

# FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH PERTH

Transcribed from the Perth *Courier* of October 1, 1942

The Perth Baptist congregation, now nearing the 100th anniversary of its institution was organized on October 21, 1842, with Rev. Robert Alex Fife<sup>1</sup> as minister and with a membership of 25. The congregation worshipped in a church built in the previous year on the site of the present church building. It was erected through the generous efforts of friends in and around Perth and was a plain, unpretentious structure, devoid of paint. Adherents of all denominations contributed to the building fund and donations were in pounds, shillings and pence, the currency of that area.

But while the Perth Baptist Church has a history of one hundred years, it cannot claim to be the pioneer Baptist Church of the county. The earliest of which there is any record was one in North Sherbrooke, not far from Dalhousie Lake. This first church was organized about 1818 by a Rev. McAlpine and the services were held at the home of Mr. Davies. Eventually through removals of people who joined the westward treks, this once prosperous church became extinct.



**Original Baptist Church and Manse built 1841**  
(Photo courtesy Perth Remember)

## County Beginning in 1819

In 1819 the Rev. Duncan McNab<sup>2</sup>, father of Mrs. C. A. Farmer and the late Misses McNab, came to this country and with his family settled in Beckwith. He preached on the Lord's Day as he had an opportunity besides working hard during the week. In 1833 he organized a church in his own home, then in Elmsley, the membership numbering five. Before there was a Baptist Church in Perth, some local Baptists went to the church in Elmsley to worship. In 1863, this church, then with 30 members was

transferred to Smiths Falls. The Drummond Church<sup>3</sup> was closed for a time, most of the members coming to Perth; the Campbells, Davidsons, McLarens, Sinclairs, Mitchells and others were regular attendants, driving over very rough roads and most of them in not very comfortable conveyances.

<sup>1</sup> Rev. Robert Fyfe (1816-1978).

<sup>2</sup> Duncan McNabb (1775-1862) was a farmer, weaver, and lay preacher, not an ordained minister. See <https://www.perthhs.org/documents/elder-duncan-mcnabb.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> This is a reference to a Baptist Church founded in 1847 by Elder Duncan McNab on the Beckwith-Drummond Township line at Tennyson where the current Baptist Church, built in 1907, stands (Drummond C-6/L-27).

Previous to the organization of the Perth church, Baptist ministers visited Perth from time to time and preached in the stone school on D'Arcy Street. Meetings were also held at the home of Donald Campbell in Drummond.

### **Charter Members**

Charter members of the Perth church were: Mr. and Mrs. Hugh McDiarmid, Mr. and Mrs. John McDiarmid, Janette McDiarmid, Donald Campbell, John Campbell, Mary Campbell, Mr. and Mrs. Peter McLaren, Christine McLaren, Isabella McLaren, Mr. and Mrs. H. McCallum, James McCallum, Mr. and Mrs. N. McFarlane, Catherine McFarlane, Jane Galbraith, Jane McQuarry, Mr. and Mrs. Robert Kellock, Mrs. McMillan, Thomas Davidson, Mrs. McEwen. Twenty one of these had been members of the Beckwith church and letters of dismissal had been given them in order that unite with others in establishing the Perth church.

The Rev. Mr. Fife, the first minister, received a salary of £60 a year, half of which might be paid in country produce or store goods. Three deacons, a clerk, a treasurer and five trustees constituted the first office bearers. The first deacons were Hugh McDiarmid, Neil McCallum, and Robert Kellock; trustees were Hugh McCallum, Donald Campbell, Neil McFarlane, Hugh McTavish, and John McDiarmid. The first clerk was John Campbell, and the first treasurer was Robert Kellock.

These were to continue in office until the last Saturday in December when Murdock McDonnell was chosen clerk, Robert Kellock was re-elected treasurer, T. Davidson was appointed precentor and trustees appointed were: William Ritchie, John McDiarmid, John Campbell, John Ritchie, and Francis Allan.

### **From Ancient Minutes**

It is recorded in the minutes of this December meeting that one of the male members of the congregation volunteered to attend to the heating of the meeting house; the keeping of it in a decent state of cleanliness was left to the women of the church and congregation who were expected to attend to it in rotation.

