

The *Baltic* Goes to Washington: Lobbying for a Congressional Steamship Subsidy, 1852

Edward W. Sloan

Trans-oceanic transportation by steam-powered vessels was still in its infancy as the nineteenth century reached its mid-point. As recently as 1838 many had still believed that a high-seas voyage under steam was limited at best to short distances. For a vessel to cross the Atlantic entirely under steam power was simply inconceivable. Then everything changed. The late April 1838 arrival in New York of not one but two British steamers — *Sirius* and *Great Western* — confounded the sceptics and ushered in a new age of transatlantic commerce and navigation.¹ Yet steam at sea in that era was primitive, hazardous, unpredictable and expensive, and would remain so for several decades. The "maritime revolution in steam" was in fact a long and troublesome process.² Moreover, steam power — such a remarkable innovation in the maritime world — like so many other major technological transformations, generated a formidable series of controversies in the realm of politics as well as in business and technology.³

The first successful transatlantic steam-powered liner operation was the British and North American Royal Steam Packet Company, or Cunard Line as it was called in recognition of its major promoter, the Canadian-born Samuel Cunard. The Cunard enterprise was successful, in part, because its initial competitors all failed by the end of the 1840s. By that time the Cunard Line was approaching its tenth year of reliable if unexciting service between Liverpool and the North American ports of Halifax and Boston. The line also was successful because from the outset, as a contracted carrier of oceanic mails, it received a large and continuing cash subsidy from the British Crown. This stipend, and the competitive advantage it afforded, had been instrumental in discouraging and defeating Cunard's early rivals.⁴

Thus, by the mid-1840s there was general agreement on both sides of the Atlantic that oceanic steamship services could not be mounted without comparable financial support. As many shipping operators and government officials argued, such backing would have to depend on government guarantees. Accordingly, the US Congress, after considerable argument over the propriety of public support of private enterprise, in 1845 authorized a programme of subsidies for oceanic steamships.⁵ Of the several recipients, by far the most ambitious and widely-heralded was a man who proposed to compete with Cunard directly by building and operating a fleet of steamships to provide liner service between New York and Liverpool. This man was Edward Knight Collins.

The Northern Mariner/Le Marin du nord, V, No. 1 (January 1995), 19-32.

Collins' steamship enterprise received formal government approval in 1847.⁶ Yet it was not until 1850, after some federal financial and legal support, that the New York and Liverpool United States Steamship Company, or "Collins Line," finally was able to begin transatlantic operations.⁷ Within two years of its initial oceanic voyage the line was in financial trouble. The annual federal subsidy of \$385,000, which its organizers and major investors first believed was sufficient to assure profitability, now appeared seriously inadequate.⁸ Collins and his backers, in viewing the profitable and expanding operations of their transatlantic competitor, believed there was both need and justification for a substantial increase in the subsidy, especially in light of additional support Cunard was receiving. His annual subsidy had been considerably more than doubled — from £55,000 (\$275,000) to £145,000 (\$725,000) between 1839 and 1846 - and by 1852 it had been increased to £173,340 (\$866,700).⁹ To make matters worse, by 1852 Cunard was offering at least twice as many sailings to North America as Collins. This was especially the case during the unprofitable winter season when the Collins Line ran only one steamer per month across the Atlantic, while Cunard — now operating from New York as well as Boston — maintained a weekly schedule by providing alternate bi-weekly services between both New York and Boston and its British terminus at Liverpool.¹⁰

As a consequence, in early January 1852 the Collins Line, with the support of both the Postmaster-General and the Secretary of the Navy, petitioned Congress for a major increase in subsidy.¹¹ Notwithstanding the popularity of its huge, fast and luxurious vessels, Collins had been losing money steadily. Shareholders had not received a cent in dividends and the stock was selling far below its initial offering price. And now the US government was asking the line to increase the frequency of its winter sailings simply to match the current Cunard schedule between New York and Liverpool. In these circumstances, Edward Collins maintained, the subsidy would have to be more than doubled just to break even. He therefore sought an increase to \$858,000 per year.¹²

Opposition to his request was immediate, vocal, and widespread. Many in both houses of Congress had always opposed on principle the idea of subsidy, whether to Collins or anyone else. They now argued that by subsidizing the Collins Line the government was stifling competition while promoting a monopoly — and "monopoly" was a particularly sensitive issue of the era.¹³ Many also saw Collins and his line as symbols of the unwelcome dominance of New York City's commercial and financial interests over other sections of the nation. Such business interests, Collins' opponents argued, profited at the expense of equally deserving business operations, maritime and otherwise, throughout the US. In addition, sectional tensions and rivalries, already at a high pitch over slavery, greatly contributed to opposition to the subsidy and would increase over the next few years. But in 1852 the focus was on Collins' perceived failure to conduct his business in a prudent, efficient, economical manner. Collins, many argued, had failed to demonstrate any ability beyond persuading his fellow Americans — whether private investors or government officials — to give him more and more money. By his own admission, his line had been unprofitable from the start; why, his opponents indignantly asked, pour good money after bad?

