

## Family, Business and Politics in Kings County, N.S.: the Case of F. W. Borden, 1874-1896

Carmen Miller

Volume 7, Number 2, Spring 1978

URI: [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad7\\_2art03](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad7_2art03)

[See table of contents](#)

### Publisher(s)

The Department of History of the University of New Brunswick

### ISSN

0044-5851 (print)

1712-7432 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

### Cite this article

Miller, C. (1978). Family, Business and Politics in Kings County, N.S.: the Case of F. W. Borden, 1874-1896. *Acadiensis*, 7(2), 60-75.

CARMAN MILLER

## Family, Business and Politics in Kings County, N.S.: the Case of F.W. Borden, 1874-1896

In the middle of March 1874, Frederick William Borden, the newly elected Member of Parliament for Kings County, Nova Scotia, boarded a boat for Boston on his way to Ottawa to take his seat in the first session of Canada's third Parliament. Borden was no stranger to Massachusetts' largest city since from 1866 to 1868 he had studied at the Harvard Medical School and a brief sojourn in Boston among friends and relatives offered what was both urbane and familiar. Ottawa in 1874 was quite another matter. Only a sixteenth the size of Boston, this cold, relatively inaccessible city of sawdust and civil servants at first must have seemed raw and alien to the new member from Kings. Apart from the recently constructed Parliament buildings, the federal capital's architectural pretensions doubtlessly fell far short of Borden's eastern seaboard standards of civic splendor. Yet the city's political climate offered much to cheer a young, untried but ambitious Reform politician. In Borden's opinion, Alexander Mackenzie's Reform government had begun particularly well. Even before Borden arrived in Ottawa, George Brown had gone to Washington to negotiate a reciprocity treaty, which if it had been successfully concluded would have been welcomed enthusiastically in Kings County and would have considerably enhanced Borden's prospects for re-election. Furthermore, the Reform party seemed securely installed on the treasury benches with a comfortable sixty seat majority. Across from them sat a temporarily discredited and demoralized Conservative opposition. In the long run, however, the government's political prospects proved to be less promising. All too soon the trade depression would deepen, reciprocity would fail and the Mackenzie Cabinet, torn by conflict and indecision, would prove less than sympathetic to the claims of the "rags and patches" of Confederation.

Closer to home, Borden's own political position was tenuous at best. In the 1874 election he had defeated the County's incumbent, Leverett De Veber Chipman by only 98 votes and Chipman, a Kentville merchant and banker, remained a strong force in the County. Chipman's family had virtually dominated Kings County politics for over a century; a Chipman had represented one of Kings County's constituencies for 63 of the previous hundred years. Borden's narrow victory had been primarily the result of the unusual political situation in the County, for nowhere was the electoral confusion which characterized post-Confederation Nova Scotian politics more apparent than in Kings. There Chipman, the son of the County's original anti-Confederate, had flirted with the Conservative government

ever since he succeeded to his father's Commons seat in 1870.<sup>1</sup> His political ambivalence had created so much dissension within the ranks of the County's Reformers that he had been challenged in the general election of 1872 by an Independent Reformer, J.L. Wickwire, a prominent merchant from the neighbouring village of Canning, whom he had handily beaten by some 604 votes.<sup>2</sup> Despite his political equivocations, Chipman agreed to run as a Reformer in 1874, but the national party's hierarchy refused to endorse his candidacy, and called upon the County to "return a man that is unmistakably a real friend of the Government, and a reliable man".<sup>3</sup> Sir Charles Tupper, who had no such qualms, immediately and shrewdly endorsed Chipman.

Meanwhile, the Canning and district Reformers met and named a candidate more to their liking, Frederick William Borden, a local twenty-six year old doctor. With the help of the Pacific scandal, the lethargy and disorganization of the provincial Conservative party, and a recent Conservative hike in the local rail tariff, Borden eked out a slender majority. But his political position in the county remained precarious. Moreover, he had not been called to Ottawa nor had he been chosen by the party's powerful. He had been elected by the constituents of Kings County and his subsequent political fate remained in their hands. If he failed he could expect no safe seat to be opened for him. However, Borden did survive and in the thirty-seven years between 1874 and 1911 met only one defeat. The point of this study is to suggest a tentative explanation for Borden's political durability in the years before 1896 when he joined Laurier's first Cabinet as Minister of Militia.

Borden's political career can best be understood in the context of his constituency's political economy, an economy characterized by transition and dislocation. In 1871 Kings possessed a population of 21,510. But while the County's population had increased rapidly in the previous two decades, it registered relatively little growth between 1871 and 1881. Thereafter, it began to decline and by 1911 Kings had only 426 more inhabitants than forty years before.<sup>4</sup> Most of the County's people lived along the Fundy and Minas Basin coast and in the five fertile river valleys, particularly in the Cornwallis river valley, stretching between Kentville and Kingsport. Their chief occupation was agriculture, which produced a lucrative export trade in livestock, hay, potatoes and, later, apples. This trade was organized by a mercantile community consisting of merchants and ship owners, closely knit by family and business ties, which dominated the political life of the

<sup>1</sup> J.K. Johnson, ed., *The Canadian Directory of Parliament 1867-1967* (Ottawa, 1968), p. 116.

<sup>2</sup> Canada, *Sessional Papers* (1873), no. 60, p. 99.

<sup>3</sup> *Daily Acadian Recorder* (Halifax), 26 January 1874.

