History of the
Grand Trunk Railway

Local History at the St. Thomas
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10 November 1852: The Grand Trunk Railway (GTR) is formally incorporated to construct a main railway line serving Ontario and Quebec, connecting Chicago with Portland, Maine. It is financed by a group of private British investors and fronted by Sir Francis Hincks, who is determined to build a main trunk line for eastern Canada.

1853: The Grand Trunk purchases five small railroad companies: the St. Lawrence & Atlantic (which reaches from Longueil, Quebec to Portland, Maine), Quebec & Richmond, Toronto & Guelph, Grand Junction, and Grand Trunk Railway Company of Canada East.

October 1856: The main line between Montreal and Toronto is opened. It is built with the Canadian Standard Gauge, 5’6”.

December 1859: The Victoria Bridge is opened to traffic. It is a tubular bridge built originally for rail traffic, although lanes for automobiles will be added in 1927. It is the first bridge to span the St. Lawrence River, and is built especially for withstanding the ice and winter conditions of the river.

1859: An extension of the main line to Sarnia via Guelph, Stratford, and London is opened. The Grand Trunk Railway now provides through transportation from Sarnia to the Atlantic coast, a distance of 800 miles.

1861: The GTR has accumulated a debt of several hundred thousand pounds sterling as the result of expansion and overestimating the demand for rail service. Sir Edward William Watkin, railway chairman and politician, is sent from London to sort out the company’s financial situation. He succeeds in having the Canadian government adopt legislation for reorganization of the company’s finances. The railway is saved from bankruptcy. Watkin serves as Grand Trunk president from 1861 to 1863.

1862: Charles John Brydges leaves his position of Managing Director of the Great Western to become General Manager of the Grand Trunk. Between Brydges and Watkin, the company is still not able to generate a substantial profit.

1864: The company acquires the Buffalo & Lake Huron Railway, providing the GTR with an American entry at Niagara Falls, N.Y., and allowing them to compete with the Great Western Railway.

29 June 1864: A Grand Trunk train plunges off the Beloeil Bridge into the Rivière Richelieu, killing 99 people. Both the conductor and the engineer failed to see the red light on the bridge indicating it was raised to allow boats to pass through. Known as the St-Hilaire train disaster, it is the deadliest train accident in Canada’s history.
1873: The switch from the original Canadian Standard Gauge (5’6”) to the U.S. Standard Gauge of 4’8½” is completed. Traffic interchange between Canada and the U.S. is much more efficient.

1875: Joseph Hickson, new manager of the company, fires 625 men in response to the financial crisis of the 1870s (known as the “Long Depression”). Wages are cut and many more are fired, followed by a period of resistance and strikes from the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, an American union. The railway is considered unresponsive to local needs.

1880: The Rivière-du-Loup extension is sold in order to purchase a line to Chicago from Port Huron, benefitting the company greatly.

12 August 1882: The official amalgamation of the Great Western and Grand Trunk occurs. Over 900 miles of track is added to the Grand Trunk Railway, which now operates through St. Thomas.
15 September 1885: Jumbo the elephant is killed in St. Thomas by Grand Trunk special freight train #151, engine #288. He is greatly mourned by the millions who knew him as “the children’s giant pet” and his handler, Matthew Scott, who came with him from England when he was sold to circus owner P.T. Barnum.

15 July 1887: The “Great Wreck of 1887” occurs when a Grand Trunk train operating on the L&PS lines collides with a Michigan Central freight train carrying oil. Fourteen people are killed and sixty-eight injured in the centre of St. Thomas.

1896: Charles Melville Hays, former president of the Wabash Railroad, becomes General Manager of the Grand Trunk Railway for the first time. He will leave in 1901 to serve as President of the Southern Pacific Railway Company but will return the following year. Hays was selected in order to bring more aggressive American business practices to the company.

Mid-1890s: The Grand Trunk Railway undertakes a massive safety program, under the guidance of Hays, in response to the bad publicity it has received from numerous accidents. This includes double tracking the main line, reducing curves and grades, and reconstructing bridges, buildings, and yards.

1897: The Wabash Railroad leases the Grand Trunk line from Windsor to Fort Erie (the former Great Western tracks). The railroad is given a trackage rights agreement for Canada by Hays, and its Canadian headquarters are established in St. Thomas.
1902: After a year of serving as the Southern Pacific Railway President, Charles Hays returns as Vice President and General Manager of the Grand Trunk, with the vision of a transcontinental railway. He will become the president of the GTR in 1908.

1903: The Grand Trunk Pacific (GTP), a subsidiary of the Grand Trunk, is incorporated in order to provide the Grand Trunk with connections across the prairies. It is also to assume responsibility for the government-built National Transcontinental Railway.

April 1912: Charles M. Hays will never see his transcontinental railway built, as he dies tragically in the sinking of the Titanic. His wife and youngest daughter, who accompanied him on the voyage, survive.

1914: The GTP is completed. It is a 4,800 kilometer system that runs from Winnipeg to Prince Rupert, British Columbia. The National Transcontinental Railway is also completed, meeting the GTP in Winnipeg and reaching to Moncton, New Brunswick.

1919: The competition from Canada’s other two transcontinental railways, the Canadian Pacific and the Canadian Northern, proves to be too much for a third railway. The Grand Trunk Pacific goes bankrupt, and the Grand Trunk Railway soon follows. They are both taken over by the Dominion government.

30 January 1923: The GTR and GTP are officially amalgamated with Canadian National Railways.
