

Report of the Annual Meeting Rapports annuels de la Société historique du Canada

Report of the Annual Meeting

The Development of the Railway Network of Southwestern Ontario to 1876

James J. Talman

Volume 32, Number 1, 1953

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/300345ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/300345ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0317-0594 (print)

1712-9095 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Talman, J. J. (1953). The Development of the Railway Network of Southwestern Ontario to 1876. *Report of the Annual Meeting / Rapports annuels de la Société historique du Canada*, 32(1), 53–60. <https://doi.org/10.7202/300345ar>

All rights reserved © The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada, 1953

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE RAILWAY NETWORK OF SOUTHWESTERN ONTARIO TO 1876

JAMES J. TALMAN

The University of Western Ontario

When Stephenson drove the first steam locomotive on the Stockton and Darlington Railway on September 27, 1825, he generated much enthusiasm in many parts of the world. The western part of Upper Canada was no exception. Between 1825 and 1840 no fewer than seventeen petitions for bills relating to railways within the region bounded by the Niagara River and Yonge Street on one side and the Detroit River on the other were presented to the Assembly of Upper Canada.¹

An early proposal for a railway in the peninsula came from a public meeting held in 1832 in London, then a village but six years old. The meeting petitioned for a charter to construct a railroad between the town of London and the head waters of Lake Ontario. The object of the supporters of this scheme was to provide facilities within the region for transporting its surplus produce to market.

When the petition reached the Legislature it was referred to a committee, the chairman of which was Colonel Mahlon Burwell, a local member. On January 9, 1833, the committee recommended approval of the formation of a joint stock company to construct a "Rail Road from the town of London to the head waters of Lake Ontario" as requested. But the committee went further, and concluded: "Your Committee cannot refrain from indulging the fond hope that the period is not very far distant when the advancement of that most interesting portion of the country to which the petitioners have adverted will be such as to require the Legislature to authorize the construction of Rail Roads from Goderich, on Lake Huron, to the town of London, and from the River Aux Pêche, near the foot of Lake Huron, via Adelaide, to the said Town of London."² This was a far-sighted proposal in view of the fact that the London District then had a population of 28,841 and in the three districts between Hamilton and the Detroit River there were only 66,692 inhabitants.³

The proposal resulted in the incorporation of the London and Gore Railroad Company on March 6, 1834.⁴ The list of promoters looks like a *Who's Who* in London. More than half of them were Londoners, and the rest represented Hamilton and intermediate points. It is interesting to note that at least one of the promoters was a stage coach proprietor who evidently saw the need to keep abreast of progress.

The effort was premature and the ideas of the promoters were greater than their funds. Subsequently the Act was renewed and

¹*General Index to the Journals of the House of Assembly of the late Province of Upper Canada* (Montreal, 1848), 472-5.

²*Journal of the House of Assembly of Upper Canada Session, 1832-3, Appendix*, 210.

³*Ibid.*, 186.

⁴Wm. IV, c. 29.

amended more than once and the name of the railway also underwent changes. The ultimate name, given in 1853, was the Great Western Railway Company.⁵

During these years a man named Henry Dalley put forward a scheme for a road between London and Detroit. He was a genial and plausible promoter and seems to have collected considerable funds in the country districts. His plans matured sufficiently to justify his sending out survey parties, if these were not part of his window dressing. His enterprise fell through, with disastrous consequences to those who had trusted him. It is said that subsequently Dalley went to New York where he made a fortune in selling patent medicines. It is difficult to accept the further local tradition that he remembered his Upper Canadian friends with gifts of Dalley's salve.⁶

During the formative years of the Great Western and its antecedents the fundamental purpose of the railway underwent a change. Instead of a portage road and a road for the distribution of local goods, the promoters began talking of the importance of providing a short road across the peninsula to carry goods from and to the American West. Many expressions of this view are available. That in the *Canada Directory* for 1851 is typical: "This road which is now in course of construction will pass through the finest portion of the Province, and when completed must necessarily be the great highway for the travel, and for the transport of a large portion of the produce of the North Western States of the American Union, as well as of Western Canada."⁷

By 1847 the Great Western had reached the stage of the turning of the first sod. On October 23 Colonel Thomas Talbot, directors, and other notables, carried out the ceremony on a vacant lot on the west side of Richmond Street, where the Hyman tannery stands today.⁸ At that time the intention was that the railway should come through London approximately on the present line of the C.P.R. Local considerations shifted the G.W.R. line to the present C.N.R. right of way.

