Charles Thompson of Summerhill and the Expansion of the Royal Mail Service to Sault Ste. Marie

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"Charles Thompson of Summerhill" played a unique role in implementing the Royal Mail service on Georgian Bay, west of Penetanguishene. Thompson's early prominence in the transportation system north of Toronto is described in an early history of the area as follows:

"The most conspicuous figure of the early-stage travel between Toronto and the Lake Simcoe region was unquestionably Mr. Charles Thompson, of Summer Hill. His name is associated with almost everything mentionable in the annals of stage transportation and postal service of Yonge Street and the Lake Simcoe waterway, between the years 1830 and 1850"[1].

The acquisition in 1842 of a 200-acre Summerhill property (in Toronto) for the construction of his residence accounts for his eponym.

The following tribute was published in The *Globe* (1855.12.20): "….a testimonial is being got up for Charles Thompson Esq., as an acknowledgement from the public of the gratitude they owe him for his exertions during the last quarter of a century in opening a trade and establishing navigation between the waters of Ontario, Simcoe, Huron and Superior. In 1833, Mr. Thompson commenced running the *Sir John Colborne*, the first steamboat that ever plied on the waters of Lake Simcoe; and subsequently, he established the Northern route by stages from Orillia to Coldwater, and thence by steamer to Sault Ste. Marie."[2]
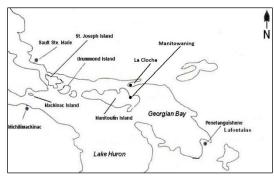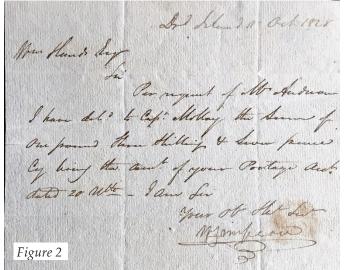

Figure 1: Geographic area covered by the article.

Before 1846, postal communication between residents of Canada West and the upper Great Lakes depended upon private arrangements. In the case of Fort Drummond (1815 – 1828), Canada's most westerly military post, located on Drummond Island, this required four to six weeks in 1828[3]. Fig. 2 shows a letter from William Simpson sent from Drummond Island in 1828.

Figure 2

A boundary commission comprised of British and American representatives was created following the War of 1812 to negotiate unsettled boundary disputes, one of which was the border around Drummond Island. Despite the British expectation that the island would lie within Canada, the commission awarded the island to the United States.

Following a review of options for the relocation of the fort, the British decided to move to Penetanguishene which was relatively close to the population centres of Upper Canada but left the vast territory and waters of the upper Great Lakes defenceless.

Thompson's purchase of a steam-boat, the *Sir John Colborne*,[4] in 1833 extended his transportation empire to Lake Simcoe. In 1834, Thompson joined Major William Kingdom Rains (a retired British army officer) and Archibald Scott (a retired British naval officer) in a plan to develop an agri-

cultural community of 100 families on St. Joseph Island situated at the western extreme of Lake Huron, east of Sault Ste. Marie[5]. The proposal included "steam communication." The same year, Thompson in partnership with Mr. Mitchell of Penetanguishene launched the steamer *Penetanguishene* appropriately named after the town of its manufacture, the first steamer to sail on Georgian Bay[6].

In 1835, the *Penetanguishene* sailed to Milford Haven, a protected bay of St. Joseph Island, with materials for a sawmill and inventory for a store. The dream of colonization, however, faded quickly. Of the three partners, only Rains who managed the store and Scott who operated the sawmill became permanent residents of the island. Within a brief period, however, Scott died, and Rains withdrew from the partnership, leaving the property to Thompson and his manager and future captain of the steamer *Gore*, Samuel Peck.

In 1839, the government of Upper Canada sent Samuel Jarvis, Chief of Indian Affairs, to Milford Haven, to inspect the community and to report on the outcome of the colonization project. He found 10 homes occupied by Ojibwa, French Canadians, and Metis, well supported by a lucrative trade of fish, furs and maple sugar which were transported to Detroit and Chicago markets by a small schooner. However, the development of an agricultural settlement did not materialize[7].

Figure 3

On December 18, 1845[8], Sir George Simpson, Governor of the Hudson's Bay Company, wrote to Thomas Stayner, Deputy Postmaster General of British North America, to advocate the inauguration of monthly Royal Mail service from Penetanguishene to Sault Ste. Marie, with intermediate stops at Manitowaning, La Cloche and St. Joseph Island. He proposed monthly service by canoe. The proposal was rejected by the British Postmaster General despite George Simpson's concerns about the lack of mail communication with the Sault, a copper boom on the south shore of Lake Superior, and the American threat to Canadian sovereignty over the western portion of Canada West.

Policy governing Royal Mail service in British North America before 1851 rested firmly in the hands of the Postmaster General of Britain, a politician and member of the cabinet. The British administration of Royal Mail services in British North America became increasingly contentious as the economies and social identities of the colonies matured. The expectation of profitability of a proposed new post office, however, remained the primary determinant of the extension of postal routes. This was a policy suitable for an established economy such as Britain's, but inconsistent with the needs of a young and growing society dependent upon an expanding communication system to facilitate settlement and economic development[9]. In response to strong opposition to the status quo from British North America, however, reform of this policy was under review by British politicians.

