

Toronto’s First Railway – The Ontario, Simcoe and Huron Railway

By Derek Boles, TRHA Historian

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At noon on October 15, 1851, hundreds of citizens began to gather in front of Toronto City Hall at the corner of Front and Jarvis streets. There were marching bands and gaily decorated floats and everyone was in a state of excitement. Resplendent in their colourful uniforms were the Sons of Temperance, the Independent Order of Odd Fellows and the Loyal Orange Institution. Soon the crowd was joined by judges, steamboat proprietors, the fire brigade, the members of the provincial legislature, and the railroad commissioners. As the time drew closer to 1 p.m., some of the most important personages in the city began to appear. They included the Chief Justice of Canada West, the Sheriff of the County of York, the Chief Magistrate, bishops of various denominations, the Chief Constable and the Mayor of Toronto.

This illustrious congress had gathered to celebrate the inauguration of a new technology. City Hall was an appropriate venue for such a commemoration as it had already hosted the birth of Canada’s telecommunications industry. Just five years earlier in a small room near the Front Street entrance the first telegraph in British North America had been transmitted from Toronto to Hamilton. As the clock tower overhead chimed half past one, the assemblage moved into position to begin the parade, the largest such pageant ever seen in the 17 year history of the City of Toronto. The procession first moved east to Frederick Street, then north to King Street where it turned west. Thousands of people were lined up along both sides of what was then the most important street in Toronto, the commercial spine of the city. Schoolchildren had been given the day off and most of the population turned out to enjoy this grand spectacle that featured 46 different groups and floats. The parade proceeded along King Street for over a kilometer and then turned south on York Street and west on Front past Simcoe where it finally halted in front of the Parliament Buildings of the united Provinces of Canada. By this time it was estimated the crowd comprised 20,000 people, an impressive gathering for a city whose total population was 31,000.

The occasion for this festivity was the start of construction of the Ontario, Simcoe &

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Huron Railway (OS&H), the first steam railway to operate in Canada West, as Ontario was then known. The first trains in Canada East had commenced operations near Montreal in 1836, so the railway era was relatively late coming to Ontario. Before the railway, Canada depended on navigable water routes for transportation but these were frozen for as much as five months of the year. Overland travel by stagecoach was expensive and uncomfortable, even for the elite few who could afford it. Transported goods were frequently damaged on journeys over rough roads and trails. Torontonians eagerly anticipated the promised delights of newfangled rail transportation with its easy year-round travel and the timely delivery of needed commodities, advantages that were only fantasies before the age of rail. By 1850, the construction of new railways in Canada was seen as the key to the British colony's economic survival. There were already over 9,000 miles of track in the United States; in Canada there were less than 60.

Now on this October day in 1851, Torontonians were gathered at this vacant lot on the south side of Front Street between Simcoe and John streets to beginning of the railway era. This august event was commemorated by a ceremonial turning of the first sod, a groundbreaking event that a later and less romantic generation would refer to as “shovels in the ground.” Lifting the ceremonial silver spade was the Countess of Elgin, the wife of the Earl of Elgin, the governor-general of Canada. Lord Elgin hovered nearby and was one of the abler members of the British aristocracy to occupy the colonial vice-regal position. Three years earlier in Montreal he had been attacked by an angry Tory mob that burned down the Parliament buildings while they were protesting the Rebellion Losses Bill. One consequence of that riot was that the colonial capital was moved away from Montreal and was at that point ensconced in Toronto across the road from the sod-turning ceremony. After Lady Elgin used her dainty little shovel to lift the pre-cut square of sod, it was deposited into an equally dainty wheelbarrow and carted away by the mayor of Toronto, who was resplendent in knee breeches and ceremonial sword.

Then began the speeches. Lord Elgin commented that ““It may seem a singular application of the division of labour that the lady should dig and the gentleman speak. But this is an age of progress in which we must be prepared for much that is strange.” Elgin was an enthusiastic promoter of railways and a month earlier had attended the Boston Railroad Jubilee, celebrating the building of a railway between Canada and the United States. Elgin had been staying at a hotel in Niagara Falls and had made the journey from there to Boston entirely by rail. The Jubilee had been attended by the most important officials on both sides of the border, including U.S. President Millard Fillmore. Referring to that recent event in his speech, Elgin noted

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that Americans “never seem more completely at home than when the power of steam is hurrying them over the surface of the earth.”

Following the ceremony, the sod was whisked away and preserved for posterity by a young civil engineer named Sandford Fleming, who would play a principal role in building the new railway and later advance to greater glory as one of Canada’s most illustrious engineers, inventors and scientists.

That night the day’s festivities culminated in a grand ball at St. Lawrence Hall patronized by Governor General Elgin and 400 invited guests. A midnight supper was served and the dancing continued until 2:30 AM. The honorary patroness of the ball was internationally famed soprano Jenny Lind, the “Swedish Nightingale,” who a week later performed at the hall in a concert arranged by American promoter P.T. Barnum. A century later a writer noted that “In such an atmosphere, combining the gala day with a night of gladness, that the people let it be known that they welcomed the coming railway.”

The construction of the Ontario, Simcoe & Huron Railway would occupy the next nineteen months.

Since there was no locomotive factory in existence in Canada at the time, the OS&H ordered their first engine from the United States.

