



Historic Gloucester

Newsletter of the

**GLOUCESTER
HISTORICAL
SOCIETY**

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St. Margaret Mary Roman Catholic Church, originally Calvin Presbyterian Church

Join us for our Fall Event—November 5, 2023—See Page 9 for details



The Gloucester Historical Society *acknowledges* financial assistance of the City of Ottawa

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President’s Report

By Glenn Clark

This edition of Historic Gloucester is coming later than hoped. We have been working hard to work out the details of a fall event.

Our Annual General Meeting was held in the Community Hall at the Sawmill Creek Pool on April 22nd at 2:30 p.m. Thirty-three attended. Included was my PowerPoint presentation on the History of Blossom Park. This was very well received, and there was a lively discussion. The presentation is now posted on our website.

This was followed by my Jane’s Walk on May 6th that started and ended at the Rockcliffe Lookout which included a discussion of the various sites, past and present including a recently discovered remnant of the historic Rockcliffe ski jump. Approximately 50 people joined the walk. Please consider joining me for my 2024 Jane’s Walk.

The GHS also participated in Door’s Open weekend on June 3rd and 4th when approximately 30 people visited our office and explored the various rooms in the building containing antiques and other historic artifacts.

The remainder of the summer was relatively quiet. but we continue to respond to various queries and open our office for research when requested. I was also involved in the dedication of a Memorial Board to past parishioners of St. James Anglican Church Leitrim. This included a picture display which is now posted on our website. This may lead to further research and the creation of biographies of the people involved. This will provide further insight to the history of the Leitrim area and its residents.

As I said at the beginning of my report, we delayed this newsletter in order to announce a fall event. **I am pleased to announce that Sergeant Major Scott Williamson has agreed to give us a tour of the RCMP Musical Ride stables on Sunday, November 5th at 1 p.m. Mr. Williamson is in charge of the Musical Ride and has considerable knowledge of the history of the Musical Ride and the location. Please see the flyer appearing later in this newsletter for further details. To manage the numbers participating, we ask you to e-mail us at LDW-13@sympatico.ca or call 613-822-2076 (leave a message) to reserve your spot(s). Depending on interest, we may have to place a limit on the number of people attending.**

This edition also includes another story on the subject of Lost Old Ottawa South. This time, we talk about the former Saint Margaret Mary School and the associated Roman Catholic Church of the same name. We see how this story also involves other churches and traces back to the 19th century history of Billings Bridge. Enjoy!

Lost Old Ottawa South

Glenn Clark, President, Gloucester Historical Society

St. Margaret Mary Catholic School – 88 Bellwood Avenue

Although the history of the school is reasonably simple, context demands the telling of the more complex story surrounding the building that served as the affiliated church, St. Margaret Mary parish located at 5 Fairbairn Street. Furthermore, the church building was not always a Roman Catholic Church, and it will serve a different purpose in the future.

The History of the Church at 5 Fairbairn Street Calvin Presbyterian Church (1914 – 1925), Calvin United Church (1925 – 1931)

Although the building at 5 Fairbairn Street served as St. Margaret Mary Roman Catholic Church for most of its history, its beginnings were as a Presbyterian church.

Calvin Presbyterian Church had its origins at Temperance Hall, Billings Bridge located just south of the bridge, dating to around 1860. Miss Sabra Billings erected a church on the south shore of the Rideau River east of Billings Bridge in 1865. Initially this church was shared by Presbyterian and Methodist congregations, but the Presbyterians were eventually given exclusive rights to the church when a Methodist Church was built on the opposite side of River Road in 1890. On July 9, 1895, Mr. J.D. Morrison was inducted as the first Presbyterian minister² and in 1898, Miss Billings deeded the building to the congregation¹. Land records show the transfer to the trustees of Billings Bridge Presbyterian Church, the original name, on August 25, 1898.

