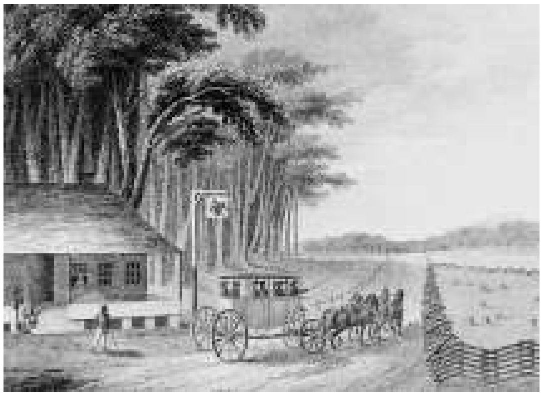
THE STAGECOACH ERA IN DORCHESTER

by W. Eugene Goodrich

Background

Stagecoaches are commonly imagined thundering across the plains of the Old West with bands of robbers or hostile Indians in hot pursuit, and indeed they sometimes did that. But they were equally common in eastern North America many decades before they appeared in the American West. The first stagecoach lines developed in Europe and were already a familiar sight in the time of Shakespeare. What made a stagecoach a stagecoach, as opposed to a private carriage, was its role as a public conveyance running over a fixed route on a regular schedule. It was able to travel faster than a private vehicle because the horses were changed at regular intervals, and so could be kept at a steady trot of 8-12 mph. Of course this was only possible if the roads were reasonably smooth, and so the history of 'stagecoaching' is inseparable from the history of road building. Also indispensable to running a stagecoach line were the roadside inns and taverns. Here, tired horses were exchanged for fresh ones and boarded in the inn's stable until the next exhausted team arrived to take their place. Passengers and drivers could get a meal, 'wet their whistle' and enjoy some welcome relief from the steady jostling of the coach. Some inns were also overnight stops for coaches that didn't run through the night.

By the time the first Loyalist refugees arrived in Nova Scotia in 1783, New England already had a well-developed network of stagecoach lines and stagecoach inns that mushroomed during the early years of the 19th century. By 1830, for example, over a hundred lines ran into Boston alone. One of the main reasons for this rapid growth, besides the desirability of a public transportation system, was the mail. Stagecoaches were actually used as mail carriers in America before they were in England, and carrying the mail became one of the most important reasons why governments in both countries subsidized stagecoach companies.



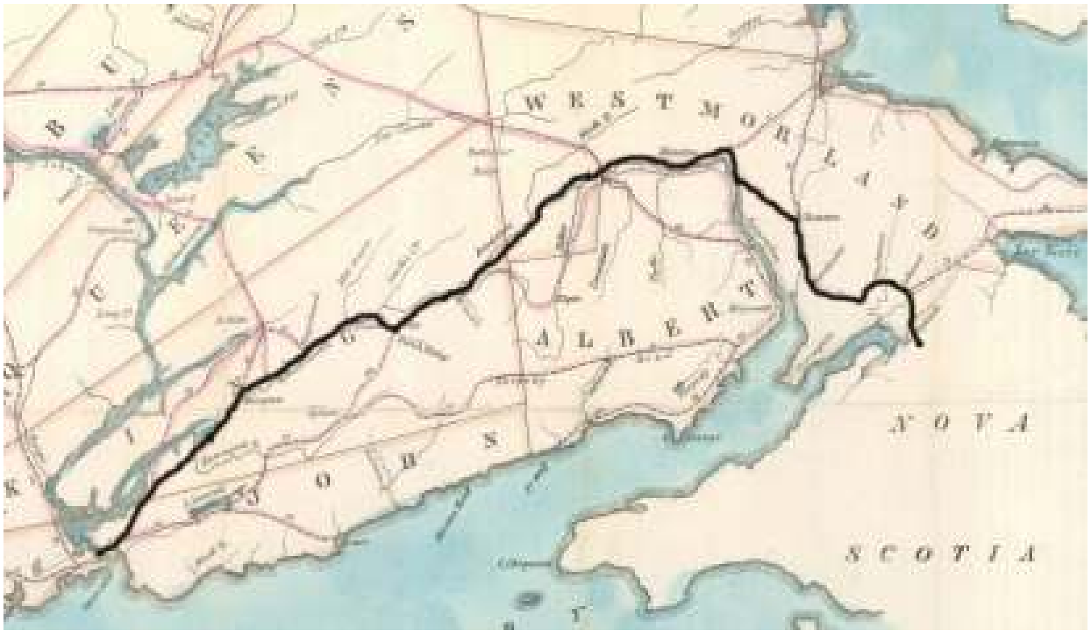
Early American stagecoach

Because the colonies that became British North America after the American Revolution were considerably less developed than their more southerly sisters, particularly in terms of roads and other infrastructure, stagecoaches were considerably slower in coming. Nova Scotia saw its first stagecoach line in 1816 when a weekly service with a simple two-horse covered wagon was established between Halifax and Windsor, followed soon afterwards by another line between Halifax and Truro. By 1830, larger four-horse coaches had been introduced and the service was increased to two or even three times a week. Government subsidies allowed stagecoach lines to expand along with the growing network of highways, and by the 1840's, Nova Scotia stagecoach companies were able to survive on mail contracts and passenger revenues alone.

