



Winter 2017

www.concordcoach.org

January Meeting Notice

The January Meeting is scheduled for Thursday, the 12th at 6:00 pm. The location is Johnny Prescott Oil Co., 122 Airport Road in Concord. In case of stormy weather, please check the website: www.concordcoach.org to find out if the meeting has been rescheduled. We do not plan on a meeting for February and the next meeting will be in March.

Dues Notice

If your dues for 2017 are due, you will find a notice attached to this newsletter. Please note any changes to your contact information and send the form along with your check to:

ADHS

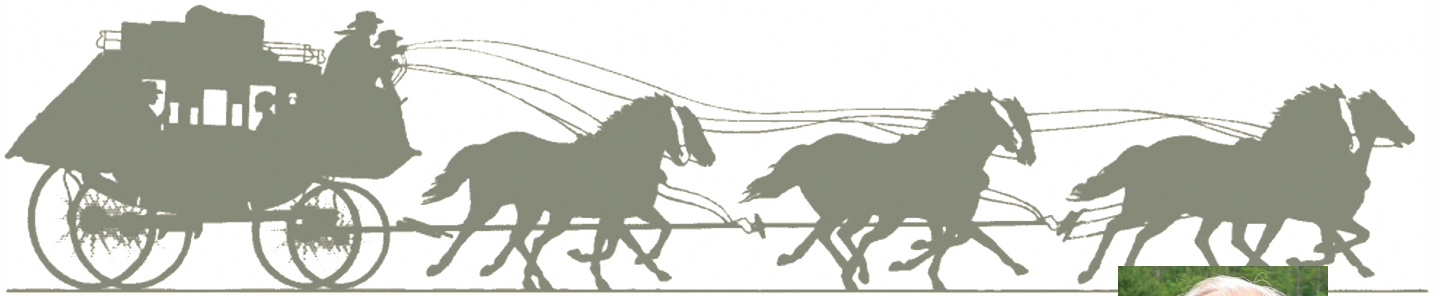
PO Box 4077

Concord, NH 03302

Your prompt payment is appreciated.

Abbot-Downing Articles

For your entertainment and edification, on the following pages is a reprint of an article that was written for "*The Journal of The Guild Of New Hampshire Woodworkers*". It is a brief history of the Abbot & Downing Companies as they existed for about 100 years and their involvement in the local woodworking industry. It is the first of two installments. They are used with permission of the authors and the editor of the *Journal*. They were written for the Woodworking Guild and are only an overview of The Abbot & Downing activities in Concord.



by Peter James

A Different Type of Woodworking

Abbot & Downing & the Concord Coach



Glenn Falls Stageline coach at the toll house to Lake George. A 12 Passenger Coach, possibly the one rebuilt by David Lamb and Chance Anderson.

Many of you have heard of noted cabinetmakers in early New Hampshire such as the Dunlaps. But there were other workers in wood who also were famous around the world including Lewis Downing and J. Stephens Abbot. The story of these two men and the Concord Coaches that they created begins in 1813.

The story really begins with a third person, a young lady named Lucy Wheelock. Lucy was visiting an aunt in Concord and her fiancé, Lewis Downing, came to visit her. Lewis was trained as a wheelwright. A wheelwright is a craftsman who crafts the wooden wheels and undercarriage of a horse drawn vehicle.

While he was in Concord, he saw that there would be a good demand for his services. He returned to his home in Lexington, Massachusetts, gathered up his tools and a small amount of money and returned to Concord to set up shop on the corner of Washington and North Main Streets. It was here that he began to manufacture a small utility wagon that had leather straps or thoroughbraces for suspension. At first, he worked with the prisoners from the state prison which was located nearby. Together they would build two wagons with Downing doing

the wood work and the prisoners doing the blacksmithing. Each would receive one of the wagons to sell.

