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HOPES RAISED BY STEAM IN 1840

By D. C. HARVEY

The Public Archives of Nova Scotia

A hundred years ago the eyes of many aspiring Nova Scotians looked to communication by steam as a solution of the chief economic problems of their day. Prior to 1830, when Americans were admitted to the trade of the West Indies, Nova Scotians had striven to get and maintain a monopoly of that market and to make their free ports distributing centres of British, colonial, and American produce assembled for that trade. But even at that early date citizens of Halifax had their eyes on the tourist trade and were expecting steam communication to provide not only a more adequate commercial link between the United States, the Canadas, and the Maritime Provinces but also a belt line for tourists from New York and Boston to Quebec, from Quebec to Halifax, and from Halifax via Windsor, Annapolis Royal, and Saint John to Boston and New York.

It was in 1830 that this hope first found clear expression, when plans were afoot for construction of the *Royal William* to ply between Quebec and Halifax and for improvement of the services by coach and steamer already provided between Halifax, Minas Basin, and Saint John.

On March 4, 1830, an anonymous writer in the *Novascotian* anticipated a heavy increase of both freight and passengers between Quebec and Halifax, and predicted that Halifax, "by a conveyance so certain and eligible, may become the storehouse for the export of her produce to the West Indies during the winter months, as well as the channel for her returns in West India produce." Estimating fifteen cabin passengers and ten steerage for every trip, he continued: "Passengers are less certain, but I think the number I have taken into my calculation, is short of what may be anticipated, particularly by those who have been at Quebec during the summer months; and witnessed the Hotels filled to overflowing with American travellers, who are constantly regretting their having to return the same way they came, and who, no doubt, would be glad to avail themselves of the Steamer to return by Halifax; and, I think the increase of trade, facility, comfort and certainty of dispatch, in passing from Quebec to this and back, would induce numbers who hitherto have not thought of visiting us, to do so."

At the close of the year 1830 the editor of the *Novascotian* wrote an exultant editorial on "Steam Boats," in which he reviewed the growth of industry in the province subsequent to the introduction of the steam engine in the summer of 1827, referred to the steamer for Quebec and Halifax, which was already assured, while another was projected for Boston and Halifax, and prophesied a rapid advance not only in local industry but also in intercolonial and international trade.¹

The optimism of 1830 was not justified by the experiences of 1831 and 1832. In the latter year the cholera, which scourged Quebec, made the *Royal William* an unwelcome visitor in the Maritime Provinces, and kept travellers at home. In 1833 the *Royal William* was sent across the

¹*Novascotian*, Dec. 23, 1830.

Atlantic to be sold, and no immediate successor was provided on the St. Lawrence. In the following year Halifax also was ravaged by cholera and, in addition, suffered a severe commercial depression, which led to a rather formidable emigration of mechanics and labourers to the United States or the adjoining provinces: so that it was not until 1835 that the hopes of Nova Scotians revived and they could turn their attention once more to the promises held out by steam communication.

In September, Howe wrote a series of articles analysing the commercial character and vicissitudes of Halifax and, in October, he followed these with another series advocating the construction of a railroad from Halifax to Windsor. In addition to the obvious arguments from the increased facility with which Halifax would be enabled to attract the agricultural produce of the western counties through the railroad from Windsor, Howe envisioned a vast increase of travel over the line which would now be linked with the steamboats plying between Minas Basin and Saint John. He estimated that local travel would be doubled within the first year; but, "if a good hotel were provided in Halifax, and a Steam communication from hence to Boston or New York, there cannot be a doubt that a very large portion of that great stream of travel, flowing through the United States from south to north every summer, could be attracted into Nova Scotia; and if it were, it would increase the income from mere passengers at least four fold."

