

## **From our history: The comfortable pew**

First-time visitors to St. Matthew's are usually curious about the seats in the sanctuary. The pews you see today date back to 1859, when this building opened. However, from the time of the congregation's birth in 1749, the seating arrangements have been an interesting part of St. Matthew's history.

The brochure *A Short History of St. Matthew's Church* tells us that in the original building, pews in the lower level of the sanctuary were rented. The best pews, which cost \$144 a year, were against the walls on the left and right of the sanctuary. Those next to them sold for \$100 a year. In the centre were long benches without backs. These were free seats for the poor, and for single women and men. Pew rents were paid quarterly, and if payments were not made on time, the pew was auctioned. Until 1850 all the leading businessmen in Halifax attended St. Matthew's, and a man's credit was judged by where he sat in the church.

In Halifax's early days there was no Garrison Chapel, so many military men attended St. Matthew's, sitting in the upper gallery. Soldiers sat on the right, with the artillery and engineers on the left. A Sergeant-Major stood in the centre with a long pole, which he used to prod anyone who started to snore. Falling asleep during the lengthy church service was more likely the result of a late Saturday night than a mind-numbing sermon.

The seating was not without controversy. In 1815, two members claimed ownership of Pew Number 10 – Mr. Barron, through possession, and Mr. Barton, through inheritance. The Committee of Management, which earlier that year had asserted that the church and not the tenants owned the pews, told the gentlemen to share the pew and assigned half to each family. Mr. Barton was reprimanded for his conduct over the issue, which included screwing the door shut to prevent the Barron family from entering.

Fire destroyed the original Mather's Meeting House in 1857. This building, which opened two years later, included the formidable box pews, complete with doors and fasteners, that you see today. The custom of renting the pews, which was a source of considerable financial support for the church, continued for two more decades. In 1872 the church declared that unrented pews would be free for the use of poor people, and in 1879 the congregation decided to eliminate pew rents altogether. The status associated with sitting in a particular pew lingered at least until the 1950s, but now the only designated seat is for the Lieutenant-Governor. This pew, at the front, has a piece of blue carpet from Queen Elizabeth's coronation in 1952.

Today, as the hymn says, "*Nobody here has a claim on a pew. Come in, come in and sit down, You are a part of the family.*"