

Construction albums and bridge photography: Defining, protecting, and splitting the local landscape in post-confederation Canada

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Abstract

Born 1831 in Scotland, railway and bridge photographer Alexander Henderson began taking photographs after attending the 1851, London World Exhibition. Once relocated to Montreal, Canada, his interest in photography, and especially the landscape, increased. Known for his ability to capture winter scenes and for his compiled albums, Henderson told compelling visual-stories of the Canadian landscape, many of which were virtually destroyed in the years following his death. Still, as the first and one of the country's only official railway photographers, Henderson captured the rapidly changing built environment as the rails that symbolically and physically promised to bind the young nation criss-crossed its vast and varying territory and bridged its powerful rivers.

Built in the year following the ceremonious "last spike," the story of the Canadian Pacific Railway Bridge at LaSalle, Quebec is typically understood alongside nation-building narratives—one where technology, design, and perseverance conquer the Canadian winter, spatial divides, and political hurdles. Yet, as recalled through Henderson's photographs and the pages of a personalized photo-album, the bridge's construction—and larger railway and nation building projects—deepened social and spatial divides and foreshadowed land use conflicts. Responding to the conference's call for narratives in bridge construction alongside stories of communities united and divided by bridges, this paper draws upon an unnamed album, found in the Dominion Bridge Company's archive to recount one of Henderson's landscape tales. Taking the entire construction site as an architectural typology, this paper explores the day-to-day construction site as a delicate cultural landscape. In retracing the steps of the album's compiler, we find how on occasion the photographer turned his lens away from the bridge, producing a subtle yet powerful narrative encompassing the entire built environment—one that documents and commemorates a rapidly changing landscape, without once showing an image of the completed bridge.