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and other early Ontario  
railways ✓ p 3.

*The*  
**ERIE & ONTARIO**  
**Rail Road**

by ROBERT V.V. NICHOLLS

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First opened in 1839 as a horse-operated tramway, the Erie & Ontario Railroad is the oldest line in what is now Ontario. Reopened in 1854, it became the third oldest steam railway, being alone antedated by the Ontario Simcoe & Huron, and by the Great Western.

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**D**URING THE DECADE 1830 to 1839, no fewer than nineteen groups of citizens petitioned to the legislature of Upper Canada for charters of incorporation as railway companies. Eight of these petitions received the Royal Assent, as listed below:<sup>1</sup>

<u>Railway</u>	<u>Incorporated</u>
Cobourg to Rice Lake	1833
London & Gore Rail Road	1834
Hamilton & Port Dover Rail Road	1835
Erie & Ontario Rail Road	1835
Niagara River to the Detroit River	1836
Toronto to Lake Huron	1836
Wellington Square to Goderich	1836
London to Devonport	1837

However, the mortality rate among these infant lines was very high due to the severe financial crisis that overtook Canada and the United States in 1837 and only one, the Erie and Ontario Rail Road Company, reached maturity.

Though the Welland Canal between Lake Ontario and Lake Erie had been opened in 1829, yet there was a band of men to be found sufficiently courageous to advocate the building of a competing line of railway. Led by John and Alexander Hamilton, sons of Hon. Robert Hamilton, the contractor for the original Niagara Portage Road, they petitioned the legislature of Upper Canada for incorporation in 1831 and again in 1832, but without success. Needless to say, the officers of the Welland Canal Company such as Merritt fought the proposal bitterly. Later, when it was evident that the legislature was sympathetic, they suggested a cooperative scheme, but in this they were themselves rebuffed.<sup>2</sup> It was intended that the line should run inland between Chippewa and

Queenston, and naturally Niagara Town was anything but enthusiastic.<sup>3</sup> Finally, the anxious years of 1812 had not been forgotten and the military authorities had to be satisfied that the line would not impede their strategic plans. Accordingly, throughout the State Papers of Upper Canada for 1834, 1835 and 1836, there is to be found an extensive correspondence between the Secretary of State for the Colonies, the Lieutenant-Governor, and the Board of Ordnance relating to this matter.<sup>4</sup> Indeed in 1834 the Royal Assent was reserved until the wishes of the Board of Ordnance could be made known; the company was instructed not to intrude on lands less than 1,000 yards from military fortifications. Yet, at long last, the Assent was given on April 16th, 1835.

The incorporators of the Erie & Ontario were John and Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Clark, David Thorburn, Robert Grant and Humphrey Tench of Queenston, Samuel Street of Niagara Falls, James Cummings of Chippewa, James Gordon and Malcolm Laing. The capital stock was limited to £75,000 sterling at £12/10s. a share; the construction was to be finished in five years; the shareholders were to meet in Stamford,<sup>5</sup> at the old Whirlpool Hotel.

The line was far from complete in 1837, and a provincial loan of £5,000 was arranged.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the question still remains as to when it was actually opened to traffic. The line is shown on Coventry's map of 1838 and De Veaux<sup>7</sup> states that it was operating between Chippewa and the Falls in 1839. Green's suggestion that each section was operated as completed is probably correct.<sup>8</sup> It is of importance to notice, however, that an extension of time was sought after, and granted in 1840,<sup>9</sup> and that some work was going on later. Indeed, Sir Richard Bonnycastle, in his book, "The Canadas in 1846" seems to suggest that the railway did not have a wharf at Queenston until that year. He had already taken the occasion<sup>10</sup> to deplore the necessity of importing an engineer from the United States to lay out the line, to wit: John B. Jarvis. James Archibald was later in charge of construction.<sup>11</sup>

Though it is true that Queenston and Chippewa in the 1830s were not towns of great importance -- indeed, even in 1851, their populations numbered only 200 and 1,000 respectively -- yet there can be no doubt that the building of a railway between the lakes to supplement the Portage Road (first used in 1789) and the Welland Canal (opened in 1829) was justified. Such a means of transportation was particularly fitted for passenger traffic and it is likely that in the summer months many tourists and passengers passed over it on their travels between Toronto and Buffalo.

The rails were of timber strapped with iron and the motive power was two or three horses hitched one ahead of the other, trotting horses for passenger cars, draught horses for the freight cars. The line began at a terminal station and warehouse on the terrace at Queenston -- a wharf was later built below -- and mounted on a long incline up the face of the escarpment to the Heights near where the Brock Monument now



stands. It then turned south along the west side of the Second Concession Road of Stamford (Stanley Street in Niagara Falls) until it reached what is now Ferry Street, passed southeasterly through a cutting, and came out on the bluff at Falls View. Then it followed the Portage Road as far as "Clark Hill" and finally ran straight into Chippewa to a steamboat wharf near the present bridge site. A reference to the map will make this description clear. Information as to the gauge of this line is not available. Bonnycastle in 1846<sup>12</sup> stated that the company owned three carriages and an open cart. Green relates in his monograph on the Niagara Portage Road<sup>8</sup> (to whom grateful acknowledgment is made) an interview he was privileged to have about 1925 with Mr. H.J. Cambie, C.E., of Vancouver. Mr. Cambie, then a man of eighty-eight years of age clearly remembered how in his 'teens he had travelled over the line on May 28th, 1852. Thus we possess an accurate picture of the tramway as it was just two years before it was converted to the use of steam power. "The passenger carriages were exactly similar to those used on the Stockton & Darlington Railway in England ten years earlier." That is to say, they were of the four-wheel variety with three carriage-like compartments, side doors and a running-board; they could accommodate about twenty-four passengers. The "enginedriver" and the baggage were carried on the roof; the "engine" was of one-, two- or three-"horsepower". Traffic being light and the cost of snow removal prohibitive, the Erie & Ontario was not operated in winter.