On October 3, 1852, the first steam locomotive to operate in Canada West (Ontario) arrived in Toronto from Oswego, New York on the steamship "Forwarder." Built by the Portland Company in Portland, Maine, the engine was named the "Lady Elgin," to honour the consort of the governor-general, the Earl of Elgin. As mentioned earlier, Lady Elgin had turned the first sod of the Ontario, Simcoe & Huron Railway on the site of today's InterContinental Hotel at Front and Simcoe Streets.

Four days after being delivered, the "Lady Elgin" began operating at Queen's Wharf (Lakeshore Boulevard & Bathurst Street) while a large crowd of onlookers cheered the event. The Lady Elgin was mostly used in construction work on the railway. The engine proved underpowered and troublesome and was relegated to secondary operation by the time the railway began revenue service in 1853.

The 1st Steam Locomotive built in Toronto – The “Toronto”

The OS&H was unhappy with the extra costs incurred by customs duties as well as shipping the locomotive across Lake Ontario and sought a local builder for its next locomotive, the "Toronto." A local foundry owner named James Good decided that

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there was money to be made supplying steam locomotives to the burgeoning railway industry and the Toronto Locomotive Works (TLW) was established at Yonge and Queen Streets, located about where St. Michael's Hospital is today.

On April 16, 1853, the "Toronto", was completed at Good's foundry. This was the first steam locomotive built in Canada, and probably the first anywhere in the British Empire outside of Great Britain. The 4-4-0 weighed almost 30 tons and was 26 feet in length without her tender. Her four driving wheels were five and a half feet in diameter. On April 18, the "Toronto" was moved outside the locomotive works onto Queen Street for display to an appreciative public, who came from all over the city and suburbs to see it.

It was decided to move the tender first, followed by the locomotive on a subsequent day. On April 19, 1853, the works crew spent all day loading the Toronto's tender onto a horse-drawn float outside the foundry at Queen and Yonge Streets and hauling it down Yonge to the nearest tracks on the south side of Front Street. The TLW hoped that the movement of the locomotive itself the following day would be less cumbersome since they planned on rolling it along rails laid in the street.

On April 20, the ponderous journey of the steam locomotive "Toronto" began. The 30-ton locomotive was far too heavy for the horse-drawn float used to move the tender the previous day. As in 2009, the locomotive would take a different route than the tender. Temporary track was laid relay-fashion 100 feet at a time and the engine was crow-barred into motion west along Queen Street. At York Street the Toronto was swiveled south towards Front Street. This laborious process occupied almost a week, much to the fascination of Torontonians who had never seen such an enormous machine. People gathered along the route to cheer the progress of the locomotive through the streets. The Toronto didn't complete its week-long journey until April 26, 1853. For the next three weeks, the railway broke in the locomotive and the engineers became familiar with its operation before it was sent out on its first revenue trip.

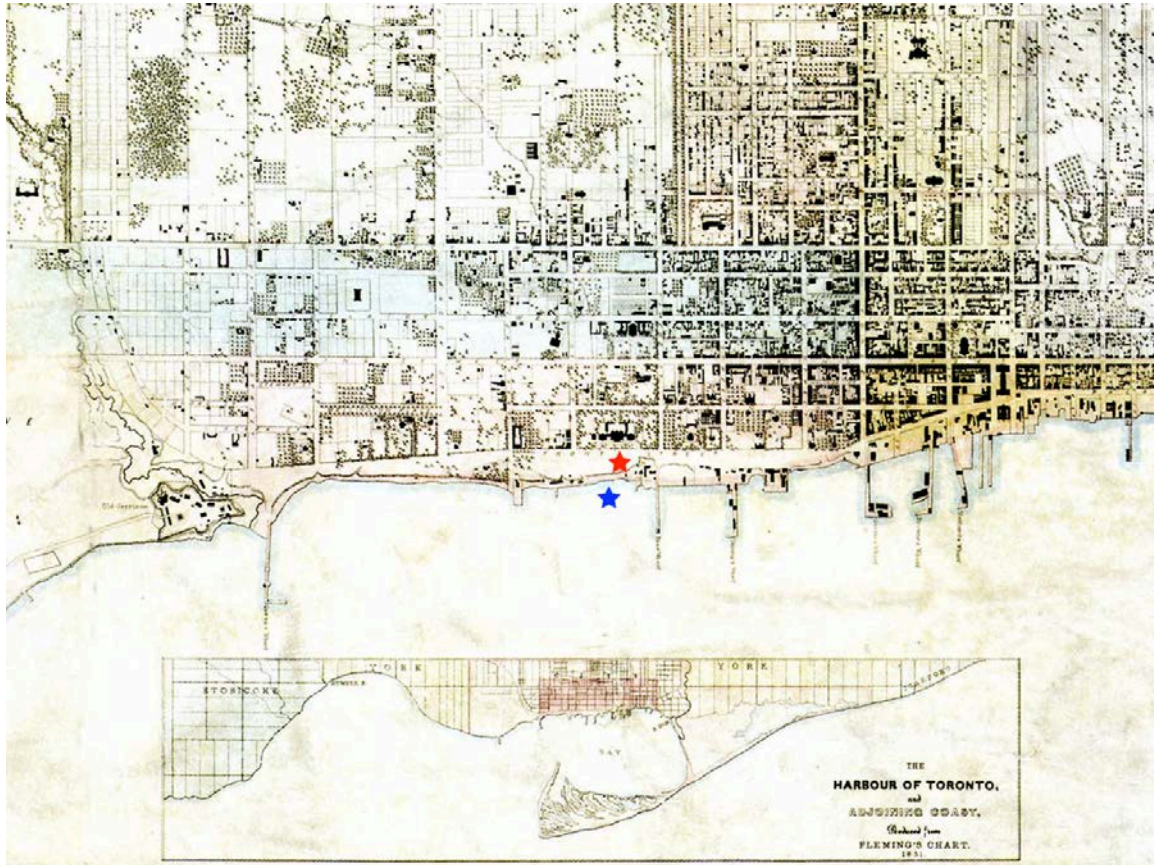
On May 16, 1853, the most historic day in Toronto railway history the Ontario, the Simcoe & Huron Railway initiated revenue railway service for the first time. The wooden depot was located close to where the eastern entrance to Union Station is today. The locomotive "Toronto" pulled the four car mixed train consisting of a coach, a combine and two boxcars to Machell's Corners, 30 miles north of the city. A year later the community was renamed Aurora.