If Nova Scotia was a long way behind New England in the development of stagecoach lines, New Brunswick was further yet. Although stage sleighs were used during the winter as early as the 1790s to carry mail and a few passengers between Saint John and Fredericton, the first wheeled stagecoaches running over regular routes did not appear until the early 1830's because there were no suitable roads before then. Until well into the 1820s, the population was very small, less than 20,000, settled in isolated pockets separated by forests, marshes, bogs, countless streams and rivers as well as many other obstacles to rapid road building. Although a road building programme was on the provincial government's agenda from the very first session of the legislature in 1785, there was less incentive than elsewhere to implement it because New Brunswick was almost uniquely blessed with a natural system of highways. Bounded on the south and east by oceans and inlets that linked the coastal communities by sea, it also encompassed the magnificent river systems of the Restigouche, Miramichi and Saint John that had facilitated water travel into the interior since time out of mind. Within a few years of the founding of the province, hundreds of riverboats connected the major population centres lying along these rivers and their tributaries, where the majority of the population, and especially the powerful Loyalist element, had settled. After freeze-up, which generally came much earlier than it does today, the rivers became ideal sleigh roads. So there was less pressure than there would otherwise have been to complete the planned network of roads.

However, the biggest reason for the slowness of road building in early New Brunswick was the poverty of the province and the government's perpetual lack of money. There were no corporate, individual or sales taxes in those days, so its main revenue, aside from a rather stingy subsidy from the British government, came from import and export duties. Because the Maritime provinces didn't get the exclusive access to the lucrative West Indies trade they hoped for after the American Revolution, allowing the far better capitalized Americans to hog most of it, volume was small and revenues too paltry to sustain any large scale public works programme. It was only when the province was able to collect duties on the timber and lumber shipped to England during and after the Napoleonic Wars—and the goods brought back from there—that it was finally able to get serious about the roads. In 1816, when Nova Scotia already had its first stagecoach line, New Brunswick began to build a system of highways (called ‘Great Roads’) linking the principal centres of population.

Of course, the highways linking Fredericton, Saint John, St. Andrews, Quebec and the Miramichi were vitally important, but one of the top priorities was the ‘Westmorland Great Road’. Already surveyed and well travelled on foot and horseback since the 1790s, it ran from Saint John through the Kennebecasis Valley to Sussex Vale. From there it passed through Portage Vale and Anagance to Petitcodiac where it crossed to the north side of that river to run through Salisbury. From thence it circled around “The Bend” (as Moncton was often called in those days) and ran down through Fox Creek and over to Memramcook, pretty much along the same route as present day Hwy 106. From there it went to Dorchester and then on to Westcock via the old Frosty Hollow Road to St. Anne’s Anglican Church, continuing down Queen’s Road, Main Street and out through Middle Sackville over to LaCoup via the High Marsh Road where it joined the Point de Bute Road to the Missiguash River, from thence continuing as a Nova Scotia road into Amherst via the Eddy Road.



The Westmorland Great Road ca.1852. Provincial Archives of New Brunswick

Over the next twenty years construction proceeded slowly but steadily until, by the mid 1830s, it was fully graveled and smooth enough to run a stagecoach over at something like a full trot, at least when the weather was fine. Also during the 1830s, the government was enjoying a bonanza from the sale and lease of crown lands to the timber interests.

There was also a great increase in customs revenues owing to a general boom in international trade, and so it now had (for a relatively short time) extra money to subsidize all sorts of infrastructure, including stagecoach lines.

The stagecoach lines that ran through Dorchester

a. McBeaths' Miramichi Line

Between 1835 and 1872 when the *Intercolonial Railroad* was completed, five stagecoach lines ran either through or to Dorchester. The first of them, started in 1835 by two brothers, Alexander and Donald McBeath from Black River near Chatham, connected Dorchester and Chatham. It operated for about ten years before being put out of business by a rival line that ran only from Chatham to Moncton. From Dorchester it ran over the Westmorland Great Road (Hwy 106) to join the Old Shediac Road about a mile past the Memramcook Bridge. It took this road to Shediac and from there it followed more or less the old highway to Chatham.

