

Steaming between the Islands: Nineteenth-Century Maritime Networks and the Caribbean Archipelago

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Abstract: Recent scholarship, particularly in “new” imperial studies, has underscored the role of networks in shaping imperial projects. A networked approach offers a useful lens through which to analyse nineteenth-century steamship services, and in this paper I draw on such a perspective to focus on the operations of the Royal Mail Steam Packet Company (RMSPC). Importantly the RMSPC, unlike some of the other British Government mail-contract holding lines, operated across an archipelago as well as an ocean. In probing the significance of the RMSPC’s archipelagic context for the maritime network, this paper draws on a theoretical intersection between networked approaches to empire and island studies. I suggest that an examination of the maritime network through an archipelagic lens brings to the fore colonial priorities, imperatives and hierarchies that can appear flattened out through a networked approach alone. I argue for an archipelagic framing of analysis in order to heighten the local and regional significance of this transportation infrastructure, in effect foregrounding the relationship between the maritime service and mobilities in the Caribbean.

Keywords: archipelago; Caribbean; empire; islands; maritime; mobilities; networks

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The Royal Mail Steam Packet Company: a maritime network

In October 1840, Foreign Secretary Lord Palmerston provided James MacQueen with a letter of introduction to facilitate his impending journey through the West Indies. MacQueen was preparing to travel to the Caribbean islands and ports in Central America “in order to make the necessary arrangements for carrying on the important public service which the Company has undertaken to perform under contract with Her Majesty’s Government” (NMM RMS 7/1, 31 October 1840). This “important public service” engaged a government-subsidized steamship line that would transport letters, news, passengers and low-bulk freight in timetabled passages across the Atlantic and the Caribbean archipelago. Along with his network of allies (including prominent individuals aligned with the West India interest, such as Thomas Baring and George Hibbert), MacQueen successfully lobbied for the new steamship service and secured £240,000 a year in public funding. MacQueen stressed that the new transportation link would stimulate commerce in the Caribbean after emancipation.

Prior to the RMSPC’s service, packet boats carried mail between Britain and the West Indies. In 1832, a Jamaica Packet travelled between Falmouth and Jamaica once a month, with stops at Barbados, St Vincent, Grenada, and Jamaica. Another Leeward Islands Packet sailed monthly, and a Mexico Packet offered a third route (Beck, 2009, p. 84). A number of these vessels were converted to steam during the 1830s and called at the larger islands (Bushell,

1939, pp. 3-4). Whereas there were disruptions and suspensions to the mail service during the pre-emancipation period, the RMSPC's new undertaking was surrounded by promises of regularity. MacQueen stressed that, as a result of the new steamship line, the "whole of the British Windward and Leeward Island Colonies would have regularly, and nearly every week, post communications with each other and with Barbadoes [sic], instead of being, as at present, weeks together without such communications" (MacQueen, 1838, p. 43) ([Figure 1](#))

While the steamship service was under consideration in the late 1830s, planters in the British Caribbean colonies were preoccupied with maintaining pre-emancipation levels of sugar production in the face of what they anticipated would soon be a reduced labour force (Hall, 1971, p. 23). The withdrawal of a significant number of workers from plantations to independent villages and urban centres was of crucial concern in this period. It was, in fact, the subject of conflicting "narratives about mobility", as the formerly enslaved interpreted control over their location as a core meaning of freedom, while planters constructed a narrative of economic crisis on the basis of these same movements (Cresswell, 2010, p. 17). Along with the planter discourse of labour crisis, a series of post-emancipation practices sought to tie newly emancipated labourers to plantation spaces through systems of debt peonage, restrictions placed on migration and the organized importation of indentured workers. Yet, despite these efforts to immobilize labour, the post-emancipation period was marked by internal and inter-island migration. The formerly enslaved deployed mobile practices, seeking out the best terms of employment in different spaces and, where required, sought seasonal and temporary employment to better establish land-based roots. In the case of Barbados, for example, 16,000 workers had emigrated by 1870, with many labourers engaged in seasonal work on other islands (Beckles, 2006, p. 152). Oceanic and land-based movements were significant in this respect, and both steamship and sail transport played a role in facilitating mobility, which was marked by a particular post-emancipation politics.

