

Remembering Pier 2:  
Halifax's Other Immigrant Gateway  
By Craig Dodge

Before Pier 21 became Halifax's entranceway for the 1 million immigrants who arrived on Canada's eastern shore, another facility stood service for many years as the city's gateway for new arrivals. With a history largely uncelebrated and bound to a past more obscure than that of its better known successor, the full story of Pier 2 remains largely forgotten. This is unfortunate given the contribution the pier has made to the growth of the country. Nearly 2.7 million<sup>1</sup> individuals immigrated to Canada during the years that Pier 2 was operational and, with the vast majority of these having come from Europe via the Atlantic, Halifax, more often than not, was their point of entry.<sup>2</sup> In those years it was Pier 2 that stood at the ready to receive them. If this story remains untold it must also be added that it may be difficult to make up for. Often conflicting and confusing, but mostly vanished or hidden, the history of Pier 2 constitutes a fascinating excursion into both a city and a country's past.



The Andania at Pier 2

The story of Pier 2 is inseparable from an account of the many disasters that over the years have plagued our region. As many disasters as the pier endured are its incarnations. Though it is possible that a wharf of some sort was present in the northern end of Halifax – below Cornwallis Street – before we have a record of it, it is only since 1880 that we can document with some certainty the historic beginnings of Pier 2. A dispatch from the Feb

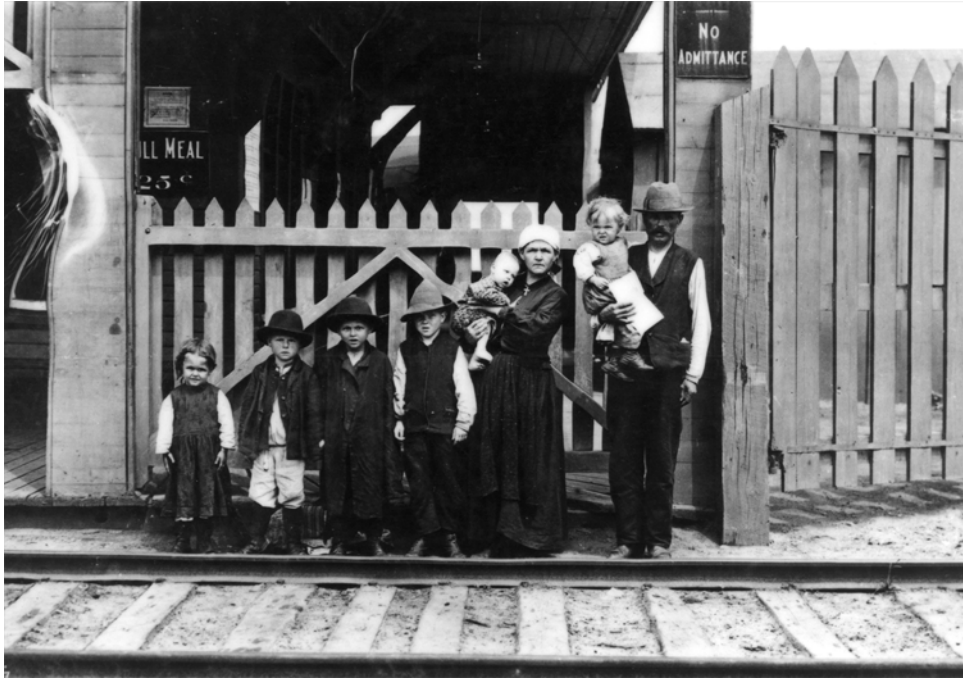
4<sup>th</sup> edition of “The Journal of Remarkable Occurrences for 1880-81” declares that “in the fourteenth and fifteenth Years of the Canadian Union” “the deep water terminus of the Intercolonial Railway at Halifax, N.S. is completed by Mr. James G Kennedy, contractor. The work was commenced in June 1877. The contract price was \$174,000.”<sup>3</sup> This brief report, besides providing us with information regarding the beginnings of Pier 2 is also important for another reason. The designation “deepwater terminus” would for several years to come serve as the common name of the Pier 2 facility. It was considered apt because of its location, one mile closer to the open ocean than the other terminals found at the government railway further north. Although the water at Pier 2 was actually no deeper than what could be measured elsewhere in the harbour, in its early years the wharf would simply be known as Deepwater. This title is definitely appropriate to describe a location ideally suited to the requirements of the many ocean liners that frequently called on Halifax.