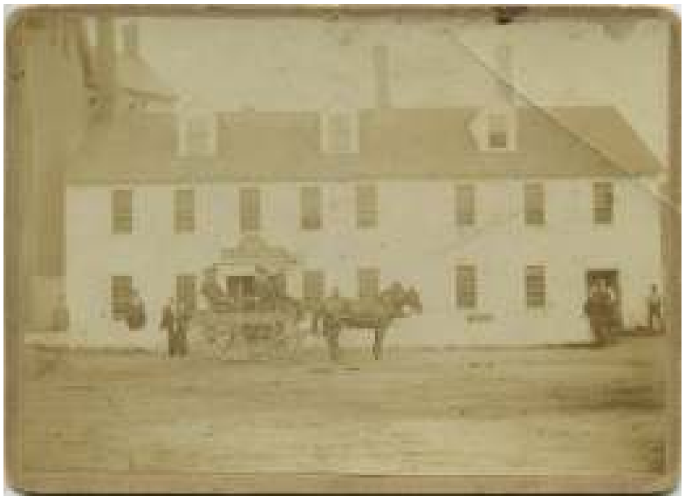
For the first five years, the McBeaths used only a small two-horse open carriage that didn't look much like a stagecoach at all. It only carried two or three passengers with their luggage, a few packages and the mail. In fact there never were very many passengers on this route; it was chiefly for conveying the mails. For the first couple of years the 'stage' ran only ran once a week, and took the better part of two days to cover the hundred miles between Chatham and Dorchester, stopping for two overnights along the route. When business picked up a little, and the government was able afford better mail service, the McBeaths expanded their runs to twice a week and added more horses in order to make better time. By having fresh teams stabled along the route about every twenty miles, they were able to trot them harder. By 1840 they were making the trip in one long day, starting in Dorchester at 5 o'clock in the morning and arriving in Chatham around ten o'clock the same night, if road conditions were good—which was not all that often. The average speed over the road seems to have been about 5-6 mph (8-10km), not including stops (i.e. considerably slower if you add the stops.)

In 1840 the McBeaths took advantage of a government subsidy to acquire a covered coach. It was not very comfortable by modern standards, but it was a big improvement over a springless wagon. Coaches of this type had a kind of suspension system, consisting of two long leather straps riveted together somewhat like a leaf spring. This allowed the coach to swing from side to side and absorb at least some of the jarring over the rough and rutted roads. But it also allowed heads to bash together, and it probably wasn't very good for an upset stomach

Typical two-horse covered coach, Yarmouth Co. Museum

Suspension system

It is unclear where the coach left from in Dorchester. Newspaper ads posted by the company mention inns in Shediac, Buctouche, Richibucto, Kouchibouguac, Black River and Chatham, but not Dorchester. Company records show that the horses were stabled in Dorchester with a William Laurance, presumably a stable owner, but it seems more likely that the passengers were picked up and delivered at one of the inns. A good bet would be Hickman's Inn (later called Hickman's Hotel) owned and operated by Irish immigrant John Hickman, which offered the best accommodations in town. The 'Weldon Hotel' was not yet built in 1835 while the 'Bell' was little more than a roadhouse that took in the occasional traveller.



Hickman's in later years, when it was 'Wilbur's Hotel'
Mount Allison University Archives

As noted above, the 1830s were boom times in New Brunswick, allowing the provincial government to rake in abundant revenues from timber licences on crown lands and hence to subsidize stagecoach companies and offer frequent delivery of the mails. But this came to a sudden halt during the early 1840s when the British government stopped giving preferential treatment to colonial timber, opting instead to open up free trade with the Americans. The result was a severe depression that prompted painful cutbacks in the mail service and government subsides to stagecoach companies—the very thing that had sustained them hitherto. Even with modest subsidies, the McBeaths made very little profit, and when the subsidies got even smaller they began to operate at a loss. Operating costs for a stagecoach line were relatively high. For example, each year it cost as much as the horses were worth—and they were a considerable expenditure—to board them at the inns along the route. And now less money in peoples' pockets meant less travel and less passenger revenue. By 1842, with passengers averaging less than two per trip, and the subsidies drying up, the McBeaths were driven to the wall. About 1844 the Miramichi route was taken over by an operator who also ran a line from Fredericton to Chatham and was apparently able to realize greater efficiencies, one of them being to drop the section between Shediac and Dorchester. From that time onward, one had to go through Moncton to get to the Miramichi from Dorchester by stagecoach.

b. The Saint John Stage Coach Company/Victoria Coach

The next stagecoach line to run through Dorchester was called the *Saint John Stagecoach Company* until 1838. Then the name was changed to *Victoria Coach* in honour of the newly crowned Queen. It was founded by a group of investors from Saint John, Sussex and Sackville (Joseph F. Allison, brother of Charles F., the founder of Mount Allison, was one of them). The managing director and eventual sole owner was John C. Vail, a prominent Loyalist from Sussex.

