

WORK THROUGH TIME

Cape Breton Stories of Land & Sea



The Archibalds of North Sydney

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In 1785 the first permanent settlement was established on the North side of Sydney Harbour. Expatriates from the former British Colonies along the Atlantic Seaboard made their new homes on the North "Bar" of the harbour. Settlers to this new land prospered as farmers, shipbuilders and fishermen. In the 1830s, with development of coal shipping piers, the North Bar experienced rapid expansion and emerged as a major shipping port of North America. By 1870, this bustling port town ranked fourth in Canada in tonnage loaded, after Halifax, Montreal and Quebec City. In 1885, North Sydney was officially incorporated as a town.

Into the twentieth century North Sydney became the hub of Cape Breton Island for ocean-going vessels, including fishing fleets, warships, convoys, and coal tramp steamers from around the globe. In 1898, the Reid-Newfoundland Company chose the town as the Canadian mainland terminal for a ferry service to Newfoundland; the 100th anniversary of ferry service to Newfoundland was celebrated in 1998. The Western Union Cable office, established in 1875, cemented North Sydney's status as the main communication centre linking Europe and North America and as a great place to conduct business during an era of prosperity and robustness.

The basis for business on the Northside had no better foundation than the Archibald families. Members of the Archibald clan came to North Sydney and Sydney Mines from Ireland, Scotland and the United States by way of Colchester County, immigrating to Canada as United Empire Loyalists after the American Revolution. The greater families of Archibald were represented worldwide in all the professions. In their direct political involvement there were eight Archibald family members of the Provincial Houses of Assembly and Parliament coming from Colchester. North Sydney's Thomas Dickson Archibald served on the Legislative Council and Executive Council (provincial cabinet) in Halifax and in 1867, when Confederation was won, Sir John A. Macdonald appointed him to the Senate, where he served until his death in 1890.

Thomas Archibald was born in Onslow, near Truro, in 1813 and attended public school there and the academically renowned Pictou Academy, which was the choice of an overwhelming number of young Presbyterians seeking to improve themselves in the world. Archibald moved to North Sydney with his brother Blowers shortly after graduating and immediately entered into business here, first with an extensive

shipbuilding yard on the main street, North Sydney Marine Railway. Here ships were built on contract: barques, schooners, brigantines and the largest, the 1,074 ton Clarendon, called after the British foreign secretary of the day. This work was supervised by master shipwright William Nesbitt and there were several hundred shipwrights, caulkers, riggers, sail makers, blacksmiths and assorted labourers employed at the yard at any given time.

Thomas and Blowers Archibald foresaw the coming of steamships and shifted their chief business endeavours to coalmining, owning and operating the Gowrie Mine in Cow Bay and holding shares in several other mines across Cape Breton. Thomas served also as the agent for the Merchant Bank and later the Bank of Nova Scotia. (His son Charles became a director of the BNS). The Archibalds were also into shipping and entered into a worldwide network chiefly for coal but other cargoes as well. These trade endeavours were enhanced with Thomas serving as consul in this province for the United States and as the representative for Lloyds of London.

In 1856 Thomas Archibald was appointed to the Legislative Council of the province, the unelected Upper Chamber. In 1860 he was promoted to the Executive Council in Premier Joseph Howe's Reform Government. He served with Howe for two years before stepping down from cabinet and further applied his energies to family business interests. He was, after all, first and foremost, a businessman and believed that Confederation would enhance his business prospects, though this step was to come a few years down the line. He was therefore susceptible when Sir John A. came calling with a Senate seat, despite his having been a member of the Reform party that opposed "the Bothereation Scheme" in 1867. There is little known of his time in Ottawa but his senatorial duties did not interfere with his business interests, in the least, and he continued to prosper, as did his brother and their families.

The Presbyterian Witness of 1890 mourned the death of Thomas on October 18th, 1890, as "one of the most exemplary and influential members of the church. In his political life he fulfilled all his duties with dignity and efficiency worthy of the family name." Thomas Archibald was one of the founders of St. Andrews Presbyterian Church in Sydney Mines, involved in a most substantial way both in the construction and in providing funds for the continued operation of the church. This was just another of his many roles in community service.

Archibald Avenue and Archibald Wharf mark the involvement of the Archibald family in the industrial expansion of North Sydney in the 19th century. Gowrie House, Shore Road in Sydney Mines, onetime home of Blowers Archibald, still operates today as an upscale bed and breakfast and dining room.

This portrait of the Archibalds in North Sydney was written by Ron MacDonald of the North Sydney Historical Society.