

1. John Joseph Caldwell Abbott. The future Prime Minister was MP for Argenteuil when this picture was taken in April 1870. Already Montreal's, and probably Canada's, highest-earning lawyer, he was also Dean of Law at McGill and President of the Canada Central Railway at that time. Library and Archives Canada Item 3497164. W. J. Topley photograph, 1870.

BAND OF BROTHERS

the ABBOTTS

By Brian Gilhuly – Part Three

Canada's early railways were shaped by a small group of men who lived and worked through the technology shift from canals to railways and the political transformation from colonies to confederation.

Remarkably, three pairs of brothers were prominent among them: Samuel and Thomas Keefer, Walter and Francis Shanly, and John and Harry Abbott. Five were civil engineers whose careers span the emergence of a profession from its craft roots. All were establishment Tories; the Keefers held public appointments, Walter Shanly and John Abbott were elected as Conservatives, while brothers Francis and Harry ran for the party without success.

John Abbott became Canada's third Prime Minister (photo 1). The brothers' legacies mark the Ottawa region but their accomplishments extended from the Canso Strait to the Pacific by way of Massachusetts. This is the third of three *Branchline* articles recounting their stories and looks at the Abbott brothers.

JOHN AND HARRY ABBOTT

Joseph Abbott arrived in Lower Canada as an Anglican missionary in 1818, posted to St. Andrews, in the seigneurie of Argenteuil, south of Lachute. There his son John Joseph Caldwell Abbott was born in 1821. A new posting in 1825 took him to a mission near Mont Yamaska, northwest of today's Granby, QC where Harry Braithwaite Abbott was born in 1829 (photo 2). The following year, the family moved to a mission at Grenville. Rev. Abbott devoted much of his energies to advancing education, and his involvement with McGill College took them to Montreal in the late 1840s.

Joseph Abbott took an early interest in railways. In 1840, he was one of the Company of Proprietors of the Upper and Lower Ottawa Rail-road (sic), chartered to build a portage railway from Carillon to Grenville. That project failed, as did a second in 1848. By then, son John had been admitted to the bar and become the junior partner of former Attorney-General William Badgley. In 1849 John married Mary Bethune, daughter of McGill's first Principal, and Harry began his civil engineering career, working for C. S. Gzowski and Co. on the construction of the St. Lawrence and Atlantic Railroad.

When the Montreal and Bytown Railway (M&B) was formed in 1853, Badgley and Abbott were the company solicitors. The Montreal and Bytown was not a success; in 1854 it built 13 miles of railway between Carillon and Grenville, by 1855 it was insolvent, and in April 1856 the Legislature authorised Argenteuil and Ottawa counties to operate its already-built section. There is no evidence that they did so.

John Abbott's legal practice flourished after Badgley was appointed to the bench in 1855, and he became lawyer of choice to Montreal's commercial and industrial elite. He taught law at McGill and became Liberal MPP for Argenteuil by the end of the decade. In 1862-63, he was Solicitor



2. Harry Braithwaite Abbott. This is 33-year-old Harry in 1862, when he was managing the Carillon and Grenville Railway between civil engineering projects. McCord Museum I-2455.1. William Notman photograph, 1862.

General for Canada East (Quebec) in the ministry of co-Premiers J. S. Macdonald and L.-V. Sicotte.

He also got into the railway business. Late in 1856, John sued the M&B and won a court-ordered sale of its assets for the benefit of creditors. By then, Harry

had formed a railway contracting partnership (Abbott & Freer) with Cortlandt Freer, L.-V.

Sicotte's son-in-law. When the Sheriff auctioned the Montreal and Bytown's assets on January

5, 1857, the Abbott brothers, Freer, and associates snapped them up for \$21,200 (photo 3). Abbott & Freer were busy with Grand Trunk contracts but had the line ready for the 1857 navigation season. It apparently operated that year and the next, though the precise arrangements are unknown.

4. Accidental Antique – When the Abbotts controlled the Carillon and Grenville (C&G), this locomotive was running on the Grand Trunk. Purchased used around 1870, it was renamed "Ottawa" in 1895, replacing the C&G's original Ottawa. Built in 1856, it was less than two years younger than the loco it replaced. – Library and Archives Canada Item 3353739. Photographer unknown, 1905.

SALE OF THE MONTREAL AND BYTOWN RAILWAY.—This property was sold by the Sheriff yesterday, for £5300. It was bought by Mr. Abbot.





**OPENING
OF THE
GRAND TRUNK RAILWAY
TO
RIVIERE DU LOUP.**

ON and AFTER MONDAY, July 2nd, DAILY TRAINS will run as follows:—
LEAVE Point Levi at 4 P.M., on arrival of Train from Montreal.
ARRIVE at Riviere du Loup at 10 P.M.
LEAVE Riviere du Loup at 8 A.M.
ARRIVE at Point Levi at 11 A.M., in time to take Express Train to Montreal, Island Pond, &c.
 Conveyances will always be in attendance to convey passengers to Quebec.
ABBOTT & FREER,
 Lessees.
 Quebec, June 23, 1860.



