

18a Cobourg's Pioneer Railways

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The Cobourg Rail Road

The idea of a railway for Cobourg first appeared in the early 1830s. At the time railways were in their infancy and only a very few existed in England and the United States. Nonetheless several visionary local individuals aspired to create a railway to tap the natural resources, primarily the wood in the forests, as a means to ensuring the economic success of the fledgling community.

In 1831 F.P. Rubidge, a provincial land surveyor, was commissioned by several wealthy citizens to survey the route of a proposed railway from Cobourg to Rice Lake. The following year he produced a map depicting the Cobourg Rail Road leaving the harbour heading east towards the vicinity of present day D'Arcy Street, thence heading north towards the Rice Lake community of Sully (Harwood) on the southern shore of Rice Lake.

Ebenezer Perry, James G. Bethune and George S. Boulton were amongst the leading citizens canvassing for support of a railway. Perry and Bethune were successful entrepreneurs and Bethune was active in promoting a variety of land and water transportation enterprises. G.S. Boulton was a successful lawyer and extensive land owner and he was also one of the two representatives of the Legislative Council from the Newcastle District.

On March 6, 1834, the Cobourg Rail Road Company received a charter to build a railway, under certain conditions, to the southern shore of Rice Lake. Interestingly, one of the clauses allowed the Company double the amount of damages to its property caused by any malicious act. Little action towards construction followed however as subscriptions to stock in the company were not very forthcoming. Part of this inability to raise funds may have stemmed from Bethune's bankruptcy and subsequent fall from influence into disgrace. He had contributed much to Cobourg's economic prosperity of the era, but subsequently died a pauper's death in Rochester, NY, in 1841.

A reinvigoration of the aspiration to build a railway occurred in 1835. A second survey that year indicated three possible routes to Rice Lake: Bewdley, Claverton (Gore's Landing) and Sully. It was confidently predicted the railway could be constructed for £26,000. Despite additional entreaties for subscriptions, all efforts failed. This may have been due in part to the popular belief that the development of the Trent Water System would better serve the transportation needs of the area, especially for the new settlers north of Rice Lake.

Two years later the Cobourg Rail Road fell victim to the political and economic disruptions of the 1837 Rebellion. Although there were several feeble attempts to resuscitate the new form of land transportation, interest in the railway fell dormant and disappeared from the vision of most citizens.

The Cobourg & Peterborough Railway (C&P Railway)

With an emerging stable political and economic environment, and with new railway legislation, certain Cobourg citizens, notably led by D'Arcy Boulton, turned their attention once again to a railway running north, but this time with a terminal in Peterborough. Late in 1851 Boulton, lawyer, entrepreneur, land owner and municipal politician, proclaimed that within three years all would hear the neighing of the iron horse in Cobourg.

Boulton, along with E. Perry, H. Ruttan, A. Jeffrey, T. Dumble and others, succeeded in obtaining a charter to construct the Cobourg & Peterborough Railway on December 10, 1852. The following February 7, 1853, at the northeast corner of Railway (Spring) and Seminary (University) Avenue a large crowd witnessed the mayor's wife turn the first sod in the construction of the C&P Ry.

A contract was awarded to Zimmerman and Balch, a contract that in the future proved to be to the decided advantage of the contractors and to the decided disadvantage of the Company shareholders. Work commenced immediately however in a spirit of high optimism on what was North America's second largest civil engineering project of the day, the erection of Rice Lake Bridge. Labour was in short supply due to the Crimean War, and wages rose to one dollar per day. Many local farmers were engaged in the work, providing lumber from their land and their horses for the road work.

The railway was built to the 5'6" "Broad Gauge" and was opened in May 1853 to Harwood. Many citizens of the area took the opportunity of a free ride to travel to Rice Lake by the new means of land conveyance at unheard speeds approaching, at times, twenty miles per hour. Work on the bridge and trestle work continued throughout the year and the whole was opened to rail traffic on December 29, 1854. A second free excursion train with passengers sitting and standing on open flat cars in extreme

cold weather occurred as the train ran over the full length of the completed 28½ mile Cobourg to Peterborough Railway.