Faced with such resistance, Collins responded in his typically direct, vigorous and heavy-handed, if calculating, manner. The Line's *Baltic* was the current transatlantic speed record holder and fastest of his four nearly-identical steamships. Collins recognized the potential benefit of sending this celebrated craft to Washington for a dramatic and tangible demonstration of what the government was subsidizing and why it was so necessary to increase the grant. Since the *Baltic* was currently in New York undergoing repairs during the winter, it was available; Collins quickly made plans for its departure for Washington.

The *Baltic*, along with its sisterships *Atlantic*, *Pacific*, and *Arctic*, comprised a fleet of the largest, fastest and most elegant ocean-going steamships in the world. Costing the then-astronomic sum of nearly \$800,000 to build and prepare for service, the *Baltic* was a wooden-hulled sidewheeler of 2723 registered tons, or approximately 5200 tons displacement. Its hull measured 282 feet in length and forty-five feet in breadth, with a thirty-two-foot deep hold. Distinctive in appearance because of a nearly straight stem, no bowsprit, and an unusually high freeboard, *Baltic* towered over most other vessels. Powered by two side-lever, simple-expansion reciprocating steam engines operating at seventeen pounds pressure and generating 2000 horsepower, the ship could sustain a speed of 12.5 knots, albeit while burning an appalling amount of coal in the process.

Capable of carrying over 250 passengers and a crew of more than 150 in peak season, the *Baltic* had set a new transatlantic record in 1851, steaming between Liverpool and New York in nine days and eighteen hours, thus becoming the first vessel to make the westbound passage in under ten days. Furnished in a style that at least equalled the most sumptuous hotel ashore, and providing a cuisine and level of service unmatched afloat, the elegant *Baltic* was an impressive expression of American maritime prowess. As a tangible symbol of America's challenge to British oceanic hegemony, *Baltic* was irresistible and compelling — absolutely ideal, Collins believed, to persuade Congress and the Fillmore administration that an increase in subsidy was warranted.¹⁴

Exceptionally severe winter conditions delayed *Baltic's* departure for over a month; not until late February was it able to leave for the nation's capitol. Captain Comstock, the commander, was disabled by inflammatory rheumatism, so Collins directed a young naval officer, Lieutenant Gustavus Vasa Fox, to take charge for the passage.¹⁵ For several months, as part of the government's requirement of a naval presence on mail steamers, Fox had been assigned to the *Baltic* as first officer for a number of unremarkable regular transatlantic runs. During that period he kept a perfunctory journal that he confined essentially to recording the vessel's performance. Now, however, he was able to describe a decidedly non-routine experience.¹⁶

Fox had noted in late January that the *Baltic* was preparing to go to Washington, but that the nation's capitol was inaccessible because the Potomac was clogged with ice. For that matter, New York harbour also was dotted with cakes of ice as the city suffered through temperatures of six degrees below zero. As a consequence, Fox journeyed overland to Washington on 24 January, crossing the solidly-frozen Susquehanna River by sleigh before arriving at Willard's Hotel, where he was "employed lending a hand to the success of further appropriations to aid the 'Collins Steamers.'"¹⁷

For nearly a month the ice persisted; finally, on 25 February the *Baltic*, with a carefully selected assortment of dignitaries on board, departed New York in fair weather and steamed swiftly southward.¹⁸ Making the 245 miles from the New York Lightship to Cape Henry in nineteen hours (an average speed of 12.9 miles an hour, or 11.2 knots), the *Baltic* entered the Potomac early in the afternoon of 26 February, steamed upriver, and five hours later anchored off Maryland Point.¹⁹

The remainder of the *Baltic's* approach to Washington was brief but troublesome. First, its anchor became hooked under its forefoot so that it could not be hoisted; Fox backed the vessel to clear the anchor but shortly afterward ran the steamer aground on a mudspit running out from Liverpool Point. Discovering that a sufficient depth of water lay just ahead, Fox lightened the vessel by blowing out part of the boiler water. He then moved passengers and crew to the bow "and gave her a full head of steam," whereupon the *Baltic* obligingly slid off the obstruction and made its way to Alexandria, where it was received "with guns and cheers." Here it anchored, being unable to go any further upstream because of its extraordinarily deep draft.²⁰

While *Baltic* spent the weekend preparing for the official receptions on Monday and Tuesday, it was surrounded by small boats with hundreds of people clamouring to come aboard. Members of Congress, however, were not uniformly anxious to pay a visit. On Monday, 1 March, a "warm debate" followed the motion of William H. Seward (Whig, New York) that the Senate adjourn until Wednesday so his colleagues could join him at a reception on the *Baltic*, in light of the "question of great interest to commerce involved." Some Democrats and Whigs supported Seward in asserting the national significance of the vessel's presence and the issue of subsidy increase that had brought it to the capitol. Others of both parties disagreed, some vehemently. Senator Brodhead, a Pennsylvania Democrat, pointed out that there were other business interests, such as iron and cotton, that demanded protection but were unable to make a comparable display of their achievements. In any case, he said, the *Baltic* had come to Washington simply "for the purpose of making an exhibition and of giving an entertainment, for the purpose of getting money from the Treasury."²¹

