

Rediscovering the old N.G.R. rail line trajectory and Sand Hill station yard

... following in Mr. Frank N. Harding's footsteps ...

Were it not for local historian Mr. Harding's writings in the 'Meaford Express,' precious little information regarding Meaford's earliest railroading days would be available today. It is interesting therefore, to read his comment quoted hereunder relative to the Sand Hill station yard:

"A diagram or plan of this neighbourhood would not be out of place here [newspaper] or in a book as one today [1940s] must be well over 50 years of age to remember much of the original railway layout." (F.N. Harding b.1899 - d. 1976)

That passage raised my curiosity and made it my quest to find an answer to what Mr. Harding alluded to. Since arriving in Meaford, I soon became acquainted with the Georgian Trail and its history as described in various publications. It came as a bit of a surprise therefore to learn of an earlier line that had run behind Tim Hortons along present Gray Avenue and across current Hwy 26 up the Sand Hill ridge where the station with appurtenances were located. I had read the plaque on the Station Hill Woods Park but that did not mention the location of the station proper. It had been somewhere along Union St. someone offered.

Most of my information had come from paper clippings of Frank N. Harding's writings kindly copied for me at the Meaford Museum. Only the footwork still needed to be done! But, where to start? After all, it had been well over a hundred years since the last train had left the Sandhill Station. I decided to try and locate its former trajectory first.

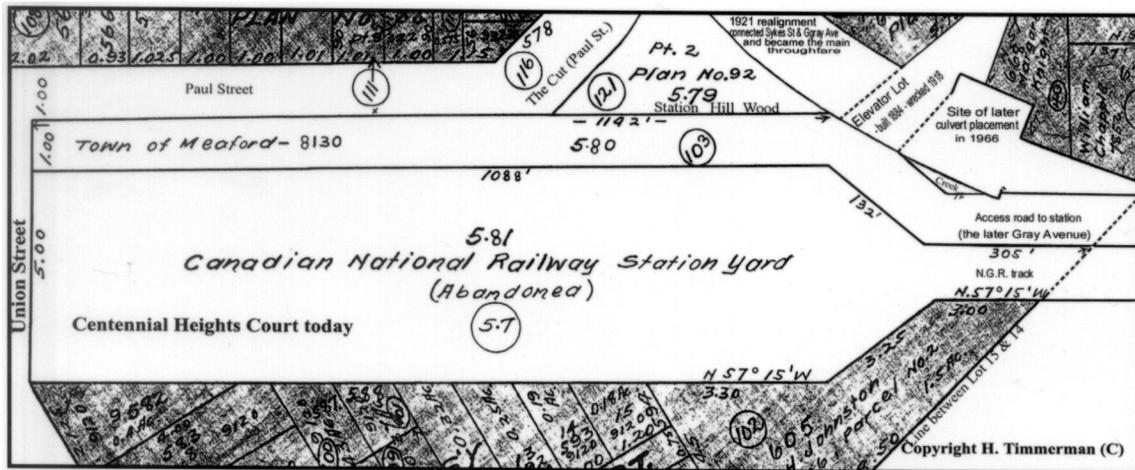
My first clue to point me in the right direction came from Jim Almond. He has lived close to the Georgian Trail all his life and recalled from hearsay that the line once deviated somewhere near Swarthmore Drive and ran along a row of evergreen trees north of the current trail. The trees are still there today for all to see. I found the spot where the line had veered off to be approximately 80m (87yds) east of the large sponsored kilometre rock directly opposite Grandma Lambe's Hwy 26 fruit stand. The land in question, an orchard, was privately owned so I sought and gained permission to walk it in pursuit of my research.

Following that line of trees through the orchard took me into a wooded area along what to all appearances resembled a backbone flanked in places by gullies. The rail bed rounded a bend in a sweeping curve to end much to my surprise in front of the trail near where the McDonald kilometre rock and bench are located. From the brow of the mound I was standing on, one of similar height was visible on the northeast extremity of the Valumart Plaza. This is where the surveyors discovered their crossing point onto high land. A clever find I might add! It became clear why the engineers had chosen this spot rather than continuing the steep gradient down to the waterfront. The Carnahan creek ran by below and a trestle bridge was constructed at this point according to Mr. Harding.

From the high ground on the other side the line would have followed where the plaza now stands and from there along the inside perimeter fence of the MTO yard toward Montgomery St. A line of evergreen trees is located there also that ends near the house,

No. 411, at the corner of St. Vincent and Montgomery Sts. Its exit point would have been where its garage is situated. From there, it followed what today is called Gray Ave. Twin trestle bridges spanned Laidlaw's Creek (Meaford Creek today). Both were located south of the current concrete culvert constructed in 1966 during Hwy 26 realignment. The southerly one carried the train – the northerly one traffic to the station proper from the southeast. Immediately across the creek, the property fanned out on either side to its planned width. The later elevator property had a direct connection to the access road and likely would have straddled present day Hwy. 26 there. Both station yard and lateral access road terminated in front of Union St. The cut, (Paul St. today) was built by the Company to enable pedestrians and horse drawn vehicles to access the station from the west end of town. A person viewing the fence line of the house east of the creek will note how it lines up with a series of houses on the other side and how their front setback is wider than is the case elsewhere.

Finally, we come to the crux of the question – the location of the station proper. While apparently no plat, sketch, or drawing had turned up previously; I was fortunate to locate and borrow a large, old survey map of the whole subdivision in the hands of a Farrar St. resident. It contained the dimensions of the rail yard property. Because of its extremely dark background, it was difficult to decipher. By making a scan of the yard area and erasing its background and around each individual letter the result became a clear imprint. Centennial Heights Court and Gray Ave nearly share the same centre line. (Google it!) The fact that the drawing shows the yard as abandoned while all around lots were subdivided makes one wonder why the property remained in apparent limbo, unless the powers that be had other plans in mind. As it is, the Centennial Heights Ct section of it can boast the most prominent street in town, a straight, broad boulevard with above average front yard setbacks. See it in spring before trees go into leaf!



Mr. Harding's question may finally have been answered.

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