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## SAINT JOHN, NEW BRUNSWICK (1800-1900)

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Canada's oldest incorporated city is Saint John, New Brunswick, that distinction having been granted by an enthusiastic Governor Thomas Carleton on May 18, 1785, and reluctantly approved by the Colonial Office. The city also claims Champlain as its discoverer (June 24, 1604), General Robert Monckton as its British liberator (Sept. 20, 1758), and the "Loyalist City" as its title in honour of the instant population it began to receive on May 18, 1783. Even with those credentials, Saint John was not selected as the provincial capitol and was deprived of the official, the military, and the educational establishments, all of which went to tiny Fredericton. The Church of England Cathedral also went to Fredericton, though the Roman Catholics did select Saint John for their Bishop. Despite this lack of official encouragement, to say nothing of official obstruction, Saint John achieved by mid-nineteenth century "a prominent role in an Atlantic communications system extending to Liverpool and London in one direction, Boston and New York in another,"<sup>1</sup> and it was not until the end of the century that rival Halifax began to establish clear dominance.

### 1. Economic Growth and Metropolitan Development

Situated at the mouth of the 450 mile St. John River, the city of Saint John controlled a lumbering-agriculture hinterland of considerable potential. The ice free harbour guaranteed year round activity, allowing its merchants to monopolize the trade of the populous western side of the province. Though the city fathers were to grasp for the capitol throughout the 1800's, it was to remain, as it had been from the beginning, a commercial entrepot. James Simonds, William Hazen, James White and Israel Perley were the more prominent of the aggressive Massachusetts traders who followed the invading army in 1758 and formed their importing and exporting businesses. They also acquired most of the property of value in the region. During the Revolutionary Wars, American and French, they and their successors supplied the British navy with masts, ships and supplies, thereby

establishing the economic base on which the city was to grow. The coming of the Loyalists both enlarged the local market and supplied the labour force for the expanding activities.

Over the first half of the nineteenth century Saint John rapidly developed into an important commercial and ship building centre, though it was painfully exposed to regular economic crises. After 1815 the entrepreneurial leadership passed to a number of energetic Scottish builders who recently migrated to the area and established a vital transatlantic trade, usually with relatives in Britain, although contacts in the West Indies, South Africa and Australia became common. The Robertsons, Wrights, Jardines, Macdonalds, even the Wallaces, had this type of arrangement. Until the 1840's the needs of the province and Saint John complimented each other, thus the government in the hands of the Loyalist establishment created few problems. With the loss of British preferences, however, Saint John sought a protected New Brunswick market for its manufactures, both real and potential, and it also pressed for railways, on which they believed all future progress would depend. Promoters like Robert Jardine, John Robertson and Richard Wright envisioned their city as the profitable clearing house for both east-west and north-south traffic on the European and North American Railway as well as the Intercolonial. Lack of support from the province precipitated an interest in politics and the eventual control of the Executive by politicians who represented them. This included men like Robert Hazen, R.D. Wilmot, J.H. Gray, Leonard Tilley and George King. Both protection and railways were achieved. Saint John's economic clout reached its pinnacle in the 1850's and 1860's when its builders, bankers, insurancemen, company executives, all often the same people, mingled with those of the world in London, Boston and New York.<sup>2</sup>

By the mid-1870's Saint John had rail connections with both central Canada and New England, but the steam ship had rendered her sailing vessels obsolete, and the railways, instead of increasing the markets, destroyed the local producers with debilitating competition. There was a considerable resurgence under the impetus of the National Policy in the 1880's but as Table I shows it was temporary.

Table I - Manufactures in Saint John from 1871 to 1911  
(Except for 1871, Portland is included)

<u>Year</u>	<u>Estab- lish- ments</u>	<u>Capital</u>	<u>Employees</u>	<u>Wages</u>	<u>Cost of Materials</u>	<u>Value of Products</u>
1871		1,225,942	4,103	1,080,248	2,815,640	5,094,976
1881	204	2,143,064	2,690	749,340	2,564,700	4,123,753
1891	773	4,838,766	5,888	1,865,348	4,628,734	8,131,790
1901	187	5,252,797	4,688	1,634,051	3,545,549	6,712,769
1911	177	9,242,338	5,270	2,269,898	5,473,788	10,081,667

