

## 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.

**I**N 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



Lumber Mill and River Street Houses showing boom and piers, one of the keys to Gibson's early success on the Nashwaak.  
**PANB P5-318a.**

was effected by destroying a row of old tenements that dated to the Rankin era and replacing them over time with what became known in later years as the River Street houses. A Parks Canada report for 1993 notes that these houses, wooden frame 1 ½ storey buildings with side gables and no foundations, originally 24 in number, appear first on a map for 1878, but is non-committal as to whether they were Rankin buildings or of Gibson's own construction. Contemporary accounts suggest the latter. Edward Jack remembered that Gibson tore down the old tenements, but contemporary accounts suggest that Gibson kept them for the first few years and sometime before 1866 began gradually replacing them with newer structures. The editor of *Headquarters* visited the site in 1866 and noted a number of striking improvements that were underway, one of which was that "The old wind- and weather-blackened shanties, irregularly planted, are either pulled down or doomed to early destruction." In their place "on the further and high bank of the stream, [Gibson] has begun to construct a row of nine commodi-



ous cottages (three of which are already finished) for his millmen and work-people.” The River Street houses, it is generally acknowledged, are inferior in construction to the 55 brick tenements Gibson built later, suggesting that in the beginning he was forced to limit his improvements to what his purse could afford.

Around the same time, or perhaps a bit later, Gibson turned his attention to creating a second village on the other side of the river on a stretch of rising ground parallel to the highway road. This became known as “Nob Hill,” a “nob,” in 19th-century parlance being a person of some wealth or social stature. According the 1993 Parks Canada report, the residential part of this construction was built in two phases. The first consisted of seven or eight houses, probably for the Gibson family and senior managers, of a type of construction very plain and common for the time: simple one-and-a-half gable frame houses, clapboarded, with double front windows and rear ells. It is thought that one of them, at 277 Canada Street, was built for Gibson’s younger brother John, who perhaps lumbered with him in Lepreau and came with him to Marysville. The plainness of these houses suggests, once again, that in the early years of the business Gibson was careful with his spending. A bit later, around 1866, the Nob Hill stretch was expanded when three considerably

The Nob Hill Clapboards. The home of John Gibson, the Boss’ younger brother, is located at 277 Canada Street.  
**PANB P5-693.**

more elaborate houses went up. These featured mansard hip roofs, ornate window trim, and bay windows along the sides. The Parks Canada report suggests that these dwellings were built for Gibson's sons - James and Alexander Gibson Jr. - but as these children were only eleven and twelve in 1866, either the dates are wrong or the plan was for the children to inherit the houses at a later time.

Rounding out the Nob Hill development was a schoolhouse at the top of the hill and Gibson's own mansion at the bottom. The schoolhouse, completed sometime in 1864, drew considerable praise in a report from the Minister of Education on Public Schools for the high grade of its construction. It was roughly 50 by 30 feet in size and equipped with fairly expensive furniture, including 20 desks for older children and 16 seats with pockets for younger students, all imported from the United States. "The school room is ceiled up to the windows," notes the report, "and painted an oak colour, and the walls are papered with expensive material, in panel work; the whole presenting a beautiful appearance. The Library, a neat little room between the two entrance halls, fitted up in the same style as the school room, contains 300 volumes for the use of the school." Provision was made to light the building, as well, in case it should be necessary to use it at night, an unusual touch. According to Parks Canada, "With its porticoed front, generous fenestration and projecting bell tower, it was both educationally and architecturally considerably more sophisticated than the simple one-room rural and village schools which dominated the province." The cost of the building - given by the *Reporter* as £250 and the Parks Canada report as \$2,000 - was said to have come entirely out of Gibson's own pocket.

The handsome little schoolhouse, the first of Gibson's many philanthropical efforts in Marysville, is an excellent example of the man's unusually strong bond with the community, a trait much noticed in Gibson's day and since. Certainly, it was a convenience to his workers and his family, a service that technically speaking he was under no obligation to provide. It took a step towards finishing the town, for what was a town without a school? But this wasn't just any town; it was Gibson's own town, an arm of himself. And this wasn't just any schoolhouse; it was, perhaps as he saw himself, a cut above the normal. Possibly it reflected a secret need in Gibson for affection or admiration. Whatever the reason, the founder would minister to his people, and they would be proud of both the little schoolhouse and the man who created it for them.

