



Thomas McKay

## **MACKAY UNITED CHURCH — ITS HISTORY & ITS BUILDERS**

“Unless the LORD builds the house, its builders labour in vain. Unless the LORD watches over the city, the watchmen stand guard in vain.”

MackKay United Church is named for the family of a great Canadian who founded New Edinburgh, brought the first railway to Ottawa, served in the Legislative Assembly of Upper Canada and the Legislative Council of the United Province of Canada, donated the land for Beechwood Cemetery, constructed St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church, and built Rideau Hall for his family. The history of the MacKay family, the community they built, and the church they endowed, are intertwined with the history of Ottawa, of Government House, and of the nation of which both are at the heart.



Annie McKinnon  
and Elizabeth Keefer,  
daughters of Thomas  
McKay, March 1868  
Photographer WJ Topley

## **THE HONOURABLE THOMAS MACKAY**

Thomas McKay (his family later spelled their name MacKay), was born in Perth, Scotland, in 1791, trained as a stonemason, and migrated to Montreal in 1817. By the 1820s he was well established as a contractor with his business partner John Redpath. His fortune was made when in 1826 he and Redpath were contracted by Colonel John By to build the spectacular set of locks on the Rideau Canal which rise 81 feet from the Ottawa River. The Commissariat Building he constructed in 1827 is the oldest surviving stone building in Ottawa and now houses the Bytown Museum. A “good practical mason” who scorned to “slim any work”, McKay secured a series of other contracts including the locks at Hartwell and Hog’s Back and two of the seven spans of the Union Bridge across the Chaudière Falls. Alone of the Rideau Canal contractors, McKay chose to remain in Ottawa.



Reverend and Mrs.  
Cameron, 1879

With his substantial profits he acquired 1100 acres of land at the mouth of the Rideau River which eventually encompassed what is now Rockcliffe, Manor Park, New Edinburgh, and the Beechwood Cemetery. McKay built an industrial complex on the islands at the Rideau Falls—a five-storey flour mill, a bakery, a distillery, and the first textile mill in Ottawa, whose products won a medal for quality at the 1851 London Exhibition. In partnership with his son-in-law John MacKinnon, he built sawmills and



Architect Henry F. Ballantyne  
(right)

factories to make sashes, doors, and shingles using wood from his timber limits on the Gatineau River. The two men were instrumental in promoting the Bytown and Prescott Railway which ran along the river through New Edinburgh, crossed the river on piers which are still visible near Green Island, and terminated where the Lester B. Pearson Building now stands.

### **THE TOWN OF NEW EDINBURGH**

In 1834 McKay laid out the town of New Edinburgh. He built a house for the MacKinnon family which later, as Earnscliffe, became the home of Sir John A. Macdonald and is now the residence of the British High Commissioner. In 1838 McKay completed an 11-room mansion called Rideau Hall where, as a politician and public office-holder, McKay received many prominent figures. Described by contemporaries as a “ruddy faced, forceful man, who, when he had an objective, generally managed to reach it”, he was decidedly Tory in his politics and “knew his place as a gentleman.” But he was also a man accessible “even to the humblest”, who did not disdain to fill the air around Rideau Hall with the sound of his bagpipes. When he died in 1855 (and was buried in Beechwood Cemetery) he left no male issue. Rideau Hall was leased, then purchased and greatly enlarged, to be the residence for the Governors-General of Canada when Ottawa was named the capital in 1864. His estate was managed by Thomas Coltrin Keefer, a leading Canadian engineer whose 1850 book, *The Philosophy of Railroads* heralded the transportation technology that would make Ottawa the capital of a transcontinental Dominion. Keefer had married one of McKay’s daughters and, when she died, married her sister, the widow of John MacKinnon.



Choir circa 1933

### **A NEW PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN NEW EDINBURGH**

McKay was a staunch Presbyterian who, during a lull in work on the Rideau Canal, had his men build the first St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church where he served for many years as an Elder and Trustee. The earliest record of Church activities in New Edinburgh is Thomas McKay teaching Sunday School in a hall at the corner of Alexander and Charles Streets in 1845. His attempt to have the Presbyterian Church establish its proposed college in Ottawa failed when Queen’s University was built

instead in Kingston. By the 1870s New Edinburgh was not only a thriving industrial town with many recent immigrants from Scotland, but it was home to the growing staff of the Governor General. In 1875 the Presbyterian churches in Canada were united and St. Andrew's began a new building. It is thus not surprising to find McKay's grandson, William Alexander MacKinnon raising funds for a new Presbyterian Church in New Edinburgh, successfully petitioning the Ottawa Presbytery to establish a new congregation, and donating two lots at the corner of MacKay Street and Dufferin Road for a church building.