This reference to a hotel shows that Howe, at least, recognized the inadequacy of the accommodation which Halifax provided for travellers at that time and the necessity of providing for the comfort and entertainment of tourists if they were to be attracted in any appreciable numbers. On November 19, 1835, he wrote a long editorial on "A Public Hotel" with special reference to the wants of Americans, amongst whom he expected to find the chief supply of tourists. To this end, while disclaiming any desire to reflect upon existing places of entertainment for existing needs and insisting that a new hotel would be more likely to create new business than to diminish that already provided for, he held up as an example *Tremont House* in Boston, which he said had given "a fillip to the minds of the population of North America in the matter of hotel keeping and accommodation." After describing in detail the various comforts to which the people of Boston and other New England towns had become accustomed in their hotels and for which they would look in Halifax, he concluded with the following estimate of the advantages to be derived from the tourist trade:

Every stranger brought into a city is a source of profit to it—each day that a Traveller is induced to stay swells the demand for every necessary of life, and increases the chance of customers to every man having anything to sell. To bring persons into a Town, and to keep them as long as they can, is the duty of all who have an interest in the common prosperity. It is a matter of notoriety, that many thousands of persons principally from the Southern States, travel northward every summer, making excursions to Canada, and to different parts of the New England States. To attract as many as possible of these wealthy Travellers into Nova Scotia, should be the study of every person who has her interest seriously at heart. The

actual outlay of these visitors would amount annually to a very large sum, but there are other and more indirect advantages which could not fail to result from the promotion of this species of intercourse. To say nothing of what may be learnt from the hints and suggestions of intelligent strangers—foreign capital and skill would insensibly flow in upon us as the wants and resources of the province became better known; and we might, in a little time, indemnify ourselves for the emigration of the past summer, by alluring into our marts not a few of the most skilful and enterprising capitalists of the neighbouring states.

As was their wont, the people of Halifax recognized the need of a good hotel but made no move to build one until Cunard's spectacular achievement spurred them to action. But the *Novascotian*, and the other papers as well, let no opportunity slip to keep the progress of steam communication and its promise of increased travel before them. On April 21, 1836, Howe published an account of the *Royal Tar*, which was fitting out in Saint John Harbour for service between Saint John, Eastport, and Boston, to connect with a railroad from Boston to Providence and another steamer from there to New York, so that travellers could pass from Saint John to New York in two and a half days including all "stoppages"; and he commented as follows: "If this line of communication were continued by a Rail Road to Windsor and steamboats to St. John, Halifax and New York would be brought within less than three days and a half of each other; and a steamboat hence to Boston or New York would secure a constant influx of travellers during the summer months passing and repassing over the whole route."

Unfortunately the *Royal Tar* was destroyed by fire in Penobscot Bay on October 25, with the loss of thirty-two lives, together with all of a menagerie except an elephant, and the continuity of this route also was interrupted.

During 1837 all Nova Scotians were preoccupied with constitutional problems and it was not until 1838 that their minds again reverted to the promises of steam communication; but this time their imaginations were fired by the trial trips of the *Sirius* and *Great Western*,² which demonstrated the possibility of regular trans-Atlantic communication by steam and excited the liveliest fear that New York rather than Halifax might be chosen as the first port of call on this continent when a permanent service should have been established.³ The two political parties bitterly divided on

²*Ibid.*, May 3, 1838: "New York dates to April 25, have been received. The only intelligence of public interest which they seem to contain, is an account of the arrival of the two Atlantic steamers, the *Sirius* and the *Great Western*. The former arrived April 22, in 18 days from Cork—having experienced much head winds, and proved herself an admirable sea boat. The *Great Western* arrived on the 23rd, in 14 days from Bristol. The arrival of those vessels have made quite a sensation at New York. The Corporation and many of the citizens went in procession on board the *Sirius*, and gave a formal and very hearty welcome to the captain, officers and crew of that vessel."

³*Ibid.*, May 17, 1838: "The intelligence from the United States is more than usually interesting. The departure of the Atlantic Steamers affords a most pleasing feature of commercial enterprise, and of the social feeling which such enterprise fosters. The success of these splendid vessels will probably be the beginning of a new era in trans-Atlantic communication. This communication cannot be complete, until the points of contact be, a western port of Ireland, and Halifax, Nova Scotia.

constitutional questions were united on this and, through their newspapers, contended hotly that Halifax, as a British port, much the nearest to Great Britain, should have the preference over an American port, that closer communication by an all British route would make the colonies and the Mother Country better known to one another, would bind the Empire more closely together, and counteract the growing attraction of American prosperity for British colonists. This was the burden of all editorial writing in 1838, and this was the burden of the memorandum which Nova Scotians and New Brunswickers, who were in London during that summer, presented to the Colonial Office.

