

Blaze destroys 135-year-old school

BY MIKE FLYNN

Telegram correspondent—Bay Roberts

St. Mark's school in Shearstown, parts of which were as old as Canada, was destroyed by fire Friday morning.

Bay Roberts fire Chief Clarence Russell said his department received a call at 4:18 a.m. from a witness who noticed flames and smoke through a basement window in the abandoned building.

Russell said the Bay Roberts Volunteer Fire Department responded within 10 minutes with two pumpers and 24 firefighters.

He said when firefighters arrived on the scene, flames and smoke were billowing through the school's basement windows.

The intense heat prevented firefighters from entering the building.

The Bay Roberts fire department called for assistance from neighbour-

ing Spaniard's Bay firefighters, who responded immediately with a pumper and 20 men.

By 7 a.m., huge clouds of smoke had spread throughout the area, attracting hundreds of onlookers. Electricity was cut to the immediate area and the main road through the community was cordoned off.

Russell said the fire was a tough one. The building had undergone numerous extensions and renovations over the past 135 years. There were numerous dropped ceilings, sheeted walls and hardwood floors throughout the building, making the fire impossible to contain.

The place was a tinderbox, he said, and with the intense heat and flames, the huge wooden structure was soon consumed.

Bay Roberts Mayor Wilbur Sparkes said it was hard to watch the building burn.



JOE GIBBONS/THE TELEGRAM

Firefighter Terry Tulk of the Bay Roberts Volunteer Fire Department douses hot spots on a front section of St. Mark's school in Shearstown Friday. The building, constructed in 1867, was destroyed in the blaze.

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'Terry Tuttle' not Terry Tulk

'Piece of history' gone

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"We have seen an important piece of history destroyed here today. As a town, we wanted to see something done with it. Several months ago, we met with the school board with the intention of maintaining the school's gym to provide a recreational facility for the children of Shearstown," Sparkes said.

St. Mark's school was constructed in 1867 — the year Canada was formed — to serve the Anglican population of the community, which at that time was known as Spaniard's Bay Pond. The building also served as a church until the late 1800s, when the congregation got together, and with mainly volunteer labour, built its own place of worship.

This was accomplished during the tutelage of Rev. W. C. Shears, after whom the community is named.

It was described by former teachers and students as a prime example of an educational institution with high academic and disciplinary standards. It remained in use until the spring of 2000 when structural defects forced

the Avalon West School Board to abandon the building and send students to Spaniard's Bay and Bay Roberts.

There was no estimate on the amount of damage to the school, which was still owned by the Avalon West board.

Bay Roberts Coun. Bill Seymour lives near the school.

"As a member of the St. Mark's Church committee, we were attempting to have the building turned over to us. We were waiting on some final papers to be signed for the turnover, and I often said that if some action is not taken soon, that place will be destroyed.

"It was a sad scene here to watch grown men cry as they witnessed the destruction."

It's not known if insurance was carried on the school. Russell said the cause of the blaze remains unknown, but the building was still being serviced with electricity.

RCMP spokesman Doug Noel said the fire commissioner will be in Shearstown today to assist police in their investigation into the cause of the blaze.



Bill Bowman / The Compass

Shearstown school burned

Youths charged with arson

By LILLIAN SIMMONS
The Compass

Two Shearstown male young offenders have been charged in relation to a fire which destroyed St. Mark's School in that Conception Bay community last Friday.

Cpl. Ron Kinnie of Trinity-Conception District RCMP said the two are facing charges of break and enter and arson.

The youth have been released from police custody on an undertaking, and are scheduled to appear in court on June 17.

There were no injuries when the school was totally destroyed after fire broke out in the abandoned structure at about 4:30 a.m., April 19.

A nearby resident leaving for

work noticed smoke coming from the 135-year-old building and called the Bay Roberts' fire department and the RCMP.

Bill Seymour, Minister's Warden at St. Mark's Church said since its closure two years ago "there's been a lot of problems with vandalism.

"The fire commissioner said it looked like one of the basement windows was open and the fire started in the staff room. Last summer a garbage box by the side of the school was burned," Mr. Seymour said. "The place was still wired as far as I know."

He said he would assume insurance was carried on the building as it was being used for storage by Avalon West School District.

The Department of Education had been in the process of passing the school back to St. Mark's Parish.