It was reported in the Ottawa Citizen on April 3, 1912 (Page 15) that three lots were purchased in February 1912 from Mr. Cassius C. Ray (original owner of the Oakland Heights subdivision) to build a new church on Sunnyside Avenue. The question was posed about the abandonment of the Billings Bridge building, but the matter was not resolved at that time. The proposed new site had been a popular tobogganing hill, known as Ray's Hill³.

In October 1912, permission was granted by the other city Presbyterian churches to start a sub-

scription to fund the construction of the new church with pastor Reverend Orr Bennett to lead the campaign. There were approximately 90 families in the Ottawa South congregation, and the building was estimated to cost \$20,000. By this time, the original church at Billings Bridge was considered too small⁴. Reverend Bennett then moved into his new residence at 49 Sunnyside Avenue in 1913⁵.

The annual meeting of Billings Bridge Presbyterian Church agreed to call for tenders on January 28, 1914⁶. The congregation voted to change their name to Calvin Church on June 3, 1914, and the church cornerstone was laid on June 19, 1914⁷.

The opening ceremonies took place on December 21, 1914 with Reverend Orr Bennett presiding. The construction contractors were Robert McKinstry and Son, and the architect was J.A. Ewart⁸. The final construction cost was \$30,000¹².

Land records indicate that the Trustees of the Presbyterian Church turned over the old Billings Bridge property for \$1 as well as the building to Charles M. Billings, executor for estate of Sabra Billings on June 1, 1915. The land was then leased to the Polar Ice Company Ltd. on August 24, 1926, the location of its ice-house for a 16 year term effective February 1, 1926 and subsequently that lease was assigned to D. George Cowan on March 20, 1930. The Polar Ice Company was founded around 1923 by William M. Brouse of Aylmer Avenue. The church was demolished sometime between 1928 and 1933 and the ice-house was destroyed by fire on June 6, 1944⁹.

Church union effectively began on July 1, 1925, when Ottawa South Methodist Church (Aylmer Avenue) and Calvin Presbyterian Church began sharing a church school. That summer, the two pastors preached at both churches, one in July and the other in August allowing each a one month vacation. At this point, both churches formally became part of the United Church of Canada¹⁰.

As a result of votes by both congregations during late February and early March 1926, it was decided to merge the two churches¹¹. The merged church was renamed Southminster United Church in 1931.

1 Ottawa Citizen, February 16, 1923 p.8

2 Ottawa Citizen, July 11, 1895 p.8

3 Ottawa Citizen, April 3, 1912 p.15

- 4 Ottawa Citizen, October 13, 1912 p.14
 5 Ottawa Journal, September 22, 1938 p.6
 6 Ottawa Journal, January 29, 1914 p.12
 7 Ottawa Citizen, January 23, 1928 p.14, Ottawa Journal,
 January 21, 1928 p.7
 8 Ottawa Citizen, December 22, 1914 p.13, Ottawa Citizen,
 December 21, 1914 p.1
 9 Ottawa Journal, June 7, 1944 p.20
 10 Ottawa Citizen, June 22, 1925 p.13, Ottawa Citizen,
 July 25, 1925 p.4, Ottawa Journal, July 27, 1925 p.14
 11 Ottawa Citizen, March 3, 1926 p.5
 12 Ottawa Citizen, October 18, 1930 p.32

St. Margaret Mary Roman Catholic Church (1929 – 2019)

An agreement for the sale of Calvin United Church was signed by their Board of Trustees and the Roman Catholic Episcopal Corporation of Ottawa in October 1930 with the ownership to be transferred on October 31, 1931. Archbishop Guillaume Forbes had agreed to establish a new parish in November 1929, with mass celebrated at the Precious Blood Monastery until the new church was available. The new parish was named St. Margaret Mary Roman Catholic Church to honour Saint Mary Margaret Alacoque (22 July 1647 – 17 October 1690), who was a French Catholic Visitation nun and mystic who promoted devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Construction of the parish school began on October 13, 1930¹.

The church was renovated for the new Roman Catholic parish in late 1931 with the rectory established in the neighbouring house at 7 Fairbairn Street³. The purchase price was \$20,000 with total expenditure including renovations and new decorations totalling \$35,708⁴.