The Toronto Locomotive Works was seriously hindered by its inconvenient location a mile north of the rail corridor. After unsuccessfully trying to relocate to the

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waterfront, they abandoned the railway business in 1859 after building 23 locomotives.

Gallery of Photographs



#1- A map of Toronto in 1851 as surveyed and drawn by Sandford Fleming. The red star indicates the location of the sod-turning; the blue star the site of the Toronto Railway Heritage Centre.

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#2- Toronto looking east from the foot of Parliament Street around the time of the sod-turning. The tall steeple in the centre of this view is St. James Cathedral at King and Church streets, although the steeple wouldn't actually be completed for another 25 years. The smaller cupola just to the left of it is City Hall, where the parade began.



#3- City Hall at Front and Jarvis streets where the parade began at noon. The municipal offices moved from here to what we today call “Old” City Hall at Queen and Bay streets in the 1890's. Parts of this building were incorporated into the present St. Lawrence Market.

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#4 - The parade route superimposed on a modern map of Toronto.



#5 - The Parliament Buildings occupy the centre of this 1857 view. The lot where the sod-turning was held six years earlier is to the left on the south side of Front Street.

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RAILWAY CELEBRATION

Order of Procession.

To be observed at the Ceremony of Turning the First Sod for the Ontario, Simcoe, and Huron Union Railroad, on Wednesday, the 15th October, 1851:

The Procession will form in front of the City Hall at 12 o'clock. The route of the Procession will be down Front-street to Frederick-street, up Frederick-street to King-street, along King-street to York-street, down York-street to Front-street, along Front-street to the ground opposite Parliament Buildings.

THE MARSHAL.
Band.
Toronto Fire Brigade.
The Temperance Societies.
Independent Order of Odd-Fellows, M.U.
Saint George's Society.
St. Patrick's Benevolent Society.
Saint Patrick's Society.
St. Andrew's Society.
Loyal Orange Institution.
County of York Agricultural Society.
Free Masons.
Toronto Mechanics' Institute.
Canadian Institute.
Steamboat Proprietors.
Toronto Board of Trade.
The Press.
Professors of Private Schools.
The Normal School.
Lions Asstics Grammar school.
Chief Superintendent of Education.
Council of Public Instruction.
Upper Canada College.
University of Toronto.
Law Society of Upper Canada.
Medical Board of Upper Canada.
The Bishops and Clergy of the different Denominations.
The Judges and Vice-Chancellors.
Chief Justice and Chancellor.
The Honorable Executive Council.
Speaker and Members of House of Assembly.
Honorable Legislative Councillors.
Sheriff of the County of Simcoe.
Officers of the County of Simcoe.
Warden and Council of the County of Simcoe.
Sheriff of the County of York.
Officers of the County of York.
Warden and Council of the County of York.
Chief Constable and High Bailiff.
Police-Magistrate.
Members of the Toronto Corporation.
Mavor and Recorder. Constable.
Two Constables.
The Honorable Railroad Commissioners.
The Engineers.
The Contractors.
Directors.
CITIZENS.
Two Constables.

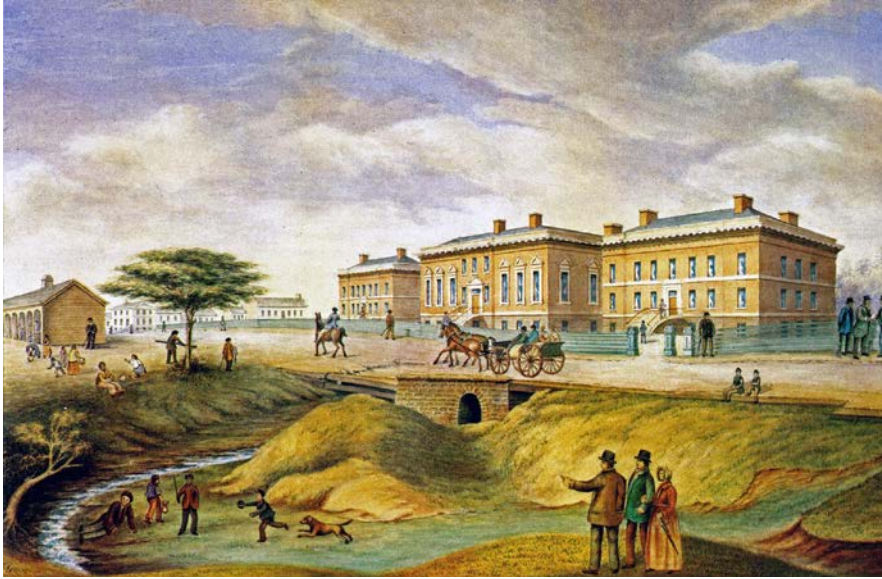
N. B.—Each Society is requested to arrange the Order of Proceeding within itself, before forming in the General Procession, where its place will be assigned by the Marshal, in accordance with the above Programme.
The Procession will move off at One o'clock, P. M.

