HISTORIC SITES AND MONUMENTS BOARD OF CANADA

RAILWAY STATION REPORT

Title: **Canadian National Railways Station**
Washago, Ontario

Source: **Anne M. de Fort-Menares, Toronto**

RSR-229

INTRODUCTION

The Canadian National Railways (CNR) station on Quetton Street at Highway 11 in Washago, Ontario (Figures 1-3) was built by the Grand Trunk Railway (GTR) in 1898 as part of a system-wide capital upgrade. Particular attention to the tourism potential of the Washago area was reflected in the functional but charming architecture of the station.

Founded on lumber shipping, by 1906 Washago had become a junction point when the Canadian Northern Railway (CNoR) built the James Bay Railway stretch of their Toronto to Parry Sound line through Orillia Township, representing one link in the transcontinental line running across northern Ontario (Figure 4). Already a stop on the GTR extension to North Bay, Washago found itself daily handling the business of two transcontinental lines.

Now modernized for frequent use by railway line staff, the station has been changed considerably since its days as a passenger building: the original wood sheathing was covered with insulbrick, then later with aluminum siding, and the interiors have been completely redone with masonite panelling and dropped ceilings. The open canopies were enclosed for offices and a second bay was added on the town side. The relationship to the tracks was changed when the junction was relocated, but the station yard retains its landmark water tower.[1] Washago has GO Transit service, for which a modern shingled shelter has been provided in front of the station.

There has been insufficient local interest to organize municipal preservation efforts in the township, and the station has not been the subject of public concern.

HISTORICAL ASSOCIATIONS

Thematic

In its setting and history, the Washago station illustrates the importance of the railway in opening resource areas for commerce and settlement. The genealogy of corporate ownership typifies the Byzantine machinations of independent railway lines during the years of system consolidation, and illuminates the larger trends to unification of lines aspiring to connect Toronto with the west, in common cause against Montréal. The first railway reached Washago in the second construction period of Ontario railway development, which spanned the 1870s and 1880s.

Washago station has an almost comically complex lineage as a result of the resource importance of the Simcoe area. The Northern Railway (chartered in 1849 as the Toronto, Simcoe, and Lake Huron Union Railroad Company) was routed through some of the best white pine forests in Canada to open up the fertile country between Toronto and Lake Simcoe, and to provide a portage railway up to Georgian Bay, where company owned steamers linked Lake Ontario business with ports on Lakes Huron and Michigan.[2] From its terminal at Allandale (Barrie), reached in 1855, the line was extended in 1870 to Orillia and Gravenhurst as the Toronto, Simcoe, and Muskoka Junction Railway (TS&M), a lease-back subsidiary built to protect Northern territory.[3] With the North Grey branch from Collingwood to Meaford, the TS&M formed the Northern Extension of the Northern.[4] In 1879 the Northern agreed to pool profits with the Hamilton and Northwestern, but affairs were so tangled that in practise the two amalgamated; in 1886 the combined Northern and Northwestern acquired the charter of the Pacific Junction to build to near Callander, which would give it access to the new Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR). All those lines and more, except the CPR, were swallowed by the GTR in 1884.[5]

In 1889 the Northern was built from Gravenhurst to North Bay, reaching the trans-Canada rail line and the mineral and lumber districts of northern Ontario. The transcontinental railway system displaced the portage function of the Simcoe county area, which was finally obviated by improvements in the Great Lakes Canal system, and ultimately by the St. Lawrence Seaway. The impact of the Northern was tremendous, promoting the clearing of the provincial forests, followed by settlement, a booming lumber industry, and as of 1891 the creation of 48 new communities on mill sites, railway stops and crossroads in Simcoe county.[6]

At the time of the construction of the Washago station, the GTR was enjoying healthy profits and, for the first time, professional management. General Manager Charles Melville Hays introduced American operating methods, reorganized the operation into four divisions and 29 subdivisions, oversaw the reconstruction of capital assets, and built the line to the west

coast.[7] In 1898 16 new stations were built across the system, and 60 were remodelled, painted and repaired.[8] An aggressive programme of station reconstruction and tourism promotion characterized GTR business at the end of the century and set the conditions for the construction of the Washago station.[9]

Local Development

Washago straddles the border between two townships at the narrows of Lakes Simcoe and Couchiching in Simcoe County. The railway station was the first building to explicitly serve and signify the supply and transshipment functions of the settlement, and this station (the second on the site) is the principal witness to those activities. Historically the area was a strategic portage on one of the fur trade routes to Michilimackinac, and Toronto-based French merchant Laurent Quetton St. George was the first land patentee in the narrows.[10] Settlement in Washago began in the 1850s around a milling centre at the head of navigation on Lake Couchiching. The timber-based local economy became dependent on the Northern Railway, constructed to Barrie in 1855, to bring in steam equipment that allowed the operation of portable saw mills. The railway immediately extended the portage function of the area which intensified with reciprocity with the United States; the Northern brought grain from the American west into Toronto via the Lake Simcoe route.[11] After the railway reached Washago in 1873, the tiny settlement had four licensed hotels, two shingle mills, a large saw mill, a grist mill, plus the first station and section house, built in that year as the terminus for the Muskoka Junction Railway (an extension of the Northern out of Barrie).[12]

The railway fostered the already flourishing timber industry and made possible the more rapid exploitation of the county's resources. Tourism followed, though its reach was limited by the effects of lumbering. Travel was reliant on the rail-steamer combination until the provincial County Road System began subsidizing municipal road improvements in 1903.[13] As of 1923, Washago could be reached by car from Toronto along highway 11, whose construction created a concentrated corridor sustaining 42% to 70% of the county population.[14] Tourism increased following improved roads and the interconnection of the Trent Waterway System in 1907. The desire to continue to attract tourists through the natural and scenic qualities of a region dependent on lumbering, coupled with concerns for sustaining the forest yield, led to a provincial reforestation project that was piloted in Simcoe, Ontario Premier E. C. Drury's home county.[15] The reclaiming of 'waste land' for forestry ensured that much of the appeal of the area would continue, and the opening of the highway 400 from Toronto to Barrie in 1952 instigated a flurry of cottage building. Now, of course, most traffic arrives by private road or water conveyance, but for many of the same reasons that first made the railway profitable.

