



The Abbot-Downing Company and the Concord Coach

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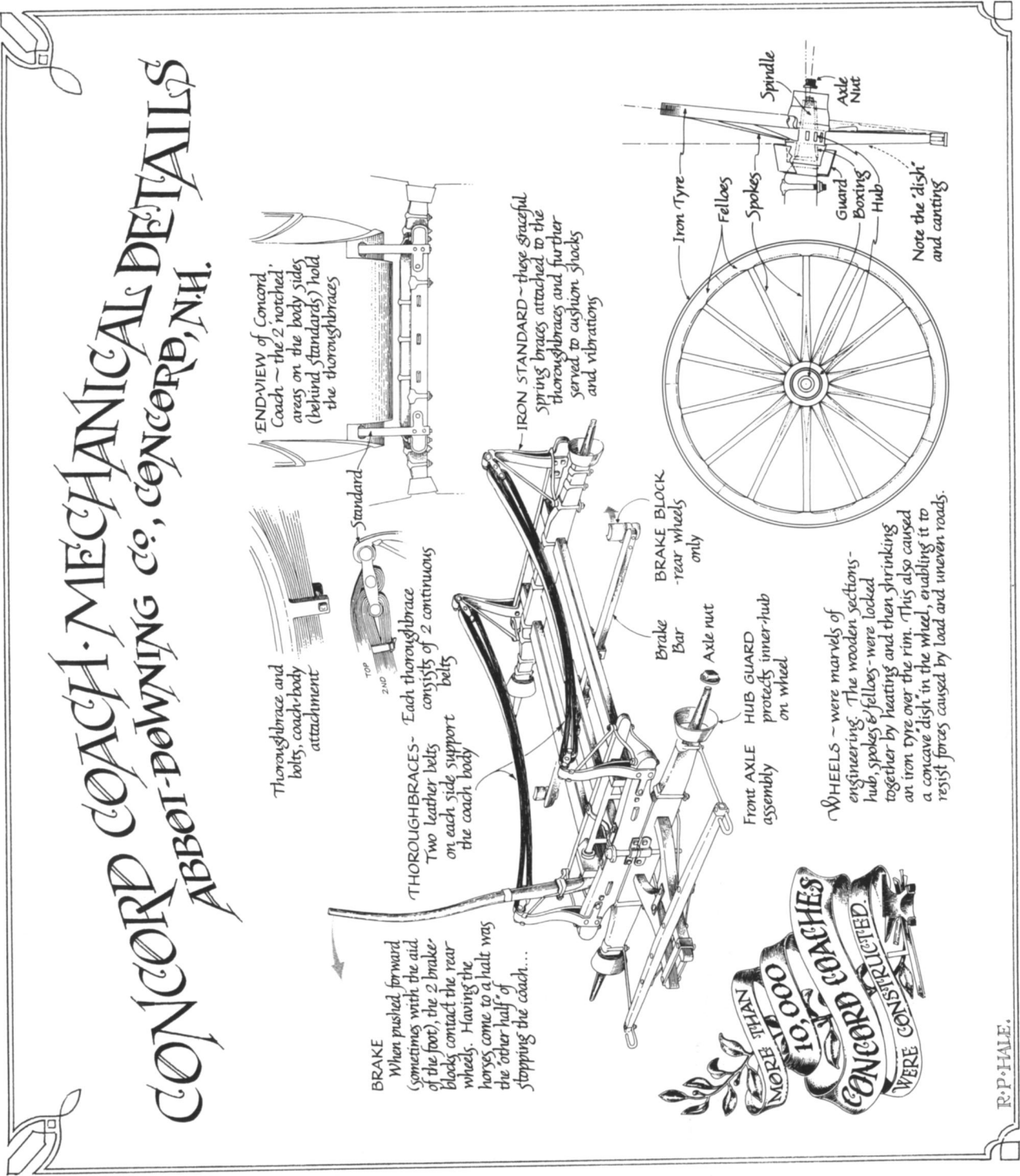


Figure 1. Concord Coach Mechanical Details. Illustration by R. P. Hale.

The Abbot-Downing Company and the Concord Coach

Sherry Wilding-White

What do Wells Fargo, television shows of the 1950s and 1960s, and even McDonald's advertisements of the 1990s have in common? The answer is the uniquely American stagecoach or, to be more specific, the Concord Coach. The small Abbot-Downing Company of Concord, New Hampshire, had a profound effect on American history. However, at the company's peak in 1890, fewer than 300 workers were employed. Abbot-Downing has been out of business for most of this century, and the last coach was made about 1915, yet the vehicles endure in literature, advertising, and ubiquitous "westerns." The surviving coaches command respect and awe from viewers of any age (figure 1).

The uniqueness of the coaches produced in Concord resulted from a combination of innovations and the highest standards of quality; they were "lighter, stronger, faster, more durable and far more comfortable, for both driver and passengers."¹ The introduction of upholstered seats alone was a vast improvement over the hard benches found in other companies' coaches. Another innovation was that the metal "tire" was no longer constructed of separate plates. Instead, a single piece was driven on while still hot, resulting in a much stronger wheel.