GEO. T. DENISON, JUNR.,
MARSHAL.

Toronto, Oct. 11, 1851. 462

#6 - A broadside promoting the parade and sod-turning and listing all the participants.

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#7- An 1830's painting by John Howard showing the newly constructed Parliament Buildings. Spectators attending the sod-turning clambered onto the roof to witness the event. At the turn of the 20th century, the parliament would be demolished to make way for a Grand Trunk Railway freight depot. Today the site is occupied by Simcoe Place and the CBC Broadcast Centre.



#8- A young army officer named Anthony Crease painted this watercolour of the crowds gathering for the sod-turning. This was the view from his drawing room window at the foot of John Street.

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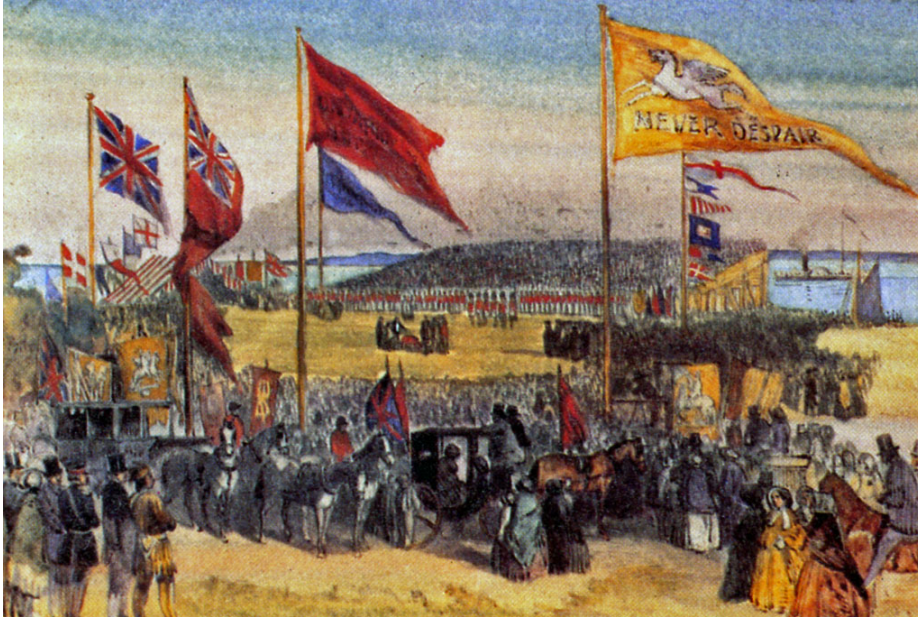


#9- Lord Elgin was James Bruce, 8th Earl of Elgin, who served as Governor General of Canada from 1847-1854. He was probably the only Governor General who actually risked his life to bring about responsible government in Canada. His efforts helped set the stage for Confederation in 1867.

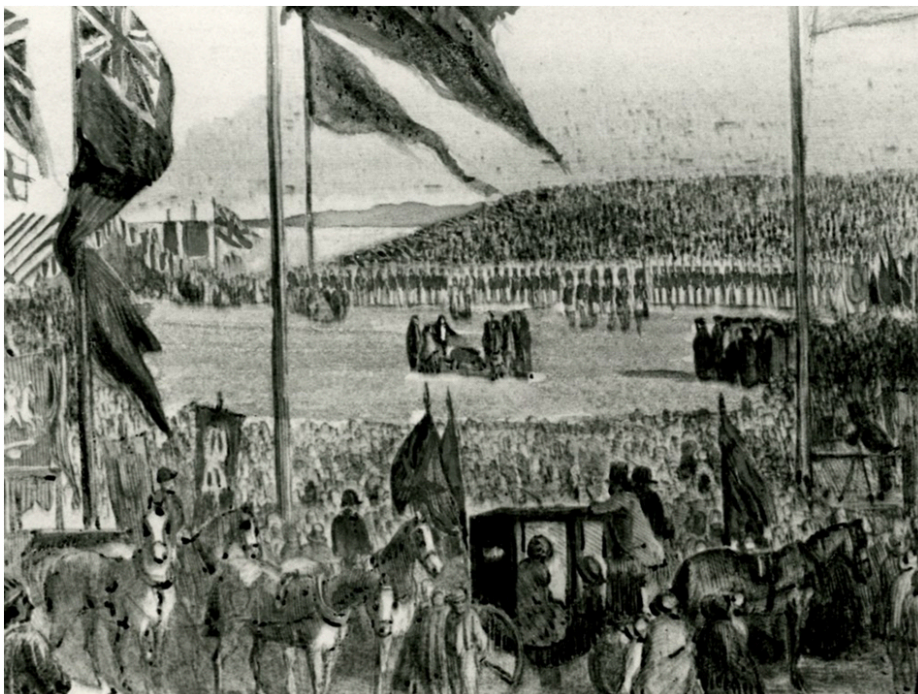


#10- In 1841, Elgin had married Lady Louise Lambton, daughter of the Earl of Durham, author of the famous Durham Report that recommended the union of the Canadas and the adoption of responsible government. While still a teenager, Lady Louise had visited Toronto with her father in 1838.

