CHAPTER ONE:

Lumbering on the St. Croix and Lepreau

Another familiar person, perambulating the bank of the river, with a pick-pole or oar on his shoulder, or guiding rafts of lumber in the swift current of the river, was that of "Sandy" Gibson, since known as Mr. Alexander Gibson, the New Brunswick Lumber King. I can only see Mr. Gibson as his appearance then was fixed on my boyish mind or vision. He was a fairly tall man, without superfluous flesh, but not thin; and his gear in warm weather was not expensive. I can't recollect ever seeing him without coat or vest on. He wore a checkered shirt, his suspenders showing conspicuously as they crossed and passed over his somewhat muscular shoulders. He generally wore a straw hat, and could often be seen about the mills, or on the river bank chewing a small chip of straw, as though in a brown study.
- George Boardman, "Men and Things on the St. Croix," *Calais Times*, 1884

IT WAS OCTOBER, 1900, and the lumber king of the Nashwaak, Alexander Gibson himself, had come to pay a visit to his old hometown after many long years. A lot had changed since then, and Mr. Gibson's fame went before him. Leaving a humble millman, he returned as "Boss" Gibson, operator of the largest lumber business in the province, extending from Marysville, a town he created virtually out of nothing, up to the Miramichi along the Nashwaak and Bartholomew Rivers. A tall man of imposing appearance, heavy of build and white of beard, with piercing blue eyes under a soft felt hat, Gibson had built an empire in spruce deals, the backbone of the timber trade, along with two railways, the Fredericton Railway Bridge, and the great cotton mill in Marysville. Quartered in a mansion across the river from his mills, just downhill from his magnificent Methodist church, a gothic masterpiece paid for entirely out of his own pocket, surrounded by family in houses he had built for them, visited by Governor Generals and courted by politicians, the Boss was arguably the largest employer of labour in the province and one of its most colorful personalities. Eighty years old now but still hale, he drove from the train station at St. Stephen out to his old homestead on the Oak Bay road, then up the Milltown road to his former home at Middle Landing, where his first children were born and where he worked for the prosperous lumber firms of William Todd and Abner Hill. "On Sunday," reported the *St. Andrews Beacon*, "the aged million-

aire worshipped in the church of his early manhood days at Milltown - the Methodist - occupying the same pew as he had occupied forty years before."

But as remarkable as Gibson's career had been, cracks in the edifice were beginning to show. Successive recapitalizations had added hugely to company debt, and his payroll, comprising up to 1,200 employees and topping $45,000 a month in the summer months, was a considerable drain on his finances. His lumber business, though down somewhat from the days in which it had averaged 50 percent of all lumber shipped from the port of Saint John and 25 percent of all shipped from the province, was being used at least partly to prop up other, less profitable parts of his empire. The Canada Eastern Railway, for example, running from the town of Gibson to Chatham, was unable to pay even for routine maintenance, and the railway bridge across the Saint John River, built largely with federal funds, was hugely in arrears of payment. The cotton mill, the largest independent mill left in Canada, was built at a time when the industry was deeply in trouble and, never operating at more than half capacity, was struggling to keep its head above water.

Still, even those who saw the cracks could scarcely have predicted that in the space of fourteen years all would be gone: the railway and bridge, the cotton mill, and the lumber business, all having passed into other hands, the church and mansion destroyed by fire, the children living in houses owned by strangers. There would be little left of the Gibson edifice but the artifact of Marysville - that, and the memory of a man Lord Beaverbrook would later describe as "the most colourful and, in his day, the most important lumber operator on the Nashwaak and St. John rivers."

NOT A LOT is known about Alexander Gibson's early life. Though many short accounts were published in his own time, there is little to nothing about what transpired before his arrival in Fredericton in 1862, even though Gibson was in his early forties at the time; and much of the information on this subject, even, is as inaccurate as it is scanty. The first reference to Gibson in a Fredericton newspaper, for instance, that of the *Reporter* for July 4, 1864, describes his improvements in the new town of Marysville as the work of a Nova Scotia gentleman. Subsequent references to his birthplace are confined to New Brunswick, but given variously as Oak Bay, St. Stephen, Milltown, St. Andrews, and even Lepreau, while the date of his birth is usually fixed upon as August 1, 1819. An inspection of the birth and baptismal records of All Saints Church in St. Andrews shows that Alexander Gibson was actually born on August 1, 1820 in that town to John and Jane Gibson, and was baptized on August 6.

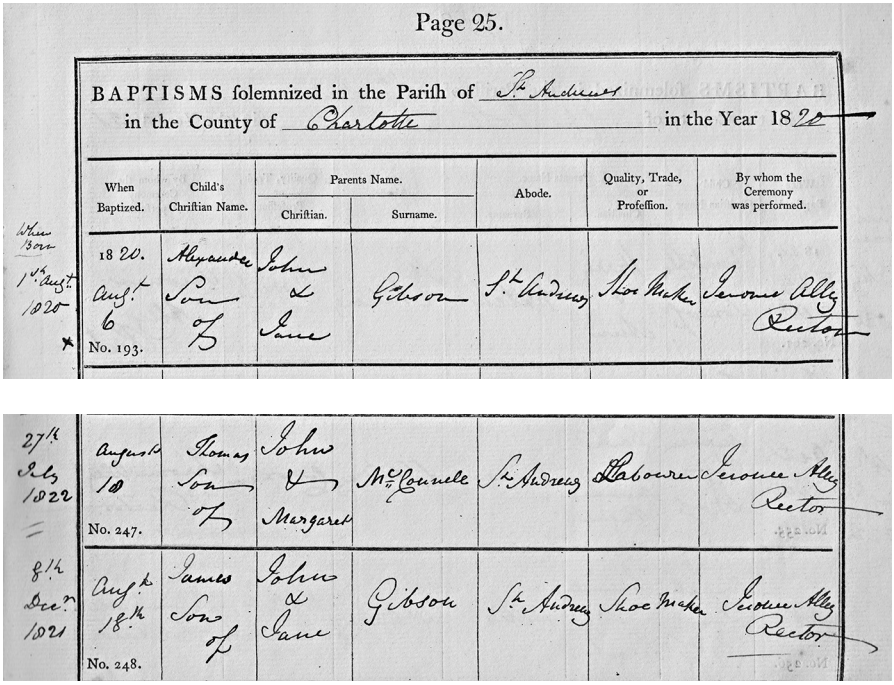
As the profession of Gibson's father is given as "shoemaker," it seems probable that the family lived directly in the town. Upon Gibson's death in

1913, an elderly St. Andrews resident named Arthur Doon informed Robert Armstrong, editor of the *St. Andrews Beacon*, that he had attended school with Alexander Gibson, who had been born in a little house on the St. Andrews waterfront near the Thomas Odell store.

