

RAILWAYS, CONFEDERATION AND OUR MOUNTAIN HERITAGE

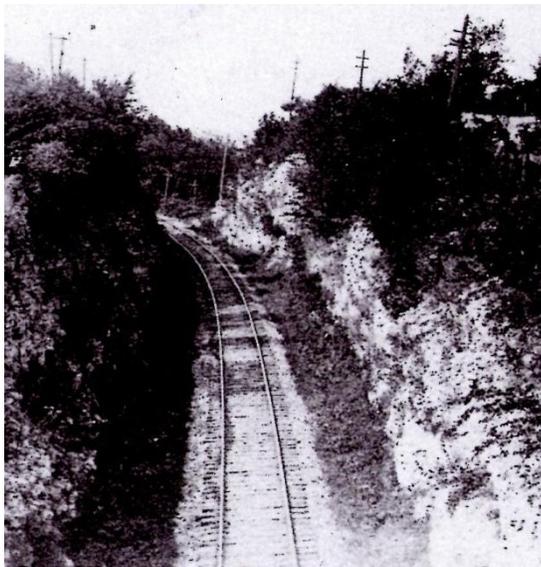
By Robert Williamson

During this 150th Anniversary of Canada's Confederation, I would like to explore the theme of 1867 in Hamilton Mountain history. The birth of Canadian confederation was encouraged by the railway building phenomenon of that period.

In the Hamilton area, the building of railways was made possible by a dedicated politician, Sir Allan MacNab who declared that, "Railways are my politics" and played a major role in their development.

With Hamilton's ideal port facilities, MacNab's investment consortium convinced the builders of the Great Western Railway from Niagara Falls to Detroit, to divert through the city. In 1854, Hamilton became one of Canada's leading railway cities. A year later, MacNab was elected president of the Hamilton and Port Dover Railway.

By 1862 a million dollars had been spent building a roadbed for the Hamilton and Port Dover Railway up the escarpment face to the top of the mountain adjacent to Albion Falls. Rising 330 feet in just over five miles, the gradient was one of the steepest in Canada and took three years to build. The Rymal Station was the first railway station on the mountain. Today the site is marked by an abandoned grain storage elevator behind the Co-operative Garden and Feed Store on Dartnall Road.



Hamilton's Lake Erie railway reached the escarpment top in 1862, shown here from the Mohawk Road East bridge at Mountain Brow Blvd. Courtesy Lois (Taylor) Bennett.

MacNab's vision was to make all of southwestern Ontario part of Hamilton's hinterland, serving the counties along the north shore of Lake Erie. This would open a connection with the lake traffic to American ports on the south shore of Lake Erie providing Canada with cheap Appalachian coal from Ohio and Pennsylvania. That dream would eventually make Hamilton the centre of Canada's steel manufacturing industry.

Coal would also be used to fire the kilns in Canada's largest concentration of brickyards at the base of the escarpment. The thick layer of red shale provided the building material for a growing nation in the kilns of Hamilton Pressed Brick, Canadian Pressed Brick, and Bartonville Pressed Brick, located in the Kenilworth/Lawrence Road area, not to mention twelve brickyards in the Chedoke Valley. (See footnote.)

If you walk down the east escarpment rail trail overlooking the Bartonville (Rosedale) neighbourhood, look for remnants of coal spilled while it was being fed down a chute from the rail cars to the brickyards below.

When MacNab died in 1862, construction faltered until the railway company was refinanced and restructured as the Hamilton and Lake Erie Railway. The next obstacle was bridging the Grand River. By 1873 the line was opened for traffic to Caledonia, Hagersville and Jarvis, reaching Port Dover in 1878. The coal and fish resources of the Lake Erie basin, as well as its agricultural and recreational potential, were now part of Hamilton's economic sphere. As the nation grew, so did Hamilton. The next time you hike the east mountain rail trail, think of it as a landmark in our nation's confederation history.



All that is left of the mountain's Rymal Station is an abandoned rail bed, telegraph pole and a storage bin. RJW

Footnote:

On March 14, 2017, a few days after this story appeared in the Mountain News, the Spectator carried a front page story about the last remaining brickyard, Century Brick, on Lawrence Road at Ottawa Street.

***Mountain Memories*, by Robert Williamson is written for the Hamilton Mountain Heritage Society and appears monthly in the Mountain News.**