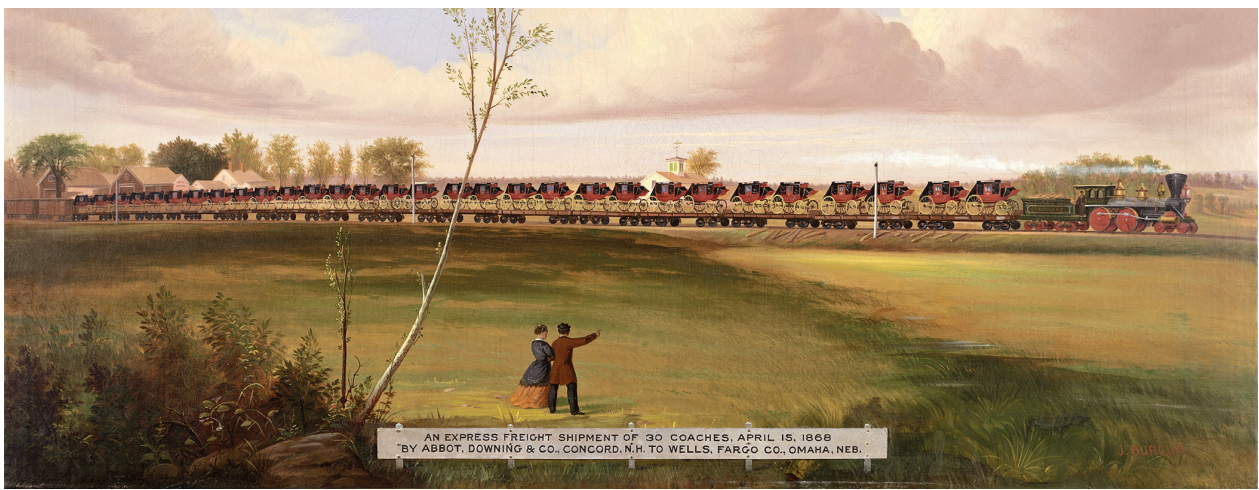
Lewis and Lucy were married in 1815 in Concord, Massachusetts and returned to Concord, New Hampshire to live. The story of Lewis Downing and Lucy Wheelock was put to music by New Hampshire's own Shaw Brothers, a popular folk singing duo. The song, *Lucy Come Ride in My Wagon* tells the story from their marriage until their deaths.

Shortly after they returned to Concord, Lewis Downing purchased a homestead and five acres of land on South Main Street in Concord. Lewis and Lucy lived the rest of their lives in the home on the corner of the lot. Lewis started building shops for his growing carriage and wagon business.

In 1826, Lewis decided that he wanted to try building stagecoaches. He was well trained and experienced in the wheelwright craft and was able to build small wagons and carriages, but the body of a stagecoach was something that was beyond his skill level.

For the initial group of three coaches, he hired a young coach body builder from Salem, Massachusetts, J. (Joseph) Stephens Abbot. Abbot was an orphan and had been apprenticed into the firm of Frothingham and Loring at the age of fourteen and now at twenty-one had seven years' experience building coach and carriage bodies. These three were completed in the winter of 1826-1827 and that being the end of Abbot's contract, he left for what he thought was a position in Framingham. When that did not come through, he went on to Providence which also failed to materialize.

In the meantime, Lewis Downing back in Concord was receiving requests for more of the coaches. He contacted Abbot and in 1828 they formed the partnership of Downing & Abbot. Lewis Downing had the capital and the shops and J. Stephens



An express shipment of thirty coaches ordered by Wells Fargo in 1868. The largest single order in company history.

had the genius to design a stagecoach design that would remain virtually unchanged for the next 75 years.

While there was nothing really new in the design, it incorporated the best features of many vehicles of the time and in a way that gave the coach strength, beauty, and a good ride on the extremely rough roads of the time. The driver sat high on the front where he could see out over the horses and have great leverage on the brake lever. The top of the coach was flat to allow for the storage of baggage, and most important, it utilized the thoroughbrace suspension, but with the bottom of the coach being oval in shape, the body would rock gently in the leather thoroughbraces rather than just bounce back and forth.

