

GASPÉ OF YESTERDAY

REV. JOHN MITCHELL

1765-1841

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KEN ANNETT

REV. JOHN MITCHELLPREAMBLE

Those descendants of Gaspesia's pre-loyalist and loyalist settlers, who are interested in family history, are aware of a serious lack of baptismal, marriage and burial records for the early years of their ancestors in the District of Gaspé. As late as 1813, some fifty years after the start of pre-loyalist, Protestant settlement, Henry Johnston, J.P. of Douglstown and Point St. Peter, in a letter to the Anglican Bishop of Quebec, wrote:

"...I will now crave your Lordship's attention to the degraded state of the Protestants as such... In this northeastern Division of the District and where three-quarters of the commerce centers, there are fifty-six Protestant families producing a population of three hundred and thirty-six souls, on an average of six to a family, ALL OF WHOM ( A FEW OF THE PARENTS EXCEPTED ) HAVE NEVER LOOKED A REGULAR PROTESTANT CLERGYMAN IN THE FACE..."

Elsewhere in his letter to the Bishop Henry Johnston did refer to - "Occasional visits by itinerant preachers" but mentioned no names. Thus for the period from the start of settlement, circa 1764 until circa 1820 when church records exist there is a great void of baptismal, marriage and burial records. This situation in Gaspesia was so serious that on more than one occasion it came to the attention of the Quebec Legislature. (Ref.- GASPÉ OF YESTERDAY - "WITH THIS RING I THEE WED" - Part I, SPEC. 01 March 1983; Part II, SPEC. 15 March 1983)

In the course of research, GASPÉ OF YESTERDAY has become aware of early Protestant missionaries in Gaspesia and is in the process of seeking out additional information on four such clergyman who served pioneer Gaspesian communities. These were:

REV. JOHN YOUNG  
 REV. MATTHEW DRIPPS  
 REV. EDWARD PIDGEON  
 REV. JOHN MITCHELL

With regard to the career of the Rev. John Mitchell, search began with the following item kindly provided by Mrs. Earlene Gilker of New Carlisle, drawn from "HISTORIC SKETCHES - PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN CANADA".

"...about 1805 Rev.Mitchell, then Independent but afterwards Presbyterian, wrought at New Carlisle, from which he toured into New Brunswick... not much is known of the results achieved by this early missionary..."

Subsequently, a reference to the Rev. Mitchell was found in the Introduction to a history of Zion United Church of New Carlisle. An extract from the Tatamagouche Pastoral Charge of Nova Scotia proved to be the key to more detailed information from the North Shore Archives of Tatamagouche and the Public Archives of Nova Scotia. The invaluable help of Mrs.Gilker, Mr. Raymond A.Ross, Secretary, Tatamagouche Pastoral Charge, Mrs. L. Weagle, Secretary, North Shore Archives, Tatamagouche, and Mr. Allan C. Dunlop, Associate Archivist, Public Archives of Nova Scotia, Halifax, N.S. is gratefully acknowledged.

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JOHN MITCHELL - ORIGINS AND YOUTH

John Mitchell was born at Newcastle-on Tyne, England, in the Spring of 1765. His parents had come to Newcastle from Scotland. His father was a flour merchant. John was the eldest of a family of ten sons and three daughters. Five of the children had died by 1796.

John received a fairly good common school education. He chose the trade of rope-making and was very carefree with his leisure. Until he was about eighteen years of age he was regardless of religion but writing in 1797 he said:

" I might notice the goodness of God to me before conversion, especially in his preserving me three times from being drowned on the Lord's Day, and on one of the times in a miraculous manner..."

"...The first time God began a saving work upon my heart was, if I mistake not, in the year 1794. It occurred one day when I was attending the horse-races in Newcastle. Great trouble of mind came upon me. The trouble I endured, and the happiness I felt when the race was over, I will never be able to express. From that wicked place I went with a full resolution never to return any more; and blessed be God, I have been enabled to keep it. The next day, when others were going to see the races, I went out to the fields to pray, read and meditate. The Bible became precious to me, prayer my delight, and divine contemplations exceedingly sweet to my soul. When I compared the surpassing pleasures I experienced in this new employ with what I used to find in the races, I was lost in wonder and admiration..."

