

WORK THROUGH TIME

Cape Breton Stories of Land & Sea



The Schools of Boularderie

The Boularderie Island Historical Project

Early Education

The majority of settlers on Boularderie Island during the 1800s were either Protestants, who mostly settled on the Northside, or Roman Catholics, who mostly settled on the Southside; both of these groups were primarily of Scottish descent. A formal education of reading, writing and speaking the English language soon became a necessity for the Gaelic speaking settlers. The language of business, government and advancement in the New World was English. Mrs. Isabella MacKay and the Ladies Association of the Edinburgh Society in Scotland sent a minister to Boularderie Island in 1836 to improve conditions for the settlers in this area; this minister was Reverend James Fraser. Shortly after his arrival, Reverend Fraser convinced Mrs. MacKay to send a teacher, Hugh Munro, to the Island. His stay was short-lived; Hugh Munro chose to move to Halifax after receiving a more lucrative offer. Alexander Munro was sent to replace him after another recommendation was sent by Rev. James Fraser.

Boularderie Academy and Alexander Munro

Alexander Munro and his wife Catherine Weir Munro arrived in Halifax in 1839. They received significant offers to stay there, but chose to continue on to Cape Breton. Munro was offered two hundred pounds to teach in Halifax, three times the amount he would later receive in Boularderie.

The Munro's faced two major challenges upon arriving in Boularderie: they had no personal dwelling, and there was not an actual schoolhouse provided for them. They were forced to live in a loghouse with a large family, who lived in the opposite end of the house; they held classes in Knox Church. Eventually the Munro's built their own home and a separate schoolhouse. Both Alex and Catherine taught at Boularderie Academy. Catherine was knowledgeable in French, music, needlework and cooking. Alex taught reading, writing, arithmetic, geography, Latin and history. By 1839 there were sixty pupils enrolled in Munro's classes. The following year the number of pupils increased to one hundred and ten.

School fees were ten shillings with books costing between one and three shillings each. The ages of the pupils ranged from seven to twenty-four years. The school day

would begin at 9:30am and continue until 4:30pm. A group of older, more advanced students would come to school early in the morning to receive instruction from the teacher; they would then teach smaller groups of younger students during the day. These students were called monitors and often went on to become successful teachers themselves.

Many students travelled long distances to attend Boularderie Academy. They came from places such as New Harris, Boisdale, Big Pond, Wreck Cove, Lake Ainslie and Judique. In the winter, students from Boisdale and New Harris would often walk across the frozen lake to school. Giant Angus MacAskill of Englishtown was said to have been a pupil of the school; he would make the long trek over Kelly's Mountain each Friday and Sunday afternoon. While attending school, students lived in log huts that were scattered around the school like a small village. They would bring enough food and supplies to last the week and return home on the weekends.

In 1867, both the Munro's house and the Boularderie Academy were destroyed by fire. A new home was built and the Munro's remained residents of Boularderie Island. When Alexander stopped teaching he became a member of the Board of School Trustees and in 1865, he became the Chairman. In 1868 he was appointed Inspector of Schools for Victoria County.

A monument in Alexander Munro's honour was erected at Man of War Point Cemetery, the site of their final resting place. He will be forever remembered for his pioneering work in the development and growth of educating youth on and around Boularderie Island.

One-Room Schoolhouses

By 1850, the province of Nova Scotia had an active system for school construction and inspections, and the first teacher training institutions had been opened. By 1860, the number of schools in Victoria County reached twenty-nine. Schools were built in Boularderie Centre in 1854 and in Big Bras d'Or and Southside Boularderie (Big Bank) in 1867. There were other schools located on the Southside near Matheson Road and one at Kempt Head on the Northside. These locations were chosen based on the criteria set forth by the province; the diameter of school districts should be limited to three or four miles – limiting the distance that students walk to a maximum of two miles.

Each school was managed by elected trustees and supported by taxes on local property. Expenses were supplemented by provincial grants, but the responsibility for establishing, managing and financing local schools rested firmly in the hands of the local community. An annual meeting was held to discuss the business of the school. At that time, the trustees and secretary would be appointed for that year. Each household was taxed (school taxes) to pay the teacher and operate the school. One technique for saving money was the boarding of teachers at houses in the district. This continued into the 1930s.

Most of the teachers who began their careers in the tiny one-room schoolhouses of Boularderie Island had a lot in common: they loved their jobs, they believed in family groupings, and most of them taught their own children. They were an integral part of the community. Because of the range of ages in the classroom, there were very few discipline problems; the younger students were helped academically and socially by having older students to look up to. Characteristic of attending a one-room schoolhouse was the healthy attitude that students held toward each other. Students were independent in their work and activities included all age groups.

Throughout Boularderie Island's history, an abundance of schoolhouses were established. The most frequently mentioned of these schools by residents and referenced in local literature are: Boularderie Centre School, Munro School, Kempt Head School, Island Point School, Boularderie East School, Boularderie West School, Southside School (Big Bank), Black Brook School, Big Bras d'Or School, Millville School, Groves Point School and Little Bras d'Or School. The last school built in the area was named the Mill Creek School; it was a larger scale school, built later in the 1900s.

