

Father O'Shea's Diocesan Reflection (part 2)

This concludes a brief diocesan look at 1864, the year of the much exalted Charlottetown Conference.

An event of much diocesan interest and achievement that year was the hauling of the former St. Andrew's Church, vacant for two years, down the Hillsboro River ice to Charlottetown where it was converted into an excellent school.

This old church had been built at St. Andrew's in 1805 under the watchful eye of Father (later Bishop) Angus MacEachern. Its dimensions were 36 by 60 feet and 18 feet in the post, the exact size mandated by Bishop Denaut of Quebec during his pastoral visit here in 1803.

Bishop MacEachern, our first bishop, died in 1835 and was buried in the basement of that church. With the removal of this building from its St. Andrew's site, the burial place of the late bishop was left exposed to the elements until solemnly moved into the basement of the new church there in 1865.

After spending nearly a month in getting the old church up and ready, the crews has it on the ice near Mount Stewart on March 7, 1864. A detailed report of its downward journey was written in the "Annals of St. Joseph's Convent" that year, mentioning that 500 men and 120 horses took part in this rather massive undertaking, obviously a sure cure for the boredom of those long 1864 winter days in the country. These figures may be exaggerated a bit but as Pilate said to the chief priests of the Jews about the sign on the cross: "What is written is written".

The Annals report states that all went well for the first third of the twenty-mile voyage until a section of the ice collapsed, plunging the church into the water. Next day, however, with much brawn, brains and faith, the building was up on top again and landed that same evening of March 8 at the Charlottetown waterfront.

On March 9 the old church made its final run along a few city streets, doing right-angled turns just like a toy, with horses prancing along in victory mode and many residents standing out to observe this unusual sight passing by.

The old church was soon placed on its new Pownal Street foundation after which the carpenters went to work carving out classroom space to accommodate 100 pupils in its first year of operation. They also put in place a second floor which ran the full 60-foot length of the building to be used as a meeting place for various events. At that time this was reportedly the largest public hall in Charlottetown and was fittingly named St. Andrew's Hall.

This new Pownal Street complex became known over the years as St. Joseph's Convent/Rochford Square School which continued to be one of the leading educational sites in the city, operated mainly by the Sisters of Notre Dame for more than a century, until its closure in 1975.

During the Charlottetown Conference in September of 1864, Thomas D'Arcy McGee, one of the delegates from Upper Canada, gave an eloquent and witty lecture in this St. Andrew's Hall, his topic being "Robert Burns and Thomas More", organized by the Young Men's Catholic Institute of the cathedral parish.

Unfortunately, Mr. McGee was assassinated on his Ottawa doorstep on April 7, 1868. Practically the whole population of Montreal was on the streets for his funeral which took place, on his 43rd birthday, in the massive St. Patrick's Church on Dorchester Street downtown, nicknamed the "Irish Church", which today is a basilica. In there still, his pew number 240 continues to be identified by his name and a Canadian flag.