

**WILLIAM HENRY:
CHRISTIAN CHURCH MINISTER
WATERLOO TOWNSHIP COUNCILLOR
FARMER**

By Rosemary Willard Ambrose

Mrs. Ambrose has recently published *Waterloo County Churches: a research guide to churches before 1900*.

In the early years of Waterloo county there were numerous preachers, missionaries, evangelists and circuit riders who traveled throughout the area preaching the word of God, each according to the tenets of his own faith. These educated, energetic churchmen included James Sim, Baptist; Benjamin Eby, Mennonite; Charles Freshman, German Wesleyan Methodist; and Fredrich Wilhelm Binderman, who is credited with organizing many early Lutheran congregations. In addition to preaching and ministering to their people, early ministers were often farmers, teachers and members of local governments.

One less well-known minister was Elder William Henry of the Christian Church, who first ministered to members of his faith from his base at the Christian Church east of Kossuth in Waterloo Township from 1853-1869. He then moved to Minto Township, Wellington County, in 1869 where he founded Jerusalem Christian Church near Greenbush, between Harriston and Clifford.

William Henry, the youngest son of John Henry and his wife Nancy Biggers, was born in New York City “just after landing of parents from shipboard being emigrants for Ireland,” in June, 1811.¹ The family from Drumless, County Cavan, had experienced a difficult seven weeks and three days sailing from their home country.² From New York City the Henry family traveled north and west via the Hudson and Mohawk Rivers, then overland to Lewiston on the Niagara River, and thence by boat across Lake Ontario to York. The family remained in York until 1816 when John Henry purchased a farm at Port Oshawa in Whitby Township.³

William Henry and his wife, the former Dorcas Abbey to whom he was married in 1834, may have moved to Waterloo Township as early as 1837; the 1837 Gore District Census for Waterloo Township lists a William Henry living on one acre of New Hope. A son, John Henry, was born there on June 25, 1838.⁴ Five years later, on April 28, 1843, William Henry purchased 162 acres of part Lot 91, Upper Block, German Company Tract.⁵ A small parcel of this land, on present-day Kossuth Road near Wellington County line, was to become the site of the Waterloo Township Christian Church.

According to the biographer of his brother Thomas Henry, William Henry apparently “embraced religion among the Methodists, and was a number of years a member of that body, though [later] loyal in sentiment and life to the Chrisitians.”⁶ The “Christians” refers to the Christian Church, which was founded in the United States in

1792 by James O'Kelly as the result of a schism in the American Methodist Episcopal Church.⁷ Missionaries of the Christian Church arrived in Upper Canada in the mid-1820s. William Henry's brother, Elder Thomas Henry, a well-known Christian Church minister who was ordained in 1829, was pastor to the Christian Church in Oshawa for many years.⁸ It is possible that Thomas' guidance led his brother, William, to exchange his Methodist association for that of the Christian Church. This conversion would have occurred sometime after the spring of 1851 as William Henry and his family were recorded in the census for Waterloo Township for that year as being of the Methodist faith. Elder William Henry was ordained a minister in the Christian Church on July 1, 1853.⁹

The first record of William Henry's involvement in local government was his appointment as assessor for Ward One of the Waterloo Township Council at the council meeting on January 17, 1853. He was to remain associated with the council in one capacity or other until the end of 1868. In addition to the duties of assessor in 1853, 1854, 1857, 1858, and 1861, he was appointed fence viewer in 1857 and 1859, overseer of highways in 1857, pound keeper in 1862 and collector in 1862 and 1863. Remuneration from these positions assisted him in providing funds for his mission work, as well as for maintenance of this farm. William Henry was a duly elected Waterloo Township councillor for the years 1864 through 1868, receiving payment for this position as well. The *Dumfries Reformer* of January 15, 1868, reported that his payment for service as councilor during the year 1867 was \$36.¹⁰ It is interesting to learn that Mrs. P. A. Henry described him as being "active and business-like in his habits, and earnestly devoted to the cause of liberal Christianity."¹¹

William Henry was a landowner and farmer in Waterloo Township from 1843 to 1869, and subsequently in Minto Township, Wellington County, from 1869 until 1873. He sold his farm in 1873 to his son, James, and moved to Harriston.¹² Through many years he was in charge of District Six of the Christian Church which included Waterloo and Wellington Counties as well as the area around Drayton where a Christian Church was erected in the summer of 1869.¹³

The Waterloo Township Christian Church was located east of Kossuth on part of William Henry's own farm, part of Lot 91, Upper Block, German Company Tract. The exact location of the church, as shown on Tremaine's 1861 map of Waterloo Township, would have been on the north side of the road, about a quarter of a mile west of the intersection with present-day Highway 24. Tremaine's map also shows a Wesleyan Methodist Church, just west of the Christian Church, on the same side of the road, on a corner of the David Ellis farm, part of Lot 92, Upper Block, German Company Tract. The fate of the Christian Church is unknown; the former Wesleyan Methodist Church remains in use as a drive shed on the Ellis farm.

