

Building Identities: St. George's Anglican Churches, Kingston, Upper Canada, 1792-1826

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Churches are articulate visual statements declaring the preoccupations, aspirations and ideologies of their builders. Whether a church is a small, weatherboard structure in a rural parish or a large imposing stone cathedral, its architectural style can tell historians a great deal about the people who built and attended it and the kind of religion they practised. This is particularly evident if we consider St. George's Anglican Church in Kingston, Upper Canada during the first fifty years of the congregation's history. The first St. George's church was built in 1792; what would eventually become St. George's Cathedral was built in 1826 to meet the needs of an expanding congregation. What is fascinating is how different these churches were, architecturally; it is clear that they were really quite different in terms of the aspirations and assumptions of their respective congregations. However, historians have tended to focus attention on the formal architectural styles of large urban churches and their symbolic importance for participants and observers. Thus, we know a great deal less about the vernacular architecture of small rural churches like the one at Kingston and the meaning that this church had for those who attended it.

Certainly a good deal has been written about the St. George's Church built in 1826. Several articles explore what historians imply is the "real" St. George's. Moreover, as one of the few neo-classical churches built in the nineteenth century in Upper Canada St. George's is considered by many historians as the physical embodiment of British conservatism in the province. William Westfall's insightful analysis of the religious

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Figure 1: St. George's Cathedral, c. 1841. Sketch by Jennifer Walton. Reprinted from Donald Swainson, ed., *St. George's Cathedral: Two Hundred Years of Community* (Kingston: Quarry Press, 1991), 27.

landscape of nineteenth-century Ontario, *Two Worlds: The Protestant Culture of Nineteenth-Century Ontario* reveals an ideological partnership between neo-classical architecture and religious and political conservatism in Upper Canada. Westfall claims that “[b]oth the internal organization and the external features of [neo-classical] churches spoke volumes about the essential cornerstone of the religion of order, [and] the close relationship between church and state.” The classical lines and symmetrical proportions of the neo-classical church “expressed a set of social

and religious beliefs that integrated religion and society in a hierarchical social system” that was distinctly conservative.¹ Westfall’s architectural interpretation of the neo-classical style exposes the conservative ideology imbedded in the very walls of this nineteenth-century church.

There is however more than architecture to suggest that St. George’s was a bastion of conservative ideology in Upper Canada. The church was originally founded shortly after the American Revolution in Kingston, which was settled primarily by United Empire Loyalists. Nationalist historians and loyalist hagiographers have assumed that the loyalists were ideologically British and sought to establish British conservatism in Upper Canada. Thus, it is presumed, building St. George’s, an Anglican Church,

was powerful evidence of the loyalists' ideological commitment to Britain and the official state church. Also, John Graves Simcoe, a staunch conservative who sought to recreate the "very image and transcript" of eighteenth-century Britain in the province, deemed St. George's a "suitable place" for staging the inauguration of the Constitutional Act of 1791 in Upper Canada. Moreover, the participation of several prominent Tories and members of the Family Compact in the Kingston church reinforced the image of St. George's as a site of establishmentarianism and conservatism in the province.

While the second church has been infused with much meaning, there has been no discussion about what the first church meant. When the first St. George's Church is mentioned historians imply that the settlers "made do" (for 34 years) until such time as they were able to build the second church.² It has generally been assumed that frontier settlers were simply too poor and too busy building homes and clearing land to have the luxury of caring much about the appearance of their church. The style of the first St. George's Church was not particularly worthy of study because historians have assumed it was merely a provisional building. Secondly, since historians have claimed that the first settlers in Upper Canada were British conservatives, it is presumed that the second church spoke for the first and hence, the original church carried no secrets.

