



# “The Fastest Ship in the World”

*You may recognize the name Marco Polo, but do you know its Maritime connections?*

BY SANDRA PHINNEY

■ Above: Painting of the *Marco Polo* by the artist Thomas Robertson. Inset: Portrait of James Smith, c. 1851, oil on canvas, builder and first owner of the ship, *Marco Polo*, that was built at Marsh Creek, Saint John, NB, in 1851.

**S**aint John has a long and illustrious shipbuilding history. In 1850, the Wright brothers laid the 182-foot keel for the *Beejapore*, which was to have been the largest ship constructed in the region. Yet, close by, competitor James Smith was constructing a ship whose keel measured 184.1 feet. An odd-looking vessel jokingly referred to as “James Smith’s folly,” she resembled a broad-beamed cargo vessel above the waterline but had the sleek lines of a clipper ship below.

Smith took advantage of spring tides for the launch. After he gave the orders to “split the blocks” to release her, the *Marco Polo* simply squatted. Then, suddenly, she plunged into the water, dove into the opposite bank, leaned over and settled into the mud.

Although it took two weeks of hard labour to dislodge her, she set sail for Liverpool, England, on May 31, 1851, and arrived in a record-breaking 15 days.

Ship buyers in need of passenger ships to sail to Australia for the gold rush took notice. The *Marco Polo* became part of the Black Ball Line and was refitted to carry passengers from England to the “Land of Plenty.”

### A most impressive ship

Decked out with fancy berths and state rooms, and an exotic dining saloon, the *Marco Polo* could carry 950 passengers, 30 crewmen and 30 others who worked for their passage. The new owner had decorations placed on her stern, including two reclining figures of the Italian traveller Marco Polo (one

in European dress and one in Oriental garb) and a carved elephant.

On July 4, 1852, the *Marco Polo* set sail for Melbourne, Australia, with the flamboyant Captain James Nicol “Bully” Forbes at the helm. She arrived in port in a record-breaking 68 days, proudly displaying a large piece of canvas between the foremast and mainmast that stated, in bold black lettering, “The Fastest Ship in the World.”

During a banquet on board that preceded the second voyage to Australia, Captain Forbes proclaimed, “Last trip I astonished the world with the sailing of this ship. This trip I intend to astonish God Almighty!”

### A personal account

Edwin Bird was a passenger on that second trip. He kept a journal and

recorded latitudes and longitudes, the ship's speed and details about the weather. He also noted everything from frivolous behaviour to deaths and dramas on the high seas. A snippet from his journal recounts:

*The Young Woman was thrown overboard about an hour after her decease. She did not sink through carelessness in not putting in enough Holy Stone. She was last seen floating on the waves towards the Coast of Africa.*

A week later, Bird wrote about a vessel with a Dutch crew coming aboard for dinner during a calm spell:

*They all got pretty tight before leaving ... Mr. Gardener got put in chains for the night. He threatened to shoot the Captain and insulted Mrs Forbes. We are knocking about in a Dead Calm.*

And later he penned:

*All the live stock is used up, the last of the mutton and pork today with the exception of a sow and a few half starved fowls.*

### The Cavendish connection

After the gold rush subsided, the *Marco Polo* was rigged for other purposes, including running coal, coke and guano, before being condemned in 1880. After a Norwegian line bought her and made some repairs, she set sail from



■ Iron anchor from *Marco Polo*.

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■ Built in Saint John, NB, the *Marco Polo* sailed the world before going aground and breaking up near Cavendish, PEI.

Montmorency, Quebec, in July 1883 with a load of pine destined for London.

During that voyage, a gale struck the Gulf of St. Lawrence. The ship's pumps couldn't keep up with the leaks, and her holds filled with water. The captain decided to beach her rather than risk the lives of the crew, so she was grounded near Cavendish, PEI.

Lucy Maud Montgomery was a young girl at the time, living with Alexander Macneill and Lucy Woolner Macneill (her maternal grandparents) on their farm in Cavendish. Later, at the age of 16, she penned an award-winning essay for the *Montreal Witness* entitled "The Wreck of the *Marco Polo*."

Montgomery wrote, "What a day that 25th of July was in Cavendish! The wind blew a hurricane and the waves ran mountains high; the storm had begun two days before and had now reached its highest pitch of fury."

She recounted how an excited crowd gathered on the beach, watching helplessly as the crew cut the rigging, and how the foremast and huge iron mainmast "...went over with a crash that could be heard for miles over the roaring storm!"

Realizing the crew would die if they tried to reach shore, some locals painted "Stick to the ship at all hazards" on a large board. The crew paid heed, and the next morning, although the seas were still rough, a rescue party fetched them. The captain

ended up staying with Montgomery's grandparents while the crew were housed with other locals.

Eventually, the *Marco Polo* and her cargo were sold to parties back in Saint John and the captain and his crew departed.

A month later, another storm took everyone by surprise, including the crew who were still working on board to salvage the cargo. Three men tried to race to shore in a small boat; it swamped. Two climbed back aboard the wreck, and the third man drowned.

"Suddenly a cry of horror burst from every lip as the ship was seen to part at the fore-castle head and at once go down," Montgomery wrote. "The next minute, however, it was seen that the windlass and a small piece of the bow still remained held by the anchors, and that the men were clinging to this."

The men hung on for hours. When the seas calmed, a rescue party went forth. Montgomery recounted, "What rejoicing there was when they were safely landed, and, as the kindly neighbours crowded around with that 'touch of nature that makes the whole world kin,' there was joy indeed."

