TRANSCRIPT

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This item draws heavily on an article that appeared in the *Perth Courier* editions October 15, 1864.

Education In the Early Days Of Perth Settlement Started in Homestead

By Clyde Bell

Editor's Note: The Foster Street Public School has been demolished to make room for Perth's new Community Center. The following series of articles dealing with education in the early days of the Perth Settlement have been written by Clyde Bell, the former Director of Public Relations for the Perth Museum, and now the co-owner and news editor of the Tweed News Publishing Coo., Tweed, Ontario.

Mr. Bell has based the articles covering the history of the local school, the Mechanic's Institute and the Public Library on records in the files of the Perth Museum, along with the original paper presented to the Perth Historical Society, November 17, 1897, the book '*John Holliday*', by Clarence Holliday, Cobourg, Ontario, and the book '*William Bell – A man Austere*', by Isabel Skelton.

From information gathered from the records at the Perth Museum, it would seem that nothing was neglected in the early days of the settlement that was conducive to the welfare of the settlers. Everything deemed necessary to give them a good start in life was provided by the Government, and their spiritual, as well as their moral welfare, was attended to.

In the matter of education, we find that they were not deficient, as an effort was made early in 1817, to start a school only about one year after the first settlers had cut their way through the forest into the town that was surveyed for them on the banks of the River Tay. That effort was unsuccessful as the following letter will show, which was written in answer to one from David Daverne[1], Secretary at Perth, [when] he was then trying to procure a teacher. The

[1] Daniel Daverne (1784-1830), Acting Superintendent of the Perth Military Settlement 1817-1819.

copy of this original letter and the reply received may be found in the ledger of correspondence written by Mr. Daverne, and now on display in the Perth Museum.

Augusta
March 14, 1817

Sir:

In compliance with the request of His Excellency, contained in your letter of the 11th inst. I have examined Mr. J. Halliday[2] in such branches as I conceived it is necessary that a teacher of a public school of that importance should be master of. In reading, writing and the common rules of arithmetic, I think him sufficiently instructed, of grammar and the classics, his knowledge is very limited, of geography, geometry and of the mathematics he knows nothing.

A knowledge of these branches I thought necessary qualifications of a teacher who is to enjoy a salary of £50, but from his deficiencies in some of them, and his total ignorance of others, as well as from his method of teaching (on which I have examined him) I think him more properly placed in the situation of a teacher of a parish school, for which he is undoubtedly well qualified in this attainments.

I have the honor to be, Sir, Your most obedient servant,

John Bethune
Addressed to David Daverne, Secretary, Perth, Upper Canada

After this successful effort, nothing seems to have been done until the Rev. Mr. Bell[3] arrived in Perth in June of the same year. Mr. Bell at once saw the urgent need for a school and, at the request of the inhabitants, determined to open one for the common branches of education. It was opened in is own dwelling on the 7th of July 1817, with 18 scholars, only two weeks after Mr. Bell's arrival at the settlement. The Governor in Chief on being informed of the circumstances ordered the salary of £50 a year be paid to Mr. Bell as teacher. The number of scholars kept increasing and the want of a proper schoolhouse was very much felt. At last, however, a suitable schoolhouse was erected, being used for a school during the week and as a place of worship on Sunday.

Things continued in this state until the end of 1819, when the Rev. Michael Harris[4] was ordained at Quebec by Bishop Mountain and sent to Perth. The Deputy Quarter Master General then took the school off Mr. Bell's hands and gave it to Mr. Harris. His reason for doing this was that he thought it right that a clergyman of the Church of England ought to have the situation under government, in preference to anyone else, and not that he had any fault to find with the management of the school which was flourishing under Mr. Bell's care.

[2] John Holliday/Haliday (1778-1879).
[3] Reverend William Bell (1780-1857), first Presbyterian minister at the Perth Settlement.
[4] Reverend Michael Harris (1795-1856), former Lieutenant 100th/99th Foot.

Mr. Bell, in speaking of this transaction says" The school under my revered successor soon after died of a consumption, and the schoolhouse has for some time been empty".

At this time, the school system in vogue in the province was much more complicated than at present; there were two school acts, one known as the 'Public School Act', and the other as the 'Common School Act'. Under the Public School Act, there was in each district one school known as the District Grammar School. The government made a grant to this school and the scholars attending had to pay fees. The first grant to the District School of Bathurst was in 1823, when the sun of £50 per annum was set aside for the purpose. There was a provision, however, that 10 of the most promising scholars in each district should be educated for free, at the District School.

