

Connections: First Baptist Church, & St. Peter's Reserve Presentation to Broadway-First Baptist Church, June 2025

Synopsis:

Our church family of Broadway-First Baptist is deeply rooted in our community and has been for over the past 150 years, almost since the very birth of the province of Manitoba. Soon after that creation, named for "where the Spirit lives", our forebears at **First Baptist Church** Winnipeg welcomed into its fold a charismatic and gifted believer, motivated to spread Jesus' love and believers' baptism among his relations and kinsfolk on what were then called 'Indian' reservations -- today's First Nation communities.

His name was **William Henry Prince** and his home community was **St. Peter's Reserve**, found close to the town of Selkirk. Our church's ties to Reverend Prince and his flock there and elsewhere throughout Manitoba's Interlake were animated by Prince's passion and nurtured by the St. Peter's community, who welcomed First Baptist into their homes and extended their hospitality and spiritual fellowship to their non-Indigenous brothers and sisters every Christmas throughout the 1890s and into the turn of the 20th century.

But national, provincial and local pressures brought ill winds to St. Peter's and the Indigenous community that had been prospering there, even in spite of promises made in Treaty No. 1 that were being broken almost before the ink had dried on them. In September, 1907, St. Peter's residents, many of whom were away from the community engaged in seasonal hunting and fishing expeditions, were faced with a hasty and orchestrated decision that would alter the course of their lives for generations: to surrender their fertile lands along the Red River for alternative lands unseen. A meeting was called with little notice, terms were outlined in a language few could hear, let alone understand, and a vote was taken with no regard for privacy and every attempt to manipulate the outcome through the allure of cash. The desired result was obtained and the people were swiftly displaced to lands far more remote, far less suited to agriculture and far more prone to flooding.

And all this happened in the absence of any discernible allyship shown by the ministers and congregation of First Baptist Church Winnipeg, in spite of nearly two decades of close associations. William Henry Prince disappears from mention in church records, as does the Baptist chapel built by the flock he shepherded at St. Peter's. The question for us today remains: what are we, the remnant of those Christians who now fellowship together at **Broadway-First Baptist Church** today, called to do in response to this injustice, and by way of reconciliation?

This is a story about relationships between believers.

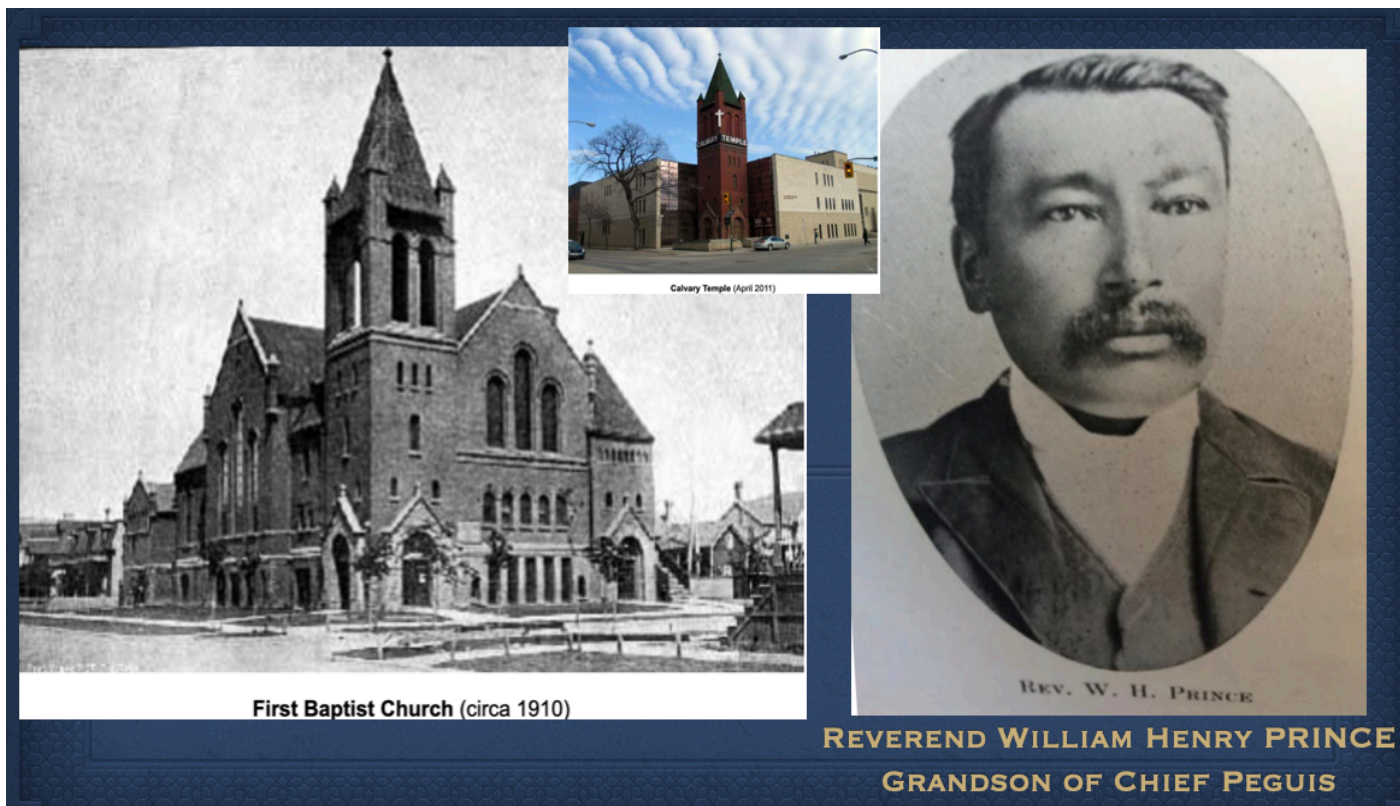
This is a message about bearing witness to the past and thinking about the future.

At the Canadian Museum for Human Rights, when we speak of rights being denied
— rights to freedom, to protections from harm, to a life of dignity and respect —
we speak of Perpetrators, Victims, Bystanders and Upstanders.

This is an account of Upstanders and Bystanders, Victims and Perpetrators
who made choices, the effects of which echo down to the present day.

We are invited to think about who are the victims in this story, who are the perpetrators, who stood up for their neighbours and who stood by and saw, but took no action.





The Church and a Christian of consequence

Pictured above are two among the main players in a story that reached a turning point about 120 years ago. On the left one can recognize present-day Calvary temple which was originally First Baptist Church Winnipeg. That bell tower was built along with a Sanctuary that no longer exists, in 1893. This community of Baptists was first established as a church some 18 years before that, in 1875, in a wooden church on Rupert Avenue in present-day ChinaTown.