Public records show that Gibson's parents were part of a small family group that arrived in Charlotte County in 1818 from or by way of Ireland. It was headed up by Alexander Gibson senior and his wife Janet Moore, and they brought with them their four children: John, aged approximately 23 and married to Mary Jane Johnson (or Johnston), aged 17; Margaret, aged about 22, James about 17, and the youngest by a fair stretch, Stuart or Stewart, aged approximately 4.

Little is known about Gibson's grandparents. Janet Moore and Alexander Gibson may both have been of Scottish origin. According to one story, Ms. Moore was a lady of gentle birth who against the knowledge or permission of her parents eloped with Alexander Gibson, a coachman on her estate. Whether or not that story is true, the couple definitely spent quite a bit of time in Ireland before emigrating to Canada, as according to the death certificate for the Boss's sister Charlotte, who died in Marysville in 1927, her father John Gibson was born in Castlerea, Ireland. As John was the eldest, all of the children of Alexander Gibson and Janet Moore must have been born in Ireland, though perhaps not at Castlerea. For when Governor General Dufferin visited Fredericton in August, 1873 and paid a visit to the Gibsons at Marysville, he was delighted to discover in a conversion with Gibson's mother that this lady hailed from his own estate of Clandeboye in County Down, near Belfast. The Gibsons he seemed to remember as having been tenants of his neighbour, Mr. Sharman Crawford. He later said he spent an hour with the Gibsons, "giving them an account of their grand-nieces and grand-nephews, and of their other various relations." From this it would seem that the Gibsons had moved from Castlerea to Clandeboye at some point, where they had an extended family, made the acquaintance of Jane Johnson, who according to Charlotte's death certificate was of Scottish birth, and after John Gibson and Jane Johnson were married sailed from nearby Belfast to British North America. It was a painful departure for the young bride. Fifty-four years after the event, Lady Dufferin noted that according to the old lady, "Her parents, having objected to her marriage, never wrote to her."

How long the Gibsons lived in Ireland is not known, but because of a possible connection with the grandparents and certainly with the mother, Scotland always trumped Ireland in the Gibson family's understanding of its cultural identity. Official documents for Alexander Gibson's children usually give "Scotland" or "Scottish" in the section concerning "racial origin." Gibson himself knew well and loved to sing the songs of Robert Burns, held Scottish



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BAPTISMS solemnized in the Parish of St. Andrews
in the County of Charlotte in the Year 1820

When Baptized.	Child's Christian Name.	Parents Name. Christian.	Parents Name. Surname.	Abode.	Quality, Trade, or Profession.	By whom the Ceremony was performed.
1820. Augt 6 No. 193.	Alexander Son of	John & Jane	Gibson	St. Andrews	Shoe Maker	Jerome Alley Rector
27th Augt 1822 No. 247.	Augusta 10 Thomas Son of	John & Margaret	McConnell	St. Andrews	Labourer	Jerome Alley Rector
8th Decr 1821 No. 248.	Augt 18th James Son of	John & Jane	Gibson	St. Andrews	Shoe Maker	Jerome Alley Rector

Baptismal Certificates for Alexander Gibson (1820), James Gibson and John McConnell (1822). **Courtesy All Saints Church, St. Andrews.**

evenings in his home in Marysville, and was a conspicuous presence at the unveiling of the statue of Robert Burns in Fredericton in the fall of 1906.

They weren't the only Gibsons in town. The 1851 census for New Brunswick shows two other Gibson families in St. Andrews at that time. George Gibson, an infirm and very elderly man aged 99 (he will die in the same year), lives with his son David, aged 40. Both are Irish, and the date of their entry into the province is given as 1818, the same as Alexander Gibson and his clan. There is another Gibson family in town as well, also headed up by a George Gibson. He is 44, and though the census has him as a native, his obituary for 1887 states that he emigrated from Ireland as a teenager about 65 years previously from County Down. His birthdate of 1806 puts him in the ballpark with Boss Gibson's uncles, and there may have been a relation - perhaps not the most cordial - between them. According to a story related by Mary Greenlaw of Upper Waweig, passed down from her grandfather, George Lee Gibson, after the death of William Gibson and his wife Evelina, George Lee Gibson's parents, Alexander Gibson

took in their children as wards and quartered them in Milltown, Maine, with a family that treated them poorly. George Lee Gibson remembered one of his sisters being beaten for eating an apple. He could never understand why Alexander Gibson, a rich man, could have sent his own relatives off to live with unkind strangers in a foreign country.

Public records show that George Lee Gibson did indeed have a father William, born in St. Andrews, and that both he and his wife Evelina died within a few months of each other in 1890. They also show a marriage certificate for an Evelyn Gibson of Milltown, Maine, formerly of St. Andrews, witnessed by George Gibson, presumably her brother. But William Gibson was not Alexander Gibson's brother, as the family story holds; his father was the George Gibson, aged 44, of the 1851 census. Alexander Gibson did have an uncle, James, who lived in Calais, Maine, adjacent to Milltown, Maine, but he died in 1860 and his wife, Mary Smyth, in 1881. There was of course Gibson's younger brother James, born in 1821, absent from the 1851 New Brunswick census and possibly resident in Maine, for whom, nevertheless, there seems to be no local death record.

