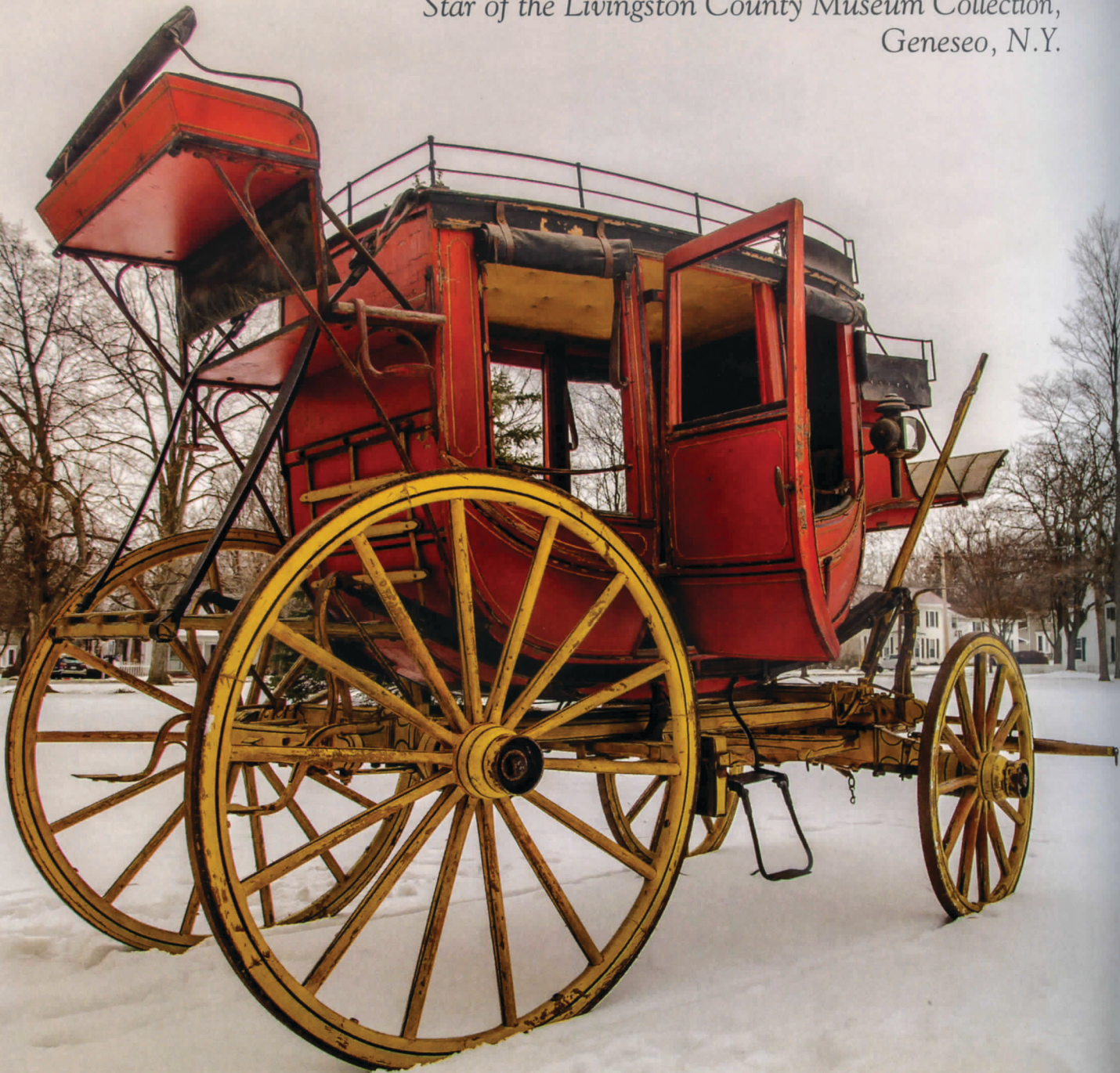


# THE WADSWORTH COACH

*Star of the Livingston County Museum Collection,  
Geneseo, N.Y.*



# A Vehicle Like No Other

by Laurie Mercer

As one historian noted, if your ancestors have been in North America for more than 100 years, chances are many of them rode in Concord coaches. The top of the line was made by Abbot and Downing Company of Concord, New Hampshire. The company occupied an enviable position supplying luxury coaches to the carriage trade as well as vehicles outfitted to help move people, mail, and goods to the ever-expanding frontier.

