

23g The Toronto & Nipissing Railway

BACKGROUND

In 1849, the Province of Canada passed loan interest legislation that triggered Canada's railway building boom. To obtain financial benefits, a railway had to be built to the "broad" or "Provincial" 5'6" gauge. During this "broad gauge" era of railway development in Upper Canada from 1850 to 1870, one George Laidlaw rose to prominence as an advocate of the economics of the narrow gauge. An emigrant from Scotland, he obtained a position with the Toronto distillery firm of Gooderham & Worts, and persuaded his employers to invest in the narrow gauge concept in sponsoring feeder lines for their business. Accordingly on March 4, 1868, the **Toronto & Nipissing Ry (T&N)** was chartered "to build from Toronto to a point on Lake Nipissing etc." with a 3' 6" gauge. The objects were threefold: (1) to provide a pipeline of grain to the distillery, (2) to break the firewood monopoly of Toronto's existing development road, the Northern Railway of Canada, and (3) to reach the proposed CPR transcontinental railway somewhere around Lake Nipissing. The T&N at first succeeded brilliantly at the first two objects, but failed miserably on the third, only reaching the first planned segment to Coboconk (the next segment was going to be the tough one through the Haliburton Highlands). The first sod was turned at Cannington on October 16, 1869 with Sir John Sandfield Macdonald, then Premier of Ontario, presiding. The T&N's charter was amended in 1869 to include an option to build via Lindsay and Fenelon Falls, which was never taken up. (In 1876 the T&N also ratified an agreement to operate the Lake Simcoe Jct. Ry, a branch from Stouffville to Jackson's Point, opened in 1877.)

THE RAILWAY

The T&N opened officially at Uxbridge on September 14, 1871, and opened to Coboconk on November 28, 1872. The railway was an instant success, carrying grain from all points north to Uxbridge, and firewood from all along the line into the City. Its promotion had been well-organized by George Laidlaw, and it had the good fortune to have a very able chief engineer in Edmund Wragge, and likewise in John Shedden, an able president from 1870 to his untimely death at Cannington in 1873. Shedden had good connections with the Grand Trunk Railway (GTR), and elsewhere as a contractor and businessman, and he understood the workings of railways. His GTR connections undoubtedly facilitated the third rail that the T&N needed to get from its Toronto terminus at Beverly St. (next to the distillery) to Scarboro Jct. on the GTR mainline, at that time on the 5' 6" gauge (soon to be converted to 4' 8½"). His death was the first misfortune to befall the T&N. By 1873, the T&N owned 12 locomotives, including a Fairlie-patent double-boilered locomotive with a very low-slung centre of gravity and prodigious hauling power for a narrow gauge engine. (It was named *Shedden* in honour of the railway's president. There were only two of them in the Province of Canada and they were widely reported as curiosities and marvels of the mechanical age.) Even with this engine, the railway could not keep up with the volume of traffic, as complaints about the backlog of firewood waiting to be carried to Toronto started to mount. The T&N's second misfortune was the worsening economic climate of the 1870s, with the result that, as with neighbouring railways, traffic receipts started to fall at the same time as the light narrow gauge rails and other infrastructure were starting to wear out on account of the heavy volume of traffic in the early years of operation. The T&N's third misfortune proved to be the very feature that had sold it in the first place. By 1873 its connecting GTR neighbour to the south had converted to the standard 4' 8½" gauge, and by 1874 its bi-secting neighbour at Lorneville Jct., the Midland Ry, had followed suit. This left the T&N "between a rock and a hard place" where its narrow gauge could no longer cope with the volume of traffic, and the increasing traffic to be forwarded beyond its borders continued to have to be unloaded and reloaded. The T&N simply could not afford to re-gauge, and thus it was taken over and re-gauged to the standard gauge by the Midland Ry in 1881 in exchange for its purchase. Thus died the Gooderham dream of reaching the transcontinental CPR, and the railway remained at Coboconk. Once acquired by the Midland, a connection was made from Wick (Blackwater) Jct. to connect with the even more destitute Whitby, Port Perry & Lindsay Ry near Manilla. For the next 80 years the segment of the former T&N south of Blackwater Jct. became part of the railway artery from Peterborough via Lindsay to Toronto. The Kirkfield Quarry, opened in 1908, also justified the retention of the track north of Blackwater Jct. until the quarry's closure in 1961. The last "mixed" train from Lindsay to Coboconk ran on March 25, 1955, and the last freight service on March 30, 1965. Of the original T&N stations, only Unionville, Markham and Victoria Road remain (the last altered and converted to a private residence).

Abandonments: Stouffville to Zephyr **1928**. Sutton to Jackson's Point **1929**. Lorneville Jct. to Coboconk **1965**. Woodville to Lorneville Jct. **1966**. Zephyr to Sutton **1979**. Blackwater Jct. to Woodville **1986**. Blackwater Jct. to Uxbridge **1991**.

Sources and further reading

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