Provisioning and accommodating recreational and sport tourism continue to be important sources of the local economy. Under CNR ownership, the Washago station sits at the junction of the Bala and Newmarket subdivisions, representing the routes of the Midland and Northern railways. GO Transit began rush hour service to Barrie in 1990, which was extended more recently to Washago, where a small shelter was built near the station (Figure 5). Ontario Northland runs passenger trains through Washago, but there is no provision in this station to accommodate them. The station continues in railway use as an office for various sectors of the maintenance and operating divisions.

ARCHITECTURE

Aesthetic/Visual Qualities

The overall form of the Washago station, with its characteristic hipped roofs with cross gables, represents a familiar station type widely used by the GTR around 1900. Basically symmetrical around the projecting operator's bay, Ontario stations such as those at Bradford (ca. 1900), Burlington (1907; municipally owned), Dundas (1901, demolished), Maple (1904; RSR 139), Newmarket (1900; RSR 138), or Stayner (remodelled 1898; municipally owned) varied chiefly in the number of bays and the extent of ornamental woodwork. In this group, Maple is the least altered. Among them, Washago was one of the smallest, and unusual in having a covered shelter: in itself a common element, and quite necessary to the designs of Brampton (1907; RSR 140), St. Catharines (1917), or Port Colborne (1925) stations, but seldom seen on tiny wooden stations.[16]

Originally the Washago station was sided in wood and painted in corporate colours, with a vertical-boarded dado painted a dark colour (sometimes dark red), with lighter horizontal clapboarding above (possibly yellow). Window and door openings were dramatic elements breaking through the light walls, joining the dark base to the shadow band thrown by the wide overhanging eaves (Figure 6). Window sashes and mullions were dark, too, with large central panes framed by delicate, intersecting muntins carrying over a common window treatment of the Queen Anne Revival. The roof was wood shingle, contributing significantly to the texture and the tonal values achieved in a fairly modest station building. Through the widths, placement, and handling of openings, the spatial functions of the building were clearly expressed.

In its present condition, the station has lost most of its detail under aluminum siding, soffits, and new aluminum slider windows, as well as asphalt roof shingles (Figures 7, 8). The relationship of form to function has been blurred by new construction that filled in the covered shelter area at one end and added a projecting bay on the north side (Figure 9). As

well, track realignments have altered the original relationship of the station to the rails.

Built in 1898, the building was apparently remodelled before 1907, but the extent of that work is not known.[17] Extensions to the building commenced in 1922, with the encroachment of new lavatories into the west side shelter, the addition of a second operator's bay on the north side, and a new passenger door was to be opened beside the bay (Figure 10). The concrete foundations and basement were put in with the same project, to provide foundations for the lavatory extension, and perhaps to accommodate a heating upgrade. The proposal may not have been fully implemented, because drawings of 1949 showed much smaller lavatories in the corners, and no additional passenger door (Figure 11).

Subsequent work included covering the building at some unknown date with insulbrick, a composite sheathing paper commonly used on stations where passenger service had declined during the 1950s; the installation of a hot air furnace in 1949; at least two phases of renovations for CNR and VIA Rail passenger service; and conversion to staff office use. In the complete submergence of the building under new materials, the prominent signalling devices were removed, and wood soffits survive in only an isolated fragment of the eaves.

Washago was not the tourist destination that Muskoka Lakes would have been, for example, where the distinctive two storey Wharf station offered a long canopy to shelter passengers awaiting direct steamer connections, and the wharf extension was framed by ornamental wooden railings that matched detailing on the upper level of the station.[18] Nevertheless, the provisions for baggage and sheltered waiting, and the decorative grounds treatment, offered passengers more than the minimum in travel amenities.

Functional/Technological Qualities

As built in 1898, the station had a typical symmetrical plan that balanced the general waiting and baggage rooms around a central operator's office that ran through the short axis of the building (Figure 12). Such a plan was efficient, easily apprehendable, clearly expressed externally, and accomplished the three principal functions of the depot with minimal complexity. Passengers and baggage essentially had straight-through paths; the operator had the requisite access to both services while obtaining a clear view of the tracks and oncoming trains; and freight business could be handled in the office while the materials were kept on sidings. Drawings indicate that the station interior was similar to the new joint depot opened at the Orillia Junction in 1897.[19] The main waiting room was 11'4" to the ceiling, the three-foot dado finished in oiled and varnished Norway pine vertical sheathing, with plaster walls and coved plaster ceilings above. A picture rail ran around the room at 9'3" just above the door frames, repeating and in part

corresponding to the horizontal banding of the exterior (Figure 13). The plan and interior were typical of stations of the Newmarket type built in the capital improvements period of the late 1890s; by the early 1900s, woodwork was more elaborately articulated, with spooled gables, fan brackets, trellis overlays, and more complex rooflines, such as occurred at Maple (1904) or Merritton (1899).

The present plan evolved from the various changes made to accommodate passenger use. Although there is no public access to the station now, circulation follows discernible patterns: entry is still through the passenger waiting room door; the operator's office is still a control centre for operations; and the waiting and baggage room spaces have been subdivided into small, panelled offices. Access to the basement is still through the coal area on the north side, although any trace of functional differentiation has been covered over. Traces of the old vertical boarding survive inside service cupboards, and the wood frames of the bay windows are visible, but otherwise all early finishes have vanished from sight, and often have been removed.

ENVIRONMENT

Setting

The station and railway junction occur at a dramatic narrowing of land between lakes Couchiching and Simcoe. The location is more evident from an aerial perspective, however, or to those arriving by train, than it is on the ground, as the water is not visible from the station. The station sat on a point of land where rail lines diverged, but the track front was farther from its line than was the "town side." Now the station is prominently visible as one of the first buildings on the highway through the town.

The most obvious distinguishing feature of the station yard is the water tower which in 1979 was rebuilt in metal to the northwest of the station from its original position as a wooden structure on the northeast (Figure 14). Until recent years, the tower provided water for the town after railway use had been satisfied.[20]

As a tourist destination, the station grounds were modestly landscaped in the early years. At Allandale and Barrie the waterfronts were sodded and flowerbeds were planted to enhance the station grounds;[21] although no written record has been found for Washago, early photographs show similar concerns for beautification, with a circular flower bed featuring canna lilies, shrubs around the station, expanses of lawn, and small hedges, organized in an effort to put definition onto the large station site (Figure 15).