But, the original St. George's is no less articulate or revealing of the preoccupations, aspirations and ideologies of its builders than its neo-classical successor. It was not a provisional building and lack of funds did not prevent these settlers from building a church that they regarded as respectable and proper. Furthermore, these builders were not nascent nineteenth-century conservatives but had a set of values and expectations quite different from those who built the second church. Thus, the men who built the neo-classical church in 1826 were not building a church that reflected a long-standing conservatism in the St. George's community; rather they were attempting to build an identity of conservatism and establishmentarianism into the Kingston landscape that reflected their own time. To address these inaccuracies, we must tear down (figuratively, of course) the nineteenth-century church to return the geographical and ideological landscape of Anglicanism in Kingston to the time before neo-classical architecture obscured the view.

In October of 1791 a group of settlers resolved to build a church in Kingston. They set down detailed and specific instructions about the

dimensions and features of the church and elected Archibald Thomson, who was a carpenter and a vestryman, to build it. Thomson constructed a weatherboard church, 40 feet by 32 feet and 12 feet high, with a gabled roof and square windows. He built, floored, plastered, and glazed the church for a sum of 168 pounds, which was paid by donations of the townspeople.

Of the 54 individuals who contributed funds for the building of the first St. George's Church, 31 (57.4%) appear on the official list of United Empire Loyalists.³ A few others had come to the Canadas from England, such as officers on half-pay, like Commodore David Betton,⁴ and Alexander Aitken,⁵ a surveyor for the British government. The rest of the non-loyalist contributors likely migrated to Upper Canada from the United States *after* the American Revolution. It is also notable that many of the loyalists were North Americans who had lived most or all of their lives in the Thirteen Colonies; men such as John Stuart⁶ (St. George's first minister) and Richard Cartwright⁷ had been born and raised in North America. The benefactors of the first St. George's Church were an eclectic group of individuals who were most preoccupied with setting themselves upon the land, establishing familiar institutions, and recreating a viable North American community.

The church that they built was, by most accounts, humble. When Lieutenant Governor Simcoe arrived at St. George's in July of 1792, Thomson had not yet lathed, plastered nor painted the walls, the church had a roof but no ceiling, and no belfry had been built.⁸ The church was in use for more than a year without a pulpit, desk or communion table.⁹ In 1795 the French Duke de la Rochefoucauld-Liancourt said St. George's looked more like a barn than a church.¹⁰ Despite the fact that the Duke spoke disparagingly about the architectural style of this church, North American observers deemed the church "commodious" and "decent."¹¹ The approval of North American participants demonstrates that this church met their expectations about what a church should look like, even though this image clearly differed from what Europeans (and later many historians) expected of a church.

Dell Upton, who has written one of the few historical analyses of parish church styles in colonial America, claims that churches built in rural and undeveloped regions tended to be simple constructions, much like the