The rounded-bottom coach used thoroughbraces instead of springs. The multilayered oxhide straps "were sewn or wrapped to a thickness of three inches . . . these functioned as shock absorbers."² The leather straps from which each of the thoroughbraces was made were almost 100 feet long and formed a cradle for the body of the coach. "Thoroughbraces . . . served the dual functions of transforming the vertical bumps of the road into a fore-and-aft rocking motion of the cradled body and permitting heavy loads without straining the team. When the horses started, the body would roll back. Rocking forward again helped them overcome the inertia of getting underway. At the same time the passengers were protected from the shocks of the wheels."³ Metal-spring suspension systems employed by other coach builders resulted in a jolting up-and-down ride. Because the body of the Concord Coach was hung, it was able to sway

when the vehicle moved. Unfortunately, the rocking motion sometimes caused seasickness.

The history of the company has been well documented. The original business was founded by Lewis Downing in 1813 and the vehicles constructed in his shops on South Main Street in Concord, where the buildings eventually covered approximately six acres. Working alone, he handcrafted buggies with no springs—the body was directly attached to the rear axle.⁴ J. Stephens Abbot joined the firm in 1826 as a journeyman coach-body builder, thus starting production of the famous coaches. The partnership of Abbot and Downing terminated in 1847 for unknown reasons. Downing opened a competing shop called Lewis Downing & Sons (figures 2, 3) while Abbot remained in the original buildings, with his firm known as J. S. & E. A. Abbot (figure 4). The two firms reunited in 1865 as Abbot, Downing & Co. (figure 5). In 1873 a corporation was formed under the name Abbot-Downing Company (figures 6, 7). "By the early eighties, Abbot-Downing was the premier firm in the carriage-making business."⁵ The turn of the new century found the company deliberating too long about its future. By the time it decided to utilize the combustion engine, other companies had taken the lead. During this later period it purchased engines from other firms and built the bodies of several types of vehicles; the most enduring were fire engines (figure 8). The company went out of business completely in 1925. The last asset, the corporate name "Abbot-Downing," was sold to Wells Fargo in 1945.

Historical circumstances proved financially beneficial to the Abbot-Downing Company. The settlement of the West required a sturdy vehicle to transport people and materials over rough or non-existent roads. Mail contracts provided by the federal government resulted in an increase in stage and freight lines. (Stories abound of the colorful drivers. For example, "'One-Eyed Charlie' Parkhurst continued to drive right into old age, plagued by rheumatism and the loss of an eye from a horse's kick. On his death and before his interment in the appropriately named Odd Fellows' Cemetery, [in] Watsonville, California, it was discovered that he had not only been a woman but a mother."⁶) The discovery of gold in California increased the demand for rugged coaches capable of carrying heavy bullion.⁷



Figure 2. *Lewis Downing & Sons* manufacturing buildings opposite the *Phenix Hotel*, date unknown. Courtesy of the New Hampshire Historical Society, N470.



Figure 3. *Advertising card for Lewis Downing & Sons.* Courtesy of the New Hampshire Historical Society, F3782.

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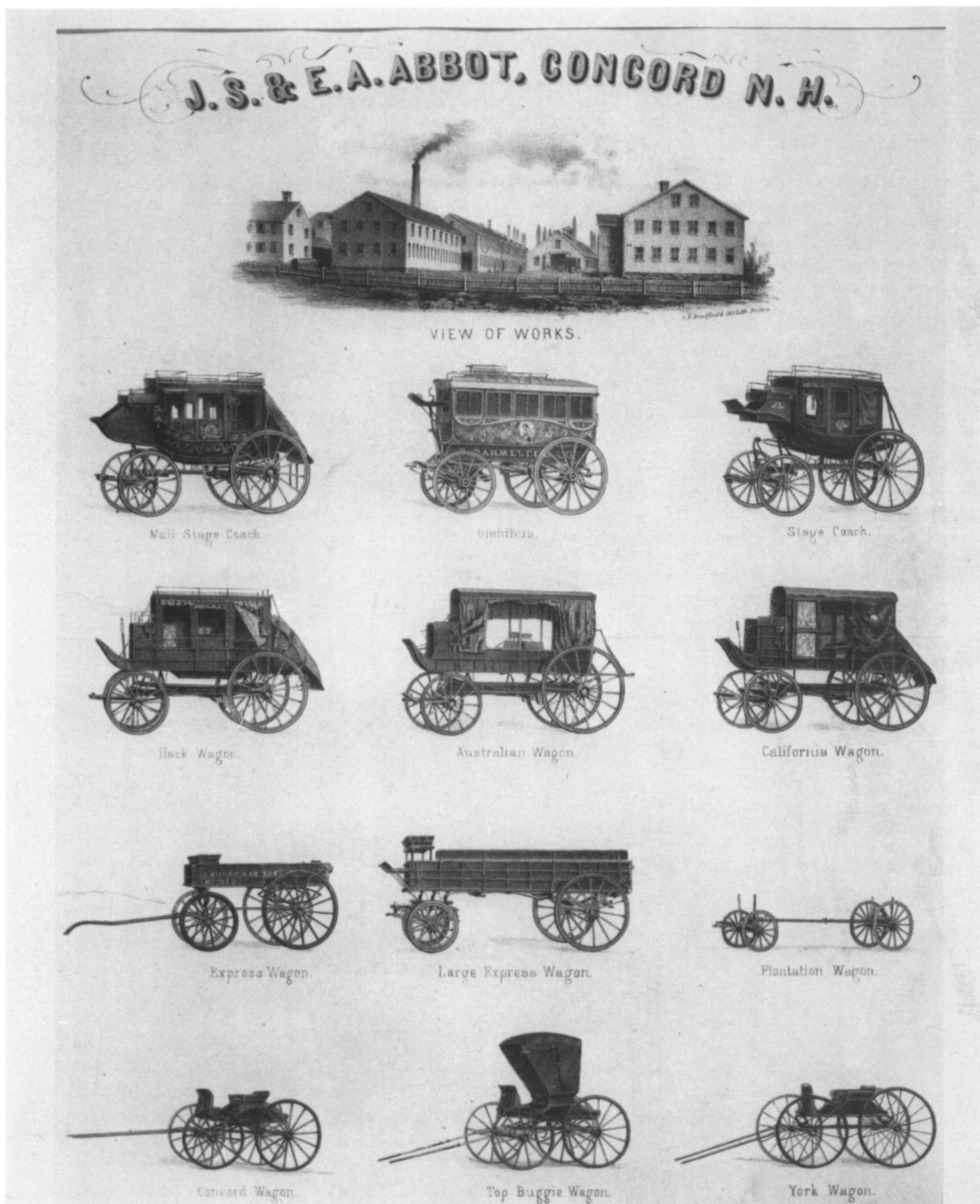