Construction of the Great Western began in 1851.⁹ The section east of the Grand River was built by Farewell and Company, of which a partner was Samuel Zimmerman, who played a leading part in the railway building of the time. West of the Grand River part of the construction was carried out by Ferrell and Van Voorhis. Recently an interesting account of this section of the work turned up in the collections of the New York Historical Society.¹⁰

In due time, on November 10, 1853, the first section of forty-three miles was completed, from Suspension Bridge, at Niagara Falls, to Hamilton. The greatest enthusiasm came with the opening of the

⁵ Wm. IV, c. 61; 8 Vic. c. 86; 16 Vic. c. 99.

⁶ Cl. T. Campbell, "The settlement of London," *London and Middlesex Historical Society Transactions* (London, 1911), III, 25.

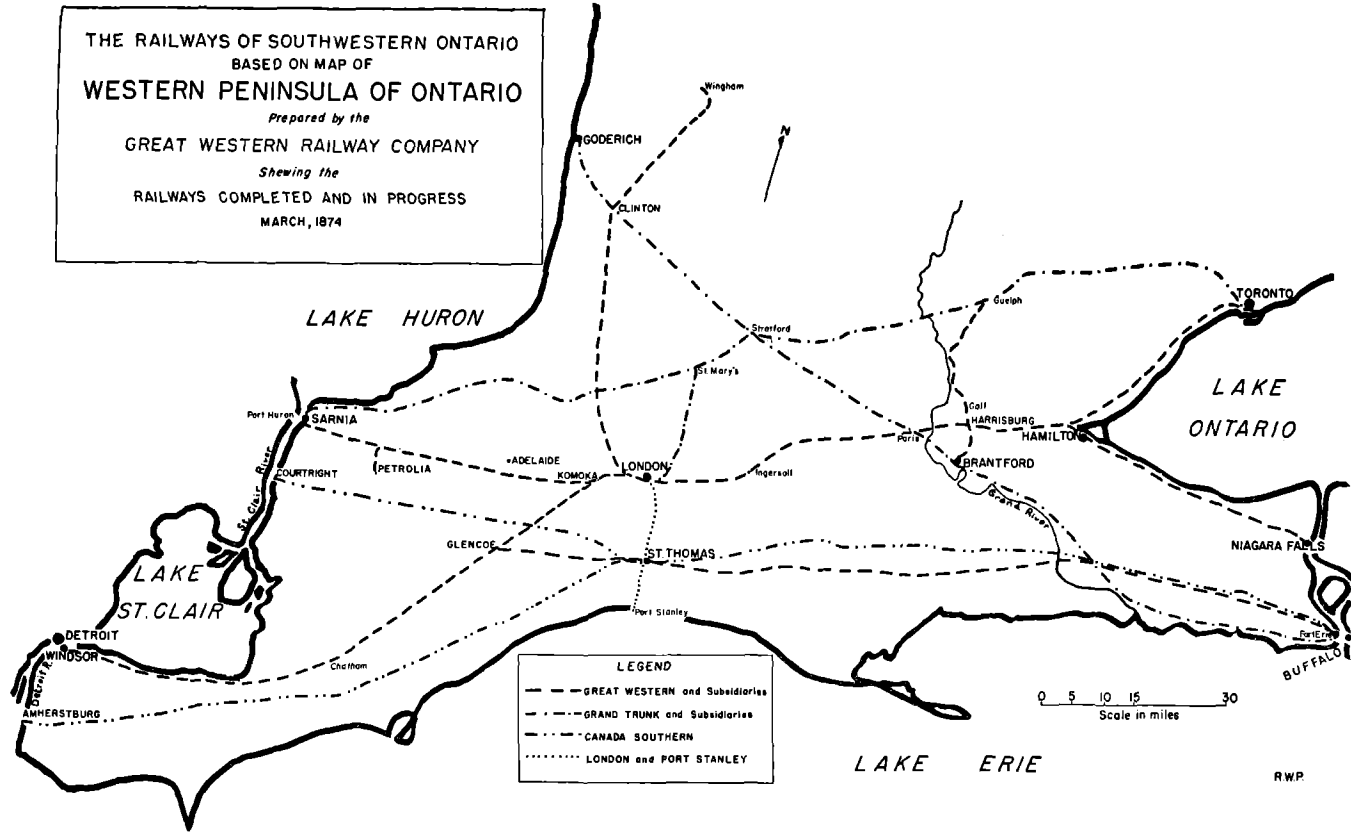
⁷ Robert W. S. Mackay, *The Canada Directory* (Montreal, 1851), 574.

