

A Handmade Church in the Arms of Green Bay: Jackson's Cove United (Methodist) Church, Green Bay, Newfoundland



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By Dennis Knight

Lying on the southern shore of Green Bay, Newfoundland, Jackson's Cove was founded in the 1840s by settlers engaged in lumbering, shipbuilding, fishing and subsistence farming. Starting in the mid 1800s, some of them also found employment in copper mines across the bay in Burton's Pond, Bett's Cove and Tilt Cove. The latter was one of the world's most productive copper mines between 1864 and 1917. It was a major supplier (of copper for bullets) to the American Civil War. Later, several small copper mines were opened near Jackson's Cove in places like Bear Cove (later Silverdale) and Swatridges. Families expanded and the community grew throughout the 1800s and early 1900s. Common family names included Knight, Langdown, Batstone, Osmond, Bowers, Moores, Newhook and Strong.

Some of the settlers brought woodworking skills to the Cove with them. Jonas Newhook for example, who married Rachel Knight circa 1852 and settled in Jackson's Cove, came from a well-established family of master shipbuilders in Trinity Bay. Jonas and his descendants developed a thriving shipbuilding business in Jackson's Cove into the early 1900s, constructing a series of schooners such as the Tasso, Queens, Swansee and the 249 ton barque Fleetwing, known for her sailing speed.

Other men in the community quickly acquired skills in carpentry and woodworking, and several developed into master carpenters and shipbuilders. For example, George Pynn of Silverdale, across the neck from Jackson's Cove, became a master shipbuilder, working on



schooners in Rattling Brook and elsewhere. Many of the settlers also became master small boat builders; a skill that was in turn passed to their children.

To fuel the shipbuilding industry, as well as the ongoing building of houses, stages, etc, there has always been logging and lumbering activity in the Cove or in the area. In the early years, lumber was produced by using either adzes (axes with blades set at right angles to the handle) or pit saws. Lumber was next produced by water-powered mills and much later, using gasoline-powered engines. Timber would be cut each winter and from it, lumber produced the following spring for a variety of domestic and commercial purposes¹.

Most of the early residents were staunch followers of the Methodist faith and its founder John Wesley. In 1855, Green Bay was one of 14 "circuits" of the Methodist Church across

¹ Herman and Terry Kelly are current sawmill operators in the Cove, continuing the one and half century-old tradition.

Newfoundland. It became the Twillingate Circuit in 1859. As the area developed, the ministerial "Charge" was based in Little Bay Islands, Little Bay, Nipper's Harbour and then King's Point (where it remains today).

Jackson's Cove followers established a church as early as 1869, when services were held in a small building located on the side of what came to be known as "Lodge Hill." Each Sunday, the school would be converted into a church. Before 1869, they probably gathered in people's homes or in venues such as store lofts.

The first minister to preach in the community may have been a Reverend Elliot. While we don't have a list of all the ministers who followed, there was a succession of people who received the call to preach the word to the people. One of them was Rev. John Dixon, a native of Bardney, Lincolnshire, England, who died in Jackson's Cove at age 26 in August, 1876 during the fourth year of his ministry. He is buried in the Jackson's Cove Cemetery.

The church was by far the most important public institution in Jackson's Cove and the other communities in the area. An active church was seen as indicative of a healthy, progressive community and vice versa. It was important to have a building that reflected this status in terms of design, quality of construction and location in the community.

When the little church on Lodge Hill burned down, therefore, community leaders determined that it was time to build a substantial structure that would serve the needs of the community for a long time to come. The cornerstone of the new church was laid in 1908 by Henry Knight (my great grandfather) with Reverend R.H. Maddox presiding. Based in Little Bay Islands, Reverend Maddox was the Minister serving Green Bay in 1908².

Henry Knight, at 78, was the eldest citizen of the community in 1908 and a long-recognized leader of the Methodist Church in the area. Born in St. John's in 1830, he had been around ten years old

when the family moved to Jackson's Cove. He died at the ripe age of 92 and is buried in Jackson's Cove Cemetery.

Construction of the church began and the main frame was erected in 1908 (planning and pre-construction work was probably undertaken for a couple of years previous). Other construction projects of the time in Jackson's Cove included the schooner *The Kathleen*, which was completed in 1907.

One record states that the church was opened to the public in 1909; however, this is unlikely given the competing demands of volunteer labour and the time required to raise money to purchase the equipment and supplies that couldn't be made locally. Completion of the building inside would take several more years³.