Figure 4. Advertising broadside of the J. S. & E. A. Abbot Company depicting various types of their vehicles beneath a drawing of the factory. Courtesy of the New Hampshire Historical Society, F2065.

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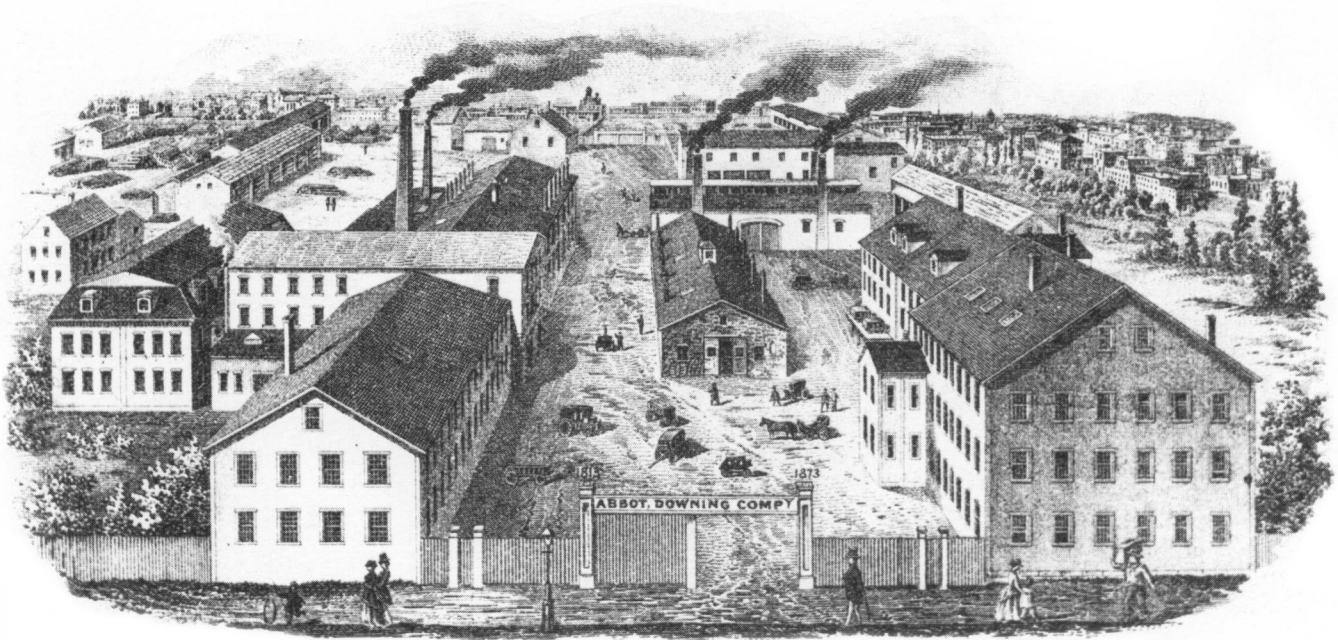


Figure 5. *Abbot, Downing & Company—an engraving used on advertising and sample books.*
Courtesy of the New Hampshire Historical Society, F492.

