

## 27 The Buffalo & Lake Huron Railway (B&LH)

Among the eventual family of GTR-owned major constituent lines (not counting the acquisition of the rival Great Western Railway) in southern Ontario, the railway that became the Buffalo & Lake Huron was one of the earliest (1851) and longest (at 163 miles).

Arguably, it also played a significant role in the turbulent financial fortunes of the GTR in its pioneering and acquisition years, and was the first evidence of the folly of the 1852 Board of Railway Commissioners' requirement that had mandated the ("Broad" or "Provincial") 5'6" gauge for railways seeking the financial guarantees offered by the Province of Canada.

The railway was first chartered as the Brantford & Buffalo Joint Stock Railroad Company in 1851. Brantford, thoroughly miffed at being bypassed to the north by the projected Great Western Railway, commissioned a survey southeast to Fort Erie. The railway's original purpose was to function as a portage railway between Goderich on Lake Huron, and Buffalo on Lake Erie.

Brantford's ambition was reciprocated by Buffalo with its own civic interests in mind, and the railway opened to Brantford on December 20, 1853 as the Buffalo, Brantford & Goderich Railway (BB&G), financed in large part with municipal bonuses backed by the Province of Canada guarantee, but also with some UK financing. The track was laid from Fort Erie through Port Colborne and Dunnville in an almost straight line, and then proceeded northwest to Caledonia. The line was completed to Brantford and to a junction with the Great Western at Paris in 1854. At this point the BB&G was out of money, and the debts continued to pile up in 1855.

At this point the Canada Company intervened, as the railway's prospective failure would have an adverse effect on the development of the Huron Tract, and in 1856 the Buffalo & Lake Huron Railway (B&LH), with backbone UK financial support, was incorporated to take the BB&G over. The railway was completed to Stratford in 1856, and despite the financial crash of 1857, to its ultimate destination at Goderich in 1858.

By 1861, the road needed a substantial capital infusion for much-needed improvements in order to stay in business, and was also considering acquisition of the Hamilton & Port Dover Railway, to give it access to Lake Ontario and to an intermediate harbour on Lake Erie. (While the Hamilton interests were ready to have someone take the Port Dover project off their hands, this proposal fell through, presumably because the B&LH was by then close to bankruptcy.) The B&LH offered to lease itself to the Great Western Railway, but this proposal was rejected unanimously by the Great Western's London, England board of directors.

So it was that the B&LH became inclined into the orbit of the other major competitor in southwestern Ontario, the Grand Trunk Railway. The Grand Trunk was keen to offer competition to the Great Western, and had come up with a plan to capture transit traffic more effectively by laying an inside Standard Gauge rail to its Provincial Gauge track between Stratford and Sarnia, with the B&LH to provide the corresponding third rail between Fort Erie and Stratford. The object of course was to facilitate through traffic with standard gauge cars to save the time and expense of unloading and reloading. Unfortunately, although this plan was also very much to the benefit of the B&LH, it could not come up with the capital, and thus in 1864 entered into a joint management agreement with the Grand Trunk to bring the plan about. Even then, the B&LH could not pull its financial weight, and after some infighting, bickering and acrimony, in accordance with an agreement ratified in 1870, the Grand Trunk acquired the B&LH under a perpetual lease [i.e., outright] effective July 1, 1869.

The section between Fort Erie and Stratford was re-gauged to the Standard (4'8½") in 1872, and between Stratford and Goderich in 1873, both as part of the GTR's general conversion from the Broad to the Standard Gauge in those years. The section between Stratford and Goderich is still in service today, operated by the short line Goderich & Exeter Railway. The remainder of the line has been abandoned in stages.

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