5. Abbott and Freer, Lessees – Harry Abbott and partner Cortlandt Freer struck a deal with the Grand Trunk to lease and operate its line east of Chaudiere Junction once it reached Saint-Pascal. They took over on December 31, 1859, opened to Rivière-du-Loup in July and ran it so profitably that the Grand Trunk took it back at the end of 1860. *Quebec Morning Chronicle*, 1860-06-30. Retrieved 2018-03-02 from: <http://numerique.banq.qc.ca/ressources/details/RJQ>

6. La Pocatière Station – Still in use by VIA today, though now unstaffed and served only by the overnight Ocean, this GTR station was already in place when Abbott and Freer leased the "Quebec and Riviere du Loup District." *Wikimedia VIA Rail station in La Pocatière*. Photographer Redlodger, 2007-09-24.

7. Worst Map Ever? – Produced in England to attract investors to the Brockville and Ottawa (B&O), this effort relied heavily on their ignorance. The odd selection of planned railways shown makes it almost impossible to date; it could be as early as 1854, but the library believes it is from 1856. The geography is bad, the compass rose is incorrect, so are numerous place names. Even the legend is wrong. Unsurprisingly, B&O bonds didn't sell well. *Toronto Public Library* 385.713 C127 SMALL. Unknown cartographer, 1856.

The new owners sought a Montreal - Ottawa charter as the Ottawa Valley Railway Company, but the bill was amended in committee and eventually passed with a more modest name and scope. The Carillon and Grenville



Railway Company was chartered on May 4, 1859 with John Abbott as President (photo 4 previous page). The company was sold to the newly-formed Ottawa River Navigation Company in 1864 for what was said to be a healthy profit.

At the end of 1859 Abbott & Freer took on another venture; they leased and operated the GTR's unwanted line from Point Levi east to St. Pascal and Rivière-du-Loup (photos 5 and 6). Their low-fare policies generated so much profit that the GTR took back operation of the line after just a year. Freer then left the partnership with Harry to serve as superintendent of a semi-autonomous GTR Eastern Division. He died, aged 31, in 1863, leaving his widow, Marguerite-Amélie, with three young children.

Among John Abbott's legal clients were shipping magnate Hugh Allan and English iron

and steelmaker Bolckow, Vaughan and Company (Bolckow). Both were involved with the Brockville and Ottawa Railway (B&O), which linked Brockville with Sand Point (*photo 7*); Allan was a shareholder and Bolckow its controlling bond-holder. It suited both to make John a director of the B&O in 1864 and Harry its Managing Director in 1866.



8. Canada Central Union Station, Ottawa – After Harry Abbott's final departure, the Canada Central opened a new Union Station at LeBreton Flats, Ottawa in May 1881 to accommodate trains of the Quebec, Montreal, Ottawa and Occidental Railway as well as its own. The next month, the CPR absorbed the Canada Central. The station burned down in 1895. Library and Archives Canada C-004848. Photograph ca. 1890, digitised by Colin Churcher.

John left the board after a year, but Harry Abbott moved to Brockville and remained with the B&O as General Manager for most of the next dozen years. In 1868, he married Marguerite-Amélie Freer. A new Bolckow acquisition, the Canada Central Railway (CCR), occupied both brothers that year. Chartered in 1861, the CCR was authorized to extend the B&O and entitled to land grants if it reached Pembroke. The immediate plan

was to connect Ottawa to the B&O at Carleton Place, linking the Capital to the Upper Valley and giving it a broad gauge connection to the GTR at Brockville. Long term, the CCR would be part of Hugh Allan's planned Pacific railway.

John had been elected in 1867 as Conservative MP for Argenteuil. He served on the boards of many companies in which Hugh Allan invested, including the Canada Central, and was President of the CCR when the Ottawa - Carleton Place section opened in 1870 (*photo 8*). Harry located and built the line, resigning temporarily from the B&O to take the construction contract. Once the CCR was open, Harry returned to manage both railways as an integrated operation. In late 1871, the Carleton Place - Sand Point section of the B&O was leased to the CCR for 999 years.