<sup>4</sup> *Census of 1871*, vol. 3, p. 90; *Census of 1911*, vol. 1, p. 67. See, too, Alan A. Brookes, "Out-migration from the Maritime Provinces, 1860-1900: Some preliminary considerations", *Acadiensis*, V (Spring, 1976), pp. 26-55.

County. An examination of the occupational composition of Kings County's pre-Confederation Members of the Nova Scotian Legislative Assembly suggests the extent of their political dominance. Of the nineteen men who represented the County in Halifax between 1784 and 1867, twelve were from the County's mercantile elite, two were farmers, one was a barrister, three were doctors and the occupation of one is unknown. Moreover, the doctors and the barrister were linked to the mercantile community by family and business ties.<sup>5</sup>

This political pattern was not unique to Kings nor did it terminate at Confederation but remained substantially intact over the next thirty years at both the provincial and federal levels.<sup>6</sup> Between 1867 and 1900 six of Kings' fourteen M.L.A.'s were merchants, three were lawyers, two were farmers, one was a doctor and two held administrative posts.<sup>7</sup> Not only did the administrators come from notable families but so, too, did the lawyers and the doctor. The first lawyer, D.B. Woodworth, was both the son of a Canning merchant and the son-in-law of the wealthy Hants County ship owner and Conservative Senator, Ezra Churchill. The second, Barclay Webster, the solicitor for the Windsor-Annapolis Railway, was the son-in-law of L. De V. Chipman. The third lawyer, H.H. Wickwire, was the son of the Canning merchant who had challenged Chipman in the 1872 federal election. Since this political group was united by strong family bonds, the County's system of political representation was something of a family compact. At least eleven of the County's fourteen post-Confederation M.L.A.'s were related through birth or marriage to men who previously held elected office on either the federal or provincial level.

Borden was neither a merchant nor the son of a merchant. His father, Jonathan Borden, was an affable and cultivated country doctor whose real and personal wealth at the time of his death in 1875 amounted to no more than \$8,000.<sup>8</sup> Nor is there any evidence to suggest that the financial career of the younger Dr. Borden was following a different course before 1874. Yet Borden was not without claim. As an educated professional, and the son of a politically prominent family, particularly on the maternal side, Borden was neither an unsuitable nor unusual representative of his community's commercial interests. Access to the mercantile elite did not stem solely from birth. Marriage constituted another important avenue to grace and favour, and three months prior

<sup>5</sup> See C. Bruce Ferguson, *A Directory of the Members of the Legislative Assembly of Nova Scotia 1758-1958* (Halifax, 1958).

<sup>6</sup> J. Murray Beck, *The Government of Nova Scotia* (Toronto, 1957), Appendix M, p. 356; D.A. Muise, "Parties and Constituencies: Federal Elections in Nova Scotia, 1867-1896", *Historical Papers*, 1971, p. 200.

<sup>7</sup> Ferguson, *A Directory*.

<sup>8</sup> Signed statement of Andrew and Frederick Borden, executors of the will of the late Dr. Jonathan Borden, 19 January 1875, the County Court of Probate, Registry of Wills, Kentville, Nova Scotia.

to his nomination, Frederick Borden had married Julia M. Clarke, the daughter of John Hopson Clarke, esquire and J.P., one of Canning's most prominent merchant ship owners, whose estimated pecuniary wealth in 1872 was reported to be between \$75,000 and \$100,000. An examination of Clarke's will, made in 1884 but probated in 1888, suggests the upper limit of this estimate as the closer approximation of his wealth.<sup>9</sup> Another Canning business of comparable strength was the co-partnership of three brothers-in-law, Stephen Sheffield, Leander Wickwire and Edward M. Beckwith, all true and stalwart Liberals. A smaller but equally prominent Liberal merchant-shipping partnership was the Clem and Robert Dickie Co. Their uncle, David M. Dickie, with whom they did business, was a Canning merchant and ship owner and former Liberal M.L.A., and his son was the Hon. Charles Dickie, another "staunch Liberal".<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, the Woodworths and some of the Eatons, who possessed small mercantile interests, were Conservatives. This is not to suggest that Canning's Liberals and Conservatives represented distinct economic or ideological interests. On the contrary in the absence of ideological and economic cleavage family and extended family alliances helped to define the shape of county politics.

In the context of these fairly clearly defined familial-political lines within the Canning mercantile community, the political position of Borden's father-in-law, J.H. Clarke, was somewhat anomalous. Related through marriage to Charles Tupper and through business to the Eatons,<sup>11</sup> Clarke may have possessed Conservative sympathies. Yet he remained on excellent personal and business terms with Stephen Sheffield, the senior partner and acknowledged leader in the firm of Sheffield, Wickwire and Beckwith. The political sentiments of Clarke's son-in-law, however, were never in doubt. Raised in the political faith of Howe, Borden had evinced an early and active interest in politics and he and his family were known to be Reformers. Two of his maternal uncles, Edward and John Lothrop Brown, had been Reform M.L.A.'s and on his paternal side his uncle Andrew, Robert Borden's father, who had run for an Assembly seat and lost by a narrow margin, was also a Reform partisan.<sup>12</sup> No one could consider Borden a political outsider. Moreover, the effect of his nomination was to unite Canning's three largest mercantile firms behind the Reform party. Backed by Sheffield, Wickwire and Beckwith, Clarke and the Dickie clan, as well as W.H. Church (the secretary of the Canning and district Reform Committee and one of the largest ship-builders in the neighbouring community of Kingsport), F.W. Borden, despite

<sup>9</sup> *The Mercantile Agency Reference Book (and Key) for the Dominion of Canada* (Montreal, 1872), p. 546; J.H. Clarke's Will, 8 April 1884, the County Court of Probate, Registry of Wills, Kentville, Nova Scotia.

