

7 Out to Coby on the Toronto & Nipissing Railway

BACKGROUND

Before the Railway Age, travel and the movement of goods in Upper Canada were dependent on waterways, and to some extent on such trails that passed for roads. In 1849 and 1851, the Province of Canada passed loan interest and gauge legislation that triggered Canada's railway building boom. To obtain financial benefits, a railway had to be built to the "broad" or "Provincial" 5'6" gauge. During this "broad gauge" era of railway development in Upper Canada from 1850 to 1870, one George Laidlaw rose to prominence as an advocate of the economics of the narrow gauge. An emigrant from Scotland, he obtained a position with the Toronto distillery firm of Gooderham & Worts, and persuaded his employers to invest in the narrow gauge concept in sponsoring feeder lines for their business. Accordingly on March 4, 1868, the **Toronto & Nipissing Ry (T&N)** was chartered "to build from Toronto to a point on Lake Nipissing etc." with a 3' 6" gauge. The objects were threefold: (1) to provide a pipeline of grain to the distillery, (2) to break the firewood monopoly of Toronto's existing development road, the Northern Railway of Canada, and (3) to reach the proposed CPR transcontinental railway somewhere around Lake Nipissing. The T&N at first succeeded brilliantly at the first two objects, but failed miserably on the third, only reaching the first planned segment to Coboconk (the next segment was going to be the tough one through the Haliburton Highlands). The first sod was turned at Cannington on October 16, 1869 with Sir John Sandfield Macdonald, then Premier of Ontario, presiding. (The spade was preserved at the then Victoria Museum, Lindsay, Ont.) The T&N's charter was amended in 1869 to include an option to build via Lindsay and Fenelon Falls, which was never taken up. (In 1876 the T&N also ratified an agreement to operate the Lake Simcoe Jct. Ry, a branch from Stouffville to Jackson's Point, opened in 1877.)

THE RAILWAY

The T&N opened officially at Uxbridge on September 14, 1871, entered Victoria County between Cannington and Woodville, and opened to Coboconk on November 28, 1872. The railway was an instant success, carrying grain from all points north to Uxbridge, and firewood from all along the line into the City. Its promotion had been well-organized by George Laidlaw, and it had the good fortune to have a very able chief engineer in Edmund Wragge, and likewise in John Shedden, an able president from 1870 to his untimely death at Cannington in 1873. Shedden had good connections with the Grand Trunk Railway (GTR), and elsewhere as a contractor and businessman, and he understood the workings of railways. His GTR connections undoubtedly facilitated the third rail that the T&N needed to get from its Toronto terminus at Beverly St. (next to the distillery) to Scarboro Jct. on the GTR mainline, at that time on the 5' 6" gauge (soon to be converted to 4' 8½"). His death was the first misfortune to befall the T&N. By 1873, the T&N owned 12 locomotives, including a Fairlie-patent double-boilered locomotive with a very low-slung centre of gravity and prodigious hauling power for a narrow gauge engine. (It was named *Shedden* in honour of the railway's president. There were only two of them in the Province of Canada and they were widely reported as curiosities and marvels of the mechanical age.) Even with this engine, the railway could not keep up with the volume of traffic, as complaints about the backlog of firewood waiting to be carried to Toronto started to mount. The T&N's second misfortune was the worsening economic climate of the 1870s, with the result that, as with neighbouring railways, traffic receipts started to fall at the same time as the light narrow gauge rails and other infrastructure were starting to wear out on account of the heavy volume of traffic in the early years of operation. The T&N's third misfortune proved to be the very feature that had sold it in the first place. By 1873 its connecting GTR neighbour to the south had converted to the standard 4' 8½" gauge, and by 1874 its bi-secting neighbour at Lorneville Jct., the Midland Ry, had followed suit. This left the T&N "between a rock and a hard place" where its narrow gauge could no longer cope with the volume of traffic, and the increasing traffic to be forwarded beyond its borders continued to have to be unloaded and reloaded. The T&N simply could not afford to re-gauge, and thus it was taken over and re-gauged to the standard gauge by the Midland Ry in 1881 in exchange for its purchase. Thus died the Gooderham dream of reaching the transcontinental CPR, and the railway remained at Coboconk. Once acquired by the Midland, a connection was made from Wick (Blackwater) Jct. to connect with the even more destitute Whitby, Port Perry & Lindsay Ry near Manilla. For the next 80 years the segment of the former T&N south of Blackwater Jct. became part of the railway artery from Peterborough via Lindsay to Toronto. The Kirkfield Quarry, opened in 1908, also justified the retention of the track north of Blackwater Jct. until the quarry's closure in 1961. The last "mixed" train from Lindsay to Coboconk ran on March 25, 1955, and the last freight service on March 30, 1965. Of the original T&N stations, only Unionville, Markham and Victoria Road remain (the last altered and converted to a private residence. The original Coboconk station was struck by lightning in August 1908).