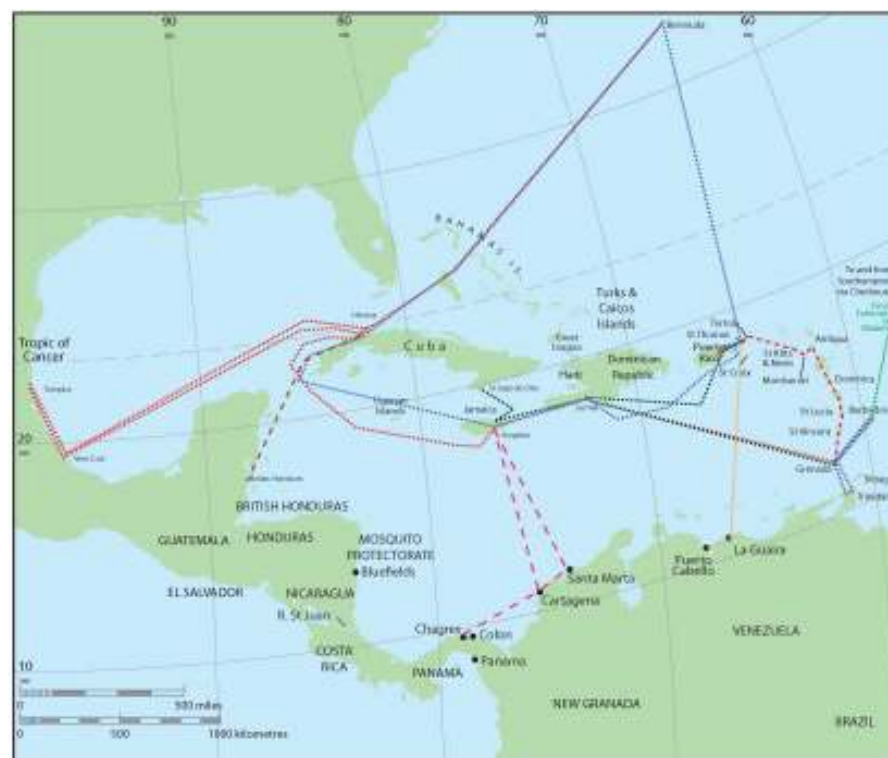
Emancipation in the Caribbean had an uneven geography; this was partly because British West Indian islands experienced a chronology of emancipation different from French, Spanish, Dutch, and Danish colonies. Yet, even within individual imperial regimes, the experience of emancipation varied depending on the state of sugar production on a given island, the availability of uncultivated land, and the relative attraction of regional migration. The RMSPC's service stretched across this uneven post-emancipation geography, and comprised ports of call cutting across imperial regimes.

The RMSPC began full operations in 1842, with its steamers calling at ports in the Caribbean archipelago as well as Central America. The Company's initial fleet consisted of fourteen paddle steamers for transatlantic service, and three schooners for inter-colonial operations in the Caribbean (Nicol, 2001, p. 54) ([Figure 2](#)). Although not a focus of this particular paper, after its first decade of operations, the RMSPC extended its routes down the east coast of South America in 1851.

From the 1840s, the RMSPC transported post, passengers and goods across the Atlantic and around a complex network of inter-colonial branch routes in a region that, following Peter Hulme (1986), we might consider to be an "extended" or "expanded Caribbean". Several islands were central to the historical geography of this steamship company, including the British Isles and those in the Caribbean archipelago. In this light, the RMSPC's history might be interpreted as one example of Caribbean archipelagic relations being "used cynically and opportunistically in the processes of colonial" control (Stratford, Baldacchino, McMahon, Farbotko & Harwood, 2011, p. 120). Despite the workings of power at play, the reality of this

