consisted of 121.5 ha. (300 acres) of land and a 11.0 m. (36') right-of-way from the main road (Main Street) to the Red River (which is now John Black Avenue).³ Throughout the winter of 1851, limestone from Stony Mountain (22.5 km., 14 miles distant) and timber from St. Peters (present-day Bird's Hill forest) were brought to the site and preparations were made to construct the stone church.⁴

The spring of 1852 brought one of the worst floods in recorded history to the Red River valley, sweeping away much of the settlement, including material for the church. Many inhabitants fled to Stony Mountain for safety and Rev. Black often addressed them (Plate 1). A stone nearby was inscribed with the letters "J.B." and remained there until 1927 when it became the cornerstone of John Black Memorial Church, 898 Henderson Highway.⁵

After the flood subsided, work again began on the church. Several problems arose, including John Black's return to Toronto and the subsequent uncertainty over his return. By late 1853 the work neared completion and Rev. Black had returned. Kildonan Presbyterian Church was opened, free of debt, on January 5, 1854 (Plate 2).⁶

² Historic Resources Branch, Manitoba Department of Cultural Affairs and Historical Resources, Kildonan Presbyterian Church (Winnipeg: Manitoba Department of Cultural Affairs and Historical Resources, Historic Resources Branch, 1981), p. 2. Below as Kildonan Presbyterian Church.

³ Ibid., p. 4; and M.E. McBeth, op. cit., p. 7.

⁴ Kildonan Presbyterian Church, p. 4.

⁵ Ibid., p. 5.

⁶ Ibid., pp. 6-7.

STYLE

Kildonan Presbyterian Church is the second oldest church in the City of Winnipeg and one of only two in the city that predate Confederation. The other is St. James Anglican Church, Tylehurst Street, built in 1853 (Plate 3). Kildonan Presbyterian is the fourth oldest extant church in Manitoba.⁷

The hallmark of early prairie church design was its simplicity. The limited resources of the congregations, and the crude materials and technology available, precluded the use of any architecturally-based style. Rather, the designs recalled familiar churches from home parishes in England and Scotland. The basic rectangular plan, whether of stone or wood, was embellished with an entrance tower or spire, a simple gable roof and pointed Gothic windows.

So basic and uncomplicated is this plan - derived from the humbler parish churches of Britain - that it formed the most common arrangement for rural churches in Manitoba until about 1945.⁸

CONSTRUCTION

The church is located on land legally described as 26 Kildonan, Plan 1866, Parcel Lot 5, and part of River Lots 26/27, on the north side of John Black Avenue. It measures 11.0 x 18.9 x 6.3 m. (36 x 62 x 20.5 ft.) with an entrance porch of 3.7 x 1.8 x 3.1 m. (12 x 6 x 10 ft.). This provides a total of 1,315.3 cu. m. (46,476 cu. ft.) of interior space.⁹ The stone walls are 0.9 m. (3') wide and have been stuccoed (Plate 8). Interior walls are plastered, the flooring is fir and the church boasts 5.5 m. (18 ft.) ceilings. Steel I-beams and columns were used in 1983 to give added support for the small

⁷ Manitoba's other pre-Confederation churches are: St. Andrew's-on-the-Red Anglican, St. Andrews Municipality, 1844-49 (Plate 4); St. Peter's Dynevour Anglican, St. Clements Municipality, 1852-53 (Plate 5); St. Clement's Anglican, Selkirk, 1861 (Plate 6); and St. Anne's Anglican, Portage la Prairie Municipality, 1862-64 (Plate 7). Compiled from K. Crossman, A Study of Anglican Church Buildings in Manitoba (Winnipeg: Manitoba Culture, Heritage and Recreation, Historic Resources Branch, 1989); N. Bingham, A Study of the Church Buildings in Manitoba of the Congregational, Methodist, Presbyterian and United Churches of Canada (Winnipeg: Manitoba Culture, Heritage and Recreation, Historic Resources Branch, 1987).

⁸ N. Bingham, op. cit., p. 14.

