HISTORIC SITES AND MONUMENTS BOARD OF CANADA

RAILWAY STATION REPORT

Title: **Canadian National Railways Station (Former Grand Trunk Railway Station) Strathroy, Ontario**

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

RSR-262

INTRODUCTION[1]

The Canadian National Railways (CNR) station at Albert and Metcalfe streets in Strathroy (Figures 1-3), was built by the Grand Trunk Railway (GTR) in 1887-88 as part of its upgrade of properties acquired in the 1882 takeover of the Great Western Railway (GWR). Although the two companies began with different objectives, by 1859 each line was intercepting lake traffic at Sarnia. This substantial brick station on the London to Sarnia subdivision represented a particular moment in the history of the railway, carrying forward the visual image established for the GWR by its chief engineer Joseph Hobson, and anticipating a healthy future for the GTR.

The arrival of railway service dramatically transformed Strathroy, causing the relocation of the business section to an area previously little more than swampland, and substantially bolstering the economy.[2]

In design the Strathroy station follows the precedent established for the GWR by Hobson at seven or eight previous stations. The building has not been significantly altered, although some rooms have been modified. Now used by the CNR signal department, the station is conspicuously situated at the centre of Strathroy, and the yard corridor is surrounded by the buildings of industries which had been rail-dependent. VIA Rail has built a separate shelter for its passengers. The London to Sarnia line is still in active use for freight, and by passengers on Chicago-bound Amtrak and Sarnia-bound VIA Rail trains. As there are no active heritage organizations in Strathroy, any local concern about the building is without an organized channel for expression.

HISTORICAL ASSOCIATIONS

Thematic

As one of a group of nine stations designed by Hobson for the GWR and GTR, the Strathroy station characterizes early railway

history in southwestern Ontario, which was largely a story of bridging the province to capitalize on the American economy.[3] While the GWR had always been planned as a southern through-route serving American traffic, the GTR started life as a national railway, expanding its scope only when it became apparent that local traffic wouldn't pay.[4] The Strathroy station, built on the GWR line, retains the imagery of the GWR stations but was made possible by the international ambitions of the GTR.

After the settlement of border disputes, Canadian rail access to the ice-free ports and larger markets of the United States occurred first from the prime Canadian commercial port of Montreal, when a railway opened to Boston in 1851, then another to Portland, Maine in 1853.[5] Investment in railways on both sides of the border fuelled a mania for building and consolidating lines, ignited by the abolition of canal tolls on rail freight in 1851, and continuing through the Reciprocity Treaty between Canada and the United States, which was in effect from 1854 to 1866.[6]

In the scheme of the Canadas, bringing traffic through the Niagara peninsula represented a small strategic refinement on the larger geographic context, but was essential to regional growth. From the GWR terminal of early 1854 at Windsor, trains were ferried to Detroit and on to the booming cities of the American west via the Michigan Central Railroad, opened in 1852.[7] From Sarnia, trains could intercept steamer traffic coming through the Great Lakes as well as make the Chicago connection. The GWR reached Sarnia via Point Edward in 1858.[8]

The GTR had also planned a through line to Sarnia, but in 1854 British financiers Baring & Glyn requested the Canadian Parliament to adjust the company's charter, including indefinitely postponing construction of the 245 kilometres between St. Mary's and Sarnia.[9] Sarnia was subsequently reached from Stratford in 1859, and the line was extended to Detroit in 1860, provoking intense rivalry with the GWR.

By the time the Canadian lines reached the Michigan border, Michigan was already connected to eastern ports by American railways. The bountiful American freight that backers were anticipating for the Canadian routes was diverted by these earlier lines. Nevertheless, the Sarnia connection proved sufficiently profitable that a third railway, the local feeder Erie & Huron Railway, was built from Erieau on Lake Erie, in 1883.[10] The GTR achieved lines into Chicago in 1880, which brought such lucrative traffic that their dependence on Canadian freight was greatly reduced. Part of the new profits came from the dressed meat traffic out of Chicago, begun in 1878, which the GTR acted quickly to secure.[11] Sarnia was also a location for major railway shops, and received international engineering attention with the construction of the Sarnia Tunnel under the St. Clair River in 1890, an improvement developed in part to expedite dressed meat delivery. In particular, in 1882-83 the

GTR rebuilt the 2.5 miles of track between its own line to Point Edward, and the recently-acquired GWR line at Sarnia.[12]

The completion of the St. Clair Tunnel allowed the GTR to route more of its business between Chicago and its Atlantic terminal in Maine via Sarnia rather than through Detroit and Windsor. Correspondingly less freight was shipped across southwestern Ontario by the company.[13] The opening of a new, $200 million rail tunnel between Sarnia and Port Huron in 1995 demonstrates the continuing importance of this route.[14]

Strathroy was the beneficiary of GWR routing, as the town would have had few natural advantages to otherwise distinguish it from its local competitors. When the GTR rebuilt the station, the company was enjoying a resurgence of revenues after the recession of the mid-1880s, and beginning a series of capital improvements that would last almost until the First World War. Grain traffic, its primary business, was up, the railway had consolidated most of the small lines in Ontario to fend off competition from the Canadian Pacific Railway, and double-tracking the line from Montreal to Toronto was underway. It was not until the late 1890s that the GTR again began building standard stations across its system in Ontario. The Hobson designs can be seen as an intermediate attempt to establish corporate identity, applied with interesting effect after the merger of the two leading railways in western Ontario.

Local Development

Strathroy was not a "railway town" in terms of employment, but its economy relied heavily on the benefits railway traffic provided. The downtown streets of Strathroy were physically delimited by railway lines, the town's fortunes depended wholly on the railway, and throughout the 19th century the town council keenly courted every possibility for enhanced rail access.

Population was only 400 in 1857, at a time when the railway had been expected for seven years; the village incorporated in 1859, the year the railway opened, and by 1862, population had shot up to 950.[15]

Strathroy was eager for railway access, and actively negotiated with the GWR to locate their line closer to town than was originally projected. As a result, the tracks crossed the Sydenham River through low, marshy ground and the business district relocated to be near the station.[16] By the 1880s Strathroy was a pleasant Ontario community, praised for her "shaded avenues...numerous fine dwellings and gardens...public and private libraries...the locomotive whistle speaking of progress, the telephone, the telegraph, all are here. This is civilization."[17]

A new GTR depot at Strathroy 80 feet east of the old GWR station was projected from 1883, when work began connecting the GWR

division and the main GTR line between Sarnia and Point Edward.[18] The tracks through Strathroy were realigned toward the southwest, and municipal buildings were eventually built on land adjacent to the old station grounds. The existing station was built in 1887-88.

The construction of the new station was given minor coverage in the local paper, and there was no official opening. The station opened to the public in May, 1888, but as of the following September was still without furniture, a situation causing "considerable" inconvenience.[19] The town had attempted to raise the company's assessment by $5,000., whereupon railway officials declined to attend the town's banquet for the opening, and apparently declined to furnish the station. The editor of the Strathroy Age considered the building handsome, commodious, and a liberal offering from the railway considering that the town was not providing any concessions to the GTR.[20] No mention was made of the old station.