The *Saint John Stagecoach Company* started a weekly service between Saint John and Amherst in May 1836, operating a small two-horse covered coach, probably very similar to the one the McBeaths acquired in 1840. During the summer months, it made the 148-mile trip in two days. It left St. John at seven o'clock Monday morning, stayed overnight in Petitcodiac, and arrived in Amherst about seven o'clock Tuesday evening—if road and weather conditions were good. It averaged about six mph over the road, and made stops for meals and/or a change of horses at Hammond River, Hampton, Norton, Sussex, Anagance (or Penobsquis) Moncton, Memramcook, Dorchester and Sackville.

During the winter season, from October to May, the coach (or sleigh) and passengers stayed Monday night in Sussex and Tuesday night in Dorchester. It went to Amherst on Wednesday and returned the same evening to spend another night in Dorchester before leaving for Saint John on Thursday and arriving there on Friday evening. On both nights in Dorchester the passengers and driver were put up at Hickman's Inn, which was also where tickets were bought and reservations made for a seat on the coach.

The *Saint John Stage Coach Company* seems have done fairly well for its first couple of years. It had a mail contract as well as a modest operating grant from government, the country was prosperous and people were travelling. Of course, not everyone could afford to go by stagecoach—fare, meals and lodging from Saint John to Dorchester was about a month's wages for a workingman. And not everyone wanted to, as stagecoach travel was strenuous as well as expensive. Its main advantage was that it was the fastest way to cover long distances. Most people travelled by wagon, private carriage, horseback or, most often, on foot. But there was evidentially enough passenger business on the route to make it worthwhile for a competitor to horn in.

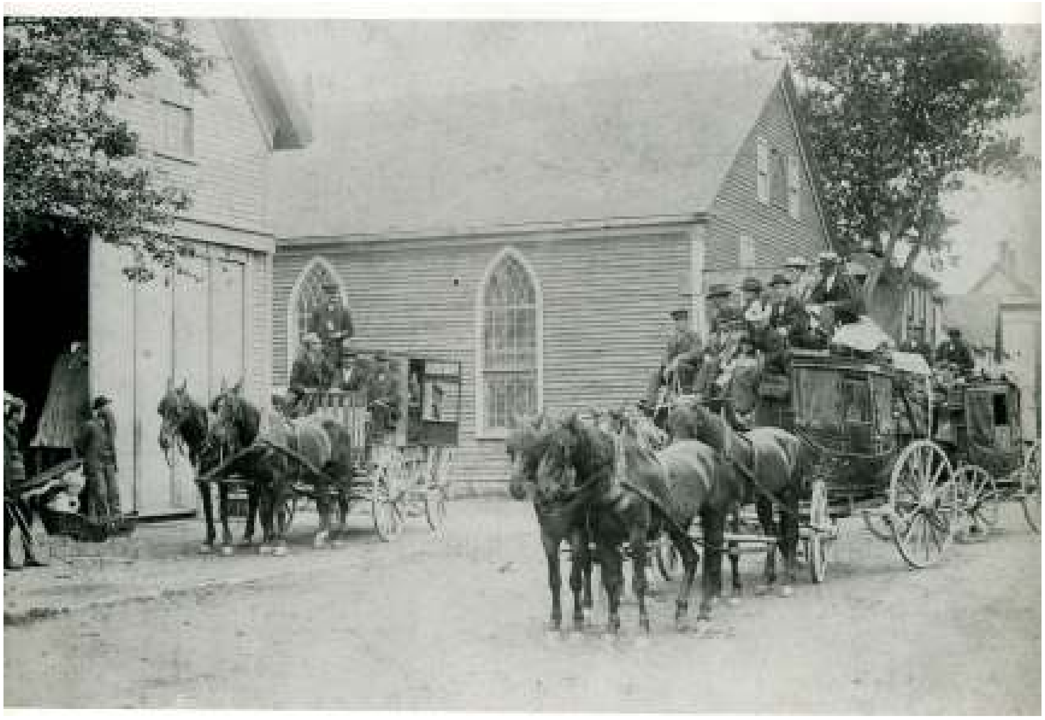
c. The Harvey Stage Line/Harvey Eastern Royal Mail Stage

This happened in the summer of 1838 when David Caldwell, a farmer and mail courier from Norton near Sussex, started the *Harvey Stage Line,* named after Sir John Harvey, the Lieutenant Governor of New Brunswick 1838-41. From the beginning, Caldwell seems to have been more aggressive than Vail, and also had better financial backing, as he headed a consortium of smaller operators. He began by running a small two-horse covered coach once a week between Saint John and Dorchester (rather than Amherst). But he either had more horses on the line or he ran them harder (it helped that they didn't have to go all the way to Amherst), as he was able to make the trip in significantly less time. His coach left Saint John on Saturdays at one o'clock in the afternoon, rather than seven in the morning, arrived in Dorchester around six o'clock Sunday evening—about three hours faster than its rival—and was back in Saint John by six o'clock Monday evening.

