

Liberal in Opinion and Broad in his Views

James Shaw (1798-1878)

The name 'Shaw', in bold block letters above the storefront at No.1 Gore Street, has been a prominent landmark in the Town of Perth for 150 years, and first marked a dry goods store across the street at No. 2 Gore 170 years ago. Often assumed, from his name, to be among the clan of Scots businessmen so prominent in the development of Perth, James Shaw was in fact Irish.



Shaws of Perth, No.1 Gore Street East

Shaw was born at New Ross, County Wexford, Ireland, in the rebellion year of 1798, the son of Richard Shaw and Anne Dowsley. The circumstances of his early years in Ireland are unknown but he *"took pride in tracing his lineage back many generations to persons of distinction"*¹. His father's family was of Scottish extraction, but resident in Ireland for many generations, while his mother was descended from the French Huguenot d'Ouselys, a name corrupted over time to Dowsley.

The Shaw and Dowsley families were well enough connected to the Protestant ascendancy that, when 22-year-old James completed his education at Dublin and set out for Canada in 1820, he carried with him letters of introduction to Lord Dalhousie, Governor General of British North America². Dalhousie was impressed by Shaw and *"attached him to his household, with an officer's pay and rations for the following six months, where he was treated with great kindness by Lord and Lady Dalhousie, and in after days, often referred to this pleasant portion of his life"*³.

¹ *A Cyclopaedia of Canadian Biography: Being Chiefly Men of the Time – Vol-2* (1888), Edited by George Maclean Rose.

² George Ramsay, 9th Earl Dalhousie (1770-1838), Governor General 1820-1828.

³ *A Cyclopaedia of Canadian Biography: Being Chiefly Men of the Time – Vol-2* (1888), Edited by George Maclean Rose.

In the spring of 1821, Dalhousie appointed Shaw, at a salary of five shillings a day, to the position of master clerk attached to Captain William Marshall⁴, Superintendent of the Lanark Settlement; a government subsidized scheme for members 40 Scottish emigration societies. In 1820 and 1821 more than 3,300 immigrants, unemployed weavers, artisans, factory workers and their families, mostly from the Glasgow area, were settled in the newly opened townships of Lanark, Dalhousie and North Sherbrooke.

Shortly after taking up his new post, James Shaw was ticketed for two parcels of land on August 15, 1821; a part of Lanark Township Lanark C-2/L-2, which lay within the emerging village of Lanark, and Ramsay Township C-9/L-16(W) which, within a few years, would become part of the town of Almonte. While living and working at Lanark, Shaw was also commissioned a Captain in Marshall's 2nd Regiment Lanark Militia on June 19, 1822. In 1837 he was promoted Major in the 3rd Regiment Leeds Militia and then Lieutenant Colonel of the Regimental Division of South Lanark in 1860.

On October 30, 1822, James Shaw married Ellen (Helen) Forgie (1802-1882) who had been born at Govan⁵, Lanarkshire, Scotland, the daughter of Gilbert Forgie Sr. (1774-1862) and Martha Beattie (1767-1810). She had arrived in Upper Canada in 1820 with her father and his second wife Margaret Stewart (1785-1861), as a member of the Bridgeton Canadian Emigration Society, via the ship Commerce. The Forgies were ticketed for land in Lanark Township at C-6/L-7, but shortly moved to concession-7. James Shaw and Ellen Forgie would become parents of six children; Richard (1822-1872), James Jr. (1824-1896), John (b.1826), Anne (1830-1832), Henry Dowsley (1833-1886), George (1835-1865), William (b.1838), Anna Dowsley (1842-1927) and Helen Montague (1845-1921). The first of these, Richard, was born on October 1, 1822, a month before their marriage and three weeks before their marriage bond was drawn by Ellen's father and Perth merchant Roderick Matheson⁶ acting as guarantor for Shaw.



Although Army Settling Department control of both the Perth and Lanark Settlements officially ended in 1822, Marshall and Shaw spent the next eight years completing the transition to civilian oversight. In 1830 William Marshall retired and returned to Scotland and James Shaw moved to the village of St. Francis on the Rideau River (later named Smyth's Falls and then Smiths Falls) where *"through Lord Dalhousie's influence, he was appointed overseer of works under the late Colonel John By⁷, from Smith's Falls to Bytown [Ottawa]"*⁸. Shaw was not directly involved in construction, but was appointed to *"oversee provisioning of the numerous navvies working on the Rideau Canal"*⁹.

