

WOODSTOCK COLLEGE 1857-1926

by

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The buildings of the former Woodstock College, Oxford County, have been wrecked and removed. On part of the old site in Woodstock the city has erected a fine new High School. In the University Hall of McMaster in Hamilton is a bronze plaque dated 1857-1926. This is "To Commemorate Woodstock College and to Honour Those of Its Students and Staff Who Served Canada in Time of War." Two other plaques, erected by the Historic Sites Board of Ontario, are in Woodstock in front of the High School. One plaque commemorates the College that was once on the site and the other Rev. Newton Wolverton, a teacher and principal. A city street beside the high school is named "Fyfe". These present memorials indicate the worth and importance in the development of the Canadian nation of this pioneer Baptist school - Woodstock College.¹

In the years before 1860 many Canadian Baptist young men travelled to the U.S.A. for theological education. Canada Baptist College at Montreal had served for 10 years, 1839-1849. Dr. Robert Fyfe, pastor of Bond Street Baptist Church (later the Jarvis Street Church) Toronto, had been principal in the Montreal school for one year. He especially felt and understood the need of Baptists for a Canadian educational institution.

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The Dec. 18, 1855 issue of the Christian Messenger printed a letter from Dr. Fyfe proposing to his Baptist brethren a school that would not only train pastors for Baptist churches but also would be a Christian school of social and intellectual culture for all who wished to study. This proposed school was to have a Theological Department for those preparing for the pastoral ministry and a Literary Department for all, both men and women. About a year later Fyfe arranged a meeting of a few Baptist leaders, who embodied this school idea in a definite plan. This plan was printed for all to understand. The Woodstock people offered six acres of land and a gift of sixteen thousand dollars to help establish such a school in their city. It was to be called the Canadian Literary Institute.

Now began the problems of administration and finance. But most Baptists were convinced of the need for the school. The prosperity of the Baptist churches of the time was part of this need. The Baptist notes in July 1859:- "Year after year our churches multiply with a rapidity which keeps pace with the inroads of civilization upon the prairie and forest. How shall they be supplied with efficient pastors?"² The Baptist reported the success of the Wesleyan Methodist Female College that had been established at Dundas, Ontario, in 1858. The first year of this school was one of unparalleled prosperity with urgent need to enlarge accommodation for the second year. The editor noted: "We heartily wish our Methodist friends success in the important

work of providing superior education for the neglected daughters of Canada." The editor saw this success as a lesson of encouragement for the Baptists to go ahead with educational work.³

By early 1860 the subscribers had the college buildings well under way. But still no principal had been appointed. Dr. Robert Fyfe was asked to take up this pioneer task. He knew its problems and found the decision difficult. He was happy in the pastorate of the Bond Street Church and in his new venture as owner-editor of The Canadian Baptist. But he accepted this new challenge. He moved from Toronto to a rented house in Woodstock in June 1860.

Funding was always difficult for the college. Week after week The Baptist appealed for donations. One issue of the paper listed 36 persons who were willing to give to the institute the sum of ten dollars each as soon as 50 other persons were found who would do likewise. This game was successful and was used time and again in fund-raising campaigns. In this first year Fyfe gave up his summer vacation to go out on the road to raise money. The dormitories were still unfinished because the funds on hand were all spent. This campaign was one of many long and exhausting fund-raising efforts undertaken by Dr. Fyfe. These were very hard on his health.⁴

As the Institute prepared to open, Mr. Hoyes Lloyd, the collector for the Institute, found that gossip and slander had developed a prejudice against the Baptists in the society. Some persons said, "I can do nothing for the Institute because it is a Baptist concern." Another said: "I will have nothing

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to do with your Baptist scholarship." "Baptists must be looked to almost exclusively for support", Lloyd reported.⁵ The term began on September 12, 1860, with 79 students and five teachers.

Attendance prospects increased rapidly. The next January 1861 term brought the enrolment of 161 students. About three o'clock in the morning of this January opening of the new term the cry of fire was heard. By dawn the college building was totally destroyed. The enterprise seemed doomed. There was a debt of six thousand dollars on the destroyed college.

But the citizens of Woodstock rose to the occasion. They took the students into their homes. They held a public meeting and raised funds. They offered the use of the Woodstock Hotel to the school for two years, free of charge. Dr. Fyfe was encouraged and inspired. Before the end of the week, classes were functioning in the hotel. Then Mr. William McMaster of Toronto offered to donate four thousand dollars provided 20 thousand were raised from other sources. Fyfe went out on tour to raise money. He got cash and promises for \$21,600 in fourteen weeks. This met Mr. McMaster's conditions and made his gift available. An architect and contractors were engaged and by July 1862 a new and larger building stood where the original had burned. So a fresh start was made.⁶

