

# CARROLLCROFT IN CONTEXT

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## ABSTRACT

Carrollcroft was built by the Colby family at a time of dramatic change in the history of Canada and of the Eastern Townships. The pre-Confederation period saw the majority of the population in Canada East, *les Canadiens*, struggle to get control of their political destiny. At the same time the economy of the country was rapidly developing and Charles Carroll Colby, a Stanstead attorney, emerged as a fledgling capitalist astutely taking advantage of business opportunities by investing in railways and mines, the newest motors of economic growth. Although he was involved in federal politics from the beginning of Confederation and often away from home, his role in pioneering business ventures and his devotion to the local community proved beneficial to his Stanstead constituents.

## RÉSUMÉ

*Le domaine patrimonial Carrollcroft fut érigé par la famille Colby au cours d'une période de changements importants dans l'histoire du Canada et des Cantons-de-l'Est. L'époque antérieure à la Confédération fut témoin de la lutte des Canadiens pour garantir le contrôle de leur destinée politique. Au même moment, l'économie du pays entraînait dans une période de développement intense. Charles Carroll Colby, avocat de Stanstead et capitaliste avisé, a bien su tirer avantage des opportunités qui se présentèrent à lui en investissant dans les mines et les compagnies ferroviaires, les plus récents moteurs de l'expansion économique. Même si, dès le début de la Confédération, il s'impliqua en politique fédérale, devant ainsi s'absenter souvent, son intérêt pour la création de projets innovateurs et son engagement envers la communauté locale s'avèrent bénéfiques pour la population de Stanstead.*

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When Dr. Moses Colby signed his last will and testament in 1855, leaving to his two sons Charles and William the estate in Stanstead which he had accumulated, including eight hundred acres of land in the surrounding area, he must have been convinced that he was putting his heirs on a solid footing that would ensure their future prosperity and protect his wife and unmarried daughter. Three years later, when he began construction of the home which was to provide the family with a strong foundation from which to contribute to the community, he was in such poor health that he had to leave the superintendence of the project to his sons. Their extravagance surprised and upset him.<sup>1</sup> So much was changing in Canada East in the middle of the nineteenth century, politically as well as economically. Moses Colby had cautiously embraced the changing times by making judicious investments, mostly in land but also in some local commercial enterprises. However, he probably had little inkling of how differently his sons would react to the investment climate of the times. In fact he was shocked by the headlong pursuit of investment opportunities into which, in his perception, his sons recklessly plunged. In his mind, their financial decisions put in jeopardy the very property which provided the basis for his estate plan. This essay will look at that changing world and what drove his son, Charles Carroll Colby (who eventually bought out his brother's share of the inheritance) to embrace so wholeheartedly the capitalist spirit which engulfed mid-nineteenth century British North America. It will examine the political changes, the railway boom and local mining activity driven by the looming American Civil War.

Construction of the home, which was later named Carrollcroft, was begun in 1858, the seventeenth year of the uneasy union of Upper and Lower Canada.<sup>2</sup> In the aftermath of the Rebellions of 1837–38 and on the recommendation of Lord Durham, the governments of the two Canadas had been combined into one elected assembly, with equal representation from both Lower Canada and Upper Canada. In the early years, however, Durham's second major recommendation, that of responsible government, remained elusive. The real power still lay with the governor who appointed the executive and legislative councils.<sup>3</sup> The challenge was to govern the colony by maintaining a delicate balance between the interests of the French Canadians and those of the rapidly-expanding and always vociferous merchant middle class. But, as Durham had foreseen, an aristocratic form of government could not last much longer. The colony had to be self-governing, at least in matters that

concerned it directly. As Desmond Morton points out, even some *Canadiens* saw the possibilities:

Etienne Parent, editor of *Le Canadien*, argued [...] that the British constitution could still be the best safeguard for French Canadian survival. Forget Durham's errors, Parent urged, go to the Assembly and fight for his idea of responsible government.<sup>4</sup>

In the new arrangement, some French Canadian politicians, led by Louis-Hippolyte LaFontaine, had seen their way to working within the British system by cooperating with their fellow moderate reformers from Canada West. The LaFontaine-Baldwin team had been successful in the election of 1848 and the new governor, Lord Elgin, was prepared to abide by its advice and counsel. It appointed its own cabinet to replace the executive council.

