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New Brunswick Shipbuilding and Irish Shipping: The Commissioning of the Londonderry, 1838

INTRODUCTION

THE NAPOLEONIC WARS STIMULATED THE BRITISH trade in timber with the British North American colonies and for much of the next half century the trans-Atlantic economy was characterized by the eastward flow of timber and the westward flow of immigrants and finished goods. It was a classic staple economy, controlled by local merchant elites in the colonies and metropolitan interests in the homeland.¹ Shipbuilding developed as a distinctive spinoff. From 1809 to 1855 the tonnage of ships built in New Brunswick grew steadily and the port of Saint John seized an ever increasing share of the British imperial market. New Brunswick managed to establish itself as the principal colony for shipbuilding and from 1839 until 1855 Saint John was the largest shipbuilding centre in the whole of North America.² From the mid-1860s, however, the industry entered a period of decline and by 1887 was largely moribund, rendered obsolete by the introduction of iron hulls and steam engines, not to mention the drastic decline in suitable timber.³

Despite the size of the New Brunswick shipbuilding industry, its net contribution to the economy, even during its heyday, was slight. Because the industry remained structurally conservative and generated only a limited range of additional forward linked industries, the economic multiplier effects were somewhat modest. Although it did account for about a fifth of the local domestic product of Saint John, it was responsible for only three per cent of the gross value of goods produced in the colony, a small amount considering the

- 1 For a discussion of the role of the merchant elites in the New Brunswick timber trade see Graeme Wynn, *Timber Colony* (Toronto, 1980) and T.W. Acheson, *Saint John: the making of a colonial urban community* (Toronto, 1985).
- 2 Richard Rice, "The Wrights of Saint John: a study of shipbuilding and shipowning in the Maritimes, 1839-55", in David S. MacMillan, ed., *Canadian Business History, Selected Studies, 1497-1971* (Toronto, 1972), pp. 317-37 and "Measuring British Dominance of Shipbuilding in the Maritimes, 1787-1890", in Keith Matthews and Gerald Panting, eds., *Ships and shipbuilding in the North Atlantic Region* (Saint John, 1978), pp. 111-58.
- 3 Eric Sager and his colleagues in the Maritime History Group at Memorial University of Newfoundland are challenging the traditional notion that the collapse of the shipping industry is a simple consequence of the transition to steam power and iron hulls. See Eric W. Sager and Gerry Panting, "Staple Economies and the Rise and Decline of the Shipping Industry in Atlantic Canada, 1820-1914", in Lewis R. Fischer and Gerald E. Panting, *Change and Adaptation in Maritime History: The North Atlantic Fleets in the Nineteenth Century* (Saint John, 1985), pp. 1-45.

proportion it consumed of the timber colony's wood production.⁴ Sailcloth, chain-cable, and other finished goods required to outfit the ships were generally imported directly from Britain, or else the ships were exported with a minimum of equipment and completed upon arrival in the British Isles. By and large, only the wood was fashioned in New Brunswick.

The documents which follow are letters from John Cooke in Derry, Ireland, instructing both his Saint John agent and his captain about what he requires in a sailing vessel for the trans-Atlantic trade in timber and immigrants. They are abstracted from the J. and J. Cooke shipping company papers in the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland in Belfast. These papers, which consist primarily of letter books, shipping, and passenger lists, contain a wealth of information about the trade between the port of Derry in north-western Ireland and the ports of Saint John, Quebec City, Philadelphia and New Orleans. The bulk of the collection pertains to the 1830s and 1840s, when the Cooke firm was the largest shipper in Derry and one of the largest in the Irish trade. Although letters in the collection refer in varying detail to the disposal of finished goods, the chartering of ships and the acquisition of timber for sale in Ireland and Britain, those which follow deal only with the commissioning of the barque *Londonderry* in 1838.

Derry, located inland at the head of Lough Foyle, served an extensive hinterland in north-west Ulster and throughout much of the 18th century it had been the primary port from which tens of thousands of Irish emigrants headed for colonial America aboard ships which had brought American flax seed to Ulster farmers. In the early 19th century the flax seed cargoes were replaced by timber and the links in trans-Atlantic trade and emigration moved northwards to entwine Derry with Saint John and Quebec City. By 1833 there were seven shipowners and a fleet of 15 ships in Derry engaged in lively trade with British North American trading partners. Over the next few years the trade came increasingly to be concentrated in the hands of the companies of William McCorkell and Joseph Young.⁵ The latter was the childless uncle of John and Joseph Cooke, and in 1837 he passed the running of the company over to his two nephews. The 300 ton barque, *Londonderry*, was to be the first new addition to the inherited fleet of the Cooke brothers and represented a major effort to expand the family business.

