

20 The Grand Trunk Railway of Canada (GTR)

Ironically, although the GTR became a significant influence in the eventual definition of Canada as a nation, its history and its role as an early “big business” corporation has remained outside public lore, for more or less exclusive study by transportation, economics and sociology historians.

The GTR’s emergence in 1852 as a major railway that was destined to become a dominant economic and social force in the 19th century in Upper Canada resulted from three primary factors – economic – political – and a prominent railway contracting firm’s urgent need for a big contract. Montreal needed to survive as a port against increasing U. S. competition, Upper Canada wished to strengthen its economic and political ties with Great Britain, the year-round ice-free port of Portland, Me. was desperate for an inland continental trade route, and last but by no means least, the prestigious and influential British railway contracting firm of Peto, Brassey, Jackson and Betts was looking for a major project after the U.K. railway bubble burst in 1847.

These forces combined to bring about the incorporation of the GTR on November 10, 1852, steered by (Sir) Francis Hincks, a dominant figure in Province of Canada politics, and aided by the Province of Canada 1849 Railway Guarantee Act for loan interest on the construction of railways not less than 75 miles in length. (Incidentally, it was this legislation that triggered Canada’s railway building boom. To obtain the financial benefits of the 1849 Railway Guarantee Act, any railway had to be built to the “Broad” or “Provincial” 5’ 6” gauge. Conversion to the Standard Gauge took place starting around 1872.)

The GTR emerged initially from its acquisition of the Portland-based **Atlantic & St. Lawrence Railroad** already under construction, and the already completed **St. Lawrence & Atlantic Railroad** from Longueuil to Sherbrooke; as well as the setting-aside of charters for construction of the pioneer **Montreal & Kingston** and the **Kingston & Toronto** Railways, as a major railway corridor from Portland, Me. via Montreal, Kingston and Toronto, and thence on to Chicago, Ill. After struggles to raise the needed capital, Montreal and Portland were connected at last at Island Pond, Vt. In July 1853, followed by the completion of the feeder **Quebec & Richmond Railway**, ready for traffic in late 1854; and the **Grand Trunk Railway Company of Canada East**, a connection between Quebec City and Trois-Pistoles, then another, but minor, port on the St. Lawrence.

Construction on the Montreal-Toronto mainline began in 1853, and the first trains in each direction passed each other in October 1856. West of Toronto, the **Toronto & Guelph Railway**, with construction already under way to Guelph, was amalgamated into the GTR as the next leg of its mainline in its bid to reach Chicago. By late 1856, the GTR had reached Sarnia. Only one link remained to be completed across the St. Lawrence at Montreal, and the **Victoria Tubular Bridge** was opened by the Prince of Wales in 1860.

The GTR’s earliest “non-mainline” acquisition was the charter of the **Grand Junction Rail-Road** in 1854, incorporated by Belleville to build a “loop line” from Belleville through Peterborough west to Toronto. With the economic fallout in England of the Crimean War, and the GTR’s intermittent financial woes, the project was shelved. (It was revived in 1870 as the **Grand Junction Railway** [GJR], but the 1870s saw another economic depression, so that the original plan was modified to a line from Belleville to Peterborough with a continuation to Georgian Bay, intended to compete with the emerging Midland Railway, but then with the rapid changes in railway politics redefined to aim for Lindsay.)

The GTR then embarked on a program of expansion and monopoly in Ontario, culminating in a desperate attempt to keep Canada’s other emerging major railway – the **Canadian Pacific Railway** – out of Ontario.

After the frenzy of railway construction in the 1850s, the ‘60s and ‘70s were troubled decades for railway financing and survival, but the GTR absorbed the ailing **Buffalo & Lake Huron Railway** (originally the Buffalo, Brantford & Goderich) in 1870. Next came another important cross-Ontario feeder line, the **Port Dover & Lake Huron Railway** in 1881, followed by the crowning acquisition of the GTR’s archrival in southwestern Ontario, the substantial **Great Western Railway** (together subsequently with its affiliates, such as the Wellington, Grey & Bruce Railway) in 1882.

In the meantime, the **Midland Railway of Canada**, emerging as an intermediate player in absorbing some local lines centred on Lindsay and Peterborough (including the Grand Junction Railway), was leased to the GTR in 1884.

The GTR’s final major acquisition, the **Northern & North Western Railways**, followed in 1888. In any event, the GTR’s effort to keep the CPR out of Ontario failed when the CPR reached Toronto (via Peterborough) in 1884. With the dawn of a new century and the reality of two major railways in place, soon to be joined by a third – the **Canadian Northern Railway** – the GTR joined the transcontinental adventure to the west with its subsidiary **Grand Trunk Pacific Railway**. WWI intervened, the immigrant flow dried up, and Canada’s railway development ended in over-expansion and bankruptcy for the GTR in 1919. Following the end of WWI, the federal government, who already owned the Intercolonial and the P.E.I. Railways to the east, assumed the Canadian Northern in 1918, the Grand Trunk Pacific and the GTR itself in 1920, with total amalgamation by January 30, 1923 into the **Canadian National Railways System** (CNR).