The building was designed and built entirely "by hand" with free labour supplied by the men of the community in their spare time. This was quite an amazing undertaking, given that everyone in the community was employed year-round trying to make a living, whether fishing, building boats, working in the mining industry, cutting wood or hunting/farming for food.

Also impressive is the fact that the project was completed without the benefit of any previously prepared design. The building team was headed by Arthur Knight⁴. He prepared the building plan with his own hand, likely with advice from the Building Committee, the Minister or others who had attended churches in St. John's or elsewhere. Those in the community who crewed and captained schooners were widely travelled around the Newfoundland coast and beyond and would have had a wide base of experience from which to draw.

Arthur Augustus Knight (known in the Cove as Uncle Art) was a Master Carpenter, well-known in the Green Bay area. In addition to Knights

² Methodist Circuit Register, United Church Provincial Archives.

³ Uncle Fred Knight remembers playing hide and seek with my father during construction, who hid inside the building for some time, before he was finally found. He estimates that Dad was 3 or 4 years old at the time, which would date his memory to 1917 or 1918.

⁴ Consultation with Lemuel Knight, community elder, September, 2003.



Building the church, circa 1915

(including Uncle Art, his brother Allen, Uncle Tom, Uncle Wall and my Grandfather Warwick), the church's craftsmen included people like Samuel Batstone, Charlie Strong and probably representatives from the Newhook, Osmond, Langdown and Bowers families.

The timber was cut on the hills overlooking Green Bay; the "mast" supporting the spire for example, was cut across the bay on Middle Arm Head. The men would have cut the logs during the winter and hauled them out of the woods by pony in the spring. The logs would be squared using adzes and most of the smaller lumber sawn by pit saw. Finished lumber, such as the boards for the pews, would have been planed by hand, using stock planes.

The structure was built on a dry stone foundation. It would take a rectangular shape, measuring 10m x 17m (33ft x 56ft), with a front porch 3m x 3.5m (9ft x 12ft) on which the builders mounted the spire. Its other external features included a steep peaked roof and rounded arch windows.

It was built to seat around 150 people, with 35 pews. The building and all its features are very well proportioned and designed. The Encyclopedia of Newfoundland and Labrador contains a picture of the building as it appears today (volume 5, page 460).

The finished carpentry work was done by several of the local carpenters, with prominent roles played by Arthur and Henry Thomas Knight (Uncle Tom). A bachelor and in his mid thirties at the time, Uncle Tom was a fisherman all his life but also an accomplished carpenter. He also operated a forge and was an acknowledged "Jack of all trades." He turned most of the woodwork on the hand-operated lathe owned by him and his brother Warwick in the family workshop up on Western Point. The shop was also known as the "Cook Room Loft" as it was on the second floor of the building that had housed a lobster cannery operated by a St. John's firm in the mid 1800s. He operated the lathe, turning the treadle with his foot. His work can be seen in the interior fittings, including around the pulpit, underneath the communion rail and the decorative ceiling pieces.

The pews (30 of the originals are still intact) were made by Charlie Strong, Arthur Knight and Allen Knight⁵ and Samuel Batstone turned the rosettes at the end of the pews with an improvised jig⁶. Features such as the altar, pulpit, window sashes and doors were all made locally. The hardwood covering the inside walls and the communion rail were shipped in, probably from St. John's, along with the stained glass for the windows, the two wood stoves (located centre front and back – since removed) and the organ. The stove pipes came from across the bay in Bett's Cove (a mining community near Nipper's Harbour abandoned shortly after 1885) and the original inside front doors may also have come from there⁷. Money for these "outside" purchases was probably raised by community "times" and other fundraisers, supplemented by small individual donations.

The original bell, likely purchased in St. John's, was quite large and could be heard across the Bay and for miles around on a calm day. However, it eventually cracked and had to be sent away for repairs (probably in the late 1940s). It was repaired but then cracked again and had to be abandoned. It spent years in Uncle Brose Batstone's yard, next to his garage; its current whereabouts are unknown. A new bell was purchased sometime in the early 1950s.

After much hard work and a total community effort over a period of at least eleven years, the grand opening of this newest witness to Newfoundland Methodism took place in September, 1919 with Reverend Ira F. Curtis officiating, accompanied by Reverend George Butt. Reverend Curtis was based in Springdale at the time, but was well-known to the people of Jackson's Cove as up to that time he had led many services in the community when no minister was available. Reverend George Butt was the minister assigned to the King's Point Charge in 1919. At age 89, Henry Knight must have been

thankful that he had lived to see his community with a church of which it could be proud.