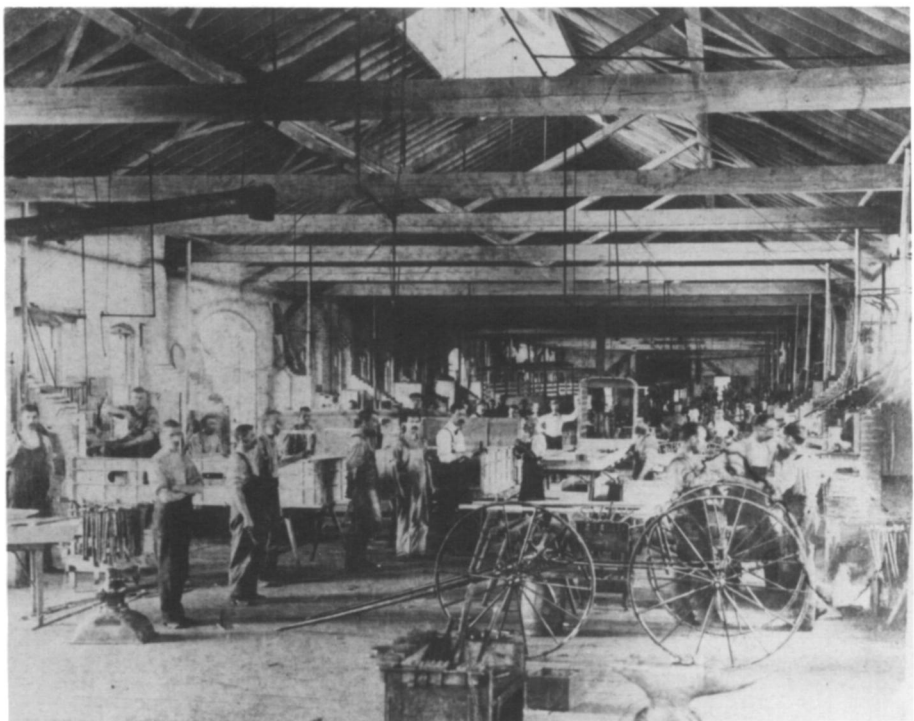


Figure 6. *The interior of the Abbot-Downing Company body shop, date unknown.* Courtesy of the New Hampshire Historical Society, F1259.

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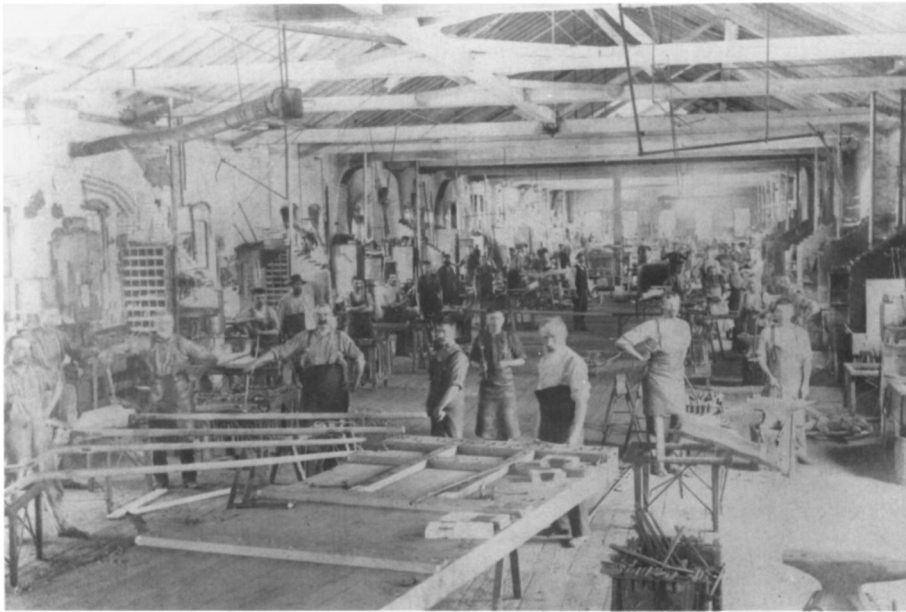


Figure 7. *The interior of the Abbot-Downing Company, date unknown.* Courtesy of the New Hampshire Historical Society, F1069.

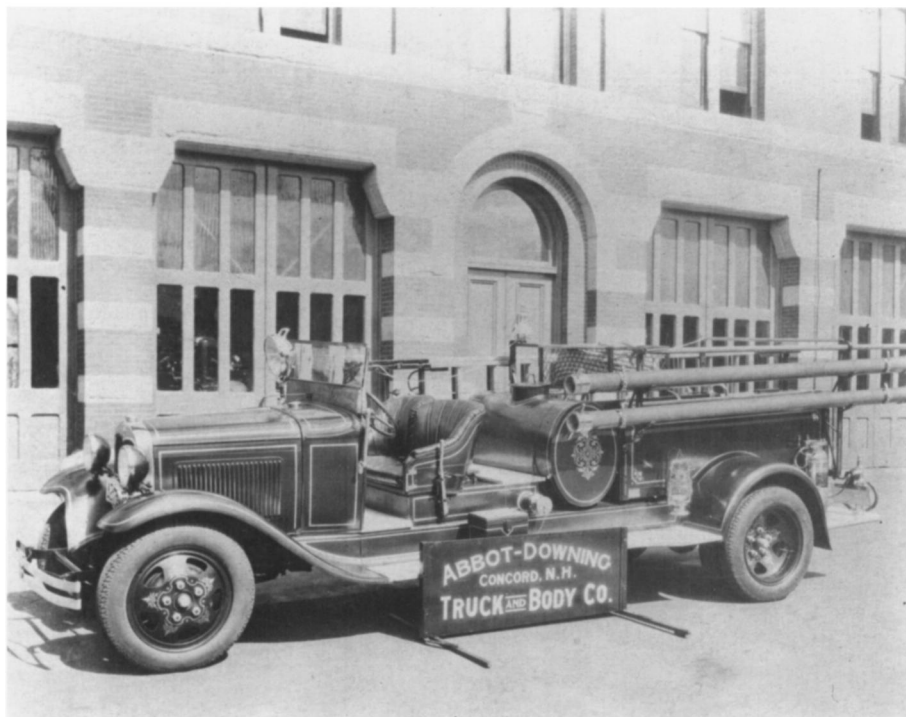


Figure 8. *An Abbot-Downing Company fire engine, date unknown.* Courtesy of the New Hampshire Historical Society, F4167.