The coaches came in three basic sizes—six passenger, nine passenger, and twelve passenger. The size only referred to the passengers seated inside and did not include those sitting beside the driver and on the roof and seats on the rear of the body. A twelve passenger coach could actually carry as many as twenty-eight people!

The coaches were manufactured from the finest materials available. The frames of the undercarriage were of straight grained red oak from northern Vermont, dried on stickers and the piles rotated on a regular basis to ensure that the wood was uniformly dry and stable. The wheels used several different woods. The hubs were elm, the spokes were ash and the felloes were oak or ash, each wood chosen for its characteristics that best suited its function in the wheel construction. The interlocking grain of the elm made a hub that was strong in spite of having the many mortises for the spokes cut into it. The ash for the spokes was straight grained and strong and the ash or oak for the felloes was strong and stable to create a strong wheel rim.

The body was built using a frame and panel method. The frame was red oak and assembled using mortise and tenon joinery. The panels were eastern poplar. The panels are only about one quarter of an inch thick and some of them are bent in two different directions to create bowed pieces. The bending was done on a mold using water and clamps to slowly pull the wood into the desired shape. This frame and panel construction produced a body that was extremely strong and at the same time relatively lightweight. One of the amazing things about the body is the fact that the drivers “box” or seat is hanging out on the front of the

body with the possibility of two large men sitting on it and yet the front wall of the body does not collapse even when traversing rough roads.

The coaches were top heavy. It is eight feet six inches to the roof and roll overs were common. Usually, they would just roll the coach back on its wheels and be on their way.

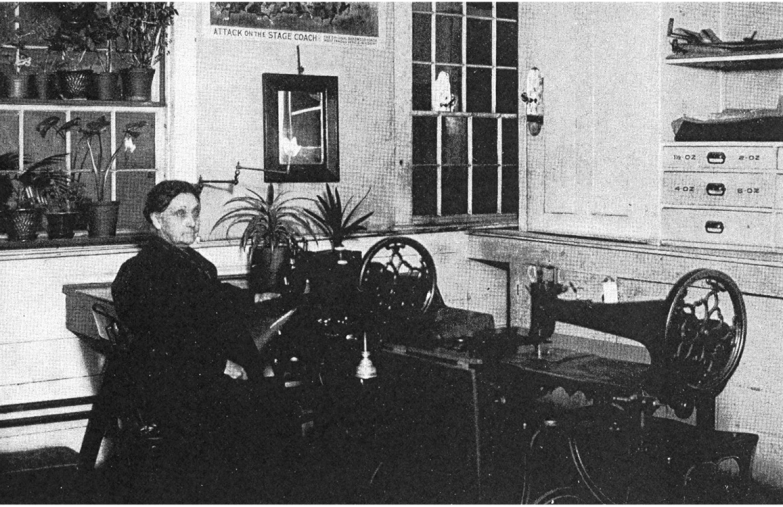
Downing & Abbot continued in business for 18 years until 1847 when they decided to split up and form two separate companies. The split was amiable and they often worked together on large orders. In the split, both Downing and Abbot brought their sons into their businesses. The two companies were L. Downing & Sons and J.S. & E.A. Abbot. They continued as two companies until 1865 when Lewis Downing retired after fifty-two years of business in Concord.

After Lewis’ retirement, the Abbots and the Downing sons joined again in business. The new company was called Abbot-Downing & Co. This time Abbot had his name first as his was the larger company going into the merger.

While the railroads were moving into the eastern United States, they only went so far, and the stagecoaches were used to carry the passengers to their final destinations. In addition to this, as the eastern railroads become more numerous, the western United States was opening up.

There was a constant demand for the coaches as well as the more than forty other different types of vehicles that Abbot-Downing made. The Civil War brought large orders as well. In 1868 the largest single order in Company history came from Wells Fargo. Thirty coaches, spare parts and the required harnesses left Concord on April 15th, 1868 and the scene was captured by a photographer and then painted by John Burgum.