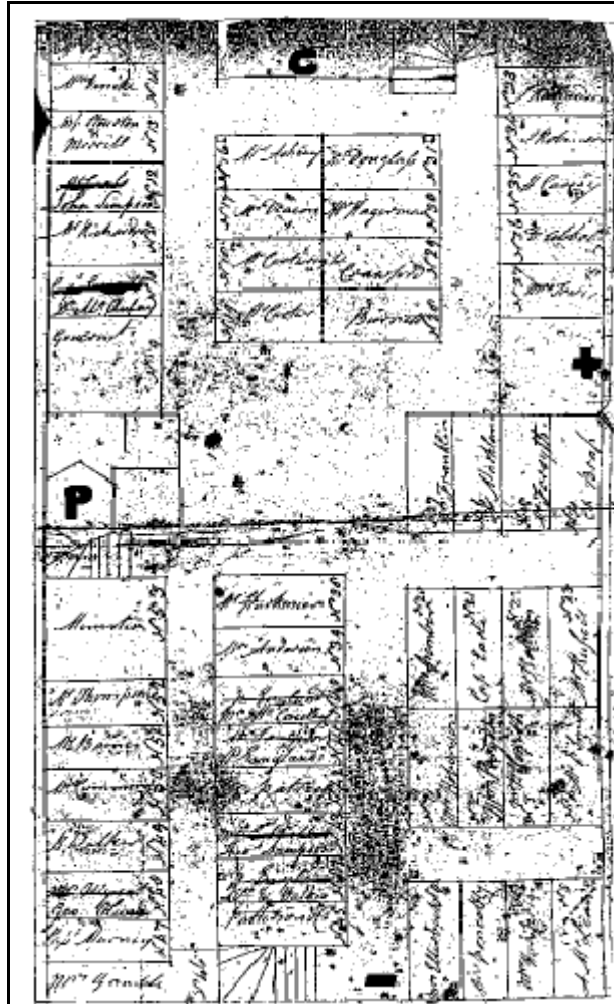


Figure 2: Interior drawing of St. George's Church, c. 1817 (Anglican Diocesan Archives of Ontario, St. George's Vestry Minutes, 2-KM-2, 1799-1817. Identification of architectural features superimposed onto the original. This drawing shows the pulpit (P) in the centre of a long north side, a double alley of pews, a raised gallery with the communion table © in the east end, a main south entry (+), and a smaller subordinate entry (-) in the west end.

church at Kingston.¹² Although these churches were neither costly nor ornate they adhered to an architectural idiom that clearly identified the building as a church in the minds of North American colonials. St. George's appearance reflected the fact that this church was a part of and inspired by eighteenth-century North American parish church styles.

Upton found that parish churches in colonial Virginia tended to fall into three basic types. The third type, which is characterized by 1)

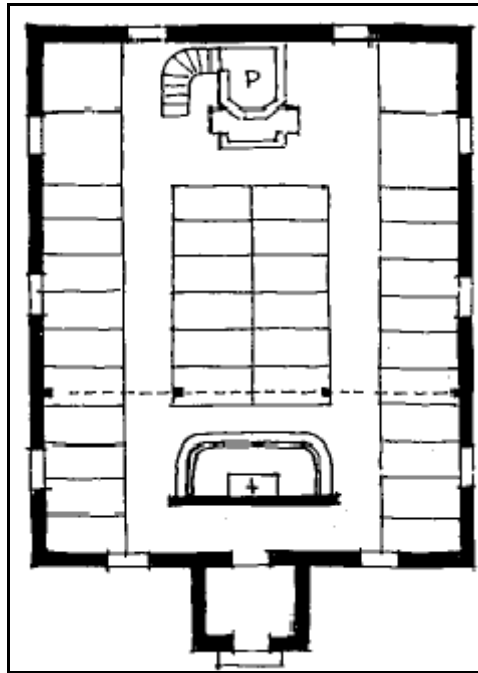


Figure 3: Interior of St. George's Anglican Church. Drawing by Anthony Adamson. Altar (+), pulpit (P). Reprinted from Marion McRae, *Hallowed Walls: Church Architecture of Upper Canada* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin & Company Limited, 1975), 36.

building. The pulpit was, however, moved to the centre of the north side after the addition was complete.¹⁴ This illustration also shows an alternate entry in the west end of the church and a gallery and communion table in the east. Also, John Stuart's description of the church's dimensions shows that like the parish churches Upton identifies, St. George's had deep width-to-length proportions. The church was originally 32 feet by 40 feet, making the width four-fifths of the length.¹⁵

This information contradicts current assumptions about the appearance and architectural inspiration of the first St. George's Church. Some historians have made the anachronistic claim that this church had a longitudinal orientation, which was a common orientation for churches in

deep proportions, 2) a central south entrance opposite the pulpit, 3) an alternate west entry, and 4) a gallery and communion table in the east, is consistent with the architectural design of St. George's.¹³ Figure 2 is a sketch of the interior of St. George's recently discovered in the Anglican Diocese of Ontario Archives and dated at 1817 with the use of the pew rent records. This illustration of the first St. George's Church shows that the pulpit occupied the long north side and the main doors were placed just off centre on the south face. The pulpit was likely opposite the main doors when the church was first built, but in 1802 twenty feet were added to the length and thus the doors were no longer in the centre of the

nineteenth-century Ontario. Marion McRae stated that the original church was modelled on the liturgical plan of St. Peter's Protestant Episcopal Church in Philadelphia at the instruction of John Stuart. A sketch of the original St. George's by Anthony Adamson, who co-authored *Hallowed Walls* with McRae, shows the pulpit opposite the altar at the west end of a main alley (see Figure 3). The myth of St. George's interior design has created an inaccurate image of the church in various drawings (see e.g.,