Our faith forebears were visited by the gentleman on the right, William Henry Prince.

He was born around 1848 and married to Catherine Bear. Interestingly, there is no sure date of his passing. He was the second son of Henry Prince, a Chief of St. Peter's Reserve. His father Henry first became Chief of that Indigenous community around the same time First-Baptist became a church, in 1876.

What really starts to make this story a part of Manitoba history, is when we go back one generation more before Prince and his father, and we learn that William Henry was the grandson of Chief Peguis, the man who welcomed the Selkirk Settlers to Manitoba, and signed the Selkirk-Peguis Treaty in 1817, the first treaty between Indigenous and Settler folk in Western Canada. And if we go in the other direction from William Henry Prince, chronologically we find that his grandson was none other than Sargent Tommy Prince, the most decorated Indigenous war hero in Canadian history.

The point being: this man, who walked into a past incarnation of our church one day in the 1890s, was both the *product* of, and *producer* of individuals of unique gifts and of remarkable events in the history of Manitoba and of Canada.

A word about sources for the story

To set us in the context of the present day, credit must be given to the person pictured here. **Jodi Spargur** has twice visited our congregation; her last visit to Broadway-First Baptist Church was in March of 2024, to bring a message to us entitled “*Jesus, the horse whisperer*”. She also helped lead a webinar organized by Canadian Baptists of Western Canada held last January, 2025 called “*Doctrine of Discovery: Exploring its hidden roots*”. It was there that she made reference to the story detailed in the following pages. Nine years ago, Jodi published a research paper which was presented at the *Baptist Heritage and Identity Commission* of the *Baptist World Alliance Conference* in Vancouver.¹ What she described inspired me to research sources including the Manitoba Historical Society, the Selkirk Museum and talks given by **Niigaanwewidam Sinclair**, an Anishinaabe scholar, author, and columnist from Peguis First Nation and Head of Indigenous Studies at the University of Manitoba. Niigaan is, incidentally, the son of the late Senator Murray Sinclair, and a good friend of our family. I also benefitted from reading portions of Susan Stevenson’s copy of *The Baptist Story in Western Canada* by Dr. J. S. Clark, among other sources listed at the end of this story. There are still many pieces to try to figure out... and opportunities for us to think and pray and talk about what the pieces of the puzzle we do have that connect us to an Indigenous community once close by, and now farther away from us geographically, historically and perhaps spiritually.



¹ JodiLynn Spargur, “*Baptists and First Peoples of Canada 1846-1976: A History*”, Canadian Baptists of Western Canada, July 7, 2016, <https://archive.org/details/bwa-2016-spargur-canadianbaptists>

Seeds of Relationship I: Peguis-Selkirk and Treaty 1

William Henry Prince was born in a community that had existed in Manitoba since the 1790s, when his grandfather **Chief Peguis** led a group of Saulteaux

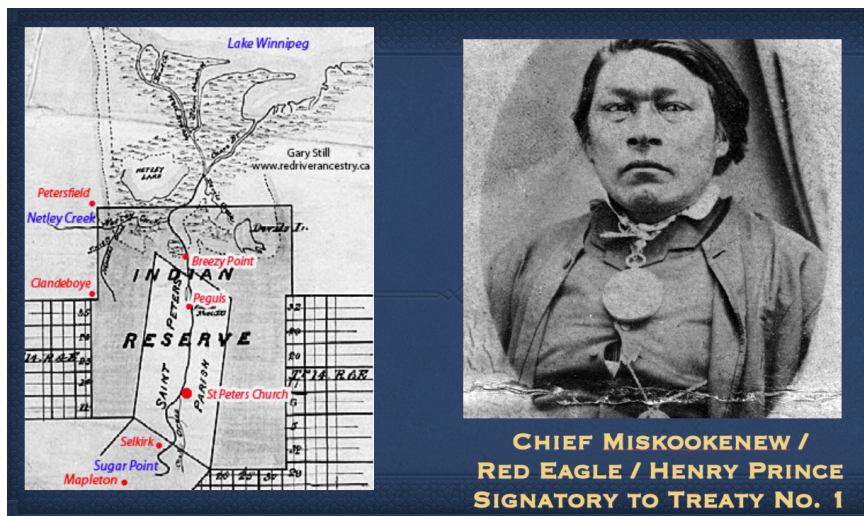
(or **Anishnabé** or Ojibwa) from the area near present-day Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, to settle in an area on the banks of Netley Creek, just south of Lake Winnipeg.

By the time William

Henry Prince was born, that settlement had begun farming in lands along the Red River a few miles to the south, up to the point where Cook's Creek flows into the Red River — an area that came to be known as St. Peter's.² It was named by Anglicans both Indigenous and non-Indigenous as one of the parish land holdings administered by the Hudson's Bay Company. It was also sometimes referred to by the Irish name "Clandeboyne".

Then, in 1869, the Hudson's Bay Company sold all the lands that had been "given to it" in 1670 by King Charles II of England, to the new government of the Dominion of Canada. By 1871, the federal government started negotiating with First Nations in Western Canada; making the treaties we now call the "numbered treaties", 1 through 11, covering most of Western Canada. Treaty 1, the territory we often acknowledge at the start of our worship services, covers the area occupied today by the city of Winnipeg, and also includes the community of St. Peter's.

The Indigenous residents of that community were and are both Anishnabé and Nehiyaw (Cree). The land reserved for them in 1871 stretched from the south end of Eveline Street in present-day Selkirk to Netley Lake in the north. Under the terms covering the entire 43,000 square kilometres included in Treaty 1, each family of five members, minimum, was accorded 160 acres or 65 hectares of land. In the cases of most reserves in Western Canada, that reserve land was far away from their actual community or from their traditional gathering places. In this sense, St. Peter's was the exception to that rule — it was *not* so far away from other (non-Indigenous) population centres, nor as isolated as most First Nations reserves were and still are today. The reason? It may be because of the historical importance of the Selkirk Peguis Treaty of 1817, and the key role community members had in welcoming the new settlers and helping them survive in the early 1800's. St. Peter's Reserve lands amounted to some 75,000 acres in total or 303 square kilometres — a considerable portion of land. The size of this reserve territory pales in comparison, however, with the vast holdings to which the governments of Canada and Manitoba gained access: over 40,000 square kilometres. In other words, St Peter's residents, with their 303 square kilometres, represented less than 1% of all the lands that settler Manitobans & Canadians gained — 0.75%, to be exact.