The church was blessed on February 7, 1932 by His Excellency Monseigneur J.G. Forbes with the parish priest being Reverend Father A.E. Armstrong. The interior of the church was described: *“The new spiritual home of St. Margaret Mary’s parishioners is artistically decorated in the interior. Above the altar is a large painting of the saint after whom the parish was named, while on either side of the church are paintings of the four evangelists, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, and the apostles, Saints Peter, and Paul. Paintings of six angels adorn the side panels in the upper part of the edifice.”*⁷

The parish World War II honour roll was unveiled on February 17, 1946, and included 124 men and women who served from the parish. The news story lists the names⁵. St. Margaret Mary’s parish honoured its war dead with the blessing of a bronze

tablet on February 20, 1949. Eleven men from the parish gave their lives for their country including Byron Joseph Becker, John Carwin Coburn, Richard Nicholas Ferris, Emmett Patrick Finn, William Joseph Hope, Stephen Oliver Kinsella, Martin Allan Knight, John Albert Macdonald, John Alfred Malloy, Joseph John Skillen and James Earl Sauve⁶.

Sadly, the church closed with the final mass taking place on June 23, 2019. The church was for sale in July 2022. There was a proposed plan to demolish the church and replace it with a 40-unit development in a 5 storey building. As the church had been originally funded by the founding families and given in trust to the Roman Catholic diocese, the former parishioners hoped that they would have some say on the use of the proceeds from the sale of the building. The hope was to direct the money towards reconciliation for the survivors of indigenous residential schools. As of January 2023, the church has been sold and will become a mosque with space available for community use. The Farooq Azam mosque opened on September 1, 2023.

- 1 Ottawa Citizen, October 18, 1930 p.32
 3 Ottawa Citizen, December 26, 1931 p.18
 4 Ottawa Journal, February 27, 1932 p.28
 5 Ottawa Journal, February 14, 1946 p.17
 6 Ottawa Journal, February 21, 1949 p.9
 7 Ottawa Citizen, February 8, 1932. P.5

Calvin Church Tennis Club (1924 – 1931), Sunnyside Tennis Club (1931 – 1942)

The Calvin Church Tennis Club acquired land to establish 6 tennis courts behind Calvin church with the courts to be ready in May 1924¹. Land records show a transfer to Calvin Presbyterian Church (United Church of Canada) on June 13, 1925.

The subsequent sale agreement of the church to the Roman Catholic diocese in 1930 did not include the tennis courts that were located between Fairbairn Street and Bellwood Avenue and owned by the Calvin Church Tennis Club². The tennis court property was then transferred to a newly incorporated Sunnyside Tennis Club in 1931³. The land transfer took place on June 12, 1931.

The Sunnyside Tennis Club maintained operations through the remainder of the decade, but when the city began cracking down on property tax collection on tennis clubs, and with declining membership

during World War II, the clubs began seeking property tax exemptions. The Sunnyside club was amongst those granted an exemption in 1942 ⁴ but it was already preparing to cease operations. The land was transferred to the Oakland Land Company Ltd. on June 1, 1942 and the tennis club was no longer evident on a 1945 air photograph. Today, the former tennis club property has been subdivided into residential lots, but a portion hidden between Bellwood Avenue and Fairbairn Street now serves as a private garden.

1 Ottawa Journal, May 19, 1924 p.15

2 Ottawa Citizen, October 18, 1930 p.32

3 Ottawa Journal, March 11, 1931 p.7

4 Ottawa Citizen, May 19, 1942 p.16

St. Margaret Mary Catholic School, 88 Bellwood Avenue (1931 – 2002)

It was normal practice that each Roman Catholic church would establish a parish school to promote both academic and religious education. When the decision was made to purchase the former Calvin United Church in 1930 for the new St. Margaret Mary parish, it was no surprise that a new separate school would be built nearby. Construction of that new school began on October 13, 1930 ¹.