SOURCE: Census of Canada, 1871, 1901, 1911

Saint John's faith in the potential of railways was not diminished, and throughout the 1880's and 1890's, huge sums were expended on port facilities to accommodate ships and trains. Pressure was also maintained on the federal government to force the C.P.R. into building the "Short Line" from Montreal to Saint John and cease using Portland, Maine, as its eastern terminal. The Saint John Board of Trade used all of its influence to have Saint John used as the terminal for the federally subsidized mail steamers then using Portland. This was the beginning of the trend that ultimately gave Saint John its new life after the turn of the century. The city had slipped into the role of a transit warehouse and regional service centre. Only with government intervention and encouragement could the city maintain any of its past luster. That help did come after 1900, but in the meantime people had been moving out.

## 2. Population

Any description of population characteristics must be incomplete as statistics before 1861 are unreliable. There is, in addition, a problem with the city boundary. When incorporated in 1785, the city was limited to about two square miles. The river winds around three rocky peninsulas at its mouth, and Saint John occupied the tips of the two next to the ocean, the harbour dividing them. The eastern

peninsula, which was slightly larger than the other and always had more than 85% of the population, had its growth restricted by the community of Portland. With water on three sides and the boundary of Portland on the other there was a strict limit on expansion. From the beginning Saint John and Portland grew together, but by 1860 Saint John (east) was out of land. West Saint John (Carleton) remained isolated and out of the main stream until the arrival of the street car in the twentieth century. By that time Portland had voted to amalgamate with Saint John, thus solving the land problem.

Immigration remained vigorous until the 1860's, most of it from the British Isles. By 1861, however, the pattern was set with over 63% of the population native born. Of the immigrant groups, the Irish accounted for 25.6%, the English 3% and the Scottish 2.2%. After 1861 there were few immigrants and by the end of the century 89% of the population was native born. Almost half of the 5,662 not native born had arrived before Confederation. The net increase in population between 1861 and 1901 was only 1984 or slightly less than 5%.

Table II - Population of Saint John and Portland

<u>Year</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>Saint John</u>	<u>Portland</u>	<u>Increase</u>
1824		8,488		
1834	17,150	12,073	5,077	
1840	27,000*	19,281	7,719*	9,850* (57.4%)
1851	31,174	22,745	8,429	4,174* (15.5%)
1861	38,817	27,317	11,500	7,647 (24.5%)
1871	41,325	28,805	12,520	2,508 (6.5%)
1881	41,353	26,127	15,226	28 (.07%)
1891	39,179	24,184	14,995**	- 2,174 (-5.3%)
1901	40,711	24,909	15,802	1,532 (3.9%)
1911	42,511	24,832	17,679	1,800 (4.4%)
1921	47,166	27,469	19,697	4,655 (10.95%)

\* Estimate for Portland

\*\* Saint John and Portland amalgamated in 1889

SOURCES: Census of New Brunswick, 1861  
Census of Canada, 1871-1921

Natural increase accounted for whatever small increase there was, but that is only part of the story. The birth rate dropped from 35.79 per thousand in 1851 to 22.55 per thousand in 1901 while the death rate dropped from 12.79 to 9.26. Neither rate is far off the national averages and should have resulted in an increase of at least 25%. The explanation is to be found in outward migration to other parts of Canada and to the United States.

The exodus was greater than the figures would indicate, for there was a significant move of up-river people into the city throughout the period. This dual migration produced a change in the religious composition of the city, as shown in Table III.

Table III - Religious Composition, 1861-1921

<u>Year</u>	<u>Roman Catholics</u>	<u>Church of England</u>	<u>Methodists</u>	<u>Presbyterians</u>	<u>Baptists</u>
1861	15,461 (39.8%)	8,866 (22.8%)	4,450 (11.5%)	4,858 (12.5%)	4,379 (11.3%)
1871	14,156 (34.3%)	9,855 (23.9%)	5,249 (12.7%)	5,369 (13%)	5,931 (14.8%)
1901	11,982 (29.4%)	9,258 (22.7%)	5,655 (13.9%)	4,365 (11.4%)	7,870 (19.3%)
1921	14,419 (30.6%)	11,392 (24.2%)	5,637 (12%)	4,445 (9.4%)	9,390 (19.9%)

SOURCES: Census of New Brunswick, 1861  
Census of Canada, 1871-1921

There is a correlation between the decline in the number of Roman Catholics and the outward migration during this period. They occupied the bottom rung on the social and economic scale and had little incentive to stay. The up-river Baptists drifted into the city about the same time and appear to have occupied both the lower class housing and occupations that were being vacated. One specific incident deserves mention. The Great Fire of 1877 destroyed upwards of 1,600

buildings and turned about 15,000 people out of home. That fire took place on the main peninsula and obliterated the most heavily populated areas, especially the Irish districts. The city was rebuilt immediately, but not always for the previous occupants. A number of residents found temporary accommodations in Portland but appear to have moved on in the 1880's. (See Table II) It was over forty years before the old city recovered its lost population.

