

CANADA'S FIRST PRESBYTERY

Planning a Special Meeting

The year was 1786. Rev. Daniel Cock was now well established in his Presbyterian church in Truro, having come to Nova Scotia originally in 1770. Now that there were two other presbyterian Ministers nearby, who had come from the same synod back in Scotland, it was time to think about forming a presbytery here in this new and developing land of Nova Scotia. The need had been here for several years, with a growing population, many new communities hungry for the services of a minister, and the difficulties in communication with the parent presbytery and synod in Scotland. The American Revolution had terminated any help from that direction, so the young churches were virtually on their own. Mr. Cock felt they should organize in order to give more formal support to each other and to reach out to new communities more effectively.

On the 26th of June, Rev. Daniel Cock, Rev. David Smith of Londonderry, and Rev. Hugh Graham of Cornwallis met in Mr. Cock's house in Truro "for prayer and consultation", and to set up the first presbytery meeting. One might consider that June meeting a presbytery meeting, but the Presbytery was not formally constituted until the next meeting, in August.

Mr. Cock was the first settled Minister in Truro*, having been called by that congregation in 1770. At that time he was already in the Truro area, having come as a Missionary to Nova Scotia from his home Presbytery of Glasgow. He accepted the call, then returned home to Scotland and came out with his wife and family in 1772, at which time he was settled in Truro. Now, in 1786, he had his home in the Upper Village of Truro, near the present Esplanade, about two miles from his church, which was down where the present cemetery is located on Robie Street, about equi-distant from the Upper Village and Lower Truro.

Rev. David Smith had also come out from Scotland shortly after Daniel Cock first came and was established just a few miles down the shore in the Londonderry township, but ***although Mr. Cock was called in 1770, he was not settled for two years while Mr. Smith was settled in Londonderry a year earlier, in 1771, and thus was the first settled Presbyterian Minister in Canada****.

The third minister, Rev. Hugh Graham, came to Nova Scotia in June of 1785 and was settled in Cornwallis, on the western side of the Minas Basin. He too was from Scotland. These three ministers certainly knew of each other, if they were not actual acquaintances, before coming to Nova Scotia, and their home synod had given them authority, according to Matthews in Two Centuries of Christian Witness in Truro, Nova Scotia, to form themselves into a Presbytery. So plans were made for an inaugural meeting to be held in Truro on August 2, 1786.

Presbytery Meeting in Halifax

It has been stated that the *first regularly formed Presbytery* in what is now Canada was the one formed in Truro in 1786. However, Halifax has some claim to having the *first Presbytery meeting* in this new country. Whether it was strictly legal, or whether it would have been recognized by any higher court of any branch of the Presbyterian Church, is very doubtful, and they met only the once. However, they did meet as a presbytery in 1770, some sixteen years before the formation of Truro Presbytery.

The reason for this unconventional meeting was that the people of Lunenburg, who belonged to the Dutch Reformed Church, had been trying to get an ordained minister, either from Europe or from New England but without results. Finally they appealed to the Governor, Lord William Campbell, who called together two Presbyterian and two Congregational ministers to meet in the Protestant Dissenter's Church (now St. Matthews) in Halifax and solve the problem. The Presbyterians were Rev. James Lyon of Truro or Onslow and Rev. James Murdock of Horton, and the Congregationalists were Rev. Beniah Phelps of Kingsport and Rev. John Seccombe of Chester.

Mr. Lyon had come to Nova Scotia from New England, probably arriving in the autumn of 1764. He had come as a result of a petition from the people newly settled in Truro and Onslow addressed to the Presbytery of New Brunswick, N. J., in the Synod of New York. He came as a missionary to Nova Scotia. He was in Pictou for a short time, then in Truro but Dr. MacKinnon concludes that he made his home in Onslow. He was never a "settled" minister here and when the revolution began, he returned to Machias, Maine.

James Murdoch came from Northern Ireland as a missionary to America, being of the "Anti-Burgher" section of the Secession Church. He landed in Halifax in 1766, preached there for some time but settled at Horton, visiting various other parts of the province. His congregation at Horton was largely Congregational and he never joined either the "Burgher" or the "Anti-Burgher" presbyteries when they were set up in Truro and Pictou, respectively, a few years later.

The Rev. Mr. Phelps was born in Connecticut in 1737, graduated from Yale and settled in Cornwallis in 1766. In 1776 he left Nova Scotia because of the American revolution and his rebel sympathies.

John Seccombe came from Massachusetts to Chester about 1761, and Dr. MacKinnon says he "spent most of his time supplying the vacant pulpit of Mather's". He died at Chester about 1792.

