

## **A Brief History of St. Thomas' Anglican Church**

Written & Researched by Gillian Wagenaar

It all began in 1867, near the hamlet of Colenso in St. Vincent Township. The Anglican community — small at the time, but influential nonetheless — was in need of a church. For a year or so, Reverend Thomas Watson had been holding services out of a school house on the 11th Line, and on occasion at the home of Colonel William Watson — a veteran of the Upper Canada Rebellion — on Lot 34, Concession 10, but with a growing population, something had to be done. While Anglican services had been conducted in the area since 1856, the nearest church to the area was Christ Church (built in 1862). The funds for the new church came largely from the prominent citizens of nearby Meaford, spearheaded by Colonel William Watson and his wife, Eliza, with the aid of Eliza's brothers, Samuel and Richard Speer, Francis R. Tottenham, and others. Eliza Watson, a woman of "above average education," had been running a Sunday School for local children for a number of years previous. Lot 34, Concession 9 was chosen as the site for the newly christened St. Thomas', and thus a parish was formed.

St. Thomas' Anglican Church was named after Thomas the Apostle, one of the Twelve Apostles of Christ, according to the New Testament. Under the Catholic church he is recognized as the patron saint of architects: a fitting title, especially considering the future of the Grey County church that would bear his name. The original building served St. Vincent Township for thirty years, but by 1889 it was made obsolete by the larger and more modern churches of the day. The country church was wrecked, and the congregation was divided throughout the community. It would be another decade before St. Thomas' found its name once more.

Before 1889, the Anglicans of Sarawak were part of the Wiaraton parish, but in January of that year, the Sarawak and Keppel missions separated from the main church. Horace Edgar Bray, minister, was appointed to serve the three new congregations in the area: St. John's in Sarawak; All Saint's in Wolseley; and any Anglican families in Big Bay and Brooke (otherwise known as Brookeholm, or Owen Sound north). By 1893, services were conducted in the Brooke school house by James E. Graham, and in 1899 by George Mark Franklin, this time in Lethbridge's Hall. On January 9, 1900, the hall was destroyed by a fire, and the Anglicans of Brooke decided that it was time to build a church of their own.

The plan, proposed at a vestry meeting in 1900, was to move the original St. Thomas' building (still located in St. Vincent) to 2310 3rd Avenue west, a property overlooking the Owen Sound harbour. Construction began almost immediately: the new church would be fitted with a chancel, the frame veneered in brick, and have a large stone basement added as well. The cornerstone was laid on July 2, 1900, by notable resident James McLauchlan, Esq., (of the McLauchlan confectioners) under a Masonic ceremony. According to an article found in the

Owen Sound Advertiser, a time capsule was also placed in the stone, containing both local and Toronto newspapers, documents, and Canadian coins. The church itself would officially open on March 10, 1901 — just over nine months later.

Described in The Advertiser as being “plain, but attractive,” the new St. Thomas’ Anglican Church would serve the community for a quarter of a century. The fondly named Brookeholm Mission would see its congregation through five ministers, countless weddings and baptisms, a break-in, and a world war. The war perhaps had the greatest impact on the people of St. Thomas’ — according to the Roll of Honour, thirty-one men from the church went overseas to serve. This absence changed the dynamic of St. Thomas’, and as with so many other congregations during this period of time, organizations run through the church flourished. The Women’s Guild, for example, provided a place for the ladies of the parish to band together in a time of great loneliness and loss. Through his group, they would take over many of the church duties that had been neglected. In the end, only twenty-eight men returned from the war, but the community itself was stronger.

Over the years, the church saw its fair share of hardships, but none which shocked the community more than the burglary. In late September of 1920, persons unknown broke into St. Thomas’ and made off with the Communion linen and the flag of the St. Thomas’ Boy Scout troop. According to an article found in the Sun-Times, no punishment seemed fitting enough. *“In every generation there are men of a sufficiently low mental calibre, and with so little respect for sacred things that they will stoop to the desecration of the House of God. A couple of hundred years ago such men would have been fittingly punished, to-day the law does not provide a sufficient punishment for such a crime.”* It is unknown as to whether those who committed the crime were ever caught.

It wasn’t until 1926 that a new building was proposed: the population of St. Thomas’ was growing too large to be held within the current church. On April 26, 1926, a Vestry meeting was held, and it was decided that five lots would be purchased on 4th Avenue west for a more modern building. In order to fund the construction, they would sell the old church. In all, it would cost about \$20,000 with the building costs and property combined — an amount exceeding \$280,000 by the standards of today.

Construction soon began on July 19, 1926. The cornerstone was laid by Judge C.T. Sutherland in mid-August of the same year — an event which several hundred community members attended. The cornerstone from the original Owen Sound church was also moved to the new site, with a new newspaper added to the time capsule within. Through the support of the congregation, a new church was built, and the dedication of St. Thomas’ Anglican Church at 1331, 4th Avenue west took place on November 11, 1926.

The church found itself quickly re-established in the community. For example, with the outbreak of the Second World War came the creation of the Twilight Club — an organization which originally made care packages for soldiers overseas, and existed well into modern memory. Countless fundraisers, concerts, dances, and every other type of gathering imaginable have been held beneath the dark beams of the church. It has seen a fire (January 1955), renovations, and financial troubles, and yet has always pulled through with the support of its congregation. The stories St. Thomas' holds within its walls could fill a hundred books, and only begin to scratch the surface.

Today, the church stands along a tree-lined street, the height of its steeple almost outmatched by the red brick houses which surround it. The present building has been a prominent feature of the neighbourhood for a decade shy of a century, and within the city of Owen Sound for well over 115 years. This year, it was announced that St. Thomas' Anglican Church would be closing. For many of us in the congregation, it is a difficult loss to bear: from Sunday services to church bazaars, Christmas pageants to candlelit memorials, St. Thomas has had a vibrant and storied life. Despite this closure, members young and old may find solace in the memories that have been shared, and look towards the future with open hearts and open minds.