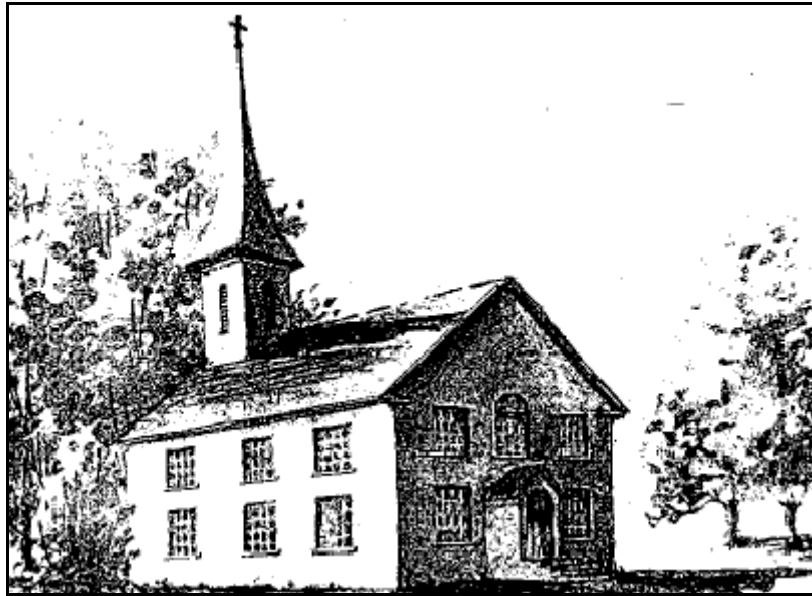


Figure 4: St. George's Church, 1792 (Queen's University Archives).

Figure 4). Figures 5 and 6 attempt to correct these inaccuracies and reproduce the basic form and appearance of the exterior of St. George's Church based on this newly discovered evidence.

It is clear from an architectural analysis of the first St. George's Church that these builders were constructing symbolic places that reflected their colonial circumstances and desire to mold their new communities in the image of familiar North American forms. The architecture of the middle and late-nineteenth century only obscured and distorted our view

of their church. Similarly the Anglican theology preached in the middle and late-nineteenth century by leaders such as John Strachan bears little resemblance to the Anglicanism that was practised at St. George's in the

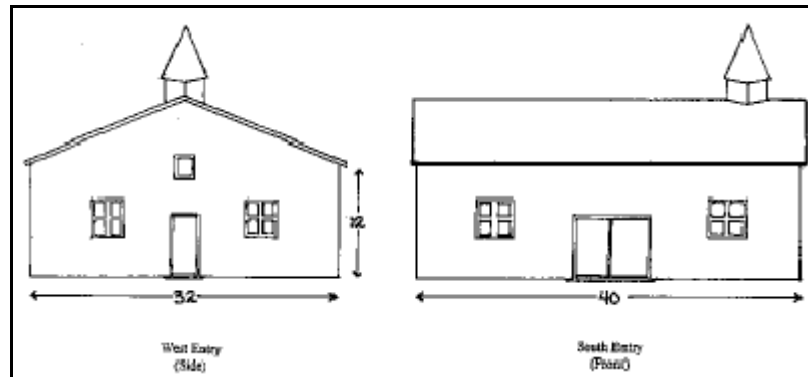


Figure 5: St. George's Church, c. 1794. Drawing by Carmen Nielson Varty, 1998. Measurements in feet.

late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century. What little is known about what went on inside the original church suggests that the establishment principles and conservatism that later characterized the Church of England in Upper Canada was neither espoused nor promulgated by the first minister of St. George's.

