Abstract

Bermuda was first described by Portuguese and Spanish sailors in the 16th century but no effort was made to capitalize on their strategic position.

Admiral Sir George Somers, leading a fleet of nine vessels to bring supplies to the Jamestown colony in 1610, encountered a severe storm and was separated from the rest of the convoy. His ship, Sea Venture, was wrecked on the reefs surrounding Bermuda. 10 months later, having built two new ships, they set sail for Virginia. The story of their adventure, when it reached England, was widely known and inspired Shakespeare to write The Tempest.

It was Somers who recognized Bermuda’s significance to the development of trade and communications between England and her growing interests in North America and the Caribbean.

This presentation will trace the growth of this developing link and its importance to the economic, social and political life of the colony founded in 1612. Without Bermuda as a base of supply, the progress of North American trade would have been much slower. Her strategic importance was demonstrated by her selection as the winter home for the British Atlantic Fleet.

Despite her pivotal role, little mail is known from Bermuda prior to 1806 when the GPO extended its Falmouth Packet service to New York with a connection from Halifax to Bermuda at the behest of the Admiralty whose summer station for the Fleet was at that city. Thereafter, mail links improved considerably to the delight of Bermuda’s merchants and populace.

Later, Bermuda was central to the Royal Mail Steam Packet routes to Mexico, the western Caribbean and north of South America. This role was maintained until the advent of reliable steamships capable of making the journey without a stop at Bermuda, c. 1850.

This paper will demonstrate the importance of Bermuda in a way that has not previously been considered within the postal historical world.