

# Heritage and the Church

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Moravians, Wesleyans, Palatines, Congregationalists, Jehovah's witnesses, Calvinists, Lutherans, Unitarians, Mormons, Puritans, Methodists, Presbyterians, Catholics, Baptists, Anglicans, Pentecostals and others have settled in Grand Bay-Westfield over the last few centuries. Some came to New Brunswick to escape persecution in Europe and the United States. Others came seeking a better life in the new world. They all were looking for a country where religion could be practiced freely without discrimination. Early settlers in Grand Bay and Westfield struggled to build a future and religion played a key role in that struggle.

Missionaries first appeared in Canada in 1497 with John Cabot. In 1701, a society was formed in England to take the gospel to the colonies and the Church of England sent ministers to North America to hold services. Baptisms, marriages and proper burials could not take place without a minister and these missionaries played an important role as communities grew. Initially, small isolated communities were served by ministers travelling from one to the other, holding services in people's houses and performing baptisms, marriages and burials. Charles Tupper, a Baptist minister, travelled through New Brunswick and visited 16, 585 homes in his career. Baptist minister Manning stayed with the Harding family (Harding's Point) and performed the first baptism in the St John River for George Harding's son. Major Coffin of Westfield held services as a lay reader in his home and later in his barn. Local Anglicans had to travel to Gagetown for marriages and baptisms. Catholic priests sent from Quebec spoke only French, making it difficult to communicate with English settlers. At that time, Fathers Farrell, Hannington and Carleton travelled by horse and buggy to say Mass twice a year and officiate at other occasions. Father O'Regan, a priest from Petersville, served Holy Mass in the home of Bernard McGovern at Keatings Corner. McGovern, one of many Irish immigrants who settled in the area, donated property at Keatings Corner for a cemetery which still exists, overgrown with blueberry bushes.

In smaller communities, missions were part of the larger churches. Ministers were assigned to 2, 3 or 4 mission churches and some held services in all of them in one day. By 1776 it was estimated that the population of English descendants in the province was about 1500. This changed with the American Revolution. Many Anglicans remained loyal to England and fled north to New Brunswick as refugees. Our province received its first Anglican bishop in 1787, Bishop Inglis, who first visited New Brunswick in 1792 to consecrate 4 churches along the St. John River. There was an influx of Methodists in 1779. In 1791, 6 missionaries were sent by the Church of England to New Brunswick, and in 1816, the Presbyterians had their first permanently settled minister in the province. With more settlers arriving from Ireland, Scotland and other parts of Europe, the population increased and so did the demand for more churches. Grand Bay and Westfield were no exceptions as local settlers grew tired of travelling great distances to worship.

Initially churches were built in the larger communities. The first Baptist church was built in Sackville in 1763. In 1784 the first Anglican Church was constructed in Saint John. The first Catholic Cathedral was

built in Fredericton in 1842. Times were difficult and funds hard to come by so pews were sold or rented to raise money. Churches also provided schools to educate the children. Acadia University was established by the Baptists for example. The Methodists obtained property in Grand Bay and called it Epworth Park after the birthplace of John Wesley. An open air tabernacle was built there. They built a church in Grand Bay-Westfield in 1806. That church burned down and was replaced by the present United Church in 1922. The Anglicans built a number of churches in the area (St. Peters, St. James, and St. Johns) along with cemeteries. These small churches served the community until they were deconsecrated. The Anglican community is now served by the Church of the Resurrection. The small churches have gone but their graveyards remain, although some are in need of maintenance and repair. The Presbyterians built a church near the present intersection of highway 7 and 177. It burned down in 1921 along with all the church records. It was never rebuilt and its overgrown cemetery is still there alongside the remains of the church foundation.

By 1848 there were 32,000 Catholics in the province, 24 priests and 60 churches. The first Catholic Church in Grand Bay-Westfield was St. Augustine's church built in 1926. This was followed in 1983 by the Church of St Matthew, located on the boundary between Saint John and Grand Bay, now named Dollard Drive, after Bishop William Dollard, first Bishop of New Brunswick. In time, when the population increased, other churches were built in or near the town such as the Wesleyan. More recently Jehovah's witnesses built a Kingdom Hall in Grand Bay-Westfield.

Churches united the community and they still do. They provided spiritual and social support and schools for pioneer families. Cemeteries on church property meant that burials could take place in consecrated ground. Churches maintained important records of births, deaths and marriages, critical in preserving the past. Some of the history of churches in our area has yet to be recorded. With that in mind, members of the town's heritage committee will be visiting local congregations to discover more details of these important institutions and their role in the history of Grand Bay-Westfield.