The New Edinburgh Presbyterian Church, built in 1875, had 24 members on its inaugural Communion roll. Rev. D.M. Gordon of St. Andrew's, later Principal of Queen's University (whose brother Charles became famous as the novelist Ralph Connor) served as interim Minister until the Reverend Charles Innes Cameron arrived with his wife from Scotland in 1876 to become the first in a long line of first Scottish, then Canadian, ministers.

### **THE DESIGNERS AND BUILDERS**

The 1875 church was designed by Robert Surtees, a leading builder of public works in Ottawa including Beechwood Cemetery, the Minto Bridges, the Carleton County Courthouse (now ArtsCourt), the Carleton County Protestant Hospital (now a condo at the corner of Rideau and Charlotte) as well as many houses including one at 52 Alexander Street in New Edinburgh. Gothic in architecture, it was made of fine rubble stone work 75 by 35 feet with an estimated cost of \$5,000—"a model of cheapness and neatness". It was a rather dark place with a few panes of coloured glass in the windows and lighting from oil lamps until electric lights were installed in the 1880s with \$68 raised by the Ladies' Aid. The congregation sat in pews with narrow seats and high backs facing a high central pulpit. At first the Choir sat in two raised rows of seats at the back of the stone hall, singing with only the aid of a tuning-fork, until a harmonium was purchased and it was moved to the front of the church. Finally a pipe-organ was installed between 1899 and 1904.



2014 restoration of the bell tower and doors

A Sunday School built of brick was added in 1878 when Sunday School and Bible classes were averaging 119 people. Eighteen years later this was replaced by a stone addition behind the church, and the Church was enlarged by the addition of a small wing on each side at the front. The 1896 Sunday School is the oldest surviving part of today's Church complex; it is now the Chancel, Vestry and choir room. This addition was built by William B. Garvock (architect) and Alexander Garvock (stonemason), who had built the original church and designed the brick Sunday School. The Garvocks would build the new church in 1910. Alexander's fine home at 139 Crichton Street is now a heritage building.

### **THE MANSE**

The Manse next to the church was donated in 1894 by Thomas McKay's daughter, Christina, who had married a prominent Montreal lawyer and later judge, Robert MacKay. This large red brick home was built by Henry Avery, a former cabinet-maker for Thomas McKay and a contractor for many New Edinburgh buildings including 114 Stanley Avenue (c. 1868), 110 Stanley (c. 1899), 116 Stanley (a heritage building) and the former St. David's Anglican Church at the corner of Charles and Crichton Streets. Christina's sister Annie (wife of T. C. Keefer and mother of William Alexander MacKinnon) then paid off the residual church mortgage of \$2000. The manse was home to many ministers until 2005, was sold in 2012 and is now called New Edinburgh House, home to New Edinburgh Community Arts Centre (NECTAR).

### **MACKAY PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

In 1901 the church was renamed MacKay Presbyterian Church in honour of the family which had done so much to support it. As Canada entered its greatest period of economic expansion, including the settlement of the west, the building of railways and the rapid expansion of industry and cities, its national capital and its public service also enjoyed astonishing growth. MacKay Church now included leading business people and public servants in its congregation, as well as some of the staff of nearby Government House. It had a Women's Foreign Missionary Society, a Mission Board, young people's groups, and clubs and missions reaching

out to the community. It was time to replace the small stone church with a building more in tune with the optimistic spirit of the times.

The architect selected for this project was Henry F. Ballantyne, (called Harry) whose family had come from Scotland and built up a prosperous coal business. Born in 1871, Ballantyne entered the new architectural program established in 1890 within the engineering school at the University of Toronto—the first in Canada and one of the earliest on the continent—and graduated at the top of its first class. In 1895 he won the commission to design the Ottawa East Town Hall at the corner of Main and Hawthorne Streets. Shortly afterward he moved to New York and in 1901 married the daughter of a wealthy Scarsdale family. Between 1907 and 1916 he practiced under his own name in New York and maintained an office in Ottawa.