The *Harvey Stage Line* picked up and dropped its passengers and mail at the 'Weldon Hotel', which later became the Payzant & Card general store. It was probably built in 1837 and was considered at the time to be one of the finest hotels in the Maritimes. Its owner was Andrew Weldon, a scion of one of Dorchester's prominent families. A guest who stayed there for a spell described him as a spare man with a long beard and "an authority on people and things hereabouts." In other words he was as a ready source of local news and gossip. For a time he was also a partner in the *Harvey Stage Line*.

Not satisfied with outdoing the *Saint John Stage Coach Company* in terms of speed, in late summer of 1838, only three months after starting up, Caldwell imported much faster four-horse coaches from the United States and began running them *twice* a week between Saint John and Dorchester. Soon afterwards, he extended the line to Amherst and, to add insult to injury, boasted in his advertisements of making the 148-mile trip "on the night of the same day." His luxurious new coaches left Saint John at six in the morning and arrived in Amherst around 1:30 the following morning. They made the 121 miles to

Dorchester by around ten o'clock the same evening. Assuming at least an hour and a half for meal stops plus seven other short stops to change horses—which was done about every twelve miles, or nine times between Saint John and Dorchester—the coach must have travelled over the road at an average speed of over nine mph (14.5km) in good conditions. The horses would have been at a full trot much of the time, and they must have been very glad when their hour and forty minutes or so was up and they could rest in the stable at the next inn, enjoying their well-earned oats until the coach returned with another tired team to take their place in the stable.

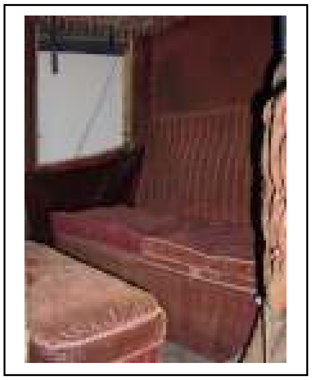


Concord and smaller two-horse coaches at Yarmouth, N.S., Yarmouth Co. Museum

Caldwell's new coaches were not only faster; they were also much larger and more comfortable. Made in Concord, New Hampshire, they were known all over North America, South America and even Australia as the 'Concord' and were considered the 'Cadillac of coaches'. They were pulled by either four or six horses, depending on road conditions and the particular model (they came in various sizes). They also had a leather

Leather spring suspension

spring suspension, but it was much more sophisticated than that of the smaller coaches and gave a much better ride. However, on rough roads it was no joy either, especially if the springs broke, which they sometimes did when ploughing through muddy potholes. It was also much better upholstered on the inside, although when the centre bench was used there wasn't a great deal of legroom. Concords could carry nine passengers inside and, in a pinch, another eight or nine on the roof. Of course, people were a lot thinner in those days.



The Bitter Fight for the Road

Faced with such competition, Vail had two choices: either try to match his rival or go out of business. He decided to fight, and within a short time he had acquired his own four-horse Concord and was running twice a week to Dorchester, although he dropped the Dorchester-Amherst leg. It was at this time that *The Saint John Stage Coach Company* became the *Victoria Coach*, probably in a bid to do Caldwell one better by branding the line in honour of the Queen, rather than a mere Lieutenant Governor. But it was a big gamble because the new equipment required a much larger outlay. Concords were three or four times the price of a two-horse rig, and the number of horses needed to draw them multiplied alarmingly. Using two-horse teams and changing five times between Saint John and Amherst, which is what I think he did originally, Vail could get along with only a dozen horses and a couple of spares in case of injury. To run four-horse teams twice a week and change teams about every twelve miles required fifty-two head, not counting spares. Each horse cost about £25, or 6-8 months wages for a workingman, and as noted above, every year operators had to shell out about the same amount for its board at the stables along the route. And debilitating injuries were quite common. Among the biggest hazards were the bridges. There were twenty-five of them between Saint John and Amherst, and they weren't kept up very well. Many horses were ruined when their legs went through a rotten plank. Others were injured in upsets, which also happened with some regularity. In their financial statements, stagecoach operators commonly depreciated their horses at 25% per year, meaning that they had to be replaced about every four or five years. Thus, in order to compete, the *Victoria Coach* had to make a considerable capital investment, and to come up with it, Vail took out a loan of ₤1500, which was probably a good portion of his total worth.