More direct in his opposition, Senator Solon Borland (Democrat, Arkansas) insisted that the American people would be surprised that anyone would have the temerity to stage an exhibition intended to put pressure on Congress. No external pressure, he said, should control or influence the Senate. The honour and interest of the Congress, and especially the Senate, required that they turn their backs with scorn and contempt upon any such exhibition. He added that if Congress desired information, "engaging in a festival" — a "jollification on board the *Baltic*" — was not a suitable way of obtaining it. But he feared that "these persons are acting upon a saying we sometimes hear throughout the country — a proposition which is an insult in itself — that the nearest way to the hearts and understanding of Senators is down their throats."²²

The *New York Times*, acknowledging the magnitude of the planned reception, could only agree:

The gallant owners of our unrivaled ocean steamers...know that the road to Congressional sympathy lies up the Potomac and through the stomach. If broiled oysters and champagne, profusely administered, will not induce a liberal vote, the case is hopeless...The country was not wholly unprepared for the somewhat oratorical clamor raised against this method of laying siege to Congressional virtue, on the floor of the Senate. Distinguished members of that fastidious body have already shown that they are insensible to the ordinary impulses of humanity...What better should be expected of them, than that they should suspect bribery in wines, and scent corruption in untainted ham! For all of this, Mr. COLLINS will not be cast down, or at all disquieted. He knows that sudden anger induces hunger; and that the sharp cravings of appetite can chop logic better than any Senator in the Halls of Congress. Besieged garrisons are often starved and taken; but, for a siege of Congress, Heidsick is better than howitzers, and a rapid discharge of canvas-back duck will do more than the biggest bombs that ever burst.

As it transpired, Senator Seward's motion for a recess prevailed, but barely so. Indicative of the level of controversy produced by both the presence of the *Baltic* and the issue that had brought it to Washington was the Senate vote on adjournment so that they could visit Collins' steamship: twenty-one yeas, nineteen nays.²³

The official visits were everything that Edward Collins desired — or perhaps considerably more than he preferred. Monday's affair was relatively decorous, with a large number of military officers and other gentlemen, together with a few ladies, brought on board. After a thorough tour of the steamship during the morning and a suitably elegant lunch, Fox noted in his journal, "the company departed and soon afterwards the ship was crowded with people from Alexandria."²⁴

The following day brought a quite different experience. This was the climax of the *Baltic's* visit, when official Washington was to congregate and Edward Collins was to show off his vessel to best advantage. Lieutenant Fox describes what transpired:

At noon the President, Mr. Fillmore, several members of his cabinet; Foreign Ministers, and others, came on board. Saluted the Chief with 21 guns...Shortly after the Pres[iden]ts arrival, steamers commenced bringing people to the ship, till it was estimated that 3000 were on board. Every *part was filled. Nothing could be seen to advantage and at Lunch a horde of strong armed uninvited guests took complete possession. Confusion, disorder and want of room must have disgusted many visitors. Few speeches or toasting took place. It was near dark before the crowd left, many of them taking bottles of wine with them. The Pres[iden]t left early, half famished.*²⁵

Newspaper reporters listed an impressive array of dignitaries on the steamer *Selden*, which brought President Fillmore for a six-mile trip downriver to *Baltic*. Passengers included four members of his Cabinet; foreign ministers from Spain, Russia, Great Britain, France, and Brazil; General Winfield Scott "(in citizen's dress)"; the mayors of Washington and Baltimore, together with their respective council members; and "a large number of ladies." Encouraged by bright sunshine and a "balmy" temperature, the city soon disgorged a throng of fashionably-dressed ladies and gentlemen, brought in carriages to the gaily-decorated wharves and from there by steamer to the *Baltic*. By two o'clock in the afternoon over 2000 people were on board, with more on their way.²⁶

The official tour of the Collins liner was gratifyingly impressive, just as Collins had intended; but his guests were mostly overawed, as one correspondent stated, by "the luxuriantly spread dinner tables, including solids and liquids of every variety - the latter, especially, in the most extravagant profusion." Not surprisingly, decorum soon gave way to ravenous appetites and "the greatest indulgence in libations in honor of the *Baltic*. ...and many were the salutes fired by inoffensive corks, in all directions."²⁷ It soon became impossible to have any formal speeches or even toasts, and as the throng of visitors grew larger and more dense it became increasingly raucous. "The crowd," reported one correspondent, "was entirely too great for comfort" because of a great "irruption of the mob of uninvited guests."²⁸ In frustration and disgust many of the invited guests - including the President of the United States - began to depart.

Most of the accounts were uncritically effusive in their praise of the *Baltic*, E.K. Collins, and the reception.²⁹ Some observers, however, believed that the affair had become so uncontrollable that instead of aiding the cause it had damaged the Collins Line's prospects - and that Collins, himself, was largely to blame. As one participant concluded:

The political waters have been troubled; disappointment and angry feelings have been aroused, from sheer bungling and bad management, which admitted, indiscriminately, without tickets of invitation, crowds of loafers and rowdies, who revelled in oceans of good liquor and choice wines, while many members of Congress were crowded and jostled out of all patience, and some, with ladies, were left standing on the wharf, watching for a chance to get on board, until the chances were all gone...[L]iquors and wines...flowed too freely, and besides spoiling many beautiful ladies' dresses and complexions, caused a reeling and staggering among members which brought them into close contact with the mobocracy, and left them cursing and dissatisfied, with headaches next day...The thing might have been anticipated. The extravagant finish and furniture of the *Baltic* - the expensive entertainment, the enormous outlay, the evident extravagance and bad management, will have a blighting effect upon their golden prospects...The nationality of the line was lost the moment the vessel departed from her line of running, and

entered the Potomac. She was then in shoal water, and meandering her way through strange currents and a crooked channel. All was lost.³⁰

