

# Gone, But Not Forgotten — the Concord Coach

*By Karen L Kirsch*

*Just as Henry Ford revolutionised the transportation industry with his mass-produced 1908 Model T car, so did wainwrights J S Abbot and Lewis Downing nearly a century before with their unique Concord Coach. And although they manufactured more than 40 types of carriages, it was the enduring Concord Coach for which Abbot-Downing became globally renowned.*



*A replica Butterfield Concord Coach by Hansen Wheel & Wagon of South Dakota, authentic to the minutest detail.*

spread about the lightness, durability and elegance of the Concord Coach, it was soon popular throughout New England. The men remained partners until 1847 when they parted by mutual consent, each continuing business independently.

Downing's sons joined his business and within a few years the company had 80 employees with more than 11 working forges. Migration into the Western frontier had opened a huge market for coaches and carriages.

Meanwhile, Abbot extended his business to the south and the west, but in 1849 fire destroyed his shops. Undaunted, he immediately replaced them and in 1852 his son Edward became a partner. The company grew rapidly and soon employed 200 workers. It had 24 forges with additional ironwork commissioned to outside sources.

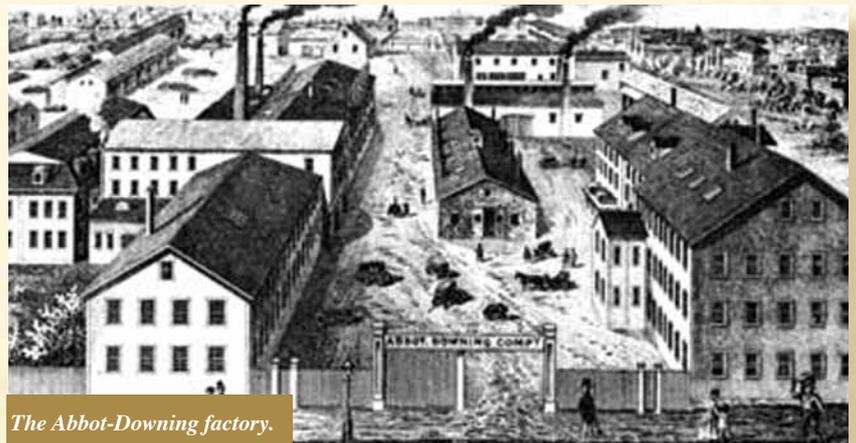
Lewis Downing retired, but in January 1865 the Concord Daily Monitor announced the formation of a new firm, Abbot, Downing & Company,

the result of his son's merger with Abbot. Carriage commerce had grown spectacularly. Abbot-Downing was filling orders from Ireland, Scotland and Prussia and employed nearly 300 men—and one woman. Marie Putnam was presented a gold watch to commemorate 30 years of service because "...being a woman she could operate a sewing machine better than any man could ever hope to."

After learning the trade from his older brother who had learned it from their father, young Lewis Downing left his hometown in Massachusetts, USA, in 1813 armed with a skill and \$125 to set up his own shop in Concord, New Hampshire. Toiling alone he built two buggies and then took them to the local prison to be "ironed." Back home he painted his Concord Waggon and sold them for \$60 apiece. By year's end he had to hire an assistant to produce enough to meet the demand. For the first 12 years Downing made only wagons which had the body fastened to the axle, but he was experimenting with various suspensions. He tried wooden springs (unsuccessful for obvious reasons), elliptical springs and leather thorough braces.

## The start of a dynasty

In 1826 he hired J Stephens Abbot, a journeyman coach body maker who arrived in town on Christmas Eve. He would build the first coach bodies ever produced in New Hampshire. Their premier Concord Coach left the shop in July, 1827. Hoping to start his own business Abbot left, but after a few disappointing attempts he returned to Concord the following year and became Downing's partner. Coaches were the focus of their business and as word



*The Abbot-Downing factory.*

The success of Abbot-Downing was well deserved. Independently and united each company was uncompromising in quality, using only the very best materials and the most highly-skilled workers. Boys taken in as apprentices were expected to serve six years learning the carriage-making trade, but company ledgers show that many of those “boys” stayed on for 40 or 50 years and family names often reappeared. It was an honourable and respected trade.

From 1827-1899 Abbot-Downing produced more than 3,000 rugged, but elegant Concord Coaches. They had sales rooms in New York, San Francisco, Boston, New Zealand, Australia and South Africa. The company continued manufacturing wagons, coaches and carriages under this name until 1919.