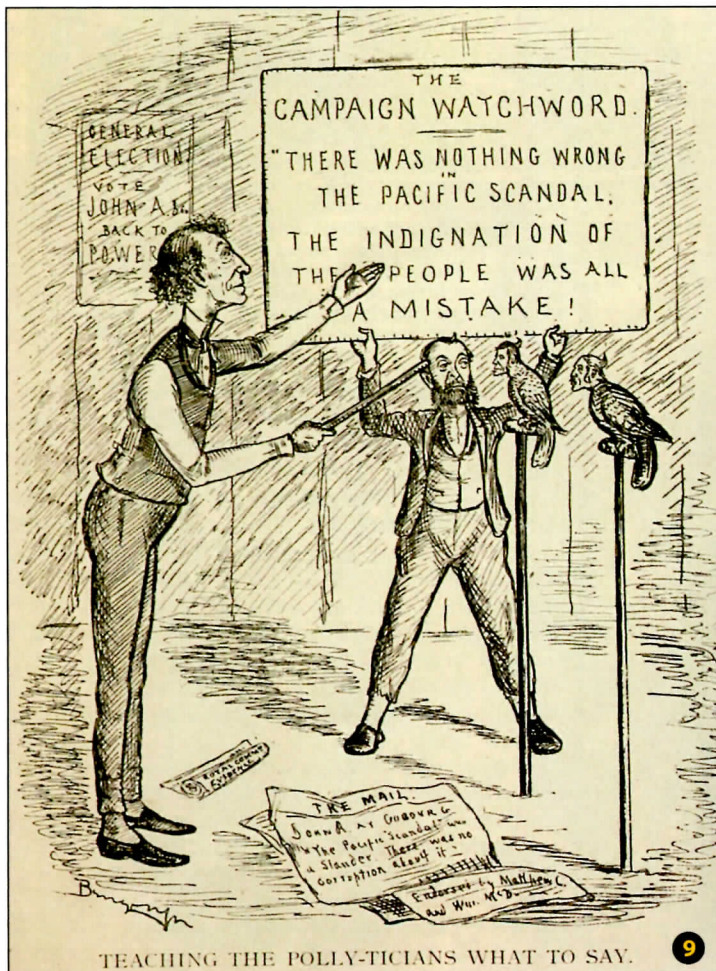
Preparations for the Pacific railway were then in high gear. Two syndicates bid for the franchise: a Toronto-based group and (now Sir) Hugh Allan's Canada Pacific Railway Co., based in Montreal. Among those in the Allan group was Senator Asa Foster, who acquired controlling interests in the B&O and CCR. The Pacific franchise would be awarded after the 1872 election, expected to be a close contest. Both Abbott brothers ran as Conservatives; John in Argenteuil, and Harry in Brockville.

The Allan syndicate offered to help the Conservatives, for a price. A bargain was struck; the syndicate provided \$360,000 to the Conservative campaign and the Party promised it the railway contract. John Abbott, the Canada Pacific's solicitor, got the pledge in writing. The bargain paid off; the Conservatives squeaked back into power, and the Canada Pacific got the contract. John Abbott was re-elected, but Harry was defeated by eleven votes.

Word of the campaign deal got out in the spring of 1873, and the documents followed. In August, the B&O and CCR removed both Abbott brothers from their functions, and Asa Foster took over as General Manager. Harry, with partner Duncan Macdonald, contracted to build Allan's Montreal Northern Colonization Railway; John was a director. In November the Government fell, Mackenzie's Liberals took over, and the Canada Pacific contract was cancelled. The episode is known to history as the 'Pacific Scandal' (*photo 9*). John Abbott held Argenteuil in the 1874 election but was unseated over irregularities.

Late in 1876, in the depths of the depression, Foster opened the CCR to Pembroke, but lost control of the B&O to Bolckow, and Harry Abbott returned as its General Manager (*photo 10*). After Foster's death on Halloween, 1877, the B&O purchased the CCR from his estate, assumed its name, and Harry became Managing Director of the 'new' Canada Central.

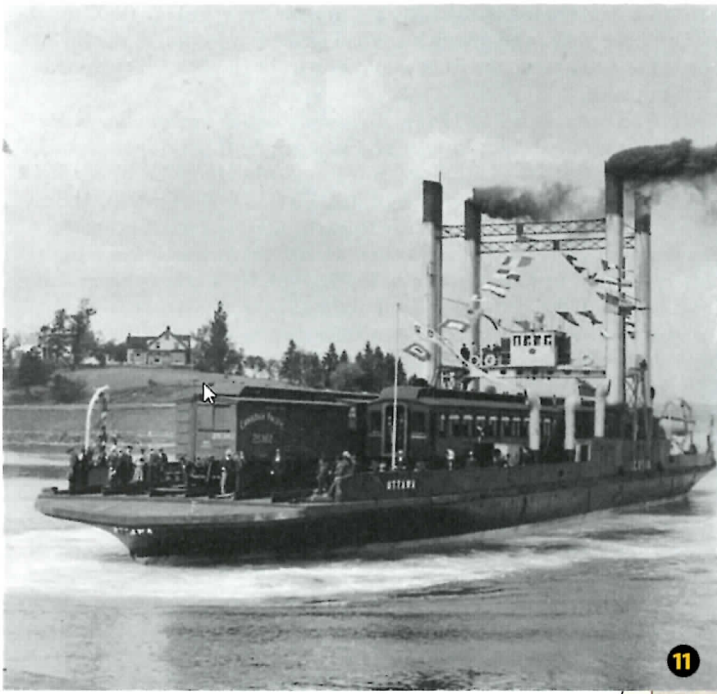
Within months he was gone, to general surprise. He later told his son that the company, expecting a Liberal win in the 1878 election, had dropped him as a political liability. Harry landed on his feet in Nova Scotia, where he built Sir Hugh Allan's Halifax and Cape Breton Railway line from New Glasgow to Mulgrave, on the Canso Strait (*photo 11 next page*). It opened in 1880, the year long-time investor Duncan McIntyre acquired control of the CCR.