Next was his own house, which was built at the foot of Nob Hill just across the river from the sawmill. Being seen to be the biggest man in Marysville appears, conventionally, to have required having the biggest dwelling



place, but perhaps Gibson simply liked to enjoy properly the fruits of his intense labour, to house comfortably his family and to live well. The “big house,” as it was known, designed by noted New Brunswick architect Matthew Stead and built by Samuel Butler, was meant to impress. When the editor of *Head Quarters* visited Marysville in a two-day excursion in the summer of 1866, as the house was just being completed, he found it “rather a bit of a surprise to meet such a mansion in such a place.” This ornate essay in carpenter gothic, popular at the time and characteristic of Stead’s work, was painted brown and stood three stories high. The plain basic structure of gable roof and rear ell were broken by a jutting tower extending from the main entrance to the roof. The main door and flanking windows on this structure, as well as those on the second story, featured projecting arched trim and stained glass, and the tower was topped with an oriel window. The wrap-around verandah roofs were hipped and, like the eaves of the rest of the house, liberally decorated with turned and carved trim.

The Alexander Gibson Jr. mansard, 343 Canada Street. Built 1866, demolished 1890. According to Parks Canada, the James Gibson residence at 377 Canada uses the same design but with a different verandah.  
**PANB P5-19.**

The editor apparently was given a tour of the building, for he published a detailed description of its interior. Ascending the front steps, the visitor passed through a vestibule with doors on either side leading to the verandah and entered a spacious hall. "The ground of the wall," he wrote, "is a beautiful bluish green hue, relieved and set off by lines and figures of brighter tints. The casements in the further end of the hall are Gothic arched with stained glass, representing flowers. To the centre of the hall, from the extreme height of the interior, light comes through the fine circular stained glass window, shining down the well hole, made by the geometrical staircase. The effect is very fine." To the left was a drawing room, 40 x 19 feet, still unpainted, divided in the centre by "a pillared arch, giving the effect of two rooms in one." On the left was the parlor, square and paneled, painted a light color, and airy in appearance. At the back in the dining room, more subdued in color, and behind it, with which it communicated by way of sliding panels, were the large pantry, kitchen, and wash rooms.

On the second floor were the bedrooms. A "gothic hall" ran down the middle, "entered through an arch supported on pilasters (in the niches made by which there will be placed sculptured figures) and lighted by gothic stained glass windows." The bedrooms are all substantial in size, "and the panellings, cornice work, and gothic centre pieces, finished and painted elaborately in varied and diverse colors and tints, add to the effect of general splendor. At the rear the editor found the library and smoking room, "whose walls are of the subdued hues that befit such a sanctuary." George Boardman remembered that some years back on a sea trip from Boston to Philadelphia he had made the acquaintance of a noted Boston upholsterer, who told him that he was on his way home from New Brunswick, where he had just completed the furnishings of Mister Gibson's new house. The bill for the job, he said, was \$18,000.

The house was furnished with all the modern conveniences: central heating from a large basement furnace, hot- and cold-water baths, marble basins in washrooms supplied by a spring one-half mile behind the house, connected by galvanized pipes laid in a trough. All in all, concluded the editor, the edifice was a monument to the taste and artistry of Mr. Stead, whose influence is to be seen not only in the house itself, but "in the tracings of lawns, numerous walks, cedar hedges, garden plots, shady groves, and a marble sculptured fountain of exquisite design, whose limpid streams add splendour to the surroundings."

The big house served the Gibson family well, being the centre of family operations until 1914, when it burned to the ground, taking with it perhaps all of the family papers. In 1866 it housed eight children: John T., aged 21; Mary Ann, 16; Alexander Gibson, Jr., 12; James, 11; Jane, 6; Jennie, 5; An-



The Gibson mansion. Built c. 1865, burned 1914.  
Courtesy Francis Campbell.

nie, 2; and William, aged 1. The names “Mary,” “Jane” and “William” remembered siblings who had died earlier - Mary, supposedly in 1840 (the date seems wrong), aged nine months; Jane, in 1859, perhaps in Lepreau, aged 12; and “Willie,” aged two months, in 1858, probably also in Lepreau. In an age when child mortality was high, the second Mary was to die in 1867 of typhoid fever, Jane in 1871, and William in 1872. If there was light amid this darkness, it was the birth in 1868 of Sophia Gibson, the last of the Gibson children.