<sup>10</sup> Arthur Wentworth Hamilton Eaton, *The History of Kings County* (Salem, 1910), p. 45.

<sup>11</sup> John Hopson Clarke's wife, Elizabeth, was a first cousin to Sir Charles Tupper. *Ibid.*, p. 606.

<sup>12</sup> F.W. Borden to Rev. Byron Borden, 19 January 1906, F.W. Borden Papers, Public Archives of Nova Scotia [hereafter PANS].

his age and inexperience, temporarily possessed the confidence and support of the area's mercantile elite, which he was not slow to exploit to his own advantage.

Although Borden retained his medical practice in Canning until 1896, medicine soon took second place to commerce. Since there were four doctors in this small village of 600 people, and the surrounding district was not devoid of medical service, it may have been the competition, the seeming saturation of available medical talent which deflected his interests elsewhere.<sup>13</sup> Or was it that very early in his professional career Borden realized that medicine, though a worthy occupation, would scarcely lead to wealth and riches? His father's career provided convincing proof of this homely truth. Borden possessed a certain mathematical talent together with organizational and administrative skills, and conscious that "success in life . . . is a question of the survival of the fittest",<sup>14</sup> he was never deaf to the call of opportunity. Born into a family of modest means, by the time of his death in 1917 he was worth at least \$300,000.<sup>15</sup> While part of this wealth was accumulated during his ministerial days in Laurier's Cabinet,<sup>16</sup> Borden was well on his way to affluence before 1896. How then do we explain Borden's rise to riches? Marrying the landlord's daughter, or, more precisely, daughters — Borden's first wife, Julia Maud, Clarke's elder daughter, died of "consumption" in April 1880 and four years later he married her sister, Bessie Blanche, Clarke's only other daughter — is only part of the answer. More to the point, Borden rose to riches by cleverly exploiting the existing economic system based on family alliances, and thereby gained a position of leadership in his community. And he did this during a period of economic transition.

Borden started his business career in an obvious and simple manner. In the 1870s he began to purchase small lots of land, often in partnership with Clem and Robert Dickie, land which they put out again in mortgages.<sup>17</sup> He also purchased shares, never more than three or four out of a possible 64, in local shipping vessels engaged in the coasting trade. In 1879 Borden owned about thirty-five acres of land, twenty-six of which he had inherited from his father, and six ship's shares divided equally between two trading ships.<sup>18</sup> Eighteen years

<sup>13</sup> Lovell's *Dominion Directory* (Montreal, 1896), p. 197.

<sup>14</sup> F.W. Borden to H. Percy Borden, 24 July 1899, F.W. Borden Papers, PANS.

<sup>15</sup> Bessie B. Borden to Court of Probate, 17 January 1917, County Court of Probate, Kentville, Nova Scotia.

<sup>16</sup> For some aspects of Borden's later business career, see Christopher Armstrong and H.V. Nelles, "Getting Your Way in Nova Scotia: Tweaking Halifax, 1909-1917", *Acadiensis*, V (Spring, 1976), pp. 105-31.

<sup>17</sup> *The Western Chronicle* (Kentville), 11 April, 2 May, 6 June 1883.

<sup>18</sup> Ships Registers, Windsor, Nova Scotia, vols. 310-1, RG12, Public Archives of Canada [hereafter PAC].

later he possessed 4,000 acres of land, two 125 to 150 ton vessels outright, and a controlling interest in a third vessel.<sup>19</sup> The precise number of ship's shares is less important than the pattern of ownership which emerges from an examination of ships' registers for the port of Windsor, Nova Scotia, Kings County's closest port of registry. Local merchants engaged in the export/import trade apparently shared the potential risks and profits in ship ownership through a partnership system best suited to an area where business associations tended to take the form of extended family relations. While non-merchants — farmers, teachers, doctors and other local notables with small sums of accessible capital — often purchased shares in vessels, control of the ship usually remained in the hands of small but recurrent groupings of local merchants whose number of shares may well have determined the quantity of space their products occupied in the outgoing or incoming vessels. Shares in the larger vessels, of course, were held for purely speculative purposes. In each case one shareholder was designated master owner. He held the purse, kept accounts and distributed profits. Sheffield, Wickwire, Beckwith and the Dickies constituted one cluster of local merchant-shipowners; the Eatons, Woodworths and Clarkes another.

While Borden began his business career modestly under the shadow of his father-in-law and his Reform mercantile patrons, by the 1890s he had established a wider and additional cluster of younger business associates. They included a Scots Bay farmer, lumberman and agent, C.V. Anthony, and three Canning retail merchants, R.W. Kinsman, W.R. Potter and R.D.G. Harris. This cluster of businessmen soon extended its affairs well beyond shipping to include a lucrative lumbering, farming and wholesale mercantile enterprise at Canning and Blomidon. In October 1895 the greater part of this business was consolidated and incorporated under the name of "The F.W. Borden Co., Limited" with an initial capital stock of \$50,000, soon increased to \$250,000. Under the company's terms of incorporation it received the right to own, buy and sell lumber, real estate and personal property including vessels, wharves, piers, scows, telegraph and telephone lines. It also possessed the right to construct, own and operate telegraph lines, telephones, railways and tramways in connection with the company's business and to conduct a general commission business.<sup>20</sup> Two years after incorporation Borden was able to raise a \$186,000 mortgage on the strength of this business.<sup>21</sup>

Two factors may help to explain Borden's rise to place and power within this mercantile community. First, following his electoral defeat in 1882, Borden became agent for the local Bank of Nova Scotia, a position he retained until May 1891.