Edward Knight Collins had intended that the *Baltic* remain on the Potomac for two weeks, but shortly after its arrival word came that it had to return to New York.³¹ Its sistership, *Atlantic*, had broken a paddleshaft, and with no other adequate steamers available for transatlantic duty the *Baltic* had to serve as a replacement. Captain Comstock came from New York to take his steamship back, but he barely got to sea when he fell ill and had to relinquish command; once again, Collins turned to Lieutenant Fox, who took the steamer back to New York at top speed. Over one stretch, Fox recorded, it made sixty-three miles in four hours fifteen minutes — a rate of 14.8 miles per hour. Unfortunately, such exhilarating speed would not persist; upon entering New York Bay the *Baltic* encountered a blinding snowstorm and had to anchor for twenty-one hours within a few miles of the dock, "for want of a proper system of buoyage" in the port, as her exasperated passengers formally noted in a published advertisement.³²

Now all that remained was for Congress to finish its deliberations and act on the increase — but Congress was in no mood to hurry. Consideration of the annual deficiency bill, onto which the subsidy had been tacked as an amendment, continued for weeks and involved wrangling over specific facts as well as general issues of public policy.³³ Collins once again busied himself with promoting the cause of his line.³⁴ His supporters in Congress focused on the theme of patriotic duty in response to a British threat. Certainly, in his initial petition Collins had defined the issue on this basis: "Relying on the national objects in view, and the national character of the enterprise," he asserted, "we have not been content to regard it as a commercial speculation, but have considered ourselves embarked in a contest of maritime skill and superiority."³⁵

Such congressional opponents as Whig Senator Benjamin Wade of Ohio responded to this patriotic appeal by attempting to trivialize the Collins Line's request as only "calculated to gratify national vanity, by beating John Bull in a boat-race across the Atlantic," and by objecting to the "splendid and showy" Collins Line steamers as "the most useless and worthless things for which this Government pays." It was absurd, Wade added, to conceive of their use as warships, since the Collins' steamships were "fitted up with expensive mirrors, which would grace the palace of a prince, and all the other furniture is on a similar scale." Indeed, he decided, "they are better calculated for eastern seraglios than for ships of war."³⁶ Collins' supporters, led by Seward, responded by ringing the changes of national pride, national power, and national honour. As Seward put it, this was a "contest for the ultimate empire of the ocean...the struggle for the freedom of commerce and the command of the seas." For Seward this was tantamount to war, a conflict forced on the US by Great Britain through Cunard's threat to control the Atlantic: "The field of battle," he said, "is chosen, not by us, but by the enemy; it is not a provincial contest, for provincial objects, but is a national one. We must meet our adversary on that field, not elsewhere, and we must meet him, or surrender the whole nation's cause without a blow."³⁷

Representative William H. Polk of Tennessee, whose brother, James K. Polk, had been President only a few years before, then sought to deflect criticism of Collins' business acumen by declaiming, with patriotic fervour:

May I stand upon the floor of the American Congress and find men who are willing to measure our greatness by the circumference of a dollar — a dollar, sir! — measure American prosperity, American greatness, by a round dollar — and thus pander to British interests, to bow the pliant knee, and say to the power...that fought us upon sea and upon land in 1812 — that has been jealous of our prosperity and greatness ever since, "Good mother, won't you carry our mails for us?" Why, sir, I scorn, I despise this anti-American feeling and sentiment.³⁸

In supporting the Collins Line, Joseph R. Chandler, a Whig from Pennsylvania, found it necessary to object to the political favouritism shown to New York interests in this connection, as he began by stating that he was "especially opposed to the patronage which this Government has weakly, and I think wickedly, bestowed upon the city of New York, in disregard, and I may say, to the injury, of other cities of the Union." Yet Congressman Chandler saw an overriding issue, as he went on to deny that the rivalry between Collins and Cunard was simply a "contest between man and man" or just a business matter between international competitors. "The affair, sir," he insisted, "is not the rude contest of commerce — it is the artful enterprise of a nation, that, having eaten the life out of India, Ireland, and Portugal, comes now with vampire appetite to fasten upon our limbs and glut itself upon the life-blood of our commerce." Warning his Congressional colleagues of the British threat, whereby "step by step that great, that artful and specious Government is gaining upon our country," Chandler appealed "to national pride...to that American feeling which manifests its gratification at every result that exhibits American superiority." And such superiority, he insisted, was essential for Americans to regain on the high seas. "The 'boat race,'" Chandler explained, was "of national consequence" because it was part of a vastly greater struggle between Great Britain and the United States for world superiority; thus "No matter on what the stake is set for national contest, it is of national import that victory should be achieved."³⁹

The opposition to Collins and the subsidy was led by Democratic Senators Hunter of Virginia and Borland of Arkansas. Hunter was the statistician, Borland the rhetorician. Together they presented a formidable case against subsidy in general and Collins in particular. Hunter called on expert testimony from a young and rising star in American naval engineering, Benjamin Isherwood, whose calculations appeared to refute the scanty information on operating expenses provided by Collins.⁴⁰ Borland, whose physical stamina was unpredictable, was forced to present his views over several days, but the total effect was undeniably a high point of mid-century political declamation and invective.