The Reverend John Stuart was a loyalist, a native of the Thirteen Colonies, and “the product of a religiously heterogeneous society.” Stuart practised a “North American Anglicanism” that shunned the exclusivity and formalism of Old World Anglicanism.¹⁶ While Lieutenant Governor John Graves Simcoe may have hoped that Anglicanism would be officially established in Upper Canada according to the British model, John Stuart certainly did not share this opinion. Stuart regarded Simcoe as “a very high churchman” who “wishes to put ecclesiastical matters on the most respectable footing.” But according to Stuart, Simcoe's expectations that Anglicanism would become the established church in Upper Canada were “sanguine” at best. Stuart, on the other hand, was “confident, that any Thing like an Establishment . . . would alarm the Sectaries, and eventually disappoint . . . [Simcoe's] . . . Expectations.”¹⁷ Stuart knew from his North American experiences that any ground gained by the Anglican Church

“must be by slow and almost imperceptible advances.” He claimed that it was “The Purity of Our Doctrine; and the unassuming, exemplary Lives of both clergy and laity, [that] will promote our cause better than any legal Sanctions or Provisions.”¹⁸

Stuart believed that moderation and circumspection were essential to a missionary’s success on the frontier in North America.¹⁹ During the formative years of settlement at Kingston Stuart made no attempt “to

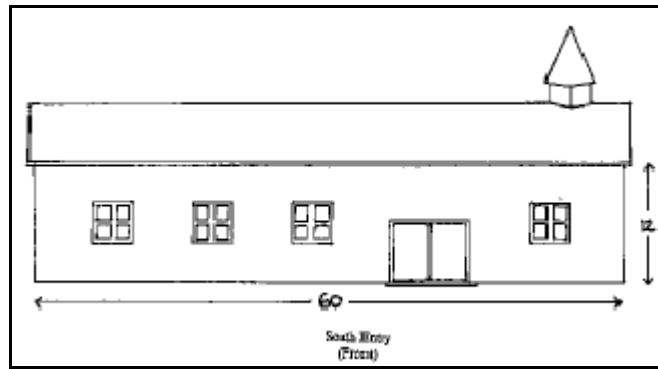


Figure 6: St. George’s Church, c. 1803. Drawing by Carmen Nielson Varty, 1998. Measurements in feet.

discriminate Episcopalians from Dissenters” and found that “every one profess[ed] his Approbation of me as his Minister . . .”²⁰ Stu-

art also reported that he had great success adapting an extemporaneous style to sermons and prayers in the fashion of Methodist itinerants. He was “fully persuaded, that . . . plain, practical Discourses adapted to mean Capacities, and delivered in this manner, will ever be attended with beneficial Effect.”²¹ Stuart’s ability to adapt Anglicanism successfully to the eclectic religious tastes and sensibilities of these colonials demonstrates the efficacy of a “North American Anglicanism” in the eighteenth-century world of Upper Canada.

The conditions of Upper Canada in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century clearly mitigated against the establishment of a formal, conservative, British-style Anglicanism in Kingston. This analysis of the first St. George’s church corroborates scholars’ recent assertions that eighteenth-century Upper Canadian colonists – who were, by and large, Americans – drew upon their experiences in the Thirteen Colonies rather than the tenets of British conservatism when building their communities.²²

Over the thirty-four year life of the first church a complex set of

processes that will only be described briefly here transformed the identity of this church and its community, of which the building of a new St. George's was the most powerful physical expression. Certainly the new large church reflected the growing size and wealth of the Anglican congregation at Kingston. But ideological, political and generational change experienced within the congregation played the primary role in determining the physical style and new image of St. George's. The beginnings of these transformations can be situated roughly around the time of the War of 1812.