Having received the light himself, this lad of nineteen years did all he could to impart it to others. He became even more diligent in studying the Bible. He reasoned and pleaded with those of his own age to turn from sin and serve the Lord. He strove for the reclaiming of his father and brothers. In 1796 he gladly accepted an opportunity of going to London and afterwards to Woolwich. In the Autumn of 1797 he went to Scotland where he lived, respectively, in Glasgow, Greenock and Gourock. Then he entered Hoxton Academy's three year course of theological instruction for the ministry. He was ordained early in 1800.

#### TO QUEBEC

Following upon his ordination the Rev. John Mitchell was sent forth in company with the Rev. John C. Benton by the London Missionary Society, which had been founded by members of different denominations in 1795. They left London on March 17, 1800 and Liverpool a week later. The voyage from Liverpool to Quebec took ten weeks. Rev. Benton remained in Quebec and Rev. Mitchell visited Montreal where he preached in a schoolhouse every Sunday evening from August 3rd., to October 5th. He had about 120 hearers belonging mostly to the Church of Scotland.

The people of New Carlisle having petitioned for a minister, Mr. Mitchell went there, mainly because the Montreal friends were able to offer a good stipend and could easily obtain a minister, whilst the New Carlisle people were poor. Against the desires of the former he said, "The cries of the poor on the Bay are more pressing than the cry of the rich in Montreal."

Taking up his work at New Carlisle in November, 1800, he found no lack of calls to minister. Without a church building, he preached, taught Sunday School, visited, established a praying society, etc., and even taught a day school for the children of the poor. In March, 1801, he visited Restigouche. Of his return trip he said, "We had one of the worst journeys I ever experienced, crossing rivers on pieces of ice, while half up the leg in water, climbing over mountains of ice heaved upon the shore by the current, travelling through woods in the snow five feet deep, in which we sank at every step, and wading over small rivers. We were four days travelling in this condition". He visited Restigouche again in October 1802.

At New Carlisle opposition was given him by those whose lives were rebuked by the simple enunciation of the law of God, English people who worked and frolicked on the Sabbath, blasphemed their Maker and baptised each other's children (thinking that sufficient to save them from damnation) The chief opposition, of course, came from the wealthier who saw vanishing their power to grind seven days' work out of those depending on them for supplies. Some who at first attended the preaching of Rev. Mitchell then refused to come because they feared the opposers. Mr. Mitchell, yearning for the welfare of friend and foe alike, strongly appealed to his Society to send a Church of England missionary to the lawless English people for whose salvation he so longed and prayed.

Notwithstanding the strong, malignant and untiring opposition his work progressed, sinners were converted, the young instructed and the true believers edified. On May 5, 1801 he wrote:

"The praying society mentioned in my journal is still continued. The time I was at Restigouche about sixty of them met every Lord's Day to pray and to read a sermon and examine the children...In the course of nine months I have travelled eight hundred miles,

"travelled twice two hundred in the winter, twice for nine days I had no bed to lie upon, and my clothes were never off; and I preached about one hundred sermons; and blessed be God I am none the worse of my journeys and enjoy a good state of health to the present day."

While at New Carlisle the Rev. John Mitchell married Janet Sherar, daughter of the British Empire Loyalists Thomas and Jeanne Melvin Sherar. Thomas, his wife and five children were of the Loyalists that arrived on the brig "ST.PETER" in 1784 and drew 300 acres of land in the initial drawing of farm lots. A veteran soldier of the American Revolutionary War, Thomas Sherar had served in the "LOYAL RANGERS". At New Carlisle he served as a Justice of the Peace. James Sherar, the eldest son of the family, who has figured in other articles of the GASPE OF YESTERDAY series was influential and well-known in Gaspesia.