⁴ William Marshall (1774-1864), Captain in the Regular Army and Lieutenant Colonel of Lanark Militia, served on the staff of the Perth Military Settling Department from late 1815 and was appointed by Dalhousie as Superintendent of the Lanark Settlement in 1820.

⁵ A suburb of Glasgow.

⁶ Roderick Matheson (1793-1873), Canadian Regiment of Fencible Infantry Drummer, Glengarry Light Infantry Lieutenant, half-pay soldier-settler at Perth, merchant, magistrate and Senator.

⁷ Lieutenant Colonel John By (1779-1836), Royal Engineers, supervising engineer on construction of the Rideau Canal 1826-1832, linking Ottawa to Kingston over 202 kilometers.

⁸ *A Cyclopaedia of Canadian Biography: Being Chiefly Men of the Time – Vol-2* (1888), Edited by George Maclean Rose.

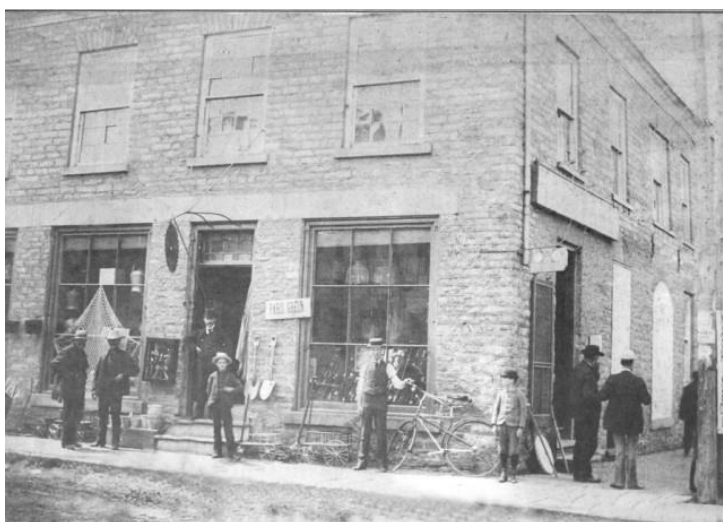
⁹ Dr. Foster J. K. Griezic, Professor of History, Carleton University.

The canal was completed and opened to traffic in 1832 and by the mid-1830s Shaw had opened a blacksmith shop at Smiths Falls and established himself as a prosperous dry goods merchant supplying the wants of settlers filling up the surrounding Townships of Elmsley, Montague and beyond. Shaw sat on the Johnstown District Council until it was replaced by county government under the Municipal Institutions Act of 1849 and then served as the first Reeve of North Elmsley Township, 1850-1854. Although he seldom acted in the capacity, he was also an early Johnstown District Magistrate.

Serving as second in command to Lieutenant Colonel George Hume Reade¹⁰ when his 3rd Regiment of Leeds Militia was called up during the Mackenzie-Papineau Rebellion, Major James Shaw saw active duty, although no rebels, at Kingston from January to May 1838.

When St. Francis Masonic Lodge No. 24 (Smiths Falls) was established on December 27, 1839, Brother James Shaw was installed as its first Master.

In 1848, in partnership with his eldest son Richard, James Shaw expanded his mercantile activities to Perth, opening a large general merchandise store, 'James Shaw & Son', at No.2 Gore Street East.¹¹ In 1852 Shaw also established the *British Standard* newspaper at Perth, with Burton Campbell as editor and manager. A few years later his fourth son, Henry, took over management of the store when Richard became manager of the Shaw owned 'Farmers' Foundry' at Perth.



James Shaw & Sons Store, No. 2 Gore Street East, Perth

Among his many business interests Shaw was also briefly involved in banking, operated a sawmill at Pike Falls (Port Elmsley), invested in land, and was one of the first promoters and directors of the Brockville and Ottawa Railway, incorporated on April 22, 1853 and opened, with a branch line to Perth, on February 17, 1859.