Whatever the details, it seems fair to assume that there was indeed a relation of some sort between Boss Gibson and the other Gibsons of St. Andrews. An 1880 map of St. Andrews shows a Gibson property on William Street near Water; this is probably the George Gibson, aged 44, of the 1851 census. It could be that this family and Alexander Gibson's were neighbours at one time, and that they arrived in St. Andrews as part of a family group. Unfortunately, passenger lists for the 1818 period are incomplete and it seems impossible now to discover when this group - if indeed they were a group - left Ireland for the New World.

These Gibsons, whatever the relation between them, were part of the very earliest wave of Irish immigrants to take to the sea-lanes after the conclusion of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815, and were among the first Irish emigrants to St. Andrews. The first boatload, perhaps in the hold of a returning timber ship, disembarked in 1817. As with the famine victims of the 1840s, a story told brilliantly in Ron Rees' *Some Other Place Than Here*, these Irish were poor, sick, and an immediate charge upon the parish finances. A levy was made to help defray the costs of medical care and their accommodation with local families; some died of diseases contracted *en route* and communicated these illnesses upon their hosts, sometimes with tragic results. This levy proving insufficient, in 1818 the Overseers of the Poor petitioned the provincial government for reimbursement of funds expended by private individuals and for the establishment of a poor house, which followed in 1819, one of many such to spring up around the province as the Irish presence continued to expand. According to Rees, in 1818 more than 2,000 emigrants landed in

St. Andrews alone, and in 1819 perhaps another 2,500 more. For the larger cities such as Saint John, the numbers were even higher. Almost all were Irish.

For both the destitute and those with some financial resources, St. Andrews was a hopeful place to disembark. For the first few decades of its existence, really until the curtailing on the timber tariffs in the 1840s, the town prosecuted a large international trade, exporting ton timber to England; boards, shingles, house frames, and cattle to the West Indies; with return cargoes of iron, coal, salt, and ship fittings from the mother country; and from the Caribbean quantities of rum, sugar, molasses, mahogany, and tropical fruit. At its high point the port owned some 11,000 tons of shipping, and at its head were wharves the size of town blocks - the property of substantial merchantmen such as Douglass, Kerr, Allanshaw, Rait, Pagan, and Scott. With the exception of the Bank of St. John, the Charlotte County Bank was the only money lending institution in the province, and the trade of the town was on a par almost with that of Fredericton and Saint John.

There was a Scottish presence in St. Andrews as well. In the same year that the Gibsons arrived, Peter Stubs, Scottish merchant, had just started up the town's first newspaper, the *St. Andrews Herald*. Christopher Scott, from Greenock, Scotland, was one of the largest ship-owners, had been a driving force behind the creation of the town's three blockhouses in 1815, would help subsidize the new poor house, and would soon finance the erection of the Greenock Church, the province's second Presbyterian kirk. Robert and William Pagan, also Scots, had emigrated to St. Andrews from Castine, Maine, where they had headed a thriving lumber business, and which they were in the process of expanding locally with substantial concessions on Chamcook Lake and in Oak Bay.

Though quartered in a town with a population of destitute immigrants, the Alexander Gibson clan itself seems not to have been poor, as the grandfather owned land and even speculated in it. In 1821, for example, he sold two unimproved lots in the town platt along Augustus Street (the town would have been mostly trees in 1821) to a friend, John Pye, for £50, no inconsiderable amount at that time. In 1827, the last year in which he would have been resident in the town, he gave a bond of £50 to Hugh Alexander by way of pledge to sell him the western third of a 60-acre government grant he was presently applying for in St. David parish on the St. Andrews road near Oak Bay, but it seems, as though assuming that the grant was certain to be approved, he and his family had already moved onto this lot by 1826. In April, 1834, he sold the middle third of the lot to John Rolls for £50, on the same day transferred title of the eastern third, the one on which he and his family lived, to his son John, Boss Gibson's father.

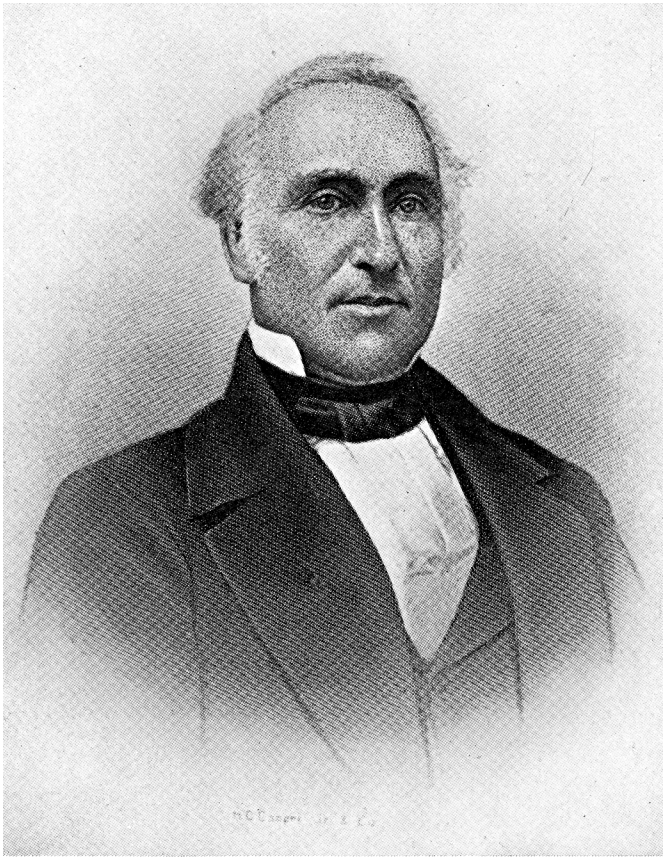
By the time the Gibsons left St. Andrews for Oak Bay, the family had grown. Margaret Gibson had married John McConnell, an Irish immigrant, in 1819, and given birth to a son Thomas in 1822. Alexander Gibson, born in 1820, had been followed into the world by a brother James, about whom nothing has been discovered. Gibson's uncle James seems to have left St. Andrews around the same time as the family moved. In 1825 he married Mary Smyth, Irish immigrant, in St. Stephen.