THOUGH THE EARLY years of Gibson’s lumbering business are obscure - Gibson doesn’t really hit the news until 1865 - it is possible to infer something about the structure of his operations by working backwards from later accounts. First and foremost - as was the case on the St. Croix and probably on the Lepreau - Gibson’s staple item, his bread and butter, was the spruce deal. This was true of all lumbering operations in the province and in Upper and Lower Canada as well. Taking a rough guess, by the time Gibson purchased the Nashwaak property, spruce accounted for about three-quarters of all logs cut in the province, with the balance being made up of squared

pine (in ever-decreasing amounts), cedar, hemlock, and a small amount of hardwood such as birch, ash, and maple. The vast majority of the deals went by sailing vessel to England. British North America was, in Lower's phrase, "Great Britain's woodyard," and the lion's share of spruce deals were received at Liverpool, other large centres being London and Belfast. Gibson is not known to have had any other broker than Farnworth and Jardine, a large firm based in Liverpool, and in all probability they were his brokers from the beginning.

When Gibson set up on the Nashwaak, he put himself at the heart of lumbering operations in the province. Of the four major rivers in 19th-century New Brunswick - the St. Croix, the Southwest Miramichi, the Restigouche, and the Saint John - the Saint John formed the economic backbone of the province, extending north from the Bay of Fundy 420 miles, with numerous large tributaries that, combined with the watersheds of the Miramichi and the Restigouche, created a transportation network in which it was possible, it was said, to traverse almost the whole of the province by canoe with only a few portages of six to ten miles.

Lumbering on the Saint John was an operation, like the river itself, with many branches and sub-branches. The port of Saint John provided the great catchment for just about all logging business on the river. Though the numbers varied with times, Saint John was home typically to about sixteen to eighteen sawmills, of which usually about half were American. This was permissible because on its upper reaches the river Saint John was an international waterway dividing Maine from New Brunswick, and according to international treaty, logs cut on Maine land could be manufactured anywhere in New Brunswick and shipped to the United States duty free. There was of course a certain liberty in the interpretation of this law, some lumber camps literally spanning the border, and it is probably fair to say that the occasional log cut on the New Brunswick side of the river was accidentally floated to an American Mill on the Canadian side. That, certainly, had been the case on the St. Croix.

Because neither Crown nor private land around the city was available in large blocks, the Saint John mills, both Canadian and American, were owners and lessees of large tracts of timberland on the stretches of the river above Grand Falls, drained by the Allagash and Aroostook on the Maine side, also by Lake Temiscouata and the Tobique on the New Brunswick side, each approximately 80 miles in length. The drive from the upper Saint John was, in later years at least, managed by the Saint John Log Driving Company. The cut was generally between 100 and 150 million feet of logs, and designated the "corporation drive." Brought down through the gap at Grand Falls as an amorphous mass, it was boomed off at locations just above Fredericton at

Springhill, in the early days by Gibson's friend A. F. Randolph, and in later years by the Fredericton Boom Company, or below the city near the present-day St. Margaret's bridge. This happened in March and April. Sorted by company name stamped on the butts, the drive was assembled into "joints," and the joints into rafts three to four layers deep, twenty to thirty feet wide, and up to sixty feet long; thence floated to the mills at Saint John, arriving there usually sometime in late spring.

Fredericton had its mills as well - two in later years just below the city, called the Victoria and Phoenix mills, and several just above, such as the Estey and Babbitt mills, which also contracted out to lumbermen on the upper Saint John and were spared the time and expense of rafting on the more precarious upper reaches of the river.