On May 16, Howe, Haliburton, Fairbanks, Major Carmichael, Smith, and others *en route* to England in the *Tyrian*, overtaken and passed by the *Sirius*, had a practical demonstration of the superiority of steam over sail from the point of view of speed and certainty, which stirred them deeply and led them to co-operate with Messrs Bliss and Crane of New Brunswick in urging the imperial government to improve their communications with the colonies. In "The Nova Scotian Afloat, No. 2," Howe gives a graphic description of this incident.⁴ "On she came in gallant style with the speed of a hunter, while we were moving with the rapidity of an ox-cart loaded with marsh mud. . . . Never did we feel so forcibly the contrast between the steamer and the sailing vessel, even for the deep sea passage. The difference is hardly greater between poetry and mathematics." He then continues:

To a Colonist—to a Nova Scotian especially, the questions naturally present themselves, what effect will this have upon our Provinces? Can anything be done to make Halifax one link in the great chain—to connect the Lower Provinces with one or other of these splendid lines of Steam Communication? These are questions to which all our minds should be strongly turned. There is no topic of more importance just now, to which the energies and intelligence of the newly formed Chamber of Commerce might be more advantageously directed.⁵ The voyage to New York, via Halifax, is but very little longer than the direct course from Bristol. Why then should the Steamers not touch at Halifax? The delay need be very trifling—and the lightness of the ships, from the coals taken in there, both going

These must be the places from which the great chain will be stretched,—and which will be linked to other parts of Europe, and the continent of America, by subsidiary steamers, radiating to every point of the compass. This day may be distant, or may not,—for science and enterprise, uninterrupted by war, can work wonders, but such a day certainly appears in prospect."

Ibid., Aug. 16, 1838: "Route to Halifax.—Despatches for Halifax were brought to New York by the Great Western, answers it appears are to be returned by the same route. This is cause of mortification,—Halifax is about four days' sailing or steaming nearer Great Britain than New York is, and Halifax is a principal British station,—yet the longer route through a comparatively strange country is preferred, Despatches were also received in New York, for Canada."

⁴*Ibid.*, July 12, 1838.

⁵*Ibid.*, Jan. 3, 1839. The reference is to the "Society for the Encouragement of Trade and Manufactures" formed at a public meeting in Halifax on December 29, 1838, with an executive committee of fifteen persons known as "The Committee of Trade and Manufactures." This society and committee replaced the older Commercial Society and Chamber of Commerce which, in 1822, had superseded the Halifax Committee of Trade set up by the merchants in 1804.

and returning, would more than counterbalance the whole time lost in taking it in, landing and receiving mails and Passengers. If the Passage was made in 15 days certain, all the Passengers from our Province, Prince Edward Island and New Brunswick, forsaking every description of sailing craft would go in the Steamers—emigrants would come out in the steerage, and, if Government was disposed to patronize the undertaking, the public Mails and Despatches could be also forwarded, in charge of an Officer, at a much less expense than by the present dilatory and costly system. We think it could be shown, that with a Government contribution of half the amount now paid for keeping up Gun Brigs, a sum exceeding £20,000 from this source, and from Passengers and freight, would be turned into the hands of any Company attempting this deviation from the direct voyage and touching at Halifax once a month. Let our active minds at home look to it. Should the Steamers ply to New York alone, almost all the Passengers from the Lower Provinces will go and return through that city—letters and papers will almost as certainly be sent that way, and if Government persist in forwarding the Despatches as at present, their intelligence will generally be a month behind that of Private individuals. It is hoped that others will endeavour to improve upon these few random suggestions, which whether wise or unwise are intended for the common good.

