

## **The Loyalists who built Digby's first Methodist church**

By Brian McConnell, UE \*

Although the first church built by the United Empire Loyalists who settled Digby, Nova Scotia was Trinity Anglican, a church was started a few years later by their children which was Methodist.

The origins of Methodism in Digby are traced to missionaries who served the Black Loyalists there in the 1780s. Freeborn Garretson, the American Methodist evangelist visited the town in 1785 soon after its founding. William Black, the "father" of Methodism in the Maritime provinces remained some weeks in the area. Through their work a Methodist Society was set up in Brinley Town, an area outside Digby occupied by Black settlers. Some had been members of the Black Pioneers, a regiment that was part of the British cause against the American rebels during the American Revolution.

The Methodist Society totaled 78 persons. By the summer of 1786 there were 66 of African descent. However, in 1792 when over a thousand persons sailed from Halifax to Freetown in Africa to establish the colony of Sierra Leone many of the Methodist Blacks of Digby were among them. After this happened the Methodist cause died out in Brinley Town. Nonetheless, among the white members of the Methodist Society was the Ray family. In 1794 a meeting was held at the home of Robert and Rachel when Daniel Fidler, a Methodist travelling preacher, visited Digby. (1)

Robert and Rachel Ray arrived in Digby with other United Empire Loyalists from New York in 1783. On August 24, 1817 the widowed Rachel Ray sold a piece of land of 33 feet square to the trustees of the Wesleyan Methodist Society. Here was built the first Methodist chapel in 1819. The Trustees appointed for the holding of Methodist property in 1818 were Gilbert Ray and Daniel Ray who were the sons of Robert and Rachel Ray, together with Jacob Cornwell, Ezra Hammond and Henry Vroom.

Jacob Cornwell was the son of Jacob Cornwell, Sr., a United Empire Loyalist born in Hartford, Connecticut, and Hannah (Weld). He accompanied his parents when they came to Digby to settle with other Loyalists. His father became a shipbuilder and merchant in Digby. He settled on Digby Neck at Waterford where he was one of the two Digby Neck representatives of the Methodist Trustees. Ezra Hammond was the second.

Henry Vroom (1786 – 1846) was the representative on the Methodist Trustees from Clements. He was son of United Empire Loyalists John and Jane Vroom, both born in Somerville, Somerset County, New Jersey.

In 1857 Gilbert Ray purchased back the land his mother sold. Soon after he and his wife made a grant of it with his wife Amelia Ray to the Methodist Trustees of Digby. It read in part:

*This Indenture made this 8<sup>th</sup> of September in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and fifty - seven.*

*Between Gilbert T. Ray of the City of Saint John in the Province of New Brunswick, Esquire, and Amelia Ray his wife, of the first part,*

*George Henderson, Edward Hardwick, Thomas Holdsworth, Lawrence Stark, James D. Letteney, James Warrington, and John B. Letteney, of Digby in the County of Digby, Gentlemen Trustees, of the second part,*

*And*

*George M. Tuttle, of Digby, in the County of Digby, Province of Nova Scotia, Clerk and the Superintendent Preacher for the time being of the circuit in the Methodist communion in which the piece of land and hereditaments hereinafter described are situate, of the third part,*

*Whereas the said Gilbert T. Ray is seized in fee of certain town lots hereinafter described and is desirous of conveying the same as a free gift for the people called Methodists for the purpose of erecting a Chapel of place of religion (2)*

Among the seven Methodist Trustees were four with strong Loyalist roots. These were:

**Thomas Holdsworth** (1800 – 1872) was a son of John Henderson Holdsworth and Lucy (Titus), both children of Loyalists. John Henderson Holdsworth (1781 – 1813) came with his father James Addington Holdsworth (1736 – 1804) and mother Elizabeth (1736 – 1825) who were United Empire Loyalists from New York to settle at Digby in 1783. The Addington's were originally from England. Thomas was the proprietor of a tannery and father of John Holdsworth who became Warden of Digby Municipality and Judge of Probate. (3)

**James D. Letteney** (1813 – 1909) was a son of John Letteney and Eleanor (Baxter) and grandson of United Empire Loyalist William Letteney from New York.

**John B. Letteney** (1815 – 1903) brother of James D. Letteney and son of John Letteney and Eleanor (Baxter) and grandson of United Empire Loyalist William Letteney from New York.

**James Warrington** (1806 – 1882) believed to be son of United Empire Loyalist James Warrington who appears in Roll of Loyalists mustered at Digby on May 29, 1784. (4)



**Grace United Church Digby photographed in November, 2024**

A Methodist chapel was built on the lands in the location of the future Grace United Church. In 1925 there was a union of Methodist, Congregational and many Presbyterian churches to form the United Church of Canada. Today's Grace United Church is a successor to the first Methodist church.

**Notes:**

- Prepared by Brian McConnell, UE on April 5, 2025. He may be contacted by email at [brianm564@gmail.com](mailto:brianm564@gmail.com)
- (1) Mair, Nathan, "Grace Through the Years" printed by the Printing Revolution, Digby, NS, 1987
  - (2) Deed recorded in Digby County, Book 26 at Page 347 as Document Number 502627662. Accessed on April 4, 2025 on Nova Scotia Property Online
  - (3) Wilson, Isiah W., "A Geography and History of the County of Digby", Mika Publishing Company, 1975, p. 335
  - (4) McConnell, Brian, "The Irish Among the Loyalists who settled Digby", accessed online on April 4, 2025 at <https://uelac.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Irish-Among-Loyalists-Settled-Digby.pdf>