The Significance of Old Hay Bay Church

by J. William Lamb

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of the Historic Sites and Monuments Board's plaque
designating Old Hay Bay Church as a National Historic Site of Canada

editor's note: Located approximately 30 miles west of Kingston, Ontario, Old Hay Bay Church is one of the two official historic sites of the United Methodist Church outside the United States – the other is the grave of Captain Thomas Webb in England. This designation was made in 1992 at the bicentennial celebration of the erection of the building. The oldest existing Methodist structure in Canada, it was built in 1792 by Loyalists being served by what later became the New York Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church. The preacher and presiding elder who almost single-handedly promoted the northward expansion of Methodism into this area (called Upper Canada, because it is upstream on the St. Lawrence) and Lower Canada was Freeborn Garrettson – the first regularly assigned Methodist Episcopal itinerant to what is now the Central Pennsylvania Conference. Rev. J. William Lamb is an authority on Canadian Methodism and the historian of Old Hay Bay Church.

My task is to give the historical background of Old Hay Bay Church to enhance the significance of the designation we make today. Old Hay Bay Church is fortunate to have a compelling, well-documented history, now stretching into a fourth century. In our limited time today I will touch on its origins, links with early Methodism, camp meetings and the native communities, the age of the building, its rescue, and its tragedy.

Its Origins

Methodism was founded in England by two priests of the Church of England, John and Charles Wesley, and some other Oxford University students. It was not intended to become a separate church, but rather a revival movement of religious societies within the Established Church. It endeavored to stir the dead embers of Deism into the flame of heart-felt, lively, methodical, and gregarious religion. It became part of the Great Awakening that swept through the English-speaking world in the eighteenth century.

In the new United States of America, everything old received a new spin. The numerous societies of the people called Methodist, that had been formed in connection with John Wesley before or during the War of Independence, were molded into a new creation in 1784 – the Methodist Episcopal Church. Under the

superintendence of Wesley emissaries, Bishops Francis Asbury and Thomas Coke, the work flourished in the post-war years – largely in the southern and central states. The plunge northward came in 1788 when the annual conference discovered a surplus of preachers – twelve young men with nowhere to go. Asbury directed them to open new circuits up the Hudson Valley as far as Lake Champlain, under the direction of presiding elder Freeborn Garrettson.

The following year a new recruit named William Losee joined this band of religious adventurers, and was sent to the northernmost circuit around Lake Champlain. He had only one useful arm, the other described as either withered or off near the shoulder, but he could RIDE! Losee was a Loyalist who had served with Delancey's Westchester Refugees, and he knew some of those fellow Loyalists who had recently settled in Canada. Rather than attempting ministry among severely scattered souls in northern New York, he wondered whether it would be more effective to address the spiritual needs of known Methodist-leaning clusters of Loyalists in Canada. Garrettson agreed to send him on a trial expedition into the now foreign country north of the St. Lawrence. To this end Losee was privately ordained to deacon's orders by Bishop Francis Asbury in September 1789 – for without official credentials he would doubtless have been returned by the authorities to his homeland – and sent on his mission.

The trial was successful, and Losee was officially appointed to what was first called Kingston Circuit. Within a year of his return, plans were made for Canada's first Methodist meeting house. Their covenant was expressed in these words: "As Almighty God has been pleased to visit us in this wilderness with the light of a preached Gospel, we think it requisite to building a Meeting-House, or Church, for the more convenient assembling of ourselves together for social worship before the Lord." And thus the work began.

Links with Early Methodism

The subscription list of February 3, 1792, is the church's oldest document. Although now lost, it was published for posterity in the *Christian Guardian* in 1860. The twenty-two subscribers whose names appear on it are sometimes called the founders of this church. They came from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds which included Norwegian and German Lutherans, Swiss Moravians, French Huguenots, and Dutch Reformed, as well as members of the Church of England and the Society of Friends.

Some of the surnames on this document also appeared on the subscription list of the John Street Chapel in New York City – the first Methodist chapel erected in mainland North America. In fact, four Hay Bay families form direct connecting links between these two American and Canadian founding churches: the John Street Chapel in New York City of 1768, and the Old Hay Bay Church in Adolphustown of 1792. Here they are.