In 1852, the Company secured a revision of its charter whereby it was permitted to reconstruct the railway and operate it by steam locomotives. The reconstruction involved the realignment of the roadbed up Queenston Heights so that an easier grade was secured through St. David's embayment, and the following of the newly-built Great Western as far as Suspension Bridge. The original roadbed was regained near the Falls. The present Michigan Central takes the same route. An extension was at the same time made to Niagara-on-the-Lake and the line was opened between that place and Chippewa on July 3rd, 1854. In accordance with the law of 1851, the line was doubtless broad gauge.

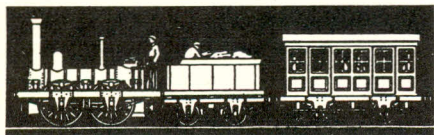
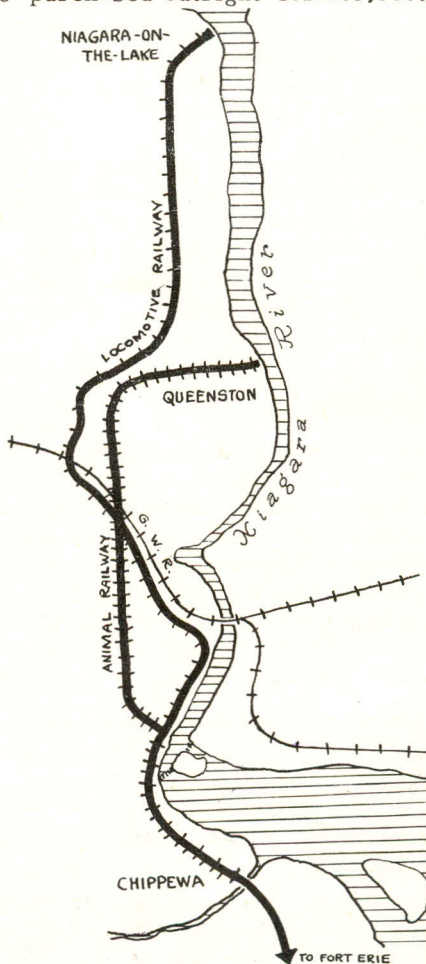
Apparently the well-known railway contractor, Samuel Zimmerman was in charge of construction for it was in his name that the one and only locomotive the railway possessed was bought. The "Clifton" was a 4-4-0 built by the Amoskeag Company of Manchester, N.H., in 1854. It was numbered 169 on their list. This locomotive had 16x20" cylinders and 60-inch drivers.<sup>13</sup>

The later history of the Erie & Ontario was not without its interest. In 1857, a company was incorporated under the title Fort Erie Railway Company, with power to build a line from Fort Erie to Chippewa and to purchase or lease that portion of the Erie & Ontario between Chippewa and Clifton (Niagara Falls). It appears that shortly afterwards, the latter railroad got into financial difficulties for in 1862 the Town of Niagara was given power to sell it on account of advances made to the Co-

mpany. The purchaser was William A. Thomson. A year later it was purchased from him by the Fort Erie and the amalgamated lines became known as the Erie and Niagara Railway. Thus, lake-to-lake communication was established by the time of the Fenian Raids in 1866.<sup>14</sup>

Let us now follow the fortunes of the Erie & Niagara. At a meeting of the shareholders of the Great Western Railway of Canada held in April, 1865, in London, England, the President, Thomas Dakin, announced that an agreement had been entered into for twenty-one years by which the Erie & Niagara with its 31 miles of line on its completion in the autumn (?) would be operated by that Company. The advantages of this scheme were that the GWR would now have a direct line into Buffalo and of the broad gauge, 5' 6", and that the route between Buffalo and Detroit would be shortened by twelve miles. In 1872, the directors further proposed that the line should be purchased outright for £75,000. It was their intention to achieve thereby a junction between the eastern end of the Main Line and the Glencoe Loop Line, but the negotiations fell through on account of disagreements between the several owners of the railway. Accordingly, the Great Western turned its attention to the Welland Railway and entered into an agreement with it. It is interesting to note that the last cars of the GWR to be converted from broad- to narrow-gauge were some nineteen that had been reserved in 1871 for use on the Erie & Niagara.

As a result of this fiasco, between 1875 and 1878 the Erie & Niagara fell into the hands of the Great Western's great rival, the Canada Southern. The Canada Southern in its turn was leased to the Michigan Central in 1904 after being operated by it for some ten years, and in 1929 leased by it to the New York Central. And this brings up to date the history of the oldest railway in Upper Canada. The route of the horse-operated tramway could still be traced in 1939.





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