On 20 April 1838, John Cooke conveyed his instructions for the new vessel to Samuel Thompson, his business agent in Saint John. These instructions for a custom-built vessel constitute an unusual record. The majority of ships produced in the British North American colonies were standardized products built for a speculative market. They would be dispatched across the Atlantic with a cargo of timber and under the command of a master instructed to dispose

4 Acheson, *Saint John*, pp. 14-5.

5 Sholto Cooke, *The Maiden City and the Western Ocean* (Belfast, n.d.), p. 62.

of both cargo and ship upon arrival in Britain.⁶ Yet a number of vessels were also built according to contract.⁷ Indeed, the *Londonderry* was built in Saint John to specifications laid down by a Derry owner, who probably had never been to New Brunswick. Cooke depended on the good offices of his agent Samuel Thompson and the ship's intended captain, Samuel Hatrick, a master with the firm since 1832, who was sent out to Saint John to oversee the building. Cooke's own knowledge of the trade and a good business sense meant that few details were left to chance. The agents had clear instructions regarding the ship's capacity, form and even its style and decoration. The draught of the vessel, no more than 14 feet when fully loaded, was determined by the shallow nature of the Foyle estuary. This limitation may well have been a factor in Cooke's decision to have the ship built in Saint John, for the New Brunswick softwood was known to have a lower specific gravity than the imported hardwood used for ship construction in Britain. Consequently, the New Brunswick ships drew less water.⁸ Cooke, however, miscalculated, and when the ship reached Ireland on her maiden voyage there was more than ample clearance between its keel and the bed of the Foyle. In addition to the size and capacity of his vessel, Cooke was also adamant that nothing but the best timbers should be used in construction and in his instructions concerning the quality of timber to be selected for the homeward cargo the young shipowner displayed an impressive knowledge of his merchandise. Although Cunningham and Mabee have asserted that "no exhortations for the proper seasoning of lumber may be found and no owners' complaints against the use of green timber" can be found in the early British North American shipbuilding records,⁹ along the Strand at Derry there was at least one owner aware of these problems. Cooke insisted that his ship not be threatened by a tendency to premature rot that he detected among New Brunswick-built vessels.

Cooke also insisted on economy. When he wrote to Thompson, New Brunswick shipbuilding had been in a periodic slump since 1835 and so Cooke was able to demand a very competitive price of £5-10-0 per ton.¹⁰ Since squared timber was valued at about 20-25 shillings per ton, Cooke was expecting a total cost about three times the price of materials, a relatively small addition to value.

6 R.S. Craig, "British Shipping and British North American Shipbuilding in the early Nineteenth Century, with special reference to Prince Edward Island", in H.E.S. Fisher, ed., *The South West and the Sea* (Exeter, 1968), pp. 21-44.

7 The earliest extant contract for such a ship is the *Jane*, a 300 ton vessel built in 1830 in Prince Edward Island. Basil Greenhill and Ann Giffard, *Westcountrymen in Prince Edward's Isle* (Newton Abott, 1967), p. 95.

