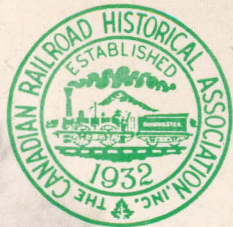


W. R. CASEY  
and CHAMPLAIN + ST. LAWRENCE

1932 - 1972



40th. anniversary

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# WILLIAM R. CASEY

## *The Forgotten Engineer*

John Beswarick Thompson.

**T**ime has dealt kindly with the builders of Canada's early railways. The names of Kefer, Gzowski, Shanly and Fleming did not die after the men but are remembered within the engineering profession and by many ordinary Canadians.

Yet the civil engineer who supervised the construction of Canada's first public railway, acted as a consultant in the planning of our second completed line and was once honored by the Governor of British North America, has been all but forgotten.

His name was William R. Casey. Born in New York in 1808, he began his career in the early 1830s as a sub-assistant engineer in the construction of the Philadelphia, Germantown & Norristown Railroad. He later moved in the same capacity to the Croton Water-works project in New York and then served as assistant engineer on the Long Island Railway. Casey first came to Canada in the spring of 1834, having been appointed assistant engineer supervising the construction of the Chambly Canal near Montreal. (1)

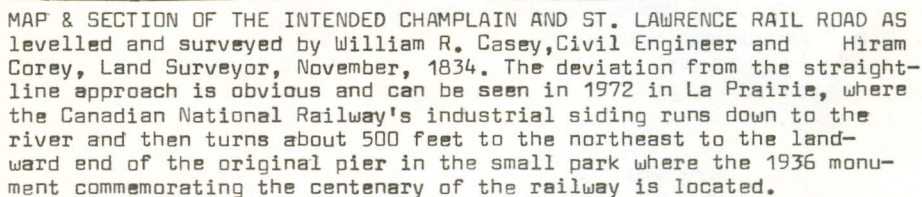
In November 1834 the Champlain and St. Lawrence Rail Road, promoted to link St. Johns on the Richelieu with La Prairie on the St. Lawrence, was formally organized and the fledgling company began casting about for suitable personnel. At about the same time, work on the Chambly Canal ceased for the winter and Casey became free to apply for a position on the railway. Having already worked for two American railroads, his credentials were impeccable. Accordingly, at the age of only twenty-six, he was appointed chief engineer of Canada's first public railway. It was no mean appointment, for, contrary to American practice, the Company did not intend to hire a contractor to build the line but planned to complete it alone using day-labor.

W.R. Casey was thus in full charge of construction. Casey began his work immediately. Within the month, he and a surveyor had produced a map and section of the line. He spent the winter in Montreal "occupied in giving the information and specifications necessary to enable the Committee to contract, without loss of time, for the timber, iron and materials". In May, 1835, the staking-out of the line was started; one month later, the grading of the road was begun. By November, Casey was able to announce "the completion of the fencing, graduation (sic), masonry, bridges, the large wharf at Laprairie and the frames of the station houses". All this had been accomplished, he proudly reported, "in a degree of harmony.....seldom witnessed on public works". (2). The prevailing 'esprit de corps' was due in no



St. Johns November 20. 1834

Wiram Covey Land Surveyor



Public Archives of Canada.

small way, according to the directors of the company, to Casey's "tact and attention" (3). Certainly, in a period of increasingly bitter French-English relations, Casey's attitude towards his French-speaking workmen was refreshing.

Of them he wrote:

"The Canadians formed by far the greater portion of the laborers and maintained their character for behaving with a degree of order and good nature, when working together in numbers, unequalled by any other people"(4).

In the winter of 1836 Casey returned home to New York, stopping en route at Troy, where he purchased four passenger cars for the company. He undertook a similar assignment the following winter when he travelled to Philadelphia to select a second locomotive for the rail-

way. In both cases his judgement proved sound. The cars were used for many years on the line; the locomotive, the "Jason C. Pierce", endured until the 1880s.

During the spring of 1836, work began on the final stage of construction, the laying of the track and superstructure. Casey used the American method of construction, known as the "cheap principle", which relied on the extensive use of wood and half-inch-thick iron strap rails. Such a line was admittedly less substantial than the British type which was laid with solid iron rail; however, up to 1848, when the last of Casey's original work was replaced, no serious accidents had occurred on the railway due to track failure. At least part of the credit for this record of safety must be given to the competence of the engineer-in-charge.