A week later, though, another gale blew in and the last vestige of the *Marco Polo* disappeared.

### A ship remembered

Today there are remnants of the *Marco Polo* living with families all over the

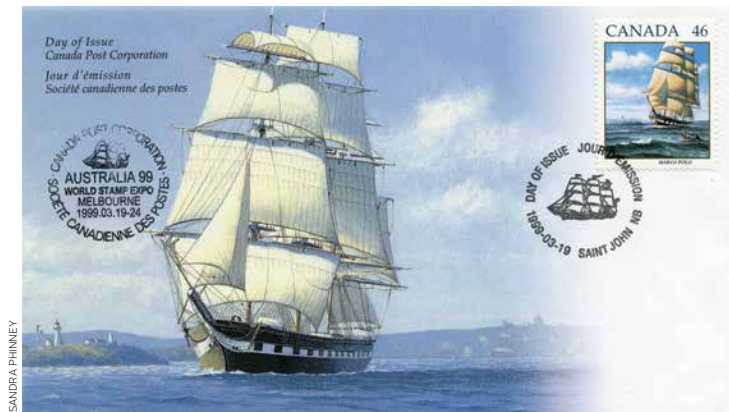
Island. One of the most beloved pieces is the carved elephant that originally graced her stern.

Former PEI premier Alex Campbell recalls hearing how locals gathered up bits and pieces of the wreckage to use any way they could. The story goes that the elephant was tossed on to a pile of rubble on the MacEwen homestead.

“They tried to chop up the elephant and got a tail and a leg off,” Campbell said, “but the wood was so tough the elephant just became a play thing on the farm. After it served its purpose, it was tossed up into the attic of a barn and stayed there until my mother, Cecelia Campbell, acquired it.”

Thane and Cecelia Campbell had built a summer home on the Stanley

Stamp issued in 1999 for the World Stamp Expo.



SANDRA PHINNEY

River in New London, PEI, in the 1930s; the elephant was restored and displayed in a place of prominence in the dining room, where it continues to live today under the caring watch of Thane and Cecelia’s grandson Brian Kinsman and his wife Jane.

There are other *Marco Polo* relics

in the region, including a porthole, a dinner bell and a spy glass housed in the bookstore at the site of Montgomery’s home in Cavendish. The site is the brainchild of Jennie and John Macneill (the grandson of Montgomery’s maternal grandparents). It’s also where the captain of the *Marco Polo* stayed after the rescue.

“When we read Lucy Maud’s journal and found out how much she loved her grandfather’s home and this land, as it was passed down to John, we thought we should do something to show people where she lived,” says Jennie, “so we created this site ourselves.” It is now a National Historic Site managed by their son, David Macneill.

### The Yarmouth connection

During her lifetime, the *Marco Polo* had many captains, but the first to sail her was Captain Amos Crosby from Yarmouth, NS. He was at the helm when the ship transported cotton from Mobile, Alabama, to Liverpool, England, in 1852. The journey took only 35 days.

Captain Crosby was so enamoured with the ship that he commissioned a portrait of her. The painting—inscribed “*Marco Polo* of Saint John, NB. Capt. Amos Crosby”—is believed to be the oldest known picture of the ship and resides in the Yarmouth County Museum.

Fast-forward to December 1998 when RCMP Corporal Gil Dares (stationed in Yarmouth) was on his way home from working in Cape Breton. En route he stopped at a convenience store and picked up a souvenir for his daughter. It was a stuffed kangaroo. He then dropped into Milford to visit his mother before completing his journey



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YARMOUTH COUNTY MUSEUM AND ARCHIVES

Top: Stern carving of a figure in Eastern dress, reputed to be the ship’s namesake, done in painted pine by Edward Charters, a Scottish sculptor. Above: One of the most beloved pieces from the *Marco Polo* is the carved elephant that also originally graced her stern.



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back to Yarmouth. Over a cup of tea, they discussed the trip he and his wife had taken to England the year before and his mother asked if he'd like to go back. He replied “No,” adding that the place he had dreamed of going to all his life was Australia.

The following morning, he received a call from RCMP headquarters. Would he be available the following March to represent Canada at the World Stamp Expo being held in Melbourne, Australia? He would, indeed.

The icing on the cake was that Canada Post would be launching a new series at that expo—featuring the *Marco Polo*. Knowing there was a Yarmouth connection, Dares later brought souvenirs from the expo back to the museum, including some original *Marco Polo* stamps.


### The story continues in Saint John

In addition to being built in Saint John and bringing much attention to the region, the *Marco Polo* and her story lives on at the New Brunswick Museum, where she is featured as part of the Wind, Wood and Sail gallery.

The display includes a large model of the *Marco Polo* under construction, along with several artifacts from the ship, such as the ship's anchor, the wooden carving depicting Marco Polo in Eastern garb (from the stern of the ship) and an oil painting that is likely a portrait of the ship's builder, James Smith.

The museum also has Joseph Schull's script about the *Marco Polo* that was entitled “She Never Was a Lady” and aired on CBC Radio in 1953 as part of its *Days of Sail* series.

The city's famous Admiral Beatty Hotel featured the Marco Polo Lounge (built much like the saloon that was on the ship), and in August 1962 the hotel trademarked an ice cream named after the ship.

Today, the bridge spanning Marsh Creek in Saint John, where the ship was launched, is called Marco Polo Bridge, and there are replicas galore of this mighty ship, including a large model of her on the wall behind the reception desk at the Château Saint John. 



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