In explaining why from the outset he had been suspicious of the Collins petition, Senator Borland emphasized his "instinctive aversion to all monopolies, to class legislation

in every form...and to all partnerships between the Government and speculators in patriotism." At this point, and in view of the extensive lobbying efforts of Collins, Borland argued that Collins' demands on Congress constituted a sort of moral blackmail, that Collins and his supporters "are gifted with a still more remarkable shrewdness of reliance upon the facility with which Congress yields to demands boldly made and pertinaciously pressed upon us." The very magnitude of Collins' lobbying and political pressure, Borland cried in exasperation, appeared to exempt his steamship line from the "usual treatment" and to give it a wholly unwarranted preference. As for the *Baltic's* celebrated appearance, Borland continued, at least *he* (unlike most of his colleagues) had resisted visiting the steamship. "I was not led into that temptation," he said, with a virtuoso display of classical mythology and metaphor, as he referred to

'the beautiful *Baltic*,' when she came a-wooing here... — another *Venus*, from the froth of the sea, as she rose upon the vision of admiring thousands, and stood revealed in all the nude voluptuousness of her charms... — leading in her train *Bacchus*, with his cups, to intoxicate the brain; and perhaps, too, the boy-god son of the zoned *Cyprian*, bearing, with arch and graceful impudence, his heart-compelling quiver. And we all know that *Orpheus* was there, as he certainly was here, with his negromantic lyre, strung to the modern 'higher law,' and played upon by steam, who successfully *moved* even this [great] Senate to adjourn.

Who knew how many "profane gods and goddesses...were there to minister at the institution of *Saturnalia* for this capital of the New World?" To be sure, he continued, he was not to be swayed "by the concord of sweet sounds," nor (as the "humblest" man in the Senate) was he as yet more fit than his colleagues for "treason, stratagem, and spoils." Thus at least *he* could proclaim, "'Get thee behind me, Satan!'" and successfully resist such temptation — yet to no avail; just as the Spartans at Thermopylae, he and his fellow opponents of the Collins Line "are surrounded — we are beaten!"

So how had this deplorable result come about? The real reason for all the special consideration of Collins' petition, Senator Borland explained, was "the vast amount of *capital* invested in this enterprise." It was not just the \$3,000,000 or so initially invested in the line but also "a fund and a force of mental shrewdness, boldness, pertinacity, and want of delicacy" which he, at least, had never seen before. By now the Collins Line controlled "the *Executive* counsels of this Government" just as it similarly controlled the Washington press:

and, remorseless still, like some huge and hungry Boa Constrictor, it is fast winding its tortuous and fearful folds about the body and limbs of this Congress, until our strong ribs are giving way, and our very heart seems ready to be squeezed out, in the ghastly form of appropriations, which, if this pressure be not removed, will pour the life-blood of the

National Treasury into the capacious and rapacious maws of bankers and speculators.⁴¹

Several days later, Senator Borland recovered sufficiently to continue his attacks on "Collins & Co." by accusing them of posing as "ill-used individuals — suffering patriots, and threatened victims, as it were, in their country's cause." Of course, he added, this was not incongruous with their earlier "high pretensions" for the simple reason that "mendacity and self-abasement form no unnatural sequel to high pretensions, and magnificent display." Regrettably, he concluded, "Mr. Collins's tongue seems to have been gifted with the spell of 'open sesame' to the heart of Congress and the doors of the Treasury; and surely he has not been idle in its use."⁴²

Senator Borland's apprehensions were borne out; discussion of the subsidy persisted until a compromise was hammered out, under which Congress after 31 December 1854 would be free to terminate the increase upon giving Collins six month's notice. The key vote occurred in the Senate on 19 May when, voting as a Committee of the Whole, it barely passed the bill by a twenty-three to twenty-one vote. On 28 May the formal vote was twenty-nine to nineteen; on 12 July the House approved the bill by an eighty-four to seventy-three vote; and on 21 July President Fillmore signed it into law.⁴³

However heavy-handed, the lobbying had succeeded. Much was due to the *Baltic's* presence; much also was due to more conventional methods of persuasion. During the latter stages of the lobbying effort, Jacob Snider, Jr., a Philadelphia merchant who had borrowed \$500 from William Bowen, one of Collins' backers, sent Bowen a list of items that Snider had supplied "to *certain parties* important to our cause at W. City:"

2 doz. Wild Cherry Brandy	\$24
1 " Extra Sparkling Moselle	18
2500 Segars - \$20 & \$56	76
Brandies & Scotch ale	35.75
	\$153.75

Bowen accepted this sum in partial payment of the loan. He then wrote James Brown, the senior partner of Brown Brothers and Company, President of the Collins Line and its largest single investor, that Snider had been "of very *essential* service." In fact, Bowen stated, had Snider not "taken hold as he did at the time" the lobbying would have failed. Snider also had arranged for the line's most popular commander, the personable James West of the *Atlantic*, to go to Washington to play a key role in the final stages of the effort. Indeed, Bowen said, West's presence in Washington and Snider's energetic efforts at the last minute had made all the difference between success and failure.⁴⁴

Collins had his subsidy increase, but at a price. From now on his line came under attack each time the annual appropriations bill came before Congress.⁴⁵ After two of the four original steamships were lost at sea (*Arctic* in September 1854; *Pacific* early in

1856), the line's prospects worsened rapidly. In August 1857, shortly before the onset of a brief but severe depression, Congress finally gave the required six-month notice of a subsidy reduction to the pre-1852 amount of \$385,000 yearly for only twenty trips.⁴⁶ By the next February the Collins Line had suspended operations, and on 1 April 1858, in the midst of bankruptcy proceedings, its remaining vessels were sold at auction.