In the Crane-Howe memorandum, which was presented to Lord Glenelg at the Colonial Office on August 24, 1838, the fearful destruction of life and property and the serious interruption of correspondence, through the frequent loss of the old ten-gun brigs, are stressed, as also the effective rivalry of the United States “from the energy of character, the general diffusion of education, and the application of industry to commercial and manufacturing pursuits”; and the memorandum continues,

If Great Britain is to maintain her footing upon the North American Continent—if she is to hold the command of the extensive sea coast from Maine to Labrador, skirting millions of square miles of fertile lands, intersected by navigable rivers, indented by the best harbours in the world, containing now a million and a half of people and capable of supporting many millions, of whose aid in war and consumption in peace she is secure—she must, at any hazard of even increased expenditure for a time, establish such a line of rapid communication by steam, as will ensure the speedy transmission of public despatches, commercial correspondence and general information through channels exclusively British, and inferior to none in security and expedition.

The pride as well as the interests of the British people, would seem to require means of communication with each other, second to none which are enjoyed by other states.

After pointing out the superiority of the Halifax terminus to New York not only from the point of view of the Lower Provinces but also of getting the mails to Canada, the memorandum then argues for Halifax as against Bermuda: “the very superior advantages which Halifax possesses, as the central point to which would be drawn passengers from the adjoining colonies, its abundant and cheap supplies of fuel and food, and

its rapidly extending commercial relations, would seem to point to that port as the one from which such branch lines as may be necessary should radiate.⁶

This memorandum drafted by Howe ably expressed the judgment and yearning of all Nova Scotians and may be said to have been the deciding factor in leading the British government to call for tenders for steam communication between England and America via Halifax. But none of the British firms which had been experimenting with steam would commit itself to the venture and it remained for the Nova Scotian Samuel Cunard to overcome all obstacles, secure the contract, and establish the first regular steam communication between America and the British Isles.⁷

Who, then, was Samuel Cunard and what was there in his past experience that gave him the courage, energy, and resourcefulness to face difficulties which intimidated the foremost mercantile firms of Great Britain itself?

His father was a Loyalist who came to Halifax from Philadelphia after the American Revolution and obtained employment in the dockyard. His mother was also a Loyalist, who came to Nova Scotia from South Carolina and settled in Rawdon. He was born in Halifax on November 21, 1787, and spent his early years in that imperial port when it was alive with merchant ships, privateers, and men-of-war and was enjoying great prosperity from the sale of prizes or from supplying the army and navy with provisions. But neither he nor his father was affected by the spendthrift habits usually associated with easy money in those days of prosperity. They were both thrifty to a high degree.

After such education as the time afforded, Samuel was employed for some years as a clerk in the engineering establishment of the lumber yard; but his heart was in trade and when he was twenty-five years old he entered into partnership with his father and commenced trading with a prize-ship purchased to good advantage during the wars. The firm of A. Cunard & Company acted as agents for English shipping firms, did a good business on their own in the West India trade, and also embarked cautiously on the ship-building industry; but, after the name was changed to S. Cunard and Company, they became agents for the Honourable East India Company, the General Mining Association, and extended their ship-building industry both for commerce and sale. The firm of Lyle & Chappell of Dartmouth built most of their ships locally, but they had large lumbering and ship-building interests in Cumberland County, in New Brunswick, and in Prince Edward Island. S. Cunard was also one of the founders of the Halifax Banking Company, and his firm was one of the few which qualified for the bounty paid by the Assembly to encourage the whaling industry. Throughout this period, though busy with his own concerns controlling a large mercantile fleet and amassing a fortune of almost a million dollars, he spent freely of his time in discharging his civic duties, and was not backward in contributing to charitable or civic projects. Though rejected by the Assembly, he was appointed to the Council in 1830. This indicates that by

⁶J. A. Chisholm, *The Speeches and Public Letters of Joseph Howe* (Halifax, 1909), I, 188.

⁷Abraham Martin Payne, "The Life of Sir Samuel Cunard" (*Collections of the Nova Scotia Historical Society*, XIX, Halifax, 1918, 75-91).

that date he had been recognized as a man of worth whom even the old Family Compact could not afford to ignore.