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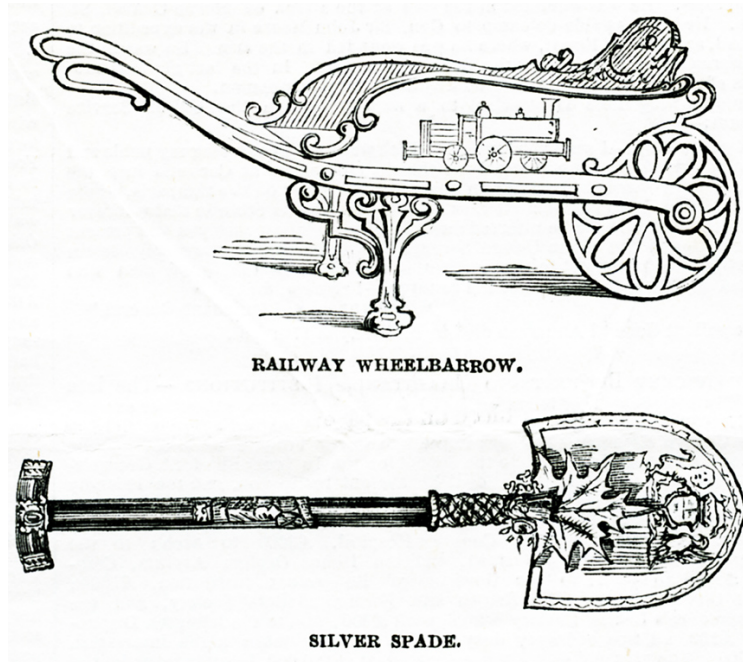


#11- A bandstand was erected to seat 2,000 people; ten times that many attended the sod-turning.



#12- A tighter view shows on the left behind the banners the tent erected for the railway officials and invited guests.

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#13- A contemporary newspaper drawing of the spade and wheelbarrow used in the ceremony. The barrow was manufactured by Jacques & Hay, Toronto’s leading maker of fine furniture and featured an image of an early locomotive on the sides. It is not known what became of the wheelbarrow.



#14- The silver-plated spade, on the other hand, was preserved by the Elgin family and donated to the people of Canada in 2003 by the current Earl of Elgin.

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#15, 16, & 17- A piece of the sod lifted by Lady Elgin was preserved by Sandford Fleming, who later mounted it in this elaborately carved box and presented it to the Royal Canadian Institute in 1863.



The box and its contents were photographed by the author in 2011.



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#18- Sandford Fleming was only 24 when he attended the sod-turning. He had already designed Canada's first postage stamp and surveyed and published a detailed map of newly industrialized Toronto.



#19- 34 years after the sod-turning, Fleming was present at another significant railway event, and arguably the most famous photograph in Canadian history, the Last Spike ceremony at Craigellachie, BC in November 1885. He's the bearded gent with the tallest hat.

RAILWAY CELEBRATION.
A B A L L
 WILL BE HELD
At the ST. LAWRENCE HALL,
On WEDNESDAY, the 15th Instant.

STEWARDS:
THE Sheriff, Colonel Orinew, the Recorder, Aldermen
 Dempsey, Robinson, Kneestaw, and M. P. Hayes, W.
 J. FitzGeraki, P. C. Caprol, John G. Heward, John T.
 Arnold, A. V. Braun, Kivas Tully, W. Armstrong, and
 George Barron, Esquires.

By the kind permission of Sir Hew Dalrymple,
THE BAND of the 71st Regt. will attend
 Tickets can be had on application to the stewards, or
 at Messrs. H. Scobie's, A. H. Armour & Co., and H.
 Russell's.

Family Tickets—15s. Single Tickets—10s.
JOHN T. ARNOLD,
Treasurer.

October 11th. 8773-td

MAD'LE JENNY LIND!
 Has the honour to announce that she will give A
GRAND CONCERT!!
IN ST. LAWRENCE HALL,
TORONTO, on the
Evening of 20th October,
 Assisted by
SIGNOR SALVI,
MR. JOSEPH BURKE,
SIGNOR E. BELLETTI.
MR. OTTO GOLDSCHMIDT,
Conductor.