In that same year, 1859, James Shaw's son, Henry, married Flora Madelina Matheson (1836-1894), the daughter of Perth merchant Roderick Matheson, the man who had posted his father's marriage bond in 1822. In 1817 Matheson had opened a saddle and harness making shop at Perth and by 1840 he had constructed a large mercantile store at No. 1 Gore Street East (across the street from the 'James Shaw & Son' store established eight years later). 'James Shaw & Sons' operated until 1863 when it was amalgamated with the Matheson enterprise. Roderick Matheson suffered a severe stroke in 1867 and in 1868 his son-in-law Henry Shaw took over management of the store under the name 'Shaw and Matheson'. The business later operated as

¹⁰ George Hume Reade (1793-1854), a fellow Irishman, who settled as a half-pay officer at the Perth Military Settlement where he was an early pharmacist, coroner and Clerk of the Peace, but who, by 1837, had been recalled to active service with the British Army Medical Staff at Quebec City while still holding command of the 3rd Leeds Militia.

¹¹ The stone building was constructed in 1835 by lumber merchant Henry Montgomery, operated as Porter's General Store 1840-1848, later became James Brothers Hardware Store and is currently occupied by Dragon Moon Boutique. From 1863 the Shaw store also included the adjoining property at 52 Foster Street.

'Shaw & McKerracher' and then, from 1908, as 'Shaw's of Perth'. Through Matheson, Shaw and subsequent owners the store has been in continuous operation for more than 175 years and today lays claim to being "*Canada's oldest department store in its original location*".

As day-to-day operation of his various enterprises moved into the hands of his sons, James Shaw turned to national politics. Running as a moderate and independent candidate, he was elected by the narrow margin of 120 votes to the Legislative Assembly of Canada in 1851, representing the United Counties of Lanark & Renfrew, and returned in the election of 1854 for the riding of South Lanark. Shaw was defeated in the election of 1857¹² but in the by-election of 1860 was elected by a wide margin to represent Bathurst Division on the Legislative Council. In the house he aligned himself with the Conservative Party but was not always in step with Tory policy. He supported dissolution of the Clergy Reserves and his electoral defeat in 1857 was "*in large measure because of his moderate attitude towards Roman Catholic demands for separate schools*"¹³. The Orange Lodge, which had supported his candidacy in 1851 and 1854, abandoned him in 1857; "*He was sympathetic to the Orange Order, although not a member*"¹⁴.

Shaw was not impressed by Confederation proposals floated in 1864, but by 1867 was a supporter, having concluded that the economic benefits outweighed his concerns. In 1867 he was appointed to the Senate of the new Dominion of Canada and remained a member of the Red Chamber until his death 11 years later. As a Senator he continued to follow a policy of tolerance including on such issues at the Riel Rebellion of 1869. He was described in his obituary as an "*old fashioned Conservative and a very credible representative of his party, possessing a great head and heart, with a dignity of temperament which ensured him respect among all parties and classes*"¹⁵,

Closer to home Shaw played a leading role in founding of St John the Evangelist Anglican Church in Smiths Falls, but, although "*a member of the Church of England, [was] not extreme in his views*"¹⁶. In Elmsley Township he donated land for construction of the Port Elmsley Anglican Church, burying ground and village school.

Absorbed by politics from the 1850s James Shaw left much of the management of family enterprises to his sons; unwisely in the case of son Richard. Due to over speculation the Shaw businesses lost heavily in the financial crash of 1857-1858 and had not recovered when the economic recession of the 1870s began. According to the *Perth Courier*, for Richard, "*figures were his great forte; the toils of business to him were recreation; and his collapse in business was but the result of the workings of an overly sanguine temperament which induced him, in his sphere, to strike for the highest stakes. Capital in his hands was never permitted to rest and had he been a millionaire every dollar would have been invested either in business or in speculation. He had faults ... and grave ones.*"¹⁷. In 1870 Richard was forced to abandoned business and

¹² He was defeated by Andrew William Playfair (1790-1868) whom the *Perth Courier* described as "*a regular fossil Tory of the Family Compact School*".

¹³ *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Perth Courier*, February 8, 1878.