² "History - Peguis Surrender Claim Trust - Overview", Peguis First Nation, , 2025. <https://peguissurrendertrust.com/overview/history/>

Another set of provisions in the numbered treaties obligated the federal government to provide the necessary support for First Nations to set themselves up as farmers. Indeed, since hunting, fishing and trapping were considered to be 'backwards' means of making a living by the Confederation-era politicians of the day, agriculture was held out to First Nations as a sign of the government's good will; that 'Indians' were being educated to use to the 'more advanced' ways of the white man. St. Peter's was among the communities most enthusiastic about claiming this right of transitional support in exchange for the tens of thousands of square kilometres they were officially sharing with the newcomers, who were arriving by the trainload every day. The Anishnabé and Nehiyawak of the Great Lakes woodlands and the Grasslands had been practicing the cultivation of corn, beans, squash, sunflowers and other crops for over 3000 years, and the soil along the Red River was fertile. Indigenous peoples had already gained thousands of years of experiences as agriculturalists in the region and were keen to modernize.

However, like many reserves during the first 20 years of the signing of the treaties, what the government was contractually duty-bound to fulfill and provide under the terms of the treaty — livestock, seed, tools and training — were not what was delivered. Numerous are the records of communities alerting the government to the fact that livestock delivered arrived sick or diseased, that equipment supplied was inappropriate or inadequate to the conditions of the land — or already broken — and that start-up seed arrived too late in the season to be planted or too old to be of any use.³

And yet, in spite of all this, the community of St. Peter's Reserve had become, by the time William Henry Prince steps onto the scene in the early 1890s, one of the most successful Indigenous communities in Western Canada. This success went largely unacknowledged among authorities and newcomers. The views of the day are reflected in numerous editorials and newspaper articles⁴; that agricultural land under 'Indian' control was 'wasted' land and that those reserves would be much better managed in the hands of new immigrants. St. Peter's people maintained a mixed economy, well adapted to the resources and climate of the country. But their mixed crops and interplanting, their seasonal hunting and berry picking times away from the farm fields were at odds with European and industrializing ways of agriculture which favoured the practice of monoculture and of full-time farm employment.

St. Peter's and its neighbours

Added to this self-perceived superiority on the part of surrounding white settlers, St. Peter's residents were becoming all-too-aware of the fact that non-Indigenous settlements were pressing in from all sides. The Town of Selkirk was legally incorporated in 1882, the Town of East Selkirk in 1883, and by 1884 the Municipality of St. Andrews and St. Clements had split their shared boundary into two corporate units running up each side of the Red River north of the St. Peter's Reserve.⁵ The Reserve was effectively surrounded by non-Indigenous corporate authorities, all competing for settlers, business and industry.

³ Kiinawin Kawindomowin Story Nations, "St. Peter's", University of Toronto, <https://storynations.utoronto.ca/index.php/st-peters/>

⁴ "The beginning of the end" St. Peter's Reserve, City of Selkirk Museum, <https://selkirkmuseum.ca/places/st-peters-reserve/>

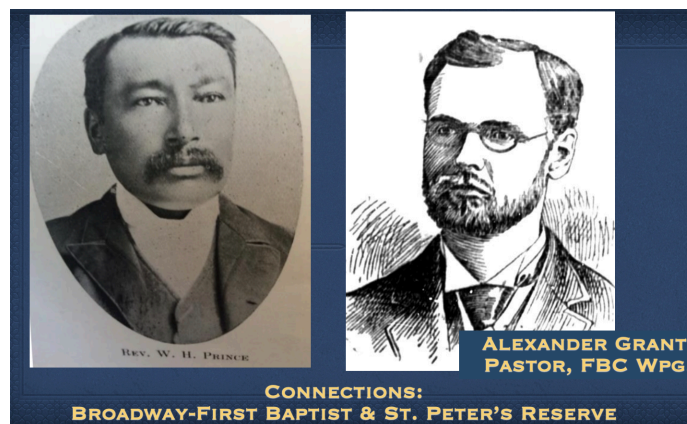
⁵ "Local government for east side of Red River" Red River North Heritage, <https://redrivernorthheritage.com/local-government-for-east-side-of-the-red-river/>

In 1883 came the first tangible sign that certain residents of Selkirk were irritated by and perhaps jealous of St. Peter's success. **James Colcleugh** a prominent Selkirk citizen, launched a petition that called on the Canadian government to "sell" the St. Peter's Reserve and make the land available for purchase, since having it in Indigenous hands was, in his words, a "*drawback to our growth and prosperity*."⁶ And by "our" we can understand he meant non-Indigenous folk. It may strike us today as puzzling how Colcleugh could speak of the federal government "selling" land that had been reserved in a signed treaty under royal assent to a First Nation. Inasmuch as it was a mistaken assumption on Colcleugh's part to think the land was the federal government's to sell if it desired, it is an irony of the treaties that even the small fraction of Canada that is "reserve land" for Indigenous peoples in Canada is still, under what the Indian Act, "crown" land, not First Nations property. More ironically, in the case of St. Peter's, even those land holdings that Indigenous families held title to, adjacent to St. Peter's before 1870, was subsumed into reserve land under an 1876 provision of the Indian Act, and those landholders thereby lost the title they had under federal law⁷. This illustrates the kind of attitude described by Spargur and others on the *Doctrine of Discovery*; the historical and legal concept (based on a Papal Bull of 1493) that justified the colonial seizure of lands from Indigenous peoples by asserting that European nations had a right to claim sovereignty over lands "discovered" by them, especially if those lands were not inhabited by Christians.⁸ A final irony: the entrenched superiority seems to have been undiminished even when many, if not most, of St. Peter's residents were at least nominally Christian.

Seeds of Relationship II: William Henry Prince and First Baptist Broadway

So now, let's take a step back from the gathering storm clouds over St. Peter's Reserve and circle back to William Henry Prince, as he attains adulthood during this period of growing success and growing tension for St. Peter's. William Henry Prince had been raised Anglican, as his father had been, since his grandfather, Chief Peguis had converted to Anglicanism during his friendship with Reverend William Cockran⁹.

In fact, Peguis changed his name to William in honour of the Reverend that shared stories about Jesus with him, and he took on the surname "King" out of reverence for his Lord. It



⁶ "The beginning of the end," City of Selkirk Museum, Op. Cit.

⁷ Red River North Heritage, "St. Peter's Reserve: Surrender, Land Dispute and Hay Marsh", <https://redrivernorthheritage.com/st-peters-reserve-surrender-land-dispute-hay-marsh/>

⁸ Travis Tomchuk, "The Doctrine of Discovery, A 500-year-old colonial idea that still affects Canada's treatment of Indigenous peoples", Canadian Museum for Human Rights, May 2023, <https://humanrights.ca/story/doctrine-discovery>

⁹ Gordon Goldsborough, "Memorable Manitobans: Peguis [William King] (c1774-1864)", Manitoba Historical Society, <https://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/people/peguis.shtml>

then made sense to him that the sons and grandsons of this newly named “King” should have the surname “Prince” not only to follow tradition for hereditary leaders but to honour the Prince of Peace.

