

Peter Mathews  
English Immigrant  
Nieuw Amsterdam  
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CANADA'S IMMIGRATION MUSEUM  
**PIER 21**



This is a story about Peter, who grew up in Britain during World War II, who married Carolyn in 1965 and how they came to emigrate to Canada, with their two boys Justin and Daniel in 1971.

They crossed the Atlantic from Southampton to Halifax on board the last immigrant voyage made by the Nieuw Amsterdam. It appears that they may well have been the last family to pass through Pier 21. My name is Peter Mathews and I was born at Sutton, Surrey, England in 1938. I am married to Carolyn Mary Matthews (nee Barraclough), who was born at Saddleworth, Lancashire, in 1944. We were married at Llanbedry-Cennin, Gwynedd, North Wales in 1965. We have four children, Justin, born at North Cave, East Yorkshire in 1966, Daniel born in North Cave in 1970, Naomi, born at North Sydney, Cape Breton in 1975 and Natasha, born at North Sydney in 1976.



Throughout my childhood it seemed that I always knew a lot about Canada, because my Grandfather and three of his brothers had emigrated to Canada from Britain in the early 1900s and were sod busters on the Prairies in Saskatchewan. They had children who were born in "soddy shacks", whom I met when I was young. So I grew up hearing stories about life in Canada, with its cold winters, open spaces and going to school in the "Little School House". My Grandfather was in Gloucester, Ontario, on the day that Britain declared war on Germany in 1914 and he joined up in the Canadian Army the following day. He served with the Canadian Machine Gun Corps throughout the war, but died in Belgium in 1919, while still serving with the army, and is buried in the Canadian Military Cemetery in Bruges.

I grew up during the Second World War and we lived on the edge of the North Downs, about 17 miles south of London. Britain was an armed camp as the Allied Forces prepared for the invasion of Europe and The Downs were used by the British and Canadian troops as a training ground. They used to go on maneuvers and stage mock battles, which was very exciting for the young children in the area who wanted to take part in fighting the Germans. My brother and I, together with our friends, used to hang around the soldier's tents as they made camp, to get food and to be shown how to use their weapons. At the age of 6 and 7, we could soon take a Lee Enfield 303 rifle apart and put it back together almost as fast as the soldiers! There was no question about it though, we preferred to be with the Canadians. They were so open, friendly, kind and patient, and always had time for us. Most importantly, they always had plenty of food and were prepared to share it with us, while the British soldiers hardly had enough for themselves. I remember the excitement when one day the Canadians gave us a whole Dixie of trifle. We didn't have spoons so we got stuck in and ate every last scrap with our hands. We were intrigued by their accents, which seemed to us to be odd, and we loved to imitate the strange words that they used like, "OK, Buddy, Eh and Crumbs". After a while some of them would come to our home for afternoon tea in the garden. They would arrive in a big army truck and were so tall, strong and full of energy. How proud we were of them and we knew that they would have no difficulty beating the Germans. They were great and one of them became a special friend to me. I have always wondered whatever happened to my Uncle Ted.

At 17 I went to sea as a cadet in the British Merchant Navy and eventually gained my Foreign Going Master Mariners Certificate. I met my future wife Carolyn in Britain in 1963 and we got married in 1965 and I took a position in Hull, East Yorkshire, as a Fisheries Development Officer doing research and development work in the fishing industry. At that time Hull was one of the worlds largest fishing ports with over one hundred and thirty very large distant water trawlers. These fished primarily for cod fish, all over the North Atlantic from Russian and Norwegian coasts, to Iceland, Greenland, on the Labrador coast and on the Grand Banks of Newfoundland. I made many trips on these vessels and as a result of this I first came to Canada in 1968 when a vessel that I was on landed me in St. John's Newfoundland. It was the middle of winter and very cold. The people were friendly enough. But frankly I found St. John's to be a rough place in those days and it didn't made a good impression on me. It had a fantastic natural harbour, but it definitely was not the Canada that I had heard about as a child.