⁹ City of Winnipeg, Assessment Record, Roll Number 12001, Ward Old Kildonan, PC 90.

balcony.¹⁰ The congregation paid the entire construction cost of ,1050, save ,150 which was donated by the Hudson's Bay Company.¹¹

DESIGN

The stone blocks used in the walls of the church were fashioned by a pitched chisel to give a rough texture. Quoins, window and front entrance surrounds, and keystones were of smoothly planed stone to add variety to the walls. Six Gothic windows, evenly divided on the east and west elevations, provide light and ventilation. The main entrance (south elevation) was originally a Gothic opening, with another Gothic window in the gable end above. The entrance has been replaced by a small closed porch. A small frame steeple tops the structure. The solidness of the design and the great care taken in its completion are partial reasons for the excellent structural condition of this nearly 140-year-old church.

INTERIOR

True to Presbyterian tradition, the church is simply furnished. Originally, the six-sided pulpit was located against the north wall and was reached by mounting several steps. Three large box pews were placed on either side of this pulpit, reserved for the settlement's most influential and prominent families. The remaining pews were arranged with a set running down the centre and shorter pews along the east and west walls. Heating was provided by two wood stoves at the back of the church, with overhead heating pipes running the entire length of the building. Afterwards, a third stove was added at the front of the church.¹² A small balcony was located along the south wall.

Several changes have occurred over the years. In 1878 the pulpit was moved forward (to its present

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Kildonan Presbyterian Church, p. 7.

¹² Ibid., p. 8.

location), at the front of the platform (Plate 9). Part of this platform was set aside for the choir and the box pews were remodelled and their doors removed. Around the turn of the century, a wooden divider was added at the rear of the sanctuary, creating a small vestry for the minister and an entrance vestibule. The four stained glass windows were added between 1924 and 1927.¹³

The interior is dotted with several historically significant objects. Reverend John Black's pulpit bible, given to him in 1881, is displayed along with the original pewter communion vessels, two communion cups donated in 1853, and a number of communion tokens handed out to members before the first communion service.¹⁴

INTEGRITY

The building has occupied its original site for almost 140 years and is in good structural condition. The 1921 stuccoing of the exterior has diminished its historical accuracy, though the simplicity and grace of the original design remains.

STREETSCAPE

Kildonan Presbyterian Church is located in a large, heavily treed lot off of Main Street. The housing and commercial development that has occurred near the church on both sides of Main Street has failed to diminish what has always been essentially a rural church.

ARCHITECT/CONTRACTOR

Duncan McRae, Hudson's Bay Company mason, executed the stonework on the church. McRae was well-known in the Red River Settlement area and he also built sections of the outer walls of Lower Fort Garry and St. Andrew's Church. Angus Polson raised the steeple, and all of the

¹³ Ibid., p. 9.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 9.

construction materials were transported, finished and raised by the men of the colony.¹⁵

INSTITUTION

The Presbyterian Church arrived in eastern Canada in the late 18th century, an offshoot of the Calvinist tradition of the Church of Scotland. In Manitoba, the establishment of the Kildonan Parish and the construction of the church marked the beginning of Presbyterianism in western Canada. It was from Kildonan that the faith was spread to the newly founded settlements further west.¹⁶

Reverend John Black, the first Presbyterian minister, was an important part of this dissemination (Plates 10 and 11). Black was born in the parish of Eskdale Muir on the Scottish border on January 8, 1818, the son of a shepherd farmer. Black longed to be a minister but family finances temporarily precluded this. He instead became a teacher and moved with his family to New York state in 1841. Three years later he was accepted as a student in the first theology class at Knox College in Toronto.¹⁷

His proficiency in French led to his appointment as a missionary in French Canada, a role he filled until he was convinced to answer an urgent call for a minister to travel to western Canada. Two years after Black's arrival, he began to travel to Little Britain to preach, and by 1862, with help from Reverend James Nisbet, Presbyterian services were being held at Fort Garry and Headingley as well. Black continued to minister to the community until his death on February 11, 1882.¹⁸

Presbyterianism continued to flourish and by 1891 it was the largest Protestant denomination in Canada. In 1925, the United Church of Canada was formed by a union of Congregation, Methodist

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 6.

¹⁶ N. Bingham, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

¹⁷ M.E. McBeth, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 9-10.

and approximately two-thirds of the Presbyterian denominations. Those Presbyterian congregations that opted out of the union (mostly in eastern Canada) formed the Presbyterian Church of Canada. In 1987 it ranked as the fourth largest denomination in the country.¹⁹ This church is one of several Presbyterian churches in Winnipeg.