Dr. J.S. Clark quotes William Henry Prince as he describes his journey of faith:

My parents were baptized under the Church of England and I was told I was baptized too. When about eight years, my mother taught me to repeat some prayers at night and morning but I did not understand them. When I was about eleven I was put in one of the French colleges in St. Boniface (Man.) and I managed to know to read a little, and write and understand the French ; but it was against my will and I did not like to go back again. After one year I was put in the English college (St. John's Winnipeg). I was there two years but I could not read English. At first I did not know except one word 'Yes' — and could not learn the language, but managed to learn to read, write and count...”¹⁰

But by the mid-1880's when William Henry Prince would have been in his early thirties, he had arrived at a different understanding of his faith and spirituality than his father and grandfather had had. He had come to the conviction that he needed to reclaim the baptism that he had had as an infant, and to be baptized as an adult believer, as practiced by the Baptist Church. That is how he found his way to meeting **Alexander Grant** the pastor of First Baptist Church in 1889; a relationship that continued until at least 1897¹¹.

It was in our church that William Henry Prince was baptized. And immediately, according to Baptist records, he expressed to Pastor Grant a desire to spread the Gospel to all his relations, not only in the community of St. Peter's, where the Anglican Church was established, but to other Cree (Nehiyaw) and Saulteaux (Anishinabe) and Oji-Cree (Anish-Ininu) communities throughout southern Manitoba and the InterLake region.¹² Thus, as Jodi Spargur writes in her research paper: *“The heart of the Baptist work among the Cree peoples in Manitoba was a heart that **came to** the Baptists, not one that **came from them.**”*

A Baptist who worked with William Henry Prince as an outreach minister, **Henry George Mellick** says Prince declared to the leadership at First Baptist Church that God had laid on his heart a desire to bring the message of the gospel to his people in the areas outside of Winnipeg, and William Henry Prince asked the BFC leadership to commission him¹³ for itinerant work among his people. Whether they did or not is not clear; Jodi Spargur explains :

“I don't know how much or if Prince is supported directly. I do know that the Baptist Women's Mission supported some of his work but I don't know what parts of it exactly.”¹⁴

It is clear that William had been gifted by God to inspire others. It is known that despite his negative experience in French school in St-Boniface, he became a gifted linguist,

¹⁰ Dr. J.S. Clark, “Mission Work Among the Indians, 1899-1919” , chapter 17, pp 380-381, provided by Susan Stevenson.

¹¹ “Memorable Manitobans: Alexander Grant”. Manitoba Historical Society, https://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/people/grant_a.shtml

¹² Dr. J.S. Clark, Op. Cit.

¹³ Mellick, Henry George. *The Indians and Our Indian Missions*. Winnipeg: H.C. Stovel, 1909.

¹⁴ JodiLynn Spargur, e-mail message, June 10, 2025.

conversant in seven Indigenous languages in addition to excellent literacy in English and a working knowledge of French.

Prince focused his efforts beginning in 1891 on his relations and friends on St. Peter's Reserve. There was soon a community of Christians there who were practicing their faith outside the Anglican Church; William Henry Prince was baptizing them.

There are four details surrounding this work of Prince's in association with First Baptist that provoke curiosity. First: Records show that the leadership at First Baptist Church decided that it was **not "advisable" (in their words) to organize a church on the reserve.**¹⁵ The reason given: it would not be possible, in the view of the leadership, to keep accurate numbers of the baptisms that had taken place. First Baptist Church Winnipeg preferred that those who had been baptized be recorded and enrolled as members of First Baptist Church in Winnipeg.

A second detail that emerges is that by 1893, the Indigenous Baptists in St. Peter's Reserve secured land for **a mission chapel.** *"They (meaning St. Peter's Baptists) showed us the parcel of land procured for the Mission Chapel; it is a lovely spot, close to the river. The scenery all around the river is delightful. The people live in neat houses - - there are about 1,200 Indians on the Reserve. There is an Anglican and a*



Roman church , four schools (three Protestant and one Catholic). English is taught in the schools and generally understood, though not much spoken."(NWB March 15, 1893)¹⁶. Construction began, and the St. Peter's residents completed it by the end of that same year. The new chapel was opened and dedicated as *"First Native Baptist Church"* in January of 1894.¹⁷

A third detail that arises out of the historic record at this time is a tradition that developed between the two faith communities that carries on for over a decade: that **St Peter's Baptists hosted members of First Baptist Winnipeg** at Christmas time. FBC Winnipeg members would travel there annually, taking four to six hours to reach the community by sleigh, where they would receive the St. Peter's First Nations' hospitality, led by the new FBC Indigenous church members for a few days. They would worship together in Cree and in English services.¹⁸

¹⁵ Reverend JodiLynn Spargur, *Baptists and First Peoples of Canada 1846-1976: A History*, paper presented to: Baptist Heritage and Identity Commission Baptist World Alliance Annual Meetings Vancouver, BC July 7, 2016.

¹⁶ Dr. J.S. Clark, Op. Cit.

¹⁷ In studying Clark's account, I am unable to determine if First Native Baptist Church is indeed recognized as such by the Baptist Union, and if, therefore, it was empowered to record its own baptisms and member roll.

¹⁸ JodiLynn Spargur, Op. Cit., p. 9.

A fourth curious detail emerging from the relationship between First Baptist Church Winnipeg and the First Native Baptist Church of St. Peter's, is that the first pastor hired to lead this flock was not William Henry Prince. It was a non-Indigenous pastor named **Reverend B. Davies**, a former missionary to Bedouins in Syria. Why, one wonders, was William Henry Prince, newly commissioned by the Baptist Church, not chosen to lead his hometown flock? Spargur feels it was to free him up to journey to other reserves and share his faith. Interestingly, the record shows that Reverend Davies spent only a year at the First Native Baptist Church before being transferred to work between Long Plains Gardens and Swan Lake reserves. It is also worth noting that Davies house in St. Peter's, which had been paid for and newly built thanks to funds from the Baptist Women's Convention of Ontario and Quebec, was converted into a new chapel building, able to provide space for more than 20 to worship.¹⁹ This appears to be a labour of charity to address the perceived needs of the non-Indigenous pastor and suggests the precedence it appears to take, absent other details, over the needs of the growing congregation.