Inspection for this report occurred during a period of heavy snow cover, but it appears that the station is mostly surrounded by a paved parking lot now which accommodates staff and commuters. The wooden platform of the first phase has long since been replaced, and the tracks that formerly ran north of the station are no longer in use. The track signals and distant coal chute are strong visual indications of the position of the station along a national rail corridor (Figure 16).

Community Status

Washago is an unincorporated municipality that falls under the jurisdiction of the new Severn Township, an amalgamation of Orillia Township (1991 population 7,934), Coldwater, Matchedash, and parts of Tay and Medonte. In its former organization under Orillia township, there was insufficient interest to support a LACAC (local architectural conservation advisory committee) but the township was willing to support designation if private interests paid for the administrative costs. Two requests were received under those conditions, but designation did not occur.

The responsibility for heritage matters in the new township is not yet clear. Orillia township had a regional plan which is to be superseded by a new official plan for the new region, but as yet there isn't even a map of Severn Township. The station closing in 1978 did not raise any stronq protests or public concerns.[22]

Endnotes

1 Rail and Transit, (Toronto: Upper Canada Railway Society), (May-June 1975), p. 29.

2 Frank N. Walker, Four Whistles to Wood-Up: Stories of the Northern Railway of Canada (Toronto: Upper Canada Railway Society, 1953), p. 55; Russell D. Smith, "The Northern Railway: its origins and construction, 18341855," Ontario History vol. XLVIII (1956), p. 24.

3 Northern Managing Director Frederic W. Cumberland was reluctant to build potentially unprofitable branch lines, so the North Grey and TS&M were protected in 1869, leased to the Northern in 1871, and formally amalgamated with the Northern in 1875. A third branch was the North Simcoe, 35 miles built in 1874 from Colwell to Penetanguishene, with the joint objectives of opening farmland and challenging the Midland Railway. A. W. Currie, The Grand Trunk Railway of Canada (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1957), p. 272, gives date of amalgamation as 1872; A. B. Hopper and T. Kearney, comps., Canadian National Railways. Synoptical History of Organization, Capital Stock and Funded Debt... (Montreal: [CNR] Accounting Department, October 15 1962),

p. 642, gives 1875 as the date the amalgamation was signed; it was confirmed by Dominion Act 40 Vic. Cap. 52, 1877.

4 Christopher Andreae, A Historical Railway Atlas of Southwestern Ontario (London: private, 1972), p. 13; Miles and Company Illustrated Historical Atlas of the County of York (1878).

5 The GTR secured the Hamilton and Northwestern, from Hamilton to Barrie; the Northern from Barrie to Gravenhurst; the Midland from Orillia to Midland; and North Simcoe Railway from Colwell to Penetanguishene. Andrew F. Hunter, A History of Simcoe County (Toronto: Warwick Bro's & Rutter, 1909), vol. I p. 198, gives dates that conflict with Currie, who is the greater railway authority. Currie, op. cit., p. 278.

6 W. W. Fieguth, The Personality of North Simcoe County: A Study in Historical Geography (London: Department of Geography, University of Western Ontario, Occasional Papers No. 2, 1968), p. 26.

7 Currie, op. cit., pp. 371, 375.

8 "Grand Trunk Betterments, Etc.," Canadian Railway and Shipping World (CRMW) (April 1899), p. 113.

9 The question of building a first-class railway hotel in the Muskoka area was repeatedly raised in the industry journal. Said to be "vitally interested in Muskoka travel," the GTR produced travel literature that was distributed in Canada and the United States. CRMW (June 1898), p. 90.

10 In 1846 his son Henri Q. St. George, who had come from France to take up his father's legacy, acquired the lands that included Orillia Island and a part of Rama Township where Washago developed. Frankie MacArthur, Green and Sparkling: The Story of Washago (n.p., 1971), p. 14.

11 Fieguth, op. cit., p. 23.

12 Gabrielle Lotimer, comp. and ed., Reflections of the Past: The Story of Rama Township (Washago: Township of Rama, 1989), p. 310, citing the Orillia Expositor of January, 1875; MacArthur, Green and Sparkling, p. 50.

13 James Craig, Simcoe County. The Recent Past (n.p.: Corporation of the County of Simcoe, 1977), p. 61.

14 Fieguth, op. cit., pp. 29, 37. 42% of the population clustered around highway 11 in 1942, and rose to 70% by 1960.

15 Craig, op. cit., p. 136.

16 Burlington station also had a covered shelter at the end; it is about to be restored by the municipality (1994).

17 Grand Trunk Railway System, "Bridges and Buildings, Northern Division," (Montreal: GTR, n.d. [1907?]), p. 140.

18 Illustrated CRMW (April 1899), p. 101.

19 "New Station Opened," The Weekly Times (Orillia), 25 November 1897.

20 In 1969 the tower still fed water to 72 homes and businesses, having been bought from the railway by theresidents around 1960. "Washago's Unique Water System...," (Orillia) Daily Packet and Times (12 April 1969); "'Petticoat Junction' water can't meet Washago's new sytem...," Daily Packet and Times (10 November 1979).