EVENT

In the almost 140 years of the church's existence, it has been witness to the births, marriages and deaths of many of the original European inhabitants of Manitoba and western Canada. These events strengthened the community and gave it a firm foundation on which to build a stable society on the prairies.

CONTEXT

This church is one of the few remaining physical reminders of the original European settlement in what would become the City of Winnipeg. It is illustrative of the faith of the settlers: faith in their beliefs, their new homes and themselves. It was the type of faith that hundreds of thousands of immigrants exhibited when populating the prairies during the early stages of the 20th century.

LANDMARK

Kildonan Presbyterian Church is one of the City of Winnipeg's oldest structures. Its importance as an historic structure is matched by its importance to the community and western Canadian Presbyterians as the mother church for the congregation west of the Great Lakes.

¹⁹ N. Bingham, *op. cit.*, pp. 10-11.

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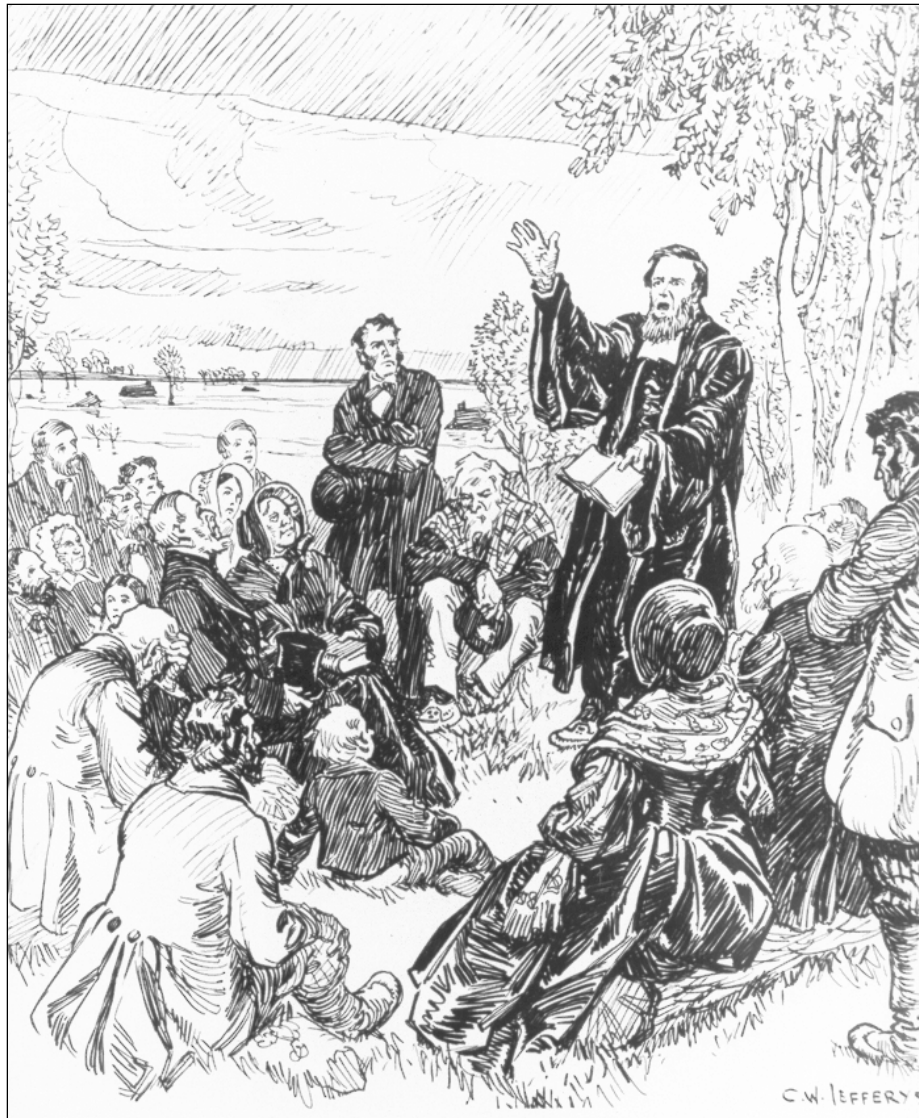


Plate 1 – Artist C.W. Jefferys' impression of the Reverend John Black preaching at Stony Mountain during the 1852 Red River flood. (Photo courtesy of the Western Canada Pictorial Index, Negative 28-849.)