And so, William Henry Prince becomes an itinerant missionary pastor. The man who took the photograph of William Henry Prince and "Mrs. Mellick" was *Mister Mellick*, i.e., **Henry George Mellick**. He wrote a book about his time in Manitoba published in 1909 called *The Indians and Our Indian Missions*.

Mellick comes across as a remarkable upstander for the inherent dignity of First Nations people. In his memoirs, he criticizes the union of church and state in the running



of **residential schools**. He argues that the partnership (between government and churches) was good neither for the church nor for the government, nor, notably, for Native peoples. Mellick asserts that it was the duty of the government to provide quality education and the duty of the church to lead people to Christ, but that the union of church and state was, in fact, yielding neither result. He writes:

"Why do we want the Indians to be like white people? I believe the Indian as an Indian is naturally better than the white... If the Indian has sunk down since the white man came here, it is because we have put a stopper on his learning anything from us because of our insatiable greed. That the whole Indian population has not become perfect demons is evidence of their greatness. The great Indian warriors... were men of ability, discernment and power. There are Indian Washingtons and Lincolns lying beneath the sod who were murdered in cold blood by men of 'superior' birth!"

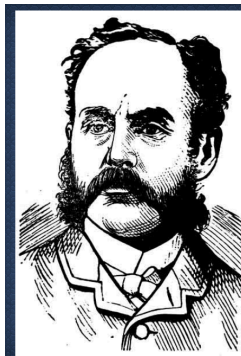
¹⁹ Dr. J. S. Clark, Op. Cit., p. 385

Jodi Spargur comments: *"These are strong sentiments in a time where government policy was that we must 'kill the Indian in the child' so we might save the man."*²⁰

The date on the Mellick photograph, the last known image we have of William Henry Prince, is **1895**, when the St. Peter's faith leader would have been about 47 years of age. He is noted in the Manitoba Free Press as having inspired a large crowd of Baptists in St. Thomas, Ontario in 1894 with the story of his conversion.²¹ The next mention we find of Prince in the public record is in 1899, when he was elected Chief of the St. Peter's Reserve.²² **The years of his Prince's secular leadership — and indeed of First Baptist Church's entire relationship with First Native Church of St. Peter's — are marked on the one hand by silence in the church record, and by turmoil and scandal in the community**, especially with respect to its treatment at the hands of outside authorities.

Perpetrators: Howell, Semmens, Pedley et al

As pressure grew on the St. Peter's community, and William Henry Prince presumably balances his roles as preacher and chief, a jurist named Hector Mansfield Howell enters the story. In the year 1906, Howell, as Chief Justice of the Manitoba Court of Appeal, is tasked by the provincial government with resolving the demands of Selkirk residents that the reserve at St. Peter's be moved. Howell publishes a report in which he finds that, on the one hand,



Hector Mansfield Howell
Member of Holy Trinity
Anglican Church
(Winnipeg),
Judge,
Manitoba Court of
Appeal

the First Nations community of **St. Peter's was deserving of more land than what they had been given following the signing of Treaty No. 1** — 1000 more acres, in fact. But on the other hand, he uses this recommendation to make the argument that, since there was no room to expand the reserve land where the reserve sat, and since it would be too large and inconvenient to establish those 1000 acres apart from the riverside lots of St. Peter's, that it was "in the best interest" of the Cree and Saulteaux to surrender their reserve lands in exchange for territory elsewhere.

Howell's recommendation prompted the federal government to organize **a fateful meeting that was held on September 24, 1907 in St. Peter's**. The sole item on the agenda: to discuss the possibility of surrendering the reserve. The list of irregularities and injustices that ensued at that meeting includes²³:

- St. Peter's Reserve members were told about the meeting only one day in advance.
- The timing of the meeting seemed deliberately calculated to generate the desired result for Selkirk settlers; autumn was when many St. Peter's community members were away

²⁰ Spargur, Op. Cit. pp. 18-19.

²¹ "Baptist Work- Manitoba and Northwest Fields Reviewed in Convention at St. Thomas", Manitoba Free Press, October 27, 1894, page 5, <https://access-newspaperarchive-com.wpl-dbs.winnipeg.ca/ca/manitoba/winnipeg/winnipeg-free-press/1894/10-27/page-5>

²² "Indian Payments - Inspector McColl says the Indian Population is not increasing", Manitoba Free Press, August 5, 1899, page 10, <https://access-newspaperarchive-com.wpl-dbs.winnipeg.ca/ca/manitoba/winnipeg/winnipeg-free-press/1899/08-05/page-10>

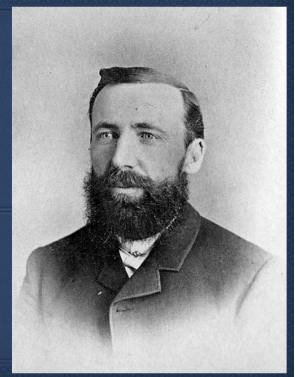
²³ City of Selkirk Museum, Op. Cit., "All called to vote"

from the reserve duck hunting, on fishing expeditions before the freeze up, and bringing crops to market. Many of those eligible to vote were unable to attend the meeting.

- Following the arrival of the government authorities the previous day by boat, they arrange to hold the meeting in a building was too small to admit all those who wished to attend the meeting.²⁴ Witnesses from all sides say that many people had to stand outside, where they tried to listen to the proceedings through windows and doors.
- At the meeting, the government appointed **Indian Agent for Clandeboye, John Semmens**²⁵, allegedly summarized a few of the terms and conditions for the proposed land surrender agreement. Those terms, written in legalese, were briefly summarized in English only, even though most St. Peter's adults had little understanding of English, let alone legalese English.
- The surrender agreement included no details about the land to be offered in place of the land being given up at St. Peter's; community members were simply told that the Chief and Councillors would be able to "select" the land. This was, as it turned out, a fabrication, since the land (along the Fisher River) was the only one proffered.
- One aspect of the surrender agreement not divulged at the meeting: the Chief (i.e. William Henry Prince) would receive 180 acres of land; the Councillors 120 acres, while other St. Peter's residents would receive 60 acres. One community member would later testify that many in the community would have only been familiar with, and approving of, Chief and Councillors being entitled only to "uniforms over and above what the others got".²⁶
- One of the officials present, **Superintendent-General of Indian Affairs in Manitoba Frank Pedley** threatened that "he had brought \$5,000 with him and that if the surrender were not made he would take it away again."
- Despite the stated purpose of the meeting as being convened to "discuss" a potential land surrender, government officials call for an immediate vote on the largely unexplained provisions of the surrender agreement. The community was not expecting to actually make a decision on the issue at the meeting. Chief William Henry Prince, would later testify that *"he had not gone to that meeting to vote for the surrender, but in order to understand the question."*²⁷

Reverend John Semmens
(Methodist)

- Principal, 'Indian' Residential
"Industrial School" Brandon,
1895-1900
- 'Indian Agent' of Clandeboye &
St. Peter's Reserves, 1906
- Shareholder, Selkirk real estate



²⁴ By some accounts, the largest General Store in St. Peter's, by others, the largest schoolhouse.