The property upon which Pier 2 was situated was at the time owned and operated by the company of Samuel Cunard, founder of the world famous line of steamships. The structure – wharf, rail facilities and unwallled shed – received a boost when, in the same year as its completion, Halifax was officially declared by Ottawa to be “a port of entry.” The city had, in fact, under the Canada Immigration Act, been running an immigration office since 1865. The local papers of the time recorded the pier’s expansion. A year after it was built, the Halifax Herald carried a glowing assessment of some recent additions to the terminus. Equipped with a new shed, which measured 546 ft long and 46 ft wide, was large enough to accommodate an increased business in coal, the paper boasted that “when the works now in progress are completed Halifax will have shipping facilities surpassing those of any other port in the Dominion and indeed, it is said by some, surpassing anything in North America.”<sup>4</sup> The new pier however would suffer its first major disaster in 1895 when a fire, the suspected cause of which was arson, raged through the structure. When the wharf was eventually rebuilt, under the auspices of the Laurier government looking to develop the port of Halifax, it was done so on a grander scale.

The construction began in September of 1911 and was finally finished in early 1915. Resident Engineer A.F. Dyer and superintendent of contracting A.A. MacDonald oversaw the project. Both of these individuals would renew their collaboration in a future reconstruction of the pier. The new facility, pier and shed, were all built entirely of reinforced concrete. It was also at this time that the wharf was starting to be referred to as Pier 2. Set up for the handling of both immigrants and cargo.

The pier was completed a year after the outbreak of the First World War, suddenly found itself taking an unexpected role. “From early 1915 until the return of the Canadian soldiers from World War, the top story [of the pier] was used for the accommodation of embarking troops...[and] practically every Canadian who went overseas to fight for the Empire, boarded a ship at the side of the pier.”<sup>5</sup> Through the upper floor of its transit shed “284,455 Canadian soldiers, many U.S. combatants and more than 50 000 Chinese, engaged for construction work, embarked from Pier 2”<sup>6</sup> in the course of the war. A hospital was put in place on the top floor as well to help treat the sick and wounded. It was an era when the pier became a focal point of city life. A bustle of ships and people alike would converge

daily on this vital point in Halifax's northern end. Perhaps the most famous vessel to have regularly docked at the pier to pick up thousands of passengers was the "fondly remembered" Olympic, sister ship to the ill-fated Titanic. On a spring day in 1919 more than 6000 veterans disembarked from this ship at Pier 2, setting a new maritime record in "human cargo carrying."<sup>7</sup>



Early Immigrants arrive in Halifax

Disaster though would strike the pier again in 1917, when the entire north end of Halifax was left in ruins by what would remain the greatest man made explosion until the 1945 destruction of Hiroshima. Though the concrete shed of the pier survived the catastrophe better than many of the other nearby buildings, the damage was still severe enough to place the pier's capacity to handle Halifax's immigration traffic under a considerable strain over the next ten years. Those arriving in the city during this time would, upon first setting sight on their new homeland, be greeted with the desolate view of a partially ruined city. Undoubtedly, it was scene, which could "not have left the happiest of impressions."<sup>8</sup>

For a while Pier 2 continued to handle Canada's inflow of immigrants, but gradually a new pier called Pier 21 was being constructed to transfer the city's immigration quarters further south along the harbour. By 1926 the new pier was completed and would form a part of the harbour-berthing complex known as the Ocean Terminals. So eager was the Department of Immigration and Colonization to move their facilities to the new location down the harbour, that even before the newly established Halifax Harbour Commission was able to assume administration of their Ocean Terminal properties federal immigration processing offices; who were already up and running on the second story level of the new pier's shed.<sup>9</sup> In 1928 the jetty known as Pier 21 officially began its long career as Canada's most famous point of entry.

Though Pier 2's role as an immigration facility was finally coming to an end its story would continue in a capacity with which it was more than familiar. During the First World War the upper floor of the pier's transit shed served as temporary accommodation for thousands of arriving immigrants. When it was no longer as heavily required for this purpose it began to fall into a steady period of decline. However, by the late twenties with a rise in demand for facilities to handle an increase in commerce with the Great Lakes region, the pier once again underwent a refurbishing. Fitted as a warehouse with a capacity of 1.5 million cubic feet for the storage of produce and goods the pier could guarantee for itself a bright future within Halifax's maritime economy. Disaster however- proving that in the case of Pier 2 it truly is persistent - would soon return again in a familiar guise.

In September of 1933 "the most spectacular and stubborn fire that Halifax has seen since the holocaust of 1917"<sup>10</sup> broke out in the upper story of the pier. The result was a financial loss of a half a million dollars and a potential crippling blow to the still lively Halifax shipping industry. However a determined effort and a concerted action by business and government both managed to, in the span of a just five months, overcome contractual squabbles and bad winter weather and restore Pier 2 to fully operational status. The pier was, in the words of Harbour Commissioner J.L. Hetherington, elevated to a position "better than ever."<sup>11</sup> A ramp was built to provide vehicle access to the upper story, electrical escalators were installed between the floors and an improved plumbing and heating systems were added. But the glory years for the old pier in the north end of Halifax where so many immigrants once found their way into Canada were not meant to last.