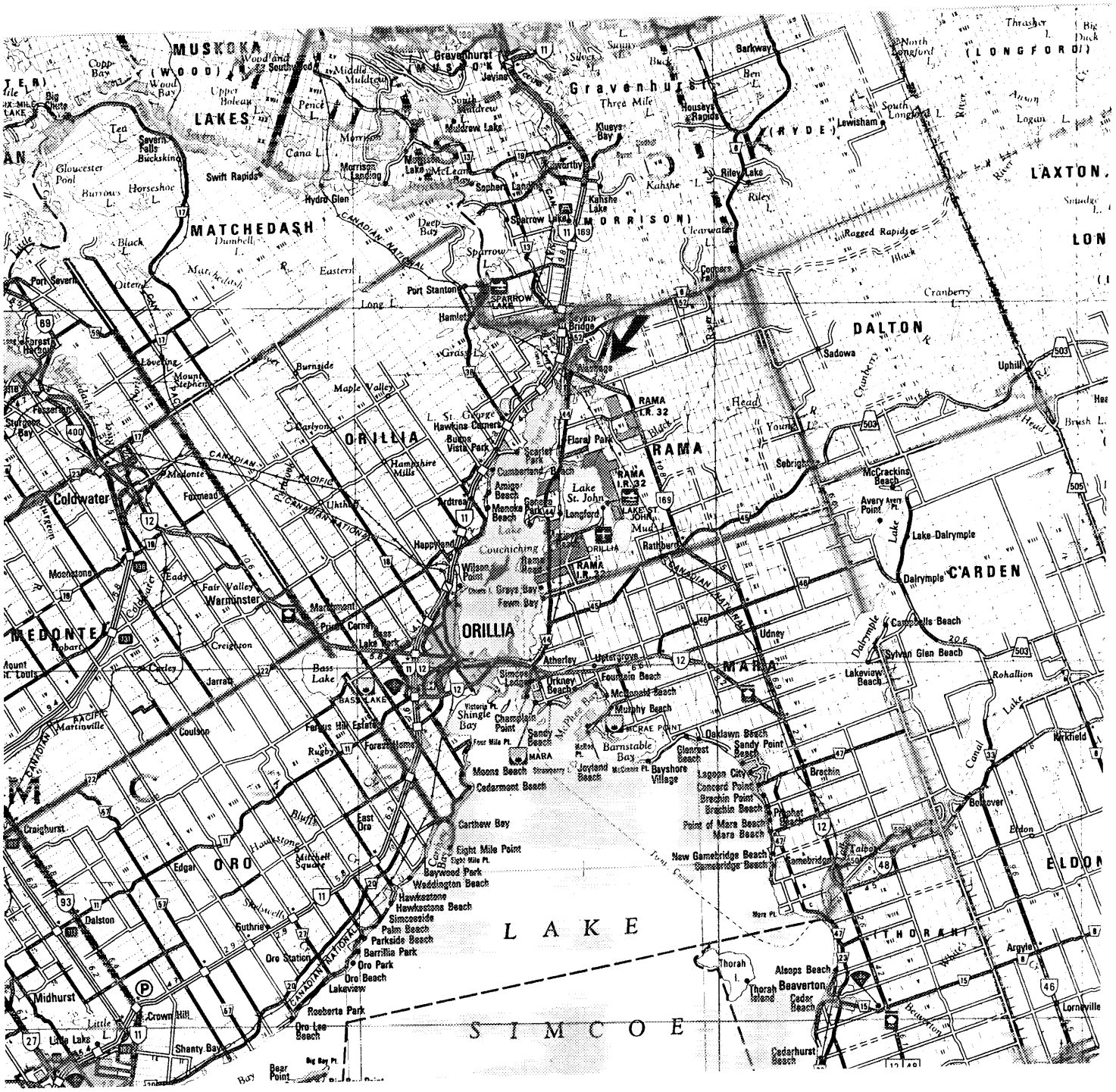
21 "Grand Trunk Betterments, Etc.," CRMW (August 1900), p.234.

22 James Mather, clerk of the former Orillia township, in conversation with the author, 21 January 1994.

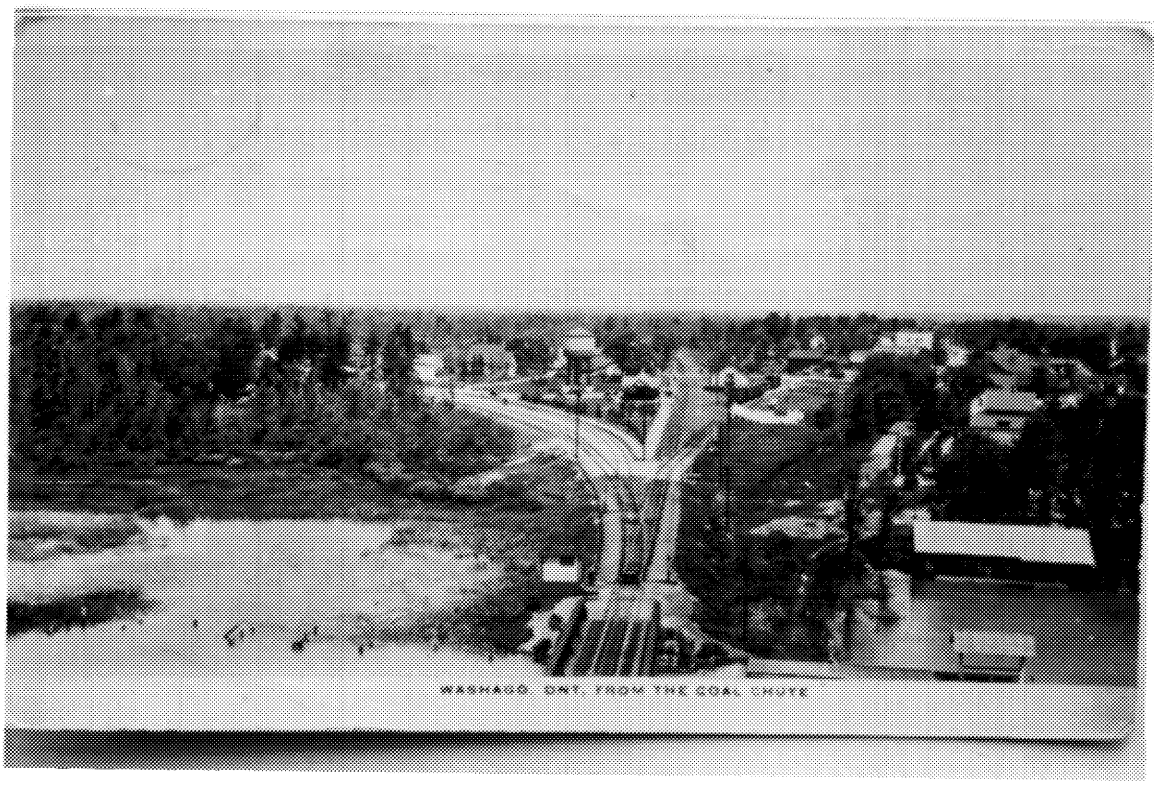
CANADIAN NATIONAL RAILWAYS STATION, WASHAGO, ONTARIO

1 Canadian National Railways Station, Washago, Ontario. Built 1898. South front elevation. (A. M. de Fort-Menares, 1994.)