²⁵ John Semmens was a methodist minister who, prior to being named Indian Agent at Clandeboye and St. Peter's, had been the principal of the Brandon Industrial School for 'Indian' children. **Semmens also happened to be a shareholder in the Selkirk Land and Investment Company** — one of the groups pushing hardest for St. Peter's reserve to be made available to non-Indigenous real estate developers.

²⁶ "Prince and Asham give evidence - Latter makes charge of attempted bribery against S. J. Jackson — Sitings at Selkirk, Ex-Chief Prince submitted to searching examination by C. P. Fullerton", July 27, 1911, pp 1, 16. <https://access-newspaperarchive-com.wpl-dbs.winnipeg.ca/ca/manitoba/winnipeg/winnipeg-free-press/1911/07-27>

²⁷ Manitoba Free Press, July 16, 1911, page 16.

- There was no secret ballot held for this vote. The Indian Agent asked the assembled treaty members to separate into two lines; those in favour of the proposal to surrender their reserve lands in one queue, and those against surrendering their reserve lands in favour of lands further north, in another queue. And yet the federal government had been implementing the secret ballot in federal elections since 1876. Apparently, even 32 years later, that right is ignored insofar as Indigenous voting is concerned. Manitoba had instituted the secret ballot in 1888, but no such right was accorded the remnant of St. Peter's residents present for a premature vote in 1906.
- As the vote was called, confusion ensued; there were calls by community members for clarification even as some of the St. Peter's members were urged to line up. Soon, it became apparent that the "No" line up (against surrendering St. Peter's land) was getting longer than the 'Yes' line up. At that point, Reverend/Indian-Agent/Land-Speculator John Semmens reportedly gestured to the 'Yes' queue and called out (*to the 'No' voters*) in broken Cree: "*Which of you want \$90? Go over there!*"²⁸
- Superintendent-General Pedley, according to numerous eyewitness accounts, once again held up his satchel full of cash and emphasized that it contained \$5000 that would be handed out that very day, if a surrender was achieved.²⁹

Despite these glaring improprieties, the officials present announced that 106 had voted in favour, with 98 opposed — much to the surprise of many St. Peter's residents present. These included William Asham, a community member elected chief in the period after the displacement of St. Peter's, who testified that "*He had been much surprised. As he had believed that there was a bigger crowd against the surrender*"³⁰... In favour of *what* was not clear to those who cast their ballot; some only understood they were receiving \$90 and obtaining \$5000 for their community, and were completely unsure of what else they were agreeing to. Opposed to the land surrender were a nearly equal number who had their doubts about this Trojan Horse windfall. Close to 30 community members present abstained from voting, due to their being unsure about what was being proposed. **No record was kept of who had voted**, and who, though eligible to vote, had not voted. Clearly, though, a **minority** of the 233 "eligible residents" had voted in favour of the agreement. And even that number (233 'eligible' voters) seems an underestimate, given First Baptist Church's estimate a decade earlier that "*there are about 1,200 Indians on the Reserve*" — even if one discounts children. The vote quickly became a matter of controversy; the short notice, the inappropriate venue, the lack of translation, the failure to assure privacy in voting, the gross simplification of the question at hand (money or no money), and the confusion quickly drew the notice of returning community members, local media and even the local Member of Parliament.

Within days, St. Peter's residents were being moved to an area which came to be named after William Henry Prince's grandfather, Chief Peguis. Peguis Reserve is found along the

²⁸ City of Selkirk Museum, Ibid.

²⁹ Sarah Carter, "Manitoba History: Site Review: St. Peter's and the Interpretation of the Agriculture of Manitoba's Aboriginal People", St. John's College, University of Manitoba, Autumn, 1989
https://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/mb_history/18/manitobaaboriginalagriculture.shtml

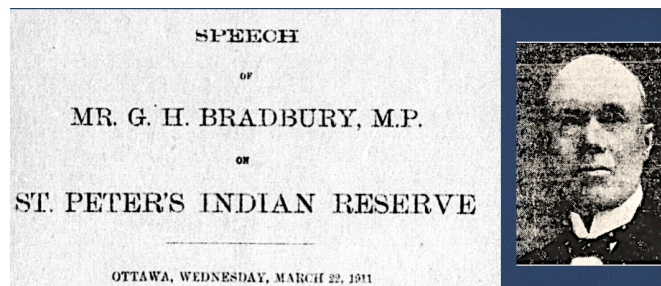
³⁰ Manitoba Free Press, July 27 1911, page 16

Fisher River, 20 kilometres southwest of Lake Winnipeg, approximately 196 kilometres north of Winnipeg, and 170 km northwest of the original St. Peter's community which Chief Peguis had established, and which his son had secured in Treaty No. 1.³¹ In an article written for the Manitoba Free Press in October 1907, just days after the fateful vote, a representative of the federal Department of the Interior, **R. D. Foley** declared that the Fisher River district was *"without doubt the finest I have yet seen in Manitoba for farming purposes outside the prairie sections. The land is first class, deep alluvial soil on clay bottom, free from stone and easily cleared, having been burnt over, leaving no more timbers than would be required for settlement purposes."*³² Unfortunately, the glowing report by Foley was far from a true description of the land, which is more properly referred to as marginal scrub and swamp land prone to seasonal flooding. As it turned out, fertile alluvial black soil farmland at St. Peter's was exchanged for a far less valuable tract.³³ Where St. Peter's had all the amenities and good infrastructure linking it to surrounding communities, including Winnipeg, Peguis had no houses, no schools, no churches, no roads. Those were all decades in the development. Some have yet to be developed.

Unlikely Upstanders: Bradbury and Commissioners

Enter Mr. **George. H. Bradbury**, Member of Parliament for the federal riding of Selkirk. He was a Conservative who had narrowly won the House of Commons seat representing the Selkirk riding in 1908, the year after the unlawful plebiscite in his riding.

Residents of St. Peter's had sent him a petition outlining their opposition to the surrendering of their reserve. Bradbury investigated the matter and became convinced of the injustice of it.