8 Craig, *British Shipping*, p. 27.

9 R.J. Cunningham and K.R. Mabee, *Tall ships and Master Mariners* (St. John's, 1985), p. 154.

10 Newly built Canadian ships ordinarily changed hands at between 7 and 12 per ton. Rice, *Wrights*, p. 320.

Cooke also desired to have the vessel outfitted to minimal specifications; final outfitting was to be completed in Britain or Ireland. Initially he even hoped to have the sails manufactured at home, since the labour costs of sailmaking in Ireland were half of those in New Brunswick, but upon the subsequent technical advice of his agent, he shipped out the new canvas for fabrication in New Brunswick. He insisted, however, upon having the cordage, anchors and chains sent out directly from Britain and the only locally fabricated components he permitted were the wooden blocks used in the rigging. He also sent instructions that three and a half tons of surplus cordage be sold in Saint John at a price 50 per cent higher than he had paid for it in Greenock. Cooke's letters expose an intrinsic colonial relationship in which goods with a high value-added component were shipped from the homeland rather than manufactured in the colonies. This procedure minimized the flow of cash across the Atlantic. In the case of the *Londonderry*, at least five-eighths and perhaps as much as three quarters of the cost of the ship were to be provided by the sale in New Brunswick of a cargo of bacon and calf skins which had been shipped out from Ireland via another vessel, the *Susan*. The remainder of the cost was raised as credit at home but was to be recovered from the sale of the cargo of timber which the newly built vessel was to bring back to Ireland. Thompson also collected in New Brunswick money for pre-paid passages for emigrants' relatives who would come out on the *Londonderry's* first passenger voyage from Ireland.¹¹ By these means the company was able to keep capital costs and interest charges to a minimum and by such financial dealings the flow of capital into the colonies was kept low.

The *Londonderry* was completed by December 1838, a construction period of less than eight months. In mid-February 1839 it cleared Saint John with 300 tons of wood and it served in the Cooke fleet for 12 years until 1851 when it was sold to Shearer and Co. of Androssan for service in the Irish Sea.¹²

CECIL J. HOUSTON and WILLIAM J. SMYTH

11 On 20 October 1838 Samuel Thompson placed the following advertisement in *The New Brunswick Courier*: "Persons residing in this country, who are desirous of having any of their friends brought out from Londonderry next spring, have now an opportunity of arranging with the subscriber on accommodating terms".

12 Cooke, *Maiden City*, p. 97.

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The Letters of John Cooke, Derry, regarding the
building of his barque, Londonderry

To Samuel Thompson, shipping agent, Saint John, 20 April 1838.

My principal reason for writing you now is that I have come to the determination of having a new ship built in your place this ensuing summer, and I wish you when you receive this letter to make an engagement with some faithful honest builder, who you can put confidence in, that will fulfill his engagement to build her. You are to contract to have the vessel finished, complete and left afloat at St. Johns. I will send the sails, rigging anchors, cables, etc out to you in the course of the summer. The description of vessel I want is one of about 300 tons registered (old measure) to be very flat built, with a good entrance and run, not to draw more, when loaded, than 14 feet water (or if less so much the better) which will answer our river, but on no account to draw more than 14 feet; to be 7 feet between decks and as she will be mostly in the timber trade and not coppered I think iron fastening may do, unless in some part of the vessel where copper is considered better and iron will not do.

I wish to have her a good strong substantial vessel, and at the same time would wish to go to no unnecessary expense that can be avoided. I have no doubts that a vessel of this description can be built on a 13 or 14 feet draft of water, when a vessel of 600 tons can be built on a 15 or 16 feet draft.

There is one thing I wish to tell you of that there is some of the St. John's ships quite rotten in 4 or 5 years. There is others quite fresh in ten years. I think this is owing to the time of year the wood is cut down and is put in them. If the sap is in the wood it soon begins to rot. This is one thing there must be a sharp look out kept on and in fact there must be no bad unsound timber allowed to go in on any account nor yellow pine unless in the decks. The timber for the top timber and for all the inside timber is Harmatac; the floorings might be birch. On this point I need not say much as you and builder will know best. With respect to the price of the vessel I expect you will be able to contract for her at £5 10s. Od. old measurement currency complete for the hull, masts, spars and boats delivered to you afloat at St. Johns. This was the price the Edward Reid cost and I am told that they have been bought last year for £5. I know you will make the best bargain for me you can and need not say more on this head.

With respect to the payment I am sending out bacon with which the passengers per Susan will amount to upwards of £800. Mr. Cock's bill and the calf skins will be upwards of £200. More currency money; these together will make upwards of £1,000. The remainder of the money you can draw on me for at 90 days sight payment in London or Derry whichever of the two places you can sell the bill for

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to the most advantage and if you can manage it I would wish that you should draw as little on me as possible till the ship is launched and then you may draw on me for what will pay him out. I wish you to arrange this part as well as you can for me which will make it more convenient for me.