The failure of the Collins Line, after years of intense publicity and public celebration, had long-lasting repercussions. Not only the Collins Line but also the idea of maritime subsidy was now discredited in American politics, and for decades the former was the primary example in opposing efforts to revive the latter.⁴⁷ Post-Civil War attempts to renew a program of maritime subsidy were briefly successful but ultimately scandal-ridden, thus reinforcing the antipathies that the Collins Line had first evoked. Political lobbying might continue to flourish in other areas of American business activity, yet the Collins Line subsidy experience — and thus the steamship career of Edward Knight Collins — would persist as a black mark in the history of American oceanic enterprise.

NOTES

* Edward W. Sloan is Charles H. Northam Professor of History at Trinity College in Hartford, CT. He is currently working on a biography of Edward Knight Collins.

1. Some maintain that the 1833 voyage from Pictou, NS to Gravesend of the Canadian-built and navigated steamer *Royal William* marked the first official crossing of the Atlantic under steam. However, much of its crossing was under both steam and sail, and frequently (when the boilers had to be cleaned of mineral deposits) it was powered only by wind. Accordingly, it joins the earlier American steamship *Savannah* as an important precursor to the steamers that made the crossing under steam alone. On the disputed claims as to which ship was the first to cross the Atlantic under steam power, see David B. Tyler, *Steam Conquers the Atlantic* (New York, 1939), 3, 16, and especially 25-27. For a more detailed discussion of the *Royal William*, see H. Philip Spratt, *Transatlantic Paddle Steamers* (2nd ed., Glasgow, 1967), 8 and especially 26-29.

2. Edward W. Sloan, "The Evolution of Seagoing Steam: Stages in a Maritime Revolution," *Log of Mystic Seaport*, XLIII (Winter 1992), 87-98; Sloan, "The Machine at Sea: Early Transatlantic Travel," in Benjamin W. Labaree (ed.), *The Atlantic World of Robert G. Albion* (Middletown, CT, 1975), 110-143, 228-234.

3. The most authoritative accounts of early transatlantic steam transportation, especially from the American perspective, are Tyler, *Steam Conquers the Atlantic* and Cedric Ridgely-Nevitt, *American Steamships on the Atlantic* (Newark, DE, 1981). See also John Malcolm Brinnin, *The Sway of the Grand Saloon: A Social History of the North Atlantic* (New York, 1971), parts I and II.

4. Francis E. Hyde, *Cunard and the North Atlantic, 1840-1973: A History of Shipping and Financial Management* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ, 1975), chapters 1 and 2, *passim*.

5. *US Statutes at Large*, 28 Cong., 2 Sess., vol. 5, chap. 69, 749.

6. *Ibid.*, 29 Cong., 2 Sess., vol. 9, chap. 62, 187.

7. The inaugural sailing of Collins' *Atlantic* in late April 1850 was nearly two years after the 1 May 1849 starting date specified in the line's 1847 contract with the government. The delay resulted from a number of factors, including the unprecedented size of machinery castings, problems in obtaining materials, and Navy Department requirements that the liners be convertible into warships. See Edward W. Sloan, "Collins versus Cunard: The Realities of a North Atlantic Steamship Rivalry,"