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Plate 2 – Kildonan Presbyterian Church, 201 John Black Avenue, ca.1870; built 1852-54, stonemason Duncan McRae. (Photo courtesy of the Western Canada Pictorial Index, Negative 52-1564.)

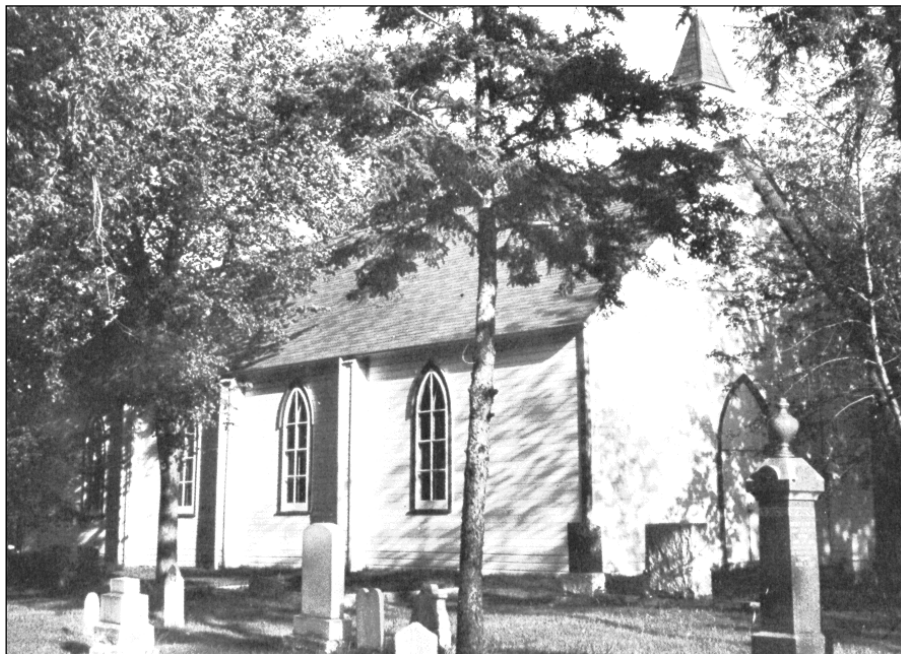


Plate 3 – Old St. James Anglican Church, Tylehurst Street; built 1853, Reverend Taylor, architect. (Photo courtesy of the Western Canada Pictorial Index, Negative 174-5435.)

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Plate 4 – St. Andrew's-on-the-Red Anglican Church, St. Andrews Municipality; built 1844-49, Duncan McRae and Reverend Cockran architects, Duncan McRae stonemason. (Photo courtesy of the Western Canada Pictorial Index, Negative 52-1570.)



Plate 5 – St. Peter's Dynevor Anglican Church, St. Clements Municipality; built 1852-53, Duncan McRae and William Cockran, architects, Duncan McRae stonemason. (Photo courtesy of the Western Canada Pictorial Index, Negative 52-1568.)

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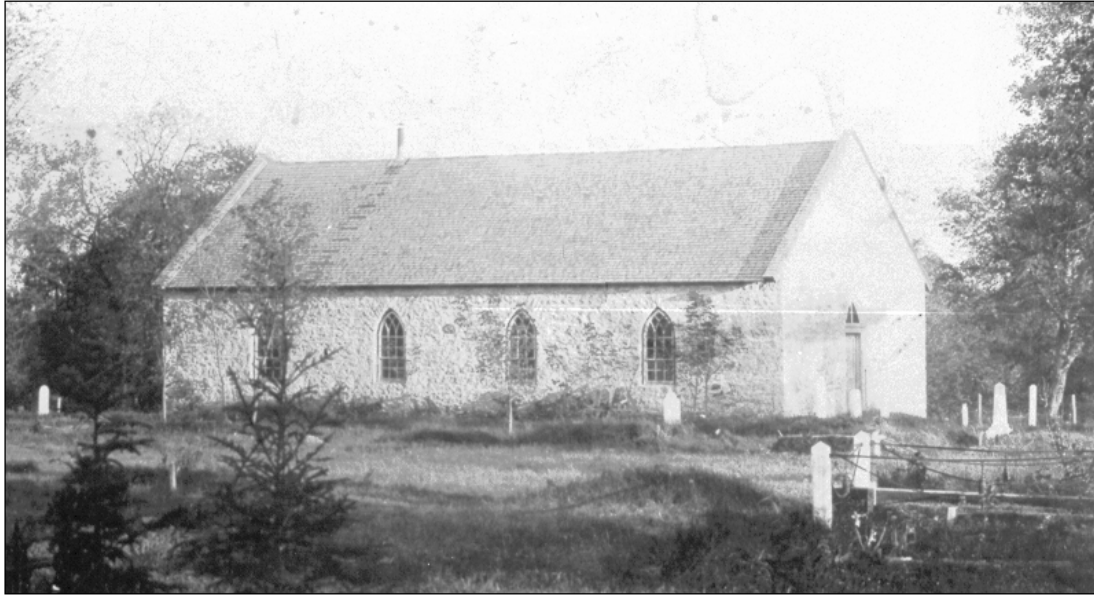


