

# The Iron Horse Arrives in Peterborough

*By Tom Mohr*



*Figure 1 Early photo of Peterborough looking south and showing the rail bed running through the Otonabee courtesy: Roy Studio Collection and the Peterborough Museum and Archives*

The theme of transportation is a defining aspect of the MNR site, and one that keeps appearing in the Peterborough story. The block is bordered on one side by the Otonabee River, whose water passage was utilized by Indigenous people for millennia. By paddle and portage, they not only navigated their seasonal rounds about the region but also developed vast trade networks. They, in turn, passed along their knowledge of the land to the new arrivals from Europe. French explorers and missionaries added these routes to the charts by which they defined ‘their’ new domain in the Americas. Then the British took claim of these territories and through their maps and surveys they apportioned the countryside for new settlement. Despite their seniority upon these lands, the First Nations found themselves relegated to ‘reserves’, instead, and the newcomers wrought great changes.

Prior to 1867, Canada had not yet coalesced as a country. The Crown called upon immigrants to tame the land and to develop a mercantile economy, but it was not forgotten that two wars had recently been fought against the upstarts to the south. The importation of (presumably) loyal British stock promised to bolster the colony's defences by diluting the number of Americans who had migrated to Canada in the first quarter of the 19th century. The attraction was free, or cheap, land.

The front lots of the lower Great Lakes were the first to be granted. Later settlers needed access to their allotments in the back townships, and a means to ship their bounty – timber, agricultural and mineral – to the marketplace. Thus the valley of the Trent was all-important to Peterborough's early settlement, though it was not the contiguous system that we recognize today. Routes to the Lake Ontario ports were augmented by portages and primitive wagon trails, so as early as the 1830s, a series of canals and locks were being planned to connect the Trent River to Lake Simcoe. However, the daunting task of taming the river ways was matched only by its expense, leading other schemes to be considered that would use both steamboat and an emerging technology – the railroad – to achieve the much needed linkages.

One might reasonably observe that much of the story of modern Canada can be told in recounting its railway saga. Rail brought consolidation, security and economic growth, though it did not come cheap. Still, at the precise moment in time that the Dominion was dealing with the concept on a continental scale, Peterborough also reached out to meet its own transportation needs.

A charter was granted in 1846 to construct a railroad between Peterborough and Port Hope that was met with "considerable enthusiasm" (White 1858: 14), but failed to generate enough funding for completion. New legislation was required to raise such large funds and Parliament responded through the *Guarantee Act of 1849* and the *Municipal Loan Fund Act of 1852*, both of which offered generous incentives for the investment of private capital. There was suddenly a lot of money to be made in railroads and not surprisingly, by the mid-1800s, development of the waterways began to stall.

Accordingly, from the 1850s onward, various conglomerates scrambled to spin iron webs across the landscape. Short runs, loops, and spurs were assembled to serve dedicated purposes, leaving the regional railway history a dense collection of now-forgotten companies. No less than 20 different railroad schemes included Peterborough in their charters, but few proved commercially viable (Turner 1982: 2). Even in 1858 it was noted how "It was the peculiarity of the Railway Legislation of 1852-3 that the large proportion of charters granted, had Peterboro' either for a terminal point, or an important station" (White 1858: 14).

While that proliferation may speak to Peterborough's central location, it also reflects the availability of cheap land at the time. Railways dealt not only with charters and investors, but with construction and land speculation. It was of great advantage to a municipality to be on a rail line, thus communities vied for service and were often compelled to entice developers with large

sums of public funds. No matter the scale of the enterprise, there was always room for money to be made, which also presented opportunities for corrupt practices to emerge.

Once again, Peterborough's railway history serves as an apt metaphor. Legislators, many of whom were also landowners, were allowed to issue charters to themselves. Construction of most rail lines was paid for by the mile, providing incentive for subcontractors to deliver up cheaper, substandard materials and service, a practice known as 'scamping.' These firms were often owned by the same consortiums that held the charter (Myers 1914:180).