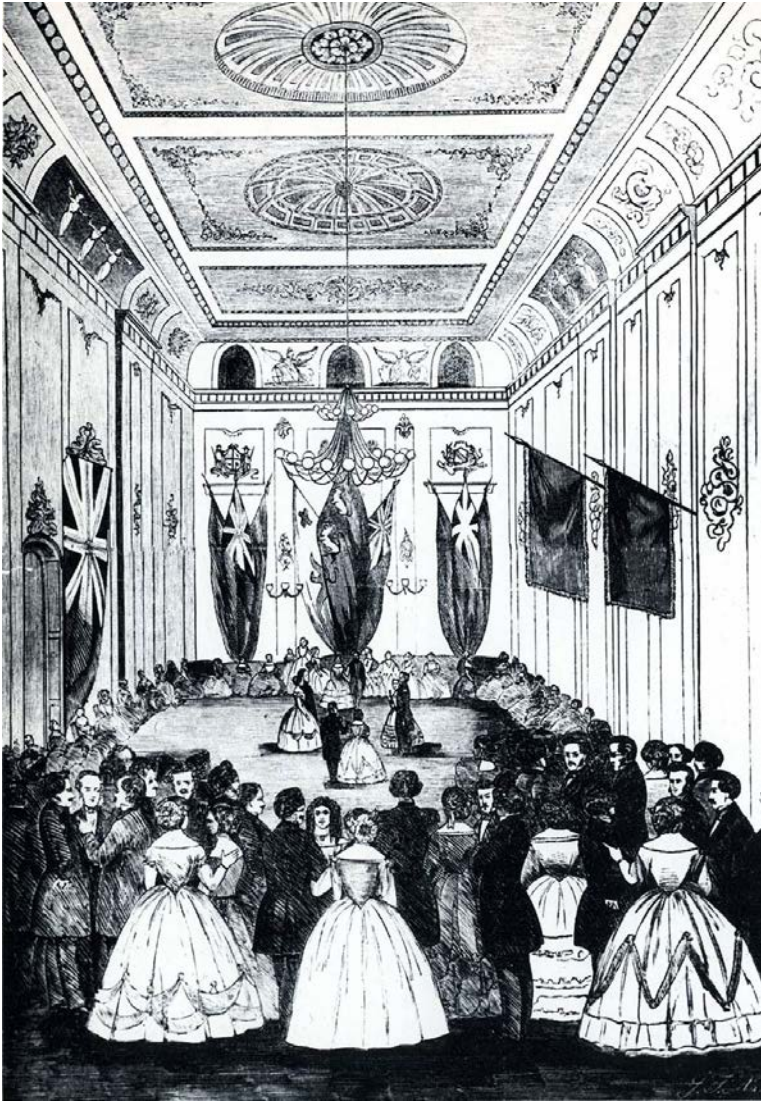
Toronto, Oct. 11th. 773-1f

#20- A newspaper ad in the Globe announcing the celebration held in St. Lawrence Hall the evening after the sod-turning. Underneath is an ad promoting an upcoming concert by internationally famous soprano Jenny Lind held in the same venue a week later. The railway managers had planned on asking her to officiate at the sod-turning if Lady Elgin wasn't available.



#21- A drawing of St. Lawrence Hall in 1855. The conveyance passing by on King Street is the boiler of a locomotive manufactured by the Toronto Locomotive Works for the Grand Trunk Railway. At the time the GTR shops were located at the original Don Station on the west side of the Don River, while the engine works were at Queen and Yonge streets.

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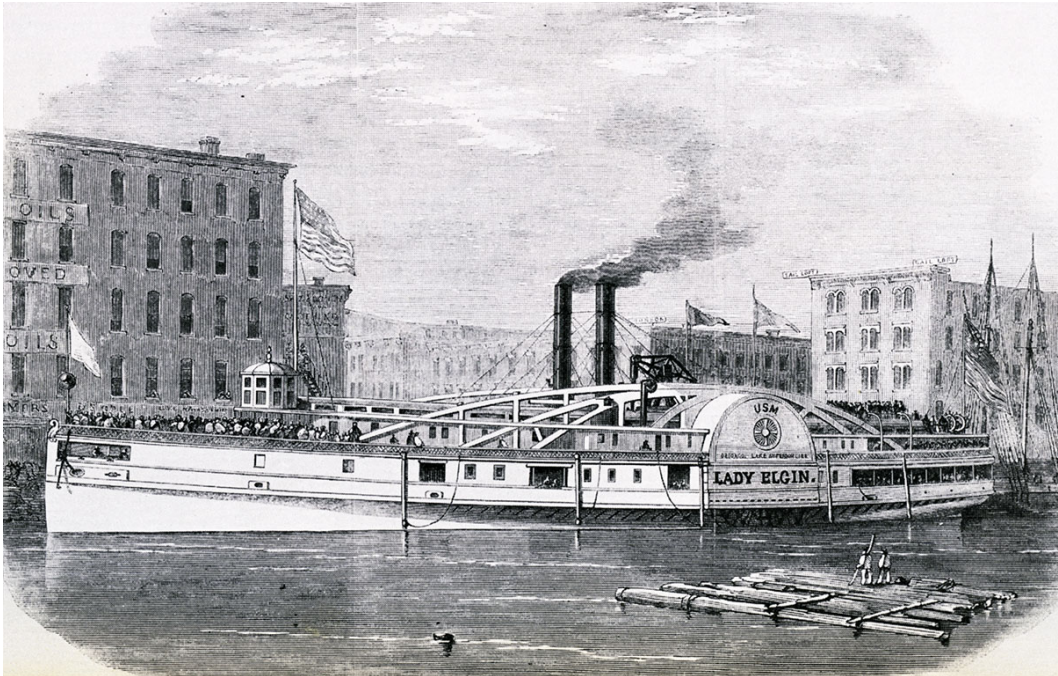


#22- The Great Hall on the third floor of St. Lawrence Hall, where the ball celebrating the railway groundbreaking was held on the evening of October 15, 1851. In 2011, the author had the honour of presenting the annual Heritage Toronto Lecture about the groundbreaking in this same venue, which is now owned by the City of Toronto.