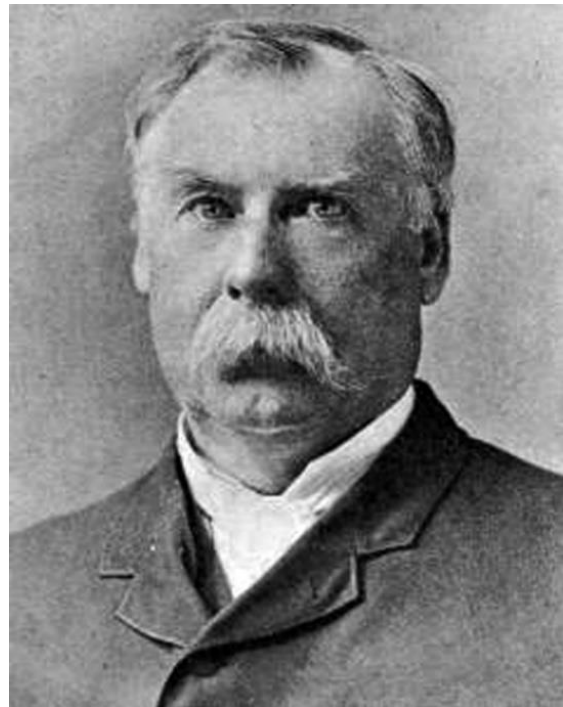
¹⁶ *A Cyclopedia of Canadian Biography: Being Chiefly Men of the Time – Vol-2* (1888), Edited by George Maclean Rose.

¹⁷ *Perth Courier*, January 12, 1872, obituary of Richard Shaw (1822-1872).

commerce and, thanks to a patronage appointment arranged by his father, went to work as a civil servant in the Inland Revenue Department.¹⁸

Unfortunately for James Shaw, financial reverses attributed to Richard added to losses associated with his investments in the Brockville & Ottawa Railway. Costs had ballooned during its five-year construction phase and when interest payments could not be met the venture had to re-finance through a takeover by the Canadian Central Rail Road in 1864. Then, in turn, the Canadian Central went bankrupt and was absorbed by the Grand Trunk Rail Road. During the final decade of his life James Shaw lived in much reduced circumstances. Although he still had his annual salary of \$600 as a Senator (increased to \$1,000 in 1873) he would leave *“his wife and daughter Annie almost destitute”*¹⁹.

James Shaw, aged 81 years, died at his Smiths Falls home on February 6, 1878. His funeral from St. John’s Anglican Church *“was one of the largest ever seen in Smiths falls”* and was attended by seven Senators, representing *“all of the Provinces in the Dominion”*²⁰, four MPs and one MPP. There is some question about his place of burial. His obituary in the *Perth Courier* reports that *“the cortege duly arrived at St. John’s churchyard [Smiths Falls] where the remains ... were consigned to their last resting place”*²¹, while a gravestone in Elmwood Cemetery, Perth, bears his name, and that of his wife.



James Shaw (1798-1878)

George MacLean Rose²², Queen’s Printer, who knew James Shaw well in the 1870s while Shaw served on the Parliamentary Standing Joint Committee on Printing²³, described the Senator as *“a gentleman of fine physique and commanding appearance, of sterling principle, unswerving integrity, and by his genial disposition and urbanity of manner, endeared himself to all with whom he became acquainted”*. The Canadian Dictionary of Biography notes that Shaw was recalled as *“Liberal in his opinions and broad in his views upon public questions ... a kind and sympathizing friend ... full of anecdote and repartee, a great favourite with all who knew him”*.²⁴

¹⁸ Richard Shaw (1822-1872) was elected a Perth Councillor in 1852, served as Reeve 1858-1859, Perth Mayor during the 1860s, and Warden of Lanark County for several years. He died of smallpox at Ottawa.

¹⁹ Dr. Foster J. K. Griezic, Professor of History, Carleton University.

²⁰ *Perth Courier*, February 15, 1878.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² George Maclean Rose (1829-1898), printer, journalist, author, politician.

²³ Shaw also served on the Standing Committee on Contingent Accounts.

²⁴ Foster J. K. Griezic.

Although James Shaw was an early administrator of the Perth Military Settlement, a prominent businessman and industrialist at both Perth and Smiths Falls, instrumental in bringing the railway to both communities, and represented the area as a member of both the House and Senate, no monument, street, park or other landmark officially memorializes him in either town. An 1854 survey shows a street named for him in the village of Port Elmsley, but it has been subsequently re-named Port Elmsley Road. Shaw's name is attached only to the store-front at No.1 Gore Street, Perth.

Ron W. Shaw (2016)