The four Reverend gentlemen met on July 5, 1770 and ordained Bruin (Brown) Romcas Cumingoe as minister to the people in Lunenburg. Mr. Cumingoe is reported to have been a Lunenburg fisherman with no college training, but a talented man of fine character, and acquainted with the Scriptures. It is not clear whether he was ordained as a Presbyterian, a Congregationalist, or a Dutch Reformed minister, but in 1818 when the Presbyterian Synod of Nova

Scotia was formed, he and his church did not join as, it is reported, they did not fully agree with the Presbyterian constitution. Mr. Cumingoe remained as pastor of the church until his death in 1820.

Truro Presbytery

By 1786 Messers Cock and Smith would be well acquainted with each other and with the Province of Nova Scotia and its spiritual needs. They had been resident here for about fifteen years, the only two settled ministers of the Burgher Secessionist branch of the Presbyterian Church. They had both travelled widely throughout the province, trying to serve the more remote communities as well as their own pastorates in Truro, Onslow and Londonderry.

The minutes of the first meeting of Truro Presbytery begin, "Truro in the District of Colchester of Halifax (County), province of Nova Scotia in North America. A.D. 1786". Then the minutes go on to refer to the planning meeting of June 26, and the reasons for the meeting. Those present at the August meeting were the three ministers who had planned the event, Cock, Smith and Graham, together with the Revs. George Gilmore and James McGregor, and Elders John Johnston of Truro and John Barnhill of Londonderry.

Rev. George Gilmore was listed as being from Windsor, but Matthews states that he was from the United States. Actually, Mr. Gilmore was born in 1720 in the County of Antrim in Ireland. In 1769 he, with his wife and three children all under ten years of age, emigrated to the American Colonies, landing in Philadelphia. He was a Presbyterian Covenanter and was ordained by the Presbytery of Boston in 1773 but was soon forced to stop preaching as he was a Loyalist. He taught school for a while but was finally forced to leave that job too and flee through the woods to Quebec in 1782, again because of his Loyalist sympathies. A couple of years later his wife and family were permitted to join him and in 1785 they all sailed to Halifax. He received a grant of land near Windsor and preached in the area. Later he moved to Horton and built the Old Presbyterian Covenanter's Church at Grand Pre. He died in 1811. At the time of the first presbytery meeting he had only recently arrived in Nova Scotia, he was not a settled minister, and not of the Burgher persuasion, so he was not considered a full member of the presbytery, but a Correspondent Member.

Rev. James McGregor, minister in Pictou, newly arrived from Scotland, attended this first Presbytery meeting as a visitor. He was invited to join but declined, no doubt because he was Anti-Burgher while the others were of the Burgher faction of the Presbyterian Church, and this split was not reunited for another thirty years. MacGregor was the son of James Drummond of Perthshire, but the name Drummond was outlawed so they took the name of MacGregor. He was ordained in Glasgow in 1786 and sailed for Halifax the same year, arriving on July 13. When he was invited to attend the presbytery meeting in Truro, he was undoubtedly delighted to have a chance to meet and talk with

fellow-Scots clergymen, but he was not yet settled in Pictou and certainly did not know his new parishoners. He decided not to commit himself to any new alliance just yet.

It was clear that the other members of this first meeting of the Truro Presbytery considered James MacGregor to be a full member and that they did not want to perpetuate, in this new land, the schism of the Burgher and Anti-Burgher factions of the Scottish presbyterians. Rev. Mr. Cock had met MacGregor on his arrival in the province and entertained him at his home and specifically invited him to attend their inaugural meeting of presbytery. Mr. MacGregor's name was kept on the list of members of presbytery for at least a year and in 1787 he was listed as "absent". Another indication that the members of Truro Presbytery wanted to bury the old division is that Truro Presbytery wrote to Mr. MacGregor at the time of the formation of the Pictou Presbytery (AntiBurgher) in 1795, and probably at least twice before that, proposing a union or at least "harmonious action and co-operation" between the groups. This letter deplored the divisions of the old country and set forth ten proposals. It is not known what reply was received but the union did not happen until 1817.

So on that pleasant summer morning, Wednesday, August 2, 1786, the congregation of Truro and Onslow, and probably some visitors from Londonderry and other areas of the province, gathered at the First Presbyterian Church in Truro at eleven o'clock and a most historical meeting took place there. Following the opening ceremonies and prayer, Rev. Daniel Cock preached a sermon from Psalm 122, verse 5: "For there are set thrones of judgement, the thrones of the house of David." In the afternoon the other ministers, Gilmore, Graham, McGregor and Smith all participated in the public worship service.