Waterloo Township's Christian Church congregation was organized by Elder E. B. Rolf on July 1, 1853, with 18 charter members. Elder Rolf was assisted by William Henry until 1856 when the latter became the only pastor.¹⁴ The last report from the Christian Church in Waterloo Township, as tabled at the annual conference of the Christian Church in September, 1861, stated "members removed 3, disowned 2, present

number 5. Pastor: William Henry.” Membership in the church had posted a steady decline from the date of the congregation’s organization. However, Elder Henry continued to serve as preacher and pastor, although the congregation was too small in number to merit inclusion in the statistics of the church. He remained in this capacity until February, 1869, when he moved to Minto Township. William Henry sold his Waterloo Township farm on February 9, 1869, and purchased another in Minto Township one week later, on February 16.

A congregation of Christian Church members was organized by Elder William Henry in Minto Township in early 1869. A short time later a church building was erected on a southerly corner of his farm, Lot 26, Concession 14, Minto Township,¹⁵ on a ½ acre parcel of land which he later, in 1873, donated to the Christian Conference.¹⁶ This frame church was replaced with a brick church toward the end of the century. Regular services in the church, called the Jerusalem Christian Church, continued until 1911; occasional services were held after that date and Sunday Schools were organized in the summer.¹⁷ Union of the Christian Church with the United Church of Canada—some church members referred to it as “absorption”—occurred in 1928. The church building was sold in 1929 by the United Church conference to the Greenbush Women’s Institute. The brick was removed from the building which then was moved to a site on present-day Highway 9 between Harriston and Clifford. It was refaced with white-painted cedar shingles and was used as a community hall until 1970 when it was once again sold.¹⁸

William Henry combined well and conscientiously his duties as church minister, township councillor and farmer, although not without some danger in the latter occupation. The *Christian Magazine* of July, 1869, contained a news item to the effect that Elder William Henry had “met with an accident on Wednesday, June 30th, whereby he was deprived of two fingers of his left hand, and probably another will have to be removed.”

William Henry and his wife, Dorcas Abbey, had a family of nine children, many of whom moved with their parents to Minto Township. Some members of the family are reported to have moved to North Dakota after the death of their mother in 1885.¹⁹

Elder William Henry continued to minister to his people until his death at the age of 69 at Harrison on September 4, 1880. Cause of death was “chronic gastritis and ulcer of the stomach.”²⁰ When visited by Elder John H. Shoults on April 6, 1880, he was described as being “quite poorly,” yet on July 12th he was well enough to travel with Elder Shoults to visit several other ministers in the area.²¹ Perhaps something of the character of William Henry can be appreciated from an item in the *Christian Magazine* of February, 1869: “Eld. William Henry, shortly removes [from Waterloo] to Minto. We pray that this self-sacrificing minister of the gospel may find a pleasant home, and be as useful in the district as he desires.” William Henry was buried in the small cemetery behind the Jerusalem Christian Church; his remains were reinterred in the Harriston Cemetery in 1884 after the farm was sold by his son, James. Dorcas Henry died August 2, 1885 and was buried in the Harriston Cemetery.

NOTES

1. Ontario Civil Registration, Deaths, 1880. Registration number 17107.
2. Mrs. P. A. Henry, *Memoir of Rev. Thomas Henry* (Toronto: Hill & Weir, 1880), p. 9-10.
3. Ibid.
4. Wesleyan Methodist Baptisms.
5. Waterloo Township, Waterloo County, Land Registry Abstract Book.
6. Mrs. P. A. Henry, p. 101.
7. *Encyclopedia Britannica*
8. Udelle V. Wood, *Our Christian Heritage*, (Goodwood, ON: The Author, 1992), p. 73
9. *Minutes* of the Annual Meeting of the Christian Church on July 1, 1853, p. 36.
10. Waterloo Township Council, *Minutes*.
11. Mrs. P. A. Henry, p. 101.
12. Waterloo Township, Waterloo County, and Minto Township, Wellington County, Land Registry Abstract Books.
13. *The Christian Magazine*, February 1869, p. 149.
14. Minutes of the Annual Conference of the Christian Church, Oshawa, June 25, 1856.
15. Clifford M. Harrison, *The Way it Was – A History of Minto Township*, (Harriston, Township of Minto, 1978), p. 217.
16. Minto Township, Wellington County, Land Registry Abstract Books.
17. Beehive Women's Institute *Tweedsmuir History*, n. d.
18. *The Harriston Review*, November 25, 1970, p. 1; Beehive Women's Institute.
19. Harriston, p. 217.
20. Ontario Civil Registration.
21. Diaries of Elder John H. Shoults.