<sup>19</sup> F.W. Borden to H. Sutherland, 8 June 1897, gives a good description of his assets, F.W. Borden Papers, PANS.

<sup>20</sup> Nova Scotia, *Journal of the House of Assembly*, 1897, App. 13, p. 6. In 1897 Borden's company became known as the R.W. Kinsman Co., though Borden maintained a controlling interest. In 1901 it was renamed The Nova Scotia Supply Company with Borden as president.

<sup>21</sup> F.W. Borden to H. Sutherland, 8 June 1897, F.W. Borden Papers, PANS.

Then, when the Canning branch was transferred to the Halifax Banking Company, he acted as their agent until 1896. While evidence on his banking career is scant, Borden appears to have used this position to advance his private business schemes. At least that is the tenor of one Bank supervisor's report to the district manager in 1888.<sup>22</sup> How this was done is difficult to determine with any degree of certainty. But soon after Borden assumed the management of the Canning branch of the Bank of Nova Scotia he began an extensive land buying drive. In the year 1883 alone he registered 28 separate land purchases with the Kings County Registry of Deeds.<sup>23</sup> The exodus from the County's coastal areas in the early eighties made land increasingly available though not markedly cheaper. In these years Kings County farmers were laying the foundation for a lucrative apple industry; in 1889 alone over 100,000 trees were planted in Kings County. Acreage was in great demand and shrewd real estate agents could extract interest rates as high as 10%. Exploiting this demand Borden placed some of his land purchases in mortgages. The marsh land he dyked and sold for \$100 to \$300 an acre depending on its proximity to the sea wall.<sup>24</sup> On still other land he planted extensive apple orchards. But most of his purchases were timber land to feed a lumber mill which he had purchased in Lower Blomidon. While Borden's land purchase drive coincided with his new freedom from parliamentary duties, it was doubtless assisted by his access to bank credit, which enabled him to secure available property more readily than his competitors.<sup>25</sup> Borden's later correspondence suggests that in some sound cases he provided bank credit to needy farmers against his own account, probably with a lien on property or a maturing crop.<sup>26</sup> Whatever the means, Borden's direction of the Canning branch of the Bank of Nova Scotia strengthened his authority and economic position within the local mercantile community.

The second major landmark in Borden's early business career was the death of his father-in-law in 1888. Not that Borden inherited from Clarke a vast sum of working capital; in fact, Borden himself received nothing. But his wife, Clarke's only living daughter, received \$6,000, and each of Borden's three children, born of the earlier marriage to Clarke's elder daughter, inherited \$2,000 to be invested in real estate until they married or came of age.<sup>27</sup> The rest of the estate after a comfortable settlement on his widow, Elizabeth, was left to Clarke's only son, Augustus Tupper Clarke, a medical doctor living in Parrsborough, Nova Scotia (he later settled in Canon City, Colorado), who displayed no interest in returning home

<sup>22</sup> James Forgan to Thomas Fysche, 5 January 1888, and Thomas Fysche to F.W. Borden, 11 July 1888, Bank of Nova Scotia Archives, Toronto.

<sup>23</sup> The County Court of Probate, Registry of Deeds, 1883, Kentville, Nova Scotia.

<sup>24</sup> *The Maritime Merchant* (Saint John), 4 March 1897.

<sup>25</sup> *The Western Chronicle*, 15 March 1882; *The New Star* (Kentville), 8 June 1888.

<sup>26</sup> F.W. Borden to W.H. Chase, 8 April 1916, F.W. Borden Papers, PANS.

<sup>27</sup> J.H. Clarke, 8 April 1884, the County Court of Probate, Registry of Wills, Kentville, Nova Scotia.

to continue the family business. When Augustus Tupper Clarke failed to dispose of the property on the open market,<sup>28</sup> Borden agreed to operate, then purchase it. Possession of Clarke's Canning business establishment gave Borden control of a substantial local enterprise. Once the dependent protégé of the community's mercantile elite, Borden now emerged from under its protective shadow to assume the status of an equal partner and to occupy the role once played by his late father-in-law in the commercial affairs of his community.

This development had been a gradual process and had been accompanied by no ringing declarations of independence. On the contrary, it led to closer economic co-operation and extended political influence in larger corporate projects which required substantial capital outlay and an elaborate organizational structure. In local public projects, like the formation of the Canning Water and Electric Light Heating and Power Company (1893), Liberal merchants pooled their financial resources to finance and control the utility.<sup>29</sup> In larger district enterprises like the construction of the Cornwallis Valley Railway, they combined with other local magnates, with men like Brenton Haliburton Dodge, a Kentville merchant, whose father was a merchant, former Liberal M.L.A. and Legislative Councillor, and C. Rufus Burgess, a wealthy Wolfville shipowner.<sup>30</sup> Although from a Conservative family, Burgess was said to have no politics but to be a man who would "support any measure of local betterment".<sup>31</sup> Even so, there was no question of the Railway's politics, with Stephen Sheffield as President<sup>32</sup> and D.M. Dickie the Company's Secretary. While these projects were inspired more by economic than partisan political gain, the effect at election time was none the less potent. Other undertakings were more blatantly political, such as the purchase of the Western Chronicle Printing and Publishing Ltd. in 1893. Its corporate members, Robert C. Dickie, Wentworth E. Roscoe, F.W. Borden and Stephen Sheffield, left no doubt of the weekly journal's political views.<sup>33</sup> Its board, like that of the Cornwallis Valley Railway Company and the Canning Water and Electric Light Heating and Power Company, reads like a directory to the County's Liberal Party power structure.

