

Samuel Cunard

Samuel Cunard (1787-1865) was a Halifax-born merchant and entrepreneur who adapted steam-power technology to scheduled high-seas navigation, making maritime travel faster and safer, and helping to inaugurate today's world of interconnected transportation and communication. The firm that he conceived and co-founded, popularly known as the Cunard Line, was the dominant passenger navigation company in the world for much of the 19th and 20th centuries, and remains a prestigious brand in the global leisure travel industry today.

One of nine children born to Abraham and Margaret (Murphy) Cunard, Loyalists who migrated to Nova Scotia in 1783, Samuel showed an early talent for profitable exchange. As a young man he purchased imported goods wholesale on the Halifax waterfront, selling them in the town at a profit. Under the auspices of his family's company,

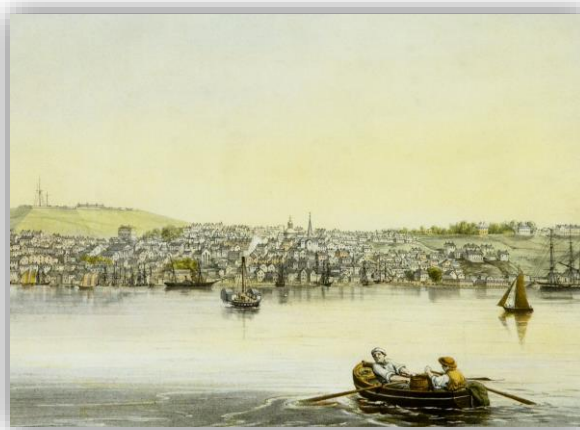
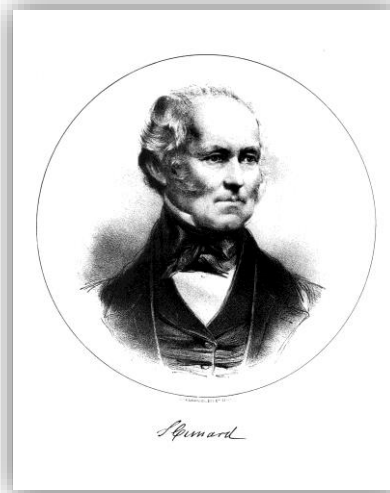
Abraham Cunard and Son, he engaged in a range of maritime economic activities made

possible by Halifax's geographical location on the North Atlantic and its political position in an expanding British Empire.

Through contacts with military personnel in the city, the Cunards entered the transatlantic timber trade, amassing large landholdings in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick,

and Prince Edward Island. Samuel Cunard used these contacts to expand his business interests into shipbuilding, trade with the West Indies, government communications, and importation

of East India Company teas from China to Halifax.



Cunard’s activities help integrate Nova Scotia into a growing web of maritime connections, often through use of new technologies. He invested in the Shubenacadie Canal Company. He served as agent for the British General Mining Association, importers of the first stationary steam engine in Nova Scotia. As president of the Halifax Steam Boat Company, operator of the city’s harbour ferries, he studied steam power’s use in inshore navigation. In 1830 he invested in the Quebec and Halifax Steam Navigation Company, operators of the *Royal William*, which in 1833 was the first ship to make a transatlantic passage almost entirely under steam power.

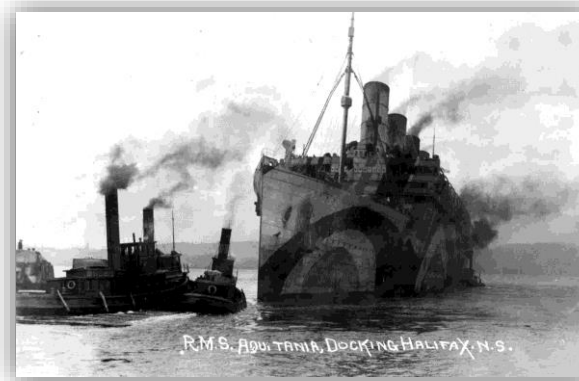
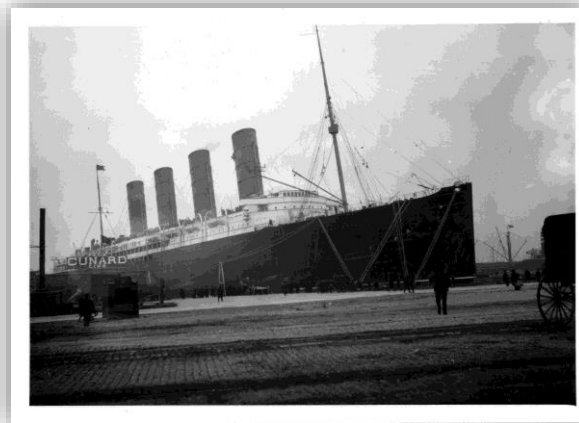
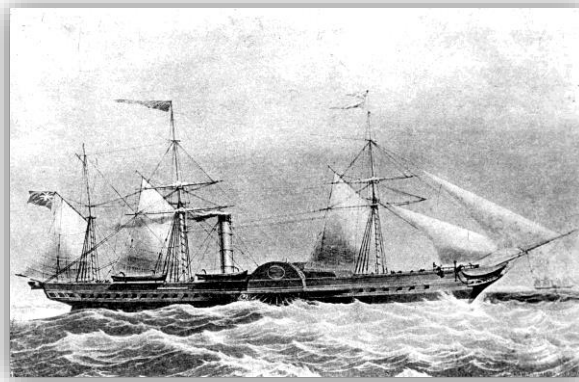
Cunard’s early recognition of steam navigation’s advantages—its ability to conduct fast voyages on a predictable schedule—prepared him when, in 1838, the British navy issued tenders for a transatlantic steam-powered mail service.