Gibson's operation resembled a miniature version of the Saint John River operations. Like the Saint John, the Nashwaak had its tributaries, the chief being the Tay, Penniac Creek, and Cross Creek, which extended up through Stanley and Douglas, and various smaller streams such as the Dunbar and McLean's Brook. As with the Saint John, the smaller rivers would be driven first, the logs then assembled with the main drive and floated down to the Marysville booms, cut, and transported from there to the mouth of the Nashwaak in rafts, and from thence downriver to the mills at Saint John. Gibson told the Royal Commission on Capital and Labour in 1888, using numbers that were probably about the same as those in his early days, that he employed about 700 men in the winter woods and about 200 in stream driving. These were not his own men but subcontracted. In 1888 the choppers got anywhere from \$16 to \$22 a month, considerably less than the stream drivers, where wages ran from \$1 to \$3 a day, depending on the "class of men." As Dan Soucoup notes in his book on logging in New Brunswick, stream driving, involving long, punishing hours in cold water, and considerable skill in log handling, necessarily paid higher wages. If the choppers were at the low end of the pay scale and the stream drivers at the highest, the mill men, earning \$1 to \$2.50 a day, were somewhere in the middle. Mill work was generally done in the summer season for those employed in the winter woods.

Gibson spread his nets wider than the Nashwaak. In the early days, he sent men into the Maine woods as well, up around Caribou on the Aroostook River, and those logs either came down with the corporation drive from the rest of the upper Saint John, or, after the construction of the New Brunswick Railroad, by rail car direct to Marysville.

Gibson's operations - in later years and perhaps from the beginning - were not confined to his own mills nor his own town. He was noted in a *Timber Trades Journal* for 1896 to be one of only three Saint John shippers, and the only manufacturer-shipper in the province. He kept an office in Saint John

for that purpose, perhaps from the beginning. He was unusual also in that he typically shipped about twice what he himself cut. He seems to have started that practice early. In August of 1868, for instance, he wrote 9 cheques totaling \$10,000 to Thomas Hilyard, Saint John sawmill owner and shipwright. This money would have been for logs which either he himself had not had resources to cut, or that for various reasons had been offered for sale at Saint John and could be picked up at good prices.

As the owner of just one lumber business in a province full of lumber businesses, Gibson faced the keen challenge of remaining viable amidst cut-throat competition within New Brunswick and abroad. Since 1860 all preferential tariffs on foreign lumber entering Britain had been removed, and Canadian manufacturers and shippers found themselves facing stern competition from Scandinavian and Baltic ports, which enjoyed the advantages of short voyages and lower insurance and freighting costs. Russian lumber in particular, cut on estates owned by nobility and sustainably managed by independent middlemen, produced wood of the very highest calibre.

On the other hand, New Brunswick and Canadian spruce deals had been for some time and were still in 1864 a highly valuable and stable commodity in British markets. *MacKay's Annual Lumber Circular* for 1863, for instance, out of Liverpool, had high praise for New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and U.S. pine and spruce deals, noting that "Year after year a large import has been met with a steadily sustained demand." This was partly because they were easy to transport from ports inland, and they were milled without loss for all manner of building purposes. But with the abolition of the preferential tariff, it noted, "a growing trade in deals has been created between this country and the state of Maine. . . . These latter from their great length and the general excellence of their manufacture as well as their quality have become decided favorites." Since a good part, often a substantial majority, of the winter's cut came down the Saint John from the Maine woods, Gibson found himself competing with the Saint John mills for local market supremacy.

And yet by 1874, during the stumpage crisis, Gibson was generally acknowledged to have become one of the biggest men in the New Brunswick lumber industry, and by, say, 1882, a year in which there are comparative statistics for the ports of Saint John and Miramichi, he seems to have assumed the top position in the market. In that year, he shipped 109 million superficial feet of lumber out of the port of Saint John, accounting for fully 54 percent of all lumber out of that city and 24 percent of all lumber in the province. By contrast Jabez Snowball of Chatham, one of the larger lumbermen on the Southwest Miramichi, shipped a comparatively modest 23 million superficial feet of lumber, Gibson's own total being only slightly less than the output of all lumbermen in Chatham and Newcastle combined.