Flour production exceeded railway capacity in the early 1880s, and residents clamoured for better service to retain businesses, which were perceived to be fleeing to jurisdictions offering better incentives. To make matters worse, the town prohibited the sale of alcoholic beverages from 1909 to 1957, which caused the closure of several hotels.[21] Despite municipal efforts "for the protection of this community,"[22] Strathroy never obtained another railway line. Towards the turn of the century, furniture making, and food canning and evaporating augmented the expanded mills producing woollens, flour, and lumber products.[23] Many of these businesses clustered around the railway (Figure 4).

A press report of 1909 noted that plans for remodelling the station had been prepared, and would include such improvements as the installation of waterworks in the yard. The yard did eventually get waterworks, and the Saginaw brick may date from that time, but it is not clear whether the station itself was remodelled.[24]

Through the 20th century, the railway dropped from most news and business accounts as other community interests took precedence: hospitals, schools, public works. Similarly, trade journals turned their focus to industry issues at the expense of site-specific items, and news of the community station became lost in the larger system. The increased bureaucratization of railway companies and municipalities, and changes in the economy, further reduced any influence local officials might have in railway decisions.

The Strathroy station is used by CNR signal crews, and part of the former waiting room is rented to a local merchandiser for storage. Amtrak and VIA Rail passengers are served by a small enclosed platform shelter west of the station.

ARCHITECTURE

Aesthetic/Visual Qualities

The Strathroy station is distinctly a Hobson design, with its characteristic hipped end gables, high roof ridge and resultant long slide of slate over the platform canopy. This building is distinguished by its four triple stack chimneys marching down the length of the roof ridge, bereft of their original corbelled caps but asserting themselves as solid anchors of the structure nonetheless (Figure 5). The structure of white brick with red brick trim has been obscured by grey paint; the original finish can be seen where a canopy strut was removed on the north side (Figure 6). Foundations are expressed as a water table of nine courses of brick.

End elevations are simple, and were originally identical: two windows and an attic bulls-eye on the west, one of the windows converted to a door on the east (Figures 7-8). Signboards are in place on both ends. The symmetry continued to both the main elevations, which were alike except for two small details: on the track elevation, the operator's bay projection had a centre mullion; on the north side, the bay served as the entrance to the ladies' waiting room, and doors opened through the centre of the bay. That bay appears to have been twice altered: from door to window, from window to small, horizontal sliding window. Every opening on the north side had a corresponding opening on the south, except that one extra opening was required on the track side to accommodate internal arrangements (Figures 9-11). Also, five of the 15 openings on the track side were doorways (three double, two single), and only three on the north side were doors.

Architecturally, the building has few details to link it to architecture of its period, or to buildings of its environs; its major feature is the roof, capable of conveying the image of shelter for as far as the building can be seen; and the powerful rhythm on both facades of the canopy struts, a major decorative element. The incised decoration is typical of scroll-saw technology introduced in the late 1870s (Figure 12). Fenestration seems to have been one-over-one; windows are boarded up now to prevent vandalism. Sills are moulded stone, with carefully sloped surfaces and chamfered lintels. Similarly, the brick around window openings is chamfered for most of the jamb, with sharp arrises at top and bottom (Figure 13). These rather simple elements show care in detailing and workmanship, and concern for durability.

Doors, where visible, are of three types showing three periods. The earliest, probably original to 1888, are the most formal: double leaved, with two unequal fielded panels with deep mouldings, and a large rectangular transom above (Figure 14). Dating from the GTR ownership are lively two panel double doors with diagonal boarding behind chamfered rails and stiles, with three small glazing panels at the top: a type typical of the

1890-1910 period (Figure 15). Latest are single-leaf doors with a vertical row of rectangular panels which probably post-date 1920 (Figure 16).

Deterioration is extensive, largely due to lack of maintenance. The original slates are still on the roof, but break off and shatter in fragments on the brick platform. Photographic evidence suggests that the ornate chimney caps were removed within 30 years or so. The west end of the trackside canopy is separating from the roof plate, threatening to tear off the canopy end. A similar problem on the north side of the west end resulted in the removal of a whole section of the canopy, eave, and four struts (Figure 16). The woodwork needs painting, and the brickwork requires attention. The light for the platform sideboard is in place, although the sign itself is down.

Early photographs show the polychromy of the building, with a dark dado effect typical of GTR stations of the period before World War I. The chimneys in particular, with dark bases, arcaded white brick stacks, and dark caps, were significant design elements (Figures 17-18). The strong roofline and recognizeable colouring[25] gave the building a confident presence.

Purpose-built stations of the GWR in the 1870s and 1880s have a character attributable to Joseph Hobson (1834-1917), chief engineer of the company. Hobson trained as a surveyor in Toronto, and acquired his credentials as a civil engineer through practical application with Gzowski and McPherson on the Guelph section of the Grand Trunk Railway. In 1870 he was appointed resident engineer to build the steel arch bridge across the Niagara River replacing the Suspension Bridge. Following that success he was named chief engineer for the GWR in 1873, eventually becoming chief engineer for the GTR system in 1895. One of his outstanding accomplishments was the design and construction of the Sarnia tunnel, stretching over two miles under the St. Clair River, completed in 1891 and considered one of the feats of the age. He also replaced the Victoria Bridge in Montreal, at its construction a great marvel, with a double-track structure.[26]

Relative to other Hobson stations, the Strathroy design has high recognition factors and high integrity, considering the extent of original interior and exterior detailing which survives, such as the slate roof, original chimneys, doors, and interior trim. It belongs to the category of single-storey, single-profile stations, as opposed to those with strong two-storey components breaking the line of the roof ridge, as seen at Niagara Falls (1879; RSR 217, designated), Windsor (1884, demolished), or Hamilton (1875, demolished).

In this category, the ornament is plainer than what is found on the Gothic examples, such as Chatham, which featured a centre gable, truncated wing gables, and was originally fringed with pierced and decorated bargeboards (Figure 19). Gothic detailing

was found at Chatham, (1874, demolished), Woodstock (1880; RSR 198, designated), and Niagara Falls, although rooflines and massing are similar among several of the stations, regardless of detailing. At Strathroy, the relationship of the canopy to the roof slope, which gives the station its distinctive silhouette and predominant character, is unique among surviving designs; but then, each of the surviving Hobson stations is unique in detail while generally sharing a family resemblance.

Functional/Technological Qualities

The building plan, which interspersed railway offices with public waiting rooms, is still largely intact, and original interior trim is evident throughout.

Originally all the major functions had independent access from outside the building, with the baggage room across the east end having a straight-through travel path (Figure 20). With five of 12 bays, the ladies' waiting room and lavatory occupied nearly half the town side elevation. In addition to the usual rooms for express and customs on the west end, the large general waiting room occupying the rest of the west half, and offices for the agent and ticketing, this station had a generous and private porters room, measuring 19'3" by 12' that had access only to the platform. The four chimneys enabled the provision of stoves in every space. Plan No. 402, which was signed by the contractors, also tells us the location of pendant gas fixtures in the main rooms (Figure 20).