The next time the Gibsons appear in the public record, in the New Brunswick census of 1851, they are well established in separate families in the parishes of Saint David, St. Stephen, and St. James, all contiguous to each other in the Milltown - St. Stephen area, and seem all to be farmers in small communities that a contemporary remembered later as little more than "windows in the forest." Stuart, the youngest at 37, of Baillie Settlement, is married to Rebecca Evans, with 7 children aged 1 to 13. (They will soon have many more.) His older sister Margaret has several young adult children living with her in St. James parish near Oak Bay, and her son John McConnell Jr., also a farmer, lives nearby with his own large family. Gibson's own parents farm the family property in Oak Bay and have 6 children aged 11 to 22 still living at home. James Gibson has moved across the St. Croix River to Calais, Maine, where he will spend the rest of his life and die in 1861, aged 59. John Gibson's own parents, Alexander Gibson senior and Janet Moore, do not appear in this census, nor in any thereafter, though Mr. Gibson is listed on a St. David tax roll for 1844 as having an income of £20 per annum. So it seems he and his wife passed away somewhere between that date and the census that followed. Their graves have not been located.

As for Alexander Gibson himself, future Nabob of the Nashwaak, he heads up his own household in St. Stephen parish, probably just upriver from St. Stephen in Milltown, the centre of lumbering operations in the county. He is married to Mary Ann Robinson, of Irish birth, from a large and close-knit family located in Baillie Settlement, emigrants since 1829. Gibson and Robinson were married in 1843 and have three young children: John T., born 1845, Jane, born 1847, and Mary Ann, born 1850. There has also been a death in the family - the first Mary Ann, according to the Gibson cenotaph in Marysville, born 1839 and died 1840. There is a bit of a problem here, as the mother's birth date on the same stone is given as 1829. Clearly one or both of these birth dates is wrong and probably the child's, but even taking an average of the mother's listed age in 1851 and 1861 still makes her a very young mother at 14 or 15 back in 1839 or '40. Her brother, Christopher, who along with another brother, John, will later move to Marysville and lumber with their famous in-law, lives nearby.

Hauling Logs. **From John Springer, *Forest Life and Forest Trees*, 1851.**

ALEXANDER GIBSON'S PROFESSION in the 1851 census is given as "millman," a very common designation for the area and time. Under the Napoleonic blockade in the first decade of the 19th century Britain's traditional access to Russian timber through ports such as Memel and Danzig had been closed. To secure its essential supply of wood for naval masts and spars, as well as for general building purposes in a country expanding under the industrial boom, Britain had looked to its colonies, chiefly the Canadas and New Brunswick, to make up the shortfall. So critical was the need for lumber that for the time being at least the otherwise prohibitive costs of transatlantic shipment and the raising of protective tariff barriers were swallowed, however unwillingly, and thus began the great assault on the Canadian forests. Shipments from British North America increased from 9,000 loads in 1802 to 90,000 in 1809, fully two-thirds of total British imports, a level that was to be sustained almost without interruption for the next fifteen years. At the colonial end, the result was an economy dependent on a single product. In New Brunswick, for example, 75 percent of provincial revenues for 1826 came from wood products. So tied was the economy to fluctuations in the British lumber market, writes



William Todd. Along with Abner Hill, said to have been Gibson's employer at Union Mills in the 1840s - 1850s. Mr. Todd acquired fame and fortune in the lumber business. **PANB 61-322.**

Graeme Wynn, that even rumours of a change in tariffs could precipitate a local fear-driven recession.

The great favorite for masts and spars was white pine. White pine was shipped as "ton timber," the logs being squared by broad axe from the narrow end to the butt, an extremely wasteful procedure which left almost 40 percent of the tree on the forest floor. Great rafts of these timbers were soon a common spring sight on the Ottawa and St. Lawrence rivers, the largest scene of operations, and to a lesser but still significant extent in New Brunswick on the Saint John, Miramichi, and St. Croix streams. Wynn estimates that by 1831 Charlotte County, with 60 mills and about a third of all timber men in the province working its forests, was the largest lumber producer in New Brunswick. Though there were mills on just about every stream large enough to handle them, most of

Home of William Todd, Pleasant Street, St. Stephen. **Author's Photograph, 2014.**

the cutting was being done in the watershed drained by the St. Croix River, just around the corner from Oak Bay. Extending more than 100 kilometers up the New Brunswick and Maine border to Spednic and Grand Lakes, the river offered, in the beginning at least, vast stands of virgin pine close to the water's edge. Timber holdings in the area, when Gibson began work, were dominated by a few powerful families: the Hills, Christies, Murchies, Eatons, and Todds.

According to a *Fredericton Gleaner* article for 1900, Gibson's first place of employment was at Abner Hill's lath mill at Middle Landing. Middle Landing, also known as Union Mills, was located midway on the St. Croix River between St. Stephen and Milltown. Around 1805, Abner Hill and Peter Christie had built there the Brisk Mill, so called from the speed of its motion, but by the time Gibson arrived the Todd family was operating several mills of their own immediately adjacent to it, so it is easy to believe that Gibson worked for both Hill and the Todds.