institutionalized transportation infrastructure meant that, for the Caribbean islands during this period, connectedness “describes the island condition better than isolation” (Hay, 2006, p. 23). The new archipelagic service fitted into a web of steam and sail travel. Passengers continued to travel to Europe by sail, and this remained the cheaper alternative. In the 1870s, Barbadians complaining of the steep RMSPC fares stressed that “a cheap, and comfortable passage from [Barbados] to England [could] be secured in a sailing vessel, bound for London, or Bristol” (*The Chronicle*, 1 July 1871). For shorter journeys, while the steamers moved back and forth and offered “inter-colonial” passages, various “small craft” also plied between the islands (*St George’s Chronicle and Grenada Gazette*, 27 May 1871). Furthermore “passage boats” carried individuals between coastal towns on islands such as Grenada (Grenada Letter book 1841-1848, 4 May 1847). By the 1880s, steamers were a significant presence, even for inter-island passages. A correspondent wrote to the *Barbados Herald* in 1884, lamenting of the inter-colonial trade that “Every body knows how hard it is for the small vessels to make a living now that more than half our trade has been taken away by the steamers” (*The Barbados Herald*, 3 March 1884). While the maritime seascape was complex, the focus of this paper is specifically on the RMSPC’s steamship network and its revisions between the fledgling years of steam and the later period of firmly established steamship networks in the 1880s.

Figure 1: The RMSPC’s May 1843 route scheme; routes 3 and 8 not shown. Source: NMM RMS 36/2. Southampton subsequently became the British port of departure and arrival for RMSPC steamers. (Reproduced with the kind permission of Digital Wisdom.)



- 1843 route number 1
- 1843 route number 2
- - - 1843 route number 4
- · · 1843 route number 5
- · · 1843 route number 6
- 1843 route number 7
- 1843 route number 9
- - - 1843 route number 10
- - - 1843 route number 11

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Figure 2: The RMSPC's May 1843 route scheme, showing routes 3 and 8.
Source: NMM RMS 36/2. (Reproduced with the kind permission of Digital Wisdom.)



Networked approaches have enabled “new imperial” scholars to examine the multiple projects and sites of empire, bringing metropolitan and colonial spaces into a single frame of analysis (Cooper & Stoler, 1997; Lambert & Lester, 2006, pp. 8–9; Wilson, 2004). While there is a wealth of recent work examining imperial trajectories and social as well as business networks (see, for example, Laidlaw, 2005; Ward, 2009), “it remains to develop a more detailed and materially ‘grounded’ understanding of the intricately fabricated imperial networks that actually linked colony and metropole together” (Lester, 2002, p. 30). In this paper, the RMSPC is considered as such a materialized network, specifically one that provided transportation and communication links in British imperial and extra-imperial spaces. Transport infrastructures such as steamship services were “complex fabrication[s]”, characterized by improvisation and relationality, and always in process (Ballantyne, 2002, p. 15). Furthermore, steamship networks, like imperial webs, comprised both vertical relations and crucial “horizontal linkages between colonies” (ibid.).

My examination of the RMSPC draws on Ballantyne's ideas, as I am concerned to foreground the ways in which the steamship network was made and re-made. Thus, the focus will be particularly upon the service as negotiated through archipelagic relations. In particular, I am concerned with horizontal and vertical mobilities. As Keith Hannam, Mimi Sheller and John Urry (2006, pp. 3-4) underscore, mobilities studies entail analysis of the relationship between power, movement, stasis, and representations of mobility. The steamship service, designed to promote elite travel and imperial communication, and characterized by intended and unintended forms of movement, lends itself to analysis within a mobilities framework. While research on mobilities has thus far focused more on contemporary than earlier periods, as Tim Cresswell (2010, p. 29) suggests, "new mobilities" cannot be analysed without historical sensitivity. It must be recognized that, hitherto, mobilities theory has been used predominantly to interrogate Western experiences. Steamship services (and particularly large government-funded lines such as the RMSPC) enabled institutionalized patterns of movement shaped by imperial and colonial power relations. A theoretical intersection with island studies helps to illuminate such power dynamics coursing through place. After all, as Russell King (2009, p. 62) notes, islands "feature prominently in ... new 'mobilityscapes'". Like mobilities studies, island studies is "an inter-, or even trans-, disciplinary focus of critical inquiry and scholarship" (Baldacchino, 2006, p. 9). What happens, then, if we explore the "conceptual scheme" of mobilities not only in an historical context, but also in relation to islands (*ibid.*)?