The war was "an irrevocable watershed in colonial development" wherein the Upper Canadian community, a mere "string of scattered settlements on the frontier," became a "relatively well-established and prosperous province."²³ After the war, communication and travel within the province and with the trans-Atlantic world improved dramatically. In Kingston, the war boosted fortunes, doubled the population, and catapulted the town and its townspeople into a position of provincial importance. In the older and more settled areas of the province, like Kingston, social institutions sprang up, including schools, libraries, and theatres.²⁴ By the mid-1820s "residents of most of the towns and villages of Upper Canada enjoyed the amenities of a relatively sophisticated urban existence. And the loneliness and back-breaking hardships of a backwoods existence was being replaced by a much more open and diversified community life."²⁵

A growing proportion of those who attended St. George's Church in the post-war period did not and indeed, could not share the experiences and outlook of the first generation congregation. They did not share the loyalists' common experience of life in the Thirteen Colonies or the post-revolutionary migrants' experience of life in the United States. Neither were they involved in settling upon the frontier. Rather, this new generation shared the experience of victorious defence of British territory against American attack and of living in a relatively sophisticated and affluent colonial community that was emerging as an important player in the larger provincial arena.

Also, between 1815 and 1828 the population of the colony doubled, owing in large measure to a major influx of immigrants, especially from Great Britain. British immigration was actively encouraged and patronized by the anxiously anti-American post-war provincial administration.²⁶ Several individuals and families from the British Isles are known to have joined the congregation of St. George's after 1812. For example, Henry

Smith immigrated to Canada from London, England with his wife and children in 1818 and began renting a pew at St. George's in 1824.²⁷ A few discharged British officers also attended St. George's, including Joseph Scott, a surgeon discharged from the Royal Navy²⁸ and Hugh Earl, a native of Ayrshire, Scotland who had been a lieutenant in the Provincial Marine during the War of 1812.²⁹ The Britons who arrived in Canada in this period and joined St. George's Church presumably had strong ties to the institutions of the British State, including an established Anglican Church.

Furthermore, in the era after the War of 1812 leadership was gradually passed from loyalist fathers to their Upper Canadian sons. This larger provincial trend was paralleled in the Anglican community at Kingston. After John Stuart's death in 1811, his son George Okill Stuart was requested by the congregation to "succeed his father at Kingston."³⁰ George Okill represented a new generation of Upper Canadians who had "new ideas and new understandings of the needs of the colony and of its relations to Great Britain and to the United States."³¹ For George Stuart and his contemporaries, these new ideas and new understandings were grounded in "a belief in British conservative ideals and respect for authority and order."³²

In its British manifestation the Church of England upheld and inculcated the conservative ideals of order and tradition to which the new elite aspired. For conservatives participation in the Anglican Church became cloaked in new political and ideological significance and was an important symbol of elite membership and status. These post-war Anglicans, many of whom were British- or Upper Canadian-born, tended to shun things American and espouse many of the traditional institutions of the British State, of which the Church of England was a pillar.

Church members such as George H. Markland, Thomas Markland, C. A. Hagerman, John Macaulay and John Kirby personified the post-war image of the Anglican congregation at Kingston.³³ These affluent and elite men were firmly committed to the conservative and Tory ideologies of the new Upper Canadian leadership. C.A. Hagerman had derived a "keen sense of the loyalist legacy and an uncompromising adherence to the Church of England" from his father and was "obdurate in his defence of church and state."³⁴ John Macaulay advocated the "preservation of the British constitution 'in all its purity.'"³⁵ And, although Thomas Markland was "perhaps the most influential member of the local 'family compact'" he left direct contact with the provincial administration to his son, George.

George Markland, “who, by virtue of age, personal contacts, and political beliefs, fitted into the society of the post-war,” was a prominent Tory advocate.³⁶ John Kirby was “[a] political conservative . . . and an ardent supporter of the province’s Tory administration.”³⁷ These men were part of an emerging elite of conservative thinkers who were instrumental in creating a new identity for the Anglican Church in Kingston. They, notably, were also the individuals who were elected to oversee the construction of the new St. George’s Church.

