



St. John's School

Wabasca, AB

St. John's Anglican Mission was established in 1894 at Wabasca Settlement (Wabiskaw or Wapuskaw), 100 km northeast of Lesser Slave Lake in northern Alberta. It was supported by the Church Missionary Society (CMS), which had recently founded two other Church of England missions in the general area—St. Peter's (1887) at Lesser Slave Lake Settlement and St. Andrew's (1892) at Whitefish Lake (Atikameg). All three posts were situated in the Diocese of Athabasca, created in 1874, and at each location Indian boarding schools were quickly established.

At Wabasca, the mission site was at the southeast end of North Wabasca Lake (named by Dominion Land surveyor in 1913), near the settlement and the Hudson's Bay Company post, which had been established in the 1880s. The fur trade flourished here until the late 1920s when the market collapsed. Aboriginal peoples in the area, mostly Cree and Métis, were attracted to Wabasca for this trading activity.

Following the signing of Treaty 8 at Lesser Slave Lake in June 1899, the Treaty and Scrip Commissioners made their way to Wabasca where adhesions to the treaty were obtained from many of the local natives, mostly ancestors of today's Bigstone Cree Nation. Many native families were not present and others at Wabasca chose not to participate. The Métis were offered scrip payments (vouchers for one-time cash payment, usually exchanged for land) but many chose to be recognized as status Indian and hence entitled to future treaty rights. Treaty children were guaranteed the right to attend schools established by the churches and government.

The first Wabasca Indian Reserve No. 166 was surveyed in 1913 and its size was largely determined by the status Indian population in 1909. Adhesions to the treaty were gradually obtained from other members of the Bigstone nation in the following decades. This prompted the treaty Indian groups to agitate for additional reserve lands, which the government partly acceded to in later years. However, Ottawa was not able to secure the most suitable land (especially needed for hay fields), due to the large number of non-native settlers and non-treaty Métis occupying some of the best lots in the Wabasca vicinity.

From its fledgling start in 1894 with six boarders, the St. John's Mission Wapuskaw School doubled its residential enrolment within two years and expansion continued. By 1903, the government had recognized St. John's as a boarding school eligible for per capita grants based on an authorized enrolment of fifteen. This date is often taken as the time of the school's establishment. In the early years, St. John's School also accepted a few day students, mostly non-native children of local settlers. Farming activity commenced soon after the school's founding and about 12 acres was under cultivation or used as pasture—about a quarter of the total school land owned by the Church. Unlike its Anglican sister schools at Whitefish Lake and Lesser Slave Lake, the Wabasca School suffered the ravages of multiple outbreaks of tuberculosis, especially prior to World War I.

At Lake Wabasca, and throughout the area of the Lesser Slave Lake Indian Agency, the Roman Catholic Church was also active, having established six boarding schools and registering the vast majority of native and Métis children in its schools. In 1901, St. Martin's Catholic Boarding School opened at Wabasca-Desmarais, 8 km south of the Anglican mission. Intense rivalry continued between these church missions for many years.



In 1945, fire destroyed the main building of St. John's School, requiring students to make use of temporary accommodation until 1949 when the government completed a new dormitory building for 60 students. In 1961, the Alberta Department of Education created the Northland School Division to administer many of the residential and day schools previously operated by the federal government and churches. At Wabasca, St. John's School came under the NSD wing in 1962, but the residences were still managed by MSCC. By 1966, new roads linked area reserves with Wabasca, allowing most native children to attend school as day students. St. John's classroom block was then closed, and students were transferred to the integrated elementary and junior high schools, managed by the Northland School District at nearby Desmarais. NSD leased the St. John's Residence for two years, after which time the local Wabasca band used the buildings for community services.

Milestones

In 1911, the Diocese of Athabasca assumed responsibility for St. John's School when it signed an agreement with the government which detailed Ottawa's funding contribution and the Church's obligation to maintain the facilities and supply staff. The Church Missionary Society continued to provide grants to the school until 1923 when operation was transferred to the Missionary Society of the Church of England in Canada (MSCC). The MSCC, through its agency the Indian and Eskimo School Commission, had also taken over most of the other similar Anglican Indian residential schools in Canada.

