The Port of Saint John, New Brunswick, 1867-1911: Exploration of an Ecological Complex

Elizabeth McGahan
THE PORT OF SAINT JOHN, NEW BRUNSWICK, 1867-1911:
EXPLORATION OF AN ECOLOGICAL COMPLEX
- - - - - - -

Elizabeth McGahan

Periodically, urban historians have been reminded of the need to view the development of cities as a process. In tracing the growth of the Port of Saint John, 1867-1911, the theoretical perspective of ecology is employed to examine the process by which one urban community was integrated, through its transport node, into a larger eco-system of cities.

The transport node of the City of Saint John provides an exemplary model of an agent of integration since it is generally recognized that a significant correlation exists between the sophistication of a society's instruments of transport technology and the organization of that society. Similarly, it has been suggested


that the infrastructure of transportation systems is closely related to the operation of urban systems and, hence, a nodal focus can offer some indication of Saint John's place in the functional hierarchy of cities. In this regard Otis Duncan, a demographer, remarked that "... a system [of cities] frame of reference assumes that what cities are like depends at least in part on what cities do (their functions); that the functions of cities are in some measure a reflection of inter-community relationships".

Previous research has revealed that from its earliest beginnings the transport node determined the primary functions of Saint John. As Jean Gottman noted, Atlantic seaports served as "hinges" between the interior and Europe. For Saint John this interior was largely based upon a provincial lumber and shipbuilding wealth, and consequently, the technological and organizational revolution of the nineteenth century, which disrupted this base, forced the city to seek integration in an industrializing system emphasizing continental

---


4 Otis D. Duncan et al., *Metropolis and Region* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1960), p. 82.


linkages. Thus, following the decline of its Port based wealth in the 1870's and having realized by the 1880's that the basis of that previous prosperity would never be regained, the City worked towards acquiring a rail connection to central Canada. Acquisition of this connection was predicated on the ability of the City to provide a particular service to the larger system: an ocean Port. Hence, during the 1880's the significance of the transport node for Saint John resulted from the eventual perception by the municipal government of the synchronous nature of Port and City economic recovery. However, unable either to expend the necessary funds itself or secure these in sufficient quantity from the Provincial Government, the City resorted to a common alternative in late nineteenth-century North America: Federal Aid. 8 This alternative singularly demonstrated the increasing scale of transport and organization throughout the country.

Seeking Federal assistance, however, was not without difficulty. Competition with Halifax within a national context for winter port status resulted in a sobering realization of the position of the Port within the transport hierarchy. Dependent upon an external agency—the Federal Government—Saint John waited until the mid-1890's before linking into a national transportation system. Throughout the negotiations with Ottawa and the Canadian Pacific Railway, the City

---

presented the Port as a winter appendage to Montreal.\(^9\) This civic response to integration suggests the need for analyzing transport nodes within a national administrative unit.\(^{10}\) For although concern over Portland, Maine's competitive abilities were real, by positioning itself within the Montreal transport matrix, Saint John hoped to diminish that threat through a Canadian intra-nodal association.\(^{11}\) Again viewing Saint John within a national system of cities, Ottawa's role in encouraging cooperative competition between Canada's two Maritime ports becomes apparent. Consequently, the presence of two port cities on the Atlantic resulted in the recognition by Ottawa of a dual transport primate within the Maritimes.\(^{12}\)

---


\(^{10}\) See especially N.S.B. Gras, "The Development of Metropolitan Economy in Europe and America", American Historical Review, XXVII (July 1922). Despite the opinion contained in the previously cited article, Gras believed "... that the Maritime Provinces of Canada would be better off in the metropolitan region of Boston". See N.S.B. Gras, "Regionalism and Nationalism", Foreign Affairs, Vol. 7 (1928-1929), 466. See also Donald Kerr, "Metropolitan Dominance in Canada" in John Warkentin (ed.), Canada: A geographical interpretation (Toronto: Methuen 1965), p. 531.

\(^{11}\) Saint John Common Council and Saint John Board of Trade, "Saint John as a Canadian Winter Port and the Terminus of the Canadian Pacific and Inter-colonial Railways" (Saint John, N.B., 1898).


For discussion of functional hierarchy see Walter Christaller, Central Places in Southern Germany (translated by W. Baskin) (Englewood
Although not experiencing population growth similar to other Canadian cities, Saint John through its nodal integration still underwent organizational and spatial changes resulting from its entrance into the system of cities. These changes were observable in the relationships between the City's power centers: the elected members of the Saint John Common Council and the voluntary membership of the Saint John Board of Trade. Each performed a function in regard to the Port. The Common Council was primarily concerned with civil self-service functions, such as operating the ferry. The Board was more intimately connected with the performance of external functions. Struggling to make inroads in the trade network over which it had no formal control, the Board of Trade attempted and succeeded in obtaining positions in the municipal government. Thus, organizationally at the municipal level, increasing participation by the Common Council in discussions related to the external functions of the Port indicated an emerging coalescence of opinion, stimulated by the presence on the Council of Board of Trade members. In this regard, members of Saint John's power center