In 1971 I was invited to go to Nova Scotia to do some consultancy work for one of the largest Canadian fishing companies. I arrived at Riverport, N.S. on January 2nd and I soon found that people were friendly and helpful and I was taken by their English, spoken with a very heavy German accent, which came down to them from the first European settlers who came to the area from Germany in the 1750s. I was immediately struck by the natural beauty of the South Shore area, almost completely frozen over with ice along its entire length and where there was any open water, clouds of smoky vapour rose from the surface of the water, which was all very new to me. The trees were covered in snow and the beauty of the coastline, frozen in the grip of winter made a big impression on me. I stayed in Lunenburg and fell in love with the town, with its unique wooden houses with gingerbread moldings and many with the widow's walk and dormer windows. I stayed in one of those big houses, which had been turned into a hotel and froze at night because the heating was quite inadequate to heat the room with its 9 foot ceiling! I soon found out at the hotel that if you did not arrive at exactly the published time for supper that you were in danger of not getting a meal and then there was a danger of starving for the night, as there was nowhere else in town open! Yes, I instantly liked Nova Scotia.

My wife gave birth to our second son Daniel on December 15th 1970 and was still nursing him while I was away in Nova Scotia. I returned home in February 1971 after delivering my consultancy report. This must have been well received as shortly after my return home, the Nova Scotian Fishing Company who had commissioned the report asked me if I would like to come back to Nova Scotia and work for them. Carolyn was nursing Daniel in bed when I received the telephone call, so I went to her, gave her a kiss and said, "How would you like to go and live in Nova Scotia?" She replied, "Well it's cold in winter but very beautiful, and the people are friendly. If it is nice in winter I suppose it must be a lot better in summer." I answered, "Well, if you think it will be good for us then let's go!" Carolyn replied, and that's about all the discussion that we had to make up our minds to emigrate to Canada.

There was a lot of planning and arrangements to be made as I resigned from my job. We sold our beautiful old Georgian home, arranged for the furniture to be shipped to Nova Scotia and we went to see our friends, relations and our parents to say, "Good-bye." We also learned about the frustration of dealing with the Department of Immigration, but we didn't mind it really and even found the time to be amused by it. We were just looking forward to being on our way. It all took time, but really we made the decision to leave a good job in Britain, to come to Canada and to change our lives forever, after no more than ten minutes discussion in our bedroom, with Carolyn nursing Daniel. We decided that it would be best to travel to Canada by passenger ship, because we had two young

boys and we wanted to take a lot of baggage with us on the trip across the Atlantic. This would have the added advantage that we would not be inconvenienced by jet lag on arrival. So I went to the travel agent who was offered immigrant passage on the Dutch passenger vessel Nieuw Amsterdam. This was one of the last of the grand old transatlantic liners and I was advised that this would be her last voyage on the Atlantic run and these would be the last immigrant fares that would be offered by sea. So I booked our passage.

On June 15th 1971 we all traveled to Southampton to embark on Nieuw Amsterdam. Carolyn was cool and calm and looked so beautiful as we boarded the vessel. I was proud of her for being so supportive of our move to Canada, as she was and is usually a person who does not like change of any sort. Now here we were leaving everything behind and starting a voyage to a new life, to a place, which she knew little about, and she had agreed to it after only a ten minute discussion. Justin was excited and interested in our move, but he did not know what it was really all about. It was only much later, when he was a teenager that we really began to understand what the move had done to him as a young boy. The disappointment that he had when he began to realize that he would not be going back to his own English garden at his home in North Cave. A real "God's Half Acre" with its flowers and birds, hiding places amongst their shrubs and bushes, the pony in the field next door and the ant hills, which he would watch for hours at a time studying the ants as they went about their business. Fortunately Daniel was only six months old and he didn't have to share Justin's loss, but he was a colicky baby and he would give Carolyn a lot of concern during our voyage as he had difficulty digesting food.

We had a nice cabin on the waterline and Justin was fascinated when the porthole was covered by sea water as we steamed along and we all peered through it trying to spot some fish! There was a whole ship to explore and there was a nursery, with a nanny to look after the children while the parents took a break. The stewards and stewardesses on board gave us excellent service and were very kind in a stiff Dutch sort of way. The stewardess would baby sit in the evening for us and this gave Carolyn and myself a chance to enjoy some of the excellent food and to dance in the evening. And for us to talk about our new life and the new job that awaited us in Canada. Our life had been so hectic getting ready to leave Britain that we had not had much time to talk to each other about it.