Ironically, before the days of digital effects, lots of Concord-made coaches crashed over cliffs in the making of many Western movies.

Abbot and Downing represented a revolution in the American commercial transit industry. Their coaches were specifically designed for long-distance travel on hard roads and offered a leather

through-braced body, which allowed for more movement and acted like a shock absorber. The company, founded by Lewis Downing, a wheel-wright, and J. Stephen Abbot, a carriage designer, sent coaches rolling along from eastern Maine to San Diego. The stages were even shipped overseas to Australia and Austria.

Built to carry 18 passengers, plus staff, the coaches were potential moneymakers. Their popularity was due to being sturdy, roomy, and comfortable.

On May 1, 1874, an Abbot and Downing Coach factory order for coach #405 was fulfilled. It specified: "One six passenger Northern style coach with six seats inside for two on a seat. And dicky seat on hind end of coach to carry eight persons on the outside. Box footboard and seat back of driver and seat to face the dicky seat. Open rack. Perches cut into axle. Axle 1% Tires 1 5/8.58. Bed plates common bolt in front. Brake as usual. Track 4 feet 8 inches out to out. Evener chains and pole chains. Sand boxes. Wiffletrees and lead bars with ring. Body color black with gilt stripe. Carriage color black with fine red stripe. No lettering. Lining Russet leather, damask head and fringe. Curtains enamel leather. Top and rack canvas, drivers, apron leather, lamps and candles."

The weight was 1,650 pounds and the price – \$770. Because it was built for a private family and not for general transportation, on the back it had a seat for a footman rather than a luggage rack and tarp.

Thus the Wadsworth Coach entered the Wadsworth family lore, which is rooted amid century-old white and red oaks in the remarkably beautiful Genesee Valley – still New York State's premium fox hunting country and still closely tied to the Wadsworth family. Having but one private

owner, the Wadsworth coach, even in storage, remained in remarkable condition. It is now described as "one of [the museum's] most significant artifacts to visitors" by Anna Kowalchuk, the administrator for the collection of the Livingston County Historical Society. Nestled in a lovely old cobblestone schoolhouse in a lively college town, it's the perfect place for a retired coach.

Beginning in 2009, the museum began an ongoing development program for the Wadsworth vehicle, which had been donated by the family in the mid 1950s. Grants and private funds now total about \$54,000 which will complete its total conservation. While this storied piece of elegant transportation will only be allowed to be transported down Main Street on a flat-bed truck, it will continue to shed a light on the horse-centric history of Genesee and modes of early transportation prior to the invention of the 'horseless carriage,' the automobile.

In Genesee, near the turn of the century, seeing the coach go by probably meant that friends and family were expected at the train station. Teddy Roosevelt was just one notable who road in the coach and also followed the English foxhounds in Genesee. The Wadsworth coach remained a common sight at community events throughout the early 20th century.

The Wadsworth family purchased this Abbot and Downing coach (#405) in 1874. It never left the family until it was donated to the Livingston County Historical Society in the 1950's. Currently being conserved by Brian Howard, the coach is a jewel of the museum's collection which is devoted to life in the Genesee Valley. Howard says its current tomato soup-can red color was likely done at the Abbot and Downing factory in Concord N.H. following a well-documented roll over in Genesee. Photo courtesy of the Livingston County Historical Society.

**One Historian Calls the Wadsworth Family's Abbott and Downing Coach a "Babe Magnet"**

"When Herbert Wadsworth and James Wolcott Wadsworth (called "The Boss") ordered the coach together, they were 24- and 25-year-old bachelors," says Linda Gibbs, a retired New York State family court magistrate, a horsewoman who fox hunts in Geneseo and Southern Pines, and the official historian for the Genesee Valley Hunt. For social times nothing beat a coach with its capacity for 20 people to ride in close quarters and comparative comfort. If private coaches could talk, imagine the stories they would tell. Many of the Wadsworth family coach journeys were to take riders to the fox hunt, often times the night before for some partying. Their mounts were hacked to the meet by staff.

She says social encounters arranged between men and women were heavily chaperoned back then, so the coach was a useful vehicle for two young men who went courting. One of the Wadsworth bachelors married just two years after the coach arrived.

"The thing about these coaches was that they had braces, which made them very comfortable to ride in compared to

other coaches," says Linda. "It made it possible to spend 5 or 6 hours in there and not get a headache."

