

# History of the Architecture of VIA Rail's Ontario Stations

By Douglas Matheson

Dotted across the landscape of Ontario, stand a great many railroad stations. Some are still in use, a great many are named as heritage buildings and more than a few are iconic buildings in their host communities. Ontario was the home of Canadian National and VIA Rail predecessors Grand Trunk (GTR), Great Western (GWR) and Canadian Northern – the biggest and most important 19th and early 20th century railways of Ontario. The Grand Trunk and Great Western railways between them built most of the outstanding stations from that time period giving VIA Rail a legacy that lasts to today.

This is the story of the design of those iconic stations told through the work of the men who brought them to life.

## THE FOUNDATIONS OF STATION ARCHITECTURE (1854-1883)

### Francis Thompson (1808-1895) and Grand Trunk in the 1850s

Casimir Gzowski won the contract to build the Grand Trunk Railway. He retained a number of capable subordinates to assist with the effort including noted British architect Francis Thompson.

Francis Thompson worked in England as an architect/engineer. He came to Canada early in his career, in 1832. In partnership with John Wells, Montréal's leading architect of that time, he designed some Italianate structures before returning to England in 1835. In England, he joined the railway construction firm of George and Robert Stephenson where he was their lead architect in designing railway structures. This experience with building solid permanent public structures in a cost effective manner attracted Gzowski's attention. Thompson returned to Canada in 1854 with his partner, civil engineer Alexander Mackenzie Ross, to work with Gzowski to build the Grand Trunk. Between 1854 and when he returned to England in 1859, Thompson was the lead architect for the GTR's stations.

Thompson created a scaleable standard design executed in a graceful interpretation of Queen Anne architecture. The stations' facades were made up of bays, each with an arched window – seven bays for major centres, six bays for junctions and five bays elsewhere.

The station in Belleville (*image 1*) shows the attractive and classic lines Thompson created. Although the gambrel roof with dormers was added later, the station looks as timeless today as when it was built more than 160 years ago. The scaleable nature of the architecture is also immediately apparent. Just as apparent is the execution in masonry which was the basis for the longevity of the structure.

The Grand Trunk erected a total of 35 stone or brick stations between the Québec border and Toronto plus five more between Toronto and

Stratford to the designs of Francis Thompson. Many stations still stand as a testament to Thompson's design concept.

Given this legacy, Francis Thompson can truly be considered as the father of Canadian railway station architecture. For a more complete review of his work, see the definitive study by David Jeanes in the Canadian Rail Historical Association publication *Canadian Rail*, Sept-Oct 2006 issue.

### Walter Shanly (1817-99) and the passing of the architectural torch

Walter Shanly was born in Ireland and educated by private tutors in Dublin. He immigrated to Canada in 1836 homesteading in Thornedale. However, a year later he left the farm to take up civil engineering in Hamilton. He worked on the construction of several railways in the 1840s to 50s including the original surveys from Toronto to Stratford of what would become part of the GTR main line. He was chief engineer to Gzowski for the trackage west of Toronto and in that role, he was a colleague of chief architect Francis Thompson.

Shanly was an engineer not an architect. He had a long and rewarding career as a highly regarded engineer and is best known for his work on the Hoosac Tunnel. Shanly is not known to have designed any stations personally, but I believe he had a profound influence on the architecture of southern Ontario's stations.

He was a colleague of Thompson in the building of the GTR and a known admirer of Thompson's work. He hired the very capable Joseph Hobson (more on Hobson shortly) during the building of the GTR and no doubt mentored him. Shanly became a Director of the GWR and was known to forcefully push his views – it is not documented, but he may have been instrumental in Hobson moving to the GWR.

Shanly later became a director of the Northern Railway. In that role, he pushed hard to secure a commission to Frederick Cumberland for the design of the imposing Barrie station (*image 2*) erected in 1872. Shanly was not known to believe in great economy of construction but was well known to have an interest in creating (personal) monuments. He was not short on ego, though in fairness, he was an accomplished and well regarded civil engineer. Through Shanly's foresight and influence, Thompson's legacy was made enduring.



1 – The 6-bay Belleville station as it appeared in summer 2018. Photo by Henk Van Zijl, from the author's collection.



2 – Frederick Cumberland was Ontario's leading architect in the mid to late 19th century. Walter Shanly never missed an opportunity to push for the building of grand designs, whether it was for bridges, canals, tunnels ... or railway stations. As a director of the Northern Railway, he ensured that Cumberland received the commission for the Barrie station. The design, rendered in Romanesque Revival, was a suitable testament to both Cumberland and Shanly. The station came into the GTR fold when they acquired the Northern in 1888. Postcard photo courtesy of the Craig Library.