Any discussion about class and occupational structures would be premature at present beyond some reference to the impact of the decline of shipbuilding on the one hand and the concurrent slump of Saint John as an entrepot. Work for labourers, tradesmen and craftsmen fell dramatically, as reported by D. Coughlan in the Report Relative to Manufacturing Interests in Existence in Canada (1885): "The presence of the ocean 'steam tramps' seriously hurts the trade of St. John. Not requiring ballast, watchmen, repairs, ship-chandlery - of which they have a supply - truckage, wharf accommodation, water, nor permitting many other expenditures, by reason of their short sojourn, the outlay in the port is but a fraction of the money sailing vessels would leave. These 'tramps' usually load in five days; sailing vessels would take a much longer time. The loss of yield to the port from the superseding of sailing vessels in the carrying trade by these 'tramps', affects all kinds of business."<sup>3</sup>

### 3. Social Organization

Saint John was originally governed by a Common Council consisting of a combination of appointed and elected men. The Mayor was selected by the provincial government until 1850 along with the Recorder and some other officials. Each of the city's wards elected an alderman and a Councillor, but the franchise was limited to those with substantial property. The charter of the city of New York was used as a model. About the middle of the nineteenth century a number of changes were implemented such as the election of the mayor by the Council between 1850 and 1853 and his election by the public in annual elections after 1853. An attempt to eliminate the property qualification for voters was rejected in the House of Assembly through the efforts of people like Tilley who "condemned the principle

of allowing those to vote who had not paid their taxes."<sup>4</sup> The next major change came after the annexation of Portland in 1889 when each ward was limited to one alderman but two aldermen at large were also elected. In 1907 the number of aldermen at large was increased to four, and in 1912 their title was changed to Commissioners when both they and the Mayor were elected for two years instead of one. From time to time there were demands for the democratization of city politics but they were ignored until reform was forced on the city in the twentieth century.

Until 1850 the Mayor was invariably chosen from among the establishment, usually with Loyalist background, while the elected officials were from the business and propertied classes. After 1850 both the Mayor and the aldermen represented the business and professional classes and interested themselves in such matters as police protection, water and sewerage, railroads, fire protection, street railways, and the improvement of port facilities. From time to time there was some attention to public health and refuse removal but it was usually limited to crises such as the Cholera epidemic of 1854.<sup>5</sup> The condition of the working classes rarely entered the debates except under police matters.

Among social organizations the Churches were by far the most important. This must be seen in relation to the intense Roman Catholic-Protestant animosities that were kindled by the July 12 riots of the 1840's, nurtured by the struggle over a public school system, and solidified into a semi-apartheid relationship toward the end of the century. With Saint John its Cathedral city the Roman Catholics had a solid centre of gravity, while the very existence of the Bishop forced the Protestants into an alliance. Saint John was the centre of the Low Church Anglicans in the province who had little difficulty finding accommodation with the Methodists and Presbyterians, though the Baptists remained suspicious. At any rate, everyone belonged to a church and the positions of the churches were either solicited or volunteered on all issues.

There were numerous other groups and organizations of varying degrees of influence. The Mechanics' Institute was among the



most influential between 1840 and 1880, providing a common meeting ground and planning centre for the elites. The Chamber of Commerce had a checkered career but served as a pressure group for the city merchants in its good years. The most vocal organizations were the various temperance groups, of which the Songs of Temperance was the most prominent. There were four temperance halls in the city and area in 1861 and more were built. Every week for decades there was a meeting, a soiree, an outing, or a study session. The middle class leadership and middle to lower class membership found more than a cause in temperance. Among ethnic organizations the St. Andrew's Society and the St. Patrick's Society were the most prominent unless one considers the Orange Order in this category. The Orangemen were active and aggressive throughout the century, having three halls in Saint John and a known attitude on most issues. The extent of their influence is difficult to measure, but they did run into many obstacles in their attempt to get a provincial charter. It seems likely that they were less important than either they or the critics claimed.