Middle Landing was just one dam on a two-mile stretch of river between St. Stephen and Milltown, a passage that Wynn has characterized as, for its time, "the most strikingly industrialized landscape in the province." St. Andrews resident Colin Campbell, editor of the *St. Andrews Courant* and owner of significant mill privileges in both St. Stephen and Milltown, penned a description of this area in 1831. He noted that on the British side of the river alone were fifteen double and single mill saws cutting annually over seventeen million feet of boards, planks, deals, and scantling. Lumber was conveyed from the mills on the upper section of the rapids to salt water principally by way of a wooden sluice, four feet wide, fourteen inches deep and a mile and a quarter long, with the rest of cartage being done by horse and ox teams, especially in the summer when the water was low. Approximately sixteen thousand tons of pine were being sent down the river each spring. Shipped from the same place yearly were more than five million cedar and sixty-two thousand pine shingles. Several of the mills ran lathing machines for converting slabs (cut-offs from the logs) into laths and pickets, most of which were being bartered with American coasters in exchange for provisions in quantities, he said, impossible to calculate. The merchants of St. Stephen owned six square-rigged vessels ranging in size from 220 to 350 tons, with more under construction, and all engaged in a brisk trade with England and the West Indies. Larger vessels that couldn't negotiate the low waters near the lower falls stopped at the Ledge, four miles down river, where frequently anywhere from 6 to 10 ships might be seen loading on a given day.

When Gibson began work, however, there was a great change taking place in the lumber industry of New Brunswick and the Canadas generally. Initially cutting was selective; only the largest pines closest to the waterways were taken. In those days the forests were still primeval, and the white pine was still of gigantic proportions. John Springer, in *Forest Life and Forest Trees*, a delightful account of timber-cutting on the upper St. Croix in the 1840s and of camp life and river drives, remembered hearing of pines upwards of 250 feet in some parts of New England. The largest he had ever encountered himself was by his own measurement 140 feet, and so vast was the butt end that even when the monster had been sectioned and loaded onto the river, it was too large to be floated and had to be left behind in the drive.

But changes were afoot. This favoured tree, so light and free of knots, so easily hewn into masts, large beams and posts, so suitable for door and window frames, wainscotings, cornices and mouldings, picture and looking-glass frames, so easily painted and so attractive when planed, was on the way out. "The woodman's ax," Springer noted, "together with the destructive fires which have swept over large districts from time to time, have, so to speak, driven this tree far back into the interior wilderness. In fact, the Pine seems

doomed, by the avarice and enterprise of the white man, gradually to disappear from the borders of civilization, as have the Aborigines of this country before the onward march of the Saxon race."

In its place lumbermen were looking more and more towards a lesser but still very serviceable product: the spruce deal. Spruce, particularly black spruce, was of great value for ship building and rough carpentry, anything where appearance was not important. That could be floor joists, rafters, studding, subfloors, the boarding in of walls and roofs, all manner of rough work. Light and strong, and in the mature tree largely branch-free in the lower section, the black spruce was customarily cut into rough planks, or "deals," of varying dimensions but often about three inches in thickness by about seven to twelve in width, and ranging in length from about twelve to fourteen feet. The spruce deal had always been an important component of the lumber industry, but after 1820, when Britain began to lower tariff barriers and embrace freer trade, the export of spruce deals filled the gap where ton timber once reigned. The English demand for spruce seemed almost insatiable, but the market required that it be at least partially milled before it made the Atlantic crossing.

The profitability of the spruce deal was created at least in part by advances in mill technology. The gang saw, capable of holding a large number of straight blades in a reciprocating sash, could slice a squared log into precisely dimensioned deals in a single pass. The result was a valued-added product of great worth. According to Dan Soucoup's *Logging in New Brunswick*, whereas in 1826 a ton of rough timber on the Saint John docks might be worth £1, a ton of dressed deals might be worth £100, even given wastage in sawing. "By 1847," writes Soucoup, "exported deals surpassed rough timber in value and five years later, deals exceeded timber in tonnage."

William Todd, whom Gibson is said to have worked for in his early days, serves a good example of the kind of money, influence, and power wielded by lumbermen with plenty of land and a solid business sense. Born in 1803 in Yarmouth, Maine, and moving to St. Stephen in 1820, Todd, by virtue of dual citizenship, possessed vast lumber tracts on both sides of the international boundary between Maine and New Brunswick that is the St. Croix River. He married a daughter of Abner Hill, his partner at Union Mills, became a promoter of the Lewy Island Railway, which brought lumber down from Grand and Spednic Lakes, was president of the St. Stephen Branch Railway and of St. Stephen Bank, became a Liberal MLA in 1854, and later declined a Senate seat at Confederation. At his death in 1871 he was counted one of the richest men in the province. The source of just about all his wealth was the humble spruce deal.

We have a picture of a young Alexander Gibson from this period courtesy of George Boardman. One of the directors of the Todd Lumber Company at Union Mills, an ornithologist of note (his bird collection was purchased for display in the Provincial Legislature), director of the St. Stephen Bank, and husband to a daughter of Abner Hill, Mr. Boardman in his later years liked to pen recollections of old times in Charlotte County. In a six-part series titled "Men and Things on the St. Croix," published in the *Calais Times* in 1884, Boardman remembered a young "Sandy" Gibson some forty years earlier, "perambulating the banks of the river with a pick-pole or oar on his shoulder, or guiding rafts of lumber in the swift current of the river." He recalled him as a tall, spare man though not thin, dressed always, even in the warmest weather, in a checked shirt, coat or vest, and straw hat, with suspenders crossed over his strong shoulders. "Mr. Gibson," he recalled, "had a thoughtful cast of countenance which would now and then be lighted up by a smile, but he always seemed too busy to laugh heartily. There was no fuss about him, but he possessed force of character without ostentation. He always had a pleasant word for an acquaintance, and in his whole makeup was a pleasant, careful, diligent working lumberman."