---

13 See Table 1.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cities and Towns</th>
<th>Provinces</th>
<th>1871</th>
<th>1881</th>
<th>1891</th>
<th>1901</th>
<th>1911</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Montreal¹</td>
<td>Quebec</td>
<td>115,000</td>
<td>155,238</td>
<td>219,616</td>
<td>267,730</td>
<td>470,480</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toronto¹</td>
<td>Ontario</td>
<td>59,000</td>
<td>96,196</td>
<td>181,215</td>
<td>208,040</td>
<td>376,538</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winnipeg¹</td>
<td>Manitoba</td>
<td>241</td>
<td>7,985</td>
<td>25,639</td>
<td>42,340</td>
<td>136,035</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vancouver¹</td>
<td>B.C.</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>13,709</td>
<td>27,010</td>
<td>100,401</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ottawa</td>
<td>Ontario</td>
<td>24,141</td>
<td>31,307</td>
<td>44,154</td>
<td>59,928</td>
<td>87,062</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hamilton</td>
<td>Ontario</td>
<td>26,880</td>
<td>36,661</td>
<td>48,959</td>
<td>52,634</td>
<td>81,969</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quebec</td>
<td>Quebec</td>
<td>59,699</td>
<td>62,446</td>
<td>63,090</td>
<td>68,840</td>
<td>78,710</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Halifax</td>
<td>Nova Scotia</td>
<td>29,582</td>
<td>36,100</td>
<td>38,437</td>
<td>40,832</td>
<td>46,619</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saint John</td>
<td>New Brunswick</td>
<td>41,325</td>
<td>41,353</td>
<td>39,179</td>
<td>40,711</td>
<td>42,511</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victoria</td>
<td>B.C.</td>
<td>3,270</td>
<td>5,925</td>
<td>16,841</td>
<td>20,919</td>
<td>31,660</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Windsor</td>
<td>Ontario</td>
<td>4,253</td>
<td>6,561</td>
<td>10,322</td>
<td>12,153</td>
<td>17,829</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sydney</td>
<td>Nova Scotia</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>1,480</td>
<td>2,427</td>
<td>9,009</td>
<td>17,723</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glace Bay</td>
<td>Nova Scotia</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>2,459</td>
<td>6,945</td>
<td>16,562</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹Population of the City Municipality.

experienced changes similar to other late nineteenth-century cities.\textsuperscript{16}

Associated with the above organizational changes, the physical evolution of the Port of Saint John reflected the extent to which national integration had contributed to the process of land-use succession. In particular, each of the following areas, during the years indicated, displayed varying degrees of dominance along the waterfront:\textsuperscript{17}

1. The Market Slip-Long Wharf, encompassing that section of harbourfront extending from the Long Wharf to approximately the Custom House Wharf and dominated during 1867-1879 [Figure 1 (1872)];

2. The Reed's Point-Lower Cove section located at the southern end of the main peninsula and dominant during 1879-1895 [Figure 2 (1878)];

3. The Carleton or West Side waterfront incorporating the entire harbour area of the Carleton peninsula and dominant during 1895-1911 [Figures 3 (1911) and 4 (1919)].

In summary, by focusing on a transport node - the Port of Saint John - this study illustrates how the complex of altering functional relationships suggested in the ecological perspective effected, and were influenced by, the city's endeavors to cope with its changed situation.\textsuperscript{18}


\textsuperscript{17}These distinctions are not intended to represent a social reality but are merely a set of temporal designations which conveniently lend themselves to the period under investigation. For further comment regarding the imprecision of stage theory see especially Wilbert E. Moore, \textit{Social Change} (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1974), pp. 2, 37-39. See also Amos H. Hawley, \textit{Urban Society: An Ecological Approach}, p. 333.

\textsuperscript{18}J.M.S. Careless, "Somewhat Narrow Horizons", Canadian Historical Association, \textit{Historical Papers}, 1968, p. 7. "But where are the studies of the attempts of Halifax or Saint John to cope with their changed situations, or the accommodations they partially achieved as continental winter ports!" See also Careless, "Aspects of Metropolitanism in Atlantic Canada", in M. Wade, ed., \textit{Regionalism in the Canadian Community} (Toronto, 1969), pp. 119-124.
Figure 1. City and Harbour of Saint John, N.B.—1872.
Source: Harriet Irving Library Archives, University of New Brunswick.
Figure 2. City and Harbour of Saint John, N.B.—1878.
Source: Provincial Archives of New Brunswick.
Figure 3. City and Harbour of Saint John, N.B.—1911.
Source: Provincial Archives of New Brunswick.
Figure 4. City and Harbour of Saint John, N.B.—1919.

Source: Provincial Archives of New Brunswick.