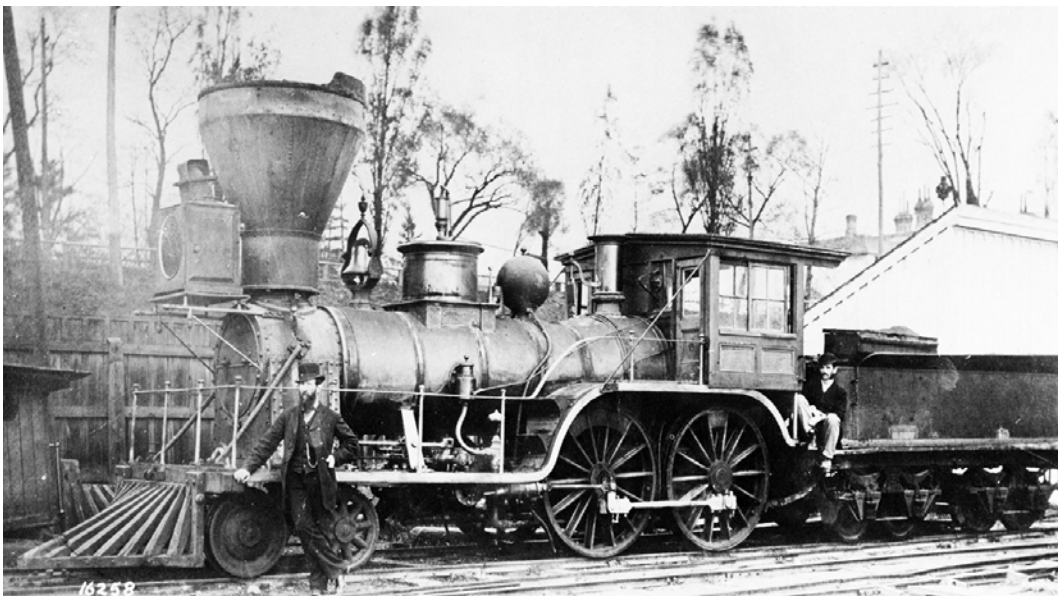


#23- A broadside advertising the Ontario, Simcoe & Huron Railway, which did not cross over the Niagara River but connected at Toronto with the Great Western Railway, which did.

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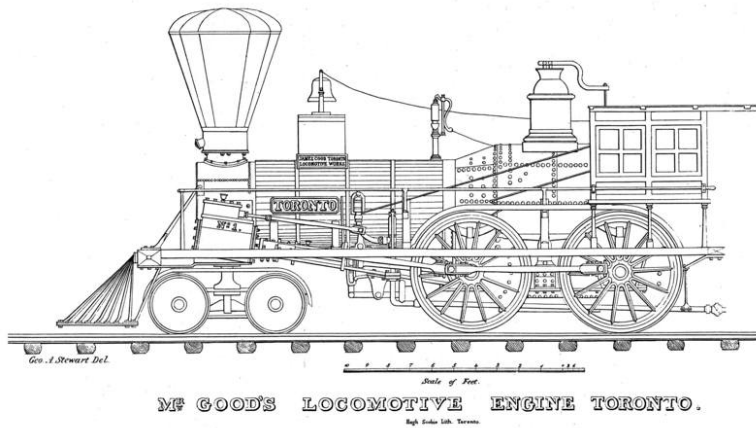


#24- Lady Elgin also had a steamship named after her that carried passengers for the OS&H between Collingwood and Chicago. It was on Lake Michigan near Chicago that the Lady Elgin sank in 1860 with a loss of 300 lives, the greatest loss of life on open water in the history of the Great Lakes.

