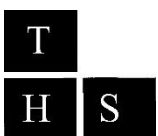


# PROPOSAL FOR ST. HENRY'S CATHOLIC CHURCH MOVE & RESTORATION

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Multi-use space for children's schoolhouse programming, exhibit, speakers, workshops, and rentable to others.

Proposal is conditional upon approval from Ontario Parks.



Tyrconnell Heritage Society  
P.O. Box 26, Wallacetown, ON, N0L 2M0 519-762-3072

# Backus-Page House Museum

## TYRONNELL HERITAGE SOCIETY

Tyrconnell Heritage Society is a local independent society incorporated in 1994 to restore and preserve the Backus-Page House and grounds situated in the heart of the Talbot Settlement in western Elgin County.

Our mission is to preserve and promote the history, culture and area surrounding the Backus-Page House Museum within the Talbot Settlement for the greater community and future generations while celebrating the past.

## BACKUS-PAGE HOUSE MUSEUM

Backus-Page House Museum is located within the grounds of the John E. Pearce Provincial Park in the heart of what was once known as the Talbot Settlement. The museum is situated within a restored Georgian style house that was constructed in 1850 by Robert Morris. Mr. Morris would be responsible for building a number of homes in the area but this one would have particular significance as it would be one of the first brick homes built in Dunwich Township, now the Municipality of Dutton Dunwich.

The house was commissioned by Andrew and Mary Jane Backus. The Backus family was one of several families that had obtained land from Colonel Thomas Talbot. The property that Andrew built his house on was given to him by his grandmother, Mary Storey, who received her original land grant in 1809.

That the Backus's prospered can be attested to by the quality of the house built (as well as surviving business records) but that did not translate to an opulent lifestyle. Written correspondence from that time period seems to indicate that though the house was handsomely built it was plainly appointed. During the time the Backus Family lived within the house it was referred to as Lakeview. The Ministry of Natural Resources has since reforested the area between the house and Lake Erie but during the Backus era that land was cleared and afforded an excellent view of the shoreline and lake.

The Backus-Page House and property was obtained by Jonas A. Page in 1925 and sold to his son Morley. The Page family had settled in the area in the early 19th century and the family homestead further up Lakeview Line remains in the family to this day. Morley and Grace Page resided on the estate and farmed the property for over 50 years - managing a small dairy herd, producing eggs, pork, beef, cash crops and maple syrup. The house underwent a number of physical changes as it aged moving it away from its original 1850s state. Neither Morley and Grace's son Bill, nor daughter Iris were involved with farming, so they were the last of the Pages to live on the farm. They sold it to the Ministry of Natural Resources in 1968 but continued to live on the farm until the summer of 1976.

Ontario Parks currently retains ownership of the Backus Page-House. The Ministry has entered into a lease agreement with the Tyrconnell Heritage Society. The society was incorporated in 1994 with the express purpose of restoring the house and property to its 1850s condition. In 1998 the society undertook a restoration of the property, renamed the house in tribute to both its long time owners and undertook a mandate of preservation and historical education regarding the estate and the Talbot Settlement in general.

## FUTURE OF TYRCONNELL HERITAGE SOCIETY HISTORIC INTERPRETATION

What sets us apart from other museums? What makes us unique?

- Only museum in the west end of Elgin County
- One of the few in southern Ontario to showcase agricultural history
- Only museum in southern Ontario to represent the small family farm
- Represent a rural example of Victorian values and lifestyle rarely showcased for the public

Closest museums or heritage societies with an historic church are in Ailsa Craig, Sparta (United Church), Norwich (Quaker Meeting House), Bright (Chesterfield Church), London (Fanshawe Pioneer Village) and historic schoolhouses are in Ingersoll (Oxford County Museum School) and London (Fanshawe Pioneer Village). None are former Catholic Churches and we are an hour drive or more from school house programming.

## IMPORTANCE OF ST. HENRY'S TO WEST ELGIN AND ELGIN COUNTY

From Blair Ferguson's draft "A Testament to Faith An Early History of Elgin's Family of Parish" (still to be edited we have left spelling, font and grammar as is).

## Early Catholic History in Elgin

A history of this family of parishes would be incomplete if we didn't first talk about when and who first brought Catholicism to Elgin. I have found in my research for this answer many books, thoughts and stories about the indigenous people of this area and the missionaries. Most of these resources contradict one another and most I'm afraid lack any real evidence, until now.