"We had all the work done. It wasn't officially handed over, but we were trying to put a plan in place for it."

Mr. Seymour, who witnessed the blaze called Friday "a day of mourning for Shearstown/Butterville.

"There's a lot of people talking about it, there were people with tears in their eyes. It's a hard way to see it go."

HISTORIC BUILDING DESTROYED - St. Mark's School in Shearstown was completely destroyed by fire Friday, April 19. Volunteer fire departments from Bay Roberts, Spaniard's Bay, Upper Island Cove, Cupids and Harbour Grace were called in to help contain the blaze.

Church still on hold for Shearstown school

By LILLIAN SIMMONS
The Compass

Shearstown resident Bill Seymour appears fed up with the bureaucracy surrounding the fate of what remains of the historic St. Mark's school.

Most of the 135-year old building was destroyed by a fire April 19.

"The newest piece, the piece that was condemned, when it was closed is what's left," said Mr. Seymour, Minister's Warden at St. Mark's Church.

The school closed down in June of 2000, and since that time the church has been trying to reclaim ownership of the property from the provincial

government.

"I'm tired of this, this has been on the go for two years now," Mr. Seymour told *The Compass* last week. "It's taking a long time for government to make a decision."

Apparently there is some question as to who owns a portion of the property on the front of the building.

"We've got the papers for the back. The front piece is in question and the government wants proof. Everybody in Shearstown believes it's always belonged to St. Mark's (church). I don't see anyone coming out and contesting it."

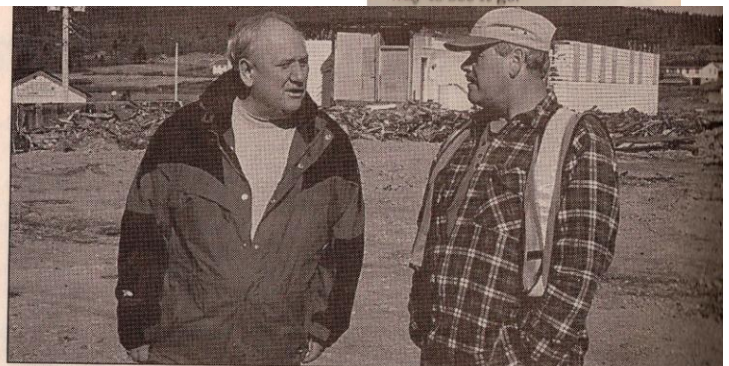
Two Shearstown male young offenders have been charged in relation to the incident.

Since the fire the remaining section, which contains four classrooms, has been under constant security.

"The school board has two people here 24 hours around the clock," Mr. Seymour said.

When the church does regain possession of the property, he said, they'll likely look at a plan to use it as a community recreation centre, providing the remaining section is safe.

"We still don't even know if there's a building to get," the warden said. "The church wants to see it settled, we'd like to have our memorial flower service here in July. I don't know if we've got to wait for an election to see this settled, or what."



Lillian Simmons / The Compass

STILL WAITING - St. Mark's Church Warden Bill Seymour and security officer Clayton Bradbury talk about the fate of what remains of St. Mark's school. A good portion of the building was destroyed by fire last month. Since that time security has been posted at the site 24 hours a day.

PEOPLE'S

Hope gone up in smoke

Dear editor,

The scene that met my eyes when I looked out my window on the morning of Friday, April 19 was gut-wrenching and tear jerking.

To see what hopes I had going up in smoke, because while the building was still standing there was a chance, no matter how small, the school could re-open again but not anymore.

A building with so much history and one that held so many memories is gone forever. I never thought I could look out my window and see the post office building and not the school.

The act of those two youths involved was careless, unforgettable and unforgivable (to some). Not only did they put themselves in danger but those who live nearby the school.

Please don't forget the firefighters from the communities that had to deal with this careless act. I thank the Lord no one was seriously hurt and the winds were not against them.

I can only hope this act of selfishness will not go unpunished. Every resident of Shearstown/Butlerville will forever be saddened when going past or looking at the piece of land where St. Mark's School once stood.

"A day of mourning for Shearstown/Butlerville" is a quote from Bill Seymour in the April 23 issue of *The Compass* and I believe it too.

Thank you for letting me have my say. I am a former student of the once to be but never again St. Mark's School.

**Hope Somerton
(Tuttle),
Shearstown**