Dr. Fyfe was a tower of strength to the college for 18 years. But too much burden was put on him. For some years he gave an average of about six theological lectures per school day. He frequently preached on Sundays and often conducted a

special class. He had a whole combination of administrative duties. He wrote letters by hand and many other articles. In 1871, in answer to a criticism from a letter in The Baptist he made a study of the first decade in the Theological Department, 1860-70. He wrote that in this period 38 men had graduated for pastoral service in the church. Out of these 24 men were serving pastorates in Canada; 2 pastorates in the U.S.A.; 2 were missionaries in India; one was editor of the C.B. one was an independent evangelist; three men were then unemployed and five had died.⁷

The Woodstock College can number many outstanding Canadians who were among its students and staff. Next to Dr. Fyfe the most outstanding principal and teacher was Dr. Newton Wolverton. Dr. Fyfe helped this brilliant young man make his start in academic life with only two years of schooling at 24 years of age. Fyfe also helped him to a meaningful life of faith and service. Wolverton graduated in 1876 with high honours from the University of Toronto. He began pastoral service at Onondaga near Brantford. In 1877 the Institute needed a teacher of mathematics. Fyfe asked him to come and teach but Wolverton replied that he should stay with his pastorate. But Fyfe insisted that this call of the denomination must be given preference at this time of need. Wolverton came to the College in September 1877. Dr. Fyfe died a year later.⁸ After three years of teaching, Wolverton became principal in 1881.

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Under Wolverton the college took on new life, although in this first year of his leadership the Theological Department was transferred to McMaster Hall. The school attendance rose that year to 228 and to an average of 240 for the next five years - the highest sustained attendance of the college. Wolverton developed the college "Observatory" to a place of special recognition by the Dominion and Ontario Governments. He made manual training an unique feature of the college as the first of its kind in Canada.⁹

The college advertised the new manual-training department in the summer of 1889 by stating: "The two-story brick workshop, equipped with a ten horse-power engine and expensive machinery will be ready for the opening." This heavier equipment was on the first floor. On the next floor were benches with complete sets of carpenter's tools for a class of twenty students. A dozen wood lathes were also available in this practical project; Wolverton considered it very important "to utilize tools, machinery and material in the education of the practical side of the boy." A survey of the students taken seven years later gave enthusiastic testimony of the values of this training in the lives of many men.¹⁰ The students took all their regular academic classes. Manual training was from three o'clock in the afternoons for those able to do this work. Wolverton stated his positive outlook on education and life in one of his graduation day speeches.

We firmly hold that any science which can adorn, or any art that can cheer, any culture that can steal away the pains and cares of life.... is worthy of our careful nourishing. When we are beautifying we are but striving to restore what sin and the hand of sinful man have effaced.¹¹

The spiritual dimension of life was very important in the school. The teachers at times noted that many students gave unmistakable evidence that they came from godly homes. Wolverton wrote in one of his reports that during the year they had reason to believe that over 40 of the students, both young men and women "had been redeemed by faith in Christ, and that 30 were baptized into the fellowship of the Woodstock church."¹² Nearly ten years later another principal noted: ... Woodstock has been the birthplace of many a soul. This term we have been blessed in this respect. A quiet, unemotional work of grace has been in progress. Our Thursday evening prayer meeting has been an all-absorbing interest. Week by week young fellows from all denominations have stood up and confessed Christ.¹³

In 1881, the first year of Wolverton's principalship, the Woodstock theological department was transferred to become the Toronto Baptist College in McMaster Hall on Bloor Street. Then in 1886 the Woodstock subscribers gave their management

rights to the Baptist denomination Board of Governors for the proposed McMaster University, with the understanding that the Woodstock College would have new funds and support for greater development. Many hoped and expected that Woodstock would become the McMaster University Arts College. But later in the same year the new Board of Governors decided to close the ladies' Department at Woodstock, and to open Moulton College in Toronto for women. Then in 1890 the McMaster University Arts Department was opened at Toronto and the Woodstock first year of Arts under the University of Toronto was discontinued.

Yet the Woodstock work continued to thrive as a vital Boys' Preparatory School. A fine new gymnasium and swimming pool complex was opened in 1907, the year of the school's half-century jubilee. The school prospered with excellent local support and a dedicated, capable staff of teachers. But changes began to show about 1915. Many of the students and staff enthusiastically took up the cause of the World War. Staff changes became frequent and the student body dropped to about seventy-five. Then after the war the attendance climbed to 120. But after 1921 another slide began. The attendance was 56 when the college closing came in 1926. The announcement of the closing was printed in the C.B. of July 1, 1926, as a statement from the McMaster chancellor. The action was approved by the 1927 Baptist Convention, which at the time was much more concerned with the church tensions of the "Shields" controversy than with the evaluation of the affairs of Woodstock College. Very little notice was taken of the event.

Three years later the property was sold for sixty thousand dollars to the Catholic Redemptorist Fathers and became known as the St. Alphonsus Seminary.