At its base, this county power structure was a federation of local business interests cemented by extended family alliances. The best example of the County's power structure in operation was the election in 1894 to the Nova Scotia Legislature

<sup>28</sup> Soon after his father's death, A.T. Clarke advertised the sale of his Canning property. *The New Star*, 8 June 1888.

<sup>29</sup> *The Statutes of Nova Scotia* (Halifax, 1893), p. 412 contains a list of the incorporators.

<sup>30</sup> *The Statutes of Nova Scotia* (Halifax, 1887), p. 258.

<sup>31</sup> *The Biographical Review of Nova Scotia* (Boston, 1900), p. 63.

<sup>32</sup> A typographical error in Marguerite Woodworth's *History of the Dominion Atlantic Railway* (Kentville, 1936), p. 104, lists the president as C.V. Sheffield. Contemporary sources consistently give the name of Stephen Sheffield; see *The New Star*, 15 July 1892.

<sup>33</sup> Nova Scotia, *Journal of the House of Assembly*, 1893, App. 12, p. 11.

of H.H. Wickwire, the son of J.L. Wickwire, of the Canning co-partnership of Sheffield, Wickwire and Beckwith. His election underscored the long standing and successful political alliance between Canning's two chief mercantile concerns, an alliance which began with the selection of F.W. Borden as the Reform candidate in the 1874 federal election. During the next twelve years H.H. Wickwire managed the County in the provincial Liberal interests almost as effectively as Borden did on the federal level. No two men worked better in tandem to advance and extend their economic and political influence in the County.

Yet, despite Borden's growing economic stature within the old mercantile community, his political position was far from secure. All the federal elections between 1874 and 1896 were hotly contested and closely won. Although in 1878 Borden beat his colourful, versatile but erratic Conservative opponent, D.B. Woodworth, by 265 votes, in 1882 Woodworth took the seat from Borden by a 350 vote majority. And Woodworth might well have driven Borden from public life if only he had been able to keep out of trouble. But the public disclosure of Woodworth's questionable involvement in Manitoba's proposed North West Central Railway, more specifically his participation in a contract deal with James Beatty, Q.C., D.C.L. and former Mayor of Toronto, proved too much even for the son-in-law of the late Ezra Churchill, the wealthy Hants County shipowner and Conservative Senator. When confronted with the evidence Woodworth's retort that "they all do it" scarcely proved convincing to his electors.<sup>34</sup> The rail scandal finished Woodworth and after Borden defeated him in 1887 by 448 votes he fled to California. Woodworth's defection and the circumstances surrounding his hasty departure disorganized the local Conservative organization and gave Borden a much needed second chance. In 1891 he defeated his Conservative opponent, C.R. Bill, but by a mere 161 votes and owing to bribery by one of his agents, he was subsequently unseated by a petition. In the by-election which followed Borden survived the most difficult campaign of his political career by only 131 votes. In this contest the Conservative government did everything in its power to break Borden's hold on Kings. Wharves, post offices, mail routes, public buildings and railway construction were lavishly promised to areas which would support the government's candidate.<sup>35</sup> Kentville, Wolfville and Berwick cast large majorities in favour of Bill and only the faithful support of the farmers and those in the coastal areas saved Borden.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>34</sup> *The Morning Chronicle* (Halifax), 2, 3 February 1887.

<sup>35</sup> Canada, House of Commons, *Debates*, 17 May 1892, p. 2750 and 14 May 1894, p. 2754.

<sup>36</sup> Canada, *Sessional Papers* (1883), no. 77, p. 203; (1887), no. 53b, p. 235; (1891), no. 27a, p. 243; (1897), no. 20, p. 251. The results are found in *Canadian Parliamentary Companion* (Ottawa, 1879), p. 238. Results for the by-election are reported in *The Morning Chronicle* (Halifax), 19 February 1892. For a more detailed discussion of these electoral contests see Carman Miller, "The Public Life of Sir Frederick Borden" (unpublished M.A. thesis, Dalhousie University, 1964).

Part of Borden's difficulty lay in the fact that his economic and electoral strength was concentrated in the coastal, mercantile region of his constituency, a region closely tied to the old sea oriented economy. In these areas the County's population had stagnated and had begun to decline. People left the County in alarming numbers. Others sought a more favourable location within the County and began to cluster around the newly constructed Windsor and Annapolis Railway, completed in 1869, which served as an alternative transportation route to the traditional system of wind, wood and sail. In the interior, all along the rail line and particularly at the key station stops and market centres of Wolfville, Kentville, and Berwick, population growth resisted the County's general trend. Whereas in the 1870s the County's population grew by only 9.11 percent, the population along the line of the Windsor and Annapolis "increased by over 15%".<sup>37</sup> In the towns like Kentville the advent of the railway literally "changed the centre of the town".<sup>38</sup> Between 1861 and 1891 the population of Wolfville grew from 1,566 to 1,963 and Kentville's population nearly doubled from 1,488 to 2,526; both were incorporated towns by 1893. Berwick's population grew at an even more rapid rate; in the same period it increased from 872 to 1,738.<sup>39</sup>

