

Settlement: 1881-1900

Unlike the 1870s, which witnessed the construction of only a handful of churches, the 1880s and 90s were marked by an unprecedented wave of church building across southern Manitoba. The arrival in 1881 of the main line of the Canadian Pacific Railway in Winnipeg caused property values in the city to soar. Simultaneously, in the country, prospective settlers and land speculators spread across the prairie seeking the best land. As a result, towns were established in the space of a few weeks, while miles of virgin farmland were broken in the length of a summer.

For the Anglican church the rapid pace of development and especially the speculative pattern of settlement which accompanied it, led to unprecedented opportunities, but also problems of a new and unforeseen kind. Dozens of parishes needed to be established to serve these new settlers, but the population was too widely dispersed to support them. The response of Robert Machray, Bishop of Rupert's Land, was twofold. He established as many parishes as he could and he wrote the great missionary societies of England for help. One letter written to the Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge (S.P.C.K.) in 1881 describes how the people themselves adapted to pioneer conditions:

At first, perhaps, in a township there may be, when it is fully settled, from 20 to 40, or 50, or more settlers, some with families, some with families coming in a year or two, some unmarried yet. Well, now, these people wish a church. They are probably of different denominations. They have no spare money. They will endeavour to build a small church, costing perhaps, \$700. Many of them will not mind what denomination comes first. They will give for the putting up of a church.... Then it is more difficult to erect another. After a few years the church will not meet the wants of the people, and they will build another at a cost of from \$1200 to \$2500.

This may in time give way to a still better. When a village rises up early, then the effort may be made at once to build a church costing from \$1200 to \$2500. Where a town rises up, as in Winnipeg, still there will be the first small church of \$1000, the larger wood or brick veneered of \$5000 or \$6000, to give way in the future to a permanent and more expensive church as in older countries.

In response to Robert Machray's appeal the S.P.C.K. gave the Diocese of Rupert's Land a block grant of £2,000 in 1881 and another £1,000 in 1885. The money was used to aid the building of dozens of churches in the province, from the largest like Christ Church, Winnipeg, to the smallest like the Church of the Advent, Kola (1884) (Figure 21). Domestic in scale, it measures 10 metres by 6 metres with a small porch 2 metres by 2 and 1/2 metres. Within this modest space the congregation created a world infused with the traditions of English Christianity. The simple lines of stained wood, the purple altar cloth, carved harmonium and brass fittings are still there to be found, recalling prairie life at the time of the Saskatchewan Rebellion in 1885 (Figures 22).

For the next forty years many small wood frame churches were to be built in every part of Manitoba, each with their own character and variations in detail. For instance, the chapel of St. James, magnificently situated overlooking the Bird Tail Creek near Solsgirth, sports a pair of lancet windows on each side, and at the east end a triple lancet (Figures 23 and 24). This fills the church with light, illuminating a beautifully carved pulpit and gas lamps. Similar in size is St. Barnabas, Somerset (1895) but here the windows have round heads with a bull's-eye window on the west front (Figure 25). Timber for the doors, windows and frames was provided by Brown and Rutherford, Winnipeg at a cost of \$100.

Despite variations in detail, virtually all churches built during the 1880s and 90s are more or less Gothic Revival in style; that is to say like St. James, Winnipeg they were vertical in proportion, featured a tower or belfry, often had pointed windows with stained or coloured glass, and sometimes wooden buttresses. These were the basic elements of church design.



Figure 21.
Church of the Advent, Kola, 1884.

Figure 22.
Interior, Church of the Advent.



Figure 23.
St. James, Solsgirth, c.1889.



Figure 24.
Detail, St. James, Solsgirth.



Figure 25.
St. Barnabas, Somerset, 1895. (PAM)



Figure 26.
St. John the Divine, Rounthwaite, 1882.

But for those congregations who could afford the expense, the Gothic Revival style offered architects and builders considerable room for elaboration and experimentation. In terms of plan, the true Gothic Revival Church ought to have a chancel, nave and porch, each distinguished by a separate roof. The porch itself could be attached either on the south side or the front of the church. In terms of decoration, the Gothic Revival had spawned an entire vocabulary of ornament, much of it particularly suited to wood frame construction.

The best example in Manitoba of an elaborate, highly decorated Gothic Revival Church built of wood is St. John the Divine, Rounthwaite, a small community in the hills south of Brandon. Constructed in 1882 at a cost of \$450, including \$75 from the S.P.C.K., St. John the Divine is the second oldest church in western Manitoba. Its form and its detail, including ornamental brackets and thirteenth century geometrical tracery carved in wood, is a textbook example of the Victorian Gothic taste. (Figures 26 and 27). A church of similar style, though not so elaborate, is All Saints, Clanwilliam (1884). It displays the same verticality and plan, with nave, south porch and chancel. Standing in a country cemetery, it retains the picturesque quality intended by its builders, with white walls, steeply pitched roof and a wrought iron cross flashing against the blue sky (Figure 28). At one of the oldest church in the Diocese of Brandon, St. Mark's Elkhorn (1887), Gothic Revival elements are spread across a slightly larger church (Figure 29).