- 1850-1858," *International Journal of Maritime History*, IV, No. 1 (June 1992), 83-100; Ralph Whitney, "The Unlucky Collins Line," *American Heritage*, VIII (February 1957), 48-53, 100-102; Tyler, *Steam Conquers the Atlantic*, chapters IX-XII. For a general discussion of Collins' maritime career, see E.W. Sloan, "Private Enterprise and Mixed Enterprise: The Changing Fortunes of Edward Knight Collins, American Maritime Entrepreneur," in Neil C. Churchill, *et al.* (eds.), *Frontiers of Entrepreneurship Research, 1990* (Babson Park, MA, 1991), 603-617.
8. Sloan, "Collins versus Cunard," 91. For early optimistic expressions about financial prospects even without subsidies, see New York Historical Society (NYHS), Brown Brothers and Company (BBC), Collins Line file (CL), James Brown to William Brown, 14 May 1847, and especially James Brown to George Brown, 8 January 1848.
9. Hyde, *Cunard and the North Atlantic*, 35, notes that the annual subsidy to the Cunard Line was even greater — £188,040 — when the subsidy for branch services was included.
10. *Ibid.*, 34-38; Tyler, *Steam Conquers the Atlantic*, 83-84, 86, 89, 97-98, 159-164; Robert G. Albion, *The Rise of New York Port, 1815-1860* (New York, 1939), 321-328.
11. "Memorial of E.K. Collins and His Associates, Praying Additional Facilities in Transporting the Mail between New York and Liverpool" (Collins' 10 January 1852 letter, referred to the Senate Committee on Naval Affairs on 15 January 1852), *Senate Misc. Doc. No. 17*, 32 Cong., 1 Sess. An earlier (late November 1851) version of Collins' petition already had been privately reprinted along with a number of supporting newspaper articles and editorials in *Supremacy of the Seas, or Facts, Views, Statements, and Opinions relating to the American & British Steamers between the United States and Liverpool, from American and British Sources, etc.* (Washington, DC, 1851).
12. *Cong. Globe*, 32 Cong., 1 Sess., 1146-1147, 1242-1243, 1327.
13. There was opposition to the Collins subsidy in the New York maritime community, especially from sailing packet operators. See NYHS, BBC, Chronological file, William E. Bowen to Stewart Brown, 23 April 1852.
14. The *Baltic* is glowingly described by Capt. Mackinnon, RN, in "English and American Ocean Steamers," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, VII (July 1853), 205-208. See also Erik Heyl, "Two Early American Passenger Liners," *Marine News* (February 1946), 92-93; Frank O. Braynard, "Baltic — A Famous American Ship," *Steamboat Bill of Facts* (June 1953), 25-28; and Ridgely-Nevitt, *American Steamships*, 150-158. For a brief contemporary description of the preparations for its "pleasure trip to Washington" and departure, see *New York Herald*, 26 February 1852. For contemporary technical descriptions of the *Baltic* and its sisters, see Charles B. Stuart, *The Naval and Mail Steamers of the United States* (New York, 1853), 115-129 and Appendix O; and [Thomas Tredgold], *Tredgold on the Steam Engine: Marine Engines and Boilers*, Division B — Steam Navigation (London, 1850), II, 25-32 and IV, 64-65.
15. Gustavus Fox later became Assistant Secretary of the Union Navy during the Civil War and was an invaluable right-hand man for Secretary Gideon Welles and a key confidant of many Union naval officers; see Robert Means Thompson and Richard Wainwright (eds.), *Confidential Correspondence of Gustavus Fox, Assistant Secretary of the Navy, 1861-1865* (2 vols., New York, 1918-1919).
16. Library of Congress, Blair Family Papers, Container 71, "Gustavus Vasa Fox Journal, June 1851-December 1855," [mss. entitled, "Private Journal Commenced in June 1851"] (hereinafter cited as "Fox Journal").
17. *Ibid.*, entries for 22 and 24 January 1852.
18. *New York Herald*, 26 February 1852. Aside from E.K. Collins, reported the *Herald's* Washington correspondent on 26 February 1882 (*Herald*, 4 March 1852), distinguished passengers included several packet ship and steamship captains (T.B. Cropper, L.C. Trippe, Asa Eldridge, J.C.

Delano, and W.G. Hackstaff); three New York City Aldermen (Smith, Dodge, and Wells) and an ex-mayor (Mickle); two navy lieutenants (Emmons and Bartlett); and several prominent New York bankers, shipbuilders, ship designers, machinery builders, and distinguished citizens (Elisha Riggs, T.B. Stillman, E. Allaire, G.W. Blunt, and Charles King, the President of Columbia College). The *Herald* also observed without further comment that "there were but three ladies among the passengers." The *New York Times* (26 February 1852) added that among the "two hundred invited guests" was "a liberal representation of the Press" and that the *Baltic* was "loudly cheered" by crowds along the docks, and then saluted by the Cunarder *Canada* and another steamer while passing down the Bay. There was great anticipation in Washington, with local newspapers seizing on any information they could gather from New York. For example, see *The Republic*, 27 February 1852, reprinting an account from the *New York Mirror*, 25 February. See also *National Intelligencer*, 26 February 1852.

19. "Fox Journal," entries for 23, 25, and 26 February 1852.

20. *Ibid.*, entry for 27 February 1852. Like its sisterships, the *Baltic* drew twenty feet, which created substantial docking problems in Liverpool. There were other reasons given for not bringing it all the way to the City; the *National Intelligencer*, 28 February 1852, noted that because of tidal conditions the river pilot was unwilling to bring the ship beyond Alexandria.

21. *Cong. Globe*, 32 Cong., 1 Sess., 657; *New York Herald*, 2 March 1852; *New York Times*, 2 March 1852. The *Herald*, a firm supporter of Collins, editorialized that "as usual, the hostile jealousy of Pennsylvania to the enterprise of this city displayed itself through Senator Brodhead." From Washington, Elisha Riggs, Jr. on 21 January 1852, wrote to his father, Elisha Riggs, Sr., a major investor in the Collins Line: "As to your inquiries regarding the steamers we are doing every thing in our power to advance your interests — & I consider the chances of success by far fairer than they have ever been before. The action on the deficiency bill is slow & I am in hopes the Baltic

will be able to come round before the matter is put to vote. The influence of such a vessel on the Western members [of Congress] could not fail to be immense...I think Collins stands a fair chance of getting his bill through. I have seen Mr. Clay on the subject of inducing him to make a speech in the Senate if necessary. I think I have succeeded in interesting him." [Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Riggs Family Papers.] Henry Clay, who did not speak, supported the subsidy.