It is evident that four years was considered the course of study, as the arrangement for electing the 10 scholars provided that once in four years every Common School in the district should send up names of not more than four scholars. These names were written on separate slips of paper, put in a box and 10 names drawn, this being the names of the fortunate scholars entitled to attend the District School without paying fees. The first District School was on the site of the first St. Andrew's Church on Craig Street.

The first teacher was Mr. John Stewart[5], better known as 'Foureyes', who was succeed by Mr. Kay, who came here from Scotland. This schoolhouse was afterwards moved farther down on the street, and a church built on the old site. This move was one that found favor with the scholars, particularly the fighting characters, as the school yard and the church yard were separated by a high board fence. This this fence as an obstacle to the view of the teacher, and the sacred precincts of the church became the battle grounds where all the disputes of the scholars were settled.

Under the 'Common School Act', if a competent number of inhabitants of any town, village, township or place, united to build, or provided a suitable building and encouraged 20 scholars or more to attend and provided a part for the payment of a teacher, they were entitled to establish a school, which under the provisions of the act shared in the annual government grant. The amount of the grant for distribution among this class of school in the Bathurst District was £250 per annum, and it was divided in proportion to the number of scholars taught in each, the remainder of the teacher's support was raised from school fees which were from two to three dollars per quarter. Parties interested met once a year and elected three trustees who had complete charge of the school, they not only had to engage the teacher, but also examine the applicants as to their qualification, for at this early date there was no provincial standards as at the present time.

A condition imposed was that every teacher should be a natural born British subject, everything else being left to the discretion of the trustees. In each District there was what was called the 'District Board of Education', composed of the persons selected or appointed by the Governor, who had charge of all school matters in the District. In case any of any dispute arising in the school, this Board decided matters finally.

[5] John Stewart (c1790-c1873), grammar schoolteacher and former editor of the *Brockville Recorder*, established Perth's first weekly newspaper, the *Independent Examiner*, in 1828.

Under this system there were [also] many semi-private schools established, as it was not necessary that persons desirous of uniting the establish a school should be residents in the same part of the town or village, as the case might be. One of the first schools in the Perth district under this system was one kept by Benjamin Tett[6] in 1823. Mr. Tett had been an assistant to Rev. Mr. Harris in the local school, but when his school failed, or died of consumption, as Mr. Bell expressed it, Mr. Tett opened a school in 1823. It was in a log building on Herriott Street, but he moved to a larger house on the east side of Gore Street opposite the Methodist Church. Mr. Tett did not conduct his school after 1825. This was the first school Mr. James Bell remembers attending. Mr. Bell being one of the oldest residents in town.

School Dunce Became an MP

In 1826 Mr. John Wilson opened a school in Mr. T3tt's building and later in the same year moved to the Red House on Craig Street, known as the Fraser property. Still later he moved to a log building on th3e west side of Drummond Street.

About 1832, Mr. Wilson gave up his school and went in with Mr. John Stewart as assistant of the District School. This is the Wilson who was the hero of the Lyon-Wilson duel fought in Perth in 1833. On leaving Perth, he practiced law in London and was subsequently Justice of the High Court during [*illegible*] or before. Mr. Dawson Kerr[7] opened a school in a log building just east of the Methodist church. This school was still in existence when the public school started.

A Mr. Hudson[8] (his grandson was later the foreman in Mr. Code's mill) and a Mr. Tully[9] both taught at this time, the former from 1830 to 1832 or 1833 in a frame dwelling on the north side of Brock Street between Beckwith Street and the river, and the latter from 1831 to 1833 in a log building which stood on the south side of the stream.

Mr. Robert Lees[10], a brother of the ex-MPP for South Lanark, conducted a school in a stone building on D'Arcy Street, starting sometime in 1839. In 1847 Mr. Lees went to Ottawa, then Bytown, to practice law. He later became a prominent Queen's Counsel of that place. Another of these schools was one directed by a Mr. Crookshanks in a building near the Methodist Parsonage in 1845-1850. In 1840 a Mr. Sommerville taught in the building on the site of the present school; a Mr. McLaren having taught there before his coming.

Besides these school mentioned, which are the most prominent, there were several conducted by ladies, from the earliest days. The first of these seems to have been one managed by Mrs. Thompson[11], mother of Mrs. Agnes Meighen, in her dwelling situated on the corner of Drummond and Brock streets, starting sometime before 1830, and continuing for many years.

