

From our history

The fire, the fundraising, and a new church

On Jan. 1, 1857, fire broke out in a merchant's premises across the street from the original Mathers Meeting House. When the alarm was sounded at 4 pm, most citizens were making their New Year's visits and sitting down to tea. Despite firemen's efforts to keep the old building wet, flames quickly spread to neighboring structures and the church "burnt like tinder." It was no help that the cellar was filled with casks of alcohol and medicine belonging to local merchants. Within an hour the tower collapsed, its bell tolling as it fell. In all 22 buildings were destroyed that afternoon and evening, and St. Matthew's had the dubious distinction of being the first Halifax church destroyed by fire. There are no photographs of that original building, but we are proud to have a model of the old Mathers Meeting House at the back of the church.

There appears to have been no thought of dissolving the congregation and having St. Matthew's members join other church communities. Instead, the congregation sold the prestigious business site at the corner of Hollis and Prince streets and prepared to rebuild a short distance away from the commercial district. The new St. Matthew's would stand a few blocks south of its original location, next to the vice-regal residence of the Lieutenant-Governor.

Members quickly subscribed more than £4000 toward the construction of the new church. A building was designed by William Thomas and Sons, on the same pattern as Knox's Free Church in Toronto. Construction was undertaken by the firm owned by Simon Peters, George Blaikloch and Henry Peters. In the Tender Contract of 1858, they agreed that for the sum of "Eight thousand, eight hundred and sixty four pounds of lawful money of Nova Scotia" they would "build, completely cover in, and thoroughly finish ... a good, substantial Brick Church covered with two coats of best Portland Cement."

Construction lasted from the laying of the cornerstone on June 18th, 1858 to the first service in the new building on October 30th, 1859. In the interim, the congregation worshipped in the mornings at the old Wesleyan Chapel on Argyle Street, and in the afternoons at St. Andrew's. When completed, the cost of the new church – including the lot -- was £11,250.