During the 1920s, the Church was hard pressed to make all the needed repairs to St. John's School, as well as the other two schools in the region—St. Peter's at Lesser Slave Lake and St. Andrew's at Whitefish Lake. These three residential schools were small and outdated. In 1926, Indian Affairs first proposed the amalgamation of all three with a large new school to be constructed at the St. Peter's site. However, the Bishop of Athabasca opposed the plan, fearing the closing of the schools at Whitefish Lake and Wabasca would leave the remaining Catholic schools as the preferred institutions for children formerly attending the Anglican schools. MSCC pressed Ottawa for money to be spent on the existing schools for short-term relief. The Lesser Slave Lake School closed in 1932, with most students relocating to Whitefish Lake, which was closer.

- 1894 St. John's Mission established at Wabasca by Church Missionary Society (CMS). Mission house accommodates 6 boarders.
- 1896 Residential enrolment increases to 12.
- 1898–1899 School temporarily closed for much of this period due to lack of missionary funds and unwillingness by government to assist school, which is in a non-treaty area.
- 1899 Aug. Wabasca area bands (Bigstone Cree Nation) adhere to Treaty 8, assuring creation of future reserve and government support of schools.
- 1902 Government recognizes St. John's Mission Wapuskaw School as a boarding school and implements program of annual per capita grants based on authorized pupilage of 15.
- 1903 Nov. Fire destroys residential school building. Students are billeted in the church until replacement classroom block and separate dormitory are completed the following year. The start on construction for this new school (funded by the church) in 1903 is often taken as the founding date for St. John's Indian Residen-

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| | tial School. Farming begins in earnest on a cleared portion of the 45 acres of heavily forested, church owned land. | 1962 | Northland School Division of the Alberta Dept. of Education assumes control of the school. MSCC continues to manage the student residence. |
| 1910 | Authorized pupilage increases to 25. | 1966 | St. John's School and Student Residence closes. Students are transferred to secular day schools (formerly Catholic) in nearby Desmarais, managed by NSD. Those eligible to attend senior high school must leave Wabasca and board with families in larger centres such as Edmonton. |
| 1911 | Operating agreement signed between Indian Affairs and Diocese of Athabasca, outlining funding formula, standards for student enrolment and Church's obligation to maintain facilities and provide staff. | 1968 | School buildings turned over to Kee Wee Tin Nok Association for native community use. |
| 1923 | Indian and Eskimo School Commission takes over operation of St. John's Indian Residential School from Diocese and CMS. | 1969 | Ottawa transfers title to school lands to Province of Alberta on condition facility continues to be used for educational or community purposes. |
| 1926–1943 | Indian Affairs proposes to close all three outdated Lesser Slave Lake area Anglican schools and replace them with a large new amalgamated residential school at St. Peter's site (Grouard). Bishop of Athabasca continues to oppose plan, which is never implemented. St. Peter's School closes in 1932 due to poor condition. | | |
| 1940s–1950s | Wabasca School suffers from chronic staff shortage, due in part to wartime labour shortage, competition from public schools offering better wages, and general inability of the Church to attract staff to this remote school. | | |
| 1945 Jan. 1 | Fire destroys main dormitory building, requiring students to be temporarily housed in makeshift quarters in other mission and settlement buildings. | | |
| 1949 Dec. 1 | Government opens new dormitory block with capacity for 60 students. | | |
| 1952 | Government purchases land and buildings from MSCC. | | |
| 1954 Sept. | Government is responsible for hiring teachers. | | |
| 1956 | Expansion of main residential school building consolidates all school activities—classrooms, dormitories and staff rooms—under one roof. Previously, the school and residence were about 2 km apart. | | |
| 1957 | School farm discontinued. | | |



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