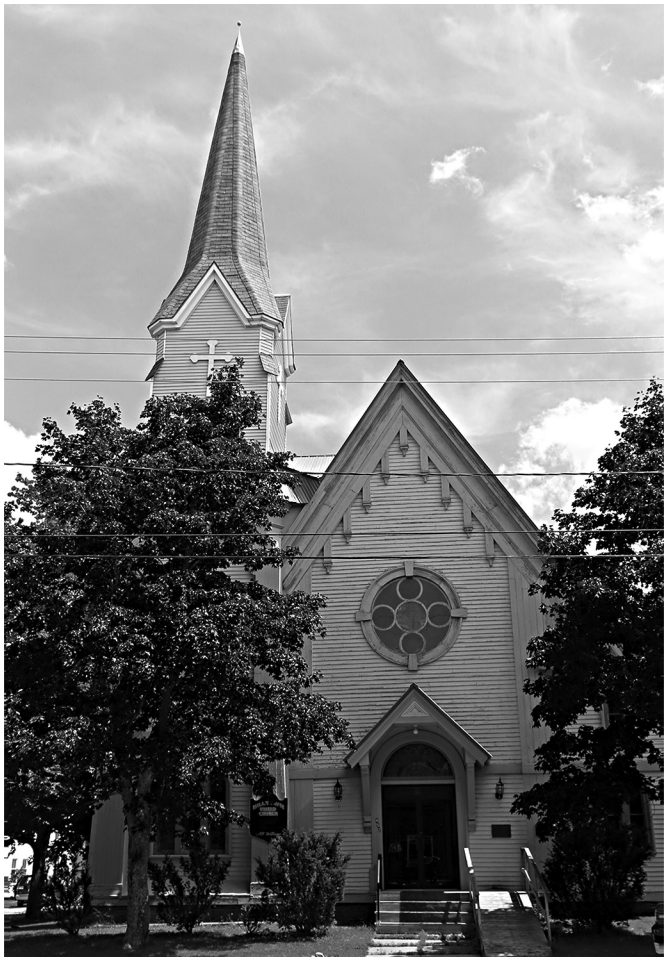
Gibson must have been generally well liked in the community for, Boardman added, in later years, after "Sandy" had become rich and famous, "no one on the St. Croix was mean enough to envy Mr. Gibson's success or was not rejoiced at it."

Boardman's memoir is interesting on a number of counts. It gives a vivid sense of Gibson's essentially serious and thoughtful cast of mind - a picture, perhaps, of one revolving plans for the future. It also shows that, though remembered for having worked at Union Mills and Middle Landing, Gibson was not just a sawyer but was employed on the river drives and probably in the winter lumber camps as well. When Gibson began work, sometime in the late 1830s, steam sawmills were still a novelty in the industry, and most mills, being water-driven, shut down when the rivers froze. At that time the men went upriver to prepare their camps and to cut the logs which, when there was enough snow on the ground, could be skidded to holding areas near the camp and later to the river brows for final piling. This work took them until April, when logs were slid into the streams as the water rose and driven downstream to the mills. Milling itself ran from late spring until early winter, when the cycle would begin again. The lumber camp always had a "boss" in charge of general operations, and it may have been on the upper St. Croix that Gibson acquired this nickname. It was later said of him that there was no aspect of the lumber business with which he was not personally familiar and in which could not outperform his employees. It was in Milltown and on the St. Croix that he would have acquired these skills.

Life in the camps and mills, not to mention the province generally, was undergoing a remarkable change at this time, one which was to leave an indelible impress upon Gibson's business and personal life. That was the temperance movement. In the first few decades of the province's existence, the effects of cheap rum pouring in from the West Indies was nowhere more evident than in the lumber towns like Milltown. In those days, remembered John Springer, "Liquor flowed as freely as the waters which bore their logs to the mills. Hogsheads of rum were drunk or wasted in the course of a few hours on some occasions, and excessive indulgence was the almost daily practice of the majority, even from the time of their arrival in the spring until the commencement of another winter's campaign." In 1832, he writes, a population of no more than 500 persons on the St. Croix consumed 3,500 gallons of ardent spirits. It wasn't unknown for loggers in the grog shops to accost passers-by and baptize them with a quart of rum poured over their heads. According to Peter Christie's *History of New Brunswick*, St. Andrews alone imported fully 104,259 gallons of rum in 1825 - not all for local consumption, certainly, but by any measure an enormous amount of booze.

A reaction soon set in. The creation in England of temperance hotels, journals, and associations in the mid 1830s was imitated along the banks of the St. Croix as well. The St. Andrews of 1838, for instance, was home to a Catholic Temperance Society, a Temperance House "where travellers can be accommodated on the Temperance system," a *Temperance Monitor*, and even a Temperance Ship Club, to which for the purposes of building a vessel members paid an annual fee that they would lose if they were caught more than one time in a state of intoxication.

Similar sentiments were afoot in St. Stephen and Milltown. A St. Stephen Temperance Society was formed in 1834, and the man who was probably one of Gibson's employers at Union Mills, William Todd, was a noted abstainer himself, though descended from English aristocracy to whom card playing and drink were common. It was a great grief to him to have to send out casks of rum to the lumber camps every fall, and a great triumph in his long career as a lumberman finally to convince a logging crew to perform an entire year's work without the aid of it. "When I made known my purpose to employ such a gang of men," he related to Springer, "the answer almost invariably was 'You may try but, depend upon it, the drive will never come down.' But old men, who had been spurred on to exertion for thirty years by ardent spirits were forced to acknowledge, when they came down river, that they had never succeeded so well as before, and learned, at that late period, that the cause of their stiff joints and premature old age was not wholly on account of exposure to the cold and work in the water, but the result of strong drink." It seems likely, given the strength of the Methodist faith in the fami-



Milltown United Church. Probably Gibson's own church in his last years in St. Stephen - Milltown. **Author's Photograph, 2014.**

ly, and of the movement among his own employers and associates, that Gibson himself was from the beginning a strict temperance man or total abstainer.

It also seems that even as a young man Gibson had acquired something of a public presence in Milltown - at least in the ranks of the faithful. Robert Conners, a Methodist emigrant minister from Ireland, passed through Milltown and St. Stephen in the 1850s and published some recollections in his *Autobiography of a Wesleyan Methodist Missionary* (1856). The rough character of the area having gone before it, he feared preaching there would be much akin to plowing among rocks. There were said to be many sins committed in the booms, mills, and

upriver camps, and the faith itself had only a nominal membership at the time, being thought by many to be too particular, stringent, and undemocratic. While in his short stay Conners found his fear too often justified, he reserved published praise for a few individuals. Among the faithful, he wrote, "there is little doubt but we shall hear that Mr. James Bowes, Mr. Alexander Gibson, Mr. James Crossett and others are zealous for the glory of the Lord, and for the maintenance and extension of Methodism in Milltown."