Abandonments: Stouffville to Zephyr **1928**. Sutton to Jackson's Point **1929**. Lorneville Jct. to Coboconk **1965**. Woodville to Lorneville Jct. **1966**. Zephyr to Sutton **1979**. Blackwater Jct. to Woodville **1986**. Blackwater Jct. to Uxbridge **1991**.

(Please see overleaf for information about stations on the line, especially Coboconk)

7a Coboconk Station

GENERAL STATION BACKGROUND

The second half of the 19th century saw the rapid development of a railway network across southern Ontario. This development was promoted by the construction of two trunk railways, the Grand Trunk (GTR) and the Great Western (GWR) Railways. Civic and developer interests combined to initiate a great number of pioneering lines to connect with these major trunk railways and with each other. Typically, both trunk and pioneering railways designed their own stations and had local craftsmen construct them all along the line according to a basic template, usually only varying the dimensions of the building according to the traffic needs of each community.

The 3' 6" narrow gauge Toronto & Nipissing Railway had its Toronto terminus at Berkeley St. with a more commodious version of the stations it built all along the line. It had an agreement with the GTR to lay a third rail inside the Grand Trunk's track as far as Scarboro Jct., where it diverged to the northeast. Stops along the line were Agincourt, Millikens, Unionville, Markham, Stouffville, Goodwood, Uxbridge, Marsh Hill, Wick, (moved in 1883 to become Wick and then Blackwater Jct.), Sunderland, Cannington, Woodville, Lorneville (also known as Midland Junction), Argyle, Eldon, Portage Road, Kirkfield, Victoria Road, Corson's Siding and Coboconk ("Coby"). This was the terminus of the intended first phase of the railway, a colonization or development road that was ultimately intended to reach Lake Nipissing for connection to the planned transcontinental railway (CPR). By the end of the 19th century however, the GTR had emerged as the dominant railway in southern Ontario, having absorbed its archrival the GWR in 1882, and among others, the Midland Railway (the intermediate owner of the Toronto & Nipissing Railway), in 1893.

Between 1900 and 1914, the GTR embarked on an Ontario-wide station replacement program to what was a more or less basically standard (and once abundant) country station design. The reasons for this station replacement program were primarily threefold: **(a.) dilapidation** (most early stations were built as "temporary" wooden structures and although some survived well into the 20th century, many were already "in poor condition") **(b.) track realignment/amalgamation** (prompted by the frenzy of railway mergers in the late 1800s), **(c.) community growth** (necessitating more station space). Incidental additional reasons, all applicable to Coboconk, were the need **(d.) to provide for station agent accommodation** (usually on a second floor, as in the case of Coboconk, **(e.) to add telegrapher's bays** for better operating efficiency, and **(f.) to replace losses by fire**.

THE COBOCONK STATION

Nothing has come to light to confirm the initial design of Coboconk's first station, but it was likely built at first (in 1872 or 1873) to the standard simple Toronto & Nipissing Railway design, similar to the stations that have survived at Unionville and Markham. Today's Coboconk station is a Grand Trunk Railway (GTR) station built to replace the station that succumbed to a lightning strike on August 4, 1908.

There is some uncertainty as to whether the replacement station is Coboconk's second or third station, since the 1907 Grand Trunk inventory of stations dates the preceding station from 1894. However, a replacement station was newsworthy, and while research in the contemporary press has a report in 1893 of a new engine house "to take the place of the one that burned a month ago", the only report for 1894 is that "the GTR has filled up all the low places in the yard here with gravel, fixed up the station and put a new platform around it." It seems safe to conclude therefore that the "fixing up" consisted of a rebuild in 1894 of the original station to the more commodious dimensions shown in the photographs of it that survive, namely likely with a second storey that accommodated the agent and his family, and perhaps with platform canopies with valances on both sides of the main portion of the building. (Stations to a similar design were remodelled at Kirkfield [1892], Victoria Road [1894], and at Brown Hill [1906] on the Lake Simcoe Junction Ry [a subsidiary of the former Toronto & Nipissing Ry].) It is also possible, however, that this station (and the others named) may have been built with the two-storey design at the outset, but that seems unlikely as the need to provide station agent accommodation was a developing competitive issue in the latter part of the 19th century. Coboconk's replacement station lasted until the end of service in 1965, and after the lifting of track at the end of service, the station served for a number of years as storage for a local building centre, before being acquired by the City of Kawartha Lakes and being moved to its present location in nearby Legion Park for restoration and use for community events.

Sources and further reading

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