### Joseph Hobson (1834-1917)

Joseph Hobson was born near Guelph where he studied civil engineering and surveying. He was hired by Walter Shanly to work on the construction of the Grand Trunk during the 1850s before leaving to join the Great Western Railway. In 1875, he became Chief Engineer of the Great Western serving in that capacity until the GWR was acquired by the GTR in 1883.

Though best known for his brilliant engineering works such as the tunnel under the St. Clair River in Sarnia, he also was an active designer of stations. Following the philosophy set out by Francis Thompson, no doubt influenced greatly by Walter Shanly, his stock in trade was scaleable designs executed in stone and brick. Hobson had a strong preference for the Gothic Revival style and his stations reflected that. Until his move to GTR in 1883, major GWR stations were built or altered in the Gothic style. Nine examples survive to this day including Woodstock, Niagara Falls, Chatham (image 3) and Sarnia.



**3** – Hobson's designs were mainly in the Gothic Revival style with his interpretation being rather less ornate than many others. Typical of his work is the station in Chatham still in use today. Photo courtesy of the Craig Library.

Although the GWR stations are credited to Hobson, it is not known if he personally created these designs. The designs were rendered before he became Chief Engineer of the railway so it is possible he drew them. However, it is also possible they were created by in-house architectural staff and Hobson merely signed off on them.

### THE GOLDEN AGE OF STATION ARCHITECTURE (1883-1925)

#### The role of Joseph Hobson and the approach of the GTR

After the amalgamation of GWR with the GTR, John Hannaford continued his position of Chief Engineer of the combined roads until his retirement in 1896. Joseph Hobson was named Chief Engineer for the GTR west of Toronto, where he operated with considerable freedom from head office in Montréal. In 1896 Hobson became Chief Engineer for the full GTR system, a position he occupied until his retirement in 1907.

By the 1880s, many of the original GTR and GWR stations were in need of renovation. Also, and perhaps more importantly, the booming Ontario economy had led many communities to outgrow the stations that were in place.

After 1883, the GTR adopted a dynamic and aggressive approach to the railway business. This included the construction of many replacement stations for those now approaching 50 years old. Especially in the medium to larger communities, the stations took on a new importance for the railroad. For these communities, the GTR had a two-pronged strategy: design in-house for most of the stations but for the most important, retain architects of some renown.

The GTR, under Hobson's direction, actively designed stations in-house. Hobson's architectural staff headed by J. M. Bearbrook and L. M. Watts designed a great many stations especially in the Romanesque Revival style, so popular in the latter part of the 19th century and into the very early 20th century. A prime example of this work is the Brampton Station erected in 1907 (image 4).

Although the famous Atherly Narrows station (1897) is not directly credited to Hobson but instead simply to the Engineering staff of the GTR,



**4 Above** – The Brampton station, erected in 1907, is typical of stations designed in-house by GTR architectural staff. Most of these designs, up until the retirement of Joseph Hobson, were done in the popular Romanesque Revival architectural style. Photo courtesy of the Craig Library.

**5 Below** – The Stratford station combined the Prairie thinking with an Italianate tower so common on the GTR of the period. The design is not attributed, so it may have been done in-house under the supervision of L. M. Watts. The picture, taken in 2018, shows the current station shorn of its tower. Photo by the author.



his influence is evident in the story book Gothic styling.

Frank Lloyd Wright made the Prairie style of architecture famous just after the turn of the 20th century. It emphasized long low lines and relatively inornate details contrasting strongly with the Romanesque Revival then in common use. The only GTR station showing the influence of this school of architectural thought is Stratford (1911) (image 5).

New, large stations which were to give an aura of grandeur to the railway were commissioned to outside architects. These stations can be broken into two main architectural styles, the Romanesque Revival and the Beaux-Arts Movement.

#### 1. Romanesque Revival

Frederick H. Spier (1855-1931) was born in Germany but immigrated to settle in Detroit where he founded the architectural design firm of Spier and Rohn. The firm designed many public buildings in the popular Romanesque Revival style and had many commissions for churches throughout Michigan and southern Ontario. The GTR and subsidiary Grand



**6** – This postcard view of Allandale station shows clearly the Italianate tower on the addition designed by Spier and Rohn. They also updated the façade on the original section to produce an iconic building still in use today. Postcard photo courtesy of the Craig Library.



Trunk Western (GTW) often turned to Spier & Rohn for the design of important stations.

Besides an impressive array of large stations in Michigan, Spier & Rohn contributed three seminal designs executed in Ontario. The first of these was an addition to the Allandale station in 1904 (*image 6*).

