

HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF OLD YARMOUTH

STAGECOACH DAYS



BY
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The story of the stagecoach begins much later than that of the ordinary, but they reached their height of glory together. In London, 1633, they were called Chariots or Whirlicotes, a sort of bed on wheels used as early as Richard II. The first coach was built in England by Walter Rippen for the Earl of Rutland in 1555. The Queen had one made a year later and Queen Elizabeth a state coach 8 years later. Criticism was set in print against coaches. It was said that they aided purse snatching. Butchers could not pass with their cattle; carts and carriers were stopped and milkmaids were flung into the dirt! Still coaches continued to be built. Early English stagecoaches were clumsy machines with no windows, seats or rails on top. Inconvenient enough when compared to the dashing mail stage a century later.

We began early in Yarmouth history to have stagecoaches. The word was originally applied to a coach which ran from station to station over a number of stops along the road, usually with a fresh horse at each stop. They were also called mail stages and were in their prime during the early to mid-1880s. Earlier transportation had been available only by small ships and packets up and down the coast carrying mail, goods and passengers. Tall poles were set on the highest points along the bay side of Cape Cod. A storm coat or some sort of sail would be tied to it for signaling the south side when the Boston packets were in! Stagecoaches traveled from Sandwich to Barnstable, Yarmouth, Dennis, Brewster, and Orleans then on to Provincetown. They traveled in rain or shine stopping at wheelwrights and shoemakers for passengers, mail bags, even sacks and packages leaning against designated trees. Improvement continued until 1827 when a quality coach was built, comfortable, stylish and fully enclosed with glass. Cape Cod coaches were handsomely decorated in bright colors and gold leaf. Often small landscape scenes were painted on the doors. It could hold nine people inside and six to eight on top drawn by four horses. Roads were improved, funded by toll houses every ten to twelve miles. Coaches usually traveled about four to five miles an hour with a change of horses every ten miles. Some traveled around the clock. There were some days in July when in spite of the beauties of nature the heat and dust of the dry roads were difficult to ignore. Cape Cod had a good part of the business with the Boston, Plymouth and Sandwich mail stage. Taverns were located every seven to ten miles, like Cornish's

Tavern on Sandwich Road and Hall's Tavern in Sandwich. A coach left Sandwich three days a week in the morning and arrived in Boston that night, returning to Cape Cod two days later. Several other towns on the Cape had their own lines to Boston. Gorham Crosby of Centerville ran two four horse coaches between Hyannis and Sandwich. He left at 2pm and arrived in time for breakfast at Fessenden's Tavern. Everyone then boarded a stagecoach for Boston. William Boyden was another famous coachman from Sandwich who drove from 1820 to 1848. Two innholders, as they were called, in Yarmouth, were Basset and Thatcher.

An early Cotuit resident, Ebenezer Crocker, built a stately Colonial Georgian home in 1775. In 1821 his grandson, Ezra Crocker, operated it as an overnight stagecoach inn. The house became an important stop of the Hyannis-Sandwich stagecoach line and possibly accommodated such notable visitors as Daniel Webster. It looks much the same today and serves as the home of the Cahoon Art Gallery. Thoreau traveled here by stagecoach and stayed at the Higgins Inn in Orleans. According to a 1973 news clipping it became a nightclub and burned down in the late Thirties. In 1933 a section of the Inn became part of the Church of the Holy Spirit construction.

The first roads in New England were called, in the early court records, "trodden paths." They were narrow lines, barely two feet wide, over pine needles and leaves among the tree trunks worn down by Indians as they walked silently in single file through the woods. These paths were soon widened by the heavy hobnailed shoes of the white settlers. Others were formed by domestic cattle, the best of all path makers, as they wandered to find water and grazing pastures. These roads are still followed and wind today in the very lines of the footpath and cattle tracks. The corduroy road was one of the common improvements made to make routes passable by stagecoaches. Marshy places were filled with saplings and logs. Whole roads were made of logs cut in lengths of 10 to 12 feet long and laid close to each other across the road.

The stagecoach drivers on local lines were on very friendly terms with dwellers

along their routes. They carried messages, packages, news and did shopping in the city for women's bonnets. One wore a great bell-crowned hat in the summer on lines leaving Boston, crammed with papers and valuables. It is said that many drivers grew bald from the constant weight on their heads. A great day on the coaches was when the schoolboys and college boys came home on their vacations. The stage drivers took full responsibility for their safety. They were always very kind and careful with children placed under their charge. Nothing is more marked in change than the travelling bags and trunks from those of stagecoach days. When our ancestors crossed the ocean they transported their belongings in wooden chests, plain or carved. There is no mention of trunks in any old colonial inventories, but are mentioned by Shakespeare. At the end of the seventeenth century they were made of leather and hide, usually studded with metal nails. This shape of trunk lasted until the days of the railroad. Many types of horses were used in a stage team: runaways, kickers, biters and tricksters. If the owners couldn't manage them they went on stagecoaches. They were seldom sick, were well fed and groomed and had quick time and short trips. And it is said they never died!

Guideboards were always found at the crossings of all well travelled roads. They stood where paths were scarcely more than lines in the grass and low shrubs. Another wayside friend of the traveler in coaching days was the watering trough. Usually a log hollowed out Indian style like a dug-out and filled with water from a nearby spring. In the later days of the stagecoach they were chiseled from fine stone. Great logs were used to form old wooden bridges. Fallen tree trunks placed by Indians were used again by early colonists to cross the inland streams. Later, as years passed by, parallel trunks were added; then, flat cross timbers and boards when hand saw and sawmills came into use. When the first railroad appeared it was met with much scrutiny. But, by 1835 there was a great deal of improvement. No one heeded the warning "Look out for the engine!" Many stagecoaches went out of business together with those that serviced them along the roads. 1836 finished the mail-coach system. Just as it was perfected it ended, rendered useless by the railroad system.

Before the train, summer journeys were filled with the scents of woods, gardens and of the sea. In autumn the smell of heaps of rotting apples filled the air as you rode along in a stagecoach. The traveler in an old stagecoach did not get just a fleeting glance of places as the railroad offered. He had time to admire the view and listen to other travelers' stories. The driver, who went over the same roads day after day, had many tales to tell of the areas. He knew the gossip of each house passed. With the early railroad, the sun beat down on the cars raising the temperature. Smoke and noise filled the air. But, it had one redeeming quality: Speed. A shorter trip, if that is really what you wanted.