Mill Creek and Point Aconi

The first schoolhouse in Mill Creek stood near the Point Aconi mine, heading towards Mill Pond, until it burned down in the summer of 1931. The community was quick to act and the second school was ready for the students in 1932. The new school was situated close to where Mill Creek Hall stands today and had a larger attendance than its predecessor. The school went from grade primary to nine. A student would have to go to North Sydney or Bras d'Or if they wished to further their education after the completion of grade nine. A lack of water from any source other than the brook a half a mile away, and no outhouses, created much inconvenience.

Nat Beaton, the school's janitor, recalled Katie Beaton, Gracie Curry, and Mary Ellen Saunders as some of the teachers who taught at the school he attended. He explained that the children of yesterday were never forced to memorize for success in school. A student would get his or her credit by proving that he or she could reach the answer and show all the steps that were required. There were always two students to a desk and all work was done on a slate with a slate pencil. It was the parents' responsibility to provide these necessities for their children, and when an older sibling was done, supplies were passed on.

Kempt Head School

Kempt Head School was built in 1905 in Upper Kempt Head at the corner of Matheson and Kempt Head Road. The students came from the Northside area between Ross' Ferry and the Head and from the Southside. Everyone walked to school, including the teacher. Many families were large and income was minimal resulting in the children making the trek to school barefoot from spring until the

ground began to freeze in late fall. One teacher, Tena Morrison, taught at Kempt Head School for many years. She walked more than two miles each way from Ross' Ferry. In the winter, when the lake was frozen and the Ferry was not operating, she often walked across the ice from Big Harbour and continued on for nearly three miles to the school. The teachers' salary was \$375.00 per year in the 1930s and eventually it increased to \$600.00.

One of the 1932 students, Isabel MacFarlane became a teacher and taught at both the Kempt Head and Southside schools. Isabel remembers all too well the intricacies of running a one-room schoolhouse through both her experiences as a student and then as a teacher. Drinking water for the school came from the adjoining property owned by the MacLeod's. Water was carried to the school in a bucket; a dipper, which hung on a nail above the pail, was used to fetch a drink from it. It was a long trek across the field and down the steep hill to MacLeod's spring and it was considered a 'great task' as it took you away from class for long periods of time. The schoolroom had two blackboards, one at the front of the classroom and one at the side. Assignments were often put on the boards and if an exam was scheduled it was put on the board and covered by a mat or a blind. By 1932, exams were usually written on paper and if there were many in the same grade, the exam would be duplicated on a gelatin duplicator. If there were just two or three in the same grade, carbon paper was used for copies.

Belle Grant, Island Point School

Belle was a schoolteacher on the Southside of Boularderie for approximately four and a half years before marrying her husband Alec Grant. Belle herself attended Boularderie Centre School on the Northside of the island. She was able to recall the teachers she once had as a student – Margaret MacKenzie, Edna Warren, Christy Nicholson, Sadie MacIver and Catherine Bryanton. After completing her school years at Boularderie Centre, Belle obtained her teaching license at Normal College in Truro after six months of instruction. She taught at Groves Point School for two years and then at Island Point School for two and a half years. The schools were one-room schoolhouses heated with potbelly stoves and instructing students from grades one to ten. While teaching in Boularderie, Belle would board with families who lived near the school where she taught.

Margaret MacIntyre, Southside Schoolhouse (Big Bank)

The Big Bank Schoolhouse was built in the year 1867. Many a student had come and gone through its door until its closure in 1966. In 1935, Margaret MacIntyre began teaching at Big Bank's one room schoolhouse. As a first year teacher at the school, Margaret made approximately \$240.00 a year. She taught in a room that contained only a picture of the King and Queen, two maps that hung on the wall (a world and Canadian map sponsored by the "Neilson Chocolate Company"), and few supplies. School started with the ring of a bell at 9am and went until 3:30pm with approximately twenty-two students attending and two students to each desk. With no

running water (water came from a spring across the road), the older students were responsible for retrieving it. Additional responsibilities included correcting other students' work, reading to them, and assisting with drawing pictures. Friday afternoons were always special for every student since anyone who had a talent for art was allowed to draw.

A Truro Teacher's Farewell to Boularderie

I've taught a year at Boularderie
At Kempt Head School house by the sea
Whose long waves ever laved the beach
And whipped the rocks of Boularderie.
Now I must leave the banks and braes
And rocks and waves of Boularderie.

I have no need of birch or rod
For love was law at Boularderie
The esprit du corps of my Scottish lads
and lasses and their comraderie.
O, my heart grieves to part with thee
My scholars dear, of Boularderie

How fine the walks, how smooth the drives
The moonlight's track upon the sea
Would follow me at Boularderie
As if to watch and ward and see
O Gallant lads, so kind to me
I near lost heart at Boularderie.

The seagulls cried so lonesomely
And followed me so far to sea
When I embarked from Boularderie
But though far flung, far called my destiny
At twilight's mystic hour old memory
Will oft return to Boularderie.

Written by Edna Huntly, circa 1909.

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