As for your commission for managing the business for me the Quebec houses charge 2 1/2% on the builder's contract and they superintend the building of the ship or gets some competent person to do so at their expense. I am not quite sure whether I may send out a captain to superintend the building of her or not, but if I do he will go out in the Susan. Captain Hatrick is at present out of a situation and probably I may send him out. When I have to pay him, 1 1/2% would then be as much as I would afford to pay you which would still bring the commission about 2 1/2%. If Captain Hatrick goes out, it will take a great deal of the trouble off you and I consider that 1 1/2% this way is as good as 2 1/2% the other way. I leave the thing to yourself however.

I have mentioned to you what I considered necessary at present and have only to say let no time be lost in getting on with the vessel as all her sails rigging etc will be sent out in the course of the summer. I will set the sail makers to work shortly and everything will be out in proper time with you. Depending therefore on you that you will make the best arrangements for my interest that you can and that you will let no time be lost in having the work commenced....

PS. She is to be barque rigged and to be a good carrying ship to her tonnage. I would prefer her with bright sides same as the States vessels and the good sightly vessel and whoever builds her will require to give you security for the delivery of the ship safe afloat at St. Johns as she might be burned on the stocks or some other accident might happen which causes it to be absolutely necessary you should have security for the fulfilment of the contract. I have now given you my idea of the kind of vessel I require and I give you a discretionary power to act as you may consider best for me during the execution of the work. Take care to have the vessel built so as she will be here next winter in time for passengers next spring.

To Captain S. Hatrick, Londonderry, Ireland, 12 May 1838

On your arrival at St. John you will please deliver the letter you have for Mr Thompson to him. I wrote him by the Liverpool and New York packets of the 24th April and 1 May giving him a description of the vessel I require and I wish you when you arrive at St. Johns to get on with the work as quickly as possible.

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I wish the vessel to be as near 300 tons register as possible (old measurement) and as Mr Thompson has the particulars I need not mention them here. I may just say that I wish her to be about the above size, not to draw more when loaded than 14 feet, to be 7 feet high between decks, with a good hold, so as she will carry a good cargo to her tonnage, have a plush flush deck and figure head. You may rig her as a barque or ship whichever of the two you prefer.

You will require to pay particular attention to the building of her, that no bad or unsound timber be put in, or timber with the sapwood on it and also to the caulking of the vessel, that it be done in a careful manner....

To Samuel Thompson, shipping agent, Saint John, 12 May 1838

This letter will be handed you by Captain Hatrick who goes out for the purpose of superintending the building of the vessel that I wrote you about on the 20th April by the New York packets from Liverpool which letter hope you duly received. If no arrangement has been entered into when you receive this please make the arrangements as soon as possible so as there may be no time lost. The description of vessel I require I sent you in my letter of 20 April. It is therefore no use in saying more about it here.

I am not aware of what may be the terms of payment you will make with the builder but I would wish that the time should be as liberal as possible and as I mentioned before that you can make as good an arrangement on this point as you can.

When you receive the bacon and pork which I expect will be in one week after you receive this you will I consider have value in your hands to the extent of £1100 to £1200 if the goods sell as well as they done last year. The goods you can dispose of in such a way as you can meet the builder's demands on you for his instalments as they become due and whenever they are exhausted you can draw on me at 90 days for the balance to pay him out or make it in two bills which might be more convenient. As soon as you make arrangements you can write me the particulars....

PS. I wish the vessel to have a flush deck and a figure head. Captain Hatrick thinks there is no use in making the sails to he writes me from St. Johns, the vessel's beam etc so as the sails can be made accordingly. The rigging and blocks may as well be getting ready immediately here. The enclosed order on Messers Doherty please present and get the amount of and place to my credit.

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To Samuel Thompson, shipping agent, Saint John, 22 May 1838

I send you by the Prudence 45 bales bacon 50 barrels pork and 9 2/3 passengers, the particulars of which you have annexed. The freight of these you would please pay per bill of lading and debit me with the same. These goods I hope will arrive to a good market and I wish you to sell them so as you meet the builder's demands on you for his instalments (as mentioned in my letter to Captain Hatrick who went by the Susan at which vessel went to sea from Moville on 15 May). Having wrote you so fully in my former letters I have nothing further to add and wishing passengers a good safe to hand.

PS. Mr Young desires me to give you his best respects.