**Travelling Register.**

**COBOURG AND PETERBORO  
Railroad.**

**W**ANTED on the C & P. R. R., Five Hundred Labourers and Two Hundred good hands for track laying, to whom the following wages will be paid—Labourers per day, 5s cy, Track Layers from 5s to 10s per day.

Any men coming by any of the Lake Ontario Steamers will have their passage money returned, providing they remain on the works one month and produce a certificate from the Captain.

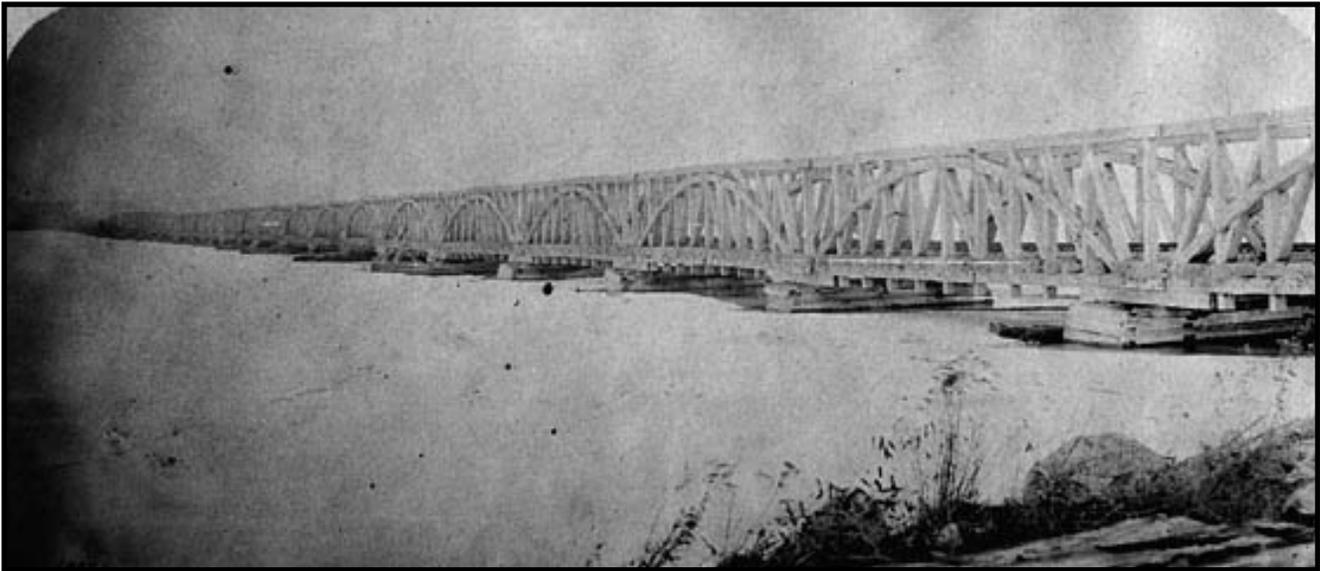
**JOHN FOWLER,**  
*Contractor.*

Cobourg, May, 1854. 1273-12t

*Figure 2 'Labourers Wanted' ad for building the railway.  
Source: E.C. Guillet's Pioneer Travel in Upper Canada.*

In 1852, sod was turned in Cobourg for the first railway to access Peterborough, and two years later, both towns were able to celebrate a completed rail connection between them. The northern terminus was declared open for business and in 1858, the authors of the county directory trumpeted the following:

“Altogether, Peterborough possesses all the elements of an important manufacturing town. The immense water power supplied by the Otonabee River, and the large timber districts in the rear of the town, offer facilities for manufacturing such as are possessed by few communities in the Province. With the railway facilities now possessed by the town, the easy method of ingress and egress; with the improvements which are going on in the interior country; the rapid settlement of that hitherto unsurveyed and almost unexplored country; and the improvements lately made in the navigations of the back waters, - the prospects of the town are flattering in the extreme (White 1858:19).”