How he managed this feat is a complex story spanning several decades of shrewd management and daring risks, drawing in railroads, land speculation, and political maneuvering. On the purely managerial side, Gibson saved a lot of money by prudent advance work, already alluded to, in making the Nashwaak a relatively easy stream on which to drive spring logs. It was much repeated in later years that no drive of Gibson's was ever "hung up." There were occasionally delays in getting a drive to the mills, temporary hang-ups occasioned by log-jams or low water, but never until the year of Gibson's death was a drive stranded in the river all summer and not gotten out until the following spring. The contrary was too often the case on the upper Saint John and the Miramichi, rivers plagued by rocks and low water. In fact, it was a general rule that the Gibson drive came in not only complete, but sooner than any other. In 1891 a new record was set of 18 days, with the whole drive in by May 13. "Thus," wrote Edward Jack, "by pier building and river improvements alone, to say nothing of anything else, the cost of log production was cheapened about \$1 per thousand feet board measure." Spread over the current span of Gibson's affairs, reckoned Jack, Gibson had in 30 years' work saved about \$600,000.

The *Timber Trades Journal* for 1896 gave another reason why the Gibson business was able to generate such profitable margins, noting that all 200,000 acres of Gibson's timberland had been accurately surveyed and mapped, "so that when he lets his winter contracts for logging the contractors are shown on maps in his office the exact location, with all necessary information relative to the work." All logging is done by contract, "with due care for the conservation of his forest wealth." It is possible that Gibson had this system in place from the beginning.

In his history of Pollok, Gilmour, and Company, John Rankin noted another savings built into the Gibson business structure - the single thing, in his opinion, that made Gibson a rich man - and that was the economies of scale achieved by being able to load deals directly from raft, woodboat, or scow to vessels waiting at the Saint John docks, avoiding the time-consuming and more expensive practice of sorting, classifying and piling on the wharves, "where they might lie for some time, only to be unplied, tallied and taken on shipboard." But, noted Rankin, the real secret behind this innovation lay in Gibson's brokers being willing to accept cargoes that did not furnish exact specifications as to quality but according to dimensions only. This was achieved by pure reputation for excellence, which overcame all difficulties and prejudices. With his experience running a first-class mill in Lepreau, Gibson may have come to York County with this excellent reputation already in place.



Log drivers breaking jam on unidentified river, 1897. Until the last year of Gibson's life, no drive on the Nashwaak was ever held over until the next spring, while most came down in record time.  
**PANB Ole Larsen Fonds: 6-211.**

From the beginning Gibson had another factor working in his favour: he had a "river to himself." These were the words spoken to lumberman Jabez Snowball in the provincial legislature in 1889, some time after Snowball had become Gibson's partner in the Northern and Western Railway and a legislative member for Northumberland County. Mr. Snowball wondered why it was that while the North Shore lumbermen all had to diversify to make ends meet, there was one lumberman in York, "one right at your door, a glaring case staring the Executive in the face," who has made a great deal of money in the lumber business without having to diversify at all. Premier Andrew Blair pointed out very tartly the exceptional nature of Gibson's case. "He used his money at the outset judiciously by investing it in land when it could be cheaply obtained," he noted. "He has a river to himself and the circumstances of his case are entirely different from those of any others that can be named." Owning large tracts of forest land along the banks of the Nashwaak, Gibson, un-

like the North Shore men, had been able to avoid renting more than a small portion of timberland from the Crown, a huge savings.

True, in 1862, even with almost seven thousand acres in his possession, Gibson did not yet have a “river to himself,” but both he and Jack could have seen that the potential for a monopoly was there. Ripe for the picking along the whole western side of the Nashwaak were the almost virgin tracts of forest land belonging to the New Brunswick and Nova Scotia Land Company. The company had been incorporated in 1834 with backing by scholar and statesman Edward Stanley for the purpose of attracting settlers to New Brunswick. In exchange for 589,000 acres of land, the company invested £200,000 sterling and agreed to clear forest and build roads, bridges, houses, churches, and mills, as well as offer building lots to prospective settlers. The town of Stanley was one immediate result of this scheme, and later small villages such as Cross Creek, Tay Creek, Williamsburg, Napadogan, and Bloomfield Ridge were added to the tally. But overall, with land away from the river banks difficult to clear and farm, the scheme was not a success. By the time Gibson came to the Nashwaak the Land Company was as eager to sell for cheap as the latter was to buy.

