

## Canada District Founding Congregations

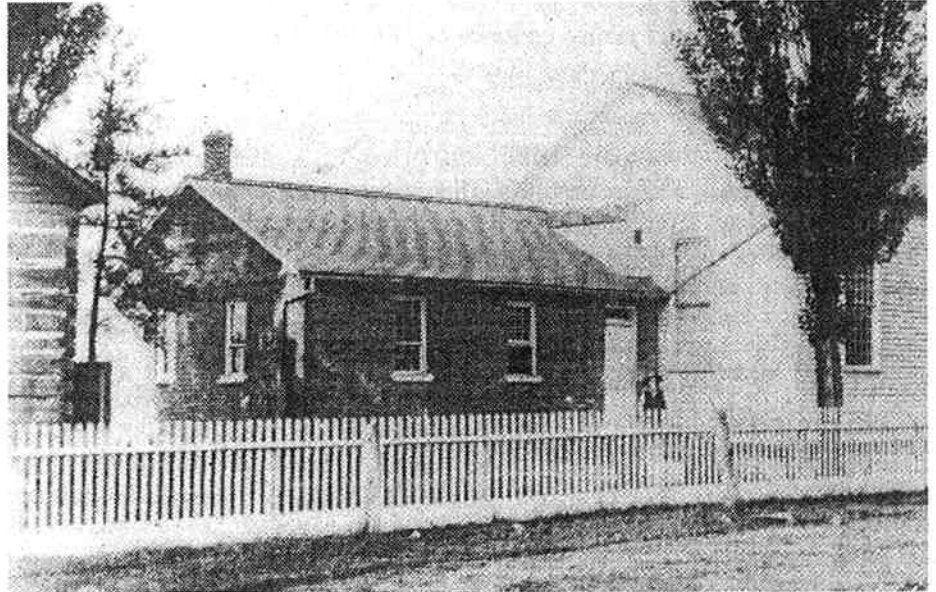
Highlighting the founding congregations of the Canada District, this edition features a congregation older than the Synod itself (St. John's, Gasline), and its sister, St. Peter's, Port Colborne, in articles by District archivist Carol Nagel. Their histories intersect often, which is not surprising, given that they are only about five kilometres apart.

# St. John's Lutheran Church, Gasline

About ten years prior to the establishment of congregations in Middleton (Delhi) and Rainham (Fisherville), German Lutheran families from Pennsylvania had settled in Humberstone Township, about midway between the Grand and the Niagara Rivers along the northern shore of Lake Erie.

As was the case with many isolated communities in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, these settlers were first served by itinerant preachers — often ex-school teachers, former lawyers and the like with little, if any, theological convictions, let alone training. Many had fled Germany due to charges of immorality and questionable financial dealings. In speaking of them, Pastor Friederich Dubpernell, a pioneer of our district, said: "The spiritual vagabonds, calling themselves Lutheran, have spoiled so many things here that it is indeed a miracle of God that there are still people in existence who are neither afraid to be known as Lutheran nor, more remarkable still, to establish congregations, build churches and to maintain them at great sacrifices. Their need and their desire for Lutheran services were supplied mostly by unsolicited and self-invited mercenary hirelings who would represent themselves as Lutheran, Reformed, Evangelical and, in fact, without any scruples whatever, as anything that may be pleasing to the individuals."

The spiritual plight of these settlers came to the attention of Rev. J. A. A. Grabau of Buffalo, New York, founder of the Buffalo Synod. In 1840 the congregation was organized as St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Congregation. A year later a tract of land was donated by one of the members and a log church erected. This was replaced in 1845 by a



This school building served the families of St. John's, Gasline, from 1845-1905

frame building with a parochial school attached. Along with the school at St. Peter's, Port Colborne, these were the first parochial schools in Ontario. By 1906, the parochial school had been replaced by Sunday School, much to the dismay of theologians.

Early in the church's history, there were parochial school teachers resident in Gasline. There is a record in 1869 of a teacher who requested and received four additional cords of wood to bring his allowance to 12 cords to see him through the year. It has been recorded that a member of the congregation had died, having frozen to death, evidence of the importance of firewood in those days. In the church minutes of 1874, the parochial school teacher was offered \$200 per year, free lodging and free firewood. In 1875, each child eligible to attend parochial school was to pay 20 cents a month toward the teacher's salary with the church

providing the rest. Children of non-members were to pay 40 cents a month.

Situated along the road leading to Fort Erie across from Buffalo, the congregation was served by pastors of the Buffalo Synod for nearly thirty years. In 1861, as a number of Lutheran families who held membership in St. John's, Gasline were living in nearby Stonebridge (now Port Colborne), they organized a daughter congregation and chose the name St. Peter's Evangelical Lutheran Church. Between 1875 and 1905, the two congregations shared the pastor.

In 1868, as a result of the historic controversy between Dr. C. F. W. Walther and Dr. Grabau over the doctrine of the church and ministry, both congregations, under advice from Rev. Christian Hochstetter, severed their connection with the Buffalo Synod and

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The May 15, 1882, Volksblatt reported the ordination and installation of Candidate Friederich Bente (above) at Gasline. After graduation from Concordia Seminary St. Louis, he continued his studies for ten months before accepting the call to St. John's. He also served Port Colborne from 1885-1893, when he was called as professor at his alma mater in, St. Louis. He had also served for six years as Canada District President, being elected in 1888 at the age of 27. He would later edit the Concordia Triglotta, a three language edition of the Lutheran Confessions.