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During the Civil War, ambulances, gun carriers, and baggage and provision wagons were produced for the Union army. Instead of the usual three- to five-month delivery time, Abbot completed 21 baggage wagons for the Second Regiment from New Hampshire in less than a week.⁸

The growth of the railroads is thought to be the beginning of the end of the coach industry. In actuality, “the new wealth which the railroads brought to communities had exactly the opposite effect, stimulating rather than depressing the industry.”⁹ In the White Mountains of New Hampshire, for example, affluent vacationers needed transportation from the train stations to the resorts.

Other newly settled countries, with poor roads or none at all, imported the rugged Concord Coaches throughout the 19th century (figure 9). They were seen as having a major advantage over the English coaches for their ability to carry heavy bullion. To South Africa went the heaviest vehicles produced: twelve-horse coaches servicing the Transvaal goldfields. Other coaches were shipped to Central America, South America, Australia, and New Zealand, and one sent to Mexico was ordered to be trimmed with purple goatskin on the inside.

In the United States, lighter, fancier vehicles were purchased by the wealthy in major American cities. The need for streetcars or horse-drawn trolleys generated many orders in the 1870s. More than 40 different types of vehicles were produced by Abbot-Downing, including specialized coaches

for bakeries, chair makers, clothiers, and expressmen. But it was the estimated 3,000 Concord Coaches that earned the company its reputation. “In the 1850s, only a few durable goods were sold in the American market under nationally-known names. Perhaps the most famous were the McCormick reaper, the Singer sewing machine, and the Concord Coach.”¹⁰

The company cut and seasoned its own top-quality lumber: oak for the spokes, ash or oak for the body, elm for the hubs, Spanish cedar for panels, and mahogany or rosewood for the ornamental work. “The making of the curved panels of the coach was rather a slow process. They were of bass wood (American linden) and were placed upon a form with clamps around the edges and were put in front of an open fire, intermittently moistened and the clamps adjusted until the form was reached on all edges.”¹¹ One of the last pieces added to the body of the coach was the inside door panel. Here the number of the coach, the date it was completed, and the signature of one or more workmen can often be found.

Besides their ruggedness, the Concord Coaches were admired for their colors, artwork, and gold leaf: each coach had an elegant color scheme of red and straw or canary yellow. Every coach had a unique picture painted on each door by John Burgum and, later, his son Edwin. Other illustrations included scrollwork and portraits of actresses on the footboard or driver’s seat. Several coats of varnish sealed the finish.¹² The leather trim and thoroughbraces

Figure 9. A Concord Coach in Yarmouth, Nova Scotia, c1900. This is an excellent example of the overcrowding of the coach: 17 passengers accompany the driver above the usual nine passengers that fit inside. Courtesy of the New Hampshire Historical Society, F3375.



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took 12 or 14 oxen hides (figure 10). Hotel owners bragged about their Concord Coaches in advertisements.¹³



Figure 10. *Mari F. Putnam in her room at Abbot-Downing, where she was the only woman in the plant for over 30 years. She stitched heavy leathers and trimmings. Courtesy of the New Hampshire Historical Society, F3712.*

Lewis Downing exacted the highest standards of materials and workmanship. “The reputation of the Concord Coach grew and grew, until it became a household synonym for perfection.”¹⁴ “It was unmatched for strength, beauty, and meticulous handcrafted construction detail.”¹⁵ Highly skilled men were imported from England, Scotland, and Canada.¹⁶

“They were for the most part skilled mechanics, well to do, owning their homes and property, becoming influential citizens.”¹⁷

Perhaps the single most famous Concord Coach was the Deadwood Stage (figure 11). Built in 1863, it was shipped around Cape Horn to California and ran between the goldfields and San Francisco. Later, in Wyoming, it ran the Deadwood-Laramie-Cheyenne route. In 1876 it was abandoned in a canyon after a robbery. There it was found by Buffalo Bill Cody, who made it a major attraction in his traveling shows.¹⁸ Cody took the Deadwood Coach through Europe from 1887 to 1890 and used it to carry princes, kings, and presidents. In 1895 this coach was returned to Concord as part of Buffalo Bill’s “Wild West Show.” “On another occasion it was made famous by the woman, Martha Canary, who when the driver was shot, seized the lines and saved it, becoming known to history as Calamity Jane.”¹⁹

The largest single order for coaches, valued at \$45,000, was made by Wells, Fargo & Company (figure 12). Thirty coaches left Concord on 15 flatcars to Omaha, Nebraska, in 1868. The paintings on the doors were mostly landscapes, and no two were the same.