Elaine Stratford et al. (2011, p. 118) argue that islands should be examined in the context of "the very archipelagos they may occupy or constitute". Although Philip Conkling asserts that islanders "across different archipelagoes share many of the characteristics imposed by the boundedness and isolation of island life", my focus on mobilities within the archipelago rather foregrounds the relations and connections negotiated by islanders. Furthermore, Stratford et al. (2011, p. 114) highlight the need to explore "connection and entanglement *between and among* islands". As they indicate, this task involves probing archipelagic experiences in relation to networks and, amongst other things, mobilities. Through such a perspective, I seek to move towards a materialized maritime "historiography that considers chains of islands in fluctuating relationship to their surrounding seas, islands, and continents" (DeLoughrey 2001, p. 23). This choice is made particularly because dealing with archipelagic imaginaries should not overshadow everyday materialized movements between islands.

I focus this examination of the RMSPC's historical geographies upon the workings of the steamship network within the archipelago. Foregrounding "island to island" relations (Stratford et al., 2011, p. 124), I argue that the Company mapped a particular set of routes and relations within the region, and that this mapping was formally and informally revised by local interests and archipelagic negotiations. The steamship network, conceived in line with British imperial priorities, was revised and altered in response to colonial realities on the islands.

Colonial adaptations

As a relatively expensive means of travel, the RMSPC's service was initially an elite option. To illustrate, in 1848, a single aft cabin from St Thomas, Martinique, Havana or Grenada to Britain cost £50. Alternatively a berth in a double fore cabin was £35 (UCL RMSP 20). Accordingly, "imperial careerists" made frequent use of the service (Lambert and Lester 2006: 2). For instance, in the spring of 1845, Dr Parry, Bishop of Barbados, used the RMSPC's service to facilitate his travel between the islands (*The Chronicle*, 24 May 1845). In 1862,

Henry Walsh, stipendiary magistrate of Jamaica, travelled with his wife on the RMSPC's *La Plata* to Southampton (TNA CO137/369 May 1862). Attorney General Tyrell Shevrington travelled first class to England on board the RMS *Conway* in 1864 (Grenada Letter Book 1853 to 1868, 24 June 1864). In the earlier period, elite individuals often made longer transatlantic journeys on the Company's steamers, along with letters, newspapers, despatches and high value objects such as spices, muslin and specie. Deck passengers meanwhile (described by the Company as "troops, common sailors, labourers, and others not superior to those classes of society" (NMM RMS 38/1, 134), could be numerous on shorter inter-colonial trips.

Yet, even given the elite framework within which the steamship service was established, it proved subject to adaptation in accordance with colonial imperatives. Although conceived within British imperial visions of improved communications and bolstered commerce, the network was tweaked in line with colonial realities and interest groups in the Caribbean. On a micro-scale, this adjustment was evident from Admiralty Agent complaints about the performance of the service in the archipelago, which failed to map perfectly onto the steamship schedule as imagined from British shores. The Admiralty Agents on board vessels held specific responsibilities for the delivery of the mail, and these figures often expressed their frustrations in letters to the Company. The tensions emerging from the workings of the service might be understood as a kind of negotiation between imperial visions and island realities. Thus Admiralty Agent Bellairs wrote from the RMS *Clyde* in Barbados in 1845 to complain of the "shameful neglect of the Towns" at night and the lack of light to guide the landing of the mail on shore. Bellairs noted that on one occasion he had been "forced to leave the mails on board a brig at Nevis" because he could "receive no assistance from the shore" (CO 318/164 14 March 1845). The norm of bustling Post Offices was another source of frustration to Bellairs, who lamented that "some of the postmasters also allow the post office to be quite full of persons during the receipt and delivery of the mails", which he noted slowed down the completion of his duties (CO 318/164 14 March 1845). Bellairs' complaints at the lack of deference shown to the service off shore and on land were, in a sense, a confrontation between an agent of the steamship service and the "the realness of island lives" (Hay, 2006, p. 30). This entirely mundane example of the difficulties of integrating the steamship service into existing coastal and postal facilities in Nevis and Barbados indicates, on a small scale, that the imperial network came into negotiation with colonial norms.

