

STAGECOACH TRAVEL

MOVERS & SHAKERS

No springs, board seats, skittish horses and roads rough enough to shake the riders' insides were the minor difficulties of riding the stagecoach. Regular runs, space for trunks and suitcases and getting to one's destination by stages, in relatively short order, were the advantages. Carrying money between bank branches, delivering the mail and sticking to tight schedules were priorities and enabled stagecoach companies to turn a tidy profit.

It's believed that the first stagecoach service in Ontario was established in 1787 between Queenston and Fort Erie. Settlement on the north shore of Lake Ontario developed considerably later but by 1817 there was a route between Montreal and Kingston, and the next year it was extended from Kingston to York (now Toronto). Soon the stagecoach became the principal means of overland transportation in Canada.



Developed in England in the 17th century, the stagecoach reached its pinnacle of use and fame as settlers moved into the American "wild west". At the peak of the stagecoach era in Canada, regular services for passengers and mail were run between all major cities and towns and into the United States. But travel was still an adventure in clumsy, uncomfortable vehicles, ranging from open wagons to ungainly carriages hung on leather springs. In winter they were mounted on runners and some even carried wood stoves for warmth.

In addition to being somewhat uncomfortable, stagecoach travel could be downright dangerous to both man and beast. It was just good fortune that no one was injured in May 1836 when a stagecoach broke through the ice at Coteau-du-Lac, Quebec. With some regularity passengers would be required to alight to lessen the load, or even to assist the horses in moving the coach along a particularly difficult portion of the route.



*Weller Stage passing Trinity Church, Toronto by artist Rowley Murphy
(Credit: cobourghistory.ca)*



Possibly the most successful stagecoach operator in Canada was William Weller of Cobourg. Born in Vermont in 1799, Weller moved to Canada with his father and made Cobourg his new home. In addition to his involvement with stagecoaches he actively promoted a plank road to Rice Lake, the Cobourg & Peterborough Railway, and Cobourg in general, serving numerous times as head of the Police Board and, in 1850, as its first Mayor.



*Bill Weller and one of his winter stagecoaches on runners, c1830.
(Credit: cobourghistory.ca)*