This land was to form the backbone of the Gibson timber business. Between 1864 and 1869 Gibson purchased 20,000 acres, and between 1870 and 1880 an additional 85,175 acres, for a total of 105,676 acres. The largest purchases were 7,300 acres in 1868, 10,500 acres in 1869, 14,600 acres in 1870, a whopping 60,000 acres in 1871, and 7,374 acres in 1873. All of this land was located in the parishes of Douglas and Stanley, with a small amount in St. Mary’s Parish near Marysville. The total for this land acquisition was \$87,303, a figure that in today’s currency would certainly top several million dollars.

Gibson made many smaller private purchases as well. Some twelve of them were modest-sized lots of a few acres or less, rather steep in price because located near his mills in St. Mary’s parish. To Elizabeth Carvell in 1871, for instance, he paid \$1,000 for four acres for land and buildings fronting on the Nashwaak, \$750 in 1876 for a further one-quarter of an acre, and \$10,000 in 1880 to Sarah Peters for a mere 400 acres on the east side of the Nashwaak. Some acreage was picked up cheaply in estate sales. Others were medium-sized farm lots of several hundred acres, a few of which had been originally purchased from the New Brunswick and Nova Scotia Land Company and sold for a few hundred dollars. Gibson also made a few small mortgage loans to families wanting to buy their own land, and on two occasions sold some small amounts of land for modest sums. At the same time, he didn’t forget about Charlotte County, making small purchases in St. James and St.

David parishes in 1869, 1872, 1875, and 1879. Several of these lots involved the Robinsons and may have been intended to add to the family holdings.

All in all, between 1866 and 1880 Gibson made some 30 private purchases for a total of about 15,000 acres. Total cost for this land was in the vicinity of \$55,000 which, added to the price of the New Brunswick and Nova Scotia Land Company lots, brought the total cost of his land purchases to about \$142,000.

And then there were the Crown land purchases, twelve of them, most located in Douglas parish near Marysville, four in Carleton County, and one in Northumberland. For the most part, these purchases were made between 1866 and 1877 and totaled some 40,000 acres. Added to land acquired privately and from the New Brunswick and Nova Scotia Land Company, Gibson's total land holdings by 1880 ran to an impressive total of 160,000 acres, most of this on the Nashwaak or accessible from it. It would be fair to say that by that time Gibson truly had "a river to himself," or at least the first 80 miles of it.

NOT ALL WENT swimmingly. According to a story in an anonymous typescript, "On one occasion when Mr. Gibson and Mr. Jack were discussing land and lumber, Mr. Jack ventured the statement that more land was being surveyed than ever would be used. For this bit of liberty, Mr. Jack was severely rebuked by his 'Boss.' Among the various names applied to him by Mr. Gibson, one was, 'You're nothing but a skunk!'" After a considered pause, Jack is said to have replied, 'Well Sandy I suppose things will continue as before, a skunk working for a ground-hog.'" Jack said that this was the only spat the two ever had.

Rather more words were expended in Gibson's attempt to secure his first 10,000 acres of Crown land, the first time that Gibson came prominently into the news. The tracts involved were both in Douglas parish - 5,047 acres on North Owl Lake and 4,903 acres on Napadogan Brook. Gibson obtained the first lot in November, 1865, but his attempt to get possession of the second, set to come up for auction on January 2, 1866, involved him a media storm of accusations and counter-accusations that brought to the fore the contentious issue of Crown lands speculation and showed that Gibson was not adverse to dabbling in behind-the-scene politicking when it suited his needs.

The *St. John Telegraph* struck the first blow in early December, 1865, with the notice that "Mr. Alex. Gibson, of Nashwaak, who supported the Government so zealously during the late election in York, spending money freely, has made application for fifty-five lots of Crown Land in York, embracing over ten thousand acres!" "What means this wholesale disposal of the public

lands to a private speculator?" chipped in the *Morning News*. "Is there not now in force a regulation to prevent any one man from obtaining more than 100 acres of land except for actual settlement? Was not this law intended to prevent speculators from locking up the public lands? And why, in the entertaining of the application of Mr. Gibson, a warm supporter of the Anti-Confederate candidate in York, has it been set aside?"