A second kind of adjustment required of the steamship service within the archipelago involved the judges' circuit around the islands. While the circulation of mail was the original priority of the service, the British Government subsequently ordered that RMSPC steamers be used to support the workings of the law by facilitating the mobility of judges between Barbados, Grenada, St Vincent, and St Lucia (UCL RMSP 21, 10 December 1859). The Company received £265 for a full circuit or smaller sums for part journeys (for instance £80 from Barbados to Tobago). This arrangement constituted another kind of adaptation of the steamship network as conceived from British shores. Thus, on 14 April 1862, the RMS *Wye* transported judges directly from Barbados to St Lucia, and returned from St Lucia to Barbados on 18 April, a journey for which the Company was entitled to charge £120 (UCL RMSP 21, 10 December 1859). This trip represents a minor adaptation of the network, whereby the Company came under pressure to alter its pricing structure in line with these irregular journeys. Then, in August 1861, Governor Hincks wrote to the Company's Superintendent at St Thomas to request that the fare be lowered when the steamers were conveying judges on circuit, "for passengers availing of the opportunity of travelling which the steamer affords" (UCL RMSP

21, 31 January 1862). While the Company resisted lowering prices below the rates charged on ordinary steamship passages, it made a slight adjustment and offered reduced fares for those travelling with an order of passage from the Governor (ibid.). The small trajectories that the RMSPC's steamers came to perform for judges on circuit are a second example of the network being negotiated in the context of the Caribbean archipelago.

A third kind of adaptation of the network can be seen by reference to one of the Company's branch route. When the RMSPC commenced full operations in 1842, from the perspective of the RMSPC's managers and directors, the Company's webbed network seemed extensive. When asking the Treasury for additional financial support in 1845, the RMSC pointed out that its scheme comprised twenty-five ports of call in the eastern Atlantic, compared to the British and North American steamship Company's four (NMM RMS 7/2, 4 March 1845). Yet as comprehensive as operations appeared from London, the limitations of the network were only too apparent to those just beyond the steamers' reach. In the same year that the Company stressed the expansive nature of its operations in correspondence with the Treasury, the Admiralty received a letter that took an antithetical view. In September 1845, petitioners from Carriacou, a small island north of Grenada, wrote to the Admiralty to express the frustration of living just beyond the limits of the steamship service. As Lambert and Lester (2006, p. 12) note, imperial webs were usually superimposed on existing pre-colonial or earlier imperial networks; in this case, the RMSPC's arrangement replaced the mail packets that had included Carriacou. Stratford et al. (2011, p. 116) argue how "most islands invariably embrace other islands within their spatial ambits: smaller islands off their coasts; larger islands (mainlands?) to which they belong; and internal islands (of interest, conflict or other assemblages for instance)". In this case, the mainland-island relationship between Grenada and Carriacou was problematized by the residents of Carriacou. Travelling from Grenada to St Vincent, the steamer on the "Northern Islands route" passed within a mile of Carriacou, but only landed the Carriacou mail on arrival at St Vincent, several islands up the archipelagic chain (Figure 3).

Figure 3: The RMSPC's 1843 Northern Islands route. Source: NMM RMS 36/3. (Reproduced with the kind permission of Digital Wisdom.)