No place in the County was more painfully aware of the economic implications of this demographic shift than Canning, once "the chief distributing port for all western Cornwallis".<sup>40</sup> Before the coming of the railway Canning had boasted a larger population than Kentville. Not that the two County centres had been rivals; in many ways they had performed different and complementary functions. As the shiretown, Kentville contained the administrative offices of County government, a court house, the regional post office and the services required by an administrative centre, such as law offices, hotels and inns. These differences are reflected in the occupational composition of the two towns. According to the 1860 Nova Scotia Census,<sup>41</sup> Canning's labour force was more skilled. It possessed only 11 labourers to Kentville's 76. But its shipbuilding industry gave it 100 carpenters to Kentville's 35. Moreover, Canning's 27

<sup>37</sup> Woodworth, *History of the Dominion Atlantic Railway*, p. 98.

<sup>38</sup> E.J. Cogswell, "Kentville A Historic Sketch" (typescript MS, PANS, 1895).

<sup>39</sup> Nova Scotia, MS Census, 1860, PANS; Canada, *Census* (1871), vol. 1, p. 73; (1881), vol. 1, p. 12; (1891), vol. 1, p. 30. Unfortunately these official census returns are not entirely useful for comparative purposes since census figures are given for districts rather than towns and the borders of districts shifted from census to census. In the absence of more accurate statistics Lovell's *Directory* may provide a clearer picture of what was happening within each village. According to Lovell, Berwick's population grew from 350 in 1871 to 1,500 in 1896, Kentville's from 1,000 to 1,686 and Wolfville's from 900 to 1,200. Canning's population remained static at 600 throughout this period. See Lovell's *Directory* (Montreal, 1871), pp. 1549, 1560, 1669 and 1789; *ibid.* (Montreal, 1896), pp. 197, 229, 275 and 445.

<sup>40</sup> Clara Dennis, *Down in Nova Scotia* (Toronto, 1934), p. 91.

<sup>41</sup> Nova Scotia, MS Census, 1860, PANS.

merchants tended to be wholesale distributors, whereas Kentville's 10 merchants appeared to trade in a wider variety of retail goods. Canning had no barristers; Kentville boasted 6. While Canning had 16 mariners, Kentville naturally had none. In short, Kentville was an administrative centre, whereas Canning was predominantly commercial.

Backing on the fertile Cornwallis Valley, at the head of the Habitant, "a narrow winding river emptying into the Minas Basin", in its prime the tiny port of Canning could accommodate as many as "eleven little 150 ton freighters".<sup>42</sup> Those which could not be handled there could be served at the government wharf in the neighbouring village of Kingsport. Nearby could be found all the principal materials for ship-building. On the northern ridge of Cape Split there was ample beech, birch and maple, while its southern slope was covered with "a heavy growth of soft wood, spruce of various kinds and fir".<sup>43</sup> During the 1850s and 1860s this region became an active ship building centre. In the shipyards of the Bigelows, Northrup and the Lockwoods in Canning, W.H. Church in Kingsport and Jonathan Steel in Scots Bay were built some of the best vessels in the province. But it was the potato boom of the early 1850s which enabled Canning to exploit its positional advantage to the maximum. Thereafter it became "one of the most flourishing and promising villages in Nova Scotia".<sup>44</sup> Yet its days were numbered, for in 1866 and again in 1868 the village was practically levelled by fire. Each time it was rebuilt in the hope of regaining its former prosperity. But in many ways the fires of 1866 and 1868 were both symbolic and prophetic. The days of Canning's glory were over. The completion of the Windsor and Annapolis Railway in 1869 proved its final undoing. Like a magnet, the railroad drew commercial traffic away from the coastal areas of the County. Kentville remained not only the County's administrative centre; it became its commercial centre.

The political implications of this socio-economic transformation were scarcely encouraging to the Liberals. Wolfville, Kentville and Berwick, the County's growth centres, were Conservative strongholds, whereas the population of the Liberal bastion of Canning, the County's former mercantile centre, remained static, despite the best efforts of its merchants to arrest its decline. The plight of Canning was also that of Borden and his Liberal party and it required little foresight to see that the County's altered demography was closely related to its changing political economy. The gradual replacement of the old wind, wood and water economy by rails, financed and controlled from outside and dependent upon monopoly and government grace, altered the County's patterns of trade,

<sup>42</sup> Margaret E. Ells, "Canning in the Seventies" (typescript MS, PANS), p. 3.

<sup>43</sup> Abram Jess, "History of Scott's Bay" (typescript MS, Dalhousie University Archives).

<sup>44</sup> *The Nova Scotian* (Halifax), 23 July 1866.

politics and business organization. In this context to cling defensively to the old wind, wood and water economy meant a slow but certain death, and Borden was too shrewd, pragmatic and versatile a man to commit himself to so obvious and ignominious an end. Nor was he alone. His Canning mercantile allies were as ready as he to extend their economic and political control into the new expanding areas of the County's economy and to make whatever accommodation the situation required. Borden's decisive electoral defeat in 1882 by D.B. Woodworth made clear that the expanding town of Kentville, the centre of Conservative strength, the seat of the County's government and the home of the partisan Windsor and Annapolis Railroad, had to be conquered. There Borden had garnered only 28 votes to Woodworth's 142.<sup>45</sup> Nowhere had his defeat been more decisive.