In the abundance of information provided to me by Evelyn McCaffery on the churches of west Elgin is a speech given by Father J.H.Chisholm in 1945. The speech is on the history of the Dunwich Parish up to that time and was quite thorough in his research. Thankfully he quotes his resources and the resource he used for the early part of the history came from the Jesuit archives in France and consists of early maps and journals of those brave missionaries who travelled the unknown to bring the faith to the indigenous people of now Southern Ontario.

In 1615 the Recollect Fathers of Quebec established their mission on Georgian Bay among the Huron's. South of this area from Niagara to Detroit was inhabited by aboriginals known as the Attiwandarons or Neutral Nation. This tribe is described as exceedingly tall and very powerfully built. their name derives not from their neutrality but by the fact that this very powerful and war like race compelled the Hurons to the north and the Iroquois of New York both

sworn enemies of one another, to behave themselves while travelling in the Neutral's territory.

Shortly after the missions had been established among the Huron, Father Joseph La Caron sent a French fur trader named Etien Brule to travel and trade with the Neutrals to investigate on the possibility of introducing Christianity to them. He returned and reported on the beauty of the area and the receptiveness of the aboriginals.

On All Saints Day 1632 Father's Breboeuf and Chaumouot set out south for the Neutral held territory. These brave men's letters and hand drawn maps are preserved and give enough detail that it is possible to trace their course through our area. They state that after travelling south from what is now Brantford they pick up a well worn Native trail which in time would become Talbot Road/street or line and even then one could travel from Niagara to Windsor on it.

The Jesuit Fathers gave the native communities they came across Catholic names. On their map is shown a valley with a small creek running through it. Laying a current map over it you would be located just east of the St Thomas airport and the creek is Catfish Creek, on the top of the valley was a native village and the Father's renamed it Notre Dame des Anges. The map than clearly shows Kettle Creek and a village some distance west. On the map shows as a palisade community which they named St Alexis. This corresponds to the Sothwold pre-historic earthworks south of Iona. Approximately 15 km west of that the map shows another community within a palisade which they called St Joseph. Again this lines up with the known historical site near the village of Clearville and finally a village far west on a fast running river they named St. Michael, this we know as Windsor.

These Father's letters tell of the hardships they had to endure. The Neutral's shaman or medicine men encouraged hostility towards these men of God and even went as far as at the Village south of Iona to vow death on anyone showing these men friendship. They were forced to survive winter without shelter and without food and by 1641 the Jesuits where forced to retreat back to their mission.

It was always the Jesuits intention to return and try again. Around 1650 the opportunity to return was removed forever. The Iroquois now part of a five nation confederacy felt strong enough to attack these giants and enemy and they did so without mercy. The Neutrals suffered a almost complete genocide with only a handful escaping south to Michigan to tell the tale. Catholic Mass would not be said again in Elgin County for almost 200 years

## St Colomkille

Catholic settlers of the Wallacetown, Dunwich area had to travel the 35 km journey to St Thomas to hear Mass and receive the Sacraments. In 1827 Colonel Talbot asked the Right Rev A. McDonnell, Bishop of Kingston to visit him in order to accommodate the Catholic settlers. In 1827 the Bishop Alexander Mc Donnell said mass to a small group of Catholic settlers in the log cabin of Col. Talbot. From this point on Mass was said by a travelling Priest in the home of various settlers. Most times Mass was said in the home of Michael Hooley.

In 1869 Michael Hooley donated a portion of his farm for a Catholic church to be constructed. On Feb 5<sup>th</sup> 1869 an agreement was made between Mr Hooley and Bishop John Walsh for a 1 acre parcel of land located at lot 17 concession 9, in Dunwich Township. This land now sits on the corner of Willey's side road and Walnut line in Dutton Dunwich Township.

Construction was started in the spring of 1869, it was to be a 24 foot by 30 foot building. The contractor was Mr. McFarlane and the total cost was to be approximately \$500.

Mass was celebrated once a month until 1876 when it was said twice a month. Father McCrae from Holy Angels St. Thomas was appointed Curate for Fingal, Dunwich and Bismarck and held that post from 1883 to 84. On July 28<sup>th</sup> 1884 Bishop Walsh blessed and officially named it St Colomkille.

