

24a The Hamilton & Lake Erie Railway (H&LE)

In 19th century Ontario, all lakeshore communities recognized the development of their harbours as the key to local prosperity, even before the emergence of railways as the dominant force in the development of commerce. As early as 1835, while still a town, Hamilton had chartered the Hamilton & Port Dover Railroad in recognition of the need for traffic to be brought to its harbour to stimulate local trade of goods, produce and natural resources. At that time, the charter's intended purpose was to establish a portage link between the harbours of Port Dover and Hamilton to divert traffic from what was then the fledgling and hence very slow and congested Welland Canal. Nothing came of that charter because of the generally unsettled economic conditions in Upper Canada at that time, until the passing of the Railway Guarantee Act in 1849. This Act ushered in Canada's railway building boom, including the construction of the Great Western Railway, which arrived in what was by then the City of Hamilton, on its way to Windsor. The GWR, however, was a "through" rather than a "feeder" railway. While any railway was good for business, the GWR did not address the needs of the local economy that depended on a vibrant market and its "spin-off" benefits of local trade and manufacture, lower retail costs and the attendant creation of additional local employment. (For more about the GWR, see leaflet 13.)

So it was that in the same year as the arrival of the Great Western Railway in Hamilton (1853), the original pioneer charter of the Hamilton & Port Dover Railroad was reactivated by Hamilton's Sir Allan "railways are my politics" MacNab, as the Hamilton & Port Dover Railway (H&PD).

One of its objects was still to establish a portage link between the harbours of Port Dover and Hamilton as a short-cut to passage through the Welland Canal, but its other aims were now "to facilitate and increase the local traffic [i.e., trade]", "to secure a portion of the freight and passenger business of the Buffalo & Lake Huron Railway and of the Grand River" [Caledonia], and to "form a connection with the proposed [Canada Southern Railway] considered to be most strategic to capture the traffic from the broad agricultural belt along that proposed line".

All the interest in a railway to the south arose from Hamilton's fear that it would be left isolated by the diversion of trade from the north to Toronto by means of the Northern Railway of Canada (the former Ontario, Simcoe & Huron Union Railroad) and, similarly, that the lucrative trade from southwestern Ontario would be diverted to Buffalo. This was a perfectly legitimate concern in view of the construction of the Buffalo, Brantford & Goderich Railway (later to become the Buffalo & Lake Huron Railway).

In 1856, the Hamilton & Port Dover Railway acquired a venture which had incorporated in 1855 "to build from Hamilton to Otterville or Simcoe". This was the short-lived Hamilton & South Western Railway. Its objective was so close to that of the Port Dover project that amalgamation was inevitable, given the similarity of the routes, both of which entailed the prospect of lifting the rails up the side of the Escarpment to get out of Hamilton.

If the H&PD had been completed in the 1850s, it would certainly have succeeded in its original intention of creating a portage link between Port Dover and Hamilton, but construction did not begin until 1856, and the cost of scaling Hamilton Mountain had been grossly underestimated. The result was that construction ceased in 1858 for lack of funds and a dispute with the contractor, and the railway had not even reached Caledonia.

The project then languished and was not revived until 1869 with some new civic movers and shakers as the Hamilton & Lake Erie Railway (H&LE), by which time it also had to negotiate with the Grand Trunk Railway (successor owner of the Buffalo & Lake Huron Railway) at Caledonia and with the Canada Southern at Hagersville for permission to cross their respective tracks. For both of these railways, access to Hamilton was a business opportunity, especially for the Grand Trunk who were by then in very keen competition with the GWR, and then with the GWR's Air Line at Jarvis for joint station facilities - all just to get as far as Jarvis in 1873.

It was not until 1878 that the last leg into Port Dover was completed under the auspices of the Hamilton & North Western Railway (H&NW), which had assumed the H&LE in 1875. This last leg had really lost its point by then, as the much improved third Welland Canal was by then in progress, and also because of the failure of Port Dover's harbour to develop as a significant port for lake traffic. Moreover, to add to the H&LE/H&NW's misfortune, a rival railway, the Port Dover & Lake Huron, had already ensconced itself in Port Dover. Not only did that railway secure for itself the best harbour location, but it was also a fact of pioneering railway competition that the first railway into any location usually retained the higher volume of traffic, which also proved to be to the H&LE's detriment. However, Hamilton did come to benefit substantially from the railway's other later objects to attract traffic to its city (and in the early years, to some extent, its harbour).

For more information about the H&LE, please consult: Cooper, Charles: *Hamilton's Other Railway*, Bytown Railway Society, Ottawa, Ont. 2001.