

22b Hamilton Irish Navvies and the Building of the GWR 1851-1852



The stirring Welland Canal workers' monument in Thorold which commemorates the mostly Irish "navvies" who toiled on the construction of the various canal projects is a popular tourist destination. The strong, often violent, anti-Irish sentiment in Thorold and St Catharine's is well documented. In whatever community the Irish lived there seemed to be a "slabtown" specially reserved for them. In Hamilton it was "Corktown", and the Irish were integral to its first large scale public works project, the building of the Great Western Railway in the early 1850s. Incidentally, the "pooling" (i.e., employment in large projects) of Irish labour created the ingredients for Hamilton's first significant workers' revolt.

As early as 1834 a railway, called the London & Gore Railroad, had been proposed to link Hamilton with the interior of Upper Canada or Canada West, to be revived as the Great Western Railway in 1845. Initial funding came from British investors. In 1849, the Railway Guarantee Act was passed that provided a conditional government guarantee, and subsequently also permitted municipalities to buy railway stocks and to make loans to railways projects. Hamilton boosters initially pledged 100,000 pounds sterling of stock in the GWR, until it was pointed out that the City's assessed real estate value was only £94,000, when the commitment was reduced to £50,000 – even then a special tax had to be levied to cover the purchase.

Preliminary surveys were started in 1847, and rights of way acquired. On October 23, 1849, 3,000 spectators saw land baron Colonel Thomas Talbot turn the first sod in London. However it wasn't until 1851 that serious work on railway construction started. The Dundas Valley proved to be the most formidable obstacle on the Niagara Falls – Windsor line. In fact, the original survey didn't call for the railway to come through the Valley at all, but rather south of the escarpment. However, city patriarch Sir Allan MacNab, who had substantial property on or near the Burlington Heights, persuaded the Great Western Railway directors to bring the line to the south shore of Burlington Bay.

The huge embankments of dirt topped with stone ballast we see today at the western end of Burlington Heights, at Sydenham Road hill and at Highway # 8 going up to Greensville were not created with modern hydraulic-operated excavators and backhoes. Most of the right-of-way building was done with picks, shovels and wheelbarrows. For this, cheap brute labour was needed. The immigrant Irish proletariat was the obvious choice. More and more inhabitants of the Emerald Isle had been coming to Upper Canada, their number rising sharply when the potato famine of 1845 struck. Many would die of "ship fever" and cholera on the empty cargo vessels returning to North America for more pine trunks to be made into sail masts for vessels of Her Majesty's navy. Here at the Head of the Lake, many Irish died in hastily constructed sheds on the wooden piers of Port of Hamilton or at the converted "War of 1812" barracks on Burlington Heights. However, most survived, and Hamilton's population rose to almost 10,000 by 1850. The *Western Mercury* newspaper reported that Irish stevedores and longshoremen would gather at the wharves off James St. early each morning, eager for a chance of a day's work. The Irish were also the first teamsters in Hamilton, many known only as 'Paddy the Driver'. Their colourful brogue could be clearly heard as they drove their teams through the crowded city streets.

But it was the Irish labouring profession as a "navvy" (short for "navigator") that is most significant. "Navvies" initially were canal builders, but the term was seamlessly applied to the constructors of the new mode of transportation that would forever change the North American and European landscapes. Canals and toll roads made of plank were marvels of engineering in their day, but were soon overtaken by "the Iron Horse" and the long ribbons of ferrous track it ran on.

Railway fever affected everyone in the early 1850s, not just Hamilton's boosters and the tweed-suited investors in far-away England. The more opportunistic "navvies" saw this as a chance to increase their wages to the unheard sum of one dollar per day. However the wily and unscrupulous Great Western Railway subcontractors played one group of workers off against another. Just as in the building of the Welland Canal, friction developed between the navvies, some choosing to work for lesser wages, others opting to strike for better pay.

Some subcontractors went broke and their workers were not paid at all, creating more tension. And there was always the lingering belief that the Irish were naturally rowdy and inclined to drunkenness. A powder keg was in the making. With Karl Marx's Communist Manifesto only three years old, could this gathering of labour be interpreted as the "critical mass" necessary for the creation of a new social order here in the backwaters of the British Empire? Six hundred labourers, mostly Irish, marched through the streets of Dundas on February 4, 1851 to the "great consternation and alarm of the inhabitants". Local authorities asked the government in Toronto for military protection, and two companies of soldiers were billeted in the Hamilton-Dundas area in late 1851 and early 1852.

Between London and Hamilton as many 2,000 labourers worked on the Great Western Railway to get it ready for the 1854 opening. Most navvies lived in camps at the edge of the line and had little to do but spend their new found wealth on the various "services" that inevitably followed the camps.

Much of the initial track of the Great Western Railway was hurriedly constructed with embankments that were steeper than recommended with the flat top too narrow for the rail bed, often leading to collapses and washouts. The track itself was also inadequately ballasted, and the early Great Western railway trains often rode over thick sheets of mud. (A government report had lambasted the Great Western Railway for opening while the track was so poor.) Most of the iron rails had to be re-laid within ten years. The improperly-secured track led to many accidents and locomotive breakdowns in the early years, and the many accidents were compounded by inexperienced railway management in what was after all still a pioneer environment.

In October 1854, 52 people were killed at Baptiste (Jeannette's) Creek outside Chatham when a mail express collided with a gravel train that was laying down stone ballast.

Another tragedy had occurred in February 1851 when ten Irish labourers died from a gravel and sand slide while building an abutment for a new swing-bridge at the entrance of Grindstone Creek where the Desjardins Canal made its way around the western part of Burlington Heights before emptying into Hamilton Harbour Bay. (The tall masts of the schooners going to and from Dundas precluded the construction of a simpler fixed bridge.) The 50ft high tower of debris that came crashing down from the building site killed the men almost instantly. A coroner's inquest urged new methods of excavation. (It also said the Irish workers should not be working on Sundays, yet the new hometown booster newspaper *The Hamilton Spectator* claimed that they willingly worked on the Sabbath.) Because of this tragedy, it was decided to make a "cut" 100 yards south of where the workers were killed, through the narrowest point of Burlington Heights.

This proved to be the location of the Desjardins Canal train wreck which claimed 59 lives on March 12, 1859. Since Adam Ferrie, a son of Hamilton's first mayor, and Samuel Zimmerman, railway promoter and the entrepreneur instrumental in the construction of the Great Western Railway, among other notables, died in the icy depths of the canal, this accident was widely reported. And a memorial to the two killed GWR employees has occupied a prominent place in Hamilton Cemetery for nearly 160 years.

However, the burials, laments and commemorations of the Irish workers who died in the February 1851 incident remain unreported and unrecognized. Other accidents and deaths that occurred in the building of one of the earliest railway systems in Canada will probably never be known.

Noted McMaster historian John Weaver said Hamilton was a "railway city" in the 1850s containing an enormous and potentially volatile work force. Considering the Irish navvies' devotion to the Catholic faith, a revolution did not happen. But it can be fairly argued that the Irish building of the Great Western Railway was the first rising of labour consciousness in the city that would see many examples of worker discontent continuing to this day.

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