*Figure 3 Grand Trunk Railway Bridge Rice Lake Ontario Courtesy of Armstrong and Beere/ Library Archives Canada*

One impressive feature of the Cobourg and Peterborough Railway (C&PR) was the three mile long Rice Lake trestle. Though lauded as a major feat of engineering and possibly the longest railway bridge in North America at the time, it proved to be vulnerable to the ravages of nature and required constant attention. Some claim it finally fell victim to an especially cold winter (Turner 1982: 9-10), but there are others who place the blame squarely on profiteering through widespread use of shoddy construction methods:

“Although this road was only 30 miles long, the cost amounted to nearly \$1,000,000, of which sum municipalities contributed \$500,000 (1856 funds). The road-bed was badly deficient, and the equipment not much better. With a celebration the road was finally opened for traffic, but hardly had the winter of 1853 set in when the railway’s bridge, three miles long across Rice Lake, was crushed in and splintered by the ice. An examination revealed that the work had been scamped; the piles had not been sufficiently driven or properly stayed. (Myers 1914:195).”

The expense of rebuilding a permanent causeway was eventually deemed too great, and by 1860, the prospect of a line between Peterborough and Cobourg had been abandoned. But the public loss still proved to be the private investor’s gain.

In fact, by 1858, profits made by railway promoters had reached a level deemed “embarrassing” and a public inquiry was held, chaired by the finance minister of the province, one William Cayley, MP. Through his offices, £10,000 of public money had been loaned to the C&PR. Cayley, himself, gave testimony that he had personal financial connections to the enterprise, and that he was related by marriage to the Mayor of Cobourg, D’Arcy Boulton, who was also the president of the company. Cayley’s shares in the C&PR had been exchanged with Boulton for land – Boulton’s uncle also happened to be the Commissioner of Crown Lands (Myers 1914: 203-6). In microcosm this captures the process writ large across the Canadian landscape in the

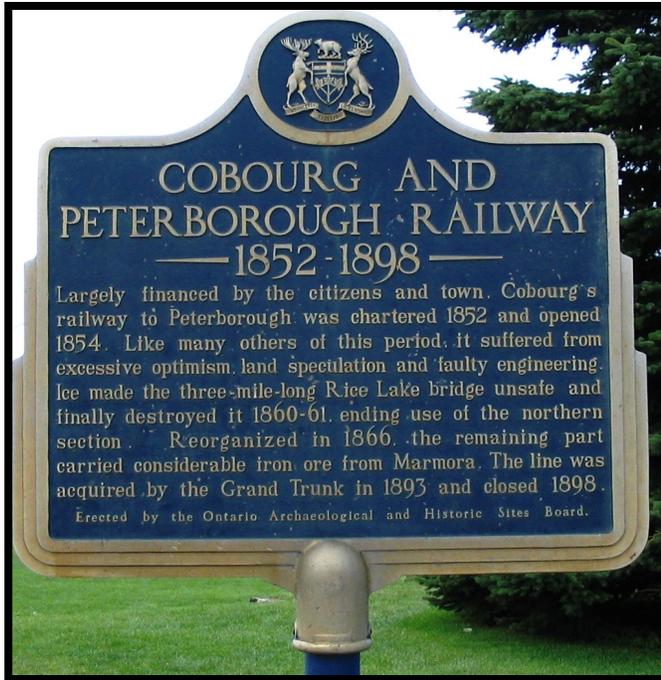


Figure 4 photo courtesy of Marsha Ann Tate

‘wild west’ days of land deals and railway building. Even such a revered figure as Sir John A MacDonal was caught up in the frenzy and it cost him his office of Prime Minister in a national scandal.

Yet the Iron Horse continued on, inexorably, as other schemes succeeded where the Cobourg and Peterborough Railway had floundered. By 1858, a spur line had been run from Millbrook to Peterborough, connecting it to the Port Hope, Lindsay and Beaverton Railroad. Through a series of mergers and acquisitions, that became part of the Grand Trunk Railway, and then the Canadian National Railway. A fellow by the name of George Albertus Cox did quite well by the process (Myers 1914: 274).