"On October 20, 1883, they rolled the coach coming back from Dansville," says Linda of a well-documented turnover. "Charles Carey was driving a little too fast by Hamptons Corners. It was occupied by 10 men at the time." Witnesses quoted in local newspaper articles that Linda has uncovered, said the passengers flew out of the coach "like ping pong balls." The Boss broke his ankle, she adds.

The Genesee Valley Hunt, begun in 1876, covered thousands of acres all over the valley, including Geneseo, Avon, Rush, Sparta, even as far away as Perry (roughly 25 miles from the kennels) when hacking to meets was the only way to get there. And while the names of faithful fox hunters are amply recorded in several valley-based personal hunting diaries, the coach horses, the patient-looking, mostly dark bay beasts we see in photos, are not remembered by name, disposition, or breed.

In another incident in the 1890s the coach horses got loose while being watered at the fountain on Main Street and took off towards the Homestead, the main house on the Wadsworth property. The groomsman, hanging between the horses, managed to pull them to a stop.

The coach was in attendance at many epic events. Linda says, "When Harper's Weekly came to cover the hunt in 1891, the writer was taken around in the coach." She said they would use the coach drawn by two horses for short jaunts such as to a picnic in nearby Mt. Morris. The coach was paraded in the 1901 Buffalo Pan American Exposition, labeled the Antique Wadsworth Coach, though it was only 28 years old at the time. On a side note, President McKinley was killed at that very exhibition.

For people of means, automobiles were eclipsing horse-power. In time, the imposing vehicle scarcely left the barn. One popular public display remained in its use as an official's stand at early Hunt

Race meets. The coach served the same function for the annual horse show organized on the east lawn of the Wadsworth's manse, known as the "Homestead." In these later years it was probably being hauled around by tractor. Sally Wood, a Wadsworth descendant, remembers playing in the old coach while it was stored. Luckily the coach, just one of 156 of its kind remaining in the country, was donated to the Historical Society in 1954, because in 1969 an arsonist burned the Wadsworth barn where it was stored, and the coach would have been lost.

Prior to the donation, the coach was jointly owned by Congressman James W. Wadsworth Sr. and his cousin William Austin Wadsworth. It was presented to the museum by the congressman's grandson Reverdy Wadsworth and W. Austin's son, William P. Wadsworth.

**Conservation, Not Restoration - Enter Brian R. Howard**

Brian Howard, a conservator from Carlisle, Pennsylvania, is one of the few coach conservators in the country. Brian, in addition to ample academic training and advanced degrees, has actively worked on old coaches since 1993, including an elaborately painted Abbot and Downing in the Gene Autry Museum, and another one, equally as fanciful in appearance and also painted by the makers, being conserved for the historical society in Barre, Massachusetts.

Brian was contracted by the Livingston County Historical Society to conserve the coach. The project is about 50 percent complete. Howard's initial examination and treatment report was issued in December 1998. He began repair of the roof rack the next year. Next, the undercarriage was shipped to him to stabilize. In late spring 2014, thanks to additional funding recently secured, the top part of the vehicle was shipped to Brian's specially built facility on 2.5 acres with laboratories constructed specifically



Always popular in community events, the coach was often used as a judge's stand for the Genesee Valley Hunt Race Meet, in this instance circa 1938. Photo courtesy Livingston County Historical Society



Two majestic icons of local history. The Wadsworth Abbot and Downing coach in front of the Big Tree Inn. The Big Tree Inn, now owned and operated by SUNY Geneseo, was often a coach stop for friends and family. The coach house was at the Homestead, the Wadsworth family manse at the top of Main Street, a beautiful place now used for weddings and special events. Recently the inn held a fundraiser to benefit the vehicle's historic conservation. The coach was rolled out in front of the inn on a flatbed truck and helped raise \$3,200 towards its rescue. Photo courtesy of Amie Alden, Livingston County Historian

for the conservation of a wide variety of materials.

Conservation in this instance also involves the community. In 1999, following a talk in Geneseo, Howard managed to find four people interested in learning the proper procedure for surface area cleaning to help in the time-consuming process. Volunteers learned how to use Q-tips to very gently remove many years of dirt. This is not typical. He used volunteers only because of the museum's request and to accommodate the limited budget for the big stagecoach.

Howard specified a nine-phase conservation plan, beginning with an examination and treatment report. Next, was the roof rack repair, and then the lower body was sent to Howard to stabilize, consolidate and varnish the exterior. Phase five was to complete in-painting the exterior, and begin to stabilize the interior, including cleaning the leather upholstery and replicating the cushions. Phase six involves repairing leather, textiles, lamps,

door glazing, linoleum, and replicating body straps, which is part of the complete stabilization of the interior, is now in progress.