Contemporary reports mentioned the provision of an apartment for the station master, but neither the drawings nor the building give any indication of such accommodation; it was also proposed that the station would be about 60 feet long and two stories high.[27] As built it was 120 feet long, and one storey (Figure 21). Modifications seem to have been made after the station closed for passenger use, possibly in the 1940s; these consist of modernisations (electricity, a new furnace) and a small number of new doorways and partitions.

Alterations to the interior include stamped metal fluorescent luminaires of a type common in the 1940s; pressed panelboard which may have been introduced at the same time; dropped acoustic ceiling tiles; plywood wall partitions; and sheet flooring materials. The most intact room, in spatial dimensions and finishes, is the baggage room, with wood floors, vertical boarded dados, and heavy trims, now painted silver (Figure 22). Even here, some composite material has been applied to upper walls and ceilings, perhaps for insulation.

Door mouldings have high, plain bases, and the trim is a shadow box of progressively larger compositions ending in a great roll on the outer edge of the frame. The vertical dado panelling is V-jointed to within a few inches of the top, recalling the detail of jamb chamfers around the window openings (Figure 23).

Baseboards, like the frame bases, are very high and deeply cut horizontally, an unusual profile.

The interior is strewn with equipment, and only one room seems to be used as an office with any frequency. Forced air heating was introduced after the station was closed without any particular concern for the integrity of the building or aesthetics. A few door and window trims are plain, relatively modern material (Figure 24).

The plan conformed to typical practise and in some respects anticipated the recommendations published by professional railwaymen in the 20th century. Passengers are given clear and direct orientation, and the ticket office is efficiently laid out. Questions arise however about the single lavatory at the end of the ladies' waiting room (was it for general use or women only?), and about the indirect route from the ladies' waiting room to the platform. By comparison, the Chatham station of 1878 offered women a straight-through, separate path to the platform. Perhaps the canopy on the north side offered protection for women to walk around the outside of the building; or the plan may have anticipated the women's retiring rooms of the early 20th century. Overall a significant amount of original, Hobson-era detailing survives.

ENVIRONMENT

Setting

The station lands are just south of the intersection of five streets on the edge of Strathroy's central district. The railway clearly marked an industrial corridor through the town, and the remains of various rail-dependent businesses are evident in the feed mill to the northwest (formerly the Pincombe Flour Mill), the agglomeration of the Strathroy Furniture Company on Caradoc Street, and the sidings still evident through the rail yard (Figure 25). Gone are the freight shed, signal tower, cattle pens, extensive coal sheds, oil tanks, and the neat garden at the east end of the station (Figure 18).

The platform was laid in Saginaw brick, a hard type used by GTR from about 1910 on. A short stretch of fenced, slightly elevated platform has been built at the track edge.

The station interjects a clear industrial zone between the business district and downtown residential area of Strathroy to the north, and a southerly residential area. It is still surrounded by working mills, warehouses, and automobile repair garages.

Community Status

Heritage concerns in Strathroy have a limited following, and the town's official commitment to its past is made in the designation of historic, municipally-owned properties, and in the support of the Strathroy-Middlesex Museum. There are no local historical societies or organizations to promote such issues.[28] Anecdotal evidence indicates scattered, individual concern about the railway station, which has no appropriate channel for expression.

Endnotes

1 This report benefits from the photographs and research files of C. A. Andreae, Historica Research Ltd., London Ontario.

2 "Strathroy's Centennial Anniversary 1832-1932," photocopy at Strathroy Public Library.

3 The Hobson stations, all in Ontario, are: (GWR)- Hamilton (1875, demolished), Clifton/Niagara Falls (1879, designated), Chatham (1879), Tillsonburg (1874, demolished), Woodstock (1880, designated); and (GTR)- Strathroy (1887), Ingersoll (1886), Sarnia (1890, designated); it is reasonable to suppose Hobson to have been responsible for the GTR station at Windsor of 1884 (station demolished, large freight shed intact).

4 A. W. Currie, The Grand Trunk Railway of Canada (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1957), expands on this convincingly, p. 222.

5 William J. Wilgus, The Railway Interrelations of the United States and Canada (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1937), p. 39.

6 Ibid., pp. 80, 41.

7 Ibid., p. 81.

8 Work was delayed by a Board of Directors dispute about whether the section was a branch or main line. A. W. Currie, op. cit., p. 169.

9 A. W. Currie, op. cit., .p. 32.

10 Victor Lauriston, Romantic Kent the Story of a County 1626-1952 (Chatham: County of Kent and City of Chatham [1952?]), p. 259.

11 G. R. Stevens, Canadian National Railways (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin & Company LImited), p. 363.

12 A. W. Currie, op. cit., p. 349.

13 Ibid., p. 350.

14 "New tunnel opens, linking Canadian, U.S. industry," Globe and Mail (6 April 1995), p. B8. The tunnel replaced that designed by Hobson. The paper stated, "CN hopes that the more efficient connection will help it regain cross-border traffic now dominated by trucks."

15 Daniel Brock, History of the County of Middlesex (1889, rev. ed. Belleville: Mika Studio, 1972), p. 417. A town charter was obtained in 1870.

16 "Strathroy's Centennial Anniversary 1832-1932," in three-ring binder titled "History of Strathroy from the Dispatch," (23 April 1879), in Strathroy-Middlesex Museum.

17 Cited in Daniel Brock, op. cit., p. 418.

18 Ken Campbell, They Came Before Us: the people of Strathroy and their lives 1832-1900 (Strathroy: Ken Campbell, 1990), p. 31; Clifford R. Cox, Strathroy: 1834-1934 (Strathroy: Age Dispatch, 1934), p. 17.

19 The Age, (6 September 1888), p. 4.

20 Ibidem.

21 Phyllis Mitchell, ed. Strathroy Centennial 1860-1960 (Strathroy?: no publisher, ca. 1960), p. 89. Booklet in Strathroy Public Library.

22 Ken Campbell, op. cit., pp. 33-37.

23 Cox, op. cit., pp. 122-28.

24 "GTR Development," Canadian Railway and Marine World (January 1909), p. 19; no further mention was made to the end of 1910, and from extensive research in this journal it seems unlikely that further works at Strathroy were mentioned.

25 GTR colours were often red and yellow, sometimes with green. The earliest photograph of the Strathroy station shows a dark base, light upper walls, light fascias trimmed with dark lines, and dark struts carrying dark trim on the canopy.