FOOTNOTES

1. The history of Woodstock College was reflected in periodical articles and in Baptist speeches. A detailed and excellent history of the college is part of the volume Woodstock College Memorial Book, published by the Woodstock College Alumni Association, Toronto, June 1951. The history section of the volume was written by Charles A. McLaurin Vining. A roll of students is printed in this volume.

For over 50 years the C.B. printed numerous articles and exhortations related to Woodstock College. Often these included appeals and financial reports. For the first 25 years of its life the college was named "The Canadian Literary Institute". This name was officially changed to "Woodstock College" in 1883.
2. C.B., July 14, 1859, p. 2.
3. The Woodstock School was incorporated in 1857 with class work beginning in 1860. The subscribers were the basis of organization, not the Baptist churches. Of the 15 trustees, 10 were Baptists and 5 were from other fellowships. The first meeting of subscribers was held in the First Baptist Church, Woodstock on March 18, 1857. They

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organized under the name The Canadian Literary Institute, adopted a constitution, approved building plans, elected 15 trustees and authorized building costs up to twenty thousand dollars.

4. Dr. Fyfe continued to be a hero to the Baptists of Ontario and Quebec. People admired and loved him. But this rather added to his burden. The respect people had for him and the strength of his personality could open purses for the college. But too often the people required his presence. If he came they gave. But the response was much less for an agent.
5. C.B., April 19, 1860, p. 2.
6. The cause of this college fire of 1861 was apparently never finally determined. An item headed "Arson Attempt - Woodstock College" was printed in The Baptist in June 1863. This was taken from another paper, The Canada Observer. This stated that "another attempt has been made by some miscreants to destroy the newly-erected Baptist College in Woodstock..." One or more parties have a diabolical hatred of our Baptist friends... This dastardly tendency to incendiarism is too fearfully common in Canada."
(C.B., June 11, 1863, p. 3) Many other buildings were later added to the college complex - and paid for with hard struggle: a separate Theological Building was constructed by 1869; a Ladies' Building in 1873 with improvements and extensions to the main building; also

in 1873 the College bought the 60 acre farm of Henry Burtch that adjoined the school. By 1889 the Observatory and Manual Training Buildings were completed. By 1907 a gymnasium with a good floor, an indoor track and swimming pool was completed.

7. C.B., Jan. 7, 1875, p. 2.

8. As the C.B. went to the press in the first week of September 1878 it reported a telegram from Woodstock that said "Dr. Fyfe was sinking fast". The editor noted: "Sad, sad news! The dark cloud, which has been gathering, seems about to break upon the denomination. The Lord is our help." The C.B. of September 12, 1878 carried full accounts of the details of his death and of his life. The whole front page of the issue was lined in black, as were pages four and five of the paper. Funeral services were held in Woodstock and in Toronto. Dr. Fyfe was buried in Toronto with a special service at the Jarvis Street Church. Later the Jarvis Street Church appointed a special committee to care for Dr. Fyfe's grave. (C.B., Nov. 29, 1894)

9. Newton Wolverton was born on a farm in Oxford County, a little north-east of Woodstock. His forefathers came to Canada from Ohio, U.S.A. When thirteen years old he was sent back to Cleveland for schooling. But after 2 years in school he enlisted in President Lincoln's armies in the American Civil War. He was made a wagon-master in charge of 25 teams. Later his uncanny skill

with a rifle was discovered. He became a sharpshooter under General Grant. Then Wolverton got out of the army and returned to Canada in July 1863. He got a job around Woodstock and area as a carpenter. Then he joined the Oxford Rifles and became a lieutenant. He served for about two years with various border patrols. After this he got free of the army again and did carpentering for another two years. Then he resolved to get an education and he met Dr. Fyfe. Wolverton had only two years of formal schooling but was well-known in Oxford County for many other skills. In January 1870, at 24 years of age, he began classes with little boys and girls. In a few months he did his exams for High School level in the Literary Institute. In two more years he did his High School and the Woodstock first year of university study. He tried exams for Toronto University in 1873 and won a high scholarship. He graduated four years later with standing, a brilliant student in languages and a genius in advanced mathematics. He had decided on the Baptist ministry and began service near Brantford. Dr. Fyfe brought him to Woodstock College to teach maths, in the fall of 1877. At 35 years of age he was made principal. After 5 years he resigned this post, but stayed on as teacher, and manager of the school funds. He pioneered the manual training department for the college. He left in 1891 to be principal of a mixed

racial college in Marshall, Texas. After seven years in the south he returned to Canada in 1898. He took up large scale farming near Brandon, Manitoba. He helped with the establishment of Brandon College. After ten years in Manitoba he moved to Nelson, B.C. He developed fruit farming in the area. He helped establish the University of B.C. He moved to Vancouver in 1930 and died in 1932. McMaster gave him an L.L.D. in 1907.

10. C.B., May 7, 1896, p. 196.
11. C.B., July 6, 1882, p. 5.
12. C.B., Nov. 1, 1883, p. 4.
13. C.B., May 21, 1891, p. 1.