The first Baptism in Dunwich was held on June 19<sup>th</sup> 1859 by Father Trachon a visiting priest. The child was John Crowley, son of Timothy and Catherine Crowley

In 1887 Wardsville, Dunwich and Bismarck were made into one Parish and in 1894 Father Quinlin became the first Parish priest. He lived in a rectory in Bismarck (West Lorne).

In the late 1890's the hamlet of Wallacetown had grown into a thriving village. Residents of Wallacetown of the Catholic faith found it difficult to get to St Colomkille as most town dwellers didn't own a horse. Winter weather made it difficult for most to get to the 9<sup>th</sup> concession so it was decided to build a larger church within the village of Wallacetown. This move would also cut 3 km off the Priest's round trip.

When the new church of St Helens was built St Colomkille was closed and the building was sold to Michael Delaney. It was moved across the road and converted into a hay barn and in 1903 the land was sold to James Tracey.

I was told that the name change for the new church was prompted by the fact that not many people spoke Gaelic anymore and the name was difficult for non Gaelic speaking people to pronounce. Gaelic would have been many of the settler's first language and for some their only language



*Unfortunately no photo is known to exist of St Colomkille. This photo was taken after the church was sold and moved across the road. The building seen in back of photo was once St Colomkille.*



## St Henry's

Brothers Henry and Wendelin Schnekenburger, German immigrants settled in Aldborough Township, in a area that came to be known as Churchville in the 1850's. This area now the cross roads of Kerr road and Thomson Line south of West Lorne, was settled by German and Irish immigrants and eventually three churches were built on opposing corners, Lutheran, Episcopalian and Roman Catholic. Thus the moniker Churchville.

The first years of pioneer life Mass was said by a travelling priest that travelled by horse back from Chatham. Mass was said mostly in the log cabin of Henry and Regina Schnekenburger.

In June of 1938 Robert, son of Henry and Regina wrote out his memories of pioneer life, the following is a excerpt from that letter.

'I remember well the first Missioners' a Father Laufaber came to our house to say Mass. We delivered the message to the closest Catholic family and they inturn ran and told the next that Mass was being said in our parlour the following day. Mass was said and Mom's bureau was the alter, my Mother was the server and sometimes interrupter in the confession, for some old Germans didn't speak English. When Father died he expressed a wish for a church to built on the farm so that the travelling Fathers would have a place to say Mass and when not everyone could gather on Sunday and sing hymns and pray together. This wish was carried out by my mother and uncle Wendlin about five years after dad died"

In the fall of 1866 Henry went to plough a garden for a neighbour. Loading the plough in the back of his wagon, he set out, down the road when a dog barked at the horse it bolted and threw the plough sliding forward crushing Henry's leg.

It took approximately Six months for the injury to eventually take Henry's life.

The exact date of the building of St Henrys is unknown but sometime between 1870 and 1872. It measures 22 feet by 30 ½ feet and was built by Xavier Pheifer along with his sons John and Frank. The cost was approximately \$450. As the church was being built Regina and her sister-in-law Josephine, travelled to Buffalo New York to purchase the Alter, Vestments and statues for the outfitting of their new church. This would have been a gruelling journey for two elderly women on their own in the 1870's. This shows the true determination and devotion of these pioneer women.



*Above photo of the interior of St Henry's shows the Alter and statues brought back from Buffalo NY.*

The items were shipped back by train to Newbury and then brought by wagon to St. Henrys by Regina's three sons Joseph, John and Henry Jr.

By 1876 St. Henrys and St Colomkille were united and Father Flannery of St Thomas came once a month. Each family contributed \$4.00 annually to cover these cost.

Mrs Adam Miller Daubs donated oak timber from which Adolph Mansale made a cross that was placed at the back of the property that had been set aside for a cemetery. The first burial was Frederick Pichette who died in 1874.

I was told by a man who was an Altar boy at St Henrys that many of the original grave markers were wooden crosses or wooden slabs and over time rotted away. If families were still around the wooden markers were eventually replaced with stone slabs or monuments. Many were never replaced. So not all graves are marked at the back of St Henrys.

In 1922 William Schnekenburger built the impressive gateway with money provided by Robert Schnekenburger of Buffalo New York at the cost of \$350. In 1930 Robert and John Cowan dug out the basement and a "bee" was held to pour the concrete foundation and basement floor, all done with monies left by Luban Schnekenburger.