He questioned the validity of the surrender in the House of Commons in 1909. He called the sale of the land a *"barefaced swindle"* and that if the agreement went ahead, it would be a *"crime against everything that is decent and fair, as well as against the town of Selkirk to legalize this disgraceful transaction"*³⁴. In April, 1909, he made a four hour long speech recounting the whole St. Peter's scandal, ending his marathon by calling for a vote of censure against the Liberal government for alleged bribery and wrongdoing on the part of the officials of the Indian Department. Bradbury's motion did not pass. The Minister responsible, Frank Oliver, said Bradbury's accusations were based on fabrications. But the Department did quietly begin an investigation which confirmed many of Bradbury's points. However the investigation was never made public, despite Bradbury's efforts.

³¹ "Peguis First Nation (formerly St. Peter's Band) Oshki-ishkonigan", Wikipedia, August 1, 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peguis_First_Nation

³² R. D. Foley, Manitoba Free Press, October 25, 1907, <https://archives.winnipegfreepress.com/winnipeg-free-press/1907-10-25/>

³³ Bruce Cherney, "St. Peter's surrender — Howell claimed new reserve was fully satisfactory to band members", Winnipeg Regional Real Estate News, April 11, 2011, <https://www.winnipegregionallrealestatenews.com/publications/real-estate-news/1398>

³⁴ Canadiana, House of Commons Debates, Third Session, 11th Parliament, Speech of Mr. G. H. Bradbury, M.P. on St. Peter's Indian Reserve, Ottawa, Wednesday, March 22, 1911, <https://www.canadiana.ca/view/oocihm.66551/1>

The conclusions of the unpublished investigation may explain why , in 1911 - four years after the expulsion of the Indigenous community at St. Peter's, Manitoba's provincial government led by **Premier Rodmond Roblin** appointed a **Royal Commission** to investigate the "Land Surrender". During the commission's investigation, the legal counsel for St. Peter's residents set out to prove that **William Henry Prince, in his role as chief at the time of the plebiscite, had accepted money and land as the price for having voted for the surrender** of the St. Peter's lands.³⁵ The article states in dramatic terms, Prince's denial³⁶ of the accusations:

*"This the old man³⁷ stoutly denied, in spite of the persistent efforts counsel to get him to admit to the contrary. The ex-chief³⁸ stated that he had received nothing from anyone for voting for the surrender. **Drunkenness amongst 'my young people' had been the cause of his desire to see the band on a new reserve.**"*

Following Prince's testimony, community leader **William Asham**, accused the local Member of Parliament at the time, George Bradbury's predecessor, **Samuel J. Jackson**³⁹, of having offered bribes to community leaders to get them to vote for surrender. **One year later, on January 12, 1912, it determined that the surrender was invalid.**⁴⁰ However the Commission's decision held no legal force and so the federal government was under no legal obligation to rescind the agreement.

In the weeks following the community's removal, real estate speculators had, by December 1907, been able to purchase riverside farmland at an average price of \$5 an acre. By the time the provincial Commission of Investigation was underway, those lands were reselling in the 1910s at multiple times (twice, thrice) that price. One of the land

³⁵ "Prince and Asham give evidence, etc." Op. Cit., page 1

³⁶ Manitoba Free Press articles in July & August of 1911 give fascinating details Prince's testimony: Prince admitted (in testifying 4 years after the events) that "*his memory was failing*". Prince remembered the band holding a meeting and deciding that they would not further discuss the surrender with Chief Justice Howell.... Prince asserts "*Chief Justice Howell had not told him that he would get 189 acres of land if the surrender was made, nor had the chief justice told him anything about getting money for voting for the surrender. No one had said anything to him about receiving money. The government had not fulfilled its promise to assist him in the building of his house on the new reserve at Fisher River, nor had the government given his family the implements promised them.. He know nothing about irregularities in connection with the holding of the elections for chief and councillors. The government had not promised him that if the surrender went through he should remain chief for life. He had not gone to the meeting to vote for the surrender but in order to understand the question. He was willing to swear that.*"

³⁷ William Henry Prince would have been about 63 years old at the time of the Commission's investigation, having been born in 1848, approximately. However, when asked his age, Prince stated he was 80.

³⁸ William Henry Prince had lost his position earlier that year, replaced by Albert Rose. The sequence of elected chiefs pertinent to our examination goes as follows: 1891 - 1897 **William Asham**; 1897 - 1899 **Henry Prince** (William Henry's father, elected for 3rd time); 1899 - 1903 **William Henry Prince** (1st time); 1903 - 1905 **John H. Prince**; 1905 - 1911 **William Henry Prince** (elected for 2nd time); 1911 - 1917 **Albert Rose**.

³⁹ Gordon Goldsborough, "Memorable Manitobans, Samuel Jacob Jackson", Manitoba Historical Society, 7 January 2023, https://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/people/jackson_sj.shtml

⁴⁰ Bruce Cherney, Op. Cit., Manitoba Free Press, April 4, 1911

speculators, **William Frank**, gave an interview to the Winnipeg Free Press in which he said: *"In the light of to-day, the prices (I paid) look ridiculously low yet the sales were honestly made, and the public realized that, Why should a few agitators, seek to stir up strife and embarrass the government, which is making an honest effort to remove these people and improve conditions in Selkirk?"*⁴¹

Notwithstanding the efforts of Selkirk opposition MP George Bradbury, the federal government seemed more inclined to William Frank's point of view than to the findings of the Commissioners for the Province of Manitoba. Far from reconsidering the fraudulent circumstances in which the removal of people from St. Peter's had occurred, the federal government doubled down on the deal in 1916 by passing the **St. Peters Reserve Act**. This new law confirmed the surrender and validity of non-Indigenous land titles. Nearly 10 years had passed since the meeting in the school house, and tens of thousands of dollars had changed hands, the majority of the money ending up in the pockets of non-Indigenous land speculators. The cold fact was: had the federal government admitted that the 1907 vote been declared invalid, hundreds of new residents on Indigenous lands would have been displaced and hundreds of thousands of dollars would have been owing to Indigenous and non-Indigenous people alike.

In search of the 'real' William Henry Prince...

And where was William Henry Prince leading up to and through all of this? What remained of his work among his community, Christian and non-Christian? There are precious few details that appear in the public record, so far as I have been able to discover. One source found dated 1903, i.e. somewhere after he disappears from church accounts and before the 1907 vote, alleges that charges of frequent intoxication and wrong doing resulted in an Order-in-Council from Ottawa dismissing William Henry Prince from the office of Chief of the St. Peter's 'Band of Indians' in 1903.⁴² This apparent fall from grace could be linked to First Baptist Church's disassociation from Prince. It is worth noting that Prince was re-elected by the community just two years later, and that he testified that he was concerned about the consumption of alcohol by local youth on the eve of the 1907 land surrender plebiscite. In 1911, the year he defended himself against accusations of accepting bribes, the Winnipeg Tribune published a short notice under the heading *"Twenty Years Ago (today)"* to the effect that *"William Henry Prince, a blood Indian, has been called to the Baptist ministry (presumably at First Baptist, in July of 1891)."*⁴³ Several years later, in 1917, there is mention made, in a Manitoba Free Press article dated on May 11th of that year, mostly about his cousin (misidentified as William Henry's 'brother') also named William: *"Chief William Prince, a veteran who fought with Wolseley during the Northwest rebellion visited The Army and Navy veterans club... Mr. Prince is accompanied by his brother (sic) William Henry Prince, who is an Indian minister."*⁴⁴

⁴¹ Bruce Cherney, Ibid.