The journey across the Atlantic couldn't have been better. The sea was like a millpond and we only have good memories about the voyage. Holland America Line did a very good job for us and lived up to their excellent reputation for providing good service. Even though this was the

last voyage for Nieuw Amsterdam on the Atlantic run. One of the highlights of the voyage for Justin was a surprisingly big pool and because of the ship's motion there were waves in it, quite big ones too. Justin always loved the water from an early age and there was never any problem getting him to take a bath. Nieuw Amsterdam's pool was the bath to end all baths for Justin and he got endless pleasure swimming in it. Carolyn was always a particular mother to the children and no matter where we were she insisted that nothing should disturb the children's routine. In particular she insisted that they have their afternoon nap on time. Our trip across the Atlantic didn't change this, hence her concern about avoiding jet lag and keeping to routine.

After six days at sea, with only a brief stop to pick up some more passengers at Cork, Ireland, we finally docked at Pier 21, Halifax, at about 11 am, on Mid-Summers Day, June 21st 1971. Of course we didn't know anything about Pier 21 or its significance. To us and I suspect everyone else, it was just a dirty, dusty warehouse, with primitive facilities for handling passengers. We do remember the pigeons that flew about inside the shed and 'cooed' noisily. We watched out when they flew about! It was a beautiful Nova Scotian hot summer's day, perhaps too hot for us Brits. It is difficult to remember exactly what went on when we arrived. I have a vague memory of the hustle and bustle that took place as we docked, as people got ready to leave the vessel, carrying their baggage about and trying to locate their baggage from the baggage hold; and of stewards and stewardesses hurrying about trying to get people to vacate their cabins, so that they could get in to clean them out. It is all a blur really, but what I can remember very well is that I wanted to leave the vessel quickly, but Carolyn insisted that the children's routine should not be disturbed and that they should have their afternoon nap before we left the ship. I can remember being very agitated about this as the vessel was due to sail almost immediately for New York, and also because I had arranged for someone to meet the ship and to drive us to our hotel in Bridgewater, on the South Shore of Nova Scotia. Carolyn would not compromise though, the children must have their nap and that was final. Everyone else would have to wait!

So finally at about 3pm much to the relief of the crew, the Matthews family slowly got itself together and we left the ship and passed through Customs and Immigration. I don't have a lot of memories of this except that we were by ourselves and the immigration procedures were very slow as our documents were reviewed. I do remember being given our immigration slips stating that we were officially Landed Immigrants and being told that we should always keep these as they were very important documents. I kept mine until I became a Canadian citizen in 1984, but Carolyn has kept hers and those of the boys as keepsakes. She became a Canadian citizen in 1985, but she said that she wasn't about to part

with her Landed Immigrant slip as she never knew when it might be needed.

So hot, weary and feeling very tired, we finally passed through Pier 21



and were met by a huge Lunenburger, Kenny Anderson, from Rose Bay, Nova Scotia, who had practically given up all hope of ever seeing us. "Mr. Matthews", he said in a thick Lunenburg accent. "I'm here to pick you up. I thought that I would never see you. You must be the last people off the 'wessel!' Here, lets get your bags and go."

As our voyage on the Nieuw Amsterdam was her last immigrant voyage, and as she was the last immigrant ship to berth at Pier 21, and as we apparently were the last passengers off the vessel, does this make the Matthews family the last immigrants to pass through Pier 21? We can't be entirely sure, but it

certainly seemed very possible that we were! If it is correct then we are very proud to have the honour, but if someone else has it then no matter. What is important is that we have made our home in Canada for 27 years and we are proud to call ourselves Canadians. Our boys grew up here and both gained degrees from Canadian universities. They have continued the family tradition of keeping the links with Britain as they have both returned there to work. But they miss the open spaces and beauty of Canada and we hope that they will be back. We were blessed with two beautiful daughters after we came to Canada. They were born in Cape Breton and are proud to call themselves 'Capers' and so they are the real home grown Canadians in the family. They too have made us proud by graduating from Canadian universities with very good degrees, and they say that they plan to stay in Canada and make their homes in this wonderful country.

Carolyn and I plan to continue to make our home on the South Shore of Nova Scotia. We are fortunate to live in one of those big, old, wooden homes, with moldings and hardwood floors, built by a Lunenburg Fishing Captain for his young bride eighty years ago, which is situated right on the water. We consider that we have been truly blessed to be able to live in such a wonderful place and to have been able to bring up our family in the safe and secure environment that we have on the South Shore of Nova Scotia. We never plan to leave.