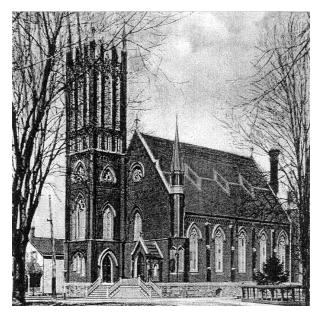
## EARLY METHODISM AND WELLAND AVENUE UNITED CHURCH

The elegant tower of Welland Avenue United Church has been a St. Catharines landmark ever since the church was built in 1877. The congregation itself, established six years earlier in 1871, is now celebrating its 135th anniversary, which makes this an appropriate time to look at Welland Avenue's early history and its Methodist origins.



Welland Avenue Methodist Church in 1912

It is said that Methodism was brought to Niagara by George Neal, a cavalry major who fought for the British in the American Revolutionary War. According to *The Mead of Memories*, published in 1936 to commemorate Welland Avenue's diamond jubilee, Neal was "wonderfully spared when his regiment was cut off and he promised the Lord to devote his life to His service," later converting to Methodism when "in a dream a two-edged sword was given him, bearing the name of Wesley." He began to preach in the United States after the war, but on October 7, 1786 crossed the Niagara River at Queenston to claim land to which he was entitled as a British officer. *The Mead of Memories* continues:

The British officer commanding at Queenston learned that Major Neal held meetings among the people and, sending for him, forbade him to hold any more, asserting that none but clergy of the Established Church of England should preach in the colonies. Major Neal determined not to yield, and the officer commanded him to leave the province within a given number of days. Before the time had expired the officer died and Major Neal continued his pioneer work. So earnestly did he denounce prevailing vices that some of the baser sort pelted him with stones until the blood ran

down his face, but, like a brave soldier, he stood his ground and won a great victory for God.

A dramatic story indeed, one that is repeated in more or less detail in almost everything written on the history of Canadian Methodism. Though A. G. Meacham says nothing about Neal in his pioneering Compendious History in 1832, other church historians had laid down the essential points by 1870. Writing in 1862, Playter states the date of Neal's arrival, in 1867 Carroll mentions Neal's escape from death, his fateful dream and the "vulgar rabble" who bloodied his face, and in 1870 Webster introduces the commandant at Queenston. He adds that Neal's narrow escape came when three cannon balls almost hit him as he was roasting meat, and that he came to Niagara only because he missed the boat from New York to Nova Scotia.

One has to wonder how much of this is really correct, for these writers do not cite original sources and parts of the story don't ring true. The date October 7, 1786 is suspiciously exact, and there were almost certainly no troops at Queenston at that time. If the reference to the commandant really means the officer in charge at Fort Niagara — Major Archibald Campbell of the 29th Regiment — he did not die in 1786. There are other problems too. Carroll says that Neal arrived in 1787, not 1786, while noted missionary Anson Green, who actually met Neal, gives the year as 1790 in his autobiography.

Despite these uncertainties, there is no doubt that Neal did play a pioneering role in the establishment of Methodism in the Niagara Peninsula and beyond. He was a typical saddlebag preacher or circuit rider, taking the Gospel to the people where they lived, preaching to them in houses, barns or outdoors. Among his converts was Christian Warner, a former Butler's Ranger who had 400 acres of land west of St. David's. The first Methodist class meeting is said to have been held in Warner's house, with Warner appointed class leader. In about 1801 he built the Warner chapel, the first Methodist church building in the area. It has long disappeared, but was located near the Warner cemetery that still survives alongside the Queen Elizabeth Way east of St. Catharines.

Neal was an independent preacher and was not ordained until 1810. At the time Upper Canada was the mission field of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States. The mission began in 1792, when the Rev. Darius Dunham was appointed to the Cataraqui circuit west of Kingston, and in 1795 he took charge of the newly created Niagara circuit.