Fuelled by a constant flow of immigrants from the British Isles (including the Irish, driven from their homeland by famine), the population increased by almost 700,000 souls in the first decade of the union. Most settled in Canada West but Montreal became the commercial metropolis of a burgeoning economy from which the produce of the western agrarian community and lumber from the Ottawa Valley were traded to markets in Europe.<sup>5</sup> As colonial policy dictated, these products were protected by tariff barriers to favour imperial interests. But in the mid-1840s British politicians were turning towards a free-trade policy; when the Corn Laws were repealed in 1846, it became less necessary to control the affairs of the colonies and protective tariffs were dropped.

Responsible governments for the colonies henceforth became British policy. This happened to coincide with a downturn in the world economy. The first real test for the new 'responsible' government of the united province of Canada was the Rebellion Losses Bill in the spring of 1849 which would compensate people of Canada East who had suffered property damage during the rebellions of 1837–38. The Montreal business elite, already feeling somewhat let down by the British government, did not believe that former rebels should be compensated for their alleged crimes. They expected the governor to veto the bill. The signing of the Rebellion Losses Bill by Lord Elgin, entirely in keeping with his commitment to responsible government, triggered a riot that culminated in the destruction, by fire, of the parliament buildings in Montreal. This hysterical over-reaction was followed up by a petition in favour of a political union with the Republic to the south. But most colonists and *Canadiens* could not be persuaded that a complete break with Britain was the

solution for the Canadas. They were more inclined to support LaFontaine and Baldwin in using the British constitution to the advantage of the province.

Prosperity returned in abundance in the 1850s. The railway boom and a reciprocity treaty signed by Canada and the United States in 1854 created a frenzy of economic activity that put the lie to the gloomy predictions of the opponents of free trade.<sup>6</sup> This activity shaped a new middle class of merchants and entrepreneurs just around the time Charles Carroll Colby was finishing up his education at his father's *alma mater*, Dartmouth College in nearby Hanover, New Hampshire. In 1851 he entered the offices of prominent Stanstead lawyer and politician, Hazard Bailey Terrill. In 1855 he was called to the bar and became one of only two practicing attorneys in Stanstead County.<sup>7</sup> He was, one might say, well situated to be *au courant* and able to take advantage of the booming times in which he began his professional career.

Politically, however, despite the excellent example of leaders such as Baldwin, LaFontaine and their successors in the reform movement, there was agitation in the Canadian parliament of a radical and sectarian nature that made French Canadian politicians fear for their language and culture. Issues such as the separation of Church and State and denominational education convinced many that political co-operation alone would not protect cherished institutions forever. *La survivance* for French Canadians became the overriding preoccupation. Durham's purpose, of course, had been the assimilation of *les Canadiens*. When the demographic balances changed and the population of Canada West surpassed that of Canada East, English-speaking Canadians began to clamour for representation by population.<sup>8</sup> For some French Canadians this was the death knell and they spoke out vociferously against it. It became quite clear that the only hope for maintaining control of their political affairs and, coincidentally, for the survival of the French language and culture was to establish a jurisdiction in which they would be able to maintain a majority perpetually. A confederation of all the British North American colonies, with Canada East and Canada West separating into two distinct political entities and a federal government responsible for issues of common interest, offered a glimmer of hope. At least Quebec, within a confederation of several other provinces, would give *les Canadiens* some assurance of being able to survive as a distinct linguistic group with a culture unique unto itself, as long as they could dominate its legislature. Talk of such an eventuality began in earnest when, "[i]n the