Partnering with experienced steamship builders and operators in the United Kingdom, Cunard

formed the British and North America Royal Mail Steam Packet Company. At 2 a.m. on July 2nd, 1840, the company’s steamship *Britannia* arrived in Halifax after a 12-day, 10-hour passage from Liverpool, England, inaugurating the world’s first sustained transatlantic liner service.

In subsequent decades technological advancements—iron and steel hulls, compound engines, screw propulsion—made Cunard ships (and those of a growing number of international rivals) bigger, faster, and more luxurious. By the early 20th century, steam-powered passenger liners had become the largest and most

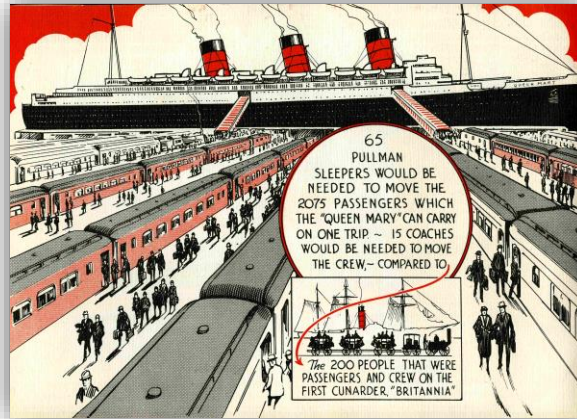
sophisticated products of modern industrial society. Atlantic crossing times dropped from 12 days to five. Millions of people, rich and poor, made routine ocean passages. This shift of



population between continents helped reshape the demographic make-up of Europe and the Americas.

In the early 20th century, the Cunard Line bested its competition with powerful ships featuring luxurious accommodation, such as *Lusitania* and *Mauretania*. These successes were followed by *Queen Mary* and *Queen Elizabeth*, in 1936 and 1938 respectively. In the 1950s, as air transportation eclipsed passenger ships, Cunard transitioned into leisure cruising. In 1962 three million passengers crossed the Atlantic, more than two-thirds by air: the age of the jetliner had replaced the age of the steam passenger liner for routine transportation. Cunard refitted the two Queens as luxury cruise ships, and built the *Queen Elizabeth 2* for the same purpose in 1969. In the 21st century, the Cunard

tradition for comfort and safety is maintained by contemporary marvels such as *Queen Mary 2* and *Queen Victoria*.



The Cunard Line's connections to Halifax were sustained throughout this period. The company's dazzle-painted liners were a familiar sight in the harbour during two world wars, and carried thousands of war brides and their children to new homes in Canada after 1945. Today, the company's ships bring leisure travelers to Halifax from all over the world. Haligonian Samuel Cunard's original vision and entrepreneurial talent, along with his appreciation of the opportunities that the maritime world offered, helped make today's densely interconnected world a reality.

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Image credits:

Portrait of Samuel Cunard. MMA MP400.28.1



"A View of Halifax Navy Dockyards and Citadel from the Dartmouth Shore..." c. 1857, by William Hickman. MMA M81.118.1

Britannia in rough seas. MMA M2007.50.16

Lusitania alongside the Cunard Pier, New York. MMA M84.110.1

Aquitania at Halifax during the First World War. MMA M78.44.14

Queen Mary promotional material. c. 1936. MMA M2007.50.91



Queen Mary's modern interior design. MMA M2007.50.92

Queen Elizabeth alongside Halifax Ocean Terminals, 1944. MMA MP18.140.13

Aquitania approaching the Ocean Terminals, Halifax. MMA MP118.141.3