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Our 1856 link to Pearson airport

What kind of investment pays dividends almost forever? Solid infrastructure, suggests one stop on a Spacing editor's rail-linked exploration

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Standing on Fort York's south ramparts, eyes shut, it's easy to imagine Lake Ontario is only a few metres below. The hum of the Gardiner Expressway even sounds like the surf. But open your eyes and the freeway looms on its concrete columns, and you must look between condominiums to catch a glimpse of the distant water.



TONY BOCK/TORONTO STAR

The former Grand Trunk Railway viaduct over the Humber River, now used mostly by GO Transit and VIA Rail. It will be on the route of the new airport rail link.

On the north side of the fort are hints of why we have Toronto terra firma where the shoreline once was. Nearly a dozen rail lines cross Toronto near this spot; one branch heads along the lake towards Hamilton, the other curves northwest towards Weston and Georgetown. The latter follows some of the historic Grand Trunk Railway route, Toronto's first railway.

Soon, the 19th century route responsible for so much of the city's early growth may play a key role in the evolution of 21st century Toronto, by serving as backbone of the long-sought rail connection between Union Station and Pearson International Airport.

The name Grand Trunk still sounds expansive; it is a reminder that after the War of 1812 railways, not armies, started to decide Toronto's future. The Grand Trunk would grow, as planned, into a main trunk line – becoming for a time the world's largest railway system – and finally morph into CN. But when first built, the Grand Trunk did not even cross what is now downtown Toronto. It swung down toward the lake from the northwest and stopped at a terminal on the south side of Fort York.

Evidence remains, in impressive earthworks visible between the fort and Strachan Ave. In the shadow of the Gardiner near here is an old trench that was dug west to Strachan, where it curves north and now disappears, with few traces, under modern Liberty Village.

The Grand Trunk was originally chartered as the Toronto & Guelph Railroad Company, and became part of plans for a railway between Toronto and Montreal and southwestern Ontario. Between 1853 and 1856, lines were built in two sections: Toronto to Montreal and Toronto to Sarnia. Engineer Casimir Gzowski was the contractor of the western section, and his Grand Trunk accomplishment is one reason the lakeside park west of Sunnyside bears his name (he is also the great-grandfather of the late CBC broadcaster Peter Gzowski). The large terminal yard for the Sarnia line was constructed in front of Fort York on eight hectares, about half of which was landfill, thus beginning the shoreline's slow move south to its current point across from the Toronto Island

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More than anything else, the railways were responsible for the extension of Toronto's waterfront, because they had the political and financial muscle to get what they wanted (the term "railroaded" means what it does for a reason). There was a gap between the Sarnia and Montreal sections of the GTR for only a short time before the railway bullied Toronto City Council into letting it lay tracks across the front of the city along the newly created Esplanade, marking the beginning of the city's estranged relationship with its waterfront. In the late 1850s, the view from the Fort's bastions was still of the lake, but also of a busy Victorian industrial scene.

TODAY'S PEARSON RAIL connection proponents may wish they had the same bullying power their 19th century counterparts did. The various schemes proposed – such as the early Blue 22 line that involved diesel trains running regularly between Union and Pearson – have met with opposition in Weston. Now part of Toronto, Weston flourished once the Grand Trunk was established in the 1850s. One proposal for the Pearson link would have closed some surface streets, threatening to cut the community in half. The trains are welcome, says the Weston Community Coalition, but "Let's build it right the first time" by burying the tracks and creating a Weston station, as there is with Go Transit – ideas that made it into later proposals.

Such discussions were unheard of when the Grand Trunk was built. The Fort York yard itself was formed by dumping fill behind a line of 62 massive timber "cribs," filled with dirt from Garrison Common (a vast tract of land that included what is now Exhibition Place and the residential neighbourhoods to the north of the Fort) and from the GTR cut itself.

Archeological issues were not considered then, so the railway was able to carve its trench through the heart of the 1813 battlefield. That's the equivalent of doing the same thing through the Plains of Abraham in Quebec or Gettysburg in Pennsylvania, and it's probable that the fill still contains cannonballs, artifacts and even human remains. The site is so important, historically, that the City of Toronto is seeking to have Fort York recognized as a World Heritage Site, which would be the first such designation in Ontario. As for the railway itself we tend to either take it for granted or else complain that the tracks cut the rest of the city off from the lake. David Monaghan, curator of the House of Commons and former curator of the land transportation collections at the National Museum of Science and Technology, says that "One of the great tragedies of Canadian Industrial and Transportation history is that so little remains of the original infrastructure that played a critical role in the development of the first railway networks in Canada."

WITH THIS SENTIMENT in mind, that lonely trench under the Gardiner suddenly echoes loud with meaning, as it was one of the reasons Toronto grew as a city. The Grand Trunk connected Toronto to Sarnia, where a ferry (enhanced in 1891 by a rail tunnel) crossed the St. Clair River to Port Huron, Mich., allowing cargo to connect by rail to Chicago, a big market for Toronto's industrial might.

Though there is a huge rail enthusiast community (just [Google](#) anything railroad and see for yourself), the heritage here has not yet been interpreted for the public.

As late as the 1950s, just before the Gardiner was constructed, photos of the rail cut show a bucolic scene resembling rural Ontario more than the centre of a great metropolis. Rail lines in general tend to have a country feel, often with antique wooden electrical poles and wild tall grasses and feral bushes. They are linear countrysides surrounded by urban landscape.

This short part of the Grand Trunk cut can only be followed to about Strachan Ave., and it won't be part of the new airport link. But there are ghosts of the GTR on the GO Train's journey west to Georgetown that will be, and that yet today demonstrate why the Grand Trunk was indeed grand.

Toronto lies in a region of ravines, and the Grand Trunk's builders had to build substantial bridges across wide valleys. Golfers at the Weston Golf and Country Club in the Humber valley, just south of the 401, today tee off to greens below the Humber Viaduct, 170 metres long and standing on eight piers 20 metres high, soaring today just as it did in 1856. Further east, just outside of downtown Georgetown, is the similar, 300-metre-long Grand River viaduct with piers made of

stone quarried nearby.

In his 1855 inspection report, Fred Cumberland Esq., chief engineer of the Ontario, Simcoe and Huron Railway, wrote that they give "such complete assurance to the mind of permanent stability." His words ring true today, as these structures continue to serve as reminders of the industrial foundations that this city and country were built on, and are still rising from.

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