Canadian parliament in 1858 Alexander Galt [the member for Sherbrooke] [...] brought in a set of resolutions that virtually forecast the subsequent program of Confederation."<sup>9</sup>

As residents of Lower Canada, Alexander Galt and his contemporary Charles C. Colby perhaps had issues of *la survivance* of their own to worry about. As businessmen their concerns were not so much for their language and culture, which were not threatened, but for a favourable climate for investment. Although they were from a part of the province, the Eastern Townships, which did not have a French-speaking majority, it was clear that the demography was rapidly changing. In the 1861 census, the French-speaking population of the Townships was already up to 47% although in Sherbrooke it was 24%. In the case of Stanstead County, French-speakers made up only 8% of the population.<sup>10</sup> Understandably, their secondary concerns would have been more towards protecting the rights of their fellow English-speaking Quebecers. Certainly Galt strove mightily to ensure that the BNA Act protected the education rights of English-speaking Protestants and that the use of the English language would be allowed in the legislature and courts of Quebec.<sup>11</sup> But, as Rudin argues so cogently in describing the work of the Quebec Conference of 1864, the articles of Confederation were written, in a certain sense, by and for Montreal's English-speaking business elite:

The Quebec resolutions set out the basic division of powers between the federal and provincial governments, with the former exercising control in those fields important to men interested in solidifying their dominance over a trans-continental economy. Banks were to be controlled by Ottawa so that the leaders of institutions such as the Bank of Montreal might easily extend their influence across provincial borders; and railways that crossed such boundaries were to fall under federal jurisdiction so that Montreal might emerge as the transportation centre of the new nation.<sup>12</sup>

Connecting the Eastern Townships with the metropolis, therefore, became an important concern for both men. Just as the architects of Confederation had seen the necessity of connecting Canada together from coast to coast, it was obvious to businessmen in the Townships that the prosperity of their region depended on its being connected by rail to Montreal.

But before Montreal could reach its potential as the transport hub of the emerging nation, it had to be connected by rail to the eastern seaboard of the United States. The freezing of waterways during the

winter months brought shipping to a halt and a solution had to be found to keep the trade goods moving all year round. Fortunately for the heavily populated area of the Eastern Townships, not well connected by navigable waterways to lucrative markets, the line would have to pass right through its centre. Montreal to Portland, Maine, proved to be the most viable option and the Atlantic and St. Lawrence Rail Road was chartered in 1845 to complete the project. There was vociferous support for it from the Townships, notably from Alexander Galt, head of the British American Land Company, based in Sherbrooke, and from Moses Colby of Stanstead. As Derek Booth explains:

There were loud voices in Stanstead, among them that of Moses Colby, who wanted the railway to pass through the Town of Stanstead. To this end surveyors were hired to find a practicable route that passed through the town and then Colby and his associates set about to convince the railway company to adopt it. Unfortunately, the most practical route from an engineering point of view for a railway leading south from Sherbrooke lay up the valley of the Coaticook River, through the town of Coaticook, and not over the uplands of Hatley and Stanstead Townships.<sup>13</sup>

In other words, while Sherbrooke's hopes were realized and a catalyst to boost industry in the growing city was to be put in place, Stanstead's remained unfulfilled.

Besides being trained in the law, Charles Carroll Colby had the experience as a young man of his father's interest in the economic prosperity of his community. He also knew, only too well, from his brother William's choice of farming as a profession, that prosperity was not assured in the occupation in which most people were still employed.<sup>14</sup> His choice, therefore, of the pursuit of entrepreneurial schemes of one sort or another is not surprising. In describing the sea change between the business world which Moses Colby faced and that which Charles C. Colby had to deal with, Van Die notes the establishment of the Eastern Townships Bank in 1859 and how it changed relationships between people.<sup>15</sup> Being paid in kind and bartering were out and financial accountability was in. Prosperity through profitability was there for the taking, especially in boom times. Referring to Charles C. Colby's business decisions, Van Die elaborates:

To supplement his income, he seized the opportunity to branch out from law and farming into railway and mining speculation [...] he was soon caught up in developing the rich veins of copper

that were being opened up in nearby Ascot Township in 1858 [...] By the time of his father's death in May 1863...mining speculation, based on hopeful prospects but mounting debts, became a constant and obsessive theme in his letters to [his wife] Hattie.<sup>16</sup>

Although he had some spectacular failures (he lost ownership of his family's Stanstead home through insolvency between 1872 and 1887) he eventually emerged as a successful entrepreneur. No doubt his contacts with other businessmen, established through his legal practice and throughout a lengthy career in politics, kept his spirits up and his interest alive.<sup>17</sup>

When the first railway proposal to connect Stanstead with Montreal was granted a charter in 1853, once again, Moses Colby had been one of the petitioners. It was called the Stanstead, Shefford and Chambly Railroad Company, and as the name implies it was intended to connect Montreal with Stanstead through Chambly, Granby, Waterloo and Magog.<sup>18</sup> This ambitious project was never fully realized due to lack of financial support from the communities through which it was intended to pass. However, a modified route was built from St. Johns, on the Richelieu River, through West Farnham, Granby and Waterloo to the boundary line of Stukely Township. From St. Johns to Montreal the SS&C had arranged to use the lines of the Montreal and Champlain Railroad to reach the metropolis. But, by the time the Stanstead, Shefford and Chambly Railroad had reached its most easterly point past Waterloo, it was 1862, its coffers were empty and it was ready to hand over its operation to the Vermont Central Railway. As early as 1858, the VC had gained ownership of the majority of the capital stock of the SS&C and had no intention of allowing the line to reach Stanstead on the doorstep of its chief rival, the Connecticut and Passumpsic Railroad. Control of international traffic between Montreal and New England was in the hands of the Vermont Central as long as the Connecticut and Passumpsic, which had reached Newport, Vermont by 1863, did not have access to Montreal.<sup>19</sup>

The reason the SS&C did not fulfill its original mandate, therefore, had more to do with company politics than profitability. It was, in fact, producing enough revenue to cover its expenses, pay its debts and, with increased freight from the communities it served, perhaps reap a profit for its shareholders in the not too distant future.<sup>20</sup> But for a second time, the aspirations of the Stanstead community in general and the Colby family in particular were thwarted and Stanstead remained cut off from rail transport.

Canada was considered to be an important market by American railroad promoters and the owners of the Connecticut and Passumpsic Railway and the people of Stanstead decided to combine their efforts: in 1862, they obtained a charter to build the Massawippi Valley Railway to connect Newport, through Stanstead Junction to Lennoxville, Canada East.<sup>21</sup> This time it was Charles C. Colby who led the bid from the Stanstead community and his prominence in the undertaking no doubt had a positive effect on his election to represent Stanstead County in the federal parliament of the new Confederation.<sup>22</sup> C.C. Colby was well into his first political mandate when the Massawippi Valley Railway was officially opened on July 1, 1870. For all intents and purposes, Colby's dream for Stanstead was realized at the time by the construction of a three-mile spur line from Beebe (called Stanstead Junction) to Rock Island, within a mile of the Town of Stanstead. The link with Lennoxville connected Stanstead with the Grand Trunk system which, since the completion of the Victoria Bridge in 1859, made it possible for riders on the MVR to disembark in downtown Montreal.

It is hard to imagine the revolutionary change that the arrival of the railway must have made for the people of Stanstead. No doubt it is comparable to the change in our own lives that has been wrought by the introduction of high-speed computers and the internet. The thought that Montreal was only a few short hours away and that a newspaper published in the city could be received in Stanstead on the same day must have been marvellous to contemplate.