### **Morning and Afternoon Worship**

Rev. Mr. Fife continued his ministry for a year when he was called to Montreal to take charge of the Baptist college in that city. Before he left, the Sunday School was organized, and this has been a feeder to the church ever since. The Sunday School meeting was held before the morning service. Regular church services were held in the morning and afternoon, many from the country remaining for the afternoon worship

## Founded Educational System

Mr. Fife was succeeded by Rev. James Cooper, later Dr. Cooper, in 1847. Rev. Peter McDonald became pastor but left in the following year when the Rev. Mr. Fife resumed the pastorate. Owing to Mrs. Fife's ill-health they were compelled to leave Perth after another year's service. Mr. Fife, later, Dr. Fife, was the founder of the religious educational system of the Baptist denomination.<sup>4</sup>

## Varied Pulpit Occupants

Then followed Revs. William Porterfield, Robert Hamilton, John Cameron, William Ashton, James Mackie, Thomas Henderson<sup>5</sup>; body of the latter reposes in Elmwood Cemetery. It was during Mr. Henderson's time that the Sunday afternoon service was changed to the evening and the Sunday School meeting was moved to the afternoon. After four years service he was succeeded by Rev. Richard Nott<sup>6</sup>. Then followed Rev. William Caldwell, author of *Mick Tracy*. In 1872 Rev. Joseph Forth began his ministry which extended over eight years; after him came Rev. J. W. Thorne and then Rev. Douglas Laing<sup>7</sup>; after four years here, he moved to Kingston where he retired later after 28 years in the Baptist ministry in that city.

## Went to Burma

In 1890, Rev. Ernest Grigg became pastor of the Perth church but after two years left with Mrs. Grigg for a mission in Burma. He served in hut work in France during the Great War.

## Recent Ministers

In 1890, Rev. G. C. Rock came next and was pastor from 1892 until 1907. He was followed by Rev. R. G. Blundell<sup>8</sup> who came in 1908 and left in 1912 for Medicine Hat, Alta. In May 1913 Rev. J. P. L. McLennan became pastor and so continued until the late summer of 1918 removing to Cobourg in November. He was followed by Rev. W. M. Walker in January 1919. In failing health Mr. Walker tendered his resignation October 13, 1924, and a week later this resignation was accepted, and Mr. Walker made honorary pastor of the church. Rev. J. VanSlyke became pastor in February 1925. His resignation tendered to the congregational meeting recently became effective yesterday September 29.

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<sup>4</sup> In 1860 Fyfe became the first principal of the Canadian Literary Institute at Woodstock, through which he exercised extensive influence on Baptist life in Canada. After his death, the Institute's theology department was moved in 1881 to Toronto as the Toronto Baptist College, and in 1887 it was incorporated as McMaster University.

<sup>5</sup> Rev. Thomas Philip Henderson (1816-1887) had been instrumental in convincing the family of Alexander Graham Bell (1847-1922) to emigrate to Canada and after he left Perth, he went to work for Bell managing promotion and sales of Bells new invention, the telephone. Henderson's daughter, Sarah (1841-1890), married Perth Dentist Dr. James Kennedy and through that connection one of the first telephones ever put in service connected Dr. Henderson's clinic and home. See <https://www.perthhs.org/documents/early-adopters-telephone.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Rev. Richard Means Nott (1840-1899).

<sup>7</sup> Rev. Douglas Laing (1847-1927).

<sup>8</sup> In 1910 Rev. R. G. Blundell accompanied Rufus Weedmark (1857-1910) to the gallows in the Lanark County Jail when he was executed for the murder of his wife.

## Short and Long Pastorates

Twenty pastors in 100 years; the shortest pastorate, that of Rev. Mr. Porterfield, six months; the longest, that of Rev. J. G. VanSlyke of slightly over seventeen and one half years, and the worth of these men is shown in their devotion to their work and their self-denying labors. Many of them attained high positions in the denomination.

## First Building In 1841

The first church building, erected in 1841, served the congregation for 47 years; during its lifetime it was the subject of various alterations and additions as occasion demanded. In 1851 the erection of a tower gave it a more ecclesiastical appearance. In 1874 the organ was introduced to aid in the singing. Hitherto the precentors had led the singing. The precentors were T. L. Davidson, later Dr. Davidson, John Campbell, D. Campbell, J. W. Adams, and Thomas Farmer, father of G. B. Farmer, C. A. Farmer, both of Perth, the late Dr. J. H. Farmer of Toronto and Rev. B. J. Farmer of Ottawa, Dean of the Theology in McMaster, Hamilton, while in Toronto. These precentors and the later organists have always given their services gratuitously.