Arthur Knight and his crew of skilled carpenters later used their skills to build churches in Coachman's Cove on the Baie Verte Peninsula and across the bay in Nipper's Harbour. The Coachman's Cove Roman Catholic Church was finished in 1926. The crew included Wallace Knight (Uncle Wall), Charlie Strong, (Grandfather) Warwick Knight and Arthur's son Errol⁸. The Jackson's Cove carpenters built the entire church, right down to the altar rail for "a few thousand dollars"⁹. The parish priest at the time was Father E.J. Hearn, who served at Coachman's Cove between 1915 and 1930. In the evenings, the carpenters would often visit the home of Joe Walsh, where there would be music, featuring Joe on the violin¹⁰. During the project, they lived in a house that is still standing in the Cove and Mary Downey was their cook. Mary became a close friend of theirs; Uncle Fred remembers them all gathering to greet her on the Jackson's Cove government wharf during a visit by the coastal boat.

Unfortunately, the Coachman's Cove building burned down in 1938. John Downey, who was born in 1932, remembers it as a handsome building, with a round tower and red roof.

Arthur was also designer and master carpenter for the Nipper's Harbour United Church, built between 1927 and 1929¹¹. His sons Errol and Len worked with him on the project, along with carpenters Uncle Wall and Charlie Strong, who worked with him on most of his contracts. The balance of the crew was made up of Nipper's Harbour men who donated their labour to the project. Seventy-four years later, the church is still standing and in use.

⁵ Consultation with Lem and Nellie Knight and Winnifred Strong, September, 2003.

⁶ Consultation with Guy and Don Batstone, August, 2003. Uncle Samuel was a man with great improvisational skills involving anything mechanical. With only a grade two education, he later moved to Corner Brook and became manager of the machinist shop for Bowaters Paper Mill.

⁷ Conversation with Rex Osmond, August, 2003.

⁸ Consultation with Lenord Knight, Victoria, BC, October, 2003.

⁹ Consultation with John Downey, community elder, Coachman's Cove, September, 2003. He thinks there were six people from Jackson's Cove in all. Who the other two were, we don't know.

¹⁰ Consultation with Jim Philpott, Coachman's Cove, whose mother-in-law was Joe Walsh's daughter – she always told stories of the Knights from Jackson's Cove who visited their home when she was a girl.

¹¹ Consultation with Lloyd Starkes, Nipper's Harbour.

One item of note is that the Nipper's Harbour church has a round tower, likely an influence from the Coachman's Cove church finished by Arthur and his crew the year before. Another interesting point is that the decorative wood around the pulpit, etc for both Nipper's Harbour and Coachman's Cove churches, was turned by Uncle Tom Knight back in Jackson's Cove at his shop in the "Cook Room Loft."

Arthur based his building operation in Jackson's Cove for several years. He would work on contracts during the building season and return to Jackson's Cove for the winter where, among other things, he would make household furniture for sale. Later, he followed his older brother Jonathan and moved to Grand Falls, where he played a key role in the construction of numerous buildings in the expanding town during the 1930s, including the Salvation Army Church, Grand Falls House and numerous company homes. Several Jackson's Cove carpenters followed him and either settled there or (as was the case with my Grandfather Warwick), commuted seasonally from the Cove. For many years, the Knights were a well-known carpentry team in Grand Falls. They built a large house and carpentry shop for John Knight on the northside of High Street (a larger one was later built across the street, near the current Stan Dawe premises). Arthur died in 1941 at the early age of 59, and is buried in Jackson's Cove cemetery.

Ninety-five years after the laying of the cornerstone, the handmade church built by Arthur and his talented crew still stands proudly at the entrance to Jackson's Cove. Its spire and weather vane¹² are still constant companions for residents, whether they are traveling around the community or out on the water.

While it began as a Methodist Church, the building became a United Church following the formation of the United Church of Canada in 1925, with the union of Congregationalist, Methodist and Presbyterian churches.

The Newfoundland Methodists came reluctantly to the union, being from the strictly

fundamentalist, Wesleyan tradition – in 1923 for example, they had voted 3 to 1 against the union.

In Jackson's Cove, as elsewhere, there was likely a great deal of debate and misgiving about the impending union, but the majority of Methodists across Canada and Newfoundland eventually voted in favour and in mid June 1925, they would have gathered in their little church and raised their voices in praise as members of the United Church of Canada. However, their Methodist beliefs and practices would remain virtually unchanged for many years to come.



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All photos courtesy of Dennis Knight.

¹² The weather vane and spire top were replaced a few years ago under the direction of Lem Knight, Henry's Grandson.