To Samuel Thompson, shipping agent, Saint John, 17 September 1838

...I have made a contract in Derry for the rigging, and for the blocks they may be made in St John's. I think the best plan will be to get an estimate for making all complete including dead eyes, harts cutting, sheave holds in masts and finding the hold of what may be required in his department for a lump sum....

Would the builders have charged you any more if the ship had been 2 feet deeper in the hold, as when they build by the old measurement the depth of hold is not taken into consideration in computing the tonnage and she would have carried a larger cargo.

There not having been any sailing vessel that I know of called The Londonderry I will call this vessel that name for the sake of the old city.

You may engage as many passengers as you can for her as I intend that she will return direct back again to St John's with passengers and you will try to get a little higher passage money this winter if possible as the passage money has been higher here than with you these past two years. However if you have opposition you must do the best you can, only the new vessel ought to have the preference.

PS. I think it better to have the ship insured at New York for the homeward voyage as they ask for very high premiums on this side from timber ports at that season of the year that she will be coming home. Cover both ship and cargo to the full value and please have it done by some respectable house in New York and let me know when it is effected. Should you not be able to get the insurance done in New York be sure to write me by 2 vessels one month before the ship sails

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from St John so as I may get it done here. Please acknowledge receipt of my letter and I will do the same with yours so we may know if any of them miscarry. (Per Royal William steamer from Liverpool 20 September).

To Captain S. Hatrick, Saint John, 18 September 1838

Your letters per Erne and Prudence came safe to hand. I hope by the time you receive this that the ship will be pretty well on. The rigging, canvass, anchors and chains will be ready to leave about the middle of next month which will I consider be time enough for you. The sails I intended to have made here but as you and Mr. Thompson consider it best to send the canvass out I will do so. The difference in making is considerable 4d. per yard with you and only 2d. per yard here.... The small chains order will be sent out with the best of the materials.

I would again impress on you the necessity of your keeping a sharp look out when they commence caulking the ship so as it will be done in a very careful manner and that no tunnel holes are left open as has been the case in some ships nor would I allow any plank to go in that has got the smallest quantity of sap wood on it as the sap soon goes to decay and consequently will not hold the caulking.

The mahogany wheel and the figure head goes on in St John's and I wish to have a full figure of a lady for a head the same as was on the brig Bowes that formerly came to Derry for passengers and which you, I suppose, will remember.... I have given Mr. Thompson orders for the homeward cargo. ...timber is the article I require most, it to be had on fair terms and I request particularly of you that you will not take a log of coarse knotty timber on board on any account as course timber is scarcely fit for anything. I wish you to select it yourself out of the ponds log by log as there is trouble and loss in getting clear of that inferior stuff here. Let your deck load be all first quality of deals with some oars and spars I have ordered. Choose the spars as straight as possible and take none that are lying over in the pond as the bark comes off them then. Get them fresh and new from the woods. The oars not to be less than 18 and 20 feet in length. Endeavour to get as many long deals as you can for me, the cleaner and newer in the colour the better.

I wish to have all the masts and yards of the ship painted white and not black. I would also wish to have the stern neat and well finished off something like the Ulster.... I wrote Mr. Thompson yesterday by the Royal William steamer for New York which letter, he will, I expect, receive long before you receive this. I am not sure whether I may write you again or not before you leave St. John's

which causes me to be more particular in this of informing you what I want done....

I send you two papers by this vessel. You can write me now and again how you are getting on. Should the figurehead I speak of other side cost more than £15 although I expect it will not cost so much, but if it should cost more you may then put on a female bust head.

To Samuel Thompson, shipping agent, Saint John, 30 October 1838

The present serves to inform you that the chains and anchors also all the small chains are shipped from Liverpool in a vessel called The Amanda, Captain Simpson. I have desired Henry Wood & Co. the people who I purchased them from to send you a bill of lading and copy of the invoice that you ordered to show the Custom House people in your place.

The Cordage canvass Buttrope etc is shipped from Greenock by the Pollock belonging to Pollock, Gilmour & Co. I had made a contract for the rigging with the rope works here in the latter end of August and after waiting a considerable time found they could not proceed until the arrival of a vessel they expected with hemp. I was therefore obliged to take the order from them and give it to the Gourick Ropework Company of Greenock. Had it not been for this disappointment the cordage etc would have been with you sooner. I have desired Gourik & Co to send you copy of invoice and bill of lading same as is with the chains.

