

44. ENIGMA - Francis Lovett Carter-Cotton (1843-1919), 'step father' of the North Poudre Irrigation Company

In the last chapter, we left the creditors of Mr. Francis Carter-Cotton stuck on the wrong side of a transom in his Fort Collins office. But don't worry, I'm pretty sure they'll get out in time for dinner.

After locking his creditors in his office, Carter-Cotton apparently made a bee-line to the Colorado Central depot on Mason Street at LaPorte Avenue and jumped on the 3:00pm train to Denver just as it was leaving the station

After gaining their freedom, his creditors, to whom he owed about \$300,000 (~\$8M today), hired a detective agency. He was spotted briefly in Kansas City, presumably making his way back to England.

Carter-Cotton had arrived first in Fort Collins in the mid-1870s and made some quick money here before returning to England. He came back shortly – possibly 1877, likely with his wife, Maria Emily né Little (1845-1937), whom he had married in 1868.¹

He became involved in the promotion of land in the Boxelder Valley to be irrigated with water from the North Fork of the Poudre River to be diverted in what is now called Phantom Canyon. He and/or his company, the *North Fork Ditch Company*, controlled 10,000, 16,000 or 100,000 acres, according to different variations of the legend. He had large cattle holdings, the profits from which bankrolled his venture. A dip in the cattle market combined with unanticipated tunneling costs in the construction of the canal and flume system (in the canyon) caused him to borrow heavily from Travelers Insurance Company and local investors. All this came to an abrupt end about 2:56 pm on November 18, 1886 with the turn of a key.²

Most versions of our local legend have Carter-Cotton disappearing from the face of the earth. Actually, he resurfaced four months later in the brand-spanking new town of Vancouver, British

Columbia where he partnered with a Scottish investor to merge two fledgling newspapers into the *Daily News-Advertiser*.

Improbably, Carter-Cotton was the paper's highly regarded editor for the next twenty-three years. His editorial stance was progressive, pro-labor and reformist, in favor of publicly owned utilities and railroads. A rival newspaper, the *Vancouver Daily World*, once described Carter-Cotton as “*the best editorial writer in British Columbia.*” He wrote “*in a polished and vigorous style modelled on that of the English essayists.*” Despite his modest beginnings, he was “*scholarly and well-read in the English classics.*”

An extremely opaque man, he never spoke about his early life. There seems no clue how or where he obtained his education. There was speculation that he had had some experience in the British diplomatic service perhaps in India.

He entered British Columbia politics in 1890 and held elected municipal and provincial offices and other government and ministerial positions continuously until 1916. He was elected the first Chancellor of the University of British Columbia in 1912 (opposite).

Carter-Cotton's editorial career seems to have been an unqualified success. His extensive political career suffered to some extent from his distant British reserve – not your run-of-the-mill flesh-pressing, back slapping pol.

Carter-Cotton's Vancouver career was not without blemish. His Scottish partner charged quite publicly that Carter-Cotton had screwed him, and sued for \$15,000. In course of the suit, the court ordered documents from Carter-Cotton and, not being timely in receipt thereof, handed down a jail sentence for contempt of court, which however, did not seem to unduly affect Carter-Cotton's political career.

He built the substantial *Carter Cotton Building* in downtown Vancouver in 1908 (opposite), still standing and on the Canadian Register of Historic Places. However, his numerous Vancouver business ventures

were a mixed bag and, in the end, he left an insolvent estate.

He also left a past shrouded in mystery even to his wife and three grown children. More than fifty years after his death, his granddaughter, Frances Vey, discovered a handsome wooden case and a red leather box among his effects. The contents were exotic looking formal German documents and a hand-painted heraldic coat of arms (opposite) – it turns out that Carter-Cotton had been made *Baron of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha* shortly before World War I, but had never let on (not a total surprise).

Carter-Cotton's larger-than-life story calls attention to the sometimes subtle distinction between *a life well-lived* and *a life lived fully*.

I can't help feeling some fondness for Carter-Cotton, having, myself, spent a considerable time mired in 'toad-beneath-the-harrow' debtor's circumstances, thanks to the Phantom Canyon Ranch project and my own stubbornness.

Carter-Cotton threw in the towel, but we didn't. A recurring question from friends, people we worked with, partners and the media was “*Why don't you just quit?*” My answer, of course, always included reference to Pat Ferree (more later).

¹ He had been born Francis Lovett Carter in London where his father was a pawn broker. When or why he modified his surname to Carter-Cotton is unclear, however his marriage records show him as Francis Lovett Carter, so it is likely that he changed his name after he married, presumably with his wife's knowledge.

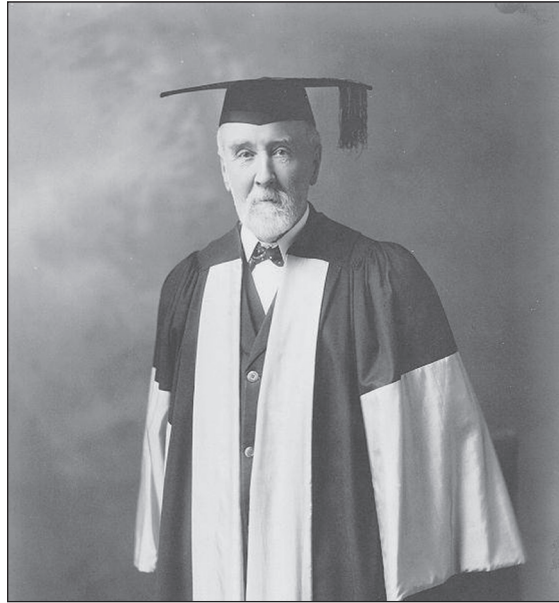
² The disastrous winter of 1886-87 was underway. If Carter-Cotton had not already lost his shirt in cattle, he would have shortly. The *Blizzard of 1886* killed an estimated 80% of the cattle on the Great Plains from Canada to Texas.

Additional credits:
Hidden History of Fort Collins, Barbara Fleming, 2017, Arcadia Publishing.
http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/carter_cotton_francis_lovett_14E.html



Francis Lovett Carter-Cotton, first Chancellor of the University of British Columbia. ca. 1912 (Wikipedia Commons)

This portrait was painted by Canadian painter, Frederick Varley (1881-1969), a member of the celebrated *Group of Seven*. The date ascribed to the portrait is 1927, eight years after Carter-Cotton's death – a posthumous portrait, commissioned by the University of British Columbia? This seems odd, since Varley was a dedicated advocate of painting his portraits from life.



Francis Lovett Carter-Cotton, first Chancellor of the University of British Columbia. ca. 1912 (Wikipedia Commons)



The Carter Cotton Building ca. 1908 and 2012

<https://changingvancouver.wordpress.com/2012/01/16/carter-cotton-building/>

<https://www.historicplaces.ca/en/rep-reg/place-lieu.aspx?id=8683>



Coat of Arms – Francis Lovett Carter-Cotton, Baron of Saxe-Coburn and Gotha

<http://www.ottawacitizen.com/Francis+Carter+Cotton+coat+arms+1912/11425102/story.html>

<http://www.vancouver.sun.com/german+baron+early+vancouver/11425092/story.html>