CANADIAN NATIONAL RAILWAYS STATION, WASHAGO, ONTARIO

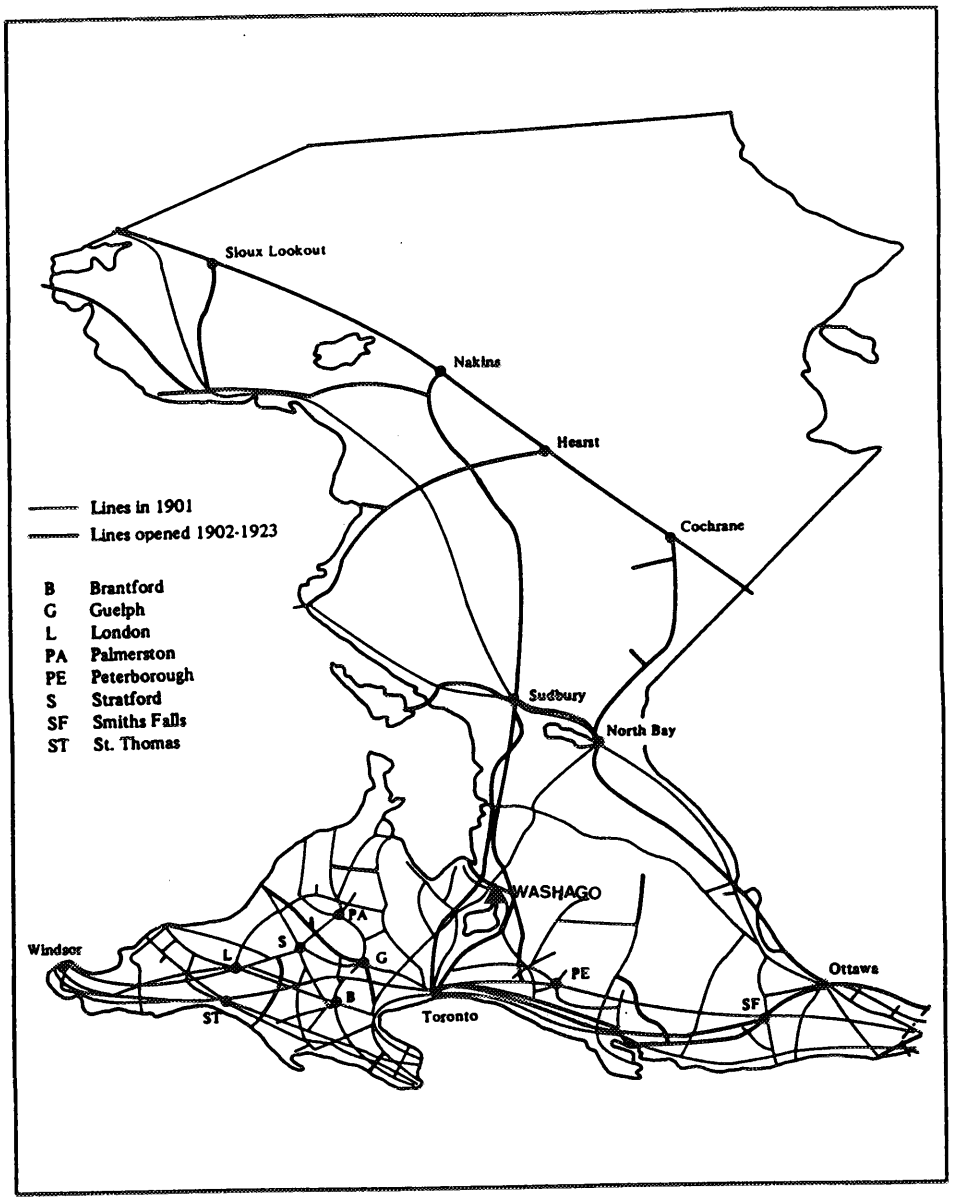


2 Location of Washago. (Map 5: South Central Ontario [Ministry of Transportation, 1984].)

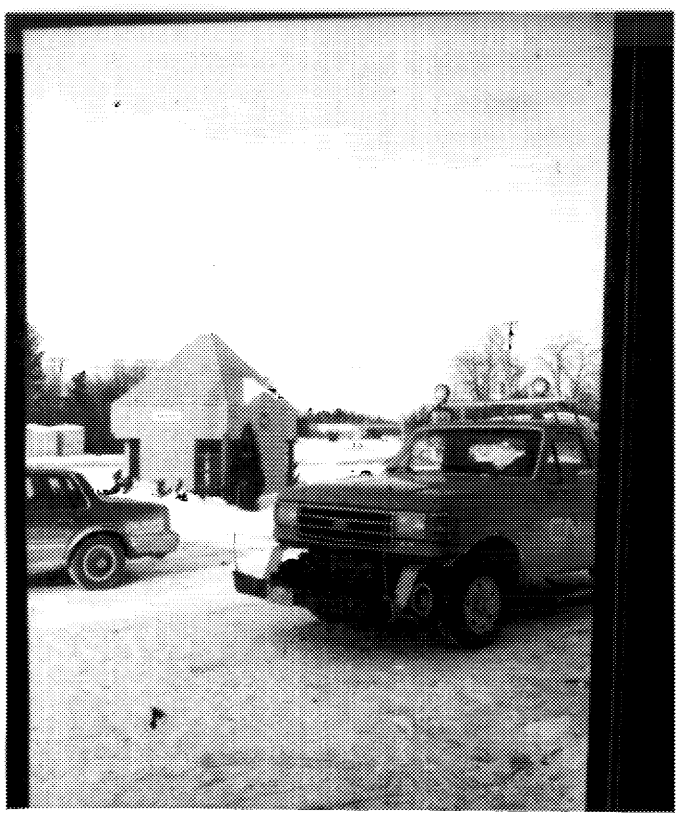


3 Washago from the coal chute. (n.d.: Courtesy John Dean private collection, Washago.)

CANADIAN NATIONAL RAILWAYS STATION, WASHAGO, ONTARIO



4 The Ontario railway network in 1923, with location of Washago and its connections to the national line. (G.T. Bloomfield, The Railway Life-Cycle in Ontario [University of Guelph Department of Geography Occasional Paper No. 17, 1992] fig. 2.6.)