In 1867 a vestry was added to the rear of the main building.

## Present Church in 1888

But the time came when the old chapel must of necessity be succeeded by a larger and more commodious edifice. During the pastorate of Mr. Laing, in 1888, the contract for a new building, the one used today by the congregation, was let and the old historic church in which the congregation had worshipped for two generations and where so many had been brought to a knowledge of a better life and which was the scene of many hallowed memories, was torn down; while the new church was being built the congregation worshiped in the music hall<sup>9</sup>.



*Present Baptist Church built 1888*  
(Photo courtesy of Perth Remembered)

## Corner Stone Laid

On June 28, 1888, the corner stone was laid by Mrs. (Col.) McMillan<sup>10</sup>, the oldest member of the church, assisted by Misses Hattie Kennedy, later, Mrs. Arthur Jackson of Gananoque, and Miss Margaret Robertson, the two youngest members of the congregation.

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<sup>9</sup> The Robertson Music Hall operated 1851-1892 on the second floor of the stone building at 11-15 D'Arcy Street.

<sup>10</sup> Mary Davies-McMillan (1802-1894) was the woman who had prompted the 1833 duel between Alexander McMillan (1783-1850) and Dr. Alexander Thom (1775-1845). Mary had been McMillan's house-servant before their marriage and Thom offended McMillan by refusing to invite Mary to a New Year's party at his home ... because of her class and her religious affiliation.

The Canada Central Association met with the local body at that time, hence many from out of town were privileged to attend the ceremonies and to hear very eloquent sermons delivered by Rev. Dr. Castle<sup>11</sup> of McMaster University.

### **Was Soon Paid For**

Seats in the new church were installed by W. J. Pink<sup>12</sup>. Many people, Baptists and others, contributed to the furnishings of the church; the total cost of the building was \$7,000. During the year, the congregation aided by a few friends, handed over to the treasurer of the building fund, H. S. Lackie, the sum of \$4,000 and it was not very long before the balance was paid off. The members of the building committee were: Dr. J. D. Kellock, convenor; H. S. Leckie, Robert Ritchie, J. F. Kellock and William Allan. Only two members of the congregation who saw the erection of the first church lived to witness the building of the second place of worship, they being Mrs. McMillan and Mrs. James McLaren.

### **Opened in 1889**

The opening of the new church was on May 31, 1889, with Rev. Douglas Laing as pastor. The exercises opened with a prayer meeting conducted by H. S. Leckie; the following service in the morning was conducted by Rev. Joshua Donovan; in the afternoon Rev. James Ross of Knox church was the special speaker and at the evening worship Rev. Mr. Donovan again occupied the pulpit. The opening services were extended over until Monday evening when the resident ministers of the town addressed the meeting.

On June 9, the baptistery was used for the first time, the following being baptised on the profession of faith; Fred Adams, C. H. Lyons, James Malcolm, Alex Robertson, Gertrude Lyon and Rockcliffe Lyon.

### **Semi-Centennial Observed**

In October of 1892 the semi-centennial was observed; morning and evening services were conducted by Rev. James Forth, a former pastor, in the afternoon. Professor J. H. Farmer<sup>13</sup> of McMaster University, a son of the Perth church and a native of the town, addressed the congregation. On the following evening a final service in connection with the celebration was held, as the church was without a pastor at the time G. B. Farmer occupied the chair having with him on the platform Rev. J. Forth and Professor Farmer. Good wishes were conveyed from Rev. D. Laing of Kingston and Rev. A. H. Scott<sup>14</sup> of St. Andrew's church, they being unable to be present. Dr. Kellock gave an historical sketch of the church since its creation 50 years previously; letters of congratulation from many friends at distant points were read and addresses by Rev. Mr. Forth. Professor Farmer and John Irons of the Moody Institute brought the occasion to a close.

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<sup>11</sup> Rev. Dr. John Harvard Castle (1830-1890), Principal of McMaster University faculty of Theology, Toronto.

<sup>12</sup> William James Pink (1843-1922) owned a furniture factory at Perth and served as town Mayor 1887-1888.

<sup>13</sup> John Hughes Farmer (1859-1928), Perth native, Principal of McMaster University 1903-1928.

<sup>14</sup> Rev. Alexander Hugh Scott (1853-1931).

In 1925 extensive alterations and renovations were carried out at the parsonage. At this time the roof was raised and the building was enlarged from one of one-half stories to one of two stories.

