

William James Stairs (1819 – 1906)

William James (W.J.) Stairs was born in Halifax, Nova Scotia, on 24 September 1819. When he was thirteen he was sent to Horton College in Wolfville where he received a classical education. It was not an easy life; students rose at 6:00 a.m. and there was no central heating. Conditions in winter could be brutal. During the recession of 1834 he was taken out of school to serve as an accounting clerk in his father's firm.

One of his heroes was Samuel Cunard, to whom he was related by marriage. When W.J. was just a young man, he met Cunard who made an indelible impression on the young merchant. In 1840, at age twenty-one, William James entered his father's firm as a partner, and it became formally known as William Stairs and Sons. Gradually W.J. began to exert his influence, and the firm moved away from selling general merchandise, beginning to specialize in ships chandlery and "outfits" along with hardware. W.J. brought some of his "book learning" to the job, as well as what appears to have been an innate business sense. During his illustrious career W.J. would invest in ships, a bank, a ropemaking enterprise, sugar refining, skatemaking and steelmaking enterprises. Like many Haligonians and Maritimers, during the American Civil War, W.J. Stairs was a Southern sympathizer but against slavery. However he undoubtedly profited from the war. W.J. was a leading member of the Maritime Anti-Confederation League. After Canadian Confederation he was offered a seat in the Senate but, in what must be one of the rare occurrences in Canadian political history, W.J. begged off citing increasing pressures of business.

Typical of a merchant of his standing W.J. had a life-long commitment to educational betterment and was a great supporter of Dalhousie University. He retired from the Union Bank of Halifax board in 1898, at the age of seventy-nine. W.J. and his wife lived to a ripe old age, celebrating their sixtieth wedding anniversary in 1905. He and Susan died within months of each other in 1906 at ages eighty-seven and eighty-four respectively.