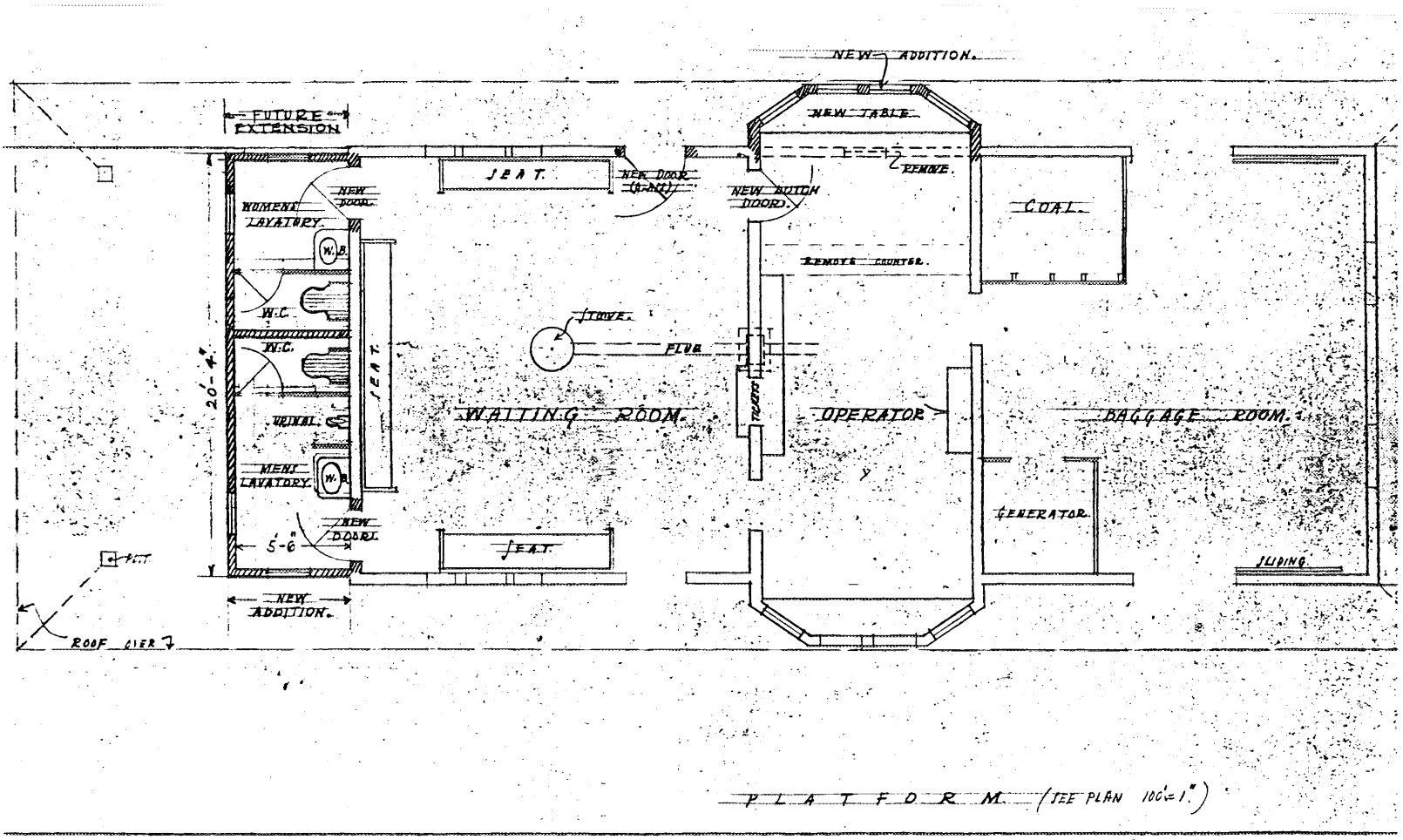
5 GO Transit shelter in front of Washago station. (A. M. de Fort-Menares, 1994.)

6 Washago station painted in GTR corporate colours. (Courtesy John Dean private collection, Washago.)

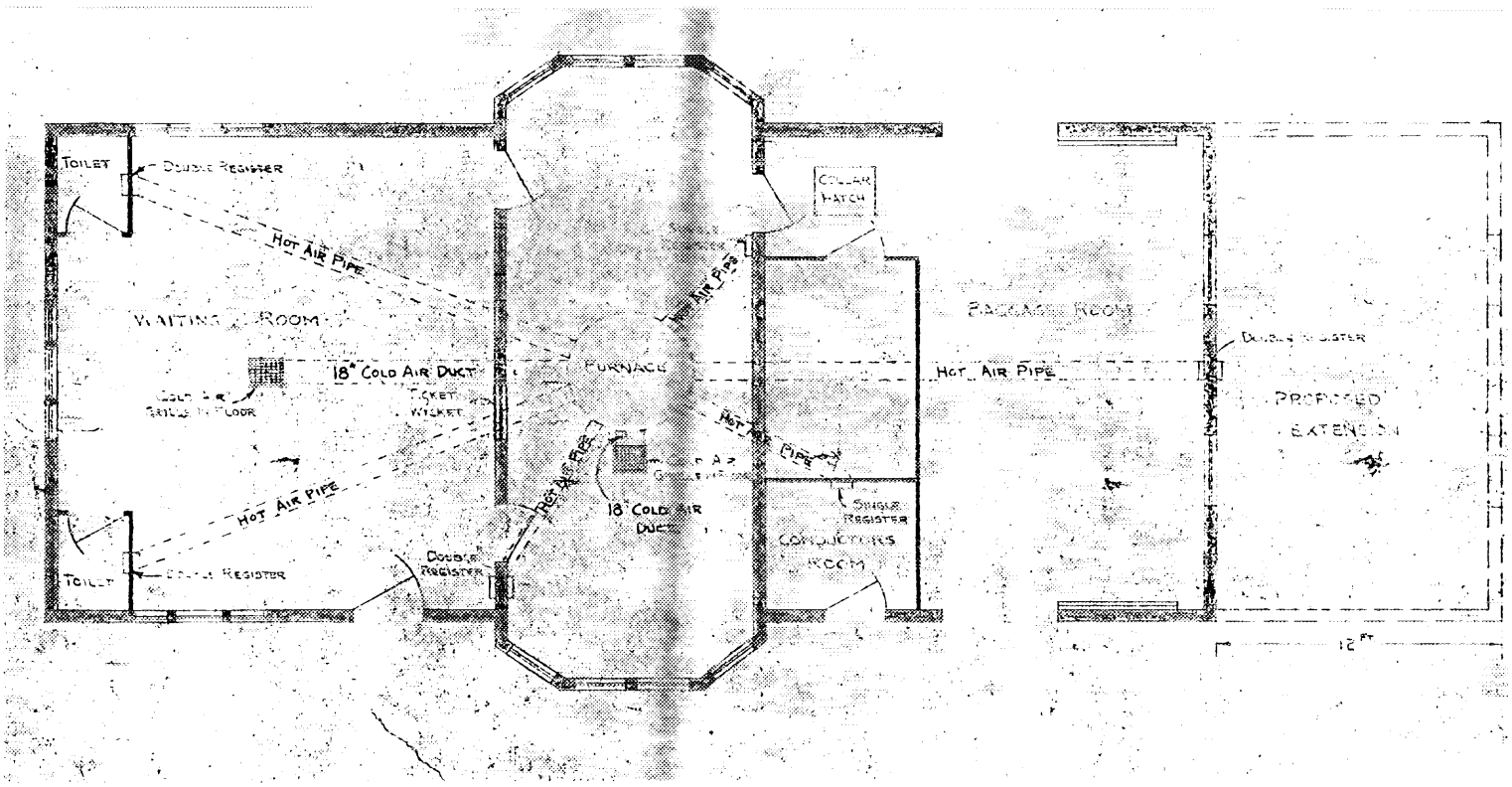
7 Detail of wall elevation at west end, with fragment of wooden soffit. (A. M. de Fort-Menares, 1994.)