#### St. John's, from p. 4

applied to the Missouri Synod for a resident pastor. The Rev. Wilhelm Koch, then pastor in Wellesley, accepted the call and was installed in 1869 as the first Missouri Synod pastor of the parish.

He was succeeded in 1874 by Rev. Johannes C. Himmler and then, in 1876, by Rev. Moritz Michael, during whose pastorate a parsonage was built in Port Colborne. At the time of the formation of our district in 1879, Rev. Christian Hochstetter was once again serving as pastor to both congregations.

In 1917, Gasline and Snyder became a dual parish under Rev. Henry Sander who served from 1915 to 1924. Rev. Louis Higenell served the dual parish from 1924 to 1946, during the depression. To supplement his wages, which were around \$840 a year, he kept chickens in the front of his garage and raised a sizable garden. His wife taught piano lessons.

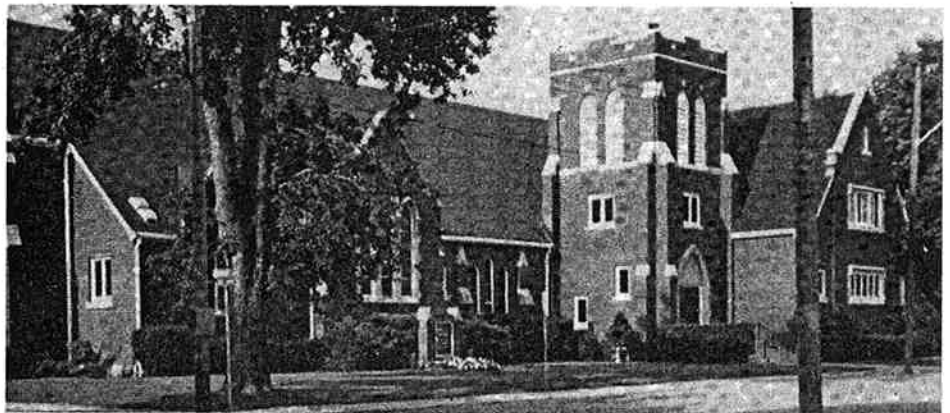
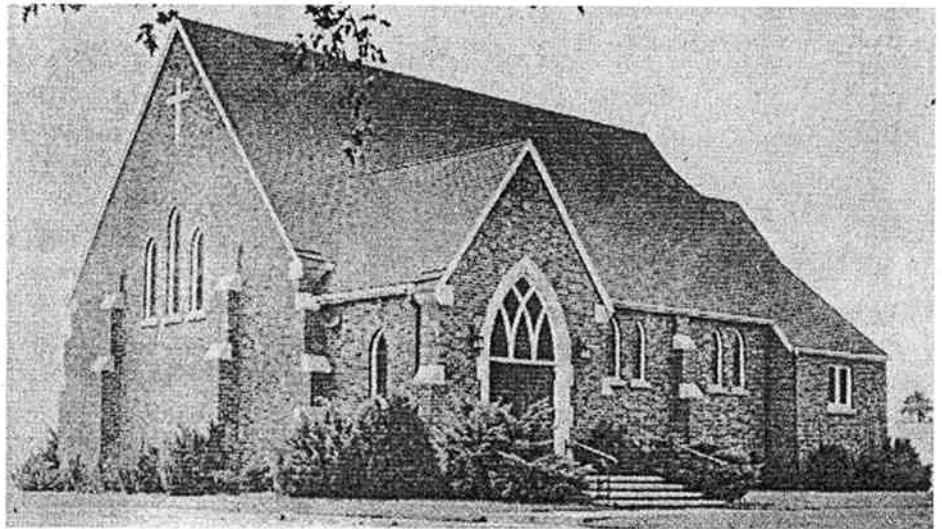
Services at the two churches were held alternately in the morning and afternoon. Rev. Higenell and the organist Godfrey Knoll would take turns driving to Snyder. In the 1940s both congregations decided to hold morning services, which meant a fast trip to Snyder for the two men. The organs at St. John's were reed organs and, the boy who pumped air for the organ received \$3 per year. Later an electric blower. During Pastor Higenell's tenure, the Walther League and Concordia Society were formed.

By 1946, when Rev. Walter E. Biesenthal became the pastor at St. John's, the frame church, refurbished in 1908, was again needing renovations. Various stages of modernization had taken place from candle light to gas lights to electric lights, frosted windows and also grained woodwork, moldings and pews. A gas lamp was installed in the pulpit in 1913 and in the main church sometime later. A beautifully

ornate white altar graced the chancel, flanked by two huge panels containing bible verses, written in gold paint with Old English lettering. However, the two wood stoves remained to poorly heat the church. The outside toilets which were situated at the far end of the church, which meant a trip around the entire building to visit the facility.

There was the normal opposition to building a new church, but the project got its final thrust when the door knob fell off the church door. With the assistance of many volunteers and donations, the new large brick church, complete with stained glass windows, oak furnishings, basement auditorium and kitchen, was dedicated in 1950.

The congregation, served by Rev. David Hamp, now numbers 176 baptized and 133 communicant members, is part of a dual parish relationship with Concordia Lutheran Church, Fonthill.



The churches of mother and daughter congregations, St. John's, Gasline, top photo, erected in 1950, and St. Peter's, Port Colborne, 1959.