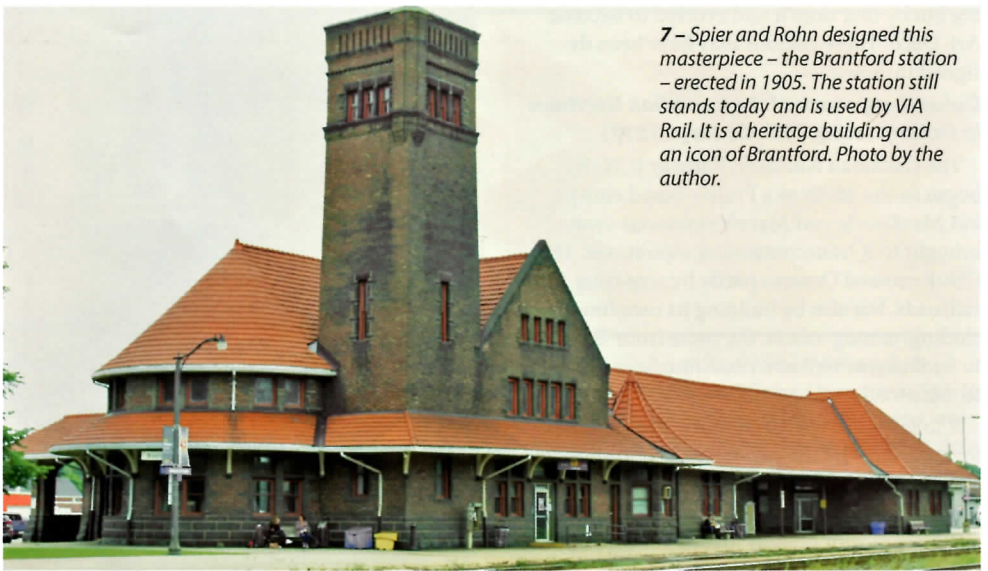
The GTR actively worked with the city of London in the first decade of the 20th century to rebuild track through the downtown and also erect a new and impressive station. Spier and Rohn were in line to be given the design commission. Ultimately, the railway and city could not agree and it was to be 30 years before London finally got a new station.

#### **The puzzle of Petrolia**

Spier and Rohn designed the famous Durand, Michigan GTR station (*image 8*) which was erected in 1903.

Also in 1903, the GTR erected the similar appearing station in Petrolia, Ontario (*image 9*).

The Petrolia station is not attributed so presumably was done in-house. There is also no record that Spier and Rohn were paid for any work on Petrolia. Given their close relationship with the architect, it is highly unlikely that the GTR pirated the design. So, either the Petrolia plan was viewed as sufficiently different from Durand, or there was an unrecorded transaction, which permitted GTR to use the design.



7 – Spier and Rohn designed this masterpiece – the Brantford station – erected in 1905. The station still stands today and is used by VIA Rail. It is a heritage building and an icon of Brantford. Photo by the author.

#### **2. The Beaux-Arts movement**

The Beaux-Arts movement gathered momentum around the turn of the 20th century and became the expression of choice for the very largest stations. In 1912, Bradford Lee Gilbert completed his design for the Ottawa Station (*image 10*) (now housing the Senate).



8 Above – The façade of the Durand, MI station originally erected by GTR and still in use today by AMTRAK. Photo courtesy of the Michigan Railroad History Museum.

9 Below – The GTR station in Petrolia, executed in Romanesque Revival architecture, bears a close resemblance to the Durand station. It was converted to be the city library during the Depression and it still is in use in that capacity. Photo by the author in January 2018.



10 – The Ottawa station still stands today in downtown Ottawa. It currently houses the Senate chambers while The Parliament buildings are being renovated, work that is likely to last about a decade. The future of this heritage building after that is uncertain. The photo shows the structure in fall 2018. Photo by the author.



The Montréal firm of Ross and MacFarlane oversaw some details of the Ottawa station as well as the actual construction, setting them in line for the grandest railroad station project in the country. The Toronto station of the day was a John Hannaford design dating back to 1875. The new Toronto Union Station, which replaced it, was designed in the Beaux-Arts style by a consortium that included John Lyle and Hugh Jones as well as Ross and MacFarlane. The design was essentially completed by 1917, but construction delays prevented the grand opening from taking place until 1927.

It is interesting to note that John Lyle was perhaps Canada's outstanding architect of the early 20th century. He designed a great many public buildings in Toronto and had very successful station designs for Cobalt and Cochrane on the Temiskaming and Northern Ontario (now the Ontario Northland Railway).

Other stations built in the Beaux-Arts style but without an architectural attribution include Thunder Bay Union Station (1910). The station in London (1935) reflected Beaux-Arts styl-



ing but by that time it had evolved to become Art-Deco. These stations may have been designed in-house.