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[6] Benjamin Tett (1798-1878).
[7] Dawson Kerr (1794-1884).
[8] Probably Edward Hudson Sr. (1790-1837), former Merchant at Gibraltar, settled Bathurst Township C-1L-8(SW), January 1818.
[9] William Edward Tully (1780-1845), later a mill owner and also established the short-lived *British Constitution* newspaper at Perth.
[10] Robert Lees (1814-1893).
[11] Isabella Gilchrist-Thompson (1792-1879).

There were three sisters, the oldest Margaret[12], being at the head of the school. These sisters finally left town and their brother, who had married the daughter of a wealthy Indian planter and dissipated her fortune, brought his wife to the old house, where she took up the school, formerly taught by her sisters-in-law, and managed it for some years. Mr. Jessop[13] was a gentleman of leisure and seems to have spent his time gardening and living on the proceeds of the school taught by his wife. She was noted for being very cross and, as it would be expressed at the present day, "cranky", and seems to have vented all her anger against her dissipated husband upon the unfortunate children who were placed under her care.

A Miss Matheson remembered attending this school when very small, later told that they had "confession" every Friday, when all the children had to go to Mrs. Jessop and confess the sins of the week. The Hon. John Haggart[14] also attended Mrs. Jessop's school and seemed to have been one of the banes of this worthy school mistress' life. He was seemingly so stupid and dull that one day, as punishment, she made him stand on the stove which did not support his eight, the result being a bad mixture of broken stove and small boy.

On the early days those ministering to the spiritual needs of the people of Perth did not receive very substantial remuneration, so Mrs. Wilson, the wife of the Presbyterian Minister, started a school by taking a few scholars at their home, and was assisted by her sister, a Mrs. Buchanan. This venture was such a success that before long the proceeds proved a very substantial addition to their income. The number of scholars kept increasing until the rooms of the manse were too small to accommodate them.

A Mr. Rutherford[15] then put up a frame building farther back on a lot facing Brock Street and in this building Mrs. Wilson conducted her school until 1844 when she and Mr. Wilson returned to Scotland. When Mrs. Wilson began to take scholars, Mrs. Jessop's school began to go down and nearly all her pupils were ultimately taken from her and sent to Mrs. Wilson. She finally was compelled to close and then accepted a position on the Common School staff.

The sisters, Miss Frasers, taught in the same building occupied by Mrs. Wilson after the latter left town, but on their giving up, there was no private school of any kind for girls. Amongst a great many others who attended Mrs. Jessop's, Mrs. Wilson's and Miss Fraser's schools were the Miss Mathesons. On the occasion of the Miss Frasers giving up teaching, the Hon. Roderick Matheson, wishing his daughters to have every advantage, arranged with a lady by the name of Leuard to come to Perth. He furnished through-out a frame dwelling just east of Mrs. Weatherhead's home, at the back of his own garden and gave it to her free besides paying her a certain among each year. He also gave her the privilege of taking other scholars to supplement her income. Mrs. Leuard was only able to stay in forth for a short time, much to the regret of her scholars and their guardians.

[12] Margaret Jessop (1789-1859).

[13] Francis William Kinnear Jessop (1798-1878).

[14] John Graham Haggart (1836-1913), MP 1872-1813, Postmaster General 1888-1892, Minister of Railways and Canals 1892-1896.

[15] William Rutherford (d.1871), Blacksmith at 66 Brock Street.

Mr. Matheson then brought the Miss Sinclairs to fill her place. Another school was kept by a Mrs. Auckland[16] and her assistant was Miss Hughes[17], the heroine of the Lyons-Wilson duel. Miss Hughes afterwards married Judge Wilson, the survivor. On the site of Mrs. Auckland's school there was a school later kept by two Miss Hawlins in the fifties, the brick house opposite St. James Church was used as schoolhouse.

Mrs. McKenzie was the head of this school. One of her assistants was a Miss Dunham who later married Mr. McNairan, the grandparents of Mrs. Cyril Inderwick[18].

Miss Helen Buchanan[19], the eldest daughter of the Rev. George Buchanan[20], a Presbyterian Clergyman, who settled in Beckwith Township in August 1822, opened a school in Perth soon after the family arrived in Upper Canada. She was assisted by one of her sisters, and the school was a great success for a year or two. Miss Helen Buchanan then married John Ferguson, a wealthy merchant and lumberman. She died on February 19, 1830. The sister, Catharine Buchanan[21] moved to Montreal where she taught school for some years. There she died on 12th November 1836.

