

Moments in Our History

(Excerpts from the Dissenting Church of Christ at St. John's 1775 – 1975)

John Jones and Bishop O'Donel (Part I)

In 1784, the Reverend John Jones noted in his Journal:

“This year the Roman Priest came to the harbour, got full toleration to marry and exercise his Religion in all respects, obtained leave to build a Chapel and laid the foundation thereof.”

The Roman Priest was James Louis O'Donel (1737-1811) Prefect and Vicar Apostolic to Newfoundland. Born at Knocklofty, County Tipperary, Father O'Donel was Provincial of the Order of St. Francis in Ireland. In 1796 at Quebec, he was consecrated Bishop of Thyatira. Since 1713, the Roman Catholic Church had been proscribed in Newfoundland. Harsh penalties were exacted for harbouring Priests or hearing Mass. On 24 October 1784, Vice-Admiral John Campbell, as Governor of Newfoundland, Issued his famous proclamation on religious liberty.

“Pursuant to the King's instructions to me, you are to allow all persons inhabiting this Island to have full liberty of conscience, and the free exercise of all such modes of religious worship as are not prohibited by law, provided they be content with a quiet and peaceable enjoyment of the same, not giving offence or scandal to Government.”

That month, Father O'Donel arrived in St. John's to begin his ministry.

The Dissenting Church of Christ at St. John's also had reason to bless “that excellent person” Governor Campbell. For nearly ten years they had been agitating for such a measure. Although they had received freedom to hold services and administer the Sacraments (though not to marry) from the previous Governor in 1781, it was not enshrined in law and had to be defended as late as the spring of 1784.