Before 1882, Borden, preoccupied with consolidating his political and economic control over the County's coastal area, had paid little attention to Kentville. Not that he had been hostile or indifferent. Indeed, given the precarious state of post-Confederation Nova Scotian politics, particularly in Kings with the defection of a prominent member of the powerful Chipman family, it would have been extremely foolish to alienate or antagonize any section of the County's electorate. Shrewd politician that he was, Borden went out of his way to placate and appease his opponents, particularly those associated with the partisan Windsor and Annapolis Railway. Few people could doubt the political bias of the Company. Chartered by a Conservative provincial government, one of its principal shareholders was Charles Tupper, who assiduously advanced the Railway's interests from the vantage of the Federal Cabinet.<sup>46</sup> If this were not sufficient evidence of the Company's political sympathies, its solicitor, Barclay Webster, and its general manager, Peter Innis, made these perfectly clear by contesting provincial seats in the interests of the Conservative party. And no political contest was complete until the trains arrived on election day carrying signs exhorting the electorate to vote Conservative. More important still was the patronage in the gift of the Railway. Yet Borden did nothing to antagonize the company. Inside and outside the House of Commons he pleaded the Railway's cause, if necessary in defiance of party policy.<sup>47</sup> Borden had no politics where local interests were involved. He made that clear on several occasions by contradicting his party's senior regional spokesman on a matter of local concern, although it meant supporting the economic interests of Conservative opponents. "When loyalty to his party comes in conflict with loyalty to the best interests of his county", Borden explained in

<sup>45</sup> Canada, *Sessional Papers* (1883), no. 77, p. 203.

<sup>46</sup> According to Woodworth, *History of the Dominion Atlantic Railway*, p. 74 n., Charles Tupper held stock in the company to the value of £4,000 under the name of C.H.M. Black.

<sup>47</sup> Canada, House of Commons, *Debates*, 15 May 1882, p. 1549.

the House, "then I think loyalty to his party should give way to the interests of the county".<sup>48</sup> In Borden's view, opponents who could not be wooed and won might, at least, be neutralized. Never did Borden attempt to deprive hostile areas of public works and rarely did he persecute his defeated opponents. His policy of conciliation, his frequent private intercessions on behalf of opponents and sons of opponents in search of positions did much to reduce the degree of personal rancour in an electoral contest.<sup>49</sup>

After 1882, however, Borden's political survival required a more aggressive policy. Yet his political options were limited. In these years no divisive public issue agitated local politics which might be turned to political advantage. Moreover, institutional associations brought only limited political benefits. In this predominantly Baptist County neither Borden's Presbyterianism, which he inherited, nor his Methodism, which he acquired through marriage, proved a political liability or asset. To those religious denominations which sought financial assistance Borden contributed generously and indiscriminately.<sup>50</sup> And neither he nor his opponents made any effort to exploit religious sentiment to political advantage. In his early career Borden had attempted to court the strong local temperance vote. But his failure to keep the pledge and pay his dues between electoral contests became a source of political embarrassment rather than benefit.<sup>51</sup> Borden's militia work was only slightly more rewarding. The militia's annual training camp in Kentville was a rare opportunity to win personal friends and meet members of the County's local elites. But beyond that the precise political advantages of Borden's militia association are difficult to measure since patronage remained in the gift of his political opponents, more particularly its commanding officer, Borden's old political rival, Leverett De Veber Chipman. And despite their political differences Borden neither gave nor received cause for complaint. The same equanimity seemed to prevail in militia affairs as on most other public issues in the County.

The County's ailing economy, therefore, became the chief subject of political controversy. Population stagnation and economic transition were obvious topics of political debate designed to strike a responsive note among the electorate. Each election became a public inquest into the cost benefits of

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 21 January 1881, p. 617; see also 14 March 1890, p. 1963. Borden disagreed with A.G. Jones' criticism of a \$3,000 subsidy to the Churchill brothers for the maintenance of a Minas Basin Ferry Service.

<sup>49</sup> F.W. Borden to C.R. Bill, 25 March 1898; L.D.V. Chipman to F.W. Borden, 18 August 1896, F.W. Borden Papers, PANS.

<sup>50</sup> Borden had a rule of giving \$100 to any Church which requested funds. This rule applied to all Churches, even those whose ministers publicly opposed his election. F.W. Borden to C. Russell, 3 February 1908, F.W. Borden Papers, PANS.

<sup>51</sup> *The Western Chronicle*, 12 February 1887.

government policy and public accounting. This subject placed Borden on strong ground. His flair for figures, business knowledge and experience gave his reasoned political harangues credence. Moreover, as a local businessman whose private economic interests were closely tied to the County's welfare, Borden was favourably placed to command the respect and confidence of his anxious constituents. Since his business and political interests were closely correlated, the extension of his business interests into the growth areas of the County was likely to reap comparable political benefits. At least it might compensate for the erosion of his political support in the depopulated coastal regions.