⁴² Red River North Heritage, Op. Cit.

⁴³ "Twenty Years Ago", Winnipeg Tribune, July 27, 1911, page 5, <https://access-newspaperarchive-com.wpl-dbs.winnipeg.ca/ca/manitoba/winnipeg/winnipeg-tribune/1911/07-27/page-5>

⁴⁴ "Indian Chief Visits Veterans", Manitoba Free Press, May 11, 1917, page 5, <https://access-newspaperarchive-com.wpl-dbs.winnipeg.ca/ca/manitoba/winnipeg/winnipeg-free-press/1917/05-11/page-5>

In 1922, William Henry Prince is mentioned in the Manitoba Free Press as chairing a Conference of Manitoba Chiefs at St. Peter's. It also mistakenly asserts that he, along with his father *Miscopensoo* or Red Eagle signed the 1871 Treaty (No. 1) and that he was 81 years of age, even though if he was born in 1848, he would have been 74 years old.⁴⁵ Finally, on Christmas Eve, 1923, the Brandon Sun cites William Henry Prince (*"grandson of the great Indian chief Peguis"*) as recalling a mild Christmas in 1875 comparable to the warm weather in 1924.⁴⁶ There appears to be no public record of his death, no obituary notice. Just as William Henry Prince seems to disappear from Baptist history after 1895, this central player — as victim? As collaborator? As Upstander? — in Baptist and Manitoba history fades out of view.

The aftermath: Oshki-ishkonigan and a Flood of Consequences

Ninety-one years after the St. Peter's Reserve removal, in 1998, the Canadian government acknowledged that the 1907 vote was indeed invalid. The descendants of that First Nation — the St. Peter's community — now live largely in Peguis First Nation. It has become the largest First Nations community in Manitoba, with a population of approximately 3,771 people who call it home full time. Interestingly, the Anishinabe name for the reserve on the First Nation's website is **Oshki-ishkonigan** meaning "new reserve" since, after all, Peguis had never established his community on the land it now occupies.⁴⁷ When others who live and work off reserve are added to the total, the community numbers 12,317 members. After 11 more years of negotiations, in 2009, the federal government offered compensation to the Peguis First Nation for the illegal uprooting of the people of the former St. Peters Reserve — the settlement amounted to \$126 million dollars. That generous-sounding figure needs some unpacking.

It amounts to \$11,000 per person of the 75,000 acres taken from their ancestors illegally. Another way of dividing it is per portion of land that was seized. That figure comes to **\$1680 per acre** acquired and then sold and re-sold. So, what is an acre of land in Selkirk worth today? The average price is about **\$20,000 per acre** (not \$1680).

While the Peguis First Nation accepted the settlement, the lasting effects of relocation, family separation, trial, and trauma are still very present today. What is more, the land which Peguis occupies, the land that then-Interior representative, R. D. Foley declared to be *"without doubt the finest I have yet seen in Manitoba for farming purposes"* — that land is perpetually subject to flooding.⁴⁸



⁴⁵ Conference of Indian Chiefs is Postponed, Manitoba Free Press, January 20, 1922, page 16, <https://access-newspaperarchive-com.wpl-dbs.winnipeg.ca/ca/manitoba/winnipeg/winnipeg-free-press/1922/01-20/page-16>

⁴⁶ "Chief Prince, of line of great chief, says from Indian lore that winter will remain exceptionally mild", Brandon Sun, December 24, 1923, page 1.

⁴⁷ Andy Thomas, Florence Paynter. The Significance of Creating First Nation Traditional Names Maps. Manitoba First Nations Education Resource Centre Inc. <https://mfnerc.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/The-Significance-of-Creating-First-Nation-Traditional-Names-Maps.pdf>

⁴⁸ Bartley Kives, "Peguis First Nation declares state of emergency over flood-induced housing shortage - Condemned former school now functioning as temporary shelter", April 30, 2024, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/peguis-state-emergency-housing-1.7188794>

Conclusion

The conclusion — of what we, the inheritors of this story intend to do with what we are learning — is yet to be written.

I, personally, am convicted by the words of an Upstander who faced injustice and, ultimately, murder, for speaking up and out to those in power and privilege:

"We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the hateful words and actions of the bad people but for the appalling silence of the good people."

"Letter from a Birmingham Jail", 16 April 1963,
addressed to *"My Dear Fellow Clergymen..."*

Reverend Dr. **Martin Luther King** Junior

Reflection

It seems to me there are several factors to take into consideration when thinking about these events from over a century ago, and in reflecting on relationships altered and ruptured. If we take William Henry Prince at his word, we see a man of faith, called by God and chosen by some of his people to lead them as a Pastor, and chosen by many of them, in two elections, to lead them as Chief. He, having battled with alcoholism, sees evidence of the same battle being brought to youth in his community, on the very eve of the fateful vote on his community's future. And William Henry Prince decides, in order to protect them from temptation, to remove them and their community to an area farther away — to the Interlake where he evangelized — to start life anew on land he is told will be fruitful. On the other hand, if we take the testimony of others from his community (Asham and Sinclair) as true, William Henry Prince succumbed to bribery and booze on the eve of the vote, resulting in the uprooting of his community. Either way, these events occurred in a community where Indigenous Christians lived and worked and counted other Christians, settlers, as their brother and sisters in the faith. Those that orchestrated the erasure of St. Peter's were considered upstanding Christians (Howells at Holy Trinity, Semmens as a Methodist clergyman). What did Christian communities think about the St. Peter's affair? What did First Baptist church members and leadership think about William Henry Prince and his flock's fate? It is human nature to seek to avoid being tainted by scandal, to want to disassociate from someone's fall from grace, to look the other way when some one or some group is in trouble. It is hard to resist that temptation in a system that is designed to treat others as wards of the state, unworthy of consideration on equal footing with the majority. It is remarkable to read Mellick's words today regarding the greatness of Indigenous peoples. How will our recognition of injustice lead us to respond to Prince's descendants and relations, as their story and the hundreds of stories like theirs emerge in this age of Truth and Reconciliation?

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