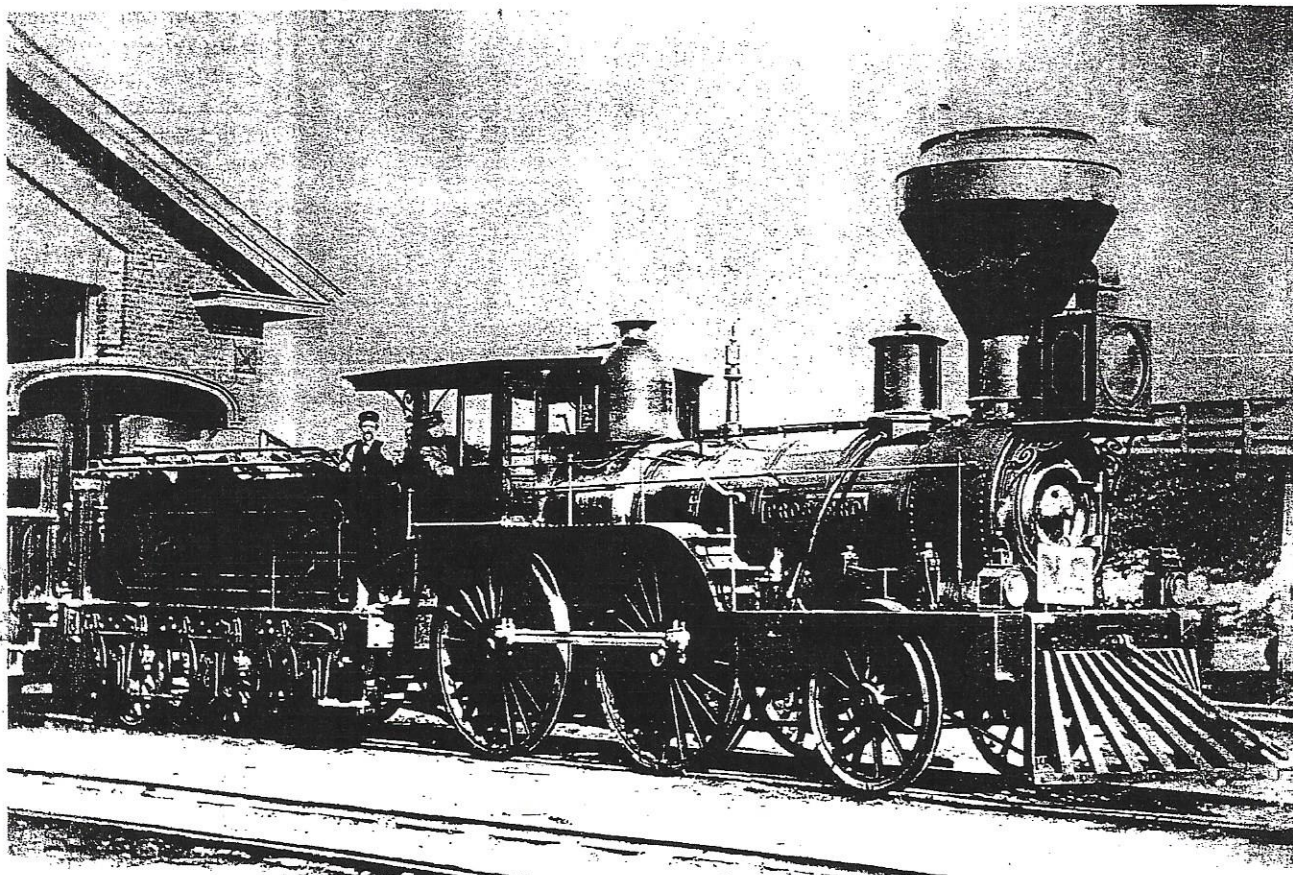


The "Underground Railroad" and a Real Canadian Railway

Information contributed by Carl Riff



Great Western Railway No. 52, "Prospero" was built by Stephenson in October 1856. It would have been less than two years old at the time of the incidents related here. Later renumbered 52, it was sold to the Midland Railway in 1873.

One of the most historic events in North American history occurred exactly 140 years ago this month. On April 12, 1861 Confederate forces fired on Fort Sumter, in the harbour of Charleston South Carolina, and the American Civil War began; it was to last for four long bloody years. While Canada was not directly involved, many Canadians fought in the war, on both sides, and the long term effect on this country was very great. Certainly the war, and its aftermath, hastened the Confederation of the British North American colonies, and the formation of the Dominion of Canada on July 1, 1867.