The corner-stone of the present Church was laid by Thomas Rankin on May 29, 1909. (One hundred years later in May, 2009, a plaque commemorating the laying of the cornerstone was dedicated by Bruce Ballantyne, grandson of the architect.) The building (dedicated the following year) was the product of a movement to break away from the neo-Gothic traditions that had dominated church designs since the mid-nineteenth century. It drew on the English arts and crafts movement, combining familiar traditions such as the square tower and stone exterior with new styles in stained glass windows that filled the church with a soft golden light, a more open, functional interior, simple yet elegant decorations such as wooden beams and hammered brass chandeliers, and furnishings including the organ from the old building. The modernism embodied in Bauhaus and Le Corbusier was still some years away, but MacKay's eclectic, comfortable, elegantly proportioned, and beautifully crafted building was well in keeping with the optimism of a new century.

Hardly was the new church in operation than the Great War drew many of MacKay's sons to military service. In 1919, the Prince of Wales (later Edward VIII), then a dapper, charming young man with movie star looks, who was staying at Government House during his triumphal tour of

Canada, unveiled plaques commemorating those who had served, and those who laid down their lives. These were later joined by plaques commemorating the service of MacKay members in the Second World War.

### **CHURCH UNION – MACKAY UNITED CHURCH**

In the early 1920s a virtual civil war erupted within the Presbyterian Church when its General Assembly voted in for Church Union with the Methodist, Congregationalist and a few smaller churches. Dissident Presbyterians denounced the extinguishment of their denomination, and the battle was fought out in public, the courts and Parliament. In the end one-third of Presbyterian congregations refused to join but MacKay voted 275-62 in favour of union. In 1925 the church was once again renamed, this time as MacKay United Church.

The growth of government and the establishment of new suburbs such as Manor Park after the Second World War greatly enlarged the congregation and required important modifications to the church. A Memorial Hall was added in 1952, with kitchen facilities, a large hall, Sunday School rooms, and a theatre and the old Sunday School was modified to contain a Vestry, Church offices, and a Choir Room. The architect for this project was Wallace C. Sproule and the contractor was C.A. Johanssen and Sons. This Hall became the centre of social activity and of community outreach for the church, hosting a variety of clubs, theatre groups, Scout troops, and the like, as well as the Sunday School and a meeting and reception place for the congregation. Along with the purchase of the manse in 2012, Nectar entered into a long-term contract for rental of the Memorial Hall and the Hall and stage were renovated to suit new programmes.

In 1954, a Chancel was added at the front of the church. The pipe-organ installed at the turn of the century was on its last legs. The 1910 church had a flat front with a pulpit and lectern flanking a recessed area for the choir—but its 44 members now found themselves squeezing into 33 chairs. The church was full in both morning and evening services—the congregation needed more space. Fortunately, the plans for the 1910

church had provided for the possibility of removing the front wall and expanding a chancel into the old Sunday School space. Sproule again served as architect for this project. In 1987 under the direction of W.E. Fancott the Chancel was beautified with the addition of a curved beam at the front to match those in the Nave, and a carved wooden cover for the organ pipes. Paul Dufresne (1987) and Michael Nault (2004) carved flowers mentioned in the Bible to decorate the wooden panels. A fundraising campaign was started in 2006 to purchase a new piano. Taking only three years to do so, a C7 Concert piano was installed and has enhanced the musical offerings by our own musicians as well as many others.

### **RECENT RESTORATION**

In 2014, major repairs were made to the Bell Tower included repointing and water-sealing to alleviate water leakage through cracked stone and gaps in mortar joints. This was done by Liliika Masonry Limited, who also put a fresh coat of paint on the louvered windows. The oak doors on Dufferin Rd. and Mackay St., including the stained glass windows, were beautifully refurbished by Ross Peterson and Associates, with new hardware and refitted in the refinished arches. Ross also coordinated the contracting work inside and outside the church. We found out new things about the Bell Tower in the process. There are no bells. There is a chimney, from the days when coal furnaces heated the church. Having ensured that there would be no further leakage of water into the Sanctuary, Blackforest Contracting Inc. plastered and painted sections of the very high ceiling in the Sanctuary. The sidewalk from Mackay St. into the Hall had fallen into disrepair over the years, allowing water to pool, ice to form and making it almost impassable during the winter and spring. Determining that the bedrock was about 4' deep and topped by shale, enabled Blackforest Contracting to rebuild the walkway with a drain in the lowest area to enable water to drain away, thus protecting the safety of all users. Restoration of the stone chimney on the northwest side was necessary due to deteriorating stonework and cracks discovered during the Bell Tower repairs.

The result is the church you see today—a building that reflects the rich history of its religion, its community and its country, whose people have kept faith with all three.