A jumbled alphabet of corporate acronyms came and went in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but it is the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) that relates most to the small section of downtown Peterborough known as the MNR Site. In early days, the CPR spanned the country and was a formative element in Confederation. However, it lacked direct access to the lucrative lines connecting the more populous areas of central Canada and so the CPR entered into a period of acquiring existing railways that would allow it to be competitive. By 1884 the Ontario and Quebec Railway had been constructed, passing through Peterborough, and shortly thereafter it was absorbed by the CPR, thus establishing their presence in the city. A splendid station was built on Water Street that same year, just south and west of what is now the MNR block, and there it stands today, ironically having survived even though passenger service has not. It presently houses the Peterborough Chamber of Commerce.

Mindful that the timber trade had become less of an economic driver, Peterborough reached out to secure other industry that could be lured by its central location, its plentiful electric power and its railways. In 1900, all three were major elements in convincing the American Cereal Company (later Quaker Oats, now Pepsico) to invest in a major facility. The rails factored into this corporate decision in more ways than one. It was railway tycoon and financier George Cox who tasked himself with bringing the company to Peterborough. The American Cereal Company was good for Cox, too. He had interests in the land that was assembled to accommodate the mills, the electrical generation facility, and financing through his bank. Having been a seven term Mayor he also wrote the by-law insuring a 42 year fixed tax assessment, and as a Senator, used his influence to access Federal funds to improve the lands. His railway connections added assurances that the deal would proceed (Brown 2016: 3-6). The integrated manner of his

ventures did not go un-noticed, though he remained impervious to criticism: “Cox found the implication that he had abused situations in which he had multiple interests puzzling, largely because no one could prove that any of his transactions had failed to maximize the interests of policyholders or other investors in his companies” (Bliss 2003).

Brown is more casual in his summation:

“Cox may not have had a modern-day sensitivity for issues of conflict of interest and independence. But his sense was that transparency trumped those matters. His view would be “It’s good for me, it’s good for all of us” so what matter is it that I am a player on both sides of a deal?” (2016: 4)

Nonetheless, Quaker Oats came to Peterborough and spurs were run north off of the main line and across the future MNR Site to service the mills. It seems poetic to note that as rail and all its potential superseded the importance of the waterway, infill was being deposited along the river’s edge. Projects that had been initiated to provide docks and warehousing were expanded to accommodate steel rail, cattle pens, engine barns, freight sheds and offices. A succession of maps reveals a process that borrowed from the river to provide for rail as dredgeate was dumped behind cribbing to create new lands. Often it was the detritus of the city’s past that was also being shovelled into the river to accommodate its future (Dibb 1997: 5).