In 1825 this building committee of Kingston’s most influential



Figure 7: Design for the facade of St. George’s Church by Thomas Rogers, c. 1825 (Queen’s University Archives).

Tories hired architect Thomas Rogers to design a large stone church in a neo-classical style. Rogers designed a classical basilica, five bays in

length, with a shallow apse, and galleries surrounding three sides of the interior. Figure 7 shows that he intended to build a terrastyle portico in the Ionic Order set against a tower of several stages, containing a clock and presumably a belfry.³⁸

A neo-classical church would proclaim a close association between St. George's and the military, administrative, and civil structures of Upper Canadian society. Several churches had been built in Kingston in the early decades of the nineteenth century and threatened Anglican hegemony in the town. The congregation's vigorous support of the Anglican establishment would be reflected by the very act of building. An elaborate corner stone laying ceremony, the proceedings of which were published in the local newspaper, clearly articulated the political and ideological importance of church building for this community. This ceremony was not just a gathering of the Anglican congregation but was a dramatic public statement that proclaimed the support and patronage of local and provincial leaders. It is clear that for these conservatives church building was a self-conscious attempt to construct an established Anglican Church onto the Upper Canadian landscape.

The first St. George's demonstrates that early Upper Canadians drew liberally on North American ideas and experiences to build their new society. The congregants who built and attended this church reproduced architectural styles with which they were most familiar and their church was very similar to small rural parish churches of the Thirteen Colonies. Also, an analysis of church benefactors' origins and an examination of the attitudes of the first minister of St. George's Church suggests that these congregants were not all loyalists nor did they ascribe to the establishmentarian style Anglicanism that was characterized by British conservatism. However, by 1826 the first St. George's no longer reflected the identity of its church community. The architecture and the image of the original church was simply inconsistent with the aspirations of prominent Anglicans who wanted to make their church a bastion of British conservatism in the town and province.

Endnotes

1. William Westfall, *Two Worlds: The Protestant Culture of Nineteenth-Century Ontario* (Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989), 145-146.

2. For example, the original St. George's Church is discussed only briefly in the institutional volume, *St. George's Cathedral: Two Hundred Years of Community*, ed. Donald Swainson (Kingston: Quarry Press, 1991). Swainson's brief description of the first church features disparaging remarks by contemporary observers who commented on the barn- or brewery-like appearance of the church ("Loyalist Stock: The Founding of St. George's Church," in *St. George's Cathedral*, 7-8).
3. A.H. Young, *The Parish Register of Kingston, Upper Canada, 1785-1811* (Kingston: The British Whig Publishing Company Limited, 1921); and Kathryn Bindon, "Kingston: A Social History, 1785-1830," Ph.D. diss., Queen's University, 1979.
4. Young, *Parish Register*, 36-37.
5. Frederick Armstrong, "Alexander Aitken," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography (DCB)*, vol. IV (1979), 12.
6. T.R. Millman, "John Stuart," *DCB*, vol. V (1983), 785-788. See also James Carruthers, "The Little Gentleman, The Reverend Dr. John Stuart and the Inconvenience of Revolution," M.A. thesis, Queen's University, 1975; Paul Banfield, "To the Love of Peace and Ease, John Stuart's Later Career"; and John D. Blackwell and Laurie C.C. Stanley, "Two Anglican Images: John Stuart and John Langhorn," in *St. George's Cathedral*.
7. George Rawlyk and Janice Potter, "Richard Cartwright," *DCB*, vol. V (1983), 168.
8. 20 August 1792, John Stuart to the Bishop of Nova Scotia, Stuart Letters, Synod of Ontario, in Richard A. Preston, *Kingston Before the War of 1812: A Collection of Documents* (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1959), 285; 15 March 1794, John Stuart to William Morice, Box 4, 38, "C" MSS, London S.P.G. Archives, in Preston, *Kingston Before the War*, 290.
9. 15 March 1794, John Stuart to William Morice, in Preston, *Kingston Before the War*, 290.
10. Duke de la Rochefoucauld-Liancourt; cited in Carruthers, "Little Gentleman," 115.
11. John Stuart; cited in Carruthers, "Little Gentleman," 114; 15 March 1794, John Stuart to William Morice, in Preston, *Kingston Before the War*, 290; 15 September 1794, Bishop of Quebec, Mountain Papers, Archives Diocesaine, A.P.Q., in Preston, *Kingston Before the War*, 292.

