

The Churches of Red River: 1820-1869

"How strange the solitude of Rupert's Land. Day after day of travel without the sign of life: and that is the normal state of this country." So runs the journal entry of Robert Machray, Anglican Bishop of Rupert's Land for December, 1869. Almost half a century earlier the first Anglican missionary, John West, had crossed this same, seemingly empty landscape on his way from Hudson's Bay to Red River. His job was to establish the Anglican Church in the colony and minister to the needs of the native population. In 1822 he built the first church, St. John's, (Figure 4) on the banks of the Red River and thus begins the history of Anglican church building not only in Manitoba but all of western Canada.

This first church, like most buildings in Manitoba at this time, was built of log according to the Red River frame system. This technique, brought to the west by the Canadians of the St. Lawrence valley, consisted of trimmed logs laid horizontally and secured, not with the familiar dovetails, but by a system of tongue and grooves set into vertical posts (Figure 5).

Over the next two decades a number of Anglican churches were constructed in and around Red River, including in 1831 a new stone church at St. John's built by Pierre Le Blanc, mason for the Hudson's Bay Company at Lower Fort Garry (Figure 6). None of these early structures survive. In 1844 work began on a new church, set high above the Red, where the river curved to meet a set of shallow rapids. It was dedicated to the patron saint of Scotland, St. Andrew, and it has been famous ever since, not just because of the beauty of its site, but also because of its stone and especially its fine tower. Today, St.-Andrew's-on-the-Red remains the oldest known church in Canada west of the Great Lakes (Figure 7).



Figure 4.

St. John's, Winnipeg, 1822. (PAM)

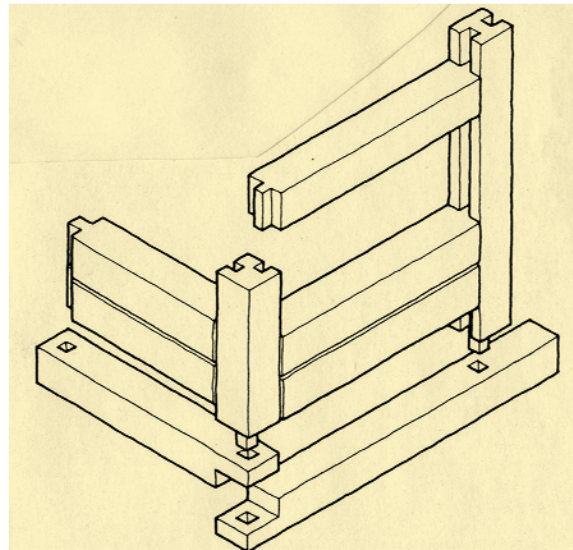


Figure 5.

Principles of Red River frame construction.



Figure 6.
St. John's, Winnipeg, c.1831. (PAM)



Figure 7.
St. Andrew's-on-the-Red, 1844-49. (PAM)

The designer of the church was the Scottish-born mason, Duncan McRae. It does not take a trained eye to see that fundamentally St. Andrew's is modelled on the churches of McRae's native Scotland. There, a standard parish church had evolved characterized by a box-like shape, pitched roof, windows set on the two long walls, a central door opposite the communion table, a steeple, and sometimes an attached tower.

This is not a bad description of St. Andrew's even as it stands today, but it is interesting to recall that McRae did not have things entirely his own way in construction of the church. He had to adapt his techniques and style to suit the local climate and conditions of building. Moreover the proportions of the church are rather longer than the models on which it was based. This it seems was the intention of William Cockran, minister of the church. According to legend, Duncan McRae argued that the church as planned would be too long for the human voice to carry. But Cockran disagreed, forcing his mason to stand some distance from him while he delivered a sermon. "Duncan McRae", he is said to have called out, "they tell me that you drink more rum than is good for you. In future, curb your bestial desires and try to live a sober, righteous and godly life." Hearing this, McRae replied that in his view, "the church is nae long enough." However true that story may or may not be, St. Andrew's is a church of great charm, and because of its early date and late Georgian or Regency style it is a landmark in the history of architecture in Manitoba.