Writing to the Admiralty to request a modification to this service, petitioners from Carriacou noted that they had been incorporated in the earlier packet network. Humbly acknowledging that full inclusion might be “incompatible” with the RMSPC’s arrangements, the residents of Carriacou pragmatically suggested a flexible measure that would allow access to the postal network by deploying their own resources. They proposed that the steamer, when passing Carriacou at 11am, might drop the Carriacou mail bag into a waiting boat, which they would finance and furnish (NMM RMS 6/4, 19 January 1846, enclosure dated 2 September 1845).¹ The British Admiralty consulted the RMSPC on the proposal, and the Company acquiesced. As a result, the Admiralty appointed a postmaster at Carriacou, and informed the RMSPC in June 1846 that a separate mail for that island could thenceforth be deposited in the waiting boat as the steamer passed from Grenada to St Vincent (NMM RMS 6/4, 30 June 1846). In this way, Carriacou gained an *ad hoc* and partial form of inclusion in the postal element of the network. The petition successfully altered the RMSPC’s network for two reasons: it involved but “trifling delay” to existing arrangements; and it burdened the Company with no additional expense (NMM RMS 7/2, 22 January 1846). Although this adaptation fundamentally maintained the shape of the network, since the steamers’ route was not altered, the transfer of correspondence to the Carriacou mail boat nevertheless affected the rhythm of journeys, as the steamer slowed between Grenada and St Vincent to deposit the post. The archipelagic steamship network was adapted, in this case, to the needs of a small island on the margins of an inter-colonial branch line. Thus the steamship network’s “constellation of mobility” (Cresswell, 2010, p. 26) was altered in terms of rhythm, and Carriacou exchanged a subordinate postal relationship with St Vincent for a direct postal service similar to that enjoyed by Grenada, St Vincent, and other ports-of-call.

RMSPC’s services were mapped out in a scheme of routes comprising a neat set of timetables. The working realities of the service, however, had to be negotiated against the facilities and realities at the Company’s ports of call. The service was adapted to accommodate inter-colonial mobility, and in rare cases the network was altered in response to interest group petitions. Thus, colonial priorities were brought to bear on the steamship network, and ensured that the network was repeatedly revised within the Caribbean archipelago.

Network hubs

Revisions and adaptations of the RMSPC’s service are equally apparent from a focus on the network’s hubs. These too were negotiated by processes and interest groups stemming from the colonies. A first example is Panama, which became an unofficial network hub as a result of the RMSPC’s co-operation with the Pacific Steam Navigation Company (PSNC). Although the Panama region was included in the timetable from the outset of operations in 1842, the 1843 revised scheme of routes only provided one schooner each month from Kingston to Santa Martha, Cartagena, and Chagres (NMM RMS 36/2, May 1843, Table No. VI; NMM RMS 36/3 May 1843 timetable, Table No. X; TNA FO 289/3, 13 February 1842). A few years later, however, this arrangement was adapted when the RMSPC’s service was synchronized with the mail contract operations of the PSNC. In 1845, the RMSPC sent Colonial Superintendent Captain Liot to report on the advantages of a trans-isthmian route. The joint report that resulted

¹ In the event that the boat was not present on schedule to meet the steamer, or if weather prevented the exchange, the steamer would proceed to St Vincent as usual to deliver the mail. See NMM RMS 7/2, 22 January 1846.

from this trip led to the establishment of a Royal Mail overland route in 1846, which consisted of travel by canoe and mule (Bushell, 1939, p. 87). In the same year, the PSNC began to carry the British mail from Panama, connecting with the RMSPC's service to Colon. Panama was constructed as a nodal point between steamship networks as a result of the establishment of local infrastructure, and the synchronization of systems (NMM RMS 6/5). This development enabled the circulation of capital between the Pacific and the Atlantic oceans, as the Californian gold rush heightened demand for steamship services (including services from the RMSPC and PSNC, and from American companies such as the United States Mail Steamship Company). Infrastructural elements were constructed and financially supported by steamship companies such as the RMSPC, and the connectivity of places such as Panama in turn were impacted upon by the steamship network itself.

Thus, in the era of Panama Canal construction, individuals migrating for labour purposes altered the balance in the RMSPC's webbed network through intensive use of the route. Archipelagic relations changed the intensity of mobility on this particular steamship route, and altered the "experience of mobility" (Cresswell, 2010), as migrant workers were numerically dominant and transformed the ship socio-culturally by their presence. The canal had two phases of construction, the first of which ran from 1880 to 1889 (Davidson & Brooke, 2006, p. 315). Robert Woolward, an RMSPC officer, reflected on a voyage on the RMS *Don* in October 1881, and wrote that on board his vessel were "the first of the people who went out to commence work on the Panama Canal" (Woolward, 1894, pp. 264–5). Woolward suggested that on "more than one occasion [he had] landed over a thousand people at Colon", explaining how "Negroes flocked there from all parts of the West Indies, attracted by the promise of high wages". Socio-economic imperatives within the archipelago dictated heavy use on this branch through the steamship network.