## No two alike

Unlike automobiles which ultimately replaced horse-drawn coaches, Concord Coaches were not mass-produced. No two were exactly alike. Each was built to order, however the basic design varied little. Some customers requested “ornament up rich and tasty,” but others, like the Eagle Hotel were more conservative, but precise as indicated by their order:

One nine passenger, French window, City Hotel Coach. Very light. Deck seat. Box footboard. Open back, middle seat 3-fold. Steps wide and set out well. Axle 1 3/4 and tire 1 5/8. Track 5 feet 4 1/2 inches. Wheels good height, 3 feet 10 inches by 5 feet. Strap to hold wheel when at depot with very stout hook so it will not bend out. Whiffle trees to go with springs. Paint body light olive, carriage light drab. Letter Eagle Hotel on sides, put Eagle on back. Plain red plush lining. Drivers boot leather. ... Plain woodwork very light. Not to weigh over 1,500 pounds.

## A cradle on wheels

Just what was it that made the Concord Coach so popular? Yes, it was durable and it had interchangeable parts, but its real claim to fame was comfort. Mark Twain once remarked, “Our coach was a great swinging and swaying stage, of the most sumptuous description—an imposing cradle on wheels.”

Technically that was so. The egg-shaped body was suspended on pairs of thorough braces fitted with a turn buckle to adjust tension. The three-inch leather straps produced a swinging motion rather than the jolting up-down ride of spring suspension. The leather was top-stitched to a thickness of two inches and cured to the hardness of steel. A single coach used 15 to 20 feet of leather per layer and required the hides of a dozen oxen. The suspension did produce a more comfortable ride for passengers, but perhaps more important was the way the swaying created a momentum that eased the load for the horses.

*Historic photo of a Concord Coach overloaded with Chinese workers in California.*



*A Concord Coach in the Mt. Washington Auto Road Museum.*

## Keeping the name alive

While it might seem that modern tools and technology would make restoring or building a replica coach easier, this isn't necessarily so. Some materials are simply no longer available. 19th century hides were considerably longer and thicker than modern hides because today's cattle are slaughtered at about 18 months whereas cattle of the period were typically four years-old when killed.

Montana wheelwright Dave Engels explains how this dilemma is solved. “To join two pieces of leather together for additional length the ends are skived to a long taper, over the length of perhaps three inches, overlapped, and then glued and stitched. The procedure is the same as a blacksmith does when he draws the two ends of the iron to a taper and then overlaps them at a white heat and welds them together. The end result is the same for both; a uniform thickness throughout the entire finished length.”

Hansen Wheel & Wagon of South Dakota is America's most complete carriage building shop and it specialises in Concord Coaches, authentic to the minutest detail. The shop has restored many original coaches and has built 25 from scratch. Because of owner Doug Hansen's respect for original engineering and attention to authenticity, several of

*Pity the team of horses!*



these are in museums. He employs 12 full-time craftsmen and the shop is always busy building coaches exactly like the originals. Just as it was in the days of Abbot-Downing, there is a steady demand for these beautiful conveyances.

Hansen explains, “The Concord Coach was the finest road vehicle of the period. It was perfect and remained virtually unchanged for nearly 70 years. Our product begins with the raw materials. Everything is fabricated right here, much like the shops of early 19th century. We are still building them just the way they were in 1840; from the wooden coach (body) maker, to the blacksmith, the wheelwright, the painter, trimmer and finally to ornamentation.”

A reproduction coach may represent 2,000 hours of labour. While Abbot-Downing's Concord Coaches cost \$1,000-1,200, Hansen's coaches start at \$59,000.

## Unique artwork

Both original and reproduction Concord Coaches reflect English elegance. The body style incorporates a compound curve from both top to bottom and front to back. This was and still is achieved by steam bending or hand carving the wood. Coaches were usually painted a bright vermilion or carmine with straw-coloured running gear which helped to hide road dust. Leather or stylish damask lined the interiors and images of famous beautiful women were sometimes painted on the floorboards. Doors were decorated with original artwork, each scene unique.

At Hansen's shop the exquisite scenes so integral to the coaches are painted by Wayne Troyer, an Ohio artist who specialises in such decoration. Abbot-Downing's artwork was done by John Burgum from Birmingham, England. Burgum had trained as a clock dial painter, but immigrated to America in 1850. He was soon recruited by Abbot-Downing to paint the beautiful coach doors. Subject matter usually depicted an area where the coach would be used. These were exclusively Burgum's work, but the surrounding scroll work was done by an apprentice. He remained with the company until his death in 1907.