St Henrys though small has been huge in the amount of love and adoration that has gone not only to building and outfitting the church but in maintenance and



safe keeping to this day. In 1953 Joseph Pheifer put insul-brick siding on the exterior. In 1963 the base of the original cross in the cemetery had rotted, it was sawed off at the base, extended and then encased in concrete base with metal supports. At some point this cross has been encased in aluminium flashing in hopes of preserving it. In 1978 Father Joe Denys and youth and volunteers resided it in cedar shakes.

Mass was said at St. Henrys on its name sakes feast day of July 13<sup>th</sup> up until the early 1980's.

St Henrys still stands today, although in need of a financial injection. It stands and shines amongst the cedars and crows that surround it. It stands as a testament to the Catholic pioneers who came to this land, to grow crops and families, to escape religious prosecution, intolerance and bigotry.

St. Henrys is the oldest standing Catholic church in the family of Parishes



*Front entrance of St Henry's as it stands today*



*St Henry's after it was first closed. It stands today in much the same state.*

## MOVING AND RESTORATION PLANS

St. Henry's Catholic Church was built between 1870-1872 by a group of mostly German settlers who arrived around 1855. Of the Catholic churches still standing in Elgin County, this is the oldest and should be restored and enjoyed by the public. Tyrconnell Heritage Society proposes to move the church including all current contents (pews, organ, tables, chairs, candle holder, etc.) to the Backus-Page House Museum grounds within John E. Pearce Provincial Park.

Conditional upon approval by Ontario Parks and permission of the church's western neighbour to move the church through their property onto Thomson Line for transportation, the church would be moved to 29424 Lakeview Line, Wallacetown and set on a foundation (most likely a concrete pad).

An accessible chips and dust walkway with accessible ramp will be added to make the space available and accessible to all visitors.

Utilities will include hydro, water, security system with built in smoke detectors, heating and cooling. All modern amenities will be kept to a minimum and out of site or disguised for the time period as best as possible.

A barrier free washroom will be added, possibly in the location where the basement stairs are currently.

The exterior will be insulated and most likely be a clapboard siding finish. We are still searching records for a photograph of the church to confirm what it looked like, but the picture of St. Colomkille included in the history is a good resource as well.

It is assumed a new roof will be needed and cedar shake style lifetime warranty roofing made from recycled materials may be used as it matches what is on the house museum.

Inside the tin walls, ceiling and chestnut wood wainscoting will be cleaned and repaired as needed. Floors will be cleaned, repaired and stain or oil applied. Windows will be maintained and restored as necessary. The confessional and storage space on either side of the altar we hope to leave as they are now unless this impacts the barrier free washroom access.

The church pews are built similar to desks in the time period so we propose to repair and restore the church pews and use them in our school house interpretation and general seating.

Museum Uses:      School House interpretation daily  
                          Exhibit inside the vestibule about St. Henry's and Churchville history  
                          Children's programming, hands on activities, and school field trips  
                          Speakers and workshops, music, art and artisan demonstrations  
                          Rentable for special occasions, meetings, birthdays, and events  
                          Board and committee meetings

## Project Timeline

When permission is granted from Ontario Parks.

Hire the project manager.-

Complete the Hydro One survey, quote and moving route.

Prepare site and foundation at Backus-Page House Museum.

When HydroOne and the moving contractor schedule the move

Continental Movers, moves church from Thomson Line to Backus-Page House Museum on Lakeview Line.

Tyrconnell Heritage Society agrees to contract a qualified person to fill in the church foundation, grade the land and plant grass seed. The current church foundation cement and concrete will not be dug out or removed from the site.

2022-2023

Restoration of interior and exterior of St. Henry's.

2024

Open to the public during the regular museum season.

## SUPPORT AND PLEDGES TO DATE

Former St. Henry's Catholic Church Members or Descendants

Evelyn McCaffery  
Joe Casey  
Larry & Mona Wilkins  
Dave McArthur  
Blair Ferguson  
Mike Hentz

Local Catholic Parish Historian  
Deputy Mayor of the Municipality of Dutton Dunwich  
Board of Directors of Tyrconnell Heritage Society  
Staff of Backus-Page House Museum

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

Please contact Cultural Manager, Angela Bobier  
519-762-3072  
[info@backuspagehouse.ca](mailto:info@backuspagehouse.ca)