What exactly Gibson was doing to earn this sort of praise can only be surmised, but given his later philanthropy it is possible he had become a church benefactor of some sort. There were two Methodist churches in the Milltown - St. Stephen area, both established by Duncan McColl, one at King Street in St. Stephen in 1790 and the other at Middle Landing in 1810. The latter burned in 1844 but was rebuilt. Among the congregation who contributed to the new edifice were Abner and Stephen Hill, brothers and temperance men with whom Gibson was connected in business matters at the time. It is at least possible that Gibson, with some money in his pockets and a desire to advance the faith, contributed to the cause. It would have been at this church, located just upstream from Middle Landing, that Gibson worshipped on his return visit in 1900.

Several stories affirm, unfortunately without any details, that Gibson entered into business for himself sometime before he left Milltown for Lepreau. He himself later stated to the Royal Commission on Labour in 1888 that he had been in business for 45 years, which would have made him an entrepreneur in Milltown at the very young age of 23, the same time he was married. Apart from the buying and selling of property, it is not known what other form this business may have taken. But at this time he seems to have had money in his pocket, or at least the desire to gamble with what little he had, as the land records for the period show him engaged quite actively in the property market. In 1846 and 1847, for instance, he purchased several lots at and near the Middle Landing from Robert Hitchings and his son, Stephen, the latter of whom, a barrister, studied law under Abner Hill's son, George. With the descriptions of land parcels at the time involving chains, degrees, roads and trees, it is difficult to say exactly where these lots were located, but it would have made sense for Gibson to buy land close to his place of work. Additionally, he and his brother-in-law, Thomas Robinson, who would work with him in Lepreau and Marysville, became joint tenants in a St. Stephen farm lot. In 1852 he purchased a 100-acre farm lot in St. James parish, mortgaging one half to Robert Robinson, another brother-in-law, and the other to John R. McConnell, Jr., son of his aunt Margaret. Between 1852 and 1853 he picked up three other lots in St. Stephen close to Middle Landing, totaling about 150 acres and costing about £425, selling one of his first purchases to

brother-in-law Christopher Robinson for £32. Whatever sort of work Gibson was doing at the time, it seems to have been putting some money in his pocket, and it was probably more lucrative than the subsistence type of work associated with labour in the mills and camps.

WITH PERHAPS SOME money in the bank, Gibson stepped out semi-prominently into the business world in 1854 when he and Samuel T. King of Calais leased William Kilby Reynolds' sawmill at Lepreau Harbour. This decision, remembered George Boardman, "naturally created some talk in a community interested in lumber operations, and new ventures in that line." About King not a lot is known. A Calais lumberman who doubtless lumbered with Gibson on the St. Croix, he after leaving the Lepreau operation became for one year Mayor of Calais (1868), and later set up a prosperous milling operation of his own, called S. T. King and Sons, in Saint John. (Kingsville road seems to be a remnant of the little village which grew up around his mill.)

William Kilby Reynolds, on the other hand, was in his day and for some time afterwards a rather famous individual. A total abstinence man from Pembroke, Maine, Reynolds was resident in Saint John with a summer home in Lepreau. In 1853 he had completed the construction of the Reversing Falls passenger bridge, the first successful attempt to span the chasm there, paying out of his own pocket the entire cost of £20,000 and giving subscribers two years to repay his investment, and that contingent only upon successful completion of the project. A few years later Reynolds started the St. John Street Railway Company, a kind of tram-service using horse-drawn rail cars, an operation which, however, was not financially viable and soon closed. In the 1880s he was the driving force behind the Grand Southern Railway, which connected Saint John with St. Stephen and, perhaps by no small coincidence, passed directly by his home in Lepreau.

In 1852 Reynolds purchased a four-acre mill property at Lepreau Harbour from William Heavey for £150. The property as a working mill dated to at least 1832, when Moses Shaw of Nova Scotia constructed two mills there, one at the upper and one at the lower falls, the property passing through several other owners before falling to Reynolds. The town of Lepreau at that time was serviced by the "great port road," as it was called then, connecting Saint John and St. Stephen, which passed directly through the village and mills. The Lepreau River, nearby Musquash River and New River, were all busy lumbering sites, if not on the same level as the Magaguadavic or the St. Croix. Reynolds was a businessman, not a professional lumberman, but, despite the failure of the Saint John Street Railway, he had excellent business sense. Between 1853 and 1854 he obtained Crown land grants for 430 acres of timberland on Lepreau River and Harbour and in nearby Pennfield, probably did some upgrading of

the mills, including the dam, and took a percentage on logs cut for him by lumbermen like Bela Lawrence and others.

Who approached whom is not known, but it seems to have been accepted on both sides that the Lepreau operation - perhaps not just the mill but log-cutting and driving operations - could be made more profitable and professional by way of outside expertise. Significantly, the terms of the lease, dating to 1854 and dictated entirely by Gibson and King, are very specific as to exactly what upgrading needed to be done before these men would be willing to take charge of the business.

By the first of April, 1855, Reynolds was to erect two gangs of saws, complete with edgers and trimmers, along with two or more lath machines, either in addition to or in place of whatever saws were already on site, and to include all necessary tools; to raise the dam by one foot; to provide wharves and piling places below the mills sufficient to hold a million feet of sawed lumber and one million laths piled ten thousand high; also to build a road and provide sufficient carts to take away the edgings and refuse wood for burning. More generally, together with the blacksmith shop on site, store, and four dwelling houses with garden plots, Gibson and King acquired the right to cut pine and spruce mill logs, masts, and spars anywhere on the Lepreau River or its branches from the tide to the head of the river as far as they could haul, and Reynolds agreed to secure all desired timberland either by purchase or lease. Aside from other stipulations, such as the right to build and repair houses, all of which would be sold back to Reynolds at a mutually agreed upon price, the lease was to run for five years beginning January 1, 1855, and Gibson and King were to pay Reynolds seven shillings and six pence for every thousand feet of lumber to be manufactured. They might, if they so chose, cut all the logs in the nearby mill belonging to Bela R. Lawrence, to a maximum of two million feet, for the sum of five shillings and six pence per thousand linear feet. This, presumably, to afford them employment until such time as the renovations to the mill were complete.