## The long road

As lavish as the coach was, long distance travel was gruelling. The six, nine and 12 passenger coaches carried mail, gold and usually far more people than the intended capacity with some riding atop the carriage. Romantic depictions of stage coach travel typically show well-dressed travellers enjoying a leisurely trip; chatting, playing cards or snoozing, but the reality was quite different.

For \$200 passengers on Butterfield's Overland Mail Coach could travel nearly 2,800 miles in 25 days. Each person was allowed 25 pounds of luggage and one canteen. Having only 15 inches of seat per person, they rode tightly squeezed into the coach three abreast, with the opposing seats so close that they had to dovetail their knees with those facing them. If the boot was weighted down with cargo, the front seat passengers pitched awkwardly and uncomfortably forward. The middle seat had only a leather strap for a back support. Since they stopped at stations for just a few minutes to change horses, there wasn't time for much beyond a quick meal of notoriously bad food before cramming back into the coach and resuming the journey.

Windows outfitted with canvas or leather 'curtains' offered the only protection from the elements, so inside temperatures were often sweltering or freezing. One can only imagine their grimy condition after several weeks on the road. Although a few coaches were fitted with reclining seats which acted as "sleepers," not everyone agreed with Mark Twain's comparison to a "cradle on wheels." Many experienced seasickness due to the rocking motion.

Concord Coaches were also popular for local transport. Archives show that a \$7 first class ticket entitled the passenger to ride all the way. Second class travellers had to get out and walk in the bad places and third class riders also had to push the coach up difficult hills.

The legacy of the Concord Coach is one that will most likely never be matched by any modern vehicle. An article in a late 19th century newspaper succinctly explained why this is so: It is worthy of remark here that while other

## Not an easy life

Coaches were put to two, four or six and sometimes eight horses. When John Butterfield was out-fitting his Overland Mail Route in 1858 he ordered "250 Concord Coaches and... 1,800 stout horses and mules..." While the animals may have initially been "stout," most of those in historic photographs appear to be ready for the knackers. They were driven at a fast pace for about 20 miles before being replaced with a fresh team.

While much is recorded about the coaches, little is written about the equine, but because success or failure of a long distance coaching company depended upon condition of the animals, they purportedly received better care than city horses. Even so, theirs was not an easy life.

Diaries suggest that just about any reasonably-sound equine was a hitch candidate, including barely-broke mustangs. When the going got really tough, passengers and cargo were transferred to lighter Celerity wagons (a stripped down version of the Concord Coach) which was put to mules. One journal noted that, "We were obliged actually to beat the mules with rocks to make them go the remaining five miles..."

carriages have undergone an infinite variety of changes in style, the Concord Coach was so near perfection in its line, at that early day, that it has scarcely undergone any change in construction since.

For all practical purposes Concord Coaches may be gone, but they are not forgotten and it's unlikely they ever will be. Australia issued a 1955 postage stamp bearing the likeness of a Concord Coach as a way to commemorate the role it played in that country's heritage. In America the Concord Coach Society, formed in 1977 with the dedicated dual mission of collecting memorabilia related to Abbot-Downing Company and educating the public to the role these remarkable vehicles played in history.

Learn more at: [www.theconcordcoach.tripod.com/abbotdowning/index.html](http://www.theconcordcoach.tripod.com/abbotdowning/index.html)

Published in the *Omaha Herald* of 1877:

## WHEN TRAVELLING IN A STAGE COACH

- The best seat inside a stage is the one next to the driver. Even if you have a tendency to seasickness when riding backwards, you'll get over it and will get less jolts and jostling. Don't let any "sly elf" trade you his mid-seat.
- In cold weather don't ride with tight-fitting boots, shoes, or gloves.
- When the driver asks you to get off and walk do so without grumbling; he won't request it unless absolutely necessary.
- If the team runs away, sit still and take your chances. If you jump, nine out of 10 times you will get hurt.
- In very cold weather abstain entirely from liquor when on the road, because you will freeze twice as quickly when under its influence.
- Don't growl at the food received at the station—stage companies generally provide the best they can
- Don't keep the stage waiting.
- Don't smoke a strong pipe inside the coach.
- Spit on the leeward side, if you have anything to drink in a bottle pass it around.
- Procure your stimulants before starting as 'ranch' (stage depot) whiskey is not "nectar".
- Don't lean or top over neighbours when sleeping.
- Take small change to pay expenses.
- Never shoot on the road as the noise might frighten the horses.
- Don't discuss politics or religion.
- Don't point out where murders have been committed, especially if there are women passengers.
- Don't lag at the washbasin. Don't grease your hair, because travel is dusty.
- Don't imagine for a moment that you are going on a picnic, expect annoyances, discomfort, and some hardships.