In 1803 the Rev. Mitchell made an extensive missionary tour to Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. From New Carlisle he sailed to the Gut of Canso, where he preached twice. He then visited and preached at Antogonish, Merigomish and Pictou Harbour. He was at River John the first week in May where he preached and baptised eight children. He then proceeded to Tatamagouche, Wallace, River Phillip, Amherst, Hopewell, N.B., Shediac, Shemogue, Richibucto, and a number of places on the Miramichi.

On his return to New Carlisle the Rev. Mitchell prepared to leave. Great was the sorrow of the majority of the people at his departure. He intended to move to Hopewell. With his wife and son John he made a stormy passage in an open boat to Shemogue and Bay Verte. They rode across to Westmoreland but finding no boat to cross to Hopewell they went on to Amherst, where the entreaties of the people constrained him to remain. This was in September, 1803.

#### AFTER GASPEZIA

In August 1804 the Rev. Mitchell undertook another extensive and arduous evangelistic tour through New Brunswick and in September came to Londonderry, N.S., by boat from Campobello.

It was September 20 when he returned to Amherst. He kept a journal of his travels and of this record the Rev. Dr. Patterson has said:

"...It tells its own tale of labour and hardship...if ever there was a man ready to endure toil and to sacrifice ease and comfort that he might preach the gospel to the destitute, John Mitchell was the man..."

In Amherst he was much encouraged by the people and the blessing of God upon his work. He would have about three hundred hearers in the summer season. With many other expressions of esteem and affection the people gave him a farm (the Berry farm), a horse and two cows. No party opposed him here and the work was comparatively light but seeing that the people of Amherst were well able to support a minister, and knowing from his own observation and the reports of others, of the spiritual destitution along the shores, Mr. Mitchell in the summer of 1808 came to River John and took up the pastoral work of River John and Tatamagouche. In the following year he was received by the Presbytery of Pictou. Hitherto he was a Presbyterian in all but this formal connection. His parents were Scottish and he had communed with the Presbyterians in Scotland for five years, studied in their schools and taught in their Sabbath Schools. He inherited the traditions of Presbyterianism and imbibed its love of liberty, reverence for the pure gospel and sympathy with the oppressed. It would have been a painful wrench for him to join any other communion.

In 1809 he removed his family to River John, having purchased the Mitchell farm from George Patriquin.

#### THE YEARS 1809 TO 1841

It was from his base at River John that the Rev. Mitchell served the adjoining communities from 1809 until his death in May 1841. While the remarkable story of that long period of pastoral service is beyond this account of GASPÉ OF YESTERDAY it may be found in the book, "RIVER JOHN - ITS PASTORS AND PEOPLE by G. Lawson Gordon published at New Glasgow, N.S. in 1911.

RETROSPECTIVE

Rev. Mitchell was a man of gentle disposition, who did not grasp at his own advantage but sought the general good and the spiritual welfare of others. He was in nowise narrow or bigoted. He got on peacefully with the Methodists and Church of England. He lent his aid to every good cause, yet never entered into the greater strifes of his times. He was diligent and faithful and kind. As a preacher he was simple, forceful and earnest in presenting his message, and his pleasant countenance, his tall, well proportioned, sinewy build, and his Northumberland burr gave him a good introduction to his audience.

In late April of 1841 he was away from home on duty and had to sleep in a cold bed in a cold room. His health failed him on his return home and after a week in bed he passed away peacefully on Saturday, May 8th., 1841. In his last illness the theme of his conversation was the love of the Lord Jesus to poor lost sinners.

REV. MITCHELL'S GASPESIAN RECORDS ?

During the years that he served the Gaspesian coast of Bay Chaleur the Rev. Mitchell must have solemnized and recorded many baptisms, marriages and burials. To date these records have not been found. As they would be of great value to many descendants of pioneer families of the District of Gaspé it is hoped that anyone with information as to the location of these records will make it known.

Notwithstanding, GASPÉ OF YESTERDAY pays tribute to one of the District's pioneer Protestant missionaries whose influence has been summed up in the statement:

"...Around him arose a band of men of like spirit the influence of whose lives still sweetens the atmosphere of the community..."