

Central United Church – November 4, 2018

How did an 1821 Deed of Land to build a Methodist Episcopal Church morph into a Wesleyan Chapel A.D. 1849.

The Methodist Church had its roots in England with John and Charles Wesley. But from the beginning, there was contact with the American colonies where a self-reliant Methodism took hold.

In southern Ontario, the first wave of immigration came after the American Revolution, mostly from up-state New York and Pennsylvania, They brought with them a variety of denominations, including the Methodist Episcopal Church.

With the American Methodist Episcopal Church came their missionaries who largely travelled on horseback and became known as saddle-bag preachers. While settlement did not extend far back into the interior, the missionary still travelled long distances on horseback to visit the scattered homesteads and villages. Services were held in homes, barns or, in good weather, outdoors

Referred to as Camp Meetings, these gatherings were often lively, and undisciplined. The preacher had to rely on a strong voice, personal fervor and a few good hymns to bring order.

One such Camp Meeting place was the farm of the great great grandfather of Dr. Howard Charleton. Edward Charleton, bought property on the South West corner of Keele Street and Sheppard Avenue in 1826. As early as 1835 , the local preaching appointment was known as Charleton's Settlement.

Two lots south of the Charleton farm, was the farm of Thomas Bull, the great, great grandfather of John Scrace, Thomas Bull farmed, raised a family and in his obituary it was recorded he attended services at Charleton's Settlement where "after 10 years of resisting, he was constrained to yield his heart to God."

The end of the Napoleonic War in 1815, and subsequent high rates of unemployment , meant immigration from England and Ireland increased. The Government was glad to see this increase in "loyal" English settlers,

and especially English Wesleyan Methodists. There had always been a concern about the influence of "American" preachers. In fact, there was government encouragement for a union of the two branches of Methodism. This was actually achieved in 1833.

Unfortunately, the congregations of the Methodist Episcopal Church thought union meant amalgamation of equals. The Wesleyan Methodists, encouraged by the government, assumed they would displace and absorb the Episcopal congregations.

There was a culture clash. The Wesleyans were suspicious and disapproving of the tradition of emotional Camp Meetings. Camp Meetings were not an appropriate form of worship. The Wesleyans demanded greater reverence. The behaviour of the Episcopal congregations was ridiculed - "how irreverent, how unseemly, how indecent to see the hat worn, to see snuffing, chewing tobacco or children running to and fro in the Holy Sanctuary."

For their part, the Episcopalians charged the Wesleyans were too formal, too concerned with respectability and status and worse, too close to the government.

Little wonder that by 1836 the short union was crumbling. We think that in our community, the split resulted in the Methodist Episcopal members leaving as a group and by 1838 moving to the corner of Church and Cross Streets where a frame church was erected and worship conducted for the next 50 years. There were strained loyalties. James Lever remained with the Wesleyans. His son-in-law Peter Curts became a Trustee of the new Episcopal church.

The congregation left on the corner of King Street was now a Wesleyan Methodist congregation as noted in the cornerstone of the second church structure on the site "Wesleyan Chapel A.D. 1849.

In 1884, Union was more successful. The little church on Church Street was sold to the Oddfellows and the proceeds contributed to the building fund to erect the core of our present church. The cornerstone read simply "Methodist Church erected 1887."