I find the sailmaker with you has ordered about one-half more canvass than is required which I did not intend sending only as you have him bound to take the excess at 50% advance I have sent it and in order to give you an idea of what quantity will be required I annex you on other side the quantity it took for to make a suit of sails for the Edward Reid which vessel is rather larger than this one consequently ought not to require quite so much and in order to prevent any dispute with him it might be as well to have the thing settled previous to his commencing them. I do not want to have any sails made at present but what is necessary to fetch the ship home and when you have the invoice you can easy tell the cost of the canvass in St John adding freight, insurance, etc. to it.

By the time you receive this letter the ship I suppose will be nearly ready for launching. I would as soon however she would not be launched until the 1 January as she would then come under the head of vessels launched in 1839 and not in 1838 which might enable me to get her kept on the first class one year longer but it may be January before she is ready to launch.

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I would much like you could procure me 300 tons of good timber on moderate terms as I want it much here. I mentioned in my last not to go above 20s. 0d. I find now that I cannot well want it. You may therefore go as far as 23s. 0d. for 15 inch timber and if not to be had at this rate send all deals.

PS I did not send any colours of bunting to make them as it was not worthwhile. You will please get a burgee made with the vessel's name Londonderry on it in black letters upon a white ground with a red border as I find they are the best also any other colours that may be required. The Pollock and Amanda have both sailed I believe and cannot be far off when this comes to hand. Should it so happen that any of these vessels would be lost on the passage out you will have to get what you want in St John I suppose as there would not be time to replace them from here.

To Samuel Thompson, shipping agent, Saint John, 11 December 1838

There will be a surplus of 3 1/2 tons too much cordage sent out from Greenock because of the length that coils of rope were made. This surplus is to be disposed of.... The price of Cordage is now 50s. 0d. per cwt. hemp having gone up to an exceedingly high price since my shipment was made. This you will take into consideration when you are disposing of it. You ought to get 75s. 0d. per cwt. for it in St John's.

To Thomas Wallace,¹³ Saint John merchant, then at Liverpool, 5 February 1839

I think if they had given the ship two feet more hold it would have been better as I consider she would have been very little over the mark 14 feetwater; timber loaded she would have carried more; the same number of men would have worked her and the builders charge I suppose would have been the same.

¹³ Samuel Thompson died on 21 December 1838 and some of his responsibilities appear to have fallen to Thomas Wallace, a merchant on the South Market Wharf of Saint John. Thompson's widow took over part of her late husband's business and together with J. Wallace (perhaps Mrs. Thomas Wallace) formed a partnership engaged in the emigration trade of Saint John. See items related to these events in *The New Brunswick Courier*, 22 December 1838, 19 January, 15 June 1839.

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To Thomas Wallace, Saint John merchant, then at London, 4 March 1839

Have you a surveyor for Lloyds at St John's, as I would like to have the vessel surveyed and put on the books when she arrives and there is none here at present. The registry office is somewhere in London. Probably you will have occasion to go past the place and if you would do me the kindness in calling and saying that I wish the vessel to be put on the books and that there is no surveyor here and if a certificate on oath by any respectable shipwright here would do in order to have her registered.

To Messrs. Bennett & Brown, brokers, Glasgow, 2 April 1839

I have a new ship called The Londonderry burthen 299 tons just arrived on her first voyage from St Johns where she was built under the particular inspection of the present master (Samuel Hatrick) for myself and is a remarkably strong well built ship. There being no surveyor at this port for Lloyds, or for your underwriters I cannot send you any survey.

She will be sailing for St John's about the middle of this month and will feel obliged by your getting her insured in your place for 12 months commencing the 10th April if to be done at not exceeding 10%. Should you not be able to get this done, have insured effected out and home to St John's if to be done at 5s. 0d. I prefer the other if possible to be done amount £2,500 vessel valued at £3,000. Insure also £1300 per said vessel to St John's on 10 tons bacon and 200 barrels pork premium 25s. 0d. per cent. The premiums will be paid when required. Please let me know as soon as possible respecting this.

PS. If you cannot succeed in getting it done at 10% for 1% more I would not object.

To Thomas Wallace, merchant, Saint John, 15 April 1839

With respect to the Londonderry she appears a handsome well finished vessel. I have no doubt will wear well.