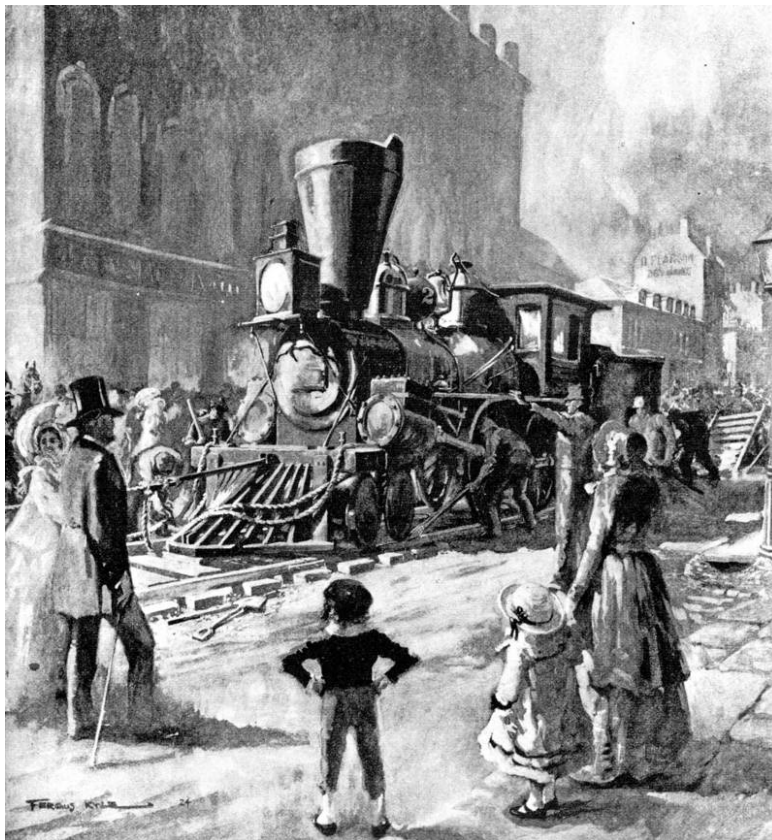


#25- The Ontario, Simcoe & Huron Railway honoured Lady Elgin by naming their first locomotive after her. The engine was manufactured in Portland, Maine and delivered to Toronto in October 1852.

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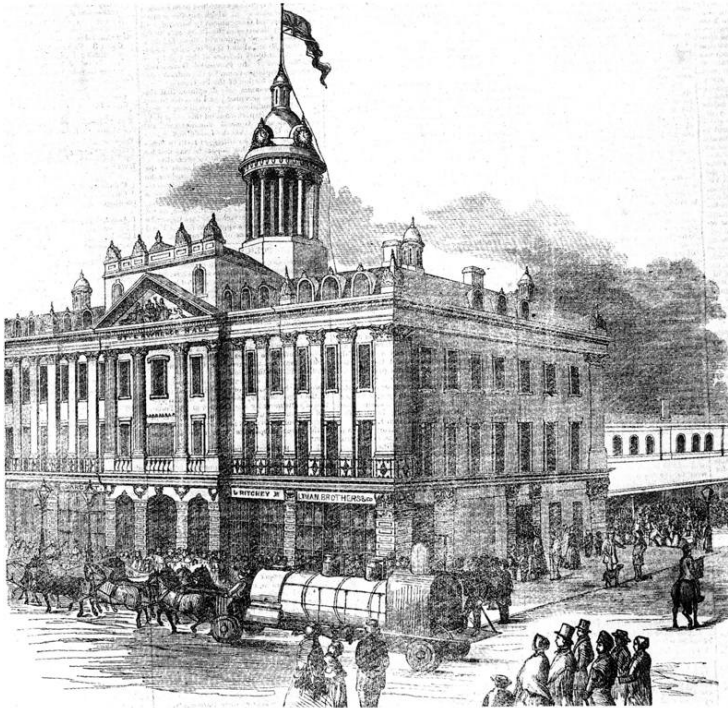


#26- The "Toronto" as it appeared in 1853 when it was built. There are no known photographs of the engine in its early years since photography was in its infancy in the early 1850's.

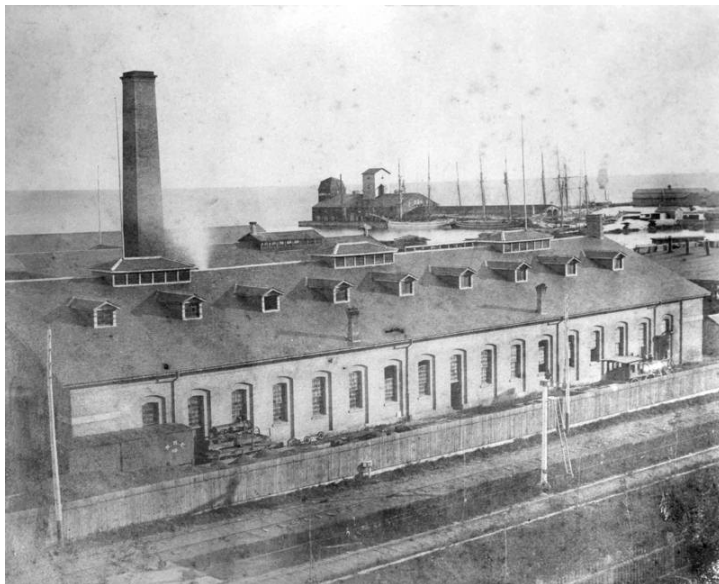


#27- The movement of the "Toronto" through the streets of the city. Although evocative, this romanticized image is inaccurate. The tender was moved separately and the locomotive is shown as it appeared after it was modified years later.

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#28- This engraving shows a Toronto Locomotive Works engine in 1855 being hauled by horse teams past St. Lawrence Hall on King Street to the Grand Trunk Railway shops near the Don River. It would appear by this time that the foundry moved the boiler separately on a horse-drawn float and completed construction of the locomotive after it was delivered to the railway.



#29- The Northern Railway (renamed OS&H) shops around 1860 looking southwest from Spadina. A locomotive can be seen outside the shops on the right. There's a possibility this was the "Lady Elgin", which was reportedly out of service by this time.

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#30- The locomotive Toronto as it appeared in 1880, shortly before it was scrapped. We can only belatedly mourn the loss of what would undoubtedly be the most precious artifact of the railway era in any museum in this country, the first locomotive ever built in Canada.

Visit www.trha.ca to learn more about Toronto's railway history