Borden's Canning merchant colleagues needed little prompting. They were ready and capable of accommodating themselves to the County's changing economic circumstance. Their means were familiar. Through business, family and political ties they extended their influence to the growth areas and soon controlled them as effectively as they had their old mercantile fiefdom. After 1882 the Canning Liberal merchants, together with Brenton Haliburton Dodge and C. Rufus Burgess, joined financial forces and with the assistance of the provincial Liberal government chartered a thirteen mile railroad, to run between Kentville and Kingsport.<sup>52</sup> Borden's part in the project was an obvious one. In Ottawa he successfully lobbied the government for the mail contract for the Cornwallis Railway.<sup>53</sup> This project was more than a political manoeuvre or a belated recognition of Kentville's new local pre-eminence, which had been emphasized a year before by its incorporation as a town. It was also an attempt to tap the trade of this growing regional centre and retard the decline of Canning. The success of their effort was soon evident. Within two years the Cornwallis Valley Railroad's competition forced the directors of the Windsor and Annapolis Railroad to purchase the line.<sup>54</sup> To maximize traffic over the Cornwallis Valley line, in 1893 the Windsor and Annapolis Railroad chartered the Evangeline Navigation Company to provide a daily steamship service between Parrsboro and Kingsport.<sup>55</sup>

Yet the Canning Liberal merchants' shrewd and timely intervention only helped to arrest temporarily the decline of their small port. Much more was needed and Borden began a concerted campaign to identify himself with Kentville's new urban status. In the Commons he led a long and vocal battle for public favours, particularly for the construction of a large post office in keeping

<sup>52</sup> The C.V.R. received a \$3,200 per mile subsidy from the provincial government and a legal right of way. Woodworth, *The History of the Dominion Atlantic Railway*, p. 104.

<sup>53</sup> Canada, House of Commons, *Debates*, 31 August 1891, p. 1120.

<sup>54</sup> Woodworth, *History of the Dominion Atlantic Railway*, p. 106.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110.

with the town's needs and pretensions.<sup>56</sup> Whereas during Borden's first two parliamentary terms (1874-82) he had concentrated his main efforts upon securing a complete renovation of the County's dock facilities,<sup>57</sup> the crowning victory of his third and fourth terms (1887-96) was to wring from a reluctant Conservative government the promise of a new post office for Kentville. Then in 1891 Borden and his cohorts leased, then purchased, Kentville's largest weekly newspaper, the "independent but not neutral" Conservative *Western Chronicle*, which boasted a circulation of 1,750.<sup>58</sup> Under the editorship of Borden's only son, Harold, it began a consistent campaign of Liberal indoctrination. When Harold left for University in 1895, the editorship passed to Fred Wickwire, the youngest son of J.L. Wickwire. In 1894 the Liberals chose J.L. Wickwire's eldest son, Harry Hamm Wickwire, a Kentville barrister, as their provincial Liberal candidate; his running mate in this dual constituency was Brenton Haliburton Dodge, the Liberal Kentville merchant who had backed the construction of the Cornwallis Valley Railroad. Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that Borden's preoccupation with Kentville led to a neglect of his old clientele in the traditional areas of the County. In 1894 the son of Jonathan Steele, the large Scots Bay shipbuilder and Liberal partisan, who had served the economic and political interests of the Canning merchants for over two decades, complained to his father that "as for Dr. Borden I do not think a lie would stick in his throat very long especially during election times. It does seem hard. The men that you have worked and slaved for the last thirty-five years, when we want a little help from them that they should turn the cold shoulder and put business in the way of other people".<sup>59</sup>

Kentville, of course, did not fall immediately. But with the help of provincial and soon federal patronage,<sup>60</sup> after 1900 the Liberals could count on breaking even in Kentville. In 1908 they even emerged with a small but comfortable majority of 41.<sup>61</sup> Given the party's past record of being in a minority of as much as five to one in Kentville, this was success indeed.

The Liberal capture of Kentville had required no abrupt break with the past. In a period of regional economic transition the old pattern of marriage and family alliances had provided a useful means of transmitting political and

<sup>56</sup> Canada, House of Commons, *Debates*, p. 2750.

<sup>57</sup> F.W. Borden's letter to *The Western Chronicle*, 27 June 1883.

<sup>58</sup> A. McKim, *Canadian Newspaper Directory* (Montreal, 1892), p. 161.

<sup>59</sup> H.H. Steele to his father, 9 January 1894, Jonathan Steele Papers, Dalhousie University Archives.

<sup>60</sup> After 1895 Dodge became the chief supplier to the annual militia camp held in Kentville, a trade which brought him \$1,000-\$3,000 business annually. Canada, *Sessional Papers* (1899), no. 1, p. 23.

<sup>61</sup> Canada, *Sessional Papers* (1909), no. 18, p. 301.

economic influence from one generation to the next, thereby easing the transition.<sup>62</sup> Through the clever exploitation of this system a closely knit, local Liberal mercantile elite had successfully controlled the County for well over a third of a century. Borden was both the product and beneficiary of the system. Through marriage he had gained easy access to the ranks of the mercantile elite which dominated the economic and political life of the County. Marriage, too, had provided Borden with access to the confidence and capital of this mercantile community and he had skillfully exploited these advantages. Borden, a professional and the son of a professional, as well as an aspiring businessman, was an appropriate representative of a mercantile elite in search of a survival strategy in a period of transition from a sea to a land based mercantile economy, in which rails had replaced ships but in which Liberal merchants still maintained political control.

<sup>62</sup> This system was not unique to Kings nor to the region. In the neighbouring county of Hants a similar pattern seemed to prevail: see Gwendolyn V. Shard, "The Industries of Windsor, N.S., 1850-1900", *Collections of the Nova Scotia Historical Society*, vol. 34, p. 141. A somewhat similar system also existed in late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century Massachusetts: see Peter Dobkin Hall, "Family Structure and Economic Organization: Massachusetts Merchants, 1700-1850", in Tamara Hareven, ed., *Family and Kin in Urban Communities 1700-1930* (New York, 1977).