The points in question dated to 1861, when an investigation into the purchase of Crown lands along the line of the European and North American railway from Saint John to Shediac revealed that land contiguous to the line of the railway had been purchased anonymously by persons connected with the government, with inside help from the Crown Lands Office. The Hon. Leonard Tilley was implicated and Charles Fisher, a member of the Executive Council, was made a scapegoat and forced to resign. To prevent similar conflicts in the future, especially as there was ongoing debate as to the location of the proposed Intercolonial Railway, the government of 1862 enacted legislation requiring that any purchase of land might only be made on condition of actual settlement. This regulation was published widely in the press, and it was hoped that the era of speculation involving Crown lands was at an end.

Lining up against Gibson were the *St. John Telegraph*, the *Morning News* and the *Fredericton Reporter*. Their accusations were essentially that Gibson, foreseeing that the Intercolonial Railway running along a proposed central route down the Nashwaak Valley would cross his own territory, wanted to secure a monopoly and sought secretly to have the order of 1862 rescinded. Failing in this, he threw his weight behind the anti-Confederation party of George Luther Hathaway and after the victory of April 1865 was rewarded for his support by having the regulation secretly overturned. "His ambition," declared the *Telegraph*, "is not confined to York; Mr. Gibson has an eye on lands in Kings and Queens, also. We would advise him to buy up all he can while his friends are in power, for we can assure him that the first act of their successors will be to shut out speculators and preserve the public domain for the hard working settlers of the Province, whose honest labours have already done so much to place their Country in its present proud position before the world."

Gibson's supporters in the press, the publishers of *Head Quarters* and the *Morning Freeman*, responded initially that although the order had in fact been rescinded and not given media coverage it had according to law been advertised a few weeks in advance in the *Royal Gazette*. And there were good practical reasons to rescind the regulation, since after 1863 railway negotiations concerning the Intercolonial Railway had been suspended, and the resolution of 1862 now stood in the way of profitable land sales. More importantly, they revealed, Gibson's application for the lands in question had been secretly

approved by the previous government, in direct violation of their own resolution. A little digging in the Crown Lands Office revealed that on May 20, 1864, Gibson made a formal petition “That he is a British subject and is desirous of purchasing 25,000 acres of wilderness Crown Lands in the tracts of 200 acres each out of the lands now under lease to him on the Nashwaak river, situate in the Parishes of Southampton and Northampton in the Counties of York and Carleton.” Further, it was revealed that the Surveyor General, Mr. McMillan, issued an order on May 20 for Deputy Whitehead “to survey for Alexander Gibson, on his application and at his expense, ten thousand acres of vacant Crown lands, in tracts of 200 acres each, in the County of York, situate as follows, viz: On the river Nashwaak, and comprised within lands now under lease to him on that river (all of which would be within the County of York).”

According to this line of argument, the granting of the lots was a mere formality once the order for survey was actually given, and the government had merely given approval to an order which had already been secretly set in motion. The other side was at pains to contest this point, but in the end a great deal of interpretation led to no definite conclusion.

If there was a voice of reason in the debate it was that of David Main of the *St. Croix Courier*, who contended that “the fault is not in Mr. Gibson, nor yet wholly in the government, but in the system which we have hitherto been denouncing, and which permits any government thus to play into the hands of its favorites.” Main pointed out what everyone in the timber business well knew: that the upcoming auction for the 10,000 acres in question was a foregone conclusion. Already holding a three-year lease on the lands, Gibson would strip them bare before his term was out if anyone should outbid him. How then was the Province to manage its lands with such a system in place?

A hogshead of ink was spilled over this issue for a full month, but on the second of January, Gibson (applying in his own name) came into possession of the lots he desired. It was never shown that, technically speaking, he did anything untoward, but if his reputation was tarnished slightly by the many accusations thrown about, both governments in question emerged with considerable mud on their faces, for each it seemed had secretly bent the regulation of 1862 to its own advantage. If he was a humorous man, Gibson probably had a quiet laugh over the whole business. With the ten thousand acres in his pocket, he was well on his way to having a river to himself. ☞