When the congregation was dismissed, they got down to business, beginning with the appointment of a Moderator and Clerk, these being Rev. Daniel Cock and Rev. David Smith, respectively. Following this they proceeded to consider the constitution of the new church court.

On the next day they reconvened at nine in the morning with prayer by the Moderator and then proceeded to new business. At this time Matthew Crawford and John Fulton of Amherst presented a petition, asking that the new presbytery transmit a petition to the synod in Glasgow to send them a minister. With the petition they presented a paper with a listing of names and the amounts they offered to pay the minister. Truro Presbytery, after due deliberation, agreed to their request.

They then set the date for their next meeting as the first Tuesday of October in Truro, at which time Rev. James McGregor would preach the opening sermon. Presbytery closed with prayer.

It should not be thought that the Ministers involved in the first meeting of Truro Presbytery were the only clergymen or even the only presbyterian Ministers in the Province at the time, nor were they the first to come. In 1786, Rev' James Murdoch, mentioned above in connection with the Halifax Presbytery meeting, was ministering in Horton township (Grand pre)- next door to Hugh Graham's pastorate in Cornwallis. Mr. Murdoch came out from Ireland in 1766.

Later he moved to Meagher's Grant and drowned in the Musquodoboit River in 1799.

Rev. James Munro was also in the area. having arrived in Nova Scotia in 1785. He preached in Onslow, the Stewiacke Valley and in the Musquodoboits before settling in Antigonish in 1808. In 1792 he joined the presbytery. He died in 1819.

Rev. Bruin Cumingoe was also nominally a presbyterian minister' serving in Lunenburg since his ordination in 1770-

Prior to this time there had been at least two presbyterian Missionaries labouring in Nova Scotia. Rev. James Lyon from the American Colonies travelled through the Province, having his base in Onslow, from 1764 until 1771. Rev. Samuel Kinloch of Scotland was here from 1766 until 1769.

At this point it would be well to look at the geography of Truro Presbytery as it is now and as it was seen by the immigrants at the time of these early Church meetings, and briefly to review the history of Nova Scotia.

Geography

Truro Presbytery today, and for much of its past. has functioned in the centre of Nova Scotia, including all of Colchester County, the eastern part of Cumberland County, most of the Municipality of East Hants, and much of the Musquodoboit Valley of Halifax County. It includes twenty-eight Pastoral Charges in the towns of Truro, Oxford and Stewiacke, and the rural villages and smaller communities. Truro, in the centre of the Presbytery and the centre of the Province, where the Salmon River becomes the Cobequid Bay, is the largest town with a population of 14,000. It is a communications hub and the commercial focus of a large agricultural area. It also has a number of small manufacturing firms and there are two small colleges in the area. The sub-urban areas adjacent to Truro and part of the original Township include Bible Hill, Valley, Salmon River, Lower Truro, Old Bams, Brookfield and a few smaller communities. These have been mainly productive agricultural areas but are now growing residential districts. In the northern part of the Presbytery, the communities of Tatamagouche, Malagash and Wallace border on the Northumberland Strait, where the major industries have been farming, lumbering, fishing and mining. West of Truro, along and near the northern shore of Cobequid Bay are the communities of Onslow, Debert, Great Village, Bass River and several smaller communities in between. As in the north, the people have worked at farming' lumbering and fishing, while mining and ship-building were once important industries. In between the North Shore area and the Truro - Cobequid Bay area stretches the Cobequid mountains, a range of low hills that are a part of the old Appalachian range. In this area are the communities of Earltown, New Annan, Wentworth and the town of Oxford. While Oxford has had some manufacturing, the remainder of this district has relied to a large extent on the lumbering industry.

South of Truro Township are the three major geographical areas of the Shubenacadie river valley, the Stewiacke valley, which is a tributary of the Shubenacadie, and the Musquodoboit valley. The main communities on the Shubenacadie, within Truro Presbytery, are Shubenacadie, Milford and Lantz; on the Stewiacke are Stewiacke town, East, Middle and Upper Stewiackes; on the Musquodoboit river are Lower, Middle and Upper Musquodoboit. These areas are all essentially agricultural. Also in Hants County and within the Presbytery are Maitland and Noel on the southern shore of Cobequid Bay, with Kennetcook and Rawdon further inland. Their industries are farming and lumbering with a small amount of fishing along the shore. Both mining and ship-building were formerly important industries.

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*From: A Tale of Two Centuries, Prepared by Truro Presbytery History Committee
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* Bold italics inserted by the webmaster in an attempt to make this part of the history easier to understand..