⁸ *The Globe*, Toronto, Oct. 27, 1847.

⁹ *Journals of the Legislative Assembly of the Province of Canada, Session, 1851*, Appendix U.U.

¹⁰ A. G. Bogue and Lillian R. Benson (eds.), "An engineer on the Great Western," (*Western Ontario History Nuggets*, No. 17, 1952).

THE RAILWAYS OF SOUTHWESTERN ONTARIO
 BASED ON MAP OF
WESTERN PENINSULA OF ONTARIO
Prepared by the
GREAT WESTERN RAILWAY COMPANY
Shewing the
RAILWAYS COMPLETED AND IN PROGRESS
MARCH, 1874



seventy-six mile section between Hamilton and London. The line opened for traffic on December 31, 1853, but the first passenger run was on December 15. On that day a special train left Hamilton in the morning. The *Toronto Globe*, December 19, 1853, gave a full account of the excursion which cannot detain us now. Suffice it to say that during the journey the celebrators stopped four times, at Flamboro, Paris, Woodstock, and Ingersoll for lunches, all of which were accompanied by champagne, "an article which, by the way," the *Globe* reporter added, "has become very common in Canada since railways came into fashion. The libations which the wheelbarrow men pour out to their god Plutus is always of this generous wine."

The journey ended in London which was suitably decorated for the occasion, where inevitably there was another dinner with many speeches and much wine.¹¹ The dream of the promoters of the London and Gore twenty years before had been realized. Colonel Talbot, who had been with the first official party to visit London in 1793, and who had turned the first sod for the railway, did not live quite long enough to see the first train. He died on February 6, 1853. Since he was an adult when he migrated to Upper Canada, his life illustrates the speed with which Western Ontario moved out of the pioneer stage.

The road to Detroit, 110 miles, was opened for traffic on January 27, 1854. Celebrations of the traditional type were held in Detroit on January 17. The return celebration was held in Hamilton on January 19.¹²

The first months of operation were a nightmare. By the end of October, 1854, there had been no fewer than seventeen accidents, thirteen involving loss of human life. Some accidents were not the fault of the railway. At least four were cases in which a train ran over a man lying drunk on the track at night. But two accidents cost the lives of six and seven passengers, respectively, and on October 27, 1854, fifty-two passengers were killed and forty-eight were injured at Baptiste Creek, not far from Chatham. The accident was caused by the negligence of a conductor.¹³ Since the railway had begun operation before the road-bed was ready, and since all train crews must have been inexperienced, the record is hardly surprising. Contemporary newspapers reported many accidents on American roads but the G.W.R. record does seem to have been excessive. So disturbing was the record of accidents that after the one at Baptiste Creek an editorial writer on the staff of the *Western Planet*, Chatham, November 1, 1854 exclaimed: "Better, infinitely better, that the whistle of the locomotive had never awoke the echo of our forests, than that it should have sounded the death knell of so many human beings, who have dyed with their blood this road, within the past few months."

¹¹The *Middlesex Prototype*, London, Dec. 17, 1853.

¹²"The Great Western Railway," London and Middlesex Historical Society *Transactions* (London, 1909), II, 44.

¹³"Schedule of accidents on the Great Western Railway from opening of the road to 1st November, 1854. Reports of the Commissioners appointed to inquire into a series of accidents and detentions on the Great Western Railway, Canada West, by commission bearing date Nov. 3, 1854." *Journals of the Legislative Assembly of the Province of Canada*, 1854-5. Appendix YY.

The Great Western quickly began developing a network within Southwestern Ontario. On August 21, 1854, twelve miles were added with the completion of the Harrisburg to Galt branch. At the end of November, 1872, this line was extended south to Brantford.

In 1857, the Great Western established connections with Toronto by amalgamating with the Hamilton and Toronto Railway, which had been put through by a different company in 1855. In 1857 the G.W.R. took over the Galt and Guelph line, which also had been constructed under another charter. In both these cases the financial arrangements were complicated.¹⁴

Thus by 1857 the Great Western controlled lines from Windsor to Suspension Bridge and Toronto, with a branch line to Guelph, through Galt. At Toronto the road made connections with the Grand Trunk and consequently had direct contact with Montreal. At Suspension Bridge, connection was made with the New York Central by means of a bridge, opened in March, 1855. At Windsor connection was made with the Michigan Central and Detroit and Milwaukee Railroads by means of ferries.¹⁵

The first railway built in Southwestern Ontario with a view to developing the region rather than to providing a short cut across the peninsula was the London and Port Stanley Railway, completed in September, 1856. This was essentially a local road of twenty-four miles. It was advocated first by business men of London and most of the capital stock was subscribed by the municipalities through which it ran. London made by far the greatest contribution, subscribing \$220,000 of the capital stock of \$388,500. In a very few years the city was forced to take over the road, into which further funds were poured.