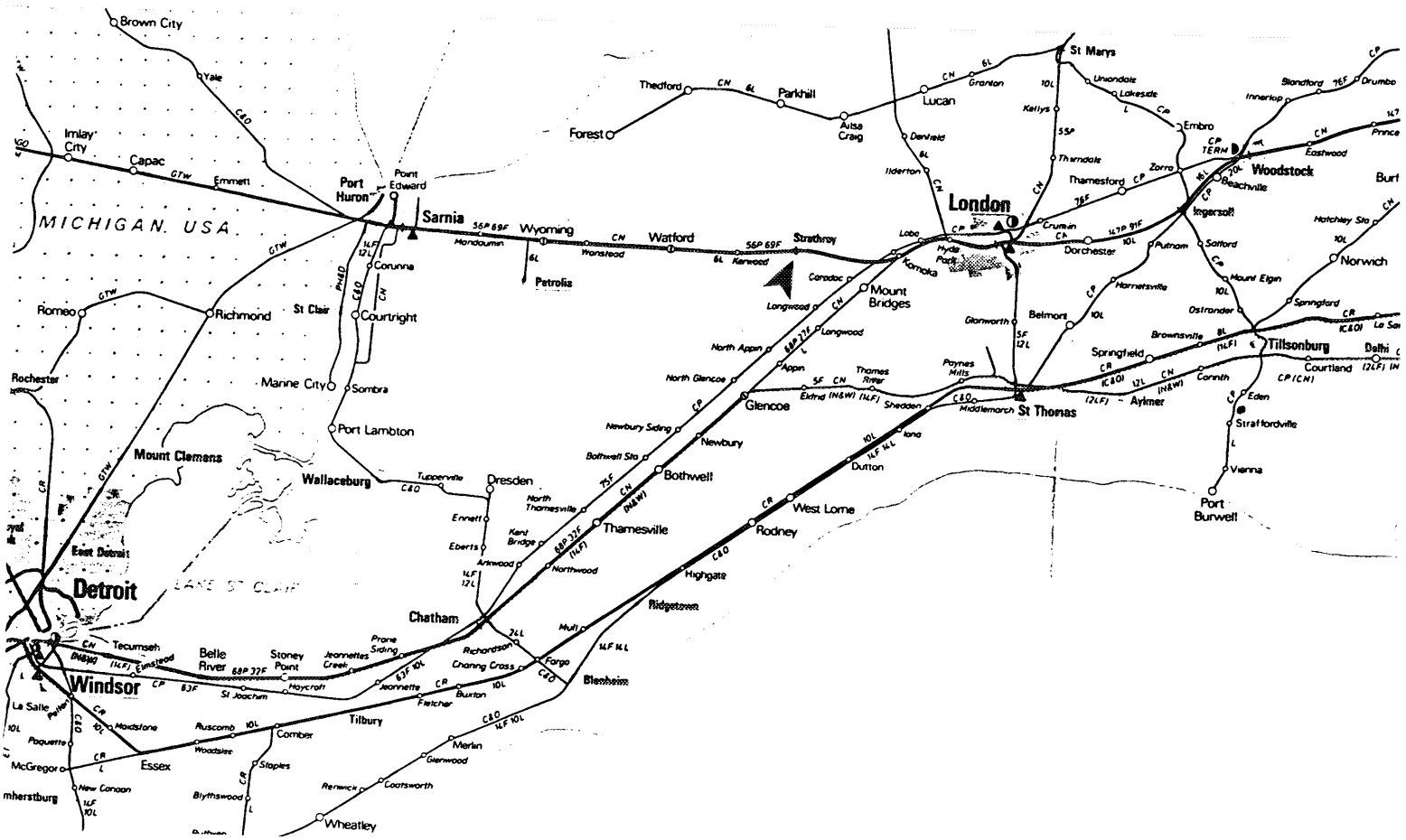
26 "Great Engineer Died Here To-Day," Hamilton Spectator (19 december 1917), p. 21. Courtesy Robert Hill. Ibidem.

27 Ken Campbell, op. cit., p. 31.

28 Muriel Kew, curator Strathroy-Middlesex Museum, in conversation with the author, 6 March 1995.

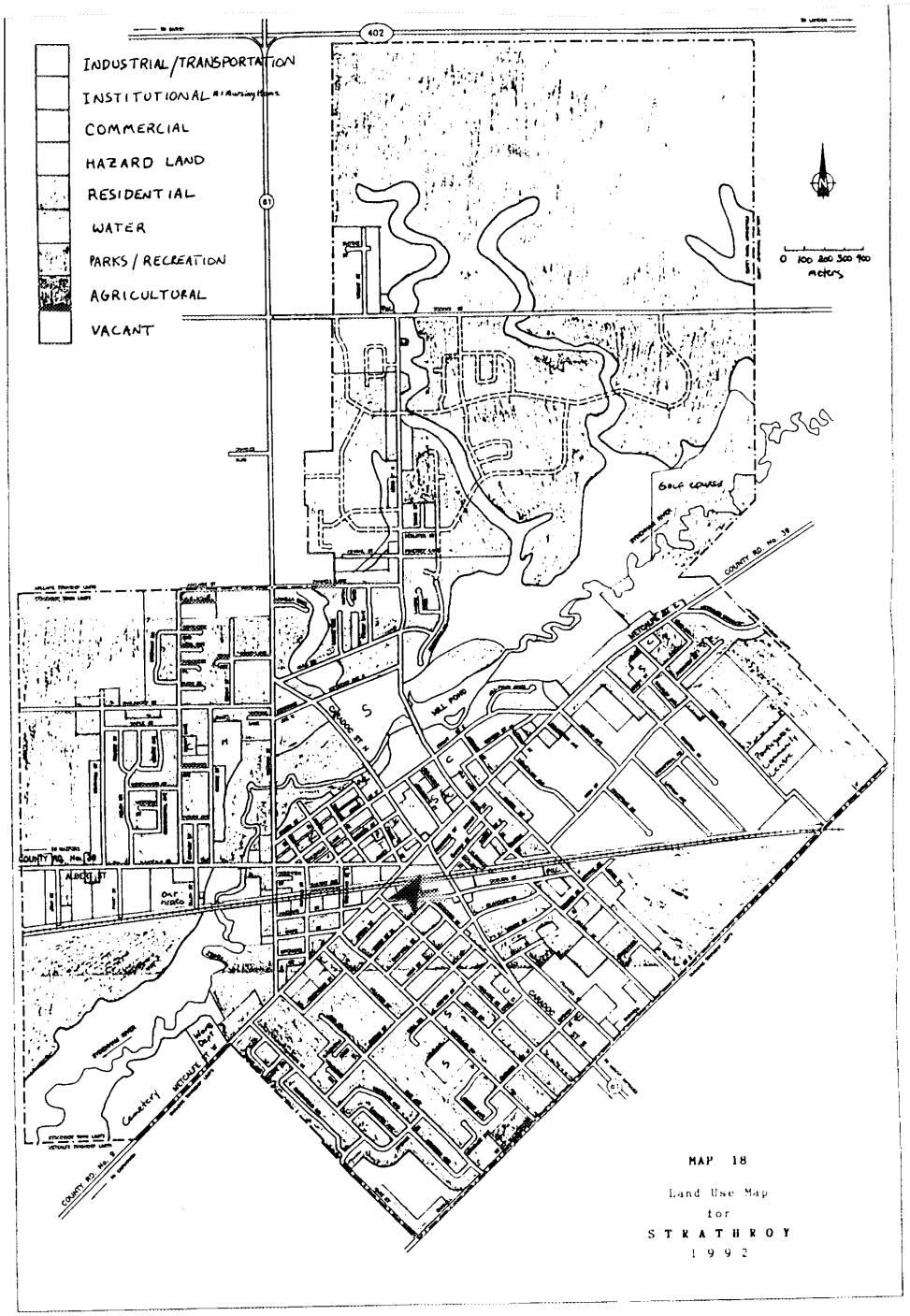
CANADIAN NATIONAL RAILWAYS STATION, STRATHROY, ONTARIO

1 Canadian National Railways (CNR) station, Strathroy, Ontario. Built 1887-88 by Grand Trunk Railway (GTR) to a Joseph Hobson design. South front track elevation from the southwest. (Historica Research Limited, August 1992.)

