

CHAPTER TWO:

A River to Himself

We learn that a Nova Scotia gentleman named Gibson, who has recently purchased the Rankin Mills on the Nashwaak, with extreme reserves of land in that vicinity, is making great alterations and improvements in that locality. He has already built what may be termed a village in the neighbourhood of the mills; is about following his good work with another in the same place. He has also built a very handsome schoolhouse for the use of the inhabitants, and has furnished it with a belfry, etc., with all the conveniences attached to such communities in wealthy communities. This erection has, we are told, cost 250 pounds. Mr. Gibson has also added largely to the working capabilities of the mills and we learn that he is about to place them in a position to saw 15 millions annually. We wish there were many others of his disposition and capabilities in York County.
- Fredericton Reporter, July 4, 1864.

IN LATE DECEMBER, 1862, Gibson finalized the purchase of six pieces of property on the Nashwaak River from Robert Rankin and Company of Saint John at bargain basement prices. The firm was in trouble. It had been incorporated in 1822 as a branch of the much larger concern of Gilmour, Pollock and Company, a small group of frugal and hard-working Scots who under the Napoleonic blockade had opened timber export businesses in Miramichi in 1812, when the area was still pristine wilderness, in Quebec and Montreal in 1828, in Restigouche in 1835, and in Bathurst in 1838. Rankin and Company held large timber reserves on the Tobique, upper Saint John, and Nashwaak rivers, including a mill at the latter location. Under Robert Rankin, renowned for his long hours at the Saint John office, the mill had been very well managed. After his retirement to Liverpool in 1838, however, the company began a slow slide into insolvency. The Saint John business was very large and complicated, wrote John Rankin, company historian, with a vast retail store, shipyard, coal and salt warehouses, and expensive harbourfront wharfage necessary for handling large quantities of timber. But while the pine-driven square timber business was dying, the Nashwaak mills, managed by a junior partner both tubercular and alcoholic, were supplying little by way of spruce deals. Alternate markets in the West Indies were not being sought out, and there was a great deal of redundancy and duplication in the management of the company. With little

else to do beyond worry about how to pay the bills, remembered an employee, “drink began before breakfast” and continued the rest of the day.

The Nashwaak mill was the relic of a much older mill, perhaps the first such in the Saint John River valley. “On a very old plan,” reported a correspondent to the *St. John Telegraph* in 1883, “which appears to have been made about 1765 by some persons from Massachusetts, who intended establishing a colony to be called Newton, a short distance above the mouth of the Nashwaak, there is laid down a sawmill upon the very spot where the Marysville mills, owned by Mr. Gibson, now stand.” Later, by 1820, local magistrate Stair Agnew owned a sawmill on the site which in 1829 was leased by his estate to Alexander McLaggan and others, who were only partially successful in their attempt to extend the dam across the river. In 1832 this lease was sold to Nathaniel Blake, who purchased it with money borrowed from Robert Rankin. Additional loans from Rankin led to an overextended business, and in 1839 Rankin foreclosed on the mortgage. The mill stood idle for a number of years, and in 1845 was put up for sale.

Its advertisement in the *New Brunswick Courier* for that year described the property as comprising “one Mill, containing six saws in single gates; one mill, containing two saws in single gates; with a grist mill, in good order, driving two pair of stones.” Though the saws were single, gangs could be easily substituted at little cost. The draw, in “perfect and complete order, having been completed at very great expense . . . runs entirely across the river Nashwaak, thus securing the whole waters of the river for the driving of the mills.” In addition there was also a fine store, a blacksmith shop, with cottage and garden, and a number of houses for the millmen. The mill came with 7,000 acres of land, and taking everything together it was asserted that “There can scarcely be found within this province such a valuable water privilege,” the whole business “well deserving the attention of any party wishing to embark in the lumber trade.”