In his trademark and problematic style, James A. Froude (1888, p. 155) made a similar remark of the use of RMSPC steamers by migrant workers on this route. Recounting an inter-colonial journey from Barbados to Jamaica, Vera Cruz and Darien canal route, Froude noted:

This wonderful enterprise of M Lesseps has set moving the loose negro population of the Antilles and Jamaica ... The vessel which called for us at Dominica was crowded with them, and we picked up more as we went on. Their average stay is for a year. At the end of a year, half of them have gone to the other world. Half go home, made easy for life with money enough to buy a few acres of land and 'live happy ever after'.

Froude travelled at a period of intense Isthmian travel during the 1880s. Between January and October 1885, for example, 11,867 people travelled from Jamaica to Colon, and 10,572 were recorded as having returned. Woolward (1894, pp. 264–5) noted that principal amongst migrants to Panama were Jamaicans, many of whom died, but, he insisted, "much the larger number returned with sufficient money to enable them to become small settlers on a bit of land of their own". Whereas Woolward indicates that Jamaicans enjoyed favourable prospects in the Isthmus during the 1880s, Colonial Office records indicate that Jamaicans were equally likely to experience hardship, finding themselves susceptible to disease as well as violence. As Risa Faussette (2007, p. 169) stresses:

Although West Indian workers were commonly viewed as shiftless, ignorant, and unreliable tropical laborers, they performed the lowest paid and most dangerous assignments on the isthmian canal project. Subject as they were to exhaustion, disease, explosions, and landslides, an estimated 15,000 West Indians perished in Panama during the canal construction era.

The temporary but markedly intense use of this particular route constituted a kind of revision to the steamship service, originally conceived to bolster elite mobilities. This revision, driven by labourers' determination to improve their circumstances by migrating for higher wages, underscores the idea that archipelagic relations shaped the steamship service.

The intensification of mobilities on the Colon route, while apparent on deck, where such migrant passengers travelled, also took place in less visible ways. During this period, notably, stevedores frequently joined RMSPC ships in Barbados. In some cases, these individuals remained on board vessels as stowaways in an attempt to reach Colon, where they hoped to seek work. T. A. Bushell narrates one RMSPC captain's attempts to tackle this problem on the RMS *Thames* in the early twentieth century. Bushell explained that to keep track of such stowaways once they were found on board, Captain Gillard took to painting the stowaways' hair red. Bushell wrote:

Each man on detection had his woolly head plentifully daubed with a quick-drying red composition, normally used to paint the underwater parts of the ship. ... When they arrived at Trinidad, the inhabitants were surprised to see a stream of red-headed negroes sorrowfully descending the accommodation ladder and entering the lighters for transport ashore. Unfortunately, the painting operation had not been completed when the ship dropped anchor, and a clever negro lawyer in Trinidad persuaded some of the victims to summon the Captain for assault (Bushell, 1939, pp. 197–8).

In this instance, routes through the archipelago became dominated by the migratory imperatives of island residents, both licit and illicit. These socio-economic realities within the Caribbean archipelago transformed use of the steamship network, altering the intensity and rhythms of mobility between its "horizontal linkages" (Ballantyne, 2002, p. 15). In turn, inter-colonial routes, originally conceived of as less important to the Company than transatlantic crossings, became logistically and financially significant to the RMSPC.

Even the steamship's official hub was negotiated and revised. In this case, the archipelagic logistics of this maritime concern clashed with British imperial rhetoric and priorities. St Thomas, a strategically positioned free port within the archipelago, was appointed the Company's Caribbean hub from the outset of operations in the 1840s. The intensity of shipping at St Thomas culminated in the mid-nineteenth century and the port enjoyed a strong transit trade (Goebel, 1997, p. 46). While St Thomas was conveniently located, and cheap in terms of shipping and labour costs (particularly prior to Danish abolition), from the early years, individuals voiced concerns that the hub of this British maritime Company ought to be situated within the British Empire.