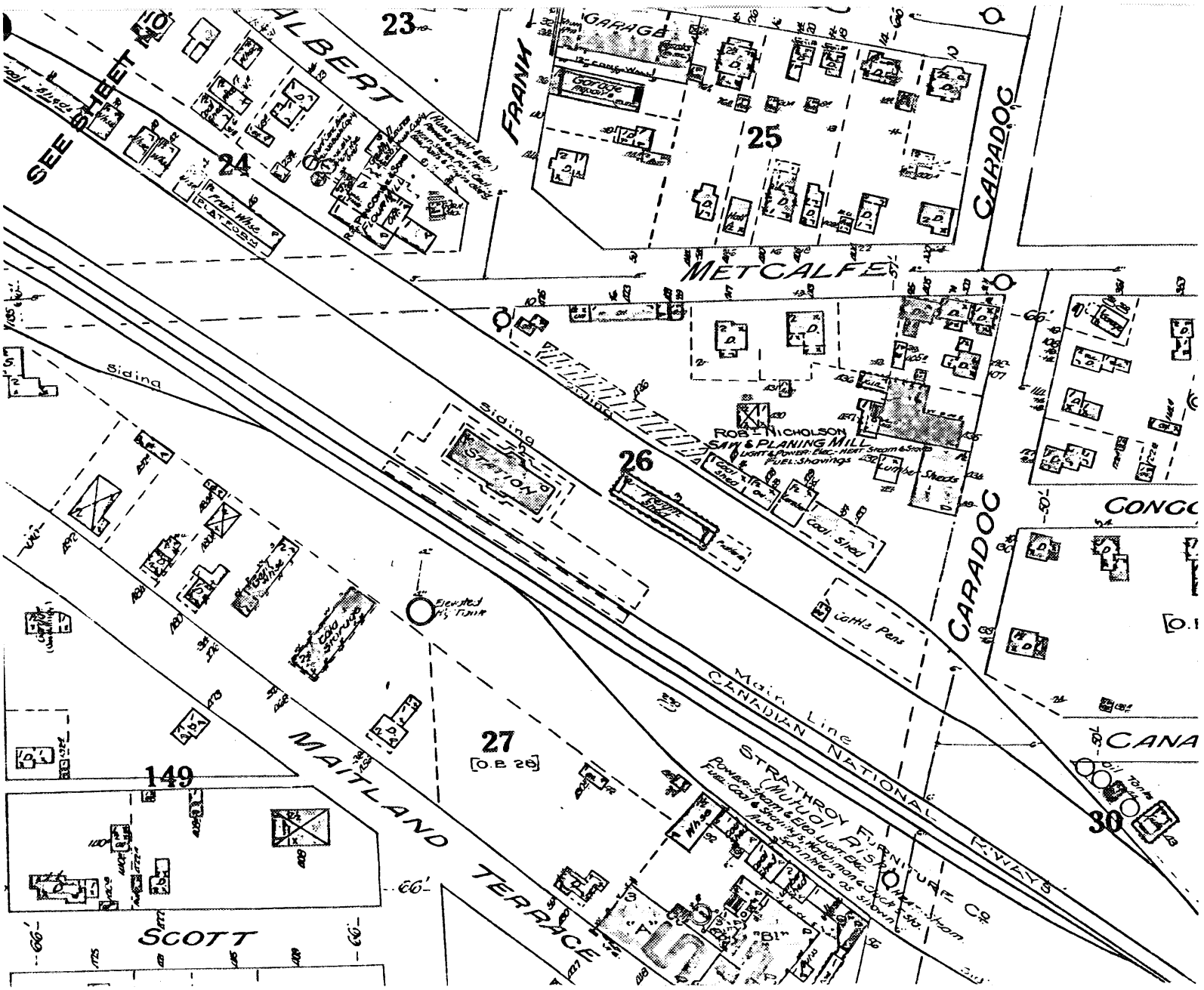


2 Location of Strathroy on the former Great Western Division, now the CNR Sarnia Subdivision. (Railway Map of Southern Ontario [Guelph: Clyde Publishing Ltd., 1984].)