9. Scandal? What scandal? – Driven from office for corruption, Sir John A. Macdonald was preparing his troops for a comeback in the election campaign of 1878. The man holding the cue card is Sir Hugh Allan. Political cartoonist J. W. Bengough became famous for his cartoons of the Pacific Scandal. Grip Magazine, 1877-09-08. Retrieved from Wikimedia.



10. Bordeaux Bridge – Harry Abbott's 1876 bridge over the Rivière des Prairies has stood the test of time. Built for the Montreal Northern Colonisation Railway, in 1882, it became part of the CPR main line to the west. Now part of CP's Parc Subdivision, it carries commuters on the Exo (RMT) Saint-Jérôme route and freight traffic to and from the Québec Gatineau Railway. Bibliothèque et Archives Nationales du Québec P48, S1, P16548. Retrieved from Wikipedia. Conrad Poirier photograph, 1948-07-20.



11. Canso Ferry – Rails reached the Canso Strait at Mulgrave in 1880, thanks to Harry Abbott, but rail ferry service to Cape Breton Island only began in 1893. The first self-powered ferry, the S.S. Scotia, is seen here on her inaugural run in 1902. As a federal vessel, her port of registry was Ottawa. University of California at Riverside, Keystone-Mast Collection 1996.0009.X4787. Retrieved 2018-09-22 from <https://sailstrait.wordpress.com> Photographer unknown, 1902.

John's legal practice continued to prosper, and he started work on a new Pacific railway scheme when the Conservatives won the 1878 election. On behalf of a group including McIntyre, he negotiated a new contract with the government, incorporated the Canadian Pacific Railway Company (CPR), and handled its purchase of the CCR in 1881, the year he re-entered Parliament. He continued as CPR solicitor until, in 1887, he became a director of the railway.

Harry Abbott joined the CPR in the summer of 1881, to build the section



13. Boisbriant – John Abbott's 300-acre country estate at the western tip of Montreal Island included the ruins of Fort Senneville and was named for the its first (1672) proprietor, Pierre Dugué de Boisbriant (or Boisbriant). Here he maintained Canada's largest orchid collection and a herd of Guernsey cattle imported directly from their namesake island. Bibliothèque et Archives Nationales du Québec. H. E. Archambault photograph, 1892. Retrieved 2018-10-19 from <http://collections.banq.qc.ca/ark:/52327/1955996>

Van Horne had chosen the location of the CPR's Pacific terminus, but it fell to Harry to make Vancouver a reality, beginning with clearing the townsite. He brought his family from Brockville in 1886, just days after the fire that wiped out the fledgling settlement. From that point until his retirement in 1897, Harry and 'Margaret Amelia' Abbott were at the pinnacle of local society, hosting Canadian Governors-General, British nobility, and international celebrities. During his term, Harry supervised an extensive rebuild of the CPR main line in BC and the construction of several branches. The Abbotts remained in Vancouver after he retired and Harry, an avid outdoorsman, enjoyed his ranch in the Cariboo until his death in 1915.

Harry Braithwaite Abbott's 48-year career extended from Canada's first major railway to the full realization of the transcontinental dream, encompassing engineering, contracting and railway management. He was a founding member of the Canadian Society of Civil Engineers. Yet he remains little-known, even among historians. He is the only one of the band of brothers who has no entry in the Dictionary of Canadian Biography. It seems he is overshadowed by Van Horne and brother John, the Prime Minister, with both of whom he was closely associated.

He ought not to be. ■

Stoney Creek May 1894



12. Reunion at Stoney Creek – Taken three years before his retirement from the CPR, this photo shows Harry Abbott (left) with two people who shaped his professional life. Forty-five years earlier, Casimir Gzowski had given him his start in railway engineering; here Sir Casimir stands third from right. Just left of centre is W. C. Van Horne, who brought Harry into the CPR as a contractor, retained him as a manager, and trusted him with the establishment of Vancouver. City of Vancouver Archives AM753-S1-F1--: CVA 256-01.19. Photographer unknown, May 1894.