Numerous Concord Coaches still exist; in 1988 there were 19 in New Hampshire.²⁰ The coach owned by the New Hampshire Historical Society was presented as a gift by the

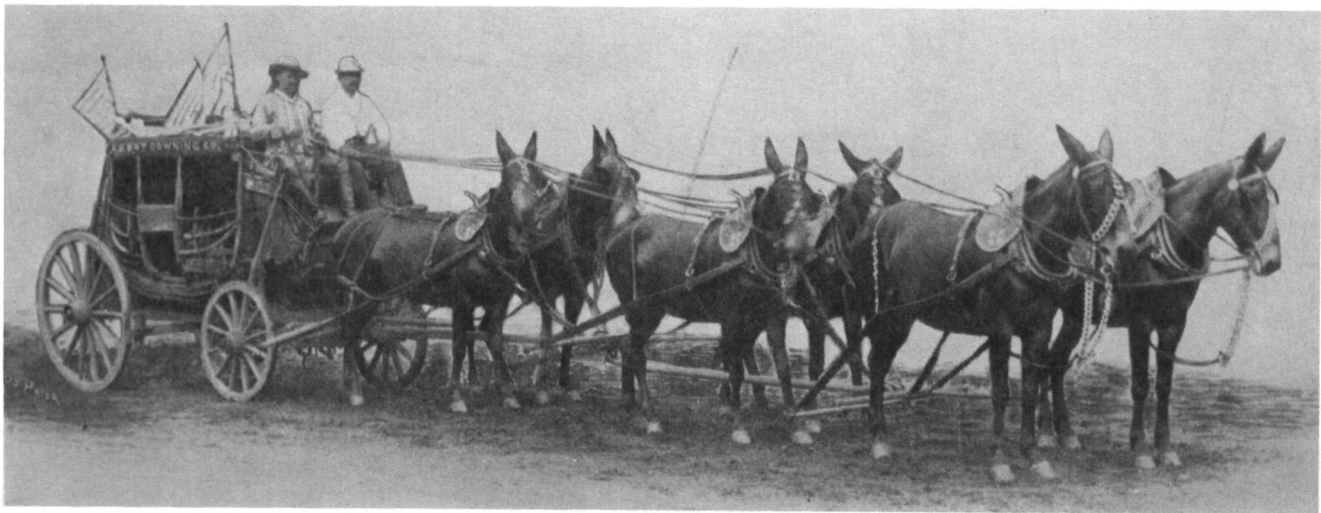


Figure 11. *The original “Deadwood Coach” as photographed in the yard of the Abbot-Downing Company by W. G. C. Kimball on July 4, 1895. Colonel W. F. Cody (Buffalo Bill) held the reins, and John F. Burke, the celebrated driver, sat beside him. Built in 1863, the coach had been shipped from Boston to San Francisco in the clipper ship General Grant on February 18, 1864, to Louis McLane, president of the Pioneer Stage Company of California. It was one of 32 similar coaches shipped to McLane “round the horn” in 1863–64. It was exhibited by the “Wild West Show” in Concord, New Hampshire, on July 4, 1895, to an audience of 20,000. It had the same wheels that had been made for it 32 years before. Courtesy of the New Hampshire Historical Society, F3780.*