Besides vertical proportions and Gothic details, another characteristic of many of Manitoba's late Victorian Anglican churches, especially those built in the 1880s, are interiors with open roofs supported by stick-like beams, braces and rafters. St. Thomas's, Rapid City is especially interesting in this regard (Figure 30). Built in 1881 it is the oldest church in the Diocese of Brandon. The handmade pews are similar to those found in the Red River churches of the 1850s and 60s and seem today an echo of a world which by the 1880s had already disappeared (Figure 31). The rest of the church however, including a stick-style roof, and triangular windows were fashionably new, made possible by the district's first lumber mill which had opened in Rapid City in 1878.



Figure 27.
Detail, St. John the Divine, Rounthwaite.



Figure 28.
All Saints, Clanwilliam, 1884.



Figure 29.
St. Mark's, Elkhorn, 1887.



Figure 30.
St. Thomas's, Rapid City, 1881.



Figure 31.
Interior, St. Thomas's, Rapid City.

The open-framed roofs of these pioneer churches seem to reflect a fashion current in the 1880s, namely the use of thin horizontal and vertical strips applied to exterior walls in order to emphasize the studs and timber framing which lay below the surface. At root this was the result of a desire to create a style which expressed the wood framing then coming into widespread use. Examples of this "stick style" in its pure form are not frequently found in Manitoba, but the style had a great influence on the design of houses in the province. Evidence of its effect can also be seen in churches (Figure 32). The best surviving example of the style is St. Alban's, Oak Lake (1889) (Figure 33).

Designed by architect James Andrew, St. Alban's is now somewhat changed, but the exterior surface is still decorated with horizontal and vertical strips painted green to contrast with the white walls.¹⁶ Boards at the corners speak of studs behind, horizontal lines of internal divisions. Originally, the church boasted a rather sensational tower, octagonal on plan, with an open arcade and shingles laid in a pulsating contrast of light and dark (Figure 34). The interior of St. Alban's is one of the most beautiful found in the province (Figure 35). The walls are covered and decorated in different kinds of wood, while above is a magnificent open roof supported by braces carved into miniature arcades.

During the late 1880s and 90s Anglican church building across Manitoba experienced a kind of flowering. Many churches were built which even today have the power to move us by their beauty, their inventiveness or the boldness and purpose which lay behind their construction. St. Alban's, Oak Lake is a good example but there are others. (Figure 36) At Holland, Manitoba the architect Andrew Maxwell produced a sophisticated design for the congregation of Emmanuel Church (1894). Following late Victorian taste, the church was enlivened by ornamental brackets, contrasts of textures and a sharply angular skyline (Figure 37). The spire added in 1898 completes the composition.



Figure 32.
St. Paul's, Clearwater, 1889.



Figure 33.
St. Alban's, Oak Lake, 1889.



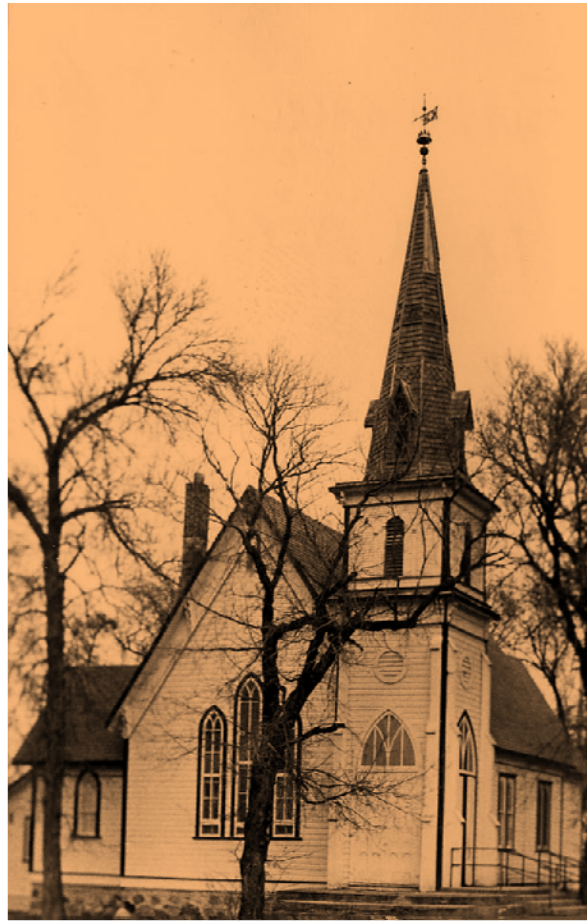
Figure 34.
Old St. Alban's.



Figure 35.
Interior, St. Alban's, Oak Lake.



Far Left: Figure 36.
Christ Church, Selkirk, 1887. (PAM)



Left: Figure 37.
Emmanuel Church, Holland, 1894. (PAM)

The skill of architects during the late Victorian period was not restricted to wood alone. Indeed, despite the popularity of wood frame, the construction of a stone or brick church remained the ambition of many congregations. (Figure 38) However, difficulty of supply meant that brick was not widely used until the late 1890s. Consequently those parishes seeking to erect a masonry church before the end of the century usually built their church of stone.

