The Railway History of St. Thomas

23 October 1849: Sod-turning commences in London for the Great Western Railway, the first railroad that will reach from Windsor to Niagara Falls. This is the shortest route for Americans travelling between the Midwest and the Atlantic seaboard. The citizens of St. Thomas are disappointed that the GWR decides to build through London instead of St. Thomas.

17 January 1854: Charles Brydges, the young manager of the Great Western, rushes the line to completion. The first through train from Niagara Falls reaches Windsor, carrying 800 passengers. It is a rough ride, as almost the entire railway is unballasted (lacking the material usually packed around the rails to hold them in place when the train goes by).
1856: The London & Port Stanley Railway (L&PS) is inaugurated. It is initially supported by St. Thomas but proves to be a financial disaster. St. Thomas has almost no industrial exports and relies entirely on agriculture. It is plagued with debt from its investment in the L&PS, which does little to help the economy.

Building the first Canada Southern bridge at St. Thomas, ON.

Talbot Street in the 1860s, before the railroad boom.

February 1868: William Thompson, owner of the Erie & Niagara Railroad, introduces his plan for an extension of the railroad from Fort Erie to the Detroit River. He begins working with Isaac Buchanan (right), a St. Thomas railway promoter, to build the line that is renamed the Canada Southern (CASO).
December 1869: The Canada Southern is granted its charter to build a southern railway. The Great Western directors are also given a charter to build the Great Western “Air Line” to compete against the Canada Southern. Both new lines will run through St. Thomas. The city begins to prepare for the arrival of two major railways.

1869: The L&PS expands their rolling stock. Passenger service is very popular. The cars carry people from London and St. Thomas to Port Stanley in an hour and twenty minutes, where they can swim, dine, enjoy the amusement park or dance in the L&PS Pavilion.
May 1873: Both the Canada Southern and Great Western Air Line have regular passenger and freight service. The CASO line provides the shortest and fastest route from Michigan to New York.

St. Thomas benefits greatly from the two major railways and industry becomes an important part of the economy.

1871: The CASO Station is built in anticipation of the railroad’s arrival the following year. It still stands today at 750 Talbot Street, St. Thomas.

The park built in front of the CASO Station.

The Canada Southern Station. The 1882 publication Picturesque Canada reported that the station was “one of the finest in the Dominion, and reminds one of the large structures in Chicago and New York.” (http://narhf.org)
1874: The Great Western leases the London & Port Stanley Railway.

1879: The St. Thomas Street Railway is built. Before its electrification in 1898, the line uses horse-drawn railcars.

1881: St. Thomas becomes a city. The population has more than tripled since 1872 as a direct result of the railways.

5 September 1881: The Credit Valley Railway (CVR) begins operations from Woodstock to St. Thomas. Less than 3 years later, it is taken over by the Canada Pacific Railway.

The Boom Years
12 August 1882: In order to avoid American domination of the railways in Canada, the Great Western amalgamates with the Grand Trunk Railway, pooling their resources.

May 1883: The Michigan Central Railway leases the Canada Southern Railway for 21 years.

The Boom Years

The Canadian Division of the Michigan Central Railway.

15 September 1885: Jumbo the elephant is killed by a Grand Trunk freight train after a Barnum & Bailey Circus performance in St. Thomas.
### December 1893: The Lake Erie and Detroit River Railway (LE&DRR) leases the L&PS lines for 20 years. In 1901, it extends its service from Ridgetown to St. Thomas.

### 1897: The Wabash Railroad leases the eastern lines of the former Great Western Railway between Windsor and Buffalo. Its Canadian headquarters (left) are located in St. Thomas because it is roughly equidistant between Detroit and Niagara Falls.

### 1898: The company that constructed the Street Railway works on developing Pinafore Park (top left) to add a recreational destination that will encourage passenger traffic.

### 15 July 1887: A north-bound Grand Trunk excursion train operating on the L&PS lines collides at high speed with a south-bound Michigan Central freight train carrying oil. The trains crash on Talbot Street and cause a massive fire and explosions. Fourteen people are killed, including a family of four and five other children. Sixty-eight are injured. It is the worst disaster in the city’s history and is known as the “Great Wreck of 1887.”

Image courtesy of the Elgin County Archives.
The Boom Years

1903: The Pere Marquette Railway (PM) acquires the Lake Erie & Detroit River Railway, with main lines running from Walkerville (Windsor area) to St. Thomas, as well as from Sarnia to Chatham and Erieau. This begins the Pere Marquette’s presence in Canada. Soon, the railway secures running rights from New York over the former Canada Southern lines to reach St. Thomas, where the PM’s main Canadian facilities are built a year later. The Pere Marquette uses car ferries (left) rather than bridges or tunnels to cross waters such as Lake Erie and the Detroit River.

August 1902: The South Western Traction Company is granted a charter to construct an electric railway out of London. The railroad passes through St. Thomas and Port Stanley like the L&PS, but the Traction Line’s path meanders through the countryside to serve the smaller villages along the way, while the L&PS is much more direct.
The mural on Manitoba Street in downtown St. Thomas, depicting a circus parading down Talbot Street.