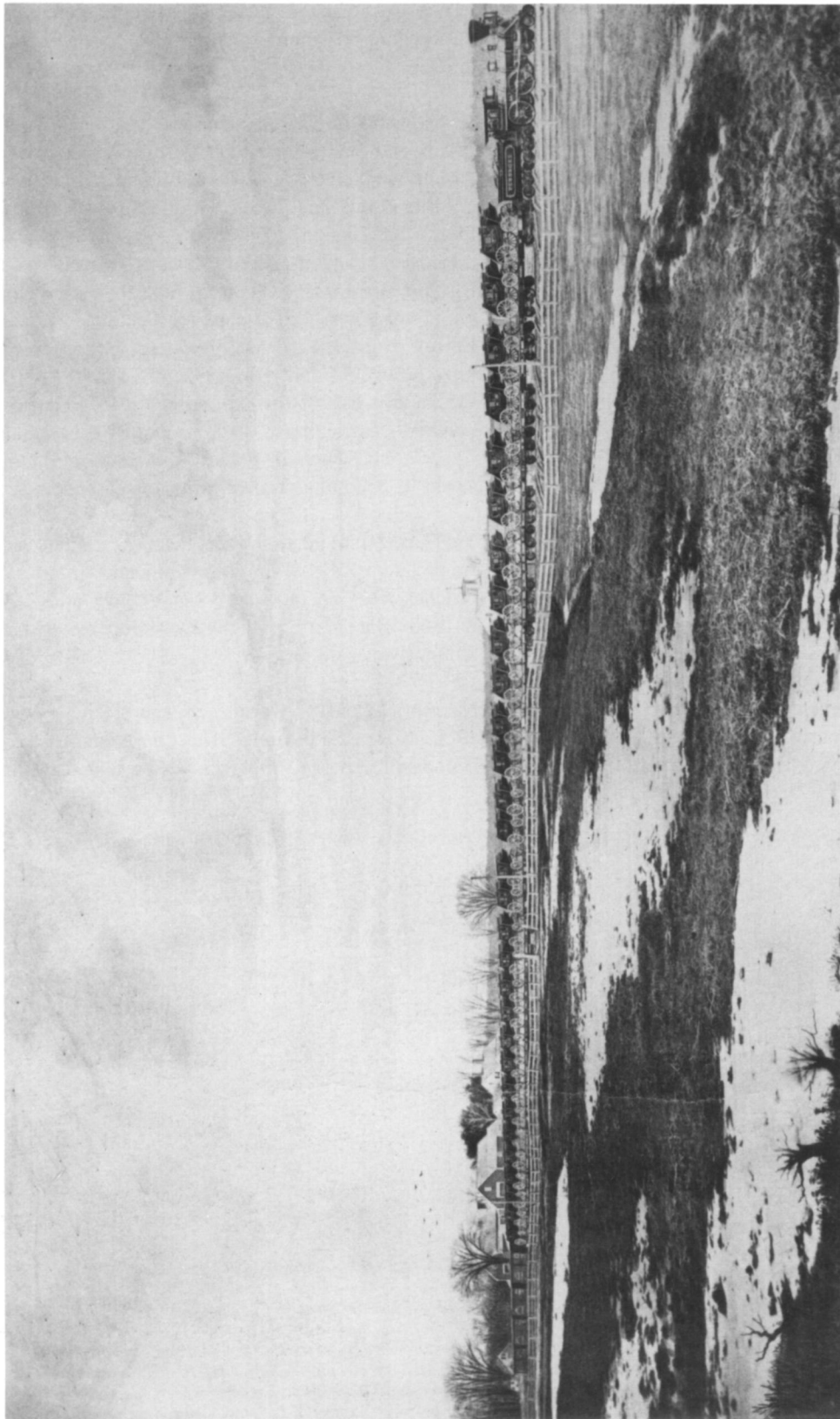


Figure 12. Shipment of 30 coaches to Wells, Fargo & Company, Omaha, Nebraska, April 15, 1868. This shipment on 15 flatcars, with four boxcars attached, containing 64 horse sets of James R. Hill & Company's harnesses, all valued at about \$45,000, reached Omaha in seven days under the guidance of Samuel Parker. The running part was painted straw color; the body was English vermilion and highly ornamented. The pictures on the doors (all different) were from the brush of John Burgum; the scrolls, varying in design and colors, were painted by Charles T. B. Knowlton. These were designed for nine persons inside and eight or 10 outside. The average weight was 2,250 pounds, and the best part of 14 sides of ox hide was used in the boots, thoroughbraces, etc. Courtesy of the New Hampshire Historical Society, N465.

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Boston & Maine Railroad in 1957. This particular coach was displayed at the New York World's Fair in 1939.²¹

The demise of the Abbot-Downing Company can be attributed to several factors. Although there were pattern books, every vehicle was customized. "There seems to have been no standard coach and they were built on a no-two-alike basis, an expensive process."²² Even after the company finally began building motorized vehicles, it was unable to compete with the growing giants of the industry. Ford and General Motors were able to turn out millions of cars a year, while Abbot-Downing was turning down orders it could not fill. "By the time the plant's doors were closed at Concord for the last time, the Concord Coach had become a collector's item Yet as long as the memory of horse-drawn transportation is kept alive, the name Abbot-Downing will represent the best of an era."²³ See figures 13, 14, 15.

Today the only remaining building of the Abbot-Downing Company is found at 7 Perley Street in Concord. This was formerly the company's blacksmith shop but is now occupied by Post 21 of the American Legion, Edward Bourgeois (tax preparer), radio station WJYY, 105.5 FM, and Bouyea Fasset's Bakery Outlet.

Notes

1. S. Blackwell Duncan, "The Legendary Concords," *The American West* 8, 1 (1971):16.
2. John Huitson, "A Stage-Coach," *America in Britain* 31, 3 (1993):14.
3. Schuessler, "The Concord Stagecoach," *Yippy-Yi-Yea* (Spring 1994):71.
4. From the beginning, Downing was an astute businessman. He made the wood bodies of two buggies and exchanged one for ironwork done at the state prison.