The hand of Duncan McRae can be seen in another church built during the era of the Red River settlement, St. Peter's, Dynevor (1852-3) (Figure 8). The church was not built by McRae but records indicate he oversaw its construction. Standing at the mouth of Cook's Creek, it has the same symmetrical proportions as St. Andrew's-on-the-Red. The two churches also have details in common including pointed "Gothic" windows with interlacing glazing bars and nineteenth century hand-blown glass brought from England in kegs of molasses. Of the two churches, however, St. Peter's is the smaller, while its tower, unlike St. Andrew's, is a later addition.



Figure 8.
St. Peter's Dynevor, 1852-53. (PAM)

St. Peter's is also a church especially interesting for its historical associations. It was on this site that the Saulteaux people under Chief Peguis established an agricultural settlement in the 1830s. Moreover, the church was built by the Saulteaux themselves. It lay at the heart of the settlement and remains today a symbol of the close relationship which Peguis and his people enjoyed with the first European settlers at Red River.

Besides St. Peter's and St. Andrew's-on-the-Red, seven other churches survive from the days of the Red River colony. Just south of present-day Selkirk is the church of St. Clement's, Mapleton, built in 1860-61 (Figure 9). If you are lucky you might hear the bell - now housed in the fine castellated tower - which was brought to Red River from England by John West in 1820. The tower itself was constructed in 1922. The church proper was built by Samuel Taylor, an Englishman, and this probably accounts for its character. Less formal than either St. Peter's or St. Andrew's, its low proportions, absence of classical details and rough masonry are more reminiscent of the parish churches of medieval England than eighteenth century Scotland. Like all the Red River churches however, it has an interior of great simplicity and charm (Figure 10). Pointed sash windows with interlacing glazing bars are set in deep reveals while the low, arched ceiling rises over handmade pews and furniture decorated with carved fleurs-de-lis.

The use of traditional Gothic motifs such as the fleur-de-lis by local builders is seen so frequently in early Manitoba churches that it seems to have formed the basis for a sort of folk art. The modification by local builders of architectural details and patterns which they remembered or saw around them is a familiar theme giving each church a life and character of its own. The interior of the church of St. Anne's, Poplar Point is an early example of this tendency (Figure 11). St. Anne's, built between 1862-64, is contemporary with St. Clement's, but it was constructed of logs following the Red River frame system, instead of the stone commonly used north of the Forks.



Figure 9.
St. Clement's, Mapleton, 1862-63. (PAM)

Figure 10.
Interior, St. Clement's, Mapleton. (PAM)