The railway opened up possibilities that could not have been considered before. Its effect on various sectors of the economy was significant. Although the border area was largely cleared for agriculture, the more northerly townships experienced a boost to the forest products industry, to sawmilling and to the pulp and paper industry. Manufacturing expanded with the advent of railways. Paton Mills, for example, became one of Sherbrooke's largest employers.<sup>23</sup> Other textile manufacturers enlarged their operations in various townships towns. Even the tourist industry experienced an upsurge with railways now able to deliver vacationing families to various resort hotels on lakes Memphremagog and Massawippi. The effect on agriculture itself was, as Booth points out, more subtle. Townships producers engaged mostly in mixed farming and had developed markets closer to home. These markets were now accessible to much more productive parts of the country and the new competition forced a sort of consolidation process whereby townships farms got larger and began to specialize more, mostly in dairying.<sup>24</sup>

One important area of activity which received benefit from the coming of the railway was mining, particularly in the area of Stanstead. The granite blocks which were used to build Carrollcroft in 1859 must have been dragged laboriously from the Graniteville-Beebe area. But after the completion of the Massawippi Valley Railroad the product was much more easily shipped over much longer distances. Similarly the copper mines in Hatley and Ascot Townships were able to benefit from the close proximity of the MVR to their most active mine sites.

Long before this innovation had come along to speed up the marketing of ores or refined metals, Charles C. Colby had become involved in the development of a number of mine sites throughout the Townships. The Civil War in the United States from 1861 to 1865 changed the prospects for copper mining drastically by more than doubling the price of copper on the New York market. W. Gillies Ross drives home the point:

During the Civil War [...] the science of weaponry made important advances. To traditional vehicles and weapons were added ironclad ships, large bore cannons, rifled barrels, metallic cartridges, and rapid-fire guns. One essential ingredient of the new technology of human destruction was copper, but the American production was insufficient to meet war needs; in 1858 the United States produced only 4,000 tons.<sup>25</sup>

Employment in the copper mines of the Townships increased so rapidly that fear was expressed of a possible labour shortage in the agricultural sector. The early 1860s were the most prosperous years for copper mining in Canada East and by the end of the decade there were five hundred copper sites listed and production had grown four times what it had been in 1861.<sup>26</sup>

After the Civil War the price of copper dropped off and, as demand decreased, only the most productive mines continued in operation. Those in Ascot and Hatley Townships, well known to Townshippers as the Albert, Capelton and Eustis mines, actually functioned until well into the twentieth century. The Eustis mine was the last to close in 1939. Charles C. Colby suffered the consequences of the downturn which followed the Civil War years but never lost his appetite for speculation in mining. As late as 1893 he signed a lease agreement with Andrew Rutherford Gray, the liquidator of the Canadian Copper and Sulphur Company, for about fifteen mine sites in the Townships. These included, among others, the Clark, Sherbrooke, Dundin and Belvedere mines in Ascot

Township, the St. Francis mine in Cleveland Township, the Carbuncle mine in Orford Township and mines in Brome and Bolton in the Bedford District.<sup>27</sup> It was speculation in these and other areas of entrepreneurship which enabled him to recover financially to the point where, in 1887, he was able to buy back the family home which, at this point, became known as Carrollcroft.

The stately mansion which is now the home of the Stanstead County Historical Society, known to the people of the border area as Carrollcroft, was built in one of the most turbulent times in Canadian history. Politically, the uneasy arrangement of the union of Upper and Lower Canada was increasingly being viewed as problematic to French Canadians struggling to maintain control of their destiny and protect their language and culture from the complete assimilation which was intended by the Act of Union of 1841. Astute politicians who saw the value of such an outcome extended their vision from coast to coast and created an entity, through Confederation in 1867, which enabled Quebec to emerge as a 'distinct society' or 'nation'. More specifically, the federal arrangement gave Quebec businessmen, such as Colby, access to potential markets within Canada at a time when U.S. markets were in decline.

