

The First Protestant Thanksgiving in North America

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An Anglican clergyman, Reverend Robert Wofall, first celebrated Protestant Thanksgiving in North America on 22 July 1578 in Frobisher Bay, Baffin Island. Wofall had been taken aboard the ship *Judith* and given special accommodation in Frobisher's third northwest voyage, after Lord Burghley had requested that several Anglican ministers be included with the ship's company. Later Wofall returned to his home in south England and was appointed cleric in several Somerset parishes. He died in 1610, aged sixty-six years. The location of Wofall's Thanksgiving service, and his dream of Christianizing the Inuit, were forgotten for about 300 years.

In the United States, Thanksgiving Day was set on the fourth Thursday of November by President Franklin D. Roosevelt (approved by Congress in 1941) and in Canada on the second Monday in October by Act of Parliament (1957). The date of these two holidays does not correspond to that of the first Protestant Thanksgiving in North America – in the United States, at Chesapeake Bay, Virginia, (4 December 1619)¹ and in Canada, on Kodlunarn (Qallunaaq) Island, Frobisher Bay, (22 July 1578)² – but they were sufficiently removed from Christmas to become a popular respite from a busy year before, and close to the end, of harvest in both countries.

Baffin Island, 1576-67

Exploration of southern Baffin Island, termed by Queen Elizabeth

Historical Papers: Canadian Society of Church History (2017)

Meta Incognita (“land of the unknown extent”), and the Canadian Thanksgiving date back to the northwest voyages of Martin Frobisher. Frobisher’s first voyage (1576) involved two ships and thirty-six men; his second (1577) involved three ships and 145 men.³

What was believed to be rich gold ore was discovered on the north shore of Frobisher “Strait” during the first voyage. The second and third voyages were essentially gold-mining ventures. But the gold content of the first mine, on Countess of Warwick (Kodlunarn) Island, was abysmally low (two parts per billion – or ppb), when samples of the *black ewer* were checked, after preconcentration, by modern methods.⁴ They even dipped below the average of the Earth’s continental crust, estimated at 3.5 ppb.⁵

Frobisher’s Third Northwest Voyage to Baffin Island, 1578

Frobisher’s third northwest voyage involved fifteen ships and 387 men. It was the largest voyage of all time to what became Canada’s arctic islands, specifically to Countess of Warwick (Kodlunarn) Island, the focus of the present paper.

The ships’ company included many men who had been pressed into service against their will. And the Queen’s council, with Lord Burghley acting as spokesman, recommended “a minister or twoo do go in this jorney, and follow the ministration of devyne service and sacrament, according to ye Churche of England,”⁶ and to preserve peace on board. Frobisher complied by taking four clerics: John Ayvie (or lvy), “minister and miner” in the *Thomas of Ipswich*; Stephen Ridsdaile, “minister” in the *Ayde*; and Robert Wolfall and William Dode, “ministers” in the *Judith*. We know nothing of Ayvie nor Ridsdaile, little of Dode, but more, via J.P. Francis,⁷ of Wolfall.

Robert Wolfall had been born in Lancashire, northwest England, but was educated in Eton pubic school, Berkshire (1558-62), and Kings College, Cambridge (1562-5), where doctrines of the Reformed Church were rampant during Queen Elizabeth’s reign. He emerged from Cambridge a staunch Anglican and was ordained (23 April 1569) by Edmund Grindall, Anglican Bishop of London. Later, as a married man with family and church parishes in Somerset county, England, he eagerly volunteered to accompany Frobisher on his third voyage and to remain in Baffin territory during the winter, to “save souls” and “reform infidels.” It was a rather ambitious undertaking to convert a native people who lacked a written language, whose pronunciation was phonetically unintelligible to

Europeans, and who were openly hostile to immigrants treading on their domain.

The ships departed from Plymouth, Devonshire (3 June 1578), sailed up the Irish Sea, and then veered westward, past Cape Farewell, Greenland (1 July 1578). The *Bark Dennis* foundered off west Greenland (2 July 1578) in a blinding snowstorm, with loss of most of the building supplies for the winter house in *Meta Incognita*, but without loss of life. The *Thomas of Ipswich*, with the remaining building supplies, carrying the cleric John Ayvie, deserted and returned to England. Plans to overwinter were then abandoned.

Towards the end of this voyage, at the meeting of the ships *Gabriel* and *Michael*, *Judith*, and *Anne Francis* in Frobisher Bay, Wofall gave the miners and mariners a “godly sermon, exhorting them especially to be thankful to God for their strange and miraculous deliverance, in those so dangerous places and, putting them in mind of the uncertainty of man’s life, willed them to make themselves always ready, as resolute men, to enjoy and accept thankfully, whatsoever adventure his Divine Providence should appoint.”⁸ This was the first Protestant Thanksgiving in North America.

