

ELDER DUNCAN McNABB (1775-1862)

North Elmsley Baptist Church



On the south side of Highway #43, a short distance west of the Town of Smiths Falls, the stone chimney of a long-gone pioneer home stands tall nearly 200 years after it was built and nearly 100 years since it was dedicated as a memorial to Duncan and Catherine McNabb recognizing their leading role in the early 19th century Baptist Church of southern Lanark County.

Duncan McNabb was born at Killin¹, Perthshire, Scotland in 1775, the son of Finlay McNabb (1744-1821) and Christine McDermid (1744-1821) and, in January 1806, at Killin, married Catherine Ferguson (1785-1874), daughter of John and Catherine Ferguson of Balquhidder, Perthshire. Like so many in the highlands of his day, McNabb was a weaver by trade, working at a cottage hand loom. He was unusual, however, in that at age 25 he abandoned his Presbyterian roots and joined the Congregational Church². Then, in 1809, while seeking a health cure in the sea air at Garelochhead³, he met the local Baptist Preacher, Daniel McArthur⁴. Convinced by McArthur's interpretation of the scriptures, McNabb was baptized by immersion in the waters of Gare Loch.

As the economic depression following the Napoleonic Wars drove Scotland's once prosperous handloom weavers to poverty, destitution and starvation, Duncan and Catherine McNabb took up the British Government proposal put forward in the 'Edinburgh Proclamation' of February 1815. It offered,

... liberal encouragement by His Majesty's government to settlers inclined to proceed from Great Britain and Ireland, and provision by vessels for their passage to Quebec with their families ... The passage and provisions during the voyage will be furnished by Government, and, on their arrival in the colony, a grant of one hundred acres of land will

¹ At the foot of Loch Tay.

² Congregationalism in Scotland emerged in the 19th century out of dissatisfaction with the lack of missionary zeal of the Church of Scotland. It occupied a theological position somewhere between Presbyterianism and the Baptists and Quakers. Numerically very small, it still made a distinctively liberal contribution to Scottish life. Explorer/missionary David Livingston (1813-1873) was a Congregationalist.

³ A fishing village in Dunbartonshire (now Argyll and Bute) at the head of Gare Loch, north of Greenock.

⁴ In the early 19th century Daniel McArthur, of Cowal, Dunbartonshire (Argyll and Bute), was "*converted by grace*" and began preaching "*with unusual fervency and zeal*". He sought out Elder Frederic McFarland of Edinburgh, the most senior Baptist minister in Scotland who had formal (originally Presbyterian) ordination, who baptized him by immersion and ordained him as Pastor of a Baptist congregation at Cowal (near Garelochhead). McArthur was subjected to persecution by the Established Church of Scotland and at one point jailed in England. In 1811 he emigrated to the United States and settled in the finger lakes district of New York State, near Ithaca.

be secured to each family ... For the first six or eight months, in order to enable the settlers to establish themselves upon their respective grants they will be allowed rations from the public stores ... Axes and other necessary implements will also be furnished to them under certain regulations at a fixed price ...

In mid-July 1818 Duncan and Catherine, with their sons Colin (9) and Thomas (4) and daughter Jannet (6 weeks)⁵, were among 205 immigrants who boarded the Brig *Curlew* at Greenock bound for Canada. Under command of Captain John Young, the *Curlew* made the north Atlantic passage in under seven weeks, reaching Quebec City on September 9th. Infant Jannet, however, did not survive the voyage. Just three weeks later, on September 30, 1818, authorities at the Perth Military Settlement issued Duncan McNabb a location ticket for 100 acres of land at Beckwith Township C-4/L-3 (about two kilometers north of Gillies Corners).

McNabb put up a log house, cleared enough ground to grow some potatoes and Indian corn, and began creating a farm. Other settlers, however, had been established in Beckwith Township from 1816 and many of them were, by 1820, already raising enough sheep to produce the wool desperately needed for clothing, where imported yard goods were prohibitively expensive. Often as adjuncts to the first sawmills, carding mills had been built to disentangle and clean the raw wool that was then home-spun into thread, ready for weaving. Duncan McNab was soon called upon to assemble the loom he had carried with him on the *Curlew* and resume his trade. The cloth he produced was taken home by the settlers for fulling, the process of soaking and stretching the fabric to make the end product known as homespun. From that material, for many years, wives and daughters sewed nearly every item the clothing worn by man, woman and child.

In a community dominated by members of the Church of Scotland (Presbyterian) and the Church of England (Anglican), as well as Roman Catholics and a few Methodists, during the first decades of the settlement adherents of the Baptist Church were few and far between. Nevertheless, on Saturday afternoons Duncan McNabb would leave his loom and trek barefoot along bush trails and across the swamps to seek out, encourage and lead Sunday bible study for the handful of his co-religionists sprinkled across the townships of Beckwith, Drummond and Elmsley. In time he began holding services in his own house every second Sunday and, on alternate weeks, in the homes of other Baptists. By 1825 this little group had organized itself into a congregation of seven charter members under the leadership of Elder Duncan McNabb.