There being no takers for this extraordinary offer, the mill eventually fell into ruin. Into the void stepped Alexander Gibson. Edward Jack, Gibson’s scholarly surveyor, related much later, in an article for the *St. John Sun*, that about thirty years previously (apparently after Gibson and King had parted ways at Lepreau) he had been asked by Samuel King, then a prominent merchant of Calais, if he knew of a good site on the Saint John River for the manufacture of spruce deals. Jack replied that he had heard from John Bradbury, a leading New Brunswick lumberman, that the Nashwaak River was excellent. It turned out that Robert Rankin and Company, owners of a large mill on that river, were anxious to dispose of their property and were willing to part with it for \$28,000, even though they had sunk \$130,000 into it themselves.

Edward Jack and Thomas Robinson (probably Alexander Gibson's brother-in-law) ascended the river with an Indian guide to look over the site.

What Jack found was not the golden property of the Rankin ad, even allowing for fifteen years of neglect, but rather "a large mill in a bad state of repair; a store, and a few mean, dirty-looking houses. The place was unhealthy, typhoid fever being endemic, owing to the use of water from a filthy well that stood behind the store, and into which drained bacteria from the neighboring cesspools. The cause of religion was represented by a small, unpainted building with a truncated spire just large enough to hold a bell. The edifice stood on a piece of low land and diverged very considerably from the perpendicular." With their considerable experience in the business of spruce lands, Jack and Robinson saw that beyond the run-down mill, dirty buildings, and crooked church lay 7,000 acres of prime spruce land, as good as they had ever seen, along with a long river extending contiguous to the vast and largely untouched land holdings of the New Brunswick and Nova Scotia Land Company, ripe for the picking. Upon his return to Calais, Jack recommended the property to King, but when the latter declined to accept the \$28,000 purchase price, "Mr. Gibson, hearing of the property, came up the Saint John River, saw and purchased the property."

Gibson seems to have driven a hard bargain. What the Rankin Company had hoped to obtain \$28,000 for went finally for £7,300 sterling. Gibson paid £2,800 down and negotiated a loan from Francis Ferguson, the Company's solicitor, partner and part-owner, of £4,500 to cover the balance. In exchange he secured, on the mill side of the Nashwaak, the Waterloo Mill tract, including the mills and buildings; 5,675 acres of spruce land upriver, reaching to the boundary of the New Brunswick and Nova Scotia Land Company holdings to the west; as well as the right to drive and boom logs along a stretch of the river known as the "Narrow Passage." On the other or highway side of the river Gibson obtained 470 acres of a tract of 630 acres granted to George and Urban Agnew, and purchased 160 acres of the remainder, including Holly Brook Farm, as well as 480 acres of land slightly upriver and spanning the Nashwaak. The total was about 6,655 acres.

Though the deal was formally closed on December 30, 1862, Gibson, his family and men had probably moved onto the property some time before this. Jack related that the first things Gibson did when he went upriver to investigate what other lands were for sale were to fill in the poisoned well, thoroughly renovate the mill, and bring in skilled mill hands. Then he did two simple and obvious things - simple and obvious to him at least - and in the judgement of all later commentators the key to his later success. First, he sent expert lumbermen up the river to clear out the branch streams and build dams. Then he had his men build a mile of piers, consisting of caissons

of squared timber filled with stone and sunk to the river bottom, just upriver from the mill, the anchors for a giant boom large enough to contain the entire drive. "The former owners," wrote Jack, "had not seen the necessity of the thing, and instead of doing the river driving entirely in the spring, when the water was high and flow constant, they could only drive a very few logs at a time into the very small boom at their mills, and thus they were river driving all summer." The boom served also to ensure that if any of the smaller upriver booms broke, as sometimes occurred, little would sneak past the mill.

According to a story published in the *Fredericton Herald* in 1902 (in an issue now lost but reproduced partially in the *St. Andrews Beacon*), Gibson's first cruise up the Nashwaak to his logging camp started on December 15. Whatever the cause - and it could have been a late decision to purchase, problems putting the properties and river in basic running order, or negotiations with the Rankin Company - this was very late in the year. Typically, the lumbermen were in the woods by first snowfall, and by mid-December a good deal of spruce would already have been cut and piled. As the spring drives would begin by late March or early April, it would have been absolutely critical for Gibson to make some kind of profit over the winter. He could not expect a return on his lumber until the fall of the next year, and in between were all the associated expenses of cutting, shipping, paying his men, and so on.