### **Oldest Member**

The oldest member of the church is G. B. Farmer who is also senior deacon and who attained his 91st birthday a few weeks ago.

### **Young Men to Armed Forces**

Among young men from the congregation who are in the Canadian armed forces are Douglas Penman and Reginald Filer who are overseas; others in the forces or who are acting as instructors in Canada are Sergt. G. Leslie Brown, Robert Hendry, Flying Officer William Farmer, Arnold Emerson, Pilot officer Donald McLaren, Gordon Parks.

### **Officers of the Church**

Officers of the church at present are: Clerk, R. F. Merrill; Treasurer, E.[?] A. Fleming.

Deacons: G. B. Farmer, C. H. Lyon, J. M. Hendry, J. D. Ewart, R. F. Parks, E.[?] A. Fleming, Allan Ewart.

Trustees: C. N. Lochhead, A. H. McLaren, R. T. Parks, R. F. Merrill, W. E. Scott, Mrs. I. J. Rodger.

Pianist: Mrs. VanSlyke, Mr. R. F. Merrill.

Ushers: W. E. Scott, H. Filer, W. H. Reid, C. N. Lochhead, Robert McEwen, Alex Reid, Allan Ewart, E. Casey, R. T. Parks.

### **Organizations Within The Church**

The women's home and foreign mission circle was organized in 1877 and present officers are: president, Mrs. M. B. Kennedy; vice president, Miss Ann Acheson; secretary-treasurer, Mrs. R. A. Brown; treasurers, Miss Mary Davies, Mrs. W. H. Reid.

Present officers of the young women's mission circle are: president, Miss Ann Acheson; secretary treasurer Mrs. C. N. Lochhead.

Present officers of the Sunday School are: superintendent, Harry Filer; assistant superintendent, A. L. VanSlyke; pianist, Miss Mary Hold; librarian, Miss Mary Reid.

Officers of the ladies' aid are: president, Mrs. I. J. Rodger; secretary and treasurer, Mrs. Gerald McEwen.

Officers of the B.Y.P.U. are: president, A. L. VanSlyke; secretary, Miss Patricia Filer; treasurer, Miss Dorothy VanSlyke.

Officers of the Sunshine Group are: president, Dorothy Reid; secretary, Joan Barrie; Treasurer, Olive Palmer.

The mission band was organized in 1877 and present officers are: president, Robert Dowdall; secretary, Murray Dowdall; treasurer, Aileen Imeson.

The work existing among the young girls under the leadership of Mrs. T. J. Farmer was taken over in 1930 by Mrs. VanSlyke and it eventually emerged in a young women's mission circle. At the same time, a group of younger girls met as the Sunshine Group and this group is carrying under the leadership of Misses Mary Reid, Patricia Filer, and Dorothy VanSlyke.

For some few years a group of boys has been meeting each week as 'Explorers' under the leadership of Mr. Van Slyke.

### **The Centennial Committee**

Executives and members of the centennial committee are: Presidents of B.Y.P.U.; A. L. VanSlyke; Mission Circle, Mrs. M. B. Kennedy; Young Women's Mission Circle, Miss Ann Acheson; Ladies Aid, Mrs. I. J. Rodger; Superintendent of S.S., Harry Filer; Superintendent of primary department of S.S., Miss Bessie Farmer; Deacon, G. B. Farmer; Clerk, R. F. Merrill; Treasurer, E. A. Fleming; Pianist; Mrs. J. G. VanSlyke; Pastor, Rev. J. G. VanSlyke. Of this committee, G. B. Farmer is honorary chairman and R. R. Merrill, chairman.

### **Had Many Members**

It is impossible owing to imperfect records to ascertain the whole number on the roll of the church since it was organized in 1842, but in its membership have been many of the men and women who contributed in large measure to the building of the Perth of today.

### **Historical Record**

The Perth church is not only an historical church but has been a mother church and has nurtured sons and daughter who, going from this church, have helped to promote the Christian faith in this and other lands. Among these have been Rev. T. L. Davidson, Rev. Allan McDougall, Dr. J. J. Farmer, Rev. W. H. Weir, Rev. S. J. Farmer, Rev. George H. Brock to India, Mrs. Ballard to India, Rev. W. Ernest, and Mrs. Grigg to Burma, Rev. Fred Filer to Riverdale Church in Brantford, Miss Grace Kenyon to India, etc.

The Church has always been self sustaining as well as regular in its contributions to the various denomination interests.