Cunard, then, by 1830, had the means and the experience necessary to implement almost any great undertaking, and besides he had the confidence of his fellow-townsmen and a character that could impress men of affairs. It was necessary, therefore, only to obtain his interest in the project of steam-communication and the battle would be won; and this was not difficult: for he had already shown interest in the experiment as early as 1825, when the first efforts were made to establish steam communication between Halifax and Quebec, and he had subscribed liberally towards the construction of the *Royal William* which was built for service between Quebec and Halifax and in 1833 made a successful voyage across the Atlantic. He had also put a steamboat in service on the Strait of Northumberland. Both from the scientific and the practical point of view Cunard was intensely interested in the possibilities of steam communication. From the scientific point of view he had often discussed the project with Richard Brown of the General Mining Association, and as the head of a firm with forty sail under their control and contracts for carrying mail between Halifax, Newfoundland, and Bermuda, he knew the uncertainties of wind and sail and the importance of certainty and regularity. It is said that he looked upon the steamboat as a sort of ocean railway that should enable the owner to issue a time-table and adhere to it with reasonable accuracy. Thus, when the British government called for tenders for a steam packet service in the autumn of 1838, Cunard was ready to respond, rich in experience, strong in the faith, able to inspire the ship-builders of the Clyde with his own faith and to secure financial support from British circles by subscribing almost three and a half times as much as the next highest contributor and eight times as much as the average. The thirty-three other partners in the British and North American Royal Mail Steam Packet Company (beginning with James Donaldson at £16,000 and ending with Alexander Kerr at £700) subscribed a total of £215,800, while Cunard himself risked £55,000 in the venture.⁸

The contract was signed in March, 1839, and called for a regular steam service between Liverpool, Halifax, and Boston and a subsidiary service between Pictou and Quebec during the season of navigation. For the transatlantic service four ships were to be employed, and these were built on the Clyde and named the *Britannia*, the *Columbia*, the *Caledonia*, and the *Acadia*. The company also purchased the *Unicorn*, which had formerly plied between Glasgow and Liverpool, and was placed on the St. Lawrence route. Thus it happened that the *Unicorn* was the first Cunarder to cross the Atlantic from England, although the *Britannia* was the first of the four steam packets to cross as part of the regular transatlantic mail service. The former arrived in Halifax on June 1, 1840, and the latter on July 17.

The news of Cunard's triumph was hailed with delight by all parties in Nova Scotia and the Reform and Tory newspapers vied with one another in discussing the new prospects opened up for the British colonies, as a result of this courageous undertaking, and in urging the citizens of Halifax to express their appreciation in a tangible way to Cunard himself as well

⁸For list of shareholders see *ibid.*, 90-1.

as to build a new hotel for the accommodation of passengers and take steps to meet the expansion of trade that would result. The *Novascotian* rejoiced that "a colonist, whose enterprising spirit we have often had occasion to notice, has had the courage to grapple with an undertaking so vast as the carriage of mails by steam between Halifax and the Mother Country—Halifax and Boston—and Pictou and Quebec."⁹ The *Times* wrote: "A new era will commence in Provincial prosperity from the moment the first steam packet reaches Halifax—and no one who knows the superior position of our port but must be convinced that the time is not far distant when it will become the centre of steam navigation for the whole American continent."¹⁰ In a later editorial it argued that steam communication should "make the Provinces the depot for the British trade with the United States."¹¹ The *Novascotian*, on the other hand, anticipated a marked improvement in imperial relations and saw in the steam boats "floating bridges" between the Mother Country and the colonies.

The voyage from 30 days is now reduced to 10 or 12. Two-thirds of the distance has thus been annihilated. The journey has been reduced to certainty. Thousands will soon visit us in search of pleasure or of business, who would never have approached our shores, had it not been for the introduction of this mode and facility of communication. Our politics will become better known and understood. The policy of the Colonial Office will grow more healthy, and be better adapted to our condition and circumstances. The true motives and standing of men and parties will be accurately scanned and valued at the source of power.¹²

In the meantime, Cunard's achievement was celebrated in advance. On April 30, 1839, the Hon. Joseph Cunard, who represented the firm at Chatham, N.B., was presented with an address, on his arrival from England, in which the undertaking was referred to as "unparalleled in commercial annals." Samuel did not return to Halifax until late in August, but on August 23 a committee waited upon him at his residence, presented an address that had been enthusiastically voted at a public meeting, and arranged for a picnic and dinner at McNab's Island on the 28th. This dinner was held in great style, and the chief toast was to "The Honorable Samuel Cunard—our pride as a Townsman—our admiration as a merchant—may every success attend his establishment of Steam Navigation across the Atlantic." Cunard replied to the toast with becoming modesty and gave all credit to the British government; but in doing so he admitted that their proposal had been for monthly mails only, whereas he had offered to convey the mails once every fortnight, as the monthly service would still have left the British colonies behind the age.

