

From the DICTIONARY OF CANADIAN BIOGRAPHY ONLINE
National Archives of Canada

DAVISON, EDWARD DORAN, businessman and politician; b. 10 June 1819 in Mill Village, Queens County, N.S., son of Samuel Davison and Eleanor Doran; m. first 18 Sept. 1839 in Queens County a cousin, Desiah Mack (d. 1886), and they had ten children; m. secondly 5 Jan. 1887 Martha Hopkins Campbell in Halifax; d. 21 Feb. 1894 in Bridgewater, N.S.

Edward Doran Davison was the sole surviving son of parents who had both died before he was 12. From his mother's family he inherited a farming, fishing, and lumbering business. An aunt, Catherine Doran, took responsibility for it and from her Davison learned the rudiments of management. At 18 he took charge of the property, which included at least 580 acres of farm and forest land, some fishing rights, and a sawmill. He loved the outdoor life, and his great enthusiasm was for the lumbering side of the family business. He had a mechanical and inventive turn of mind and a capacity for work. By 1845 he had built one of the first steam sawmills in Nova Scotia, and the business was increasing.

In politics a Liberal, Davison was elected a member of the Nova Scotia legislature for Queens County in 1855. He wrote later, "I liked [William Young*] better than I did [Joseph Howe*] as leader and it cost me many the £ to sustain him against [James William Johnston*], opposition leader." In the election of 1859, however, he went down to defeat and was left to argue against confederation outside the house.

By 1865 Davison's timber holdings on the Medway River system had increased to 10,000 acres, but much of the woodland had been burnt over in the great fire of 1849. With the active participation of his three capable sons, Davison undertook a new venture in Bridgewater at the head of the tidal reaches of the La Have River. Lumber operators on the La Have had explored the upriver lands but had concluded that the river itself was uncontrollable. They had suffered heavy losses when booms and water-powered mills were damaged by ice in the spring runoff, and they were ready to withdraw. The company of E. D. Davison and Sons, formed in 1865, undertook to prevent the ice from flowing out by building new dams across the river and by strengthening the booms. It succeeded where others had failed.

Several rival lumbering operations on the La Have were forced to close after the financial disaster of 1873, and in the next 13 years the Davisons were able to acquire the properties of all of them. Meanwhile, in the early 1870s they had increased their holdings on the Medway and Nictaux rivers, buying up large blocks of land from American and New Brunswick operators who by 1871 considered them unprofitable. In 1888 the acquisition of the properties of three more owners greatly expanded their Medway and Nictaux holdings.

By the 1880s E. D. Davison and Sons had become the largest lumber business in Nova Scotia, with property totalling 200,000 acres. The company employed 350 men and

50 teams of oxen to supply and run five mills, three of them capable of cutting up to 250,000 feet daily. The annual output averaged twelve million board feet and sold for about \$120,000. For many years the major market for the company's products was Argentina. Exports went also to the Azores, Madeira, and the West Indies and eventually to most countries bordering the Atlantic.

In 1891 Davison, looking back on this enterprise, was able to note in his diary, "In my family I were blessed from beginning till now, never wishing for better days than I did enjoy. . . . And now at 72 I enjoy my time at my first love which is lumbering in all its branches from Stump to foreign Markets with other engagements thrown in for the fun of the thing." After his death in 1894, others in the community praised his many charitable acts.

Article contributed by Catherine Pross, Librarian, Ecology Action Centre, Halifax, Nova Scotia.

PANS, MG 1, 254–55; MG 3, 70–109. Joseph Howe, "Letters relating to confederation written by Joseph Howe to Edward Doran Davison, former M.L.A. for Queens County," PANS, Board of Trustees, Report (Halifax), 1965: 20–22. J. E. Defebaugh, *History of the lumber industry of America* (2v., Chicago, 1906–7), 1: 249. B. R. Robertson, *Sawpower: making lumber in the sawmills of Nova Scotia* (Halifax, 1986). J. B. Tanner, "The rise of entrepreneurship in the Bridgewater–La Have region: the Davison legacy, 1865–1894" (ma thesis, Dalhousie Univ., Halifax, 1986). *Halifax Daily Echo*, 3 July 1903. R. S. Johnson, "A nostalgic look at an old lumber company," *Atlantic Advocate* (Fredericton), 68 (1977–78), no. 11: 67–75.