

CHAPTER EIGHT:

The Nashwaak Potentate

We have no desire to decry Mr. Gibson's importance in a political contest. He wields a large influence no doubt, but we have yet to learn that all the electors must sneeze every time he takes snuff.

- Herald, Feb 16, 1895.

IN 1893 A curve was built on the Nashwaaksis side of the river allowing Canadian Pacific trains from Woodstock to bypass the Canada Eastern Railway station at Gibson, prompting a melancholy observation from the *Herald* that "Railroading does not appear to have many advantages to offer this city but rather the opposite." Gibson senior must have been feeling the same thing. The CPR's decision to drop the Fredericton - Salisbury section of the Short Line seemed almost to have doomed the Fredericton Railway Bridge from the start, and the Canada Eastern Railway was not turning enough of a profit to pay even for basic maintenance.

It was understood that obtaining Gibson's support at election time was of critical importance. Gibson himself had never felt the need to run for political office, being able to work his will sufficiently behind the scenes. He had been very fortunate to have unloaded the New Brunswick Railway on George Stephen and the projectors of the Canadian Pacific Railway. This time, however, things were different. He needed to maintain for at least the time being the more than favorable terms secured for the railway bridge while he endeavoured to sell both it and the Canada Eastern Railway to the federal government. That was now his most pressing project, and it would take ten years of political maneuvering to accomplish it.

In the run-up to the Federal election of 1896, it was revealed that not since 1888 had the Fredericton Bridge Company paid any interest on its original \$300,000 loan. Not, that is, since Charles Eulas Foster, Conservative member for Kings, had become Finance Minister and Gibson himself had deserted the Liberal party for the Conservatives. The Liberal *Herald*, Gibson's former supporter, struck the first blow in February of 1895 when it accused Gibson, the "Nashwaak potentate," of parachuting his own personal candidate, for his



Thomas Temple (1818-1899). A lumberman, businessman and close associate of Alexander Gibson, Temple served as High Sheriff of Fredericton, was President of the Fredericton Branch Railway, Director of the "Gibson Branch" railway to Edmundston, and Conservative M. P. for York from 1884 to 1896. He was appointed to the Senate in 1896.
LAC PA 033696.

own personal reasons, into the contest for York. "We have no desire to decry Mr. Gibson's importance in a political contest," stated the paper. "He wields a large influence no doubt, but we have yet to learn that all the electors must sneeze every time he takes snuff." Gibson was defended by the conservative *Gleaner*, his former enemy. Mr. Gibson left the Liberal party at the same time, it retorted rather speciously, "when Mr. Edward Blake, their then leader, was obliged in justice to his reputation as a statesman and a thoughtful, prudent, farseeing man to sever connection with the party."

Gibson's position on the National Policy came up for discussion. The Conservatives pointed out that a few months previously, when Mr. Fielding, Maritime leader of the Liberal party, was in Fredericton attempting to curry favor with Mister Gibson, he stated that the Liberal free trade policy would not hurt Gibson's business, as he

George Eulas Foster, M. P. for York. New Brunswick born, Foster was educated at the University of New Brunswick where he served as Professor of Classics, later Member of Parliament under seven consecutive Prime Ministers, mostly in conservative governments. Appointed to the Senate in 1921. LAC PA 027771.



was too strongly situated that way for any change in tariff to much affect him. So why, it argued, does Gibson now support a policy which even the opposition has acknowledged he does not need to continue healthily in business? Because it is the best thing for the country as a whole, it concluded, that's why. The *Herald* countered that yes Gibson was once quoted in the words of the *Gleaner* itself that he "does not consider the National Policy necessary to the prosperity of his cotton business, but believes that he can manufacture cotton and hold his own against all comers in a fair field." But just a few days previously, in a speech at City Hall, did not Mr. Foster state in no uncertain terms that "No cotton industry would be able to continue its operations for a single three months if the duty was taken away, even against Great Britain alone." How then is Mister Gibson not actuated by self-interest in his switch to the Conservative platform? "They declare

that the National Policy is a good thing for the country,” chimed in the *St. Andrews Beacon*, “but to our mind it simply proves that pelf, not patriotism, is the actuating motive in Mr. Gibson’s case. He sees in the continuance of the National Policy an opportunity to add a few more millions to his pile.”