January 1904: The Michigan Central extends its lease of the CASO tracks to 99 years.

The Boom Years

1906: Approximately forty-six passenger trains and an enormous number of freight trains come in and out of St. Thomas on a daily basis. It is described as one of the most “progressive, healthiest, and liveliest” cities in Ontario.

1909: The South Western Traction Company goes bankrupt as a result of a fire and expensive equipment upgrades. It is reorganized into the London and Lake Erie and Navigation Company (L&LE) and begins to make a profit.

Michigan Central yards.
1 July 1915: Electric service on the L&PS begins providing passengers with smoke-free transportation. With its direct route and advantageous beach location, it soon puts the London and Lake Erie and Navigation Company out of business.

The Boom Years

1 December 1925: It is decided that the Street Railway will be scrapped and a bus line introduced. Though it is well loved, the Street Railway was never extremely profitable and cannot compete with the new bus proposals.

1929: The facilities which the MC has been leasing are subleased to the New York Central Railroad (NYC) for 999 years. NYC assumes complete control over the Michigan Central.
The Second World War causes a temporary boost in railway use, but the increased popularity of the automobile after the war results in a huge overall decline of the railway. Many companies merge together in this time period.

**1947:** The Pere Marquette is merged with the Chesapeake & Ohio Railway (C&O). In 1972, another merger forms the Chessie System.

**31 December 1965:** The L&PS ends freight services and its entire operations wind down. It was the oldest railway in Canada still operating under its original charter.

**18 February 1957:** Passenger services are discontinued on the L&PS.
In 1968, the Pennsylvania Railroad merges with the New York Central Railroad, and becomes the Penn Central Company (PC). The PC now operates the former NYC tracks through St. Thomas.

In 1976, the PC and several other bankrupt railways are amalgamated to form the federal Consolidated Rail Corporation (Conrail) which begins operations in St. Thomas.

In 1982, a section of the line between St. Thomas and Port Stanley is washed out. It is abandoned until citizens of London and St. Thomas form the Port Stanley Terminal Rail Inc. and purchase the line between St. Thomas and Port Stanley.

In 1983, the first train ride for tourists on the Port Stanley Terminal Rail takes place.

Mergers and Decline

Conrail
30 April 1985: The Canada Southern is back in Canadian hands when it is purchased jointly by the Canada Pacific Railway (CP, later CPR) and the Canadian National Railway (CN) in order to eliminate competition, rather than use the line. Operations slowly wind down.

1987: CSX Transportation is founded: the successor of the Pere Marquette, Chesapeake & Ohio, and Chessie System.

9 November 1998: The St. Thomas and Eastern Railway, a division of Trillium Rail, assumes operation of the former Great Western Air Line tracks between St. Thomas and Delhi. The St. Thomas and Eastern Railway currently provides freight service to the area, with connections to the CN and CPR.
14 December 2009: The Ontario Southland Railway (OSR) begins operations in St. Thomas, taking over the Canadian Pacific tracks between St. Thomas and Woodstock (originally the Credit Valley Railway).

Mergers and Decline

1 June 1999: Conrail operations in St. Thomas are divided between the CSX Transportation Company and the Norfolk Southern Railway. Neither companies currently operate in St. Thomas.

31 January 2006: An agreement is announced by CSX and CN that CN will begin hauling CSX traffic between Sarnia and Buffalo, as well as Sarnia and Toledo. This leaves CSX only operating in Canada between Sarnia, Wallaceburg, and Chatham.
The City of St. Thomas has done a lot of work to preserve St. Thomas’ railway heritage.

The Michigan Central Railroad shops are the oldest continuously operating locomotive repair shops in North America. The building serves as headquarters for the Elgin County Railway Museum and locomotive, passenger car and railway service vehicle repairs and restorations are performed here today.
The Canada Southern Station became a heritage railway station under the National Railway Stations Protection Act in 1988. In 2005, the North American Railway Hall of Fame assumed ownership of the building and took on the huge project of restoring it. The CASO station is now open for tours and bookings.

The second floor of the building is currently in the process of renovation.
Port Stanley Terminal Rail Inc. came into existence in 1982 for the purpose of rebuilding the London & Port Stanley Railway into a working tourist operation again. It would take years of work for the track between Port Stanley and St. Thomas to become usable and to obtain a charter, the first Ontario Railway Act since 1927. Currently, there are over 400 departures per season carrying approximately 25,000 passengers a year. (http://www.pstr.on.ca/)
In 2012, the City of St. Thomas began the project of recreating the London & Port Stanley station and restoring the tracks between Parkside Collegiate Institute and Talbot Street in downtown St. Thomas, where the station once stood. Passengers can now travel from central St. Thomas to Port Stanley on the train.

**Railway Heritage**

The original (below) and expanded (above) L&PS station in St. Thomas.

A replica designed for the 2010 International Plowing Match that is now reinstalled in Station Parkette on Talbot Street.