Finally, on 21 July 1836 the Champlain and St. Lawrence was officially opened by the Governor of British North America. Casey's work elicited praise from the dignitaries who travelled along the line on the first run. One such observer wrote:

"Certainly too much praise cannot be bestowed upon the conductors for the neat, orderly, and first-rate manner in which the whole has been completed. To be sure, the ground offered every advantage, but we in Canada are so accustomed to see things done ill, that a work well done is a miracle" (5).

To mark the inauguration of service on Canada's first public railway, elaborate ceremonies were held at its eastern terminus of St. Johns. Among those honored was William Casey. The directors praised his work; the men presented him with a gold medal in appreciation of his "gentlemanly conduct towards them". But the greatest of tributes was paid him by the Governor himself. He proposed a toast to Mr. Casey, "Whose abilities had been extolled by his employers and whose conduct had been approved of by those under his control" (6).

Because there were no other railways about to be built in the country following the completion of the Champlain and St. Lawrence, Casey returned to New York. He paid occasional visits north during the next few years, making "numerous surveys.....in various parts of Upper and Lower Canada," but it was not until 1846 that he had the opportunity of returning to Canada to work on a railway. In that year, the newly chartered Montreal and Lachine Railway invited Casey, whose reputation had remained high, to plan their line. While at work on the project that summer in Montreal, he fell ill with tuberculosis. Tragically, on the sixth of August he died. He was only thirty-eight (7).

→ JULY 21, 1836, WAS THE FIRST DAY OF OPERATION ON WILLIAM R. CASEY'S Champlain & St. Lawrence Rail Road. This painting by Adam Sherriff Scott, the property of the Royal Bank of Canada and reproduced here with their permission, portrays the artist's concept of that important day. From a print in the Public Archives of Canada.









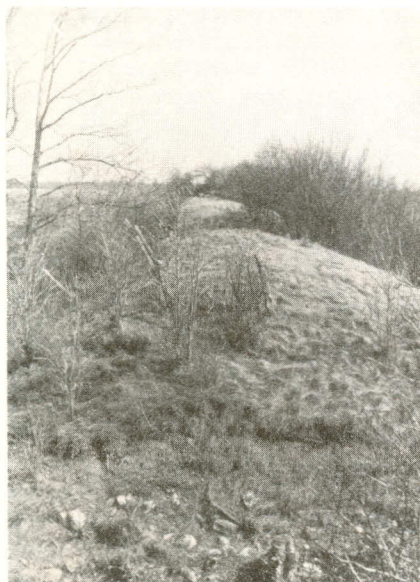
Ironically, Casey's death occurred on the eve of the first Canadian railway boom. With his experience, there is little doubt that his services would have been sought after by other railways. With his reputation, there is a great likelihood that he, like other engineers of that era, would still be remembered today. Instead, his remains lie unmarked somewhere on the mountainside of Montreal, and his name has been forgotten.

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#### References:

- (1) Journals of the Legislative Assembly, 1842, Appendix Z.
  - (2) Chief Engineer's Report, 1835, cited in R.R. Brown, "The Champlain and St. Lawrence Rail Road", Railway and Locomotive Historical Society, Bulletin 39, 1936, p. 18.
  - (3) Report of the Committee of Management, cited in Brown, p. 16.
  - (4) Chief Engineer's Report, cited in Brown, p. 20.
  - (5) THE VINDICATOR, (Montreal) 26 July 1836.
  - (6) THE MORNING COURIER (Montreal) 23 July 1836.
  - (7) THE GAZETTE (Montreal) 11 August 1846.
- See also OF MANY THINGS, E.A. Collard, THE GAZETTE (Montreal), 30 May 1970.

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LOOKING STRAIGHT EAST ALONG THE PRESENT-day right-of-way of Mr. Casey's line - the Champlain and St. Lawrence Rail Road - across the fields from the Ruisseau des Barbottes to Côte de la Bataille and the ridge west of the Little River at L'Acadie. S.S. Worthen's photograph was taken 132 years after the opening of the railway in 1836.

A PAINTING BY ADAM SHERRIFF SCOTT, R. C.A., Showing the opening of the Montreal & Lachine Rail Road on November 19, 1847. The station is Montréal's first at St-Bonaventure Street, Chaboillez Square. The engine is a Norris-Philadelphia 4-4-0, at a later date lost in the swamp to the west of Tanneries Village (St-Henri) in 1848. Photo courtesy CNR.