

NELSON UNITED CHURCH
PIONEER CHURCH TOUR

Saturday, October 01, 2005

The land on which Nelson United Church (“Nelson”) is located was once Canada’s Native People’s territory. After Europeans came to the area agreements were made with the native peoples during the 1700’s, and the land was allocated to new settlers, and farms were hewn out of the forests.

Governor-General Lord Dorchester became concerned for protection of this frontier following the American Revolution, and pressured Colonel John Graves Simcoe, to move the capital of Upper Canada to York (now Toronto). In connection with that development, what is now known as Dundas Street was established, in accordance with a survey done by Augustus Jones in 1794. It was named after Rt. Hon Henry Dundas, Home Secretary in the British Government, and was far enough from Lake Ontario to be beyond the range of fire of American warships. A map, loaned by Don and Joan Hunt, of the Nelson Township area showing land allocations surrounding Nelson, is on display today. It bears the date 1806.

About this time, Methodist circuit riding preachers traveled this area, and Rev. John Shearman quotes in his 1982 essay, from the diary of one of them, William Case, who wrote the following in his diary in 1808,

“Next day pre’d (preached) to the people in the New Purchase (a term describing an area of land in late 1700 negotiations) where the Lord helpd me in a special manner so that there was great joy among the brethren in the evening prayer meeting. On 14 Sept. preached at br. Hopkins where his son-in-law Mr. Easn. (Eastman) presbyterian meinister attended.”

The exact location of “br. Hopkins” homestead is not clear, but Rev. Shearman says the weight of evidence seems to point to Nelson Township, which ties in with notation on an early map of the area, and seems to be the first verifiable date of worship in what became known as the Nelson-Palermo Pastoral Charge.

A later diary entry regarding his journey Sunday, November 14, 1808, which gives some sense of the challenges of that era, reads,

“At length I came to the high banks of the 12 mile creek, which with great difficulty passed. Being very steep and slippery; for some time I could not get my horse to go down, till by getting advantage I pulled him on, so sliding down, sometimes on his feet & sometimes on his belly, for 50 feet at length we landed at the bottom, with some hurt in one of his legs. Then passing along the valley came a creek where in attempting to cross mired down, but I jumped by my horse. Here Satan strove hard against me, tempting me to impatience & call in question why God should require such fatigues. But on commending my care to God on my knees I found relief. Now my horse could not stand in many places. (This hill was more than 150 feet high.) Neither could I myself only by the trees & bushes. However after great toil we ascended. Sometimes all his feet would slide from under him & only find safety by landing against a tree. Then trembling would again attempt to recover & again would fail, but patient and faithful he continued his exertion till we gained the top of the hill. Then thro’ a muddy way thro’ a severe snow storm passed on several miles till at length I came to my appointment, wet and weary. Considerable reasoning passed in my mind why the Lord should require this service, when there was so little possibility of doing good, as the people did but few attend the meeting in the storm. But I came to the conclusion that it might be to humble me instead of some other affliction & so to prepare me for more profitable service in the church in which belief I was more confirmed afterwards, for He mightily stood by me the next Sabbath, so that several sinners were awaked to seek the Lord.”

Circuit riders’ territories apparently changed every year or so, and in the 30 years following William Case’s Nelson area travels there were said to be 56 others appointed to cover this and adjacent areas. This list is said to include some of the most famous leaders in Methodism in Canada over the next half century. A search continues for this list of names of clergy or acting clergy and lay people.

There were extensive family connections with Americans, which would have caused strained relationships in this community when the Americans declared war on Great Britain on June 18, 1812. In fact this writer wonders whether this has some bearing on the mystery of why there appear to have been burials in the Nelson cemetery for which no grave stones now exist.

The cemetery is one of the oldest in the township, being used for early settlers for many miles around, and has been declared an historic site. Reportedly Mrs. Hugh McLaren was buried there while her husband was serving in the war of 1812-1815. Miss Bastedo

is reported to have been buried there in 1817, and the monument to her memory was later erected in the family plot at St. Pauls, east of Nelson village (formerly Hannahsville). The oldest tombstone is the one for Martha Calvert who died July 19, 1828, located near the southwestern corner of the cemetery. More cemetery research needs to be done.

The earliest authentic documentation of real property ownership is Deeded May 26, 1830 when Moses McCay transferred one acre, being the south west corner of Lot 16, north of Dundas Street, to the Trustees of the Methodist "Episcopal" Church, for the sum of Five Pounds. Another document dated 1861 records the transfer of ownership of ½ acre by T. R. Springer. It therefore appears that the property had been used for cemetery purposes prior to transfer of land title, but the 1830 date may be in connection with the construction of the first building. A Springer family member by marriage, George Carson Madden became a minister at Nelson. The collection plates were donated by Mrs. Edith Madden Mass in memory of Mrs. Eliza Springer Madden.

A church was said by circuit rider Anson Gr