In 1821 Barter Agreements Paid For Education

The system under which the District School and the semi-private schools were run, continued in force for many years. In 1874 the Grammar School took the place of the District School, the first trustees being the Rev. Michael Harris, the Rev. Mr. Bain[22], the Rev. Mr. Bell, and Mr. Joshua Adams[23]. During the next few years, the following names were added to the board – Messrs. Anthony Leslie, W. O. Buell[24], Murdoch McDonnel, John R. Gemmill[25], John Livingston, John Robertson, and the Rev. J. Duncan[26]. Three years later, in 1851, the common and semi-private schools united forming the Public School of the present day. This latter date is also the year that the first Perth Board of Education was formed. The trustees who united and formed the board were.

Grammar School – Rev. Mr. Harris, chairman; Rev. Mr. Bell and Mr. Bain, J. H. McDonagh[27] and W. O. Buell.

Public School – Mr. J. Davis[28], Chairman; Mr. J. McKay[29], Clerk of the County Court; Mr. Thomas Brooke[30], Town Clerk, and Clerk of the County Council, and Mr. Robert Kellock[31], father of Dr. Kellock[32].

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16 Mrs. Gideon Ackland.
17 Elizabeth Johanna Hughes (1812-1904).
18 Winnifred Shaw-Inderwick (1905-1990).
19 Helen Buchanan-Ferguson (1803-1830).
20 Reverend George Buchanan (1761-1835), pioneer Presbyterian preacher at Franktown, Beckwith Township.
21 Catharine Buchanan (1806-1836).
22 Reverend William Bain (1814-1889).
23 Joshua Adams (1779-1863), miller, founder of Glen Tay.
24 William Oscar Buell (1818-1878).
25 John Raeside Gemmill (1808-1891).
26 Reverend James Burns Duncan (1825-1909).
27 Father John Hugh McDonagh (1812-1866).
28 Probably Josiah Davies Jr. (1805-1866), a stone and marble cutter.

The first teacher of the Grammar School was Mr. McIntyre[33] who afterwards managed the Bank of Montreal, Perth, and he also had charge of the Public School. After three years Mr. McIntyre was given and assistant in the person of Mr. Findlay McNab. The assistant teachers of the school were Mr. Somerville, Mr. Thompson, Mrs. Jessop and Miss Thompson. The present schoolhouse was not built at this time and the following temporary arrangements were made – Mr. Somerville and Mr. Thompson were to occupy the school then occupied by Mr. Somerville on the D'Arcy Street site. Mrs. Jessop and Miss Thompson, the school then occupied by Mr. Thompson. This was on the corner of Herriott and Drummond Streets. This arrangement was followed until 1852 when the present Public School building was erected on Foster Street and both the Grammar and Public Schools moved into it.

The following abstract was taken from the booklet published by the Kingston Historical Society, Kingston, Ontario, January 1963.

Benjamin Tett – On his arrival in Canada, he went directly to Perth where he found that the best immediate situation he could hope for was that of a schoolteacher – as the assistant to the Rev. Michael Harris, the Church of England clergyman in that place. In 1821, however, Mr. Harris gave up the government school and despite local support, Benjamin Tett was not appointed to succeed him. This disappointment forced the young teacher on his own resources, and he opened a private school. Twenty-sux pupils came to him at once, indicating that his abilities already had begun to command attention. Ten shillings per pupil per quarter, however, offset against £6 rent plus the cost of wearing apparel and fuel left very little for the teacher.

He lived in a two-room apartment while in Perth keeping what he called 'Bachelors Hall'. One room was used for the bedroom and pantry and the other for the school and cooking purposes. In September of 1822 the class increased to between 45 and 50 in number. The problem however was to realize any tangible cash profit.

In 1822 Mr. Tett took up a 100-acre immigrant holding about 12 miles from Perth, and also purchased a half acre town lot, in the town. On both of these lots he intended to build houses. The reason for this building spree was that many of his debtors could not afford to pay him in cash, and by providing them houses on which they could labor, and towards the construction of which they could donate materials, he made it possible for them to remunerate him in this useful fashion.

He bought another quarter acre in Perth in 1824, presumably for the same collection purposes, since he continued in 'Bachelor Hall'.

Thus, while in Perth he experienced and partially met great pioneering problems – how to advance economically in a land where cash was scarce.

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[29] John McKay (1789-1840).
[30] Thomas Brooke (1809-1891).
[31] Robert F. Kellock (1806-1883).
[32] Dr. John Dickson Kellock (1835-1898).
[33] John McIntyre (1821-1858).

- ***Transcription & notation by Ron W. Shaw (2024***)