

Earl of Selkirk impressed by church project

By: Cheryl Girard

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If walls could talk and gravestones speak then the historic old church and cemetery by the river in Old Kildonan would easily have a century's worth of tales to tell.

And their voices would gladly have joined in the buzz of the crowd that packed the tiny Kildonan Presbyterian Church on a recent blustery afternoon when the 11th Earl of Selkirk, James Hamilton, came to visit.

The descendant of the fifth Earl of Selkirk, who first led the original Selkirk Settlers to the area near The Forks in what is now Winnipeg, visited the church as part of the bicentennial celebration of the arrival of the settlers.

He also was here to help launch the conservation of the 158-year-old church, said June Thompson, chairperson of Friends of Historic Kildonan Church, the group charged with its eventual restoration.

The story of the church begins with the settlers who, because of land clearances, were driven from the hills of Scotland to seek a better life. Aided by Lord Selkirk, they settled here in 1812, and brought with them a strong determination to survive as well as an enduring faith. But since many of them were Presbyterians, they waited 40 years for a minister of their own.

When Rev. John Black arrived in 1851, the settlers hauled stone from the Stonewall Quarry and spruce from Bird's Hill and built their long awaited place of worship, fashioning it after lingering memories of the parish churches of Scotland.

The humble little church served its parishioners faithfully for well over 100 years until 1988 when they moved to larger quarters at nearby 2373 Main St.

Since then it has stood for the most part, unused, unheated and empty. That is until recently when a committee formed to try to restore it and Lord Selkirk's descendant paid his visit.

"What a marvellous day, it is wonderful to have this little church so vibrant today," said Thompson to the standing room only crowd.

Of the efforts to conserve the church, Hamilton said, "I know that here in Manitoba you take enormous pride in the achievements of your ancestors....I have not the slightest doubt that you will succeed. So God speed."

Since the group began in 2011, it has received a \$15,000 grant from The Winnipeg Foundation towards a feasibility study.

Architect Wins Bridgman spoke about the need to stabilize the building prior to restoring it and on establishing a future use for the church. Some possibilities include a centre for peace, for church studies or as an adjunct to a university.

As guests wandered past the headstones in the surrounding cemetery, the names of early settlers could be seen, the same names that are kept alive on many of our city street signs, that are commemorated in museums and on monuments, and are remembered proudly in stories that are told and retold throughout the decades again and again.

Cheryl Girard is a Riverbend-based writer who loves to write about all things Manitoban.

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Cheryl Girard is a community correspondent for West Kildonan.

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