8 East end and south front, Washago station. (A. M. de Fort-Menares, 1994.)

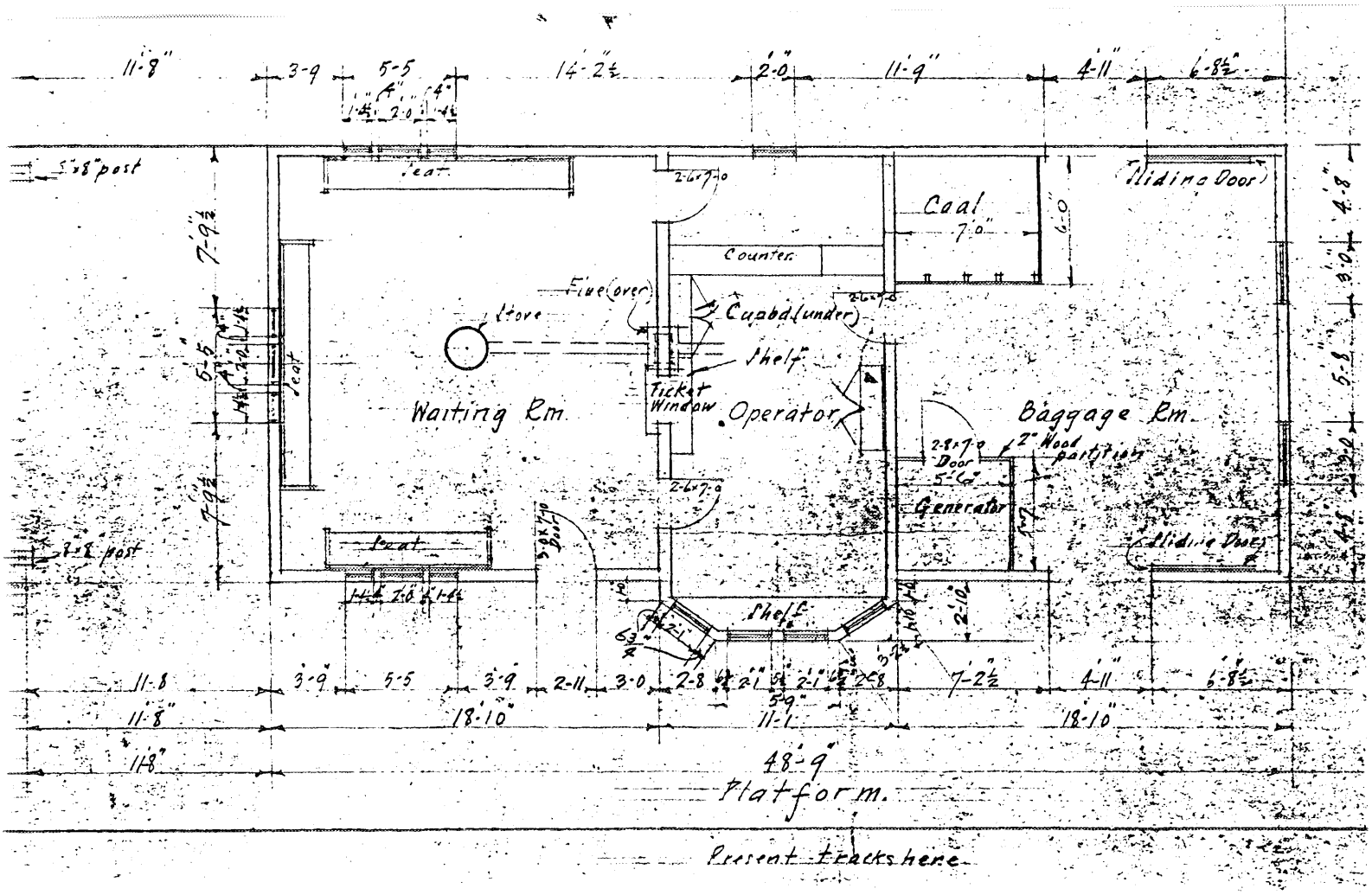
9 Later bay on north front, Washago station. (A. M. de Fort-Menares, 1994.)