Plate 6 – St. Clement's Anglican Church, Selkirk; built 1861, Samuel Taylor, architect and builder.
(Photo courtesy of the Western Canada Pictorial Index, Negative 171-5352.)



Plate 7 – St. Anne's Anglican Church, Municipality of Portage la Prairie; built 1862-64, architect unknown.
(Photo courtesy of the Western Canada Pictorial Index, Negative 224-7172.)

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Plate 8 – Kildonan Presbyterian Church, 201 John Black Avenue, 1973. (Photo courtesy of the Western Canada Pictorial Index, Negative 1016-30472.)



Plate 9 – Interior of Kildonan Presbyterian Church, 201 John Black Avenue, 1969, pulpit in present location. The glass case at the left of the pulpit holds many of the artifacts used in the original service. (Photo courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, A/S 27/69.)

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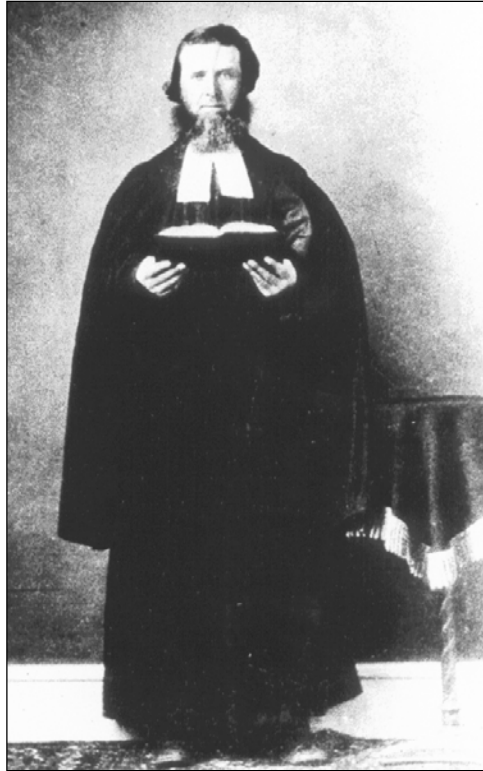


Plate 10 – Reverend John Black (1818-1882), first minister of Kildonan Presbyterian Church, n.d.
(Photo courtesy of the Western Canada Pictorial Index, Negative 33-973.)

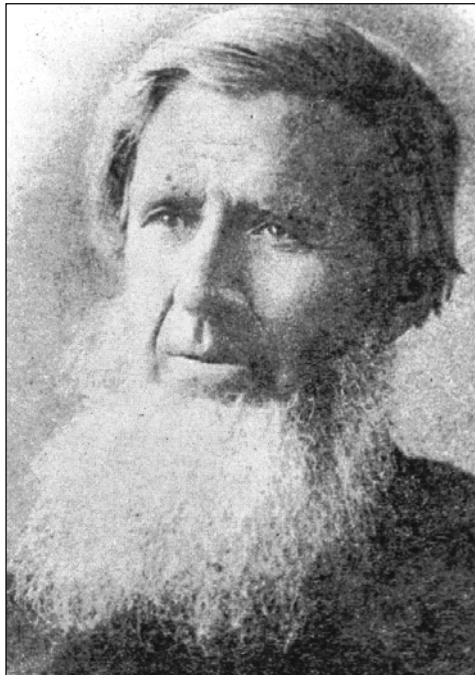


Plate 11 – Reverend John Black, n.d. (Photo courtesy of the Western Canada Pictorial Index, Negative 618-19188.)