Labour organizations were in existence of one variety or another throughout the nineteenth century, and during the heydays of the 1850's Saint John had "a unique and powerful labour movement, unrivalled in Canada until the early 1860's."<sup>6</sup> The associations, societies and unions reached into dozens of trades and even included some white collar workers in an Early Closing Association, which was started in 1857. The Labourers Benevolent Association eventually emerged as the largest and strongest of the organizations, but when it crumbled during the depression of the 1870's the movement entered a period of decline in tandem with the city itself. By the 1890's the formation of the Trades and Labour Council and the Nine Hour Movement began to revitalize it somewhat. During the middle decades the various associations had provided a significant outlet for the labourers.

#### 4. Physical Environment

The railways, street cars and steamships all contributed to change in the second half of the century. The steam ship has already

been mentioned (Section 2) and there is no denying that a totally new waterfront was created to accommodate the new types of ships. Large, gaunt warehouses joined to steel tracks replaced the quaint shops of the sailmakers and the small merchants. Some interesting studies might also be done on the psychological impact of the change. "What sooty monster mirks the sky, Whose seeting prow makes sick the sea"? a dismayed poet asked in "St. John Mourning Her Sail."<sup>7</sup>

The railways, which were supposed to have saved the economy of the city, appear to have had the reverse effect. The local markets were so exposed to central Canadian competition that the Saint John producers could not survive. They too were replaced by warehouses that dotted the Intercolonial rail line. Running parallel to them were the slum houses of the day labourers and night hustlers. The railway also permitted the growth of Saint John's most exclusive suburb nine miles north-east of the city at Rothesay. There the country club atmosphere flourished.

The Peoples Street Railway Company with its horse cars was begun in 1866. It ran between Market Square at the centre of the city and Indian Town, a river port above the tidal rapids. Since most of the line ran through Portland, it encouraged the movement of people into that suburb, but it was not until the introduction of the electric street car in 1893 that the system became reliable. The system was expanded in all directions, cirsscrossing the old city and reaching east to a new suburb in Simonds and west to another in Fairville. In the process West Saint John was finally linked to the city. The original city with its three and four story tenement houses built wall to wall against the streets was unattractive to many. Those who could afford it moved to Rothesay, but there were acceptable closer locations such as Mount Pleasant overlooking the city to the north or Douglas Avenue on the peninsula dividing the harbour and the river to the west. Both were handy to the street car line.

By 1900 the city retained its original business location on King, Prince William and Charlotte Streets. The owners no longer lived in the core, however, for they had gone to the suburb, leaving the old city to the less well off or their employees. There were, naturally,

exceptions to this, for many fine stone and brick houses had been erected in the burned out district where lawyers, doctors and other professionals lived. In addition, the North End (Indian Town) with excellent street car service grew into a crowded working class location.

It is tempting to picture Saint John as a fossilized remnant of a departed age by 1900. With Bliss Carman there was much wondering "Where are the ships I used to know", the first line of his "Ships of Saint John" (1895). Compared to the other cities Saint John had a significantly different pattern. It did not, however, remain static, and the urban reform movement that took root about 1900 was to revitalize all aspects of the city.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. J.M.S. Careless, "Aspects of Metropolitanism in Atlantic Canada," in Mason Wade (ed.), Regionalism in the Canadian Community, 1867-1967, (Toronto, 1969), p. 119.
2. See ibid., pp. 119 ff. He suggests that Liverpool and Portland, Maine, were the limit of their interests.
3. From Canada, Sessional Papers, No. 37, 1885, p. 84.
4. Quoted in the New Brunswick Courier, March 15, 1851.
5. See Geoffrey Bilson, "The Cholera Epidemic in Saint John, N.B., 1854," Acadiensis, Vol. IV, No. 1, Autumn (1974).
6. Richard Rice, "A History of Organized Labour in Saint John, New Brunswick, 1813-1890," Unpublished M.A. Thesis, U.N.B. (1968), p. 161.
7. Bruce MacKinnon, The Canadian Magazine, Vol. XLI (1913), p. 31.