The actual arrival of the *Unicorn*, which made a trip to Boston before going on the St. Lawrence route, and the *Britannia*, which inaugurated the regular transatlantic service between Liverpool, Halifax, and Boston, was a source of much gratification to Nova Scotians, in that Halifax was to be the first to receive news from overseas and to become the distributing

⁹*Novascotian*, April 11, 1839.

¹⁰*Times*, Halifax, April 9, 1839.

¹¹*Ibid.*, May 21, 1839.

¹²*Novascotian*, Sept. 17, 1840.

centre for all mail of the Maritime Provinces and the Canadas;¹³ but the fact that all boats of this line hurried on to Boston seemed to nip in the bud the hope of making Halifax "the depot for British trade with the United States." On the other hand, the latter feature of Cunard's contract gave great joy to Boston, which during the last decade had been overshadowed by New York, and did much to revivify close and friendly relations between Great Britain, Nova Scotia, and New England. In fact, Boston outdid Halifax in recognition of Cunard's services as well as in the domain of prophecy.

The arrival of the *Unicorn* was celebrated by a procession and dinner attended by the highest official mercantile and social dignitaries in Massachusetts. The procession formed at the City Hall and proceeded to Faneuil Hall. The mayor presided and made an eloquent speech on the relation of Massachusetts to old England and the work of New Englanders in opening up the western hinterland to trade and colonization. He spoke in glowing terms of the benefits anticipated for Massachusetts "when she stands as the half way point upon the most direct route between Europe and the Rocky Mountains." A long list of toasts followed from which I choose the following as most typical:

The Hon. Samuel Cunard.—The founder of direct Steam Navigation between Great Britain and the City of Boston,—a wise negotiator—while the Governments are arguing about the *boundaries*, he makes a successful incursion, with a peaceful force, into the *heart* of the country.

Halifax.—A member of the new confederacy of cities formed by the magnificent enterprise which we have assembled to commemorate; may prosperity ever attend her.

City of Boston.—With steam navigation to the Father-Land; railroad communication with the Father of Waters; and the smiles of the Father of Mercies; she needs no guarantee of her future growth, prosperity and happiness.

England and America.—Wise men will soon be satisfied that *Mr Cunard's Line* is of more importance than the *Boundary Line*.¹⁴

The speeches delivered and toasts proposed on the arrival of the *Unicorn* were not excelled in eloquence or exceeded in number by those at the larger banquet given to Cunard himself on the arrival of the *Britannia* in Boston. They all show that the hopes raised in New England were as great and equally destined to a measure of disappointment as those of Nova Scotia. But if geography placed both Halifax and Boston nearer to Great Britain than Montreal or New York, that same geography gave Montreal and New York more direct access through inland waters, canals, and railroads to the large productive hinterlands which were to supply food and

¹³*Ibid.*, June 18, 1840. "The 'tables are turned' at last. The regular custom was, for those who had to cater for the public in the News department, to seek their intelligence from the latest New York or Boston papers. 'The first of the Cunard line' has broken the ice, in this respect,—we had our 'latest' last week, by the good ship *Unicorn*, and this week we get the same back again, by the *Unicorn*, in the Boston papers. The Bostonians also rejoice in the fact, for they formerly had to depend on New York,—and to communicate with the old world by way of Halifax, is the next thing to an altogether direct line."

¹⁴*Ibid.*

raw materials for European markets and ultimately to draw the Cunard and other lines of steamships to the ever-increasing larger centres where the volume of exports and imports could be most profitably assembled and exchanged. In the meantime, however, the inauguration of regular transatlantic communication by steam gave a feeling of exaltation to both Halifax and Boston, expanded their energies and stimulated their efforts to improve overland communications with their respective hinterlands; and despite the obvious conflict of interest renewed, for the time being, the old friendship between New England and Nova Scotia, America, and Great Britain.