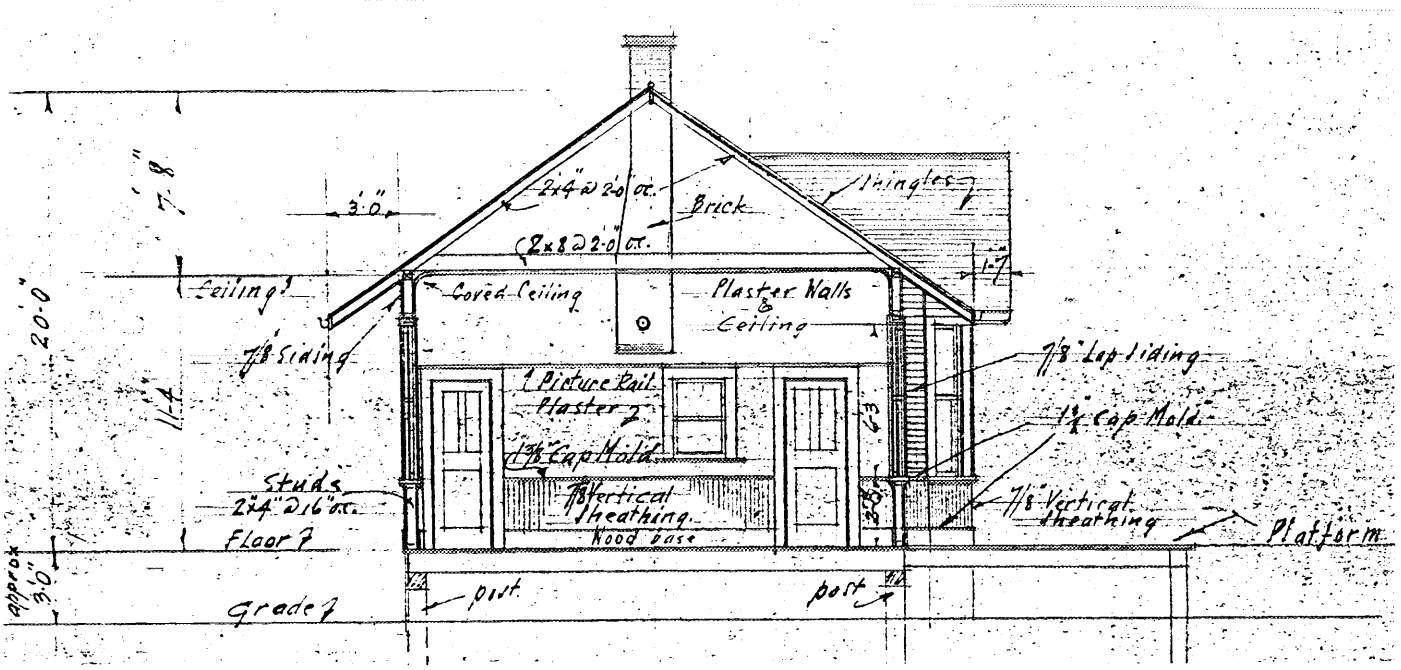
10 "Alterations and Additions to Station," CN Railway November 1921. (Courtesy Ken Rose, VIA Rail.)



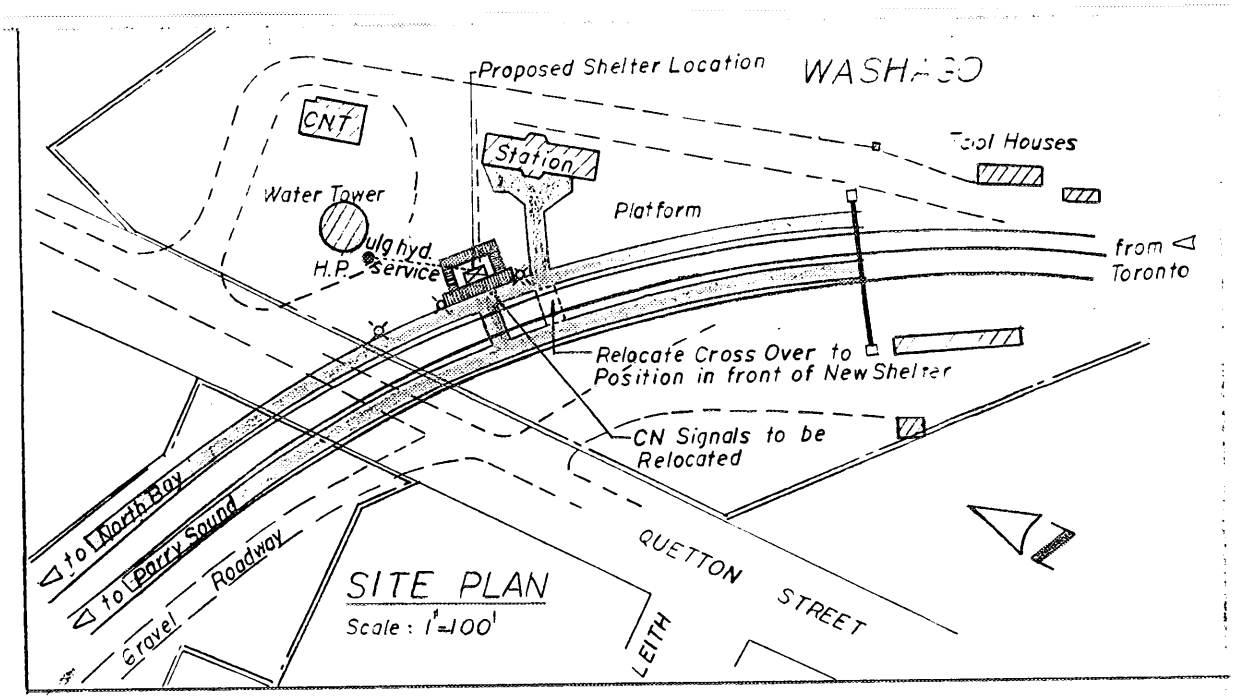
11 "Heating Layout," CN Railways, July 29 1949. (Courtesy Ken Rose, VIA Rail.)



12 Plan as built, Washago station. (Courtesy Ken Rose, VIA Rail.)



13 "Cross Section," CNR Washago, 31 October 1921. (Courtesy Ken Rose, VIA Rail.)



14 Site plan, Washago station, showing relocation of facilities to accommodate GO Transit services. (Robert F. Sward, P. Eng., Railway Engineering Services London, Ont. June 29 1987. Courtesy Ken Rose, VIA Rail.)

15 Historic photograph of Washago station showing landscaping. (Orillia Public Library OR-823.)

16 View of station grounds from north. The Washago station is at centre, with the water tower on the right and signal structure on the left. (A. M. de Fort-Menares, 1994.)