There were many causes of the Civil War, but the main one, and the one that provided the final spark, was the question of slavery. Although all American colonies, British, French and Spanish, had had slaves, the practice had virtually died out in the north by the time the United States became independent in 1776. In those colonies that remained British the slave system was outlawed in the early nineteenth

century. Thus the British colonies, and for a time the Northern states, became a safe haven for slaves who escaped from the South. However in 1850 the U.S. Congress passed a fugitive slave law which provided for the capture and return of slaves even if they succeeded in escaping to the North. So it was that Canada became the new safe haven for escaped slaves, and an elaborate network of sympathizers, abolitionists and "safe houses" was set up to transport the escapees across the border into Canada. This became known as the "Underground Railroad", and over it many thousands of slaves were transported to freedom. Its operation is well described in the highly influential novel "Uncle Tom's Cabin", written by Harriet Beecher Stowe and published in 1852.

While the "Underground Railroad" was not really a railroad, nor was it underground, there were several incidents involving real railroads, some of them right in Canada. One of these occurred on the Great Western Railway of Canada in 1858 when a southerner was traveling across Canada,

from one point in the U.S. to another, and he had his slave with him. What happened next was vividly reported in the London (Canada West, now Ontario) Free Press on September 30, 1858:

A Train Attacked by Negroes at Chatham. - A singular affair took place on the Great Western at Chatham, two days since, which has thus been described by the conductor, Mr. G.S. Goodrich:-

A party of Southerners were on the express train due at Windsor at 5.15 p.m., and one of them had a mulatto servant, a boy of ten years, along with him. At London, a colored man was observed in conversation with the boy, while standing upon the platform. No suspicion was excited by this, however, but when the train reached Chatham, where it stops to wood and water, it was instantly surrounded by a tumultuous gathering of three or four hundred colored people, evidently laboring under great excitement. A white man, representing himself to be the Sheriff of the town, entered the car where the gentleman and his servant sat, followed by a crowd of colored men. One of the latter individuals asked the boy to come out. He replied that he would not, and clung to his master. In the meantime, those outside were shouting "Bring him out", etc., and revolvers were freely shown by the negroes outside as well as in. The boy was taken out, crying and endeavoring to cling to his master, and borne away by the crowd. The train then started, and the gentleman, whose name is W.R. Merwin, and residence St. Louis, went on to Detroit, and is now stopping at the Russell House. Passengers on the train state that no blame can be attached to conductor Goodrich, as the crowd was so large that any effort to repel them by the hands upon the train, would have been entire folly.

Needless to say the case was very much discussed, pro and con, on both sides of the border. A follow up article appeared in the Free Press six days later, on October 6, 1858:

The Chatham Slave Case.- The occurrence that took place at Chatham a few days since, when a coloured boy was forcibly taken off a train on the Great Western Railway, has attracted considerable attention in the United States. The New York Tribune, speaking of the matter, says:-

1. *Mr. W.R. Merwin is not a Southern gentleman, but a Northern travelling agent for a house in this city.*
2. *He is not the legal owner of any slave.*
3. *If he pretended to own this mulatto boy, he must have been cheating somehow, for he has assured his employers here that he did not own him.*
4. *The boy was almost certainly free born; but in all events, he was made free by being taken through the Free States and Canada, even if he had been a slave before.*



For many the last section of the "Underground Railroad" was a boat ride. This illustration, from the 1852 edition of "Uncle Tom's Cabin", shows the fugitives after landing, safe and free, at Amherstburg, Canada West.

No one, we suppose, will for a moment doubt that the boy, if a slave, became free upon touching British soil. He was, therefore, his own master, and though the forcible taking of him off the train cannot be justified on any ground, except he was detained against his will by the person he was with, yet that he had a perfect right to leave Mr. Merwin at any point of the route through Canada, is a principle which will ever be maintained.

The case then disappeared from the papers and the unnamed boy became just one more person who had reached freedom in Canada. But the whole situation was moving rapidly towards its inevitable climax. Less than two years later the Great Western played another part in the story, as was reported in the Hamilton Times of May 15, 1860:

Railway Speed.- A large number of Delegates to the Republican Convention at Chicago, passed through this city yesterday via the Great Western Railway. The special train, which left Suspension Bridge at 6.4 a.m., consisted of eight loaded cars, and we understand, made the distance between Suspension Bridge and Windsor, 229 miles, in six hours and twenty-six minutes - arriving at 12.30 p.m.; - the exact running time between Stations being:- Suspension Bridge to Hamilton, 1 hr. 30 min.; Hamilton to London, 2 hr. 19 min.; London to Windsor, 2 hr. 40 min.; or thirty-eight miles an hour - and as the train entered the depot a grand salute was fired, amidst the enthusiastic cheering of the immense crowd assembled to greet their friends from the East.

This train proved to be even more historic than was realized at the time. The delegates, who made their 229-mile trip across Canada, were on their way to a history-making event. In Chicago they met in convention and chose their candidate for President of the United States. The name of the winning candidate was Abraham Lincoln. The stage was set for the great struggle which would end slavery, make the "underground railroad" obsolete, and end forever such incidents as that which occurred on the Great Western at Chatham in September 1858.