Economically, change could not have been more profound. The contrast between the business practices of Moses Colby's generation and those of his son Charles were astonishing and acutely felt by the patriarch. Investment in land for security, considered by the father to be basic common sense, was nothing but a source of collateral for raising investment capital to the son. The railway boom of the 1850s and 1860s was seen by Charles C. Colby as an opportunity for wealth accumulation, not only for himself and his family but also for his community to which he was very profoundly devoted. The mining boom, stimulated by the outbreak of the American Civil War, attracted his attention and energy. We know that it was investment in a marble quarry in Vermont with two of Hattie's brothers which caused the over-extension that led to insolvency and the temporary loss of the cherished family home.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless his persistence eventually paid off and he made what has to be considered a spectacular recovery. In 1887 he was in a position to not only repurchase the property but invest in extensive renovations before moving back in with his family.<sup>29</sup>

Beneficiaries of this recovery were not only the generations of the Colby family which were to follow as proprietors of Carrollcroft, but the extended community of Stanstead County and surroundings which now enjoys its use.

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## NOTES

1. Marguerite Van Die. *Religion, Family, and Community in Victorian Canada: The Colbys of Carrollcroft*. (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005), 37.
2. *Ibid.*, 86.
3. Ronald Rudin. *The Forgotten Quebecers: A History of English-Speaking Quebec, 1759–1980* (Quebec: IQRC, 1985), 135.
4. Desmond Morton. *A Short History of Canada* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Inc., 1997), 52.
5. Jacques Monet, S.J. "The 1840s," in *Colonists and Canadiens 1760–1867*, ed. J.M.S. Careless (Toronto: Gage Publishing, 1971), 207.
6. J.M.S. Careless. "The 1850s," in *Colonists and Canadiens 1760–1867*, ed. J.M.S. Careless (Toronto: Gage Publishing, 1971), 227.
7. Van Die, *Religion, Family, and Community*, 47.
8. At the beginning of the union in 1841, the population of Canada East was 650,000 and that of Canada West was 450,000 but by 1851 the respective figures were 890,000 and 952,000. (Careless, "The 1850s," 240).
9. *Ibid.*, 245–246.
10. J.I. Little. *Ethno-Cultural Transition and Regional Identity in the Eastern Townships of Quebec* (Ottawa: Canadian Historical Association, 1989), 21.
11. Rudin, *Forgotten Quebecers*, 141.
12. *Ibid.*, 140.
13. J. Derek Booth. "The Impact of Railways on Stanstead: 1850 to 1950," *Stanstead Historical Society Journal* Vol. 22 (2007), 49.
14. Rudin, *Forgotten Quebecers*, 71.
15. Van Die, *Religion, Family, and Community*, 87.
16. *Ibid.*, 88.
17. Marguerite Van Die makes it abundantly clear that he had a stellar reputation with his contemporaries as an honest Christian gentleman. See "A 'Christian Businessman': The Convergence of Precept and Practice in Nineteenth Century Evangelical Gender Construction," in *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* vol. 10, Number 1, (1999), 103–127.
18. J. Derek Booth. *Railways of Southern Quebec, Volume I* (Toronto: Railfare Enterprises Limited, 1982), 17.
19. *Ibid.*, 19–28.

20. *Ibid.*, 27.
21. *Ibid.*, 52.
22. Charles C. Colby represented Stanstead County in the House of Commons first, from 1867 to 1872, as an independent liberal-conservative and from 1872 to 1891 as a Macdonald conservative. Van Die, *Religion, Family and Community*, 151–153.
23. Ronald Rudin. "The Development of Four Quebec Towns, 1840–1914: A Study of Urban and Economic Growth in Quebec." (Ph.D. diss., York University, 1977), 86.
24. Booth, "The Impact of Railways," 56–62.
25. W. Gillies Ross. *Three Eastern Townships Mining Villages in Quebec, 1863–1972* (Sherbrooke: Les Productions GGC Ltée, 1996), 13.
26. *Ibid.*, 14.
27. Stanstead Historical Society Archives, Charles Carroll Colby Papers, Series 3, Box 1, file 5A.
28. Van Die, *Religion, Family, and Community*, 90–91.
29. *Ibid.*, 94.