The new school, St. Margaret Mary Separate School (later simply St. Margaret Mary School) at 88



This 1933 air photograph shows the Sunnyside Tennis Club in the middle of the block bound by Sunnyside Avenue to the north, Fairbairn Street to the west and Bellwood Avenue to the east. St. Margaret Mary Roman Catholic Church appears immediately north-west of the tennis courts at the Sunnyside-Fairbairn intersection.

Bellwood Avenue opened on February 1, 1931. The construction cost was \$35,000. The Ottawa Separate School Board appointed Miss Marion Melville as the first principal². The new school was a two-storey building with ten classrooms. Throughout its history, there were no expansions of the building, and it was one of the smallest schools within the school board.

As demographics changed and the post-war baby boom passed, discussions to close the school were already taking place in October 1982³. Closure hung over the school for several years. In January 1999, Reg Charette, Chairman of St. Margaret Mary School Advisory Council offered the following comment:

“Forgive me for using the school my children attend as an example. Unlike Mr. Denley’s generalizations, St. Margaret Mary School is oper-

ating at more than 70 per cent capacity, with full capacity projected by the Ottawa-Carleton Catholic School Board within three years.

The 175 children in the school use eight of the school’s 10 classrooms (two are leased by a co-operative day care, one of only two in our neighbourhood).

That puts roughly 22 children in each class, pretty close to standard of 25 children per classroom that Ontario Premier Mike Harris has set as the provincial goal. St. Margaret Mary School operates at a cost per student that is 20 per cent lower than the board average. Yet this school is slated for closure.”⁴

A report debated on December 11, 2001 by the school board recommended closure. By this time, enrollment had declined to 121 students, the smallest school in the board⁵.

Parents rally to keep school open

BY SIRI AGRELL

A group of parents spent Valentine’s Day showing their love for a school by fighting to keep it open — for the second time in three years.

Fifty parents attended a lunch-time rally at Boomerang Kids clothing store in Old Ottawa South to launch the “Save St. Margaret Mary School” campaign.

“If you take schools out of neighbourhoods, you take families out of neighbourhoods and you destroy neighbourhoods,”

said MPP Richard Patten, who attended the rally.

Built in 1931, St. Margaret is in need of major renovations. In 1999, the Ottawa-Carleton Catholic School Board named the school among those slated for closing. Parents launched a campaign and the board voted unanimously to keep St. Margaret open and consider plans to revitalize it.

Last spring, the school’s parent association presented renovation plans with an estimated cost of less than \$1 million. But in December 2001, the board de-

cided the cost was closer to \$2.7 million and once again recommended the school be closed.

“It’s such a vibrant school and the kids just love it,” said Missy Fraser, who is heading the campaign. “Closing it would be a huge loss to the community.”

Businesses have rallied around the cause, displaying “Save St. Margaret” posters and helping fund the campaign.

The Parent Advisory Council will make its case to the board at a special OCCSB meeting on Tuesday. The Bellwood Avenue school has 120 pupils enrolled.

The final decision to close the school was made in early March 2002. Beginning in September 2002, students were bused to Corpus Christi School in the Glebe⁶. Despite efforts by the community to prevent demolition and to preserve the green space⁷, demolition proceeded in December 2004 and eighteen town houses were built on the former school property.

- 1 Ottawa Citizen, October 18, 1930 p.32
- 2 Ottawa Citizen, January 24, 1931 p.31
- 3 Ottawa Citizen, October 23, 1982 p.41
- 4 Ottawa Citizen, January 14, 1999 p.E5
- 5 Ottawa Citizen, December 11, 2001 p.D3
- 6 Ottawa Citizen, March 7, 2002 p.C6.
- 7 Ottawa Citizen, February 9, 2005 p.B3



Demolition of St. Margaret Mary Catholic School in December 2004

One Person's Memory of St. Margaret Mary Church

By Joan Scott

Glenn's article about the history of St. Margaret Mary's Church brought to mind some interesting events associated with this church.