(1) The first name is **Bininger**. Rev. Abraham Bininger (1720-1811) was a Swiss-born Moravian minister who had served as a missionary to the black

slaves in two Danish colonies in the Carribean. In New York City he befriended Philip Embury, America's first Methodist preacher, finding him a kindred spirit and a fellow pietist. Abraham later buried his dear friend Philip in his own graveyard in Camden Valley NY. It was Abraham's son John Bininger who settled in Adolphustown, subscribed towards the erection of Hay Bay Church, and served for a few years as a teacher to the Mohawks of Tyendinaga.

(2) The second name is **Carscallen**. Edward Carscallen (c.1725-1803) contributed £1 to the New York chapel, and later settled here as a Loyalist in neighboring Fredricksburg township. Although his name does not appear on our subscription list, he would have attended here at least for the quarterly meetings.

(3) The third name in **Detlor**. Valentine Detlor (1726-1798) also settled in Fredricksburg. Like Carscallen, he was 43 when the New York chapel was built and lived to see this building established also. He was a subscriber to Embury's chapel in that great seaboard city in 1768, and he personally witnessed the rise of both of these two primary historic Methodist buildings 24 years apart. His son Samuel Detlor hosted Losee's second class meeting, and was the one who personally preserved the original subscription list during his lifetime – even though his own name does not appear on it. Another of Valentine's children was the beautiful Elizabeth Detlor, who jilted Losee and married Rev. Darius Dunham.

(4) The fourth name is **Embury**. Andrew Embury's (1757-1844) name appears on our subscription list, his father David Embury's name on that of New York. David was a brother of Philip Embury, the preacher who founded the first Methodist society in America in New York City in 1766.

These families were what might be termed "the advanced guard" – already converted to Christ and Methodism before Losee's arrival. They would have eagerly welcomed him, and the hope of establishing Methodist Episcopal churches in their midst. These four families – Bininger, Carscallen, Detlor and Embury – were double founders who assisted in planting Wesley's standard in two British colonies.

John Street Church in lower Manhattan still serves a worshipping congregation in their third building on the original site – only a few blocks from where the World Trade Center stood less than a week ago. It is one of the twelve historic shrines of the United Methodist Church.

Camp Meetings and the Native Communities

In 1805 the first camp meeting held anywhere in Canada took place here in Adolphustown. Although the idea had originated with Presbyterians in Kentucky, it was the Methodists who made the most of this intense outdoors evangelistic event which flourished for much of the nineteenth century. Usually lasting several days or a week, it added untold numbers of new members to the church.

Among the unexpected side-effects here was a remarkable outreach to the native communities. The camp setting was a much more satisfying milieu for them than were church buildings. The turning point came at a camp meeting at

Ancaster, near Hamilton, in the early summer of 1823. Peter Jones, also known as Kahkewaquonaby, a young man of mixed Ojibwa and Welsh parentage, came forward at the altar call and later stood up to acknowledge his change of heart and life. Rev. William Case, who knew the family, called out, "Glory to God! There stands a son of Augustus Jones, of the Grand River, amongst the converts! Now is the door opened for the work of conversion amongst his nation!" It proved to be a prophetic statement. Case recognized that any outreach to the native communities would be successful only when undertaken by native converts themselves. Over the next two decades a tidal wave of new religion swept through the native communities, sparked by some sixteen native evangelists – including Peter Jones, John Sunday, Peter Jacobs and William Beaver. They traveled as far as Lake Superior to reach many isolated tribal groups. Over one thousand, mainly Mississaugas, were converted and baptized. Each name was carefully recorded – most of them seeing their native name in writing for the first time.

Although individual natives had attended camp meetings, it was in 1826 that a whole tribe first attended en masse – and that took place here in Adolphustown. William Case wrote a report that vividly described the arrival in canoes of 60 adults and children, and the setting up of their camp beside that of the white people. The earnestness of the prayers and exhortations of the Indians in their own tongue impressed the others. When the 3000 white people who came sang the great hymn "O for a thousand tongues to sing my great Redeemer's praise," they thrilled to hear the native camp singing "O a pa kish he che go twak, Nege a ne she na paig" to the same melody. Twenty-one adult natives requested baptism, and when it was explained to them through an interpreter they assented to each item with a solemn, "Yooch!" The next day they all shared in the sacrament of bread and wine together. It was an unforgettable Christian moment. Thus camp meetings became a bridge between the cultures.