### **General approach of the Canadian Northern in Ontario (early 20th century - 1917)**

The Canadian Northern Railway (CNoR) began in the 1890s as a Prairie-based entity, but MacKenzie and Mann's ambitions soon brought to it transcontinental aspirations. The CNoR crossed Ontario partly by acquiring some railroads, but also by building its own lines including, among others, the route from Toronto to Sudbury, as well as a main line from Toronto to Montréal.

It followed its well established Prairie-based formula of standard stations built of frame construction. The CNoR had a well-earned reputation for cheap (and uninspired) architectural approaches with designs mainly rendered in-house. The railway was capable of better on the rare occasion when direct competition demanded it. For example, company architect R. B. Pratt designed the Smiths Falls station (*image 11*) which was built in 1912 and was one of only a very few departures from the standard designs.

### **STATION DESIGN DURING THE CN AND VIA RAIL PERIOD**

Intercity rail passenger travel peaked in 1920 just as Canadian National inherited the GTR and the CNoR. As a result, building new stations took on a relatively low priority, especially after the onset of the Depression in 1929, unless changes in a community forced the railroad to act.

London was the exception to the rule. After the GTR and the city failed to reach an agreement in 1907-8, the problem of congested roads and trackage in the downtown fell to CN. Finally during the 1930s, grade separation agreements were reached and the railroad constructed a new station in Art-Deco architecture.

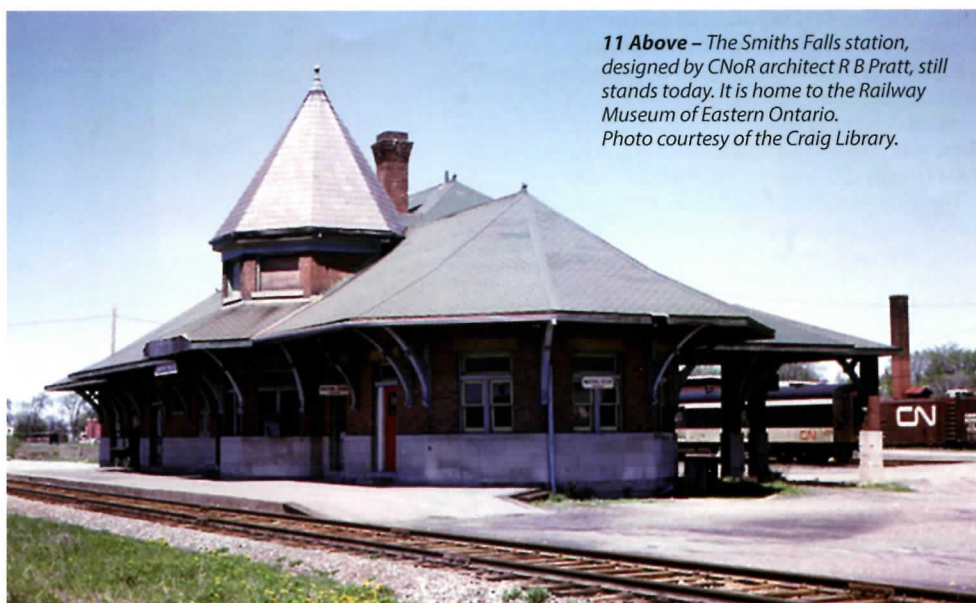
It was to be many years before another major station was constructed. During the 1960s, the federal government reached an agreement with the railroads to remove the tracks near the Rideau Canal in Ottawa as the canal area was renovated. The beautiful old 1911 Ottawa station in Beaux-Arts architecture was bought by the government and became a Conference Centre. It was more recently renovated to temporarily house the Senate.

A new station was constructed in the near suburbs (*image 12*).

VIA Rail took over the intercity passenger business in the 1970s. Outside of some minimal alterations to existing stations and the addition of some uninspired and utilitarian small structures, no new stations have been built. Toronto, as a city, has undertaken the refurbishment of the Toronto station mentioned above, but otherwise station architectural evolution has stopped in Ontario.

Elsewhere, the world carries on as evidenced by this 2016 Dutch train station (*image 13*).

Only time will tell if we will enjoy a renaissance in station architecture here in Ontario. ■



**11 Above** – The Smiths Falls station, designed by CNoR architect R B Pratt, still stands today. It is home to the Railway Museum of Eastern Ontario. Photo courtesy of the Craig Library.



**12 Above** – The new Ottawa station was designed by Parkinson and Associates in 1966. It has polarizing modern architecture scorned by some but much admired by others. It looks as modern today as it did 50 years ago. Photo by the author.

**13 Below** – The Arnheim, Netherlands train station opened in 2016. Its futuristic architecture may inspire a new era in design. Photo by Henk Van Zijl, from the author's collection.