As we have seen, in the Red River Colony limestone had been exploited as a building material as early as the 1830s. (Figures 39 and 40) But in the 1880s there was an innovation of a new kind: the use of fieldstone. The explanation for the introduction of fieldstone is a simple one. In the fields of southwestern Manitoba, far removed from the easily worked limestone deposits of Red River, the best and most easily accessible building stone was the granite and sandstone which could be found in fields and sloughs across the prairies.

In the southwest, builders used fieldstone as a foundation material at an early date. This can be seen both at Rapid City (1881) and Rounthwaite (1882). The first Anglican church built entirely of fieldstone does not appear until 1889, a year which saw the construction of two important churches: St. Matthew's, Boissevain and St. Mary's, Virden. St. Matthew's (Figure 41) is a work of great charm, much loved by its congregation. Local builder William Lambert drew upon the vernacular tradition already well established and the basic elements of the church are those typical of the 1880s, including paired lancet windows (set in brick), and a south door leading to the vestry. But translated into stone these simple lines and volumes give the church an enduring, timeless quality.



Figure 38.
St. Andrew's, Hartney, 1894. (PAM)

Figure 39.
Church of the Ascension, Stonewall, 1882.



Figure 40.
St. John's, Winnipeg, 1866. (PAM)



Figure 41.
St. Matthew's, Boissevain, 1889. (PAM)

The church of St. Mary's, Virden (Figure 42) is a different sort of church altogether. In a manner similar to Boissevain, the fieldstone for St. Mary's was quarried in the surrounding fields and brought to town by the congregation themselves. The church itself, however was the work of a professional, Walter Chesterton, an English architect who had settled in Winnipeg in the 1880s. His design was closely modelled on an English parish church. Given the difficulties of working with fieldstone this was an ambitious concept, but it proved to be a suitable one. Translated into local stone, the square medieval tower, and the long line of the nave take on a monumental quality, which is both extremely powerful and suited to the prairie landscape. Chesterton himself seems to have been well aware of the realities of the Manitoba climate. On the south side of the nave he extended the roof to create a covered passarelle at the vestry door. Catching the sun, it gives protection from the north wind even in the depths of winter.

By 1900 the age of fieldstone construction was beginning to pass, but not before other congregations and architects had tried their hands at this difficult but beautiful building material. A gem among Manitoba's fieldstone churches is St. Mary's, Kaleida (1892). Designed by the Winnipeg architect Charles Wheeler, the church is a delight, well known to people in the district as "The Stone Church" (Figure 43).

At Kaleida, the stone was laid with an eye to colour, with great stone arches which break the rubble coursing. The interior of the church is sophisticated, and includes coloured glass produced by the Winnipeg firm of Ernest Edgell. A smaller, but equally attractive fieldstone church can be found near Copley in the southwest of the province. Built at the centre of an English community in 1890-92, the church, St. George's, is now falling into ruin (Figure 44). At Christ Church, Cartwright (1897-98) the use of fieldstone comes closest to imitating the standard plan so commonly seen in wood (Figure 45).



Figure 42.
St. Mary's, Virden, 1889.

Figure 43.
St. Mary's, Kaleida, 1892.



Figure 44.
St. George, Copley, 1890-92.



Figure 45.
Christ Church, Cartwright, 1897-88.

Although the 1880s and 90s were years when a great many Anglican churches were built, it was not until after 1900 that many of the large urban churches found today began to appear. There are however, two important exceptions to this, one built in Winnipeg, the other in Portage la Prairie. The first of these, Holy Trinity, is a landmark in the history of Manitoba's architecture (Figure 46). Built in 1882 to designs by Charles Wheeler, it is characteristically Gothic in style. By late Victorian standards the façade was rather conservative, but the plan boasted a wide nave, unobstructed by piers, and spanned by an elaborate hammerbeam roof (Figure 47).

In terms of Manitoba's architectural development, the successful use in the church of local limestone laid in smooth courses and carefully carved as moulds, Romanesque capitals, and medieval gargoyles signals the development of a sophisticated architectural culture in the province. Not to be missed in the church are coloured clerestorey windows designed by Wheeler himself.

One of the last Anglican churches to be built in Manitoba before the turn of the century is St. Mary's, Portage la Prairie (1898) (Figure 48). Like Holy Trinity it is the work of an accomplished architect, in this case H.S. Griffith, an Englishman who had opened an office in Winnipeg in 1893. Light-hearted and playful with a bell-cast roof and open bell-tower, St. Mary's is one of the best examples in Manitoba of the late nineteenth century taste for picturesque invention.



Figure 46.
Holy Trinity, Winnipeg, 1882. (PAM)



Figure 47.
Interior, Holy Trinity, Winnipeg (PAM)



Figure 48.
St. Mary's, Portage-la-Prairie, 1898.