Misfortune soon struck. On January 1, 1855 ice so damaged the bridge-trestle structure that it was closed for several weeks to undergo repair and reinforcement. This was a precursor to continued ice woes and financial brinkmanship. The railway, when it operated, was an economic boon to the area, transporting agricultural products and millions of board feet of lumber to Cobourg harbour. Northbound trains carried a variety of goods and implements. But the railway struggled financially for the rest of the decade.

Several times the shareholders foreclosed on the operators and leased the railway to individuals. The most successful lessee was John H. Dumble who recognized that the trestle had to be filled in to form a causeway. As this engineering reinforcement continued to show success, the shareholders wrested his lease in an act of duplicity. They leased the C&P Railway to several stockholders in the Port Hope, Lindsay & Beaverton Railway. This cartel had formerly been active in the construction and operation of the C&P Ry, but fell out of favour with the C&P shareholders of the day. Not wanting to operate two lines so close together, these men one evening surreptitiously removed the locomotives to their Port Hope property. Later, by stealth, they approved the removal of a number of stays and pins from the bridge. This caused several sections eventually to crash into the water and float away. By the early 1860s the Cobourg & Peterborough Railway was effectively moribund, an extravagant white elephant costing the community more than one million dollars, a debt not paid off until 1937.

The Cobourg, Peterborough & Marmora Railway & Mining Company (CB & MR & M Co.)

By the mid 1860s interest in reviving the C&P Railway occurred. Local residents, unable to raise funds in the community, scouted opportunities in the United States. Several Pittsburgh men expressed interest in obtaining iron ore from Marmora and saw the moribund railway as a means of bringing the ore to Lake Ontario. To that end they purchased both the railway and the ore property and created the Cobourg, Peterborough and Marmora Railway & Mining Company early in 1867. The line to Harwood was refitted, new ore cars were ordered from James Crossen, a new rail line was constructed from Trent Narrows to the Blairton mine, and two new locomotives were ordered from the Kingston Locomotive Works. For the next half decade, under the direction of Managing Director William P. Chambliss, an American, the road proved moderately successful. Chambliss was insistent that the road's primary purpose was in transporting ore, but if the citizens of Cobourg and Peterborough worked together to provide assistance and if the profits of the railway warranted, then the line from Harwood to Peterborough would be restored.

The unprecedented depression in North America in 1873, coupled with continuous municipal bickering, mainly in Peterborough, about supporting the railway, ended the efforts towards rebuilding the missing link in the title of the railway. The railway itself struggled over the next decade, operating only sporadically. The last ore shipment left Cobourg harbour in 1882. The railway was sold to T.P. Pearce of Belleville. His interest in the Marmora property was for its wood and he reorganized the railway as the Cobourg, Blairton & Marmora Railway & Mining Company. Pearce had no better luck with the railway than his predecessors, and in 1893 the CB & MR & M Co. was acquired by the Grand Trunk Railway of Canada and amalgamated into that company. Seldom used by the GTR, the rails to Harwood were removed during World War I.

Remnants of the railway exist north of Cobourg as the berm is visible in several locations both north and south of Rice Lake. In Cobourg the small section of track running north from the CNR yard towards the Canada Pallet Company plant still has rails in use, these rails being on the old C&P Ry berm.

Cobourg's "Paper" Railways

In 1889 the Cobourg, Northumberland and Pacific Railway was chartered to build northeastwards from Cobourg to a connection with the Canadian Pacific mainline between Perth and Peterborough. Some construction of this line occurred during the 1890s and its berm can be seen today south of the Dale road near Baltimore. The Crossen interests were behind this federal charter as a means of securing a direct link to the CPR which was their primary customer at the time. Construction delays prevented access to funds and this line subsequently lost its charter.

At the beginning of the 20th century several electric radial railways were chartered by local interests, all of which were incorporated in 1909. Beyond projections and surveys neither the Cobourg, Peterborough & Kawartha Lakes Electric Railway, the Cobourg, Port Hope and Havelock Electric Railway nor the Cobourg Radial Railway moved from the paper hopes of their charters to any form of reality.