When the government set up the system of Indian reserves, there was less contact – although native converts often spoke at missionary meetings across the province. John Sunday of Alderville, also known as Shawundais, was the most popular – having the artless, witty and winsome manner of a Will Rogers. He and some other ordained Indians went to England – not only to raise funds for the mission to their people, but to petition the monarch and government officials about their land claims. Hay Bay people would frequently read of these matters in the *Christian Guardian.*

The Age of the Building

I would also like to address the age of this building. There is no question about the age of its commencement in 1792. The subscription list of that year is well attested, and affirmed by historians. Nor is there any doubt that the heavy timber frame was raised within months, and probably enclosed before winter.

These timber posts have served well for 209 years, but that figure does not account for the age of these former trees. Some of them would have been felled

the previous year for seasoning – that would have been in 1791, the year in which John Wesley died in England. These twenty-foot corner posts measure at least 20 inches in diameter. How many years of growth does that represent? Fifty? One hundred? These trees were well matured during the War of American Independence. They echoed to the songs of the courier-de-bois and fur traders passing up the Bay of Quinte and Trent river system. Surely they were standing firmly on their roots for 53 years – that would take them back to 1739, the year in which Wesley organized the first Methodist societies. If they were cut down at age 90, that would be before John Wesley was born in 1703. Perhaps the science of dendrochronology may be able to tally the growth rings and give us a more exact date of birth for these great pine timbers. My point is that the frame of this building is older than Methodism itself. How appropriate for this temple of timber to be called "The Cradle of Methodism."

Its Rescue

In 1860, the Adolphustown congregation, finding this old building beyond repair and inadequate for its needs, chose to abandon it in favour of a new building, one concession south. It was sold to a farmer, who used it for the storage of grain and farm machinery. Over the next 50 years attempts were made to reclaim the building as a symbol of the heritage of early Methodism. A great picnic and service of worship celebrated its centennial in 1892, an event made memorable by the photograph of the crowd – which appears on your folder. Irish-born Rev. Richard Duke endeavoured to awaken interest in its reclamation – but it took an engineer to bring it about.

Allan Ross Davis, a native of Adolphustown and a civil engineer and surveyor, almost single-handedly campaigned for the building's restoration. Finally, with the assistance of Chancellor Nathaniel Burwash of Victoria University, the General Conference of the Methodist Church of Canada was petitioned to repurchase the old Hay Bay Church. The General Conference met in 1910 in Victoria, British Columbia. It was chiefly preoccupied with the issue of Church Union, and at that meeting voted to merge with Presbyterian and Congregationalist churches in what would fifteen years later become the United Church of Canada. The day after that vote, Burwash persuaded the General Conference to obtain the old church. As Methodism came to its twilight in Canada, the ancient structure found a new dawning. A deed was obtained in December 1910, and repair and restoration began. It is probably the only abandoned church building to be purchased by the highest governing body of any denomination in Canada.

Its Tragedy

This ancient and hallowed place has been spared the ravages of fire and flood, earthquake and hurricane, vermin and vandals – but it has not escaped great

tragedy. The story of the drowning of ten teenagers on their way to church in 1819 has proven to have an endless fascination. It seems miniscule in comparison with the catastrophic destruction of the World Trade Center, and the murder of thousands by terrorists, in New York City this very week. Yet in its own day, among a much smaller population, the event was heralded in at least five newspapers in the two Canadas – even though overshadowed by the tidings of the sudden death, that same weekend, of the Duke of Richmond, the Governor-in-Chief of British North America. Even as late as 1904 it made headlines, as the *Belleville Intelligencer* blazoned above the obituary of Eliza Belnap Lott the words "LAST LIVING WITNESS OF 1819 CATASTROPHE." May I retell the tale for the sake of those unfamiliar with it?

A Quarterly Meeting was called for the weekend of August 29th and 30th, 1819. That year Napoleon was dying in exile on an island in the south Atlantic, and a young princess was born in England by the name of Victoria. In Adolphustown, hundreds of area Methodists flocked to the church in anticipation of a spiritual feast and the necessary circuit business. Local homes overflowed with guests, and the church vibrated with song, testimonies, prayer, sacrament, and great preaching.

The young people, many of them new converts from the recent revival, shared in the public meetings, and in their own well-chaperoned "sleep-overs." Early Sunday morning a group of teenagers on the north shore of Hay Bay squeezed into Barnard Cole's overcrowded boat to cross over for the service. Sixteen youth and two adults sang the songs of Zion, unaware of the water leaking in. When their danger was realized and bailing proved fruitless, one lad who could swim offered to lighten the load by jumping out. When he did so, the boat capsized and all were thrown into the water.