In 1854, just before taking up business at Lepreau, Gibson and King acquired two properties at nearby Pennfield from Reynolds for £125: both half-acre lots with house and out buildings, one being used by the present occupants as a hotel. As one of Gibson's grandchildren later recalled that her mother was born at Lepreau, it is possible that Gibson and King moved their families nearby, though Gibson did not give up his properties in St. Stephen, and some other of his children may have been born there as well. Gibson also brought men with him from Milltown and St. Stephen. Some of them continued on with him after the move to Fredericton, and died in Marysville.

Though not a lot is known about the Lepreau mill, a traveller on the Grand Southern Railway in 1891 remembered it in its heyday. The mill itself "stood on a high wall of red sandstone that barred the advance of the tide from the Bay of

Fundy and had a fine head of water and a grand supply of logs." Nearby was the company store, "where many thousands of dollars changed hands, and where the officers of ships from all countries came to make character." Out in Shaw's Cove always stood many vessels waiting to load.

This mill acquired some fame in its day. It probably wasn't true, as was related in one Gibson obituary, that Gibson "became lessee of what was then the finest and fastest mill in the province." It is more likely, as was originally stated in the *Biographical Review* for 1900, that under the expert guidance of Gibson and King, the Lepreau mill "proved to be the finest and fastest in New Brunswick." In 1876, well after Gibson and King had gone, the mill burned, as mills often did in those days. The *St. John Weekly,* reporting on the event, stated that the cost of upgrading the mill had been $20,000, and that for water power "it had few equals on the continent." "During the continuance of the lease," it added, "it performed some remarkable feats of sawing. On one occasion it with one gang cut 67,000 feet of long lumber in ten hours, the logs being taken from the pond without being sorted for the purpose. It is believed that this, taking everything into consideration, has never been beaten."

The rapid development of this operation under Gibson and King can be inferred somewhat from the rapidly increasing amounts of Crown timberland Reynolds leased over the next few years, which climbed steadily from zero square miles in 1853, to 28 in 1855, to 41 in 1859, reaching a high of 60 to 62 in 1861 and 1862. After Gibson left the operation in the fall of 1861, leased square mileage declined to 41 in 1863, reached zero in 1864, climbing back after this to the low teens and high thirties when Reynolds enlisted Nathan Smart to take over where Gibson and King had left off.

All accounts agree that the property, which probably had never been very profitable, made considerable money for Gibson and perhaps for King. Oscar Hanson, long-time resident of the area, remembered (perhaps not with total accuracy) that many decades previously, Gibson had told him that he was taking ninety thousand dollars of clear profit from the operation, and that all he had invested in the concern was five hundred dollars. It would be useful to know over what period of time this profit had supposedly accumulated. According to one story, it wasn't by way of mill work alone that Gibson came into his money, but chiefly from the secret salvage of £70,000 in gold and silver coin from the hold of His Majesty's brig "Plumper," which sank nearby in 1812 en route from Halifax to Saint John. According to Austin Squires in an *Atlantic Advocate* article for 1963, in the early 1860s, when air pumps and rubber diving suits were available, Gibson probably hired divers to salvage the treasure, and "it may not be mere coincidence that the next year he was able to buy two lumber mills in the Nashwaak valley and extensive lands in central New Brunswick."

An antidote to this account could be drawn from an article in the *Chicago Lumberman*, which was reprinted in the *Gleaner* for 1894. According to the writer, "A sprig of nobility visited Marysville, Gibson's home, and having been shown over the town and through the industrial establishments, asked the proprietor how he had attained such marvelous success in life. Without a word the old man threw his hat down, stripped off his coat and took his place at the edger, and having edged four or five deals, he turned to the visitor, and with fire in his eye and a glow on his cheek, answered the question: 'By hard work, sir!'" To this might have been added, if Gibson had been a less modest man, very shrewd business sense and a willingness to take calculated risks.

Not a lot more is known about the Lepreau operation. While there, however, Gibson continued to buy and sell land in St. Stephen. He sold four of his lots at or near Middle Landing for £300 but also bought one lot near the sluice at Middle Landing for £25, as well as a 70 acre lot on the north side of the St. Andrews road opposite the Gibson homestead in St. David for £50. This was later the home of Gibson's sister Charlotte, after the death of her husband James Glendenning, a St. Stephen lumberman who worked with Gibson in Marysville.

At some point, Gibson and King parted ways, and there may have been some sort of falling out. According to Fred Phillips' "Boss Gibson, Tycoon of the Eighties," a racy if sometimes fanciful collection of anecdotes which appeared in *Canadian Magazine* in 1936, one day Gibson, deciding that the business was not big enough for him and anyone else, penned a note to King and set it beneath a paperweight on the office desk and walked out. The note read simply: "I will buy or sell half this business for $10,000." When he returned he found the note gone, and in its place a cheque for $10,000. "So Sandy took his cheque and prepared to change the scene of his activities to a location that had fascinated him for some time previous. That location was the valley of the Nashwaak, which river converges with the St. John from the northeast just opposite the city of Fredericton." That, at least, is one story, inaccurate in at least one sense, as Gibson and King were never owners of the mill.

The Lepreau operation ground on after Gibson's departure, though in later years it was remembered more for Gibson's having been there than for anything else. By the time the correspondent on the Grand Southern wandered the grounds in 1891, long after the fire of 1876 and Reynolds' death in 1882, there was little left but "some old iron wheels, a few rotten timbers and a general appearance of desolation." Hard to believe, wrote the traveller, that "here Mr. Alexander Gibson, the Nashwaak lumber and cotton king, began that busy lumbering life that reached its consummation at Marysville and the Nashwaak."