In June 1868, the West India Committee received a memorial drawn up by seven men at Demerara and backed by the colony's legislature. These individuals had formed a committee to recommend St Lucia as the central transfer station, instead of St Thomas. Yet members of the influential West India Committee disagreed with the petitioners, and wrote to the British

Treasury in July 1868 to state that they were “unanimous in thinking that the best central depot for the West India Packets would be Barbados” (ICS M915 Reel 16, WIC letter book and memoranda 26th October 1866 - 4th April 1870, WIC 10 July 1868). The West India Committee devoted considerable energy to lobbying for the RMSPC’s Caribbean hub to be changed to Barbados; this was during a period of economic “uncertainty” for the island, with sugar production modestly rising while sugar prices remained flat (Beckles, 2006, p. 195). However the British Treasury, obliged to extend the RMSPC’s contract if it demanded a change in transfer station, cited expense as a compelling reason to retain St Thomas, and declared this place “satisfactory so far as the convenience of the postal service [was] concerned” (ICS M915 Reel 16, WIC letter book and memoranda 26th October 1866 – 4th April 1870, letter from the Treasury, received 23 January 1869).² Expense was a key factor that stabilized the network’s routes, and ensured that the Company privileged a pragmatic hub within the archipelago over a symbolically fitting British colony. In this instance, the RMSPC prioritized an archipelagic logic (for financial reasons) over a British imperial rationale.

Eventually, the RMSPC shifted toward a British imperial mapping of routes across the Caribbean, as the Company transferred the central hub from St Thomas to Barbados in the late 1860s, but this was almost two decades into operations. Even when the change eventually came, it was gradual. The March 1872 timetable promoted Barbados to a partial position of strategic importance, with the transatlantic steamer departing on the second day of each month calling at St Thomas, and the second steamer of the month, departing from Southampton on the seventeenth day, calling at Barbados (NMM RMS 36/4, Table of routes commencing from Southampton January 1864, corrected to 18th March, 1872). Barbados finally became the primary central transfer station by the scheme of routes of July 1885 (NMM RMS 36/4, Table of routes commencing from Southampton 2nd July 1885). While Barbados gained strategic and symbolic importance within the network, the new scheme was also partly promoted in terms of island to island connections, as the route via Barbados would offer “earlier and more direct communication for Demerara and Trinidad” (*Barbados Herald*, 17 November 1884). In this case, the network was eventually altered in a gradual and piecemeal fashion in response to interest groups in the British Caribbean colony, especially Barbados, but the longstanding reliance on St Thomas as a hub underlines the importance of examining nineteenth-century maritime relations in the context of the regional archipelagos as well as empires.

Nodal points and hubs in the steamship network demonstrate the ways in which the service was revised, in practice, in a Caribbean context. The Colon route became more significant than the Company had ever intended, with the flow of deck passengers proving numerically and financially significant to revenue in the latter decades of the nineteenth century. Migrant deck passengers used the service in ways other than those intended or even imagined from British shores in the late 1830s. Even in terms of the network’s official hub, a kind of tension emerged between the practicalities of designating St Thomas as the hub in the Caribbean archipelago, and the rhetoric surrounding this British imperial project. This tension was only gradually resolved over a number of decades. The steamship service was re-made then, unofficially and officially within the Caribbean.

² By the terms of the British Government’s 1868 contract with RMSPC, the Government could request that the central transfer station be changed from St Thomas to another port. If the request caused the RMSPC additional capital outlay, the Postmaster General had to grant a contract extension as compensation for this added expense.

Conclusion

I have examined in this paper how, historically, those negotiating a transportation network within the Caribbean archipelago were forced to respond to “connection and entanglement *between and among* islands” (Stratford et al., 2011, p. 124). I have sought to indicate that the RMSPC’s service was a network of communications altered and shaped by negotiations and revisions in the Caribbean archipelago. While a focus on mobilities foregrounds materialized ties between places, the archipelago was a crucial spatial context for these mobilities. If the steamship network was a network in process (Ballantyne, 2002), part of this process was one of resolution between maritime links and archipelagic relations. I have suggested that a theoretical intersection between mobilities and island studies may help to foreground materialized movements within the archipelago. It seems timely to extend the debate in this direction, in order to further develop a nuanced understanding of the significance of mobilities in colonial and postcolonial contexts.

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