And so the fight was on. For both contestants, success depended on three things: mail contracts, operating subsidies, and passengers. Caldwell gained a tremendous advantage in mail contracts, and this is what allowed him to eventually win the war. Until about 1840, both companies seem to have picked up the Halifax mails in Dorchester, delivered from Truro in a simple ‘mail wagon’ that sometimes carried the odd passenger. Dorchester was the main post office in this region until 1849 when Sackville took over that position, and it was here that the mails were sorted for redistribution. Both lines probably also carried mail from Saint John to Dorchester, although we have no direct proof of this. But then, in 1840, the good citizens of Amherst petitioned the Nova Scotia government to subsidize a regular stagecoach line between Amherst and Truro that would replace the primitive mail wagon, adding that it was a stain on the honour of the province to be surpassed by New Brunswick in the quality of its stagecoach service. Tenders were put out and David Caldwell, who was originally from Halifax and had friends in the Nova Scotia legislature, won the contract and began running stagecoaches all the way to Truro. Even more importantly, he also won an exclusive contract to carry the Queen’s mail between Truro and Saint John for the handsome sum of £1170 a year. To celebrate, he renamed his company *The Harvey Eastern Royal Mail Stage.*

John Vail also had political connections. He had been a member of the New Brunswick legislature for several terms before getting into the stagecoach business, and he ran for a seat several times afterwards, usually unsuccessfully. But he still had friends in the New Brunswick legislature, which didn’t hurt him when applying for subsidies. Not surprisingly, he did much better than Caldwell at this game. In fact Caldwell was shut out altogether after 1839, probably in part because he had such a fat mail contract, while the *Victoria Coach* was one of the most generously subsidized stagecoach companies in the province. The bad news for Vail was that even the biggest yearly subsidies in New Brunswick were only £250, less than one quarter of what Caldwell was getting from his mail contracts.

With less operating revenue and a large debt to pay off, Vail could not afford to keep up with Caldwell in the number of horses he was using. From a financial statement he submitted to the legislature in 1842 when applying for his yearly grant, it is clear that he didn’t have enough horses to change teams every twelve miles. And from the schedules posted in his newspaper ads it is clear that his times to Dorchester were slower than Caldwell’s, although he was still averaging around 8 mph over the road, which suggests that he was overtaxing his horses in an effort to stay competitive.

With somewhat slower service (two hours difference between Saint John and Dorchester), the lion's share of the passenger business soon went to Caldwell along with the mail contract, leaving Vail in an increasingly difficult situation. True to standard business practice, his partners deserted him, and by 1842 he was the sole owner of a stagecoach line in serious trouble. Smelling blood, Caldwell tried to finish him off by petitioning the legislature to cancel his subsidy on the grounds that it was a waste of public money since he, Caldwell, had most of the passenger business anyway, and was giving much better service. He even generously offered never to ask for a subsidy again if the House would cut Vail off at the knees. The House ignored him and gave Vail his subsidy for that year, 1842—it always helps to have friends in high places if you can't be there yourself. But it wasn't enough to do more than keep his head above water, and then the final blow fell. The depression of the 1840s set in, the grants got stingier and stingier and finally dried up altogether. The last we hear from Vail as a stagecoach operator was in 1844, when he petitioned the legislature for a grant to reimburse him in part for the losses he had suffered. After considerable debate, he was allowed £150 as a kind of charity case and folded his stagecoach line soon thereafter.

d. Kings' Stages

With the *Victoria Coach* gone Caldwell enjoyed a monopoly, but not for long. About 1849 a new line started up on the Westmorland Great Road, but there isn't much information available about it. All the previous lines advertised in the newspapers and applied for government grants, so it was possible to work out their schedules, years of operation, fare rates, type of equipment, and even something of their finances, from the records they left. But all the New Brunswick stagecoach lines stopped advertising in the newspapers by the late 1840s, perhaps because it was expensive, perhaps because they found posters and notices in the inns just as effective as well as cheaper. When the government grants dried up, there were also no more petitions from stagecoach companies, and hence no mention of stagecoach companies in the journals of the legislature, the other major source of information on the companies discussed so far. What little we know about David Caldwell's new rival comes from a couple of obituaries of two of the owners and an interview with one of them long after he had gotten out of the stagecoach business.

