

201 JOHN BLACK AVENUE – KILDONAN PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
Duncan McRae (stonemason), 1852-53



Built nearly 140 years ago, Kildonan Presbyterian Church now stands near Winnipeg's northern boundary as a testament to the faith and perseverance of some of the first European settlers on the prairies.

In the early 1810s, Lord Selkirk recruited Scottish tenant farmers for a new colony along the Red River in the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) territory of Rupert's Land. A number of Highlanders from the Church of Scotland's Kildonan parish in Sutherlandshire were among those who took up the challenge, attracted by land grants and Lord Selkirk's promise to provide the settlement with a Presbyterian minister.

During 1812-15, the Highlanders opened homesteads in a district soon known as Kildonan (now West Kildonan). Among the many setbacks they experienced was a failure of initial arrangements to supply them with a clergyman. Indeed, there were no Protestant ministers at Red River until Anglican John West arrived in 1820.

Over the next 30 years, it was to Reverend West and his successors that the Presbyterians turned to fulfill their spiritual needs. They did not abandon efforts to secure their own minister, however. Their many petitions to the HBC, Church of Scotland, and eventually the Presbyterian Church of Canada finally were answered in 1851 with the appointment of Reverend John Black. Shortly after reaching the settlement in September of that year, Black held the first Presbyterian service west of the Great Lakes.

That event took place in a log manse and hall which the settlers erected for Black. Plans soon followed for a permanent church on a 121.5-hectare site west of the Red River in an area known as La Grenouillere or Frog Plain. Progress was interrupted by a severe 1852 spring flood. The 300-member congregation pressed on, however, assisted by Duncan McRae, an HBC mason who also worked on Lower Fort Garry and two period Anglican churches, St.-Andrew's-on-the-Red and St. Peter's Dynevor.

Kildonan Church officially opened on January 5, 1854. Built of solid limestone, the structure was reminiscent of the settlers' parish church in Scotland -- rectangular in form, with a gable roof, a small frame steeple atop the front (south) gable, and three Gothic windows on each of the side (east and west) elevations.

The building's rough-textured, thick stone blocks were fashioned by a pitched chisel. In contrast, smoothly planed stone was used for window and front entrance surrounds, keystones and quoins. The main doorway, set in a Gothic opening, was later enclosed by an entrance porch with a sharply peaked roof. Among other changes, the exterior was stuccoed in 1921 and four stained glass windows were installed between 1924 and 1927.

The interior continues to be simply finished and arranged. It has plastered walls, fir flooring, a small south-end balcony, and two aisles that separate a centre section of pews from shorter rows of side seats. A high, six-sided pulpit originally adjoined a wooden panel at the sanctuary's north end. To both sides were three large box pews for prominent members of the congregation. In 1878, the pulpit was moved forward, the box pews were remodelled, and an area was set aside for the choir. A wooden screen later was erected below the balcony to create an entrance vestibule and small

vestry. Since 1983, steel I-beams and columns have given added support to the balcony.

Reverend Black (1818-1882), who was born in the parish of Eskdale Muir on the Scottish border, served the Kildonan Scots until his death. He also organized congregations in Little Britain, Fort Garry and Headingley. Prior to his call to Red River, he had been a teacher and had lived briefly in New York state. He enrolled in the first theology class at Knox College in Toronto in the mid-1840s, then served as a missionary in French Canada.

The original open prairie setting for Kildonan Presbyterian Church is now well treed and the building is surrounded by memorials marking the graves of Kildonan Scots and their descendants. This is the fourth oldest existing church building in Manitoba and the second oldest, next to St. James Anglican (1853), in Winnipeg.