In contradiction with the established British postal policy, four post offices opened simultaneously on October 6, 1846, at the locations proposed in 1845 by George Simpson: Sault Ste. Marie, St. Joseph Island, Manitowaning and La Cloche (Fig. 3).

Mail service for each of these was under contract with Charles Thompson for the period 1846 - 1850[10]. Except for the post office on St. Joseph Island, all were located at established Hudson's Bay Company posts.

One might be surprised that Thompson would seek this mail contract which would require substantial capital investment:

• The contract committed him to provide postal service to a vast, undeveloped wilderness best known to the indigenous peoples, fur traders and a few missionaries. The region's social structure and economic

potential were poorly understood by government officials[12].

• The region of Upper Canada west of Penetanguishene lacked both policing and military protection. In 1838, a group of discontented Canadian Metis and French Canadians living in the American Sault were suspected of organizing an attack on the British side of the St. Mary's River. The Hudson's Bay Company factor appealed successfully to the American troops stationed in Fort Brady to protect Canadian interests and oppose the attack[13].

• The Georgian Bay economy had steadily declined following the merger of the Hudson's Bay and North West Companies in 1821 when trade was re-routed through Hudson and James Bay[14] forts.

• In his travels across the country in 1845, Canadian artist, Paul Kane, made the following pained view of the Canadian Sault: "The British side presents to the traveller a collection of poor miserable hovels, occupied solely by half-breeds and Indians."[15]

Thompson and Peck, however, were quite familiar with the region after some twelve years of business and travel within the area and recognized the great potential for resource development west of Penetanguishene. A copper boom was underway in the nearby United States and promising copper exploration in the Sault Ste. Marie's area was underway. Peck, married to a Metis woman[16], had much greater respect than Kane for the dominant indigenous and Metis populations of the region.

The steamer *Gore*, the pioneer Georgian Bay steamer on Thompson's "Royal Mail Line," was built in 1839, and measured 160 tons, 125 feet in length, 15.5 feet across and 9 feet in depth[17] (Fig. 4).
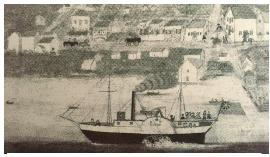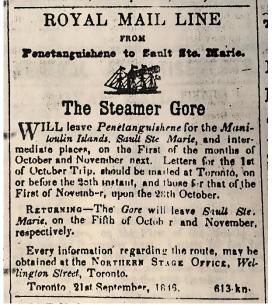

Figure 4: The steamer Gore[18]

Figure 5: British Colonist (Toronto, 1846)[20]

The ship made 1 to 2 round trips monthly from Penetanguishene (Sturgeon Bay) to Sault Ste. Marie during the seven-month shipping season. The inaugural sailing of the *Gore* in October 1846 (Fig. 5) completed an integrated communication system between Toronto and Sault Ste. Marie, served by stages and steamers for passengers, freight and mail. In an article of 1848.05.31, the *Buffalo Daily Courier*

Figure 6a: *This stampless folded letter (SFL), dated January 17, 1851, and posted from Barrie to Mica Bay, was destined for a mining exploration camp on the north shore of Lake Superior via Sault Ste. Marie. Postage (2/3cy) was calculated based on distance and weight[22].*

reported that the time required to complete the trip between Toronto and the Sault was 60 hours[19]. The same article noted that Samuel Peck, Thompson's business manager at Milford Haven, St. Joseph Island, captained the *Gore* and praised him "as a pioneer of our northern waters."

Peck's years of exporting fish, maple sugar and furs from Milford Haven to customers in Detroit and Chicago by schooner had familiarized him well with the treacherous waters of Georgian Bay and Lake Huron.

Thompson's contract included mail transport during the summer and winter[21].

The letter in Fig. 6 was carried to Mica Bay by couriers on snowshoes and dogs pulling sleds. Thompson's 1850 contract stipulated five round trips during the period from December to April. A former courier's account

Figure 6b: *Barrie hand stamp on the back of cover*

Figure 7: *Mail being carried across Lake Huron[24]*

of the brutal conditions of winter mail transport is described by Edward Capp in his history of the Soo[23].

The Ojibwe couriers could travel 35-40 miles per day in good weather (Fig. 7).

The couriers' route took them primarily over the ice of Georgian Bay. On one occasion, five miles from shore, one of two couriers working together broke through the ice and was fortunate to survive. Along the way, couriers spent the nights with fellow Ojibwe who shared wigwams and food with the travellers. For the letter in Fig. 6, a special trip north of Sault Ste. Marie would probably been required to deliver mail to Mica Bay.

Two of the four post offices which opened in 1846 had closed by 1848; the La Cloche one because of high operating costs, and the St. Joseph Island one on application by the Montreal Mining Company to move the post office close to the company's copper mining operations in Bruce Mines[25].