Though Methodism grew steadily, the early years of the 19th century were not easy ones. The Church of England enjoyed a privileged status (it alone received income from the Clergy Reserves, for example), and the attitude of the Anglican hierarchy towards Methodism bordered on hostility. The Methodists faced constraints on church building that were not lifted until 1829, and incredibly perhaps were not allowed to solemnize marriages until 1830.

The fact that the Methodists were associated with an American church did not help, especially during the War of 1812, when their loyalty was called into question. After the war they found themselves competing for souls with the British Wesleyan Methodists, and though the Methodist Episcopals became independent of their American brethren in 1828, the divisions persisted. At times during subsequent decades there were up to nine separate Methodist denominations in Canada. Not until 1884, following two phases of amalgamation, were they brought together.

The first Methodists in St. Catharines were likely affiliated with the American Methodist Episcopal Church. According to local church histories (the earliest of which date from about 1900 — there are no contemporary sources), the initial meeting took place in 1816 at the home of Rufus Wright on the corner of Ontario and Trafalgar Streets, but it is not unreasonable to suppose that the Methodists were gathering in town before that time.

In about 1823 they erected a church building, only the second to be built in St. Catharines. The very first was the "English Church" built in 1796 just back of today's Rockpile at Ontario and St. Paul Streets. A document in the possession of St. George's Church names 44 people who contributed money towards the founding of that church. They were from a wide area that included Thorold and the future Merritton, so this was evidently a district church. Indeed, it could hardly be otherwise, for there was no village of St. Catharines in 1796. All that existed was a storehouse on the Twelve Mile Creek belonging to merchant Robert Hamilton and a dairying operation (and possible cheese factory) run by Yorkshireman John Backhouse. Otherwise, save for scattered pioneer farms, it was all wilderness.

This first church was built of wood, measured 30 by 34 feet and possessed a balcony. It seems to have been primarily Anglican, though it lacked a resident minister until 1828. Prior to this it was served by itinerant preachers. These included Anglican Robert Addison, who became the first permanent minister of any denomination in the area when he arrived at Newark in 1792. The original church was also used by the Presbyterians, but it is not known if the Methodists ever worshipped there.

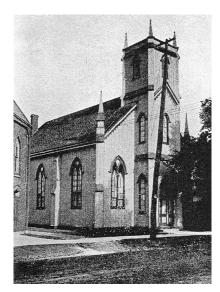
A school was built about the same time as the church, and a year or so later a tavern. These early buildings formed the nucleus of what became St. Catharines. Growth was slow initially, but increased rapidly with the building of the First Welland Canal in the late 1820s. It was during this period that many familiar downtown streets were laid out.

One street already in existence was the old Indian trail that became St. Paul Street, and this was where the Methodists built their church in about 1823 — a frame building on the same site as the present United church. Before this, according to traveller John Howison in 1821, they were meeting "three or four times a week" in each other's houses, where they carried "their religious mania to an immoderate height" and displayed "degrees of fanaticism and extravagence" that were "degrading to human nature." He was not an unbiased observer.

By the 1830s the "English Church" was too small for the Anglicans, and an 1832 cholera outbreak precluded further use of the burying ground nearby. They decided to move, and in 1835 the cornerstone was laid for St. George's on what is now Church Street. Their old church was sold to the Canadian Wesleyan Methodists. These were not the same Methodists as those at St. Paul Street, but a group that had broken away from the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1828. They agreed to allow the Anglicans to use the church until their new building was finished, but sadly it was destroyed by fire in March 1836. The Methodists still paid the Anglicans the balance owing on the purchase cost, however.

With the exception of the British Methodist Episcopal Church, built in 1855 to serve the black community, St. Paul Street remained the only Methodist church in town until the 1870s. By this time it was affiliated with the Wesleyan Methodist Church in Canada. In the interim St. Catharines had continued to grow, and in 1845, the year the Second Canal opened, it was incorporated as a Town with its northern boundary along Welland Avenue. Five years later the boundary was extended north to Carlton Street, but the area between Welland and Carlton remained largely undeveloped.