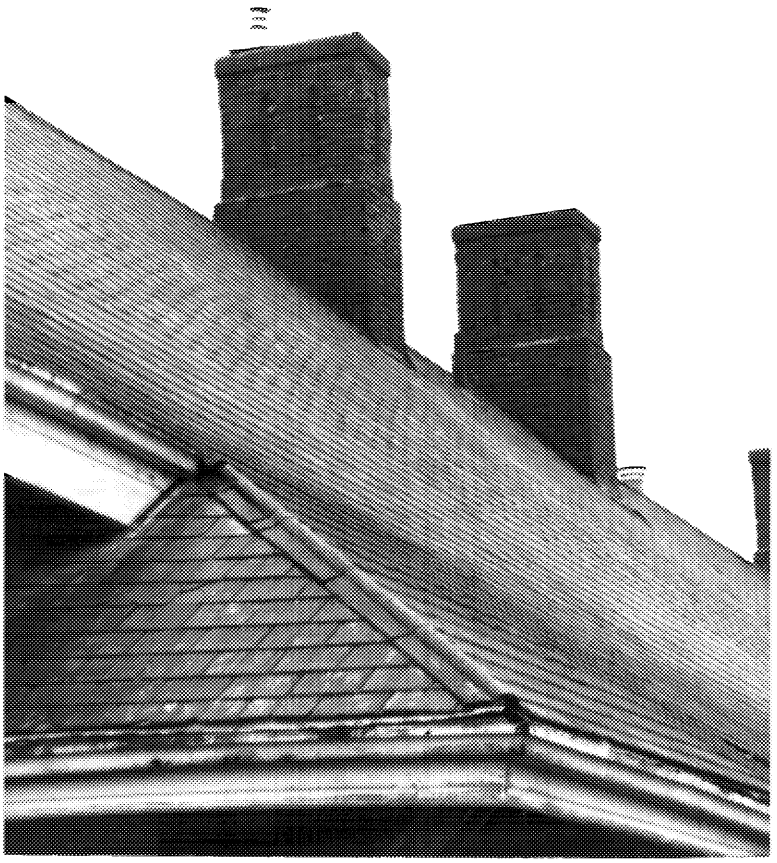
CANADIAN NATIONAL RAILWAYS STATION, STRATHROY, ONTARIO



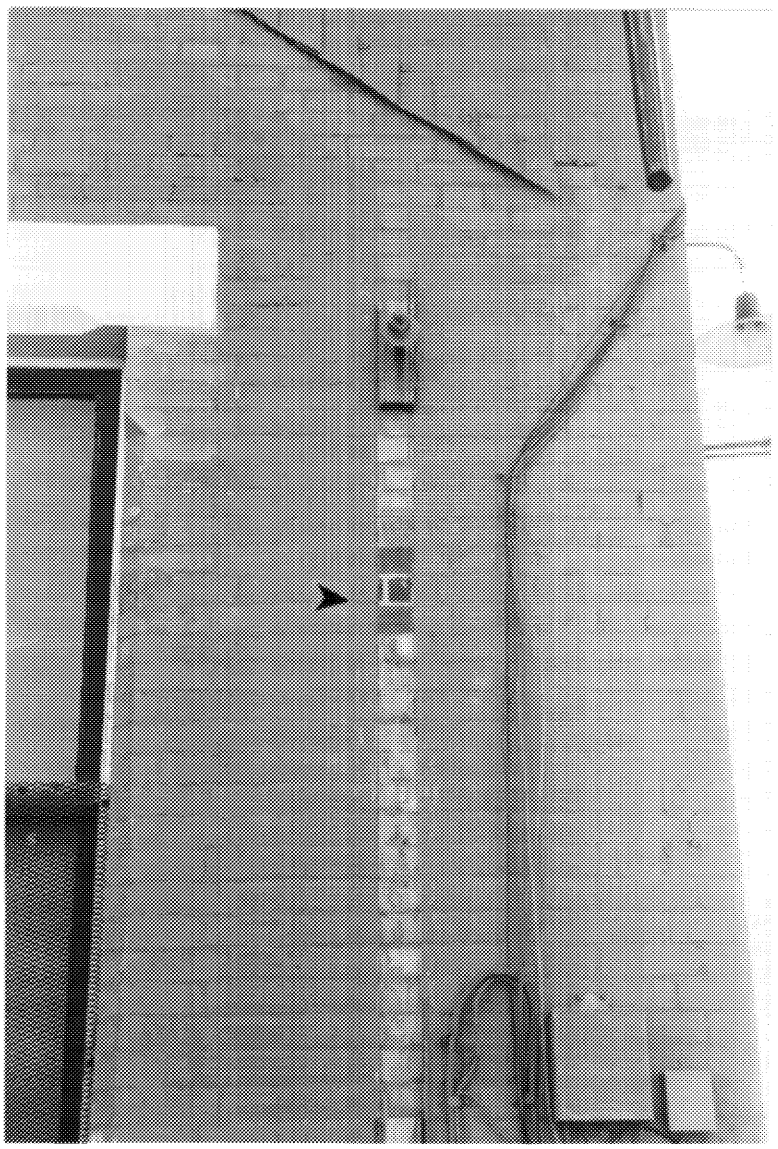
3 Map of Strathroy, showing location of the station. ("Land Use Map for Strathroy, 1992," in D. Charlton, Maps of the Town of Strathroy 1837 to 1992 [University of Western Ontario term paper, 1993, at Strathroy Public Library], map 18.)



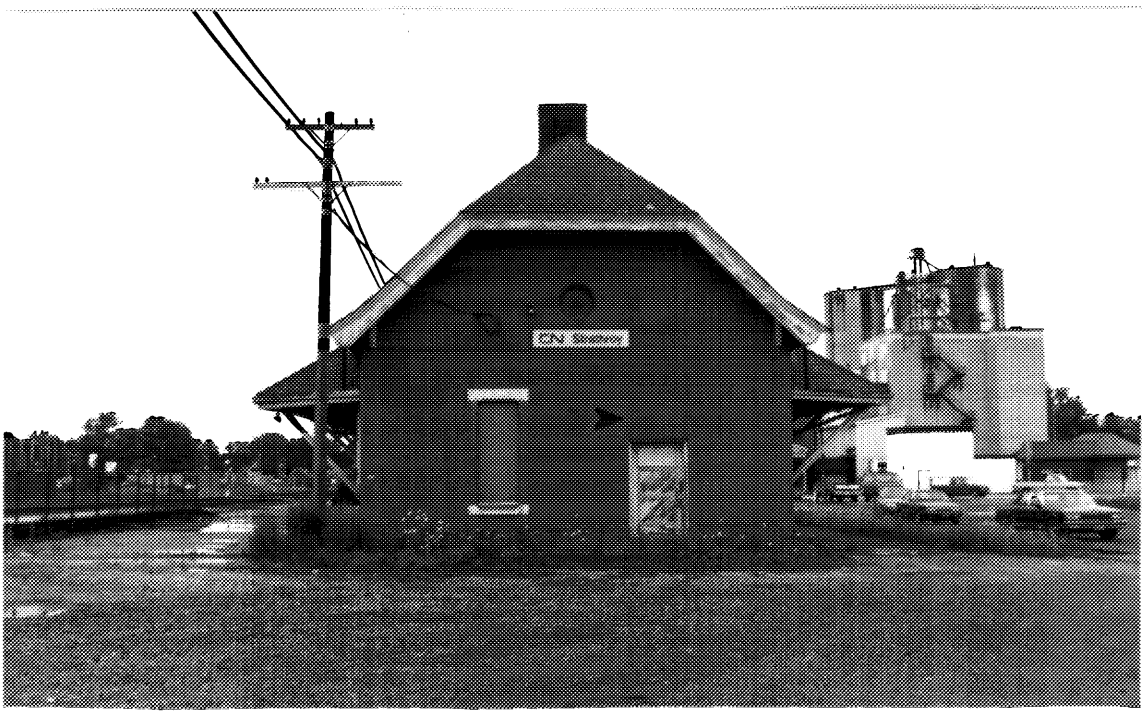
4 Strathroy station area in 1929. (Insurance Map of Strathroy [Ottawa: Underwriter's Survey Bureau, 1929].)