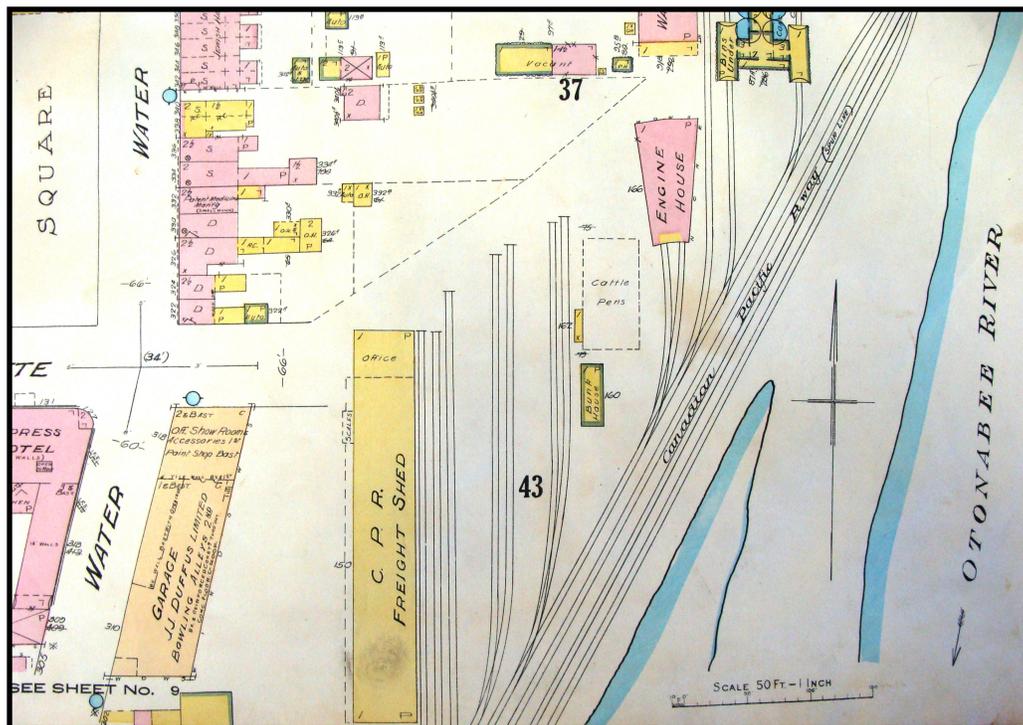


Figure 5 Detail of Goad Insurance Map for Peterborough, 1929, showing CPR tracks and shed. Courtesy of Trent Valley Archives

For the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Peterborough continued to expand and prosper as a manufacturing centre. Railroads flourished in and around the town, to the extent that the city even had its own electric trolley for most of the years from 1893 to 1928. But as early as 1933, Guillet observed that “over optimism has led to the construction of at least one third too much railway mileage for the population of Canada” (1933: 598). The industrial boom that followed the Second World War put more people behind the driver’s seat as they were able to afford their own automobiles. New home ownership for returning veterans fuelled a suburban sprawl farther from centralized rail resources and people simply preferred using their cars. Passenger service fell off, and by the end of the 1980s, the CNR had cancelled its service to Peterborough.

Over the next few decades, market forces drove Peterborough’s manufacturing base into decline, further decreasing the need for railways. CP maintains its freight service for Quaker and Canadian General Electric, but cancelled its passenger runs in 1990. The Havelock line, which carries nephelite from mines at Blue Mountain and Nephton, still runs through town. Nevertheless, as of this date, the rail beds see more walking trails than train tracks.

At a time when the CPR was starting to wrap up its service, its subsidiary, Marathon Realty, was exerting another influence over the city. Its Peterborough Square project, located in the downtown core adjacent to the MNR site, caused numerous 150 year-old buildings to be demolished in the mid-1970s. Ironically, this massive redevelopment has gradually been reduced in relevance by an evolving economy and today the commercial district is being revitalized by capitalizing upon what remains of its 19<sup>th</sup> century charm. Furthermore, it was the jarring impact of Peterborough Square that spurred the creation of the Peterborough Architectural Conservation Advisory Committee so that in the future, heritage landscapes might be protected from such onslaughts.

On site, Millennium Park celebrates the evolution of the riverside, but the city’s railway story may not yet be over. Peterborough is a vibrant city and also functions as a bedroom community for Oshawa and the east Toronto region. The ride from the hinterlands and back is now regarded as a viable commute, but the highways that drew away the rail passengers are becoming increasingly congested. A reinvigorated rail system might just be a remedy for traffic woes.

The old CPR station on Water Street stands waiting.



*Figure 6 Peterborough CPR Station courtesy of Ron Crough, Peterborough, ON via Wikimedia Commons*

Notes: The author wishes to thank the following individuals for their assistance in synthesizing a truly complex topic: Charles Cooper, Elwood Jones, Heather Aiton, Gordon Dibb, Rita Granda, & Dirk Verhulst. One is encouraged to consult *Charles Cooper's Railway Pages* on-line for more information on the region's railway history. To learn how to finance a railroad the old-fashioned way, seek out Gustavus Meyer's *A History of Canadian Wealth*.

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