By the late 1860s, however, this land was being opened up for housing, and in December 1870 the Official Board at St. Paul Street Church voted "to build another Wesleyan Methodist Church in this town in the neighbourhood of Welland Avenue." Early in 1871 a Board of Trustees was formed and a 50-by-100-foot lot purchased at Welland Avenue and Henry Streets. An attractive frame church complete with tower and seating for 250 was designed by builder William Pay and completed by the year's end. (A second mission church, Niagara Street — now Memorial — was to follow in 1873.)



The original Welland Avenue Methodist Church

The congregation soon outgrew the church. The adjacent lot was purchased, and in 1877 a new brick church — the present building — was erected, the original church being moved to the rear. This was just one year after Welland Avenue became independent of St. Paul Street.

The new church was designed in the Gothic style by architect Sidney Rose Badgely. This was his first major commission, and is said to have established his reputation for innovative design. He later became a renowned church architect in the United States, with particular expertise in acoustics. In St. Catharines he also designed the Oille Fountain and the old Carnegie Library, but his most significant Canadian work by far was Massey Hall in Toronto.

The Mead of Memories and The Centennial Story, a second church history published in 1971, both claim that the tower of Welland Avenue Church is a "replica" of that of Magdalen (pronounced Maudlin) College at Oxford University in England. This claim is often repeated, but it is not true. While there are some similarities between the two towers, they are greatly outweighed by the differences.

The total cost of the new church was \$21,000 and the mortgage debt was over \$13,000, which meant that money was to be a continuing problem. This was especially so in the 1880s after the Third Welland Canal was completed and many temporary workers left town, while others found themselves unemployed. In 1881 the church was saved from disaster only when the pastor of St. Paul Street raised \$6000 among local Methodists. Problems continued, and in 1894 the pastor at Welland Avenue

introduced mite boxes to help reduce the debt. A year later he immortalized them in song, with the chorus as follows (regrettably the tune is unknown):

The mortgage was finally discharged in 1911, the church's 40th-anniversary year. Over 550 people attended a special service, and the mortgage was burned on a brass plate donated by J. Sutcliffe Smith, a well-known local jeweller (and in 1906 the very first person in St. Catharines to own a car).

The pastor at that time was Manly Benson, who was sufficiently eminent to merit an entry in the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*. Described as "a handsome and eloquent man," he acquired fame as a public lecturer on a variety of uplifting themes. He travelled extensively in North America and Europe, and in 1894 was sent on a lecture tour of Britain to promote immigration. For 14 years he played a leading role at Grimsby Park, the local Methodist "Chautauqua."

Married to the daughter of a Chatham judge and senator, Benson served four years in St. Catharines. He lived across the road from the church at 78 Welland Avenue, which served as the manse between 1887 and 1920. For ten years prior to this Welland Avenue had been granted use of the original St. Paul Street Church manse at 2 Lyman Street. It stood behind the new manse built on King Street in 1877 (the present Hulse and English funeral home).

In 1920 additional land was bought back of the church, and the old house (since demolished and replaced) at 7 Henry Street became the manse. In 1928 a new Sunday School building designed by local architect Arthur Nicholson was erected on the site. The original frame church had to be moved once more to provide space, but still survives as a gymnasium. Though much has changed — the tower has gone, and the windows are truncated — it still bears some resemblance to the original.

Three years earlier, in 1925, Welland Avenue Methodist Church became Welland Avenue United Church, when the Methodists, Congregationalists and some Presbyterians joined together to form the United Church of Canada.

**Principal Sources**: histories of Welland Avenue, St. Paul Street, St. George's and other local churches; Welland Avenue *Annual Reports*; histories of Canadian Methodism; *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*; Hopkins, *Canada: An Encyclopedia*; Howison, *Sketches of Upper Canada; Farmer's Journal*, 1827 issues; *St. Catharines Journal*, 1836 issues.