12. Dell Upton, *Holy Things and Profane: Anglican Parish Churches in Colonial Virginia* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1986).
13. Upton, *Holy Things and Profane*, 97.
14. 29 October 1802, John Stuart to the Bishop of Quebec, Box 1/12, 3-3, Episcopal Records, Anglican Diocesan Archives of Ontario.
15. Upton, *Holy Things and Profane*, 91.
16. Blackwell and Stanley, "Two Anglican Images," 176.
17. 25 June 1793, John Stuart to the Bishop of Nova Scotia, Box 1/12, 2-3. Episcopal Records, Anglican Diocesan Archives of Ontario.
18. 25 June 1793, John Stuart to the Bishop of Nova Scotia, Box 1/12, 2-3. Episcopal Records, Anglican Diocesan Archives of Ontario.
19. Blackwell and Stanley, "Two Anglican Images."
20. 6 July 1788, Letter to Bishop Inglis, Stuart Letters, Synod of Ontario, in Preston, *Kingston Before the War*, 133.
21. 11 March 1792, Letter to Bishop of Nova Scotia, Box 1/12, 2-3, Episcopal Records, Anglican Diocesan Archives of Ontario.
22. See for example, Jane Elrington, *The Lion, the Eagle and Upper Canada: A Developing Colonial Ideology* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1987).
23. Elrington, *The Lion, the Eagle and Upper Canada*, 89.
24. Elrington, *The Lion, the Eagle and Upper Canada*, 90-91.
25. Elrington, *The Lion, the Eagle and Upper Canada*, 90.
26. See G.M. Craig, *Upper Canada: The Formative Years, 1784-1841* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1963), 87-88; and Elrington, *The Lion, the Eagle and Upper Canada*, 98, 159-163.
27. Donald Swainson, "Sir Henry Smith," *DCB*, vol. IX (1976), 725.
28. Bindon, "Kingston," 583.
29. Preston, *Kingston Before the War*, 251, fn. 38.
30. 30 August 1811, 2-KM-2, 1799-1817, St. George's Vestry Minutes, Anglican Diocesan Archives of Ontario.

31. Elrington, *The Lion, the Eagle and Upper Canada*, 92.
32. Elrington, *The Lion, the Eagle and Upper Canada*, 93.
33. See Robert L. Fraser, "John Macaulay," *DCB*, vol. VIII (1985), 514; S.F. Wise, "John Macaulay: Tory for All Seasons," in *To Preserve and Defend: Essays on Kingston in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Gerald Tulchinsky (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1976); Craig, *Upper Canada*; J.K. Johnson, *Becoming Prominent: Regional Leadership in Upper Canada, 1791-1841* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989); and Elrington, *The Lion, the Eagle and Upper Canada*.
34. Robert L. Fraser, "Christopher Alexander Hagerman," *DCB*, vol. VII (1988), 365-366.
35. Fraser, "John Macaulay," 514.
36. Jane Elrington, "Thomas Markland," *DCB*, vol. VII (1988), 584.
37. Jane Elrington, "John Kirby," *DCB*, vol. VII (1988), 471.
38. J. Douglas Stewart, "George Browne's Influence: The Architectural Heritage of St. George's," in *St. George's Cathedral*, 29.