

26 WELLAND RAILWAY - By Rob Hughes

Location:

The line is located at the east end of the Niagara Peninsula parallel to the Niagara River, connecting Port Colborne on the shores of Lake Ontario with Port Dalhousie to the south on Lake Erie.

History:

The Welland Canal, first opened for traffic in 1829, was constructed as a vital link in a series of canals built in the nineteenth century to connect the Atlantic Ocean, St. Lawrence River and the Great Lakes. Extending between Lakes Ontario and Erie over the Niagara Escarpment, the canal had been upgraded in the past to keep up with the expanding size of ships desiring to pass through. By the early 1850's, however, it became clear that once again the size of the canal was inadequate to accommodate the newer and larger vessels in use at the time. To avoid the high costs of rebuilding, it was felt that the construction of a railway connecting the two canal terminal points would assist in the transfer of grain and other products between steamships operating on both lakes. Older vessels that actually were of a size that could pass through could also be lightened to avoid bottoming out. In addition, some winter traffic would be possible after the canal had frozen.

Consequently, in 1853 the Port Dalhousie & Thorold Railway was chartered with authority to build a line between Port Dalhousie and Port Colborne. The name of the company was changed to the Welland Railway in 1857. Construction began in 1854 and proceeded at a leisurely pace, with approximately 25 miles (40 km) of track opened for service in 1859, all paralleling the canal.

Grades for the line were exceptionally adverse for southbound traffic as a result of the Niagara Escarpment. To supplement canal traffic, the railway also attempted to intercept trade normally transhipped from Buffalo over the Erie Canal or American rail lines to New York ports, by diverting it to Oswego and then from there to the Atlantic. In 1862, the directors decided to obtain their own steamships to implement the above plan as current arrangements were not working out with hired marine contracting firms. This initiative included the construction of grain elevators at each lakehead.

In order to provide the needed funding for the vessels and elevators, the company was reorganized the next year. Backers of the new project included both Sir Samuel Cunard and Sir Thomas Brassey. The new boats were delivered to the company in the spring of 1866, unfortunately at a time when traffic was down and costs were up along the line. Disaster struck in 1868 when one of the ships was destroyed by fire with the lives of 14 people.

Looking for other avenues of income, the railway in 1878 leased to the Great Western a portion of line extending 15 miles between Welland Junction and Allanburg to complete the link in their Canada Airline project to the Suspension Bridge in Niagara Falls. A third rail was laid (the Welland Railway had not been converted yet from the 5'6" broad gauge) and the track upgraded to handle the increase in traffic. An offer by the Great Western was made to purchase the entire line, however, the amount was considered too low.

In 1882, the lease of the line passed to the Grand Trunk with its acquisition of the Great Western. Soon after, GTR officials came to terms with the Welland Railway and the line was sold. The primary reason why the Grand Trunk acted so quickly in purchasing the Welland was to ensure that the line did not fall into the hands of the rival Canada Southern.

<http://www.niagararails.com/h3.shtml>