5 Strathroy station, detail of arcaded chimneys. (Historica Research Limited, August 1992.)



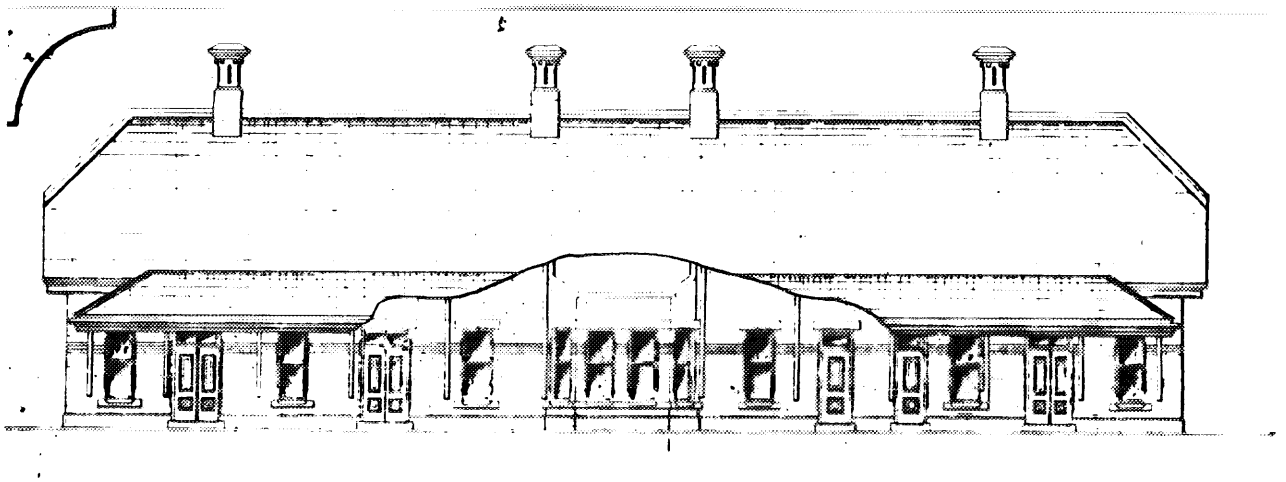
6 Strathroy station, strip showing polychrome brickwork where a strut was removed on the north side. (A. M. de Fort-Menares, January 1995.)



7 Strathroy station, east gable end with rebuilt opening. (Historica Research Limited, August 1992.)

8 Strathroy station, west gable end. (Historica Research Limited, August 1992.)

9 Strathroy station, north elevation. (Historica Research Limited, August 1992.)

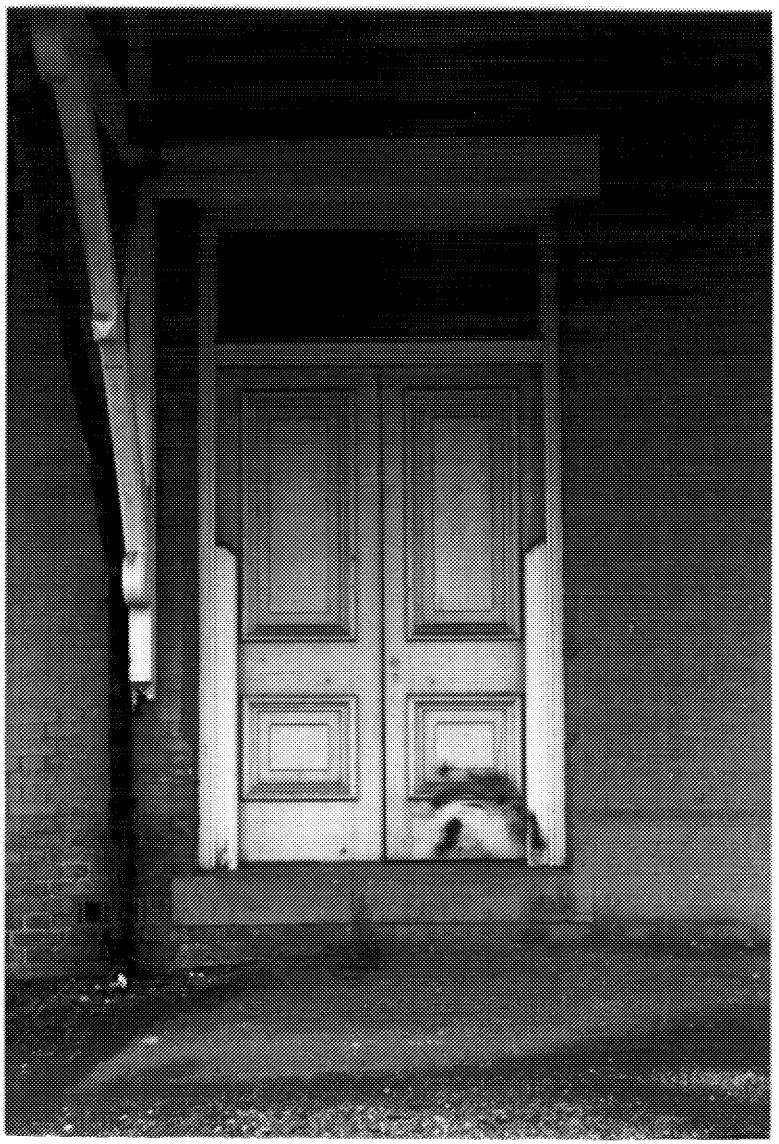


10 Track elevation, "GTR G.W.Div. Sarnia Branch, Plan of Passenger House at Strathroy Station." (National Archives of Canada [NAC] National Map Collection [NMC] 969810.)

11 Projecting bay of Ladies' waiting room on north side of station, showing double alteration to central opening. (Historica Research Limited, August 1992.)

12 Strathroy station, detail of strut carrying the platform canopy. (Historica Research Limited, August 1992.)

13 Detail of window sills and chamfered surrounds. (Historica Research Limited, August 1992.)



14 Detail of original Hobson doors. (Historica Research Limited, August 1992.)

15 Loading doors for express office typical of GTR work 1890-1910. The temporary supports for the collapsing canopy have been in place nearly three years. (Historica Research Limited, August 1992.)

16 West end of north side where four struts and part of the canopy have been removed, with 1920s type door on the right. (A. M. de Fort-Menares, January 1995.)