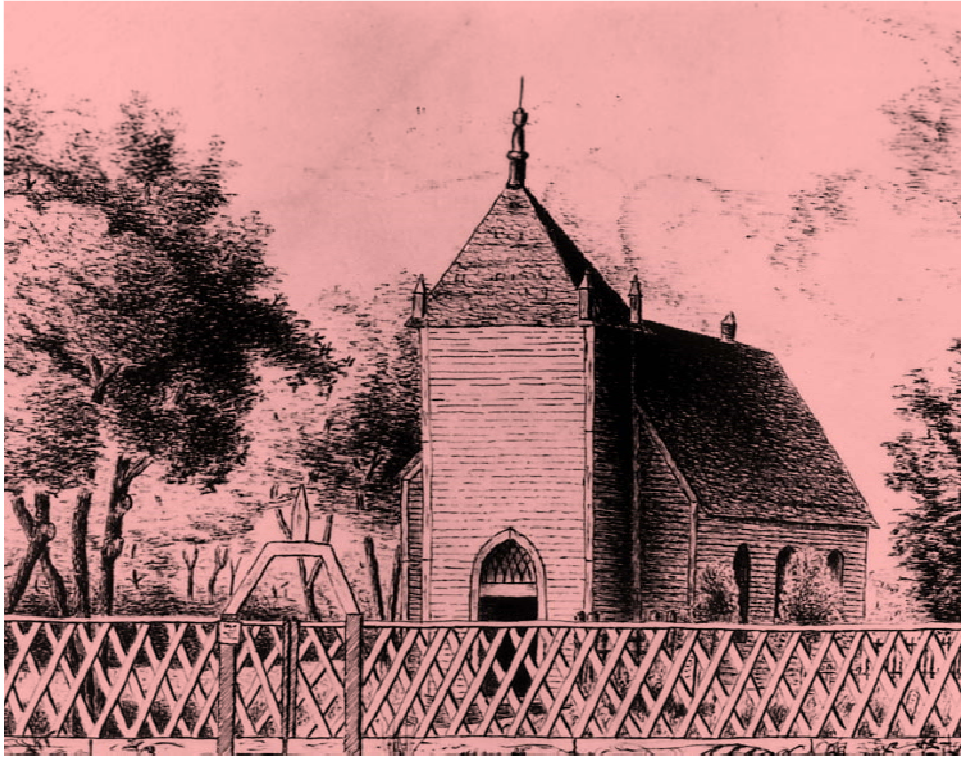


Figure 11.
St. Anne's, Poplar Point, 1862-64. (PAM)

Today St. Anne's Church is little changed save for a new foundation, heating and electric light. Particularly striking are the handmade pews with their ornamental ends, and the vestry screen decorated with jack-knife-cut crosses (Figure 12). The base of the baptismal font was painstakingly planed from an oak log. The exterior of the church is simplicity itself. There are no eaves and little disturbs the flat surface of the walls save for the shallow mouldings of the pointed windows. Its plan and tower, including finials and a single door are similar to St. Andrew's, but because of its wood construction St. Anne's has an entirely different character. Functional and unadorned, the church is an eloquent expression of the simple life and faith of its builders.



The final Anglican church surviving from Manitoba's colonial period is, surprisingly, found within the confines of modern Winnipeg. This is all the more remarkable in that it is a church of log, a material less durable than stone and much more easily altered. The church is old St. James. Built upon a knoll on which natives and Europeans alike took refuge from the flood waters of 1826 and 1853, it has given its name to the district of the city which surrounds it.¹⁰ Constructed in 1852-3 it is one of the oldest buildings in Winnipeg, and the oldest known wooden church in Western Canada (Figure 13).



Apart from its great age, the church of St. James seems today not particularly unusual. Its white painted walls, green pitched roof and bell tower are characteristic of many pioneer churches seen across Manitoba. But in this lies its true importance. For St. James was the first church of this type built in the province, and if not a model, then at least it was an example of the sort of simple parish church which would accommodate the needs of the Anglican service and which could be built by any ordinary builder.

Figure 12.
Interior, St. Anne's, Poplar Point.

Figure 13.
Old St. James, Winnipeg, 1852-53. (PAM)

The church of St. James is significant for another reason besides, and that is it was the first church in the province built in the spirit of the Gothic Revival rather than just the addition of a few Gothic details. The Gothic Revival of the nineteenth century was an artistic and architectural movement of considerable complexity, but fundamentally it reflected a desire to revive the style and manner of building found in the Middle Ages in England. Of course it was impossible to conform exactly to this idea in Manitoba in 1850, but there were certain things one could do to emulate a medieval church. The proportions could be predominantly vertical, the church could be designed to fit the needs of the traditional liturgy with nave, chancel and vestry, and one could use Gothic decoration, however simple.

At St. James, the architect, Reverend Taylor, tried to incorporate these ideas into his design. As he admitted in his letters this was difficult: "Workmen are scarce as means" he wrote, "and the difficulty in getting anything done correctly and properly with men who have never seen anything like they are required to do is great."¹¹ But despite this, Taylor succeeded to a remarkable degree. Much of the effect of the church as it was built is now lost; the tower is gone, the interior plaster removed, and the open timber roof is covered in. Nonetheless, drawings which show the church as it originally was make clear that with St. James Church, the Gothic Revival had come to the banks of the Assiniboine (Figure 14).



Figure 14.
Old St. James, with its tower. (PAM)