Although the anticipated revenues were not realized, the building of the London and Port Stanley quickly had a salutary effect on rail rates in the region. The Great Western and the Grand Trunk, it was stated, were forced to reduce rates fifty per cent on farm produce and merchandise on account of the competitive rates offered. Certainly, in 1858, wheat shipped from London, via the Great Western, cost one cent a bushel less to put aboard a ship at Hamilton than wheat shipped from Ingersoll, nineteen miles closer to that destination.¹⁶

The railway, in addition, provided an inexpensive means of travel whereby excursionists from London and St. Thomas could visit the lakeside.

The position of the Great Western as a carrier to and from the American west was soon challenged by two other roads. The first was the Buffalo and Lake Huron, which ran from Fort Erie to Goderich. It crossed the G.W.R. at Paris Junction. This road was incorporated in 1852 and like the Great Western was largely controlled in England. The road was opened on June 28, 1858, but the official celebration did not come until July 8. The purpose of the road was

¹⁴J. M. and Edw. Trout, *The Railways of Canada for 1870-1* (Toronto, 1871), 96, 97.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 95.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 114-7; *Weekly Dispatch*, St. Thomas, Nov. 4, 1858. See also T. H. M. Ferris, *History of the London and Port Stanley Railway, 1852-1946*, ms. thesis in the General Library, The University of Western Ontario, London, 1946.

revealed in the speeches on that day and by the banners decorating the large hall built especially for the occasion. In addition to such obvious banners as "God save the Queen" and "Welcome", there were others, "Buffalo", "Saginaw", "Chicago", "Milwaukee". The general manager of the railway spoke of the great commercial highway which had been opened up "between Buffalo, the Saginaw, Milwaukee, Chicago and the Great West." This railway, he said, "was of all others the best and shortest route for the immense trade and travel between the east and west."¹⁷ The Buffalo and Lake Huron was operated by the Grand Trunk.

The main line of the Grand Trunk soon posed a far greater threat to the Great Western. By August, 1856, the railway was operating from Toronto to Montreal and gradually began pushing west. By November 21, 1856, the rails reached St. Mary's, leaving only the gap between that place and Sarnia and between Detroit and Port Huron in a line from the Atlantic to the west. But the threat to the G.W.R. came closer to home on September 27, 1858, when the Grand Trunk opened a line from St. Mary's to London.

The Great Western, three months later, on December 27, reached Sarnia with a branch from Komoka. The celebration of this event on January 14, 1859, took the usual form of an excursion and a dinner. The Honourable Malcolm Cameron, speaking on this occasion, said that he considered the Sarnia branch essential to the Great Western, "in fact its salvation, as affording the most direct connection between the west and eastern Railways, to the seaboard." Sarnia, he believed, "from its natural position, was the best crossing place between the west and the Atlantic cities." The *Sarnia Observer* stated that he said: "It was well known he had always been favorable to the Grand Trunk, but he felt satisfied that the Great Western formed the chain of communication to the Suspension Bridge, consequently it would always be the great thoroughfare for all traffic from the west to New York and Boston." Cameron also pointed out that the completion of the branch to Sarnia brought to fruition the original idea of the promoters of the London and Gore.¹⁸

Although the competition was not good for the railways concerned, one fact stood out. The city of London profited. By the end of 1858 London had rail connections to the west at Windsor and Sarnia and to the east or northeast at Stratford and Hamilton (thus with Toronto, Montreal, and Portland), Suspension Bridge (thus with New York and Boston), and to the south at Port Stanley (from which place a steamer sailed every other day during the summer to Cleveland).

Before the Grand Trunk had completed its line to Sarnia the Great Western suffered a financial crisis. The newspapers which supported the road attributed its troubles to the general depression of the time. Opponents blamed the situation on the directors for putting the railway into operation before the road-bed was finished, with resulting expensive accidents, and for rushing into the construction

¹⁷The *News of the Week*, Toronto, July 16, 1858; The *Globe*, Toronto, July 10, 1858; The *Leader*, Toronto, July 12, 1858.