According to the story, the day set for departure opened with a blinding snowstorm, and it was thought by many that the expedition would have to wait for clear weather before starting out. But the naysayers did not know Mr. Gibson, remembered an eyewitness, because at the appointed hour he and his axmen and scalers were assembled and ready to start out. What with the bad weather the horses were able to make only 28 miles in the first day, and the first night was spent at Johnston's farm. The parlour was furnished with a box stove and the floor, and for entertainment there were Gibson's Scotch songs and silly stories by a certain "Polly," an Irishman who seemed to be a kind of clown and camp hanger-on. "Mr. Gibson," recalled the teller, "then possessed a rich tenor voice, and could sing a Scotch or Irish song with just expression and rare effect. I remember two songs he sang that night, 'I'll awa to Nannie' and 'Lochaber no More.' When he finished the last song he said, 'Now Polly for a story.' So Polly told us a bear story as follows." And here Polly told the tale of about how once on the St. Croix he got a big bear that was following the sled drunk with chunks of beef soaked in a pail of rum ("Ye know, Sandy," he needled, "we couldn't cut them logs without rum."), knocked him on the head and dragged him to camp. Gibson listened quietly to this absurdity, then took out his notebook and speaking aloud wrote: "Here we are at Johnston's this evening of the 15th of December listening to Polly's

nonsense.” “Yes,” said Polly, “and while we’ve the pencil in hand, just put to it, and to Gibson murtherin’ Irish songs!”

This, the only picture of Gibson in the years between his arrival in Marysville and first notice in the press in 1864, says a great deal about the man. His pride in his Scotch heritage, his touch of showmanship and the easy way he fit in with his men, not to mention his sense of humour and ability to take a joke, are all illustrated quite nicely in this charming anecdote. It may say something, too, about the loyalty Gibson inspired in his crew. In all probability “Polly” was just one of many who journeyed from St. Stephen to Lepreau, and from there to the Nashwaak. It also shows that at this point in his career, Gibson was out there in the woods with his men. Later, this duty would be devolved upon his sons and grandsons, and Gibson would take a purely administrative role, but at this point the money didn’t seem to be there.

According to one account, Gibson was able to saw 25 million superficial feet of spruce in his first year, though this, as with so many of the stories that post-date Gibson, may be something of an exaggeration, as Gibson’s first notice in the local press, a *Fredericton Reporter* article for July 4, 1864, states that the new owner of the Rankin property, “a Nova Scotia gentleman named Gibson,” has improved his mill to the point where it will soon be able to saw 15 million feet annually. Whatever the amount Gibson actually cut in his first year’s work, the revenues seem to have been fairly substantial. In October, 1863, when the money from the previous winter came in, he was able to pay off his mortgage in full, and after less than a year at his new location found himself impressively debt free.

He may have had money left over, because between the spring of 1863 and the summer of 1864 he began to make substantial improvements to his new mill property. It was to be more than a sawmill with a crew of men quartered around it; it was to be a village of his own creation. He named it Marysville after his wife - not, as one story later had it, after his daughter Mary who died of typhoid in 1867. According to a *Reporter* article of 1865, Gibson had already built a village and splendid schoolhouse, with an adjacent village in the works. A year later a correspondent to the *St. John Globe* also drew attention to the changes that had been made at the Nashwaak site. When Gibson took hold of the property, he recalled, “it seemed like a ‘deserted village,’ everything about it was so crazy-and-tumble-down looking,” but now with “the neat cottages, the modest schoolhouse, the smiling fields of grain, and the well-cultivated gardens,” it seemed like a different place.

On the west side of the river, at the corner of Canada and Bridge Streets, as early as 1863, Gibson had built a frame 2 ½ storey general store, moving the old Rankin store north to be used as a feed store. As for proper quartering of his men, and perhaps in the earliest days himself and family, this