The owners were James and Andrew King, who, like Caldwell and Vail, were also from the Sussex area and their company was known as *Kings' Stages*. The King brothers got their start in the stagecoach business as part of a temporary pony express system set up in 1847 to carry important letters overland from Halifax to Montreal during a time of tension between Britain and the United States, when the Americans stopped the British mails from going by train from Boston to Montreal. When the dispute was settled, the pony express closed down, but in 1849 the Kings got another temporary contract from a consortium of New York newspapers to carry news dispatches from the British steamers arriving in Halifax down to Granville Beach near Annapolis Royal. From Granville Beach a fast steamer carried the headlines across the Bay of Fundy to Saint John, from where they were telegraphed to New York. When the telegraph arrived in Halifax later that year, the pony express was finished. But the Kings had built up such a reputation for speed and reliability that they were able to land mail contracts from both the New Brunswick and Nova Scotia governments, and soon afterwards they set themselves up in the stagecoach business in both provinces. In Nova Scotia they bought out the line from Halifax to Annapolis Royal and operated it as *Kings' Western Stages* until the coming of the railroad. Since they did not advertise in any New Brunswick newspapers, it is impossible to know what their schedule was. But from brief notices in their obituaries it seems that they ran out of Saint John, and at one point at least, were going all the way to Nova Scotia. So they probably stopped in Dorchester. Since Caldwell was still in business, and was associated with the Weldon Hotel, I assume that Kings' stages stopped at Hickman's Inn. We know from Nova Scotia sources that they ran the big Concord coaches on the Halifax-Annapolis Royal route, and they probably did so in New Brunswick as well. Caldwell certainly had them, and they could hardly have competed with him using the old two-horse models.

There is little record of how the competition between Caldwell and the Kings played out. Both of them were still in business until shortly before the completion of the *European and North American Railroad* between Saint John and Shediac in 1860, but at some point they apparently divided the route between Saint John and Moncton between them, with Caldwell taking the Saint John-Sussex section, and the King Brothers the stretch between Sussex and Moncton. This suggests that there was not enough passenger business to sustain two lines for very long—to say nothing of the loss of the mail contracts to the railroads—and that they settled the matter by a gentlemen's agreement, rather than a fight to the finish. One reason for this may have been that the *European and North American Railroad* between Saint John and Shediac was already in the process of being built by the mid 1850s and both parties would have realized that the stagecoach days on the Westmorland Great Road were soon going to be over, so it wasn't worth getting into a ruinous bidding match that could only have hurt both of them.

e. The Hickman Line

The last stagecoach line to run through Dorchester was owned by William Hickman, a son of John Hickman, the proprietor of Hickman's Hotel. William later went on to become one of the shiretown's leading shipbuilders, while his brother, Joseph, became one of its leading merchants. The Hickman line ran only between Moncton and Amherst, and Hickman seems to have acquired it about 1858, shortly before the *European and North American Railroad* was completed. What little we know about it comes from two sources. In an article in the Saint John *Telegraph* Journal the Sackville newspaperman and local historian, W.C. Milner, described a trip he took in 1860 from Amherst to Hillsborough to see the Albertite mines. He tells us that he travelled from Amherst to Moncton on Hickman's stage. The other source is a letter written in 1858 by a Dorchester native named William Cochrane to a friend in Massachusetts, describing people and life in the shiretown. From these accounts, we learn that the stage ran three times a week to accommodate the mails, but that there were usually only about three or four passengers on each trip. There was no need of a large coach for such small numbers, and so for the most part a simple two-horse coach was again used, apparently even more primitive than the first ones to travel the Westmorland Great Road. Both Milner and Cochrane describe it as a 'covered wagon' (though presumably one with springs). Only when the English steamers arrived in Halifax, which was every two weeks, depositing immigrants and other passengers bound for points west, was a larger conveyance necessary. Then, in the words of Cochrane,"a big coach with four horses loaded with passengers dashes down the hill to the Hickman stables. This is the great event of the day and attracts a crowd." No doubt it was a Concord, and it might well have been a second-hand one. The railroad was putting the other stagecoach lines on the Westmorland Great Road out of business and so there were probably some good used ones on the market.

We learn from Milner that the coach left Amherst at eleven o'clock at night (the mail didn't arrive from Truro until shortly before this time) and got into Moncton about six in the morning. Whether this was the schedule for all three runs, we have no way of knowing. But it seems likely, since the mail was clearly the most important part of the business, except for the bi-monthly trip with the big coach. Milner's coach stopped for an hour to sort the mails at Colls' Hotel in Sackville, which, he notes with some satisfaction, was "not wanting in liquid refreshments." (By this time Sackville had replaced Dorchester as the main post office in this area.) The coach stopped in Dorchester to change horses and allow the passengers to refresh themselves at Hickman's Hotel. However, it wasn't the Hickman's Hotel we have been talking about up till now. It's true that William Hickman took over the family hotel from his father in 1852, but in 1856 he sold it to Harry Wilbur and in 1858 he bought the Bell from Albert J. Smith, the famous Dorchester lawyer who was about to make his name in New Brunswick politics, and renamed it 'Hickman's Hotel'. The original Hickman's—which was also known as the 'Dorchester'—was henceforth known as 'Wilbur's' (and also the 'Dorchester').