According to the ship’s log of Edward Fenton,⁹ this meeting took place on Tuesday, 22 July 1578 (Julian calendar), off Countess of Warwick, or Kodlunarn Island. Probably the ships’ company of 105 men assembled on the *terra firma* of the island. They thanked the Lord “for delivery from dangers past and placing them in so safe a harbour.” They then received Holy Communion. In the meantime, Martin Frobisher was away in the *Ayde*, attempting to thread the Northwest Passage and carrying with him a cleric, Reverend Stephen Ridsdaile. Wofall gave a repeat Thanksgiving and communion after the arrival of Frobisher at Winter’s Furnace (Newland Island) in late August 1578.¹⁰

In the *Judith*, Wofall, Pillion, and Dode were accommodated under special circumstances. Wofall’s wages (fifty shillings a month, above room and board) were about twice that of mariners and miners. In addition, a servant, Thomas Pillion, and a cleric’s assistant (“brother”), William Dode, chaplain in Middleton, Lancashire, were looked after by the mining company’s treasurer, Michael Lok.¹¹

Why was Wofall so eager to go on the third voyage and what was the reason for his special treatment? It appears that Frobisher was acquainted with his family before the northwest voyages. Wofall’s older brother, Thomas, was linked with Frobisher in piracy ventures in 1565 and

1567, and these may have cemented a bond of friendship.

After the return of Frobisher's third northwest voyage, Wolfall continued as an Anglican preacher, with parishes in Somerset county, England. He died in 1610 at the age of sixty-six, an old man for the time.

Epilogue

As interpretation of Inuktituk language has importance in this story, the following passage may be relevant and has been principally taken from the account of Kenn Harper.¹² In the fall of 1852, John Bowlby, a British wine merchant of Hull, United Kingdom, in his tiny sloop *The Bee*, arrived as a whaler in Cumberland Sound, where he met Ebierbing (aged circa seventeen, nicknamed "Joe"), his wife Tookoolito (aged circa fifteen, nicknamed "Hannah"), and an unrelated youngster Akulukjak (aged circa five). These three Inuit travelled, enthusiastically, with Bowlby to England, where they were comfortably accommodated with the family of William Gedney, the ship's surgeon. Largely through the efforts of Robert Bowser, treasurer of Hull's zoological gardens, a twenty-minute audience (3 February 1854) was arranged with Queen Victoria, Prince Albert, and two daughters at Windsor Castle. Conversation, during tea, was entirely in English, which, by that point, Hannah and Joe spoke fluently. The Queen was presented with a pair of slippers, handmade and embroidered by Hannah. She was thrilled. It was her first meeting with Inuit from North America. Bowser was paid £25 for making the arrangement. Bowlby returned the three Inuit safely to their homeland in 1855.

Charles Francis Hall, journalist and explorer from Cincinnati, Ohio, set out in 1860 to discover the fate of Sir John Franklin's lost arctic expedition. On assessing stories passed down by Inuit oral tradition, Hall concluded that what they called "Kodlunarn Island" (White Man's island) corresponded to Martin Frobisher's "Countess of Warwick Island." The Countess had donated £65 10d to the enterprise of 1578. With Inuit guides Hannah and Joe, Hall visited the site on 21-22 September 1861, and described their "Ship's Trench," "Reservoir Trench" and Edward Fenton's stone house of 1578.¹³ The precise location had been lost to the world for 283 years!

Today the island is known as Kodlunarn and Queen Elizabeth's "*Meta Incognita*" as Baffin Island in Nunavut Territory. Kodlunarn Island was designated a National Historic Site in 1964.

Wolfall's objective to Christianize the Inuit of *Meta Incognita* was

not accomplished, due to lack of time. It remained for the Anglican missionary Edmund James Peck to complete the task. Peck had been given instruction by the Church Missionary Society (CMS) of Reading (United Kingdom) and was ordained on 3 February 1878 by Bishop John Horden at Moose Factory, Ontario. After taking posts in northern Quebec, Peck was appointed Anglican minister of Blacklead Island in Cumberland Sound, Baffin Island.

The name “Blacklead” was a translation of an old German mining term “*schwarzblei*” in allusion to dark graphitic interlayers in pale quartzofeldspathic gneiss. The dark layers contained no lead, but the misnomer continues today with our term “lead pencil.”

At the time of Peck’s arrival (1894), Blacklead Island was a major supplier of whale oil for candlelight, a commodity that was soon to be replaced by incandescent tantalum, later tungsten, using electric power. The whaling station at Blacklead Island had been established in 1860, although whaling in the area had taken place since 1840.

Peck was given tight accommodation by the new proprietor, Crawford Noble of Aberdeen, Scotland, who had just acquired the station from Williams & Co. of New London, Connecticut. Peck was given housing in a building 20×10 ft., which was altogether too small for the main use, religious service, on an island with a population of 171, and many services were conducted outside in the open air.

Peck’s clear delivery earned him the sobriquet *Uqammaq* (“one who speaks well”) and, for his zeal, “Apostle to the Inuit.” He successfully completed four two-year terms, from 1894 to 1905, as Anglican minister at Blacklead Island, punctuated with one-year furloughs to England, to visit his wife, Sara Ann (Coleman) Peck, and family. We have from him an Inuktitut translation of the *Four Apostle* chapters in the *New Testament* (1878), portions of an Inuktitut translation of the *Book of Common Prayer* (1881), an *Eskimo-Grammar* (1919-54), and an *Inuktitut-English dictionary* (1925). A documentary of his work and achievements is given by Peck himself (2006),¹⁴ and a summary of his feats by F. Laugrand (2005).¹⁵

Blacklead Island was designated a National Historic Site in 1978.

Endnotes

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14. Edmund James Peck, *Apostle to the Inuit: The Journals and Ethnographic Notes of Edmund James Peck – The Baffin Years, 1894-1905* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006).
15. Frédéric Laugrand, “Peck, Edmund James,” *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967-): 15:815-16.