22. *Cong. Globe*, 32 Cong., 1 Sess., 657-658.

23. *Ibid.*, 659.

24. "Fox Journal," entry for 1 March 1852. See also *National Intelligencer*, 1 March 1852

25. "Fox Journal," entry for 2 March 1852.

26. *New York Times*, 3 March 1852.

27. *Ibid.*

28. *New York Herald*, 3 March 1852.

29. *Washington Republic*, 3 March 1852, reprinted in *National Intelligencer*, 4 March 1852. The most detailed (and uncritical) account of the *Baltic*, its promoter, and the reception was in a letter to the editors of the *National Intelligencer*, printed in that paper's 5 March edition.

30. "Our Washington Correspondent [signed Abel]," letter of 4 March 1852 printed in the *New York Herald*, 7 March 1852.

31. During that period, the *New York Times* reported on 26 February 1852, the *Baltic* was to take the President, his Cabinet, the members of Congress, and heads of government departments "on an excursion down the Potomac."

32. "Fox Journal," entries for 3 and 4 March 1852; *New York Herald*, 6 March 1852. The more than 100 passengers included Cornelius Vanderbilt, who within a few years would become a rival of Collins on the transatlantic run; "Mrs. President Fillmore and son;" Commodore Lawrence Kearney,

Col. W.H. Polk, Bulwer Lytton, Daniel E. Sickles; T.F. Secor; naval engineer James W. King; R.W. Shufelt; and General Aaron Ward.

33. Officially described as "the bill to supply deficiencies in the appropriations for the service of the fiscal year ending the 30th of June, 1852."

34. An instructive example of the course that lobbying for the subsidy took at this point is contained in NYHS, BBC, CL, William E. Bowen to Brown Brothers and Company, 12 June 1852.

35. "Memorial of E.K. Collins," *Senate Misc. Doc.* No. 17. As an example of such argument being used in the process of lobbying by means of private communications, see NYHS, BBC, CL, draft letter from Joseph Shipley (a retired partner of Brown, Shipley & Co., Ltd., of Liverpool, the English agents for the Collins Line) to an unidentified Congressman, 21 February 1852.

36. *Cong. Globe*, 32 Cong., 1 Sess., 10 May 1852, 1302-04.

37. *Ibid.*, 27 April 1852, 1199-1202.

38. *Ibid.*, 8 July 1852, 1699.

39. *Ibid.*, appendix, 6 July 1852, 781-784.

40. *Ibid.*, 32 Cong., 1 Sess., 1241-1243 (Senate debate of 5 May 1852). Benjamin Isherwood would become Engineer-in-Chief of the Union Navy and Chief of the Bureau of Steam Engineering during and after the American Civil War.

41. *Ibid.*, 32 Cong., 1 Sess., appendix, 604-608.

42. *Ibid.*, 32 Cong., 1 Sess., appendix, 611-613 (remarks of 17 May 1852).

43. *US Statutes at Large*, 32 Cong., 2 Sess., vol. 10, chap. 139, 239.

44. NYHS, BBC, CL, William E. Bowen to Brown Brothers and Company, 15 July 1852; John A. Brown to William E. Bowen, 19 July 1852; William Bowen to James Brown, 24 July 1852

(containing a copy of the 24 July note from James Snider, Jr. to Bowen, which itemizes the deductions from the loan). A photograph of the Snider note to Bowen, along with a brief discussion of the lobbying effort, is in John A. Kouwenhoven, *An Historical Portrait of a Great Private Bank: Brown Brothers Harriman & Co., 1818-1968* (Garden City, NY, 1968), 96.

45. NYHS, BBC, CL, Ambrose W. Thompson to William Bowen, 12 December 1852. Thompson alerted Brown Brothers to "a movement against Mr. Collins line of Steamers," which he had been requested to join and went on to say he had heard enough to believe that the opposition was determined to invoke the six-months notice of subsidy reduction; "the price at which they want to offer was named, etc., and I was finally threatened with opposition to my measures if I did not come in. I give you the information that you may put your friends on their guard. There is also another scheme, which has for its foundation an effort & intention to levy more 'blackmail' from the line...I think that the movement may be checkmated if taken in time." James Brown wrote to Bowen two days later that, having seen Thompson's warning letter, "our minds are made up to go on with our Contract irrespective of any threats of Black Mail."

46. *US Statutes at Large*, 34 Cong., 1 Sess., vol. 11, chap. 162, 102.

47. A particularly useful and informed discussion of maritime subsidies as an American political issue, and the role of the Collins Line in this regard, is Marguerite M. McKee, "The Ship Subsidy Question in United States Politics," *Smith College Studies in History*, VIII (October, 1922); see also Tyler, *Steam Conquers the Atlantic*; Jesse E. Saugstad, *Shipping and Shipbuilding Subsidies* (Washington, 1932); and John G.B. Hutchins, *The American Maritime Industries and Public Policy, 1789-1914: An Economic History* (Cambridge, MA, 1941). For a recent, critical assessment of Collins, see Mark W. Summers, *The Plundering Generation: Corruption and the Crisis of the Union, 1849-1861* (New York, 1987), especially 104-106.