Like most churches, St. Margaret Mary's had a large hall with an adjacent kitchen, washroom and some other general purpose rooms, all in the basement of the church. The hall was a popular meeting place for various clubs, organizations and church functions.

I believe it was in the 1970's that a group of people of Irish descent formed a dancing afternoon in the hall. Many of these people belonged to the Irish group Comholtas Ceoltoir Eireann, which has over 300 branches around the world and works to promote Irish culture and music. This organization sponsored events in Ottawa including the Irish dancing lessons which took place at St. Margaret Mary's hall. One of my sons, and two of my daughters, were participants in the lessons, as was I, to a lesser extent. There were classes for young children, teenagers, and adults. After the classes finished some of the adults would dance a few reels just for the fun of it. Then we would have a cup of tea and cookies or something similar. It was not just a lesson, but a social occasion as well. I don't know when the lessons stopped, but they were still going in the 1980's and into the 1990's.

Research shows that Ottawa had a St. Patrick's parade from 1901 to 1918. It is assumed that it was cancelled then because of the great influenza epidemic. From time to time people would ask why Ottawa did not have a St. Patrick's Day parade, but apparently there was none until March 1983 when it was revived and continued for some time.

The 1983 parade was a hastily put together event with great enthusiasm but little expertise in staging a parade. Many of the floats were amateur but colourful. One such float was conceived and put together with a group of four young men who were dancers from St. Margaret Mary Church. Help also came from a few other sources.

A small structure was erected on the float with a dance area in front of it. The structure was made by the Comholtas Ceoltari and the Ottawa Irish

Society with help from other groups of interested people who assisted with offering supplies, or donating decorations or time. As a mother of some of the young dancers who were helping decorate the float,, I usually drove them to the site of where the floats were being assembled. My contribution was a little different though. I would go to Kelly's Funeral Home, where the father of one of the young men (a Kelly) worked. They would give me some beautiful, if slightly used, bouquets of flowers to decorate the float.

I think this was the first time they had dancers in a St. Patrick's Day parade in Ottawa. The hundreds of people who came to view the parade loved to see the dancers going through their paces.

As the years passed, the parade grew to be an important event for the city. More and more sponsors contributed to the floats. The number of participants increased and the floats became more sophisticated and fancier than the original which were hastily, and amateurishly made in the first few years. Later Comhaltus Ceoltoir Eireann began entering a float of its own. The young men who originally danced on the float were now too busy with their own lives to participate so the parade continued without them, but thrived and provided a great attraction for many years.





The Gloucester Historical Society Presents

A Guided Tour of the RCMP Musical Ride Stables

Hosted by Sergeant Major Scott Williamson



Sunday, November 5, 2023, 1:00 p.m.

Location: Musical Ride Stables, 1 Sandridge Road, Ottawa
(free parking next to the log cabin immediately north of the St. Laurent/
Sandridge intersection on the right)

Tour Length: Approximately 1 hour

Reservations: E-mail LDW-13@sympatico.ca or call 613-822-2076 (leave a message)

Open to the Public, Free parking and admission, Bus Route 7 nearby



**THE GLOUCESTER HISTORICAL SOCIETY HISTORY ROOM WILL
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 Glenn Clark at english@gloucesterhistory.com or
 Call 613-822-2076 and leave a message.**

Historic Gloucester is published by The Gloucester Historical Society quarterly. It is intended as a Newsletter to members of the Society to provide interesting articles on Gloucester’s past and to keep them informed of publications available, upcoming events and other items of general interest. Comments, suggestions and potential articles are always welcome.



*Gloucester Historical Society gratefully acknowledges
 the financial support of the City of Ottawa.*

To renew or become a new member, please complete this form and return it to the address below with your cheque. Memberships may also be purchased on our website.

Membership Form—Gloucester Historical Society/Société historique de Gloucester
 (Membership year runs from April 1 to March 31.)

Annual Membership - \$20.00 for one year _____ 10 year Membership \$150.00 _____

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