Driven by the copper boom in the nearby United States, Canadian prospectors discovered marketable quantities of the metal at Bruce Mines. Cornish labour, experienced in copper mining, was hired from Britain to develop the mines.
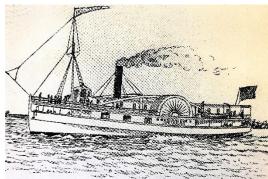
The village of Hilton Beach on St. Joseph Island opposite the mines was established by Thompson. It provided agricultural produce to Bruce Mines which lacked nearby farming land[27]. Firewood was harvested in the Hilton Beach area to supply fuel for the steamers on Georgian Bay. During the early years of operation, the mines were profitable. The Canadian Directory for 1857-1858 noted that the population of Bruce Mines was about 500, greater than the population of Sault Ste. Marie (about 400)[28].

Figure 8: A cover commemorating the discovery of copper at Bruce Mines[26]

In 1853 *Gore* was retired and replaced on the Sturgeon Bay to Sault Ste. Marie route by the *Kaloolah*, (Fig.9) a side-wheeler: 188 feet, 25-foot beam, 9¾ foot depth, 450 tons[30].

Thompson's decision to purchase a vessel much larger than the *Gore* was a sure

Figure 9: The Steamer Kaloolah

indication of the commercial success of the Royal Mail Line since 1846.

The promotion of Thompson's Royal Mail Service consistently defined the route as the "Northern Route." In an advertisement published in the *Globe* in 1853, the

route "Toronto to Sault Ste. Marie" is outlined in detail:

1. Toronto to Bradford Landing by stage.

2. From there to Orillia by steamer *Morning.*

3. From Orillia to Sturgeon Bay by stage.

4. From Sturgeon Bay to Sault Ste. Marie aboard the steamer *Kaloolah* via Penetanguishene, Owen Sound, Manitoulin, St. Joseph (Island) and Bruce Mines.

The Killarney post office (Fig. 10), on the mainland north, opposite Manitoulin Island, was opened on 1854.06.01 (Postmaster Robert Johnstone)[31] and became a stop typical of Thompson's mail service. Strangely, the post office had been authorized to open in 1853[32], under the same postmaster, but under the Ojibwe name "Shebabonaning" meaning "canoe passage" the traditional name of the community. Johnstone refused to accept the position in 1853. In 1854, however, he had a change of heart and opened the post office that year under the name "Killarney". Nevertheless, advertising for the Royal Mail Line continued to show "Shebabonaning" as the destination port of the *Kaloolah* as late as 1857[33].

Back Stamp

Figure 10: The cover displays a clear strike of the early Killarney U.C. postmark, proofed in 1854. The cover, however, was posted during the decimal era (1859) at the domestic (1/2 oz) rate of 3c, and before the mandatory requirement of an adhesive stamp (1875). The poor-quality Toronto back stamp (D1_22. W. Bruce Graham, Ontario Broken Circles) approximates the date of the cover in a usage range: 1870.10.10-1873.05.01

Thompson retired in 1855[34] when the "Ontario, Simcoe and Huron Railway" linked Toronto and

Collingwood. With the railway in operation, Sturgeon Bay was abandoned as the departure port for the Soo, and the *Kaloolah* moved to Collingwood to continue service to Sault Ste. Marie in 1855 as the renamed *Collingwood*[35].

Summary:

Charles Thompson contributed three important "firsts" to the expansion of the western frontier of Canada West:

• The first steamer on Lake Simcoe, *Sir John Colborne*, would become part of an integrated communication system between Toronto and Sault Ste. Marie

• The *Penetanguishene*, the first steamer on Georgian Bay in 1834

• The *Gore*, the first steamer to provide regular mail service Georgian Bay from Sturgeon Bay to Sault Ste. Marie in 1846

Although the colonization attempt on St. Joseph Island in 1834 failed, a small community, Milford Haven, did survive on the Island, which employed a small schooner to trade fish, fur, and maple sugar successfully with clients in Detroit and Chicago. The twelve-year commercial experience prepared Thompson and his manager, Samuel Peck, to navigate Lake Huron and to appreciate the economic potential of northwestern Canada West, a vast wilderness poorly understood by government officials. The British colonial government granted Thompson a mail contract in 1846 to provide steam communication during the seven-month navigation season and by mail couriers on Lake Huron during the winter, an undertaking which Thompson continued to manage until his retirement in 1855.

Notes and References

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19. *Buffalo Daily Courier*, (1848.05.31). Maritime History of the Great Lakes (clippings), Internet access, 2016.05.29.

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22. The cover is one of a number addressed to William Cowell at Mica Bay.

23. Capp, Edward H. "*The Story of Baw-a-Ting Being the Annals of Sault Sainte Marie.*"

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24. This sketch was downloaded from the Library and Archives of Canada (R9266. Container: C-150505, depicting mail carried across Lake Huron from Penetanguishene to Sault Ste. Marie, dated March 1853.

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26. This cachet, issued by the town of Bruce Mines, celebrates Canada's first copper mine.

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31. Library and Archives Canada. *Killarney*, PSFD-(5262), Item 94105.

32. Postal History Society of Canada. https://www.postalhistorycanada.net/php/index.php

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