No more disasters lay in store but inevitably the end of an era had begun. Today the transit shed is long gone and the old rail lines are torn up or invalid, but the pier still abides in the very place where it first began to stir in the winter of 1880. Today the Canadian navy has taken over the location and while little indication of its important past remains; the vibrant story of Pier 2 continues to be one worthy of remembrance.

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### Some Facts about Pier 2

#### A brief chronology

Feb 4<sup>th</sup> 1880- first began as "Deep Water Terminus"

Jan 6<sup>th</sup> 1885- construction of a coal shed in connection with the Intercolonial Railway

May 20<sup>th</sup> 1895- a fire believed to have been caused by arson results in severe damage

Sept 1911- construction of the Pier 2 facility began

Aug 1914 to Nov 1918- is used as the point of departure for troops heading overseas

Winter 1915- construction of Pier 2 facility is officially completed

Dec 6<sup>th</sup> 1917- much of the area in and around Pier 2 is destroyed in the Halifax Explosion

March 1928- immigration offices are officially transferred to new facilities at Pier 21

Sept 1933- a fire causes .5 million dollars in damage and ruins the upper storage shed

Oct 1934- the pier is restored to a business position “better than ever”

Sept 1939- Canada enters WWII and the navy takes over the Pier 2 facilities

### The location of Pier 2

Throughout its history Pier 2 has been located in the north end of Halifax, approximately at the waterfront below Cornwallis Street.

### The dimensions of Pier 2

The Halifax Herald of Sept 1<sup>st</sup> 1882 lists the dimensions of the original storage shed as 546 ft long and 46 ft wide. It was 16 ft high and had a flat roof.

“The Port and Province” of October 1933 describes the Pier 2 transit shed of the post 1911 period as having in its upper floor storage space of 1.5 million cubic feet. The base floor of the pier is given as 700 ft long and 235 ft wide. The transit shed is listed at 688 ft long and 200 ft wide. The cost of the structure is reported to be approximately \$1.2 million. (Note the Halifax Harbour Commission in its annual report for 1928 varies these figures slightly, listing the base floor of the pier as 700 ft long and 225 ft wide and the transit shed as being 694 ft long and 202 ft wide.)

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> This figure is based on information provided by Statistics Canada. It includes a summation of the immigrant numbers for the years 1911 to 1928, inclusively. The figure could be increased to 5.5 million if numbers are counted going back to 1880, the year Pier 2's predecessor at Deepwater Terminus first opened. SOURCE: for 1852 to 1976, Department of Manpower and Immigration, 1976 Immigration Statistics, table 2, p. 4, Ottawa, 1977; for 1977, Employment and Immigration Canada, Immigration 1977, Quarterly Statistics, Fourth Quarter, table 2, p. 7. Or see <http://www.statcan.ca/english/freepub/11-516-XIE/sectiona/sectiona.htm#Immigration>

<sup>2</sup> The Pier 21 Story: Halifax 1924-1971, (Halifax: Employment and Immigration, 1978), p.2. Available at the Resource Centre at Pier 21.

<sup>3</sup> "Dominion Annual Register for 1880-81", Journal of Remarkable Occurrences, v.237. Available from the Nova Scotia Archives and Records Management.

<sup>4</sup> "Additions to the Wharf and Deep Water Terminus", Halifax Herald, Sept 1, 1882, p. 2. Available from the Nova Scotia Archives and Records Management.

<sup>5</sup> H.M. Hyatt, "Port Authority's Vigorous Action Averts Business Disaster", Port And Province, (Oct 1933), pp. 7, 26-7. Available from the Nova Scotia Archives and Records Management.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> The Pier 21 Story, 4.

<sup>9</sup> "Report for the Year 193", Halifax Harbour Commissions Annual Reports, 1928-35, p. 12. Available from the Nova Scotia Archives and Records Management.

<sup>10</sup> Port and Province, 6.

<sup>11</sup> Chas S Bennett, "Fires Destruction of Historic Pier Turned to Advantage", Port and Province, (Feb 1934), p. 4. Available from the Nova Scotia Archives and Records Management.

Note: The National Archives of Canada has several files in their holdings relevant to the history of Pier 2. Descriptions of these files can be found in the ArchiviaNet database. See [www.archives.ca](http://www.archives.ca).