

Stage Coach Service in the 1800s

Excerpts from PISKAHEGAN AND THE STAGE COACH by Rev. Charles M. Smith
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Since the old "Fredericton- St. Andrews Road" was called a "Stage Coach" road perhaps a word on such means of transit might be of some interest. At the outset I should point out that every main road centering upon Fredericton was (understandably) called "the old Fredericton Road"; and many 19th century highways (or "Great Roads") were titled as "Coach Roads". The reason for this identification is clear: Stage-Coaches were the only means of long-distance, inland travel before the coming of railroads. These impressive vehicles tumbled over country and woodland roads bearing (mainly) passengers and mail. However, this type of travel persisted long after the coming of trains, and in fact, complimented train and ship arrivals, as stages met schedules of ports and RR Stations bearing passengers from thence to their ultimate goals.

Let us, therefore, first of all glance at "Coaching" in the New England states in the 19th century, as depicted in Harold A. Davis's "International Community on the St. Croix", (Page 189); herein he generalizes briefly on "Coach" travel in Maine and New Brunswick.

"There were daily Stages to Bangor and St. John, and one three times a week to Houlton. Great Roads had connected St. Andrews with St. John and Fredericton for many years".

"It was in 1857 that the famous "Airline Stage" route between Calais and Bangor was opened," mainly to improve mail-service. This route was some twenty-five miles shorter than the old and long established stage-line which followed the coast. Passengers left Bangor at 9:30 P.M. and reached Calais at 3:30 P.M. the following afternoon. The old route required about six hours longer".

The Stage averaged about 5½ to 6 miles per hour on these long and arduous routes. Two separate Stage Companies operated these two services. Stops were frequent,--more out of deference to the horses than to the passengers.

Inns or "Post Houses" were to be found about every 40 miles apart where passengers could rest and find refreshments; and here horses were changed allowing fresh teams to take their burdensome places. Although many of the larger type Coaches between the greater cities were drawn by six horses, most Coaches had two or four horses. The smaller Stages carried six or eight passengers inside and often having a few more on the outside seats on the tops of the carriages. However, (in the US at least) employees of the Coach Companies sat in the "box-seat" or driver's seat.

Some Coaches, especially those of the more affluent society of England, were "about 24' in length; 8' 3" in width and with a height of 12'. The length of the pole was '2' 4"; and weighing altogether 4 tons". Small parcels were placed on the roof and heavy luggage was strapped to a baggage rack at the rear of the carriage". Mail Coaches (generally of lighter weight and less ornate) operated under contract with the Postmaster general and kept to strict time-tables,--when possible." Some of these early Coaches were closed only at the front and back, but the sides were open except for adjustable curtains. Inside there were usually three rows of seats, each row wide enough for three passengers. Those sitting in the front row had their backs to the driver; the middle row was swung on a pivot to allow the doors to open. There was a fourth row of seats for passengers on the top of the Coach behind the driver's seat". (Quotes, Canadiana 9, page 390)..

Winter travel was always fraught with difficulties,--if not even with some discomfort and pain. Of course in this season "Winter-Coaches" (on sleds instead of on wheels) were used and travel under these conditions were even slower than with wheeled vehicles--averaging around 4 to 4 & 1/2 M.P.H. Stage departures were generally very early in the morning, some leaving at 4 or 5 A.M.; others even earlier.

Also, although such travel information was well advertised on bulletin-boards posted outside Coach offices and in the (weekly) press, yet 'arrivals' were far from any dependable hour,--as one might well expect! Accidents were quite frequent; illnesses among the passengers; disabilities among the animals; breakdown of coaches,--thus requiring the weary and jostled passengers to unload under any circumstances, in forests or wheresoever. "Coaching", as it was called, could never become a pleasant experience. One writer stated that "holdups were not infrequent"; passengers would be plundered and their possessions confiscated; and so in certain remote areas of New England, travelers journeyed with a prayer-book in one hand and a pistol in the other-" One can well imagine with what concern (rather than happy anticipation) a prospective traveler might look forward to a Stagecoach trip: the purpose therefore would have to be most essential!

The following is a small sampling of five petitions to the Lt. Governor of New Brunswick which concerns matters relative to Stage Coach services in the province;

(1) Petition by Solomon Vail of the Parish of Kingsclear (George Turner's son-in-law).

Feb. 10, 1842 Vail reports that he "commenced running a Stage for the accommodation of Travelers on the new line of Road between Fredericton and St. Andrews about the first of January last and has continued to drive on the said road since that period once a week and occasionally twice. That your Petitioner has six horses on the said line, together with another pair of horses at all times ready in case of necessity. That your Petitioner leaves Fredericton on Monday in each week and St. Andrews on Wednesday each week, and performs the journey through in one day'.