Forced to defend himself, Foster took the rostrum at City Hall in March, praising Gibson as a producer and developer of resources without parallel in the county, and claiming for his own policy “a perfect right for it to appeal to men like Mr. Gibson,” as well as a perfect right for himself “to have the political friendship of Mr. Gibson, if he chooses to give it to me.” Meanwhile, in Parliament, dirty laundry was beginning to be aired. Mr. McMullen and other Liberals noted that the Bridge Company had paid only one year’s interest on its \$300,000 loan - \$12,000 for 1887 - and since Mr. Foster became Finance Minister in 1888, not one penny. Now fully \$72,000 was outstanding, and this in spite of letters to the Bridge Company from the Auditor General, none of which had been answered. When Mr. Hazen, Conservative member for Saint John and quondam political opponent went out his way to praise Gibson as a citizen to whom New Brunswick never owed a greater debt of gratitude, Mr. McMullen retorted that Mr. Gibson was doubtless as prudent as he was wealthy. The paid-up stock of the Bridge Company was only 10 percent of the \$200,000 maximum, a mere \$20,000, divided among five directors. While Gibson could have financed the whole project out of his own pocket, “It would be much safer, from his standpoint, to be merely a small stockholder, and utilize his friend, Mr. Temple, to secure from the Government a loan at a very low rate of interest. In this he was successful. They obtained this loan in 1887, and in return Mr. Gibson joined the ranks of the Tory party, and has supported them ever since.” Sir Richard Cartwright, while making the same point, was rather more delicate in his phraseology. “Mr. Gibson,” he said, “as well as other people, possibly desires to obtain for himself a little larger gratuity, shall we say, or assistance shall we say, or recognition shall we say, from the public treasury, than, perhaps, citizens of less wealth are likely to secure.”

Gibson had some reason to be confident in Foster’s success. In February, a provincial election had returned Blair’s Liberals to power with almost a complete sweep, the only victors for the Conservatives being the contestants in Saint John and to no very great surprise the four Conservative candidates for York: John Black, William T. Howe, Herman H. Pitts and James K. Pinder. “The adverse result in York,” wrote the *Yarmouth Herald*, “is attributed mainly to Alexander Gibson, of Marysville, a wealthy lumberman and cotton manufacturer, who practically dictates the votes, though not the opinions, of the large majority of electors in many of the parishes. For instance, in the village of Marysville, which is owned almost entirely by Gibson, and where

almost every elector is his employee or tenant, the vote stood for the government 17 against 355.”

To no one's very great surprise Foster won in York, but the country as a whole swept Laurier into power, and Gibson, in whatever business dealings he was now contemplating with regard to the bridge or the Canada Eastern Railway, now found himself on the wrong side of the aisle in both the provincial and federal chambers. With government assistance now unlikely, he turned his attentions first to the CPR. That summer saw him at Covenhoven in St. Andrews, the palatial summer estate on Minister's Island of CPR President William Van Horne. Doubtless, speculated the *St. Andrews Beacon*, Mr. Gibson is in town in regard to railway and bridge matters. That is, since Charles Tupper was no longer in a position to advocate for the Canada Eastern Railway as a “feeder” of the Intercolonial Railway, as he had once seemed to promise, those to whom such promises were made “will either have to go without the promised favors or seek help in other quarters.”

Whatever possibilities lay with the CPR, Gibson was not one to put all his eggs in one basket, and he now looked to his former opponents and friends, the federal Liberals, as a second option. Opportunely, the long-standing Premier of New Brunswick, Andrew Blair, had taken the federal post of Minister of Railways and Canals in July, and newspaper reports the following year suggested that he favored incorporation of the Canada Eastern Railway into the Intercolonial Railway. Van Horne himself took a turn over the railway in 1897 but the *Gleaner* was not convinced that the great man's denial that the Canadian Pacific Railway had any real interest in the line was anything more than a ruse. York county would much prefer the line to stay in the hands of Gibson himself, it stated, rather than have it pass into the power of a soulless corporation, and measures should be taken to force Blair to exert himself a little more on the matter. “Until this is done,” it said, “the public will be satisfied that Mr. Blair is either insincere in his professions or is utterly without influence in the Federal cabinet.”

Rumours of a possible buy-out by either the federal government or the Canadian Pacific Railway persisted through 1897, and anxiety was ratcheted up a notch in December when Gibson took a trip to Montreal, presumably Canadian Pacific Railway related. Such was provincial interest in the matter that early in 1898 representatives from along the line of the Canada Eastern Railway met to formally advocate for incorporation of the line into the Intercolonial Railway. Their reasoning passed party lines; they took the perhaps dubious position that the Canada Eastern Railway would be a way of lessening the Intercolonial Railway deficit, and, more strongly, that federal ownership would protect them from higher freight rates, such as had been the case when the Gibson Line of the New Brunswick Railway had come un-