Milner also tells us something about the drivers on Hickman's line. Stagecoach drivers had a reputation for being great storytellers, so that passengers vied to get a seat beside them, and Hickman's drivers were no exception. The 'whip' (as stagecoach drivers were commonly called) that night was apparently a good Methodist with a Methodist sense of humour. Milner says, “with his stories of the road, the people whom he met and his adventures punctuated with his own candid observations, he kept me in perpetual laughter.” He had two fox terriers, which he called John Wesley and Charles Wesley after “the smartest men he knew.” (The Wesley brothers were the founders of Methodism.) If that was how he kept Milner in “perpetual laughter,” perhaps his jokes weren’t real thigh-slappers, but they would have been better than stony silence.

In his *History of Sackville* Milner also tells us about another driver who appears to have driven for Hickman’s as well as one of the earlier lines, either Caldwell’s or Kings’, an old codger by the name of Miles Hoar. Miles loved to regale his passengers with the story of a near disaster when driving over the Tantramar marsh one really dark night. As the coach approached the bridge, the lead horses reared up and refused to go further. When Miles got down to investigate, he discovered that the bridge had been washed out with the tide. Good old horse sense had saved the day. A few more feet and they would have been in the river, coach, horses and all.

Horse sense and Mile’s timely response averted a Tantramar tragedy, but other incidents on the Westmorland Great Road did not have such a happy ending. Newspapers reported an upset near Moncton that severely wounded a horse and bruised the passengers quite badly, while a runaway near Hampton ended with the stagecoach turning over, several passengers being badly bruised and the driver probably killed (the newspaper account said that his life was despaired of). A number of stagecoach fatalities are recorded on other routes in the province. So, stagecoach travel could be dangerous as well as uncomfortable—although probably not as dangerous as the early trains, which had an appalling accident rate. But anyone who rode the sixteen to eighteen hours between Saint John and Dorchester in a pitching, swaying and tossing stagecoach must have been pretty sick of it by the end of the journey, even if it was in a Concord. In bad weather, and in general during the last years of the stagecoach era when the road had had time to deteriorate, it took considerably longer than that. An English lady touring North America left a harrowing account of a trip from Moncton to Saint John that took twenty hours—with stops only for meals and a change of horses. After an unusually soggy summer, the roads were so muddy that the passengers had to get out and walk up the hills because the horses balked at dragging the heavily laden coach through the mire. They also had to get out and walk across several bridges that were in such bad shape they were in danger of collapsing under additional load. It didn’t calm their nerves any when they were told, after crossing one particularly rickety specimen, that only a few weeks before, a coach and six horses had broken through its rotting planks—whether with injuries or fatalities was left unsaid.

Hickman folded his line either in 1868 when the first iron horse puffed its way into Dorchester, or 1872, when the *Intercolonial Railway* linking Nova Scotia and New Brunswick to the rest of Canada was finally completed and stagecoach days on the Westmorland Great Road came to an abrupt end. By that time, Hickman was well established in the shipbuilding business and probably didn't miss them too much. Like most people, he was likely pretty glad when the railroad came with all its conveniences and efficiencies. But something of value was also lost, as it usually is when progress marches on, and not too long after the end of the stagecoach days, those who remembered them waxed nostalgic for a world that was lost forever. As an old-timer from Sussex testified to a reporter many years later:

> My recollections of the old coaching days are among the most pleasant of my life. What memories of youth, hope and health cluster about the time when, after an early breakfast at the Saint John Hotel, we would jump into the coach and wheel away over the Marsh Road to Hampton Ferry, and Sussex and the Bend, and Dorchester and Sackville and across the marshes to Amherst! Those were delightful days. One saw the country as he traveled. Now, as one is dashed along by the rail cars, he might as well be asleep as awake; nothing impresses itself upon his memory. From point to point he dozes and dreams.

Author's note: This article is based on my much longer and far more detailed work *Stagecoach Days on the Westmorland Great Road 1835-1872*, published by the WHS and available in the Keillor House Gift Shop, Tantramar Heritage Trust, Sackville, Tidewater Books, or from the author. Phone (506) 536-1143 or goodrich@mta.ca