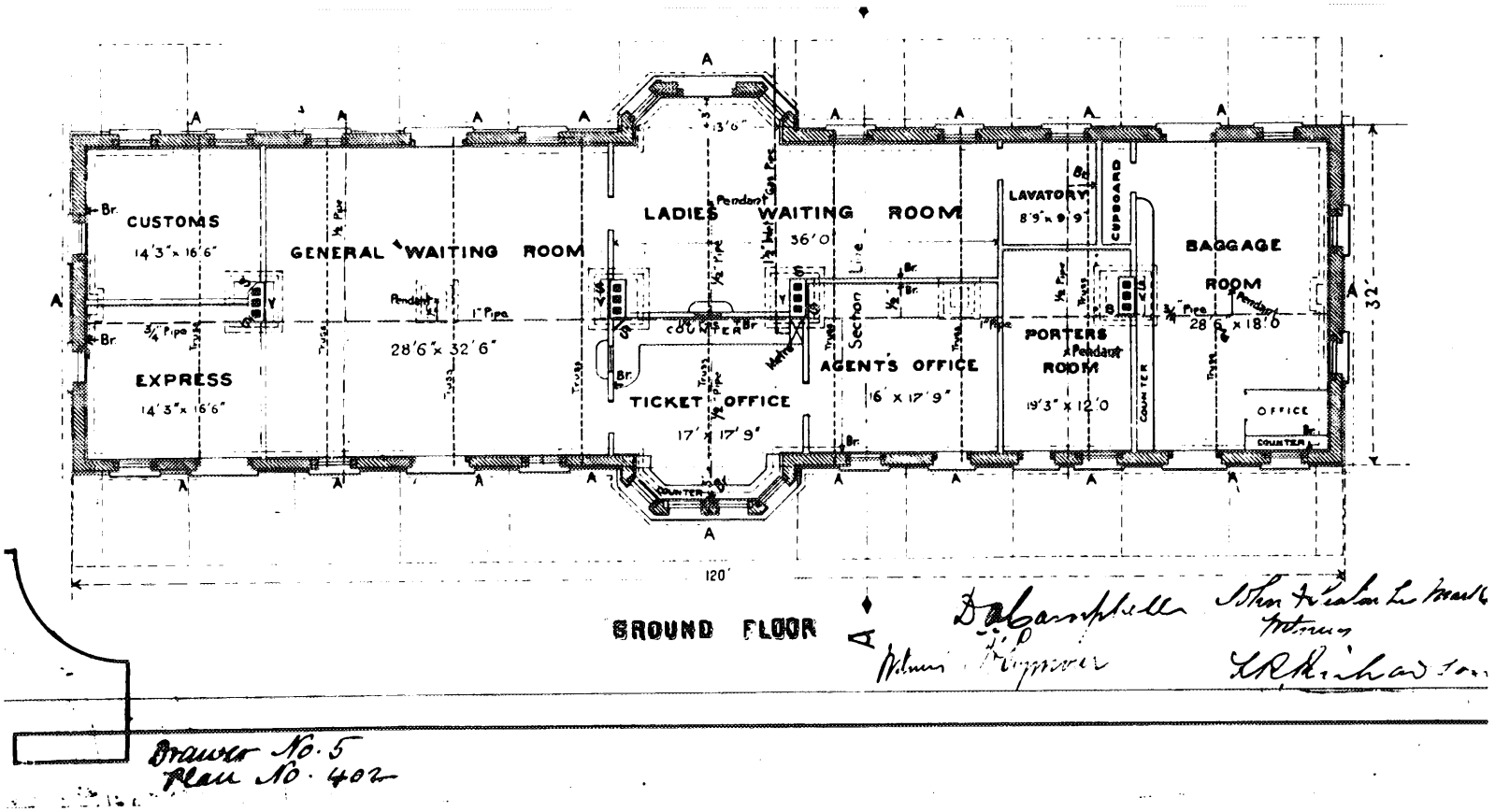
17 Earliest photograph of Strathroy station, probably ca. 1895. (Courtesy Strathroy- Middlesex Museum, Strathroy.)

18 Strathroy station, early 20th century, with small east garden. (Courtesy Strathroy-Middlesex Museum, Strathroy.)

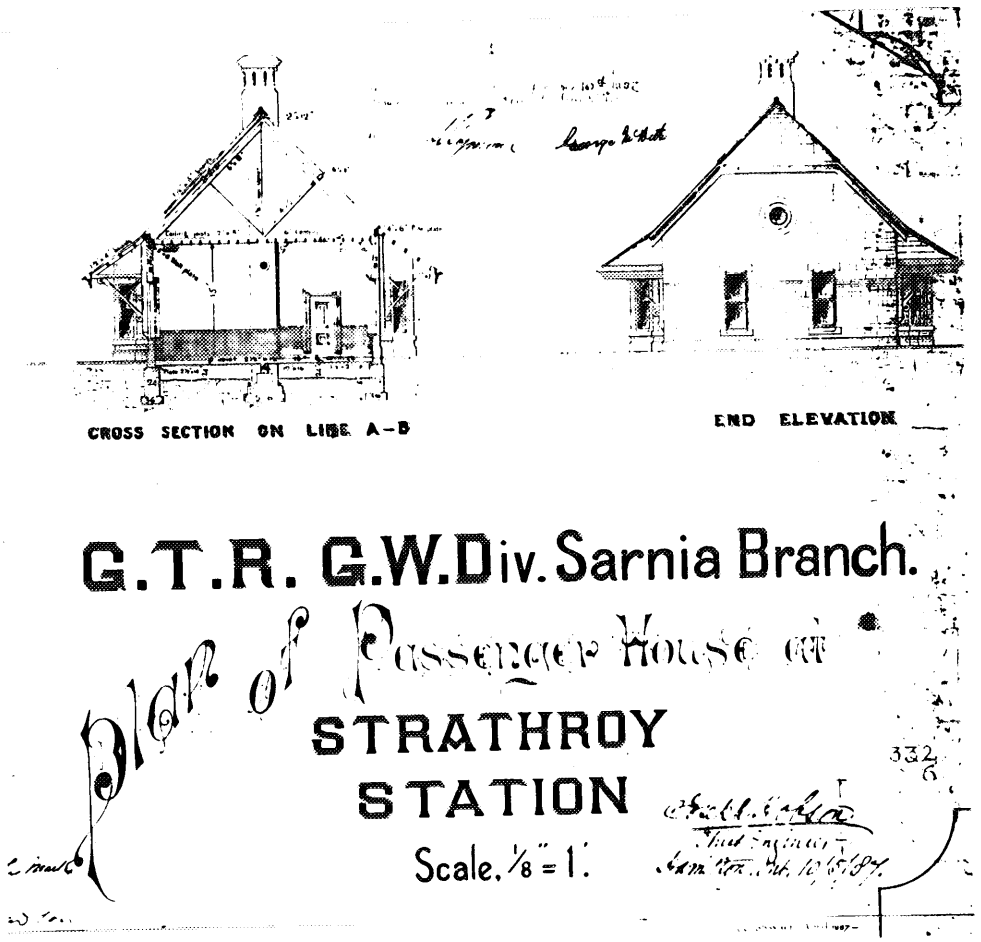
CANADIAN NATIONAL RAILWAYS STATION, STRATHROY, ONTARIO

19 Former Great Western Railway station at Chatham, completed in 1878 to a design by Joseph Hobson. (Historica Research Limited, August 1992.)

CANADIAN NATIONAL RAILWAYS STATION, STRATHROY, ONTARIO



20 Plan of Strathroy station by Joseph Hobson. (National Archives (NA), National Map Collections (NMC) 96910.)



21 Section and end elevation of Strathroy station, 1887. (NA NMC 96910.)

22 Former baggage room. (A. M. de Fort-Menares, March 1995.)

23 Detail of V-jointed wood dado and door trim, Strathroy station. (A. M. de Fort-Menares, March 1995.)

24 Modern trims on interior, Strathroy station. (A. M. de Fort-Menares, March 1995.)

CANADIAN NATIONAL RAILWAYS STATION, STRATHROY, ONTARIO

25 View of Strathroy station and rail yard from Caradoc Street to the east. (A. M. de Fort-Menares, March 1995.)