¹⁸The *Sarnia Observer*, Nov. 25, Dec. 30, 1858; Jan. 14, 1859.

of branches. The *Leader*, Toronto, October 10, 1859, stated "To build branches was to supply contracts; and if the branches did not pay, it is reasonable to suppose, looking at the enormous cost of the road, that the contracts did. If those who advanced the money were the losers, those who got it were the gainers."¹⁹

Finally, to round out the troubles of the Great Western, the Grand Trunk completed lines from Detroit to Port Huron and from St. Mary's to Sarnia on November 21, 1859. Despite the remarks of Malcolm Cameron and the enthusiastic support accorded the Great Western Sarnia branch by the *Sarnia Observer* less than a year before, that paper declared on August 5, 1859: "The Grand Trunk road from Portland westward, will ultimately be the great thoroughfare between Europe and the great North-west territory of this continent, there can be no doubt whatever, as well for the conveyance of passengers and goods to this vast region, as for the transport of its products to the old world." The editor might have been writing for a newspaper ninety years later when he described the completion of the Grand Trunk as "almost amounting to the annihilation of time and terrestrial space," compared with the state of things a half century before. He estimated that it would take fifty-six hours to go from Detroit to Portland.

With competition to the north, it was not long before competition for the Great Western also developed to the south. The Great Western consistently and spiritedly opposed the incorporation of any southern competitor, but in 1868 the Canada Southern Railway was projected from Amherstburg to Fort Erie and in 1873 was completed. Partly to compete with this southern rival the Great Western built a branch, called the "air-line," from Glencoe to Buffalo. During the early months of 1873 a race developed between the two roads. The Great Western won by a few weeks. Later in the same year the Canada Southern ran a branch from St. Thomas to Courtright on the St. Clair River.²⁰

So far the railway network centring on London had one gap, a line envisaged by Mahlon Burwell in 1833. This was a rail connection north to Lake Huron. This line came with the opening on December 31, 1875, of the London, Huron and Bruce, operated by the Great Western. This line ran from London to Wingham through Clinton, where it crossed the old Buffalo and Lake Huron, thus making connections with Goderich.²¹

In 1882 the Grand Trunk absorbed the Great Western. Such a union had been talked of several times. The end of the Great Western was inevitable largely because the road had no adequate termini. In due time the Grand Trunk disappeared in the Canadian National Railway System. Interestingly enough the most important line of the C.N.R. through Southwestern Ontario is the old G.W.R. right-of-way, the Komoka to Sarnia branch, being the important link. The London business men of 1832 who proposed the original railway, and Colonel Burwell who called for an expansion of their views, were far-sighted for their time and the subsequent years have borne out their judgment.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, May 27, June 3, 1859; *Hamilton Times*, *London Free Press*, quoted in *Sarnia Observer*, Sept. 30, 1859.

²⁰*Weekly Dispatch*, St. Thomas, Oct. 10, 1872; Feb. 20, 27, Dec. 25, 1873.

²¹The *Huron Expositor*, Seaforth, Jan. 7, 14, 1876.

DISCUSSION

MR. CONACHER raised the question of the lack of urban centres along the Lake Erie shore, in contrast with the populous shoreline of Lake Ontario. MR. PACKER suggested that the ridge running east and west, somewhat north of the shore, provided a foundation for east-west transportation routes, which would be interrupted by frequent creeks which ran through deep gullies to Lake Erie; in the case of Lake Ontario's shore, the transportation pattern on land developed to link up port towns by a shore route. MESSRS. STACEY, TALMAN, SAGE and SAUNDERS emphasized the importance of schooner traffic both across and along Lake Erie, and contrasted the evolution of transportation and the spread of settlement in the history of the two lakes. Turning to the development of railways MR. SOWARD questioned the motives for such obvious over-projection of lines. MESSRS. TALMAN, STACEY, WAITE, LANDON, GLOVER, GRAY, MASTERS, PRESTON and STEVENS sought for the economic stimulants which gave rise to the railway building boom; indicated that railways were but a part of the whole development of finance capitalism, a field as yet little examined by Canadian historians; and indicated that some source material for the history of the Grand Trunk and Great Western Railways had been lost by fire, but that other material remained, such as the Francis Shanley papers in the Ontario Archives. A history of the Canadian National Railway from 1837 onward, it was stated, had recently been commissioned.