Meanwhile in the church, a prayer meeting was in progress. Just as one was heard to pray that this "would be a day long to be remembered," screams were heard from the bay. Rushing to the shore, folk were helpless to reach the drowning youth in time. Some of the parents watched in agony as their children disappeared beneath the water. Ten were drowned, eight survived.

Monday morning saw at the funeral the largest attendance ever known at Hay Bay Church. The grief and sobbing was so great that Rev. Isaac Puffer was unable to finish his message. Nine were buried in the cemetery across from the church, and one, Mary Cole, was laid in the family plot on the north shore. The community ached for years.

Memory of the tragedy was kept alive through a sixteen-stanza poem that recited the events. For over a century, the poem was memorized by school children in the area. T.W. Casey wrote of it in 1897, "We doubt if any other production, crude as it is, was ever so extensively read and committed to memory in this part of Upper Canada." Mary McGillvray of Toronto told me she heard it being recited in a North Fredricksburg school in the 1920's. It has touched hearts for generations with its melancholy tale. And we hear it again today, from this schoolmaster and these children in period attire.

A Ballad on the Death of Ten Young People, Drowned in Hay Bay

Come all you good people of every degree,
Read over these lines, which are penned down by me;
And when you are reading these lines, which are true,
Remember the warning is also for you.

In the year of our Lord eighteen hundred nineteen,
On the twenty-ninth of August, on Sunday, I mean;
The place where it happened I'll also put down,
But the loss I can't tell of, in Adolphustown.

These people were all in good health and in prime,
All modestly clothed in apparel so fine.
To church they were going, their God to adore;
To reach the said place they had Hay Bay to cross o'er.

The boat being small, and their number eighteen,
To go over together they all ventured in;
They launched away singing a sweet exercise,
Their moment near by them was hid from their eyes.

The voice of Jehovah speaks to us all:
Always be ready, to go at His call;
And when you are reading these mournful lines o'er,
Death may be sent for you, and enter your door.

The boat being leaky, the water came in,
To bale with their hats they too late did begin.
They looked at each other and began for to weep;
The boat filled with water and sank in the deep.

Their friends on the shore then for help flew with speed
And eight of the number from the water they freed;
There were brothers and sister and parents also,
Soon heard the sad story, which filled them with woe.

A seine was preparing to draw them to land,
Their friends all a-weeping around them did stand;
Such cries and lamentings were never before,
The loss was so fatal, that none cold restore.

There were John and Jane German, Peter Bogart also,
There was Mary and Jane Detlor in the waters below,
There was Matilda Roblin, and Betsy McCoy,
Betsy Clark, Huldah Madden, and the said Mary Cole.

To the unchangeable regions their spirits are fled,
And left their poor bodies inactive and dead;
Their friends with loud weeping around them were found,
Their bodies preparing to enter the ground.

On the Monday following, their coffins were made,
And into the same their bodies were laid
And solemnly borne into the churchyard;
Their graves, in rotation, for them were prepared.

A large congregation, on that solemn day
Assembled together to visit their clay,
To join the afflicted in their mournful state,
And also to comfort in sorrow so great.

A sermon was delivered on that solemn scene,
By Sir Isaac Puffer, from Job the nineteen:
"Although these vile bodies the worms may destroy,
They shall see God in glory, in fullness of joy,"

The sermon being over, and brought to a close,
And some words of comfort were offered to those
Whose hearts were quite broken and filled with grief,
And in a few moments these bodies must leave.

Their coffins were opened to all public view
That all might behold them and bid them adieu,
And then to convey them to the silent clay,
No more to behold them till the Judgment Day.

And now we must leave them, beneath the cold ground
Till Gabriel's trumpet shall give the last sound:
Awake! Thou that sleepest, and arise from your tomb,
And come forth to Judgment to hear your last doom!

Conclusion

The work of restoration is on-going. This masterful pulpit, designed in the style of the early 1800's, was installed this summer. More work is planned to enable this storied place to tell its tale more faithfully. In a flyer sent to hundreds of homes a few weeks ago, we gave this church a persona – calling her "the grand old lady of Hay Bay." And we gave her a voice which said, "I was here before your great-grandparents were born, and I hope to be here for your grandchildren." So be it. Amen.