It was in this period of the latter half of the 18th century, that the company employed between 350 and 400 men... and one woman, Maria Putnam. Maria Putnam worked for Abbot-Downing for over thirty years sewing the interiors and light leather fittings on the coaches and carriages. She was hired because it was thought that a woman could better handle the newfangled sewing machines that were just coming into use. We have a photograph of her workspace and it is truly amazing to see the personalization that she has in it. In 1895 when the photograph was taken, you went to work, did your job and went home. Her space has plants on the table and in the window,



mirrors and posters on the wall and fancy kerosene lamps. It was her space!

The coaches were more than just a means of transportation, they were works of art, both in the graceful design of the body, but more so because of the beautiful gold leaf scroll work on the panels and the delightful painted scenes on the doors. These were done by John Burgum and later by his son Edwin. The interiors were trimmed with velvet and fringe of the finest quality. They were truly a very high class vehicle.



J. Stephens Abbot died in March 1871 and Lewis Downing passed on two years later in March of 1873. The business carried on under the direction of their sons. In 1873 The business changed from a partnership to a corporation and stock was

issued and funds raised. With the new funds, a local competitor, Harvey, Morgan & Company was acquired, but more important, much new steam powered equipment was purchased.

After this time, however, the company started on a slow slide downhill. This was brought about by many factors including a major recession, the further influence of the railroads in the world's transportation, and eventually the motor car and truck. The company could not see that motorized vehicles would become the transportation of the future, but felt that it was just a passing fad only available to the wealthy.

The last of the coaches were built about 1899, although, there still was some business repairing the existing coaches and the production of horse drawn wagons and other commercial vehicles like street sweepers and sprinklers used to keep the dust down on the dirt roads and streets.

While the use of the coaches for basic transportation ceased, they were still popular with the mountain grand resort hotels where they continued to be used for sightseeing excursions into the 1930s and in some cases even later.

About 1916, the company now reorganized several times due to bankruptcies and other financial issues attempted to get into motor truck production. Like many small producers, the trucks

that they produced were "assembled" trucks using mostly parts from other suppliers. The engines were by Buda, the transmissions by Timken, and frames and wheels by other large suppliers. Abbot-Downing added the sheet metal and bodies and put all the parts together and sold the trucks, mostly locally as they did not have a large dealer network.

The trucks were called "Concords" and apart from the distinctive radiator, were not different in look or function from those that were produced by any of the hundreds of other small manufacturers that existed at this time. Abbot-Downing came into the truck business too late with too little capital to compete with the likes of Ford, General Motors, Dodge Brothers, and some of the other large companies.

The end of one hundred years of building high quality vehicles in Concord came in 1928 when all production ceased. Two final events in the company history, brought the real end. Wells Fargo Bank bought the name Abbot-Downing in 1945 which they use today for a division that handles accounts for extremely large investors. And in about 1962 there was a large fire that destroyed all but two of the Abbot-Downing manufacturing buildings. All that are left are the building that housed the wheelwright shop, now a clothes cleaner and the building where 16 blacksmiths worked that now is a veterans group meeting place and a tee shirt printing company.



1928 "Concord" fire truck owned by Concord Professional Firefighters Union

Total production of the famous Concord Coaches was about 1,800 over a period of seventy-five years. Today there are about one hundred sixty remaining and in New Hampshire there are nineteen examples. All of the New Hampshire coaches can be seen except one and that one belongs to the New Hampshire Historical Society. It was previously on display in the Stone Mill Museum located just off North Main Street and across from the State House in Concord.

My interest in this subject has grown out of my involvement with the Abbot-Downing Historical Society, a group located in Concord, NH, where the Concord Coaches were originally built. The group has two of the coaches from about 1850 and several other Abbot-Downing vehicles in its collection. For more information, visit their website at concordcoach.org. ■