In 1833 McNabb sold his Beckwith Township homestead and moved to a property in Elmsley Township (C-6/L-7) where he farmed, continued to practice his trade as weaver and where he *“carried on aggressive Christian work”*⁶. He soon formed North Elmsley Baptist Church with five charter members who, as in Beckwith, met in the McNabb home.

⁵ Another daughter, Elizabeth (b.1812), died before their departure.

⁶ From a paper presented by Duncan McNabb's great-grandson Thomas Farmer (1887-1935) at the Smith's Falls and District Baptist Centennial, as quoted in the *Perth Courier* November 10, 1933.

*The change of location caused no change in zeal and devotion in the service of his Lord, and his work resulted in the salvation of many souls, while the harmony of the Church continued profound and unbroken.*⁷

When Reverend William Bell (1780-1857), pioneer pastor at First Presbyterian Church in Perth, stopped by for a visit, he recalled finding McNabb *“busy at his loom”* and, reflecting the important role Catherine McNabb played in advancing the Baptist cause, Bell noted that he judged her *“the better preacher of the two”*.⁸

As late as the 1861 census there were only about 150 Baptists recorded in North Elmsley and southern Drummond Township, including just 16 in the Town of Smiths Falls. Services continued at the McNabb home but in 1853, as advancing age sapped McNabb’s energy, his congregation became a mission of Carleton Place Baptist Church. In 1861 McNabb’s North Elmsley congregation of 30 members was admitted to the Johnstown Association of Baptist Churches, with services held at Smiths Falls. When McNabb died the following year, his church was permanently re-located in Smiths Falls under the name First Baptist Church.



Duncan McNabb's house c1894

For several decades in the second half of the 19th century the local schoolhouse was located on Duncan McNabb’s North Elmsley Township property.

McNabb is credited with nurturing the establishment of four pioneer Baptist churches: Perth (1841), Carleton Place (1843), Smith’s Falls (1847) and Beckwith Town Line Church (1847). The latter, located near Tennyson⁹, served both Beckwith and Drummond Townships.

In addition to sons Colin and Thomas, who had been born in Scotland, Duncan and Catharine McNab had six more children born in Beckwith and Elmsley Townships; Duncan Jr. (1823-1903), Thomas (b.1824), Fergus Findlay (1827-1901), Catherine (b.1829), Peter (b.1841) and Finlay (b.1848).

⁷ *History of the Churches in Our Association*, by T. Luckens (1879), published in the minutes of the 50th annual meeting of the Canada Central Association of Regular Baptist Churches.

⁸ *Diaries of the Reverend William Bell*, Queens University, Kingston.

⁹ Located on Drummond C-6/L27 where the current Baptist Church, built in 1907, stands.

Baptist Elder Duncan McNabb died in North Elmsley Township, Lanark County, on November 12, 1862, and was buried in Hillcrest Cemetery, Smiths Falls. Christine McNabb died August 28, 1874 and was buried beside her husband.



At an unknown date in the early 20th Century the McNabb's log home at North Elmsley Township C-6/L-7, on the south side of today's Ontario Highway #43, about five kilometers west of Smiths Falls, was destroyed by a fire that left only its stone fireplace and chimney standing. On October 29, 1933, on the 100th anniversary of the founding of Elder McNabb's North Elmsley congregation, that chimney was dedicated as a monument when First Baptist Church Smiths Falls unveiled an attached plaque to the memory of Duncan and Christine McNabb.

Duncan McNabb's handloom, carried from Scotland in 1818, remained in possession of the McNabb and Farmer families¹⁰ until 1997 when it passed to Michael and Janet Girdwood who, in turn, donated it to the Mississippi Valley Textile Museum at Almonte in 1998. The museum confirms that "a loom purported to be from the McNabb family was gifted to the museum in the 1990's"¹¹ but reports that it can no longer be accounted for.

It may have rested only a short time in the collection of the MVTM. It is unfortunate that its time here was also before the professionalization of the record-keeping. It was of the type known as a 'barn loom' which usually indicates a level of 'rustic' construction, and at that time it was missing several key elements, and the remaining parts were in poor condition. It appears as if the past management of the museum either handed off the loom pieces to another institution or discarded them.¹²

- Ron W. Shaw (2020)

¹⁰ Via Duncan McNabb's son Colin McNabb (1809-1879) and grand-daughter, Christina McNabb (1859-1944), who married Charles A. Farmer (1857-1947).

¹¹ Email, May 4, 2020, from Sean Joynt, Artifacts and Facility Manager, Mississippi Valley Textile Museum, National Historic Site, 3 Rosamond Street East, Almonte, Ontario, K0A 1A0.

¹² Ibid.