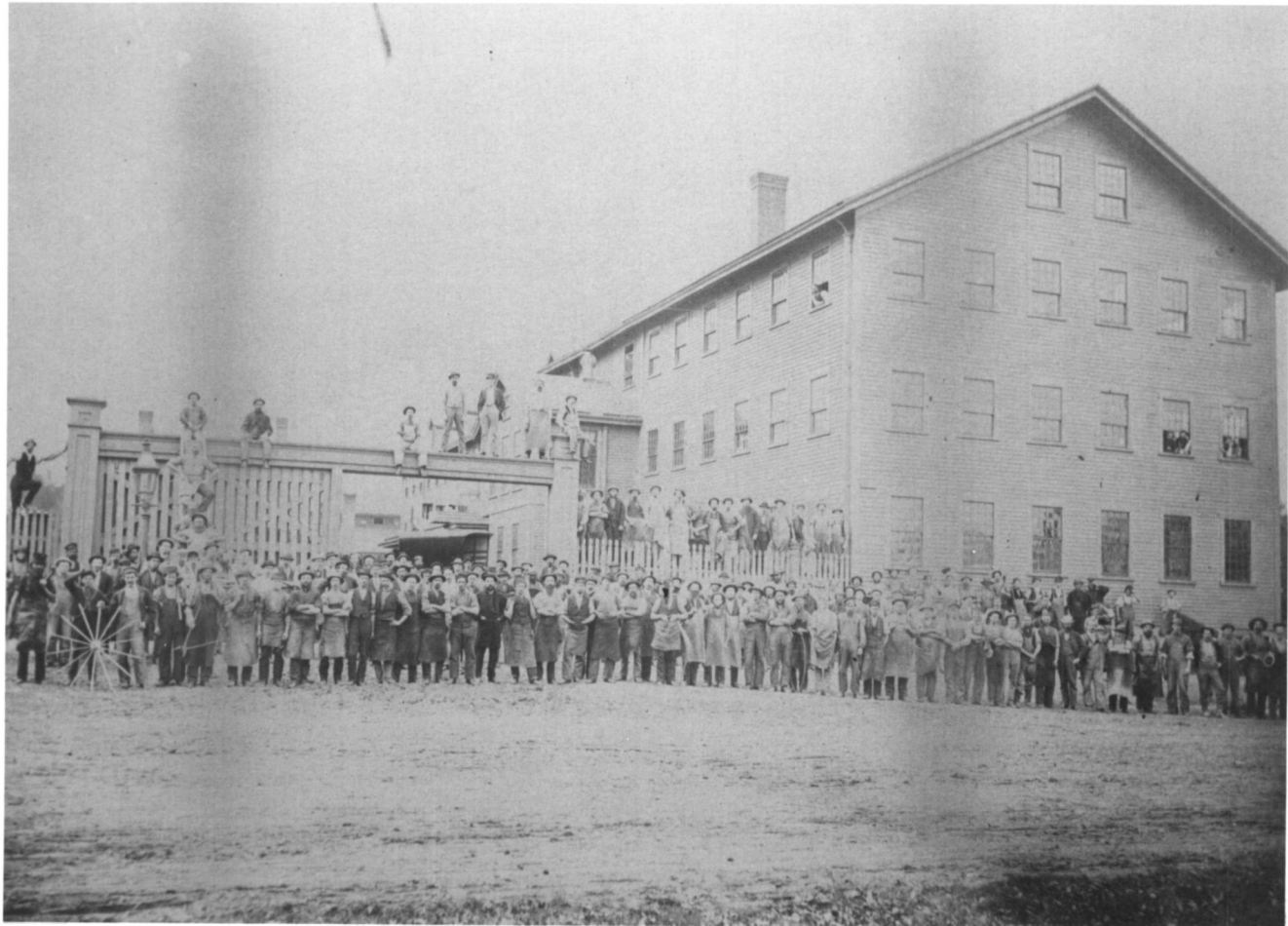


Figure 13. A group of workers in front of their shops at the Abbot-Downing Company, South Main Street, Concord, c1870. Courtesy of the New Hampshire Historical Society, F89.

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Figure 14. *The remaining buildings of the Abbot-Downing Company as they appeared in October 1965.* Courtesy of the New Hampshire Historical Society, F4165.



Figure 15. *The demolition of most of the Abbot-Downing Company buildings in 1971.* Courtesy of the New Hampshire Historical Society, F4166.

5. Seymour E. Wheelock, "The Concord Coach: A Western Legacy from the East," *Colorado Heritage* 4 (1986):24.
6. Huitson (n. 2 above), p. 16.
7. Edwin G. Burgum, "The Concord Coach," *Colorado Magazine* (September 1939):5. In the early 1860s, two coaches costing \$600 were shipped to California by boat around Cape Horn. They reached California in six months and were placed in storage. Since they were never claimed they were eventually auctioned for \$2,500 each, in gold.
8. Harry N. Schreiber, "Coach, Wagon, and Motor-Truck Manufacture, 1813–1928: The Abbot-Downing Company of Concord," *Historical New Hampshire* 20, 3 (1965):3–25.
9. Edwin Valentine Mitchell, *The Horse and Buggy Age in New England* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1937), p. 17.
10. Schreiber (n. 8 above), p. 7.
11. Burgum (n. 7 above), p. 2.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
13. Dignitaries were often transported by Concord Coach. In 1951, Princess Elizabeth and the Duke of Edinburgh visited Canada and rode in a Concord mail coach that had been in service in Nova Scotia.
14. Duncan (n. 1 above), p. 17.
15. Wheelock (n. 5 above), p. 20.
16. The only woman employed by the company was Mari F. Putnam, who for 30 years did all the leather stitching.
17. Burgum (n. 7 above), p. 3.
18. There was in fact more than one coach on the Deadwood-Laramie-Cheyenne route, but Buffalo Bill popularized the one he owned, creating the myth that only one Deadwood Coach existed.
19. Elmer Munson Hunt, "Abbot-Downing and the Concord Coach," *Historical New Hampshire* (November 1945):19.
20. Pamphlet of the Concord Coach Society published by Discovering Publications, 1988.
21. Hunt (n. 19 above), p. 13.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
23. Schreiber (n. 8 above), p. 23.