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Why was St. Paul's built so far from the river?

This year the Anglican Parish of Whonnock celebrates its 110-year anniversary.

In 1891 they built a church on 272nd Street, then called North Road or Whonnock Road, about a mile inland from the settlement on the river. They called their church St. Paul's.

For many years the only church building in Whonnock and the Stave River area had been the Roman Catholic church on the Whonnock Reserve. Anglican and other clergymen preached at the little schoolhouse in Whonnock, which was close to the shop and the post office, and also near to the rail station and the wharf where the steamers called daily.

Why then did the Church of England people choose to build their first church at such a distance from the river? One of the reasons must have been that there were no parishioners living in the old settlement. Most of the land on the riverside was at that time owned by the Presbyterian Reverend Alexander Dunn. In 1891 there were only a handful of homes there. Only the Reverend Dunn, the shopkeeper George A. Smith, Robert Robertson, and Clement Stickney had houses there. None of them were Anglicans. Almost all Church of England people lived on spread-out farms either to the north of St Paul's in "North Whonnock" or in the Stave area, as far away as the Rolleys at Rolley Lake, and beyond. For others, such as the Sampsons, the Olivers, and later the Percys, the new church was relatively close to their homes. The location of the church may have meant a few extra steps for Ashton and Benjamin Spilsbury, but they would have arrived on horseback anyway. Obviously the parishioners did not think that the site of their church was in any way inconvenient or "out of the way."

Since 1885 Noble Oliver had been the first shopkeeper and postmaster in Whonnock. He owned acreage a mile inland and for a few years he divided his time between his farm and the business of shop-keeping and handling the mail. Soon he decided to move to his farm and to get rid of the shop.

Apparently the Reverend Alexander Dunn was the next owner of the store, leasing it to George A. Smith. Noble Oliver remained officially the postmaster, but not for long. The trouble surrounding the transfer of the position of postmaster may also have played a role in the choice of St. Paul's location away from the river and is a story worth telling.

Early November in 1889, a petition by the people of the area was addressed to the Post Master General in Ottawa. It read: "Mr. Noble Oliver, Postmaster, Whonnock BC, having removed with his family from the Post Office premises to his farm, a mile or more distant and no longer taking any active part in the duties of the Post Office, we the undersigned beg to suggest that Mr.

George Alexander Smith, Store keeper, who has been acting as assistant Postmaster for the last three or four months, be appointed Postmaster of Whonnock.”

The Post Office Inspector in Victoria noted in his letter to Ottawa that he had written to Noble Oliver informing him that his resignation was expected. Oliver delayed his response because he wanted to find out who from the neighbourhood had signed the petition. He called it “a very underhanded way [by Dunn and Smith] to try to get a post office.” There were no signatures of Church of England people on the petition, with one glaring exception: Mr. Sampson, Justice of the Peace, a person of authority who had hosted the Anglican Bishop Sillitoe in his house that same summer of 1889.

Early in January 1890 at the close of the Divine Service at the Whonnock School, the Anglican Reverend Ditcham and Noble Oliver cornered Mr. Sampson. Ditcham asked if Sampson had indeed signed the petition and Oliver wanted to know how Sampson could have done this to a fellow parishioner.

The Reverend Dunn reported, “Mr. Sampson said that it was not a matter about churches, but a matter of public opinion-the people in the neighbourhood wished the post office to be at the store and Mr. Smith to keep it. Mr. Sampson, by the way, reminded Mr. Ditcham that as he was not a resident of Whonnock, he should not interfere or have anything to say on the subject.”

The heated discussion became public knowledge. Service or the lack of it became the issue. As Dunn wrote: “Country people as a general rule are slow to complain-will bear a great deal before making trouble--but once roused and put on their defence they will act as others do. They all would like that the thing be arranged quietly, without more to do.” The Reverend Dunn also wrote that “rather than that Mr. Oliver should be postmaster and distribute mail at his house [the people] would have their mail come to Langley and pay old Robbie Robertson a dollar a week to bring it up.”

Shopkeeper George A. Smith was nominated postmaster on 1 May 1890.

In 1891 George and William Walden started campaigning for a church building. Their sister in England, as Arthur Watson told Daphne Sleight in 1973, put up the money to build St. Paul's. A contract price of \$800 is mentioned. Noble Oliver, who owned 270 acres on both sides of 272nd Street at that time, donated an acre of land for the church. The offer of free land was probably by itself a good reason why St. Paul's was built there and not closer to the river.

It must have been with mixed feelings, but certainly also with pride that in the following year Mr. Oliver saw the new church going up on the land he donated. He may have envisioned this land away from the store, the contentious post office, and Reverend Dunn's land as a new

community core. Perhaps in time there would be a new store and even a post office close to St. Paul's. But that did not happen.

Thirty years later the congregation moved closer to the river, stores, the post office, and the station. The acreage once owned by the Reverend Dunn was now populated by many new residents and the Church of England people there wanted the church closer by. In 1921 a new house of worship, St. John the Evangelist, took St. Paul's place.

Miraculously the building of St. Paul's has survived to the present day as a private home. You can see it on your right, when you drive up 272nd Street on your way to Whonnock Lake.

Fred Braches