Phases seven through nine involve cleaning and stabilizing active corrosion on the running gear, consolidating, in-painting, and varnishing the running gear, and transporting the coach top back to the museum.

Technically speaking, on a conserved artifact, nothing original that survives is replaced. A conserved coach, for instance,

is not required to return to stressful use. In restoration, however, almost anything is fair game, including using automobile paint for that nice shiny look. In horse-drawn carriages, almost anything is replaceable in the interest of achieving the right look, and often returning it to functionality, being 'put to' a horse again.

Even though the Wadsworth coach was originally painted dark blue with gold leaf, the conservation will hold to its current red tomato color, which Brian says was done at the Abbot and Downing facility in

Concord, according to a label found inside one of the doors. He explains, "The color is very old and was probably repainted after the accident." As a conservator he says, you "go with what you've got if the changes made were used and not done in some haphazard manner or visually distracting or unsound."

While Abbot and Downing sometimes painted their vehicles elaborately with 19th-century aesthetics in mind, including pastoral scenes and cherubs abounding, he says it is unusual that the vehicle was repainted by the company that manufactured it. To do so, the coach would have been hauled from Geneseo to New Hampshire and back again. It is also special because, while many coaches were used as buses in their day, this one remained completely unaltered and in the same family. "It is in very good condition," he says.

**Anna Kowalchuk,  
Another Kindred Spirit**

Conserving and restoring any horse-drawn vehicle is expensive and time consuming. If it weren't for Anna Kowalchuk, museum administrator of the Livingston County Historical Society, the Wadsworth coach might still be carefully stored away collecting dust. Anna is a high-energy, focused historian who, while not a horse-woman, once drove a gypsy caravan in Europe for several weeks while on a vacation with her husband. She received the original funding for the Wadsworth coach restoration from an \$8,000 New York State grant with help from state Senator Catherine Young. A New York State Conservation grant for \$7,500 followed. Private donations, including Walnut Hill, exceed \$9,000, and even the historic Big Tree Inn on Geneseo's Main Street (often a destination for the coach) donated \$3,200 after a successful tie-in with the coach that also marked an anniversary for the inn.

Recently \$25,000 was awarded by the Rochester Area Community Foundation, to be used for preservation and to jump start interest in the Concord coach.

Beyond conservation there is a need for an ideal viewing area where the breadth and height of this magnificent piece of engineering can truly be appreciated during a walk around by visitors of all ages.

"The Wadsworth coach is something unique that the museum had in its collection," says Linda Gibbs, just one of the people who learned how to clean with a

Q-tip. "It is gratifying to see that through conservation the coach will remain in its original condition so that we can share its story with visitors about the importance of horses in Geneseo and early transportation, as well as the influence of the Wadsworth family upon the land and the community."  $\Omega$

**More About Conservator B.R. Howard**

B.R. Howard's conservation workshop, founded in 1989, is located in several large, specially outfitted buildings on 2.5 acres in a rural setting in Carlisle, Pennsylvania near major transportation corridors. The staff and tools on hand are devoted to the conservation of historic artifacts in accordance with the principles defined by the American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works Code of Ethics and Guidelines for Practice. Materials that they conserve include: metals, wood, stone, paper, textiles, leather, and paintings.

Brian says in the past 40 years his work has evolved into the profession of conservation. It is an interdisciplinary approach that embraces the object's art, historic research, scientific analysis, and material science in order to secure documentation, and stabilize and repair the artifact, including taking preventative measures to deter future deterioration.

Restoration, as traditionally practiced among many carriage owners, seeks to restore a vehicle to its historic condition or an assumed identity, using whatever materials are possible, including shiny and somewhat chip-resistant automobile paint. Conservation is more exacting, and most of the vehicles conserved will never again be put to a horse.

Generally speaking, Brian offers the following four main avenues of approach to conservation to help demonstrate the difference between it and restoration.

- Examination. Study of the structural stability and materials used in the artifact's construction.
- Documentation. Written notes and photos of discovery and techniques used for conservation.
- Treatment. Work required to stabilize an artifact's condition to prolong its existence according to the recognized code of ethics.
- Stabilization. Steps taken to stop active deterioration that will ultimately lead to loss.



*Superficial cleaning, as done by Brian Howard, was a task that enlisted four local volunteers. Photo courtesy Livingston County Historical Society*