

Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada

Railway Station Report

TITLE: Canadian National Railway Terminal,
Capreol, Ontario

SOURCE: Heritage Research Associates Inc.

RSR-286

INTRODUCTION

This terminal (Figure 1) on Front Street, Capreol (Figures 2,3) is Canadian National's (CN's) centre of operations in Northern Ontario. Designed and constructed by CN Buildings and Bridges, this terminal is composed of three parts, built in 1959, 1961 and 1975-6 respectively. Each part represents a major step in the consolidation of post World War Two CN operations. In addition to this terminal, CN's immense Capreol site also accommodates VIA Rail's first station (discussed in a separate paper), evidence that much of the testing for modern rail operations occurred in Northern Ontario.

Situated between extensive rail yards and a town that exists to support its activities, this terminal is key to CN's railway culture in Northern Ontario.

HISTORICAL ASSOCIATIONS

Thematic

As the junction of CN's transcontinental lines to Toronto and Montreal, Capreol has been an important divisional point on CN's transcontinental line since CN was established in 1919. Since 1961, it has been headquarters for CN operations in Northern Ontario.

Although Capreol was established as a stop on the Canadian Northern Railway (CNoR) line between Port Arthur and Ottawa in 1915, it became the take-off point for transcontinental western service when CN was formed in 1919. CN built passenger, freight, stock and equipment transfer facilities, and also created a major service depot in Capreol.¹ In the age of steam, Capreol was one of several CN communities critical to keeping the transcontinental track open north of Lake Superior. Others included Hornepayne, Longlac and Hillsport.

When CN modernized to keep pace with "the postwar expansion of Canada's industrial and agricultural output,"² many of its new

programs were tested in Northern Ontario. These tests were run with special government funding designed to assist in overcoming the cost of up-grading a vast distance of track through remote territory.

During the 1950s, these improvements included the introduction of diesel and Centralized Traffic Control (CTC). The transcontinental track that passed through Capreol was among the first to be converted to diesel. It was complete by 1958, two years before CN operations were fully dieselized.³ Immediately afterwards, CN began to use Northern Ontario as its testing ground for CTC "by means of which a single track line can be made to handle traffic generally more rapidly and efficiently than a double track line, not signalled"⁴. As communications headquarters for this new technology, Capreol received a new dispatching/ telegraph facilities in 1959. By 1960 train operations between Foleyet and South Parry⁵ were controlled by automatic dispatch from Capreol.

In 1960 CN streamlined its operations across Canada by decentralizing into five regions, each of which was "in effect a miniature railway responsible for its own results."⁶ One of them, the Great Lakes Region, was sub-divided into four business areas or "geographic centre[s] of operations"⁷. These were located in Toronto (Vaughan), London, Detroit, and Capreol. New headquarters facilities were constructed in each of the Canadian centres. The one in Capreol was to administer CN activities in Northern Ontario.⁸

Capreol's role as a regional centre became more vital during the mid 1970s as CN closed stations and local administration points, and centralized more operations in this terminal which required its expansion. VIA was created in 1978, changing the nature of passenger operations. Since VIA initially used existing station facilities, it occupied the former passenger station in Capreol which was much too large for its requirements. By 1985 it had become clear that in this and other situations VIA would benefit by constructing some stations for itself. Tests to establish the image and costs for such stations were conducted by CN in Capreol where CN engineer Peter De Wit began to work on a design. De Wit left the company during a down-sizing exercise shortly thereafter, and completed the project in the private sector as a VIA Rail design. The first VIA Rail station constructed was built to accompany this terminal in Capreol.

Although Capreol retains its status as regional headquarters and centre of Northern Ontario operations today, the dimensions of that role have been significantly reduced by downsizing in the 1980s and 1990s.

Local Development

Rail service is, and has always been, central to Capreol's existence. Since 1959, Capreol (Figure 4) has been the major CN

Rail town in northern Ontario. It was founded by hotel owner Frank Dennie who purchased land and established a townsite on speculation upon hearing the CNoR would pass through the area. Dennie negotiated a deal with Sir Donald Mann of the CNoR, granting the railway land rights in return of a promise "to make Capreol a permanent divisional point with shops, a roundhouse and other railway buildings."⁹ This promise was fulfilled in 1915 when the CNoR completed its mainline and constructed the depot with a small station (Figure 5).

Capreol incorporated as a town in 1918, and expanded the following year as CN increased its yards to accommodate the depot's enhanced role in transcontinental service. Along with this expansion came railway-sponsored housing and quality of life assistance. CN supplied public services until 1929¹⁰, donated a school car for local children and maintained a YMCA for crew accommodation and community recreational activities. Over the years depot services were up-graded to meet expanding needs, and the original station was replaced with a much larger structure (Figure 6).

By its presence the railway stimulated lumbering and mining activities. National Steel operated an iron ore mine north of town that kept the local economic base diverse.¹¹ During the 1950s and 60s the community also expanded in response to Capreol's important new role in the CN system. In 1959 and 1961 respectively, CN constructed the new TTC (Figure 7) and administration quarters (Figure 8) that form the basis of the present terminal. Capreol was incorporated into the Regional Municipality of Sudbury in 1973. In 1993 it had a population of 3,531.¹²

Capreol's economy has encountered difficult times in the past two decades. In 1979 the iron mine closed removing its secondary base. Downsizing at CN in the 1980s coupled with sharp reductions in passenger service in the 1990s have substantially reduced the number of jobs available. Capreol's future is much less certain today than at any time since its founding.

ARCHITECTURAL ASSOCIATIONS

Aesthetic/Visual Qualities

CN's Capreol terminal (Figure 1,9-18) was designed and built by local CN staff. It is a composite building that follows the loose interpretation of the International style adopted by CN in the 1950s for formal company facilities. Its emphasis, however, is less upon design than upon functional accommodation. Today it is a long thin structure composed of disparate parts knit together with minimal concession to aesthetic coherence.

The terminal was constructed in three sections. The first was the TTC building (1959). This utilitarian red brick box was

originally two storeys high on the west end with a single storey extension on the east (Figures 6,7). Its only features were small steel windows (mostly in parallel) on the north, and a glassed stairwell on the west end of the south facade (Figure 12).

The second portion was the administration building constructed on the east end of the complex (Figures 6,8) in 1961. This was an official building, and its role is reflected in its greater design formality. Long banks of glass provided horizontal lines to both the north and south facades (Figures 8,10). This was offset by irregular solid brick corner sections that defined vertical height. The east end of the building (Figures 8, 9) defined its vertical height in glass and concrete slab.

Many of the original features of these buildings were obscured in the mid 1970s when the portion between them was filled with a three storey grey concrete block structure (Figures 11,12,17). The parallelled window banks on the north facade of the administration building were extended to the east corner, and removed on the west (Figure 16), and the south facade corner was bricked in and extended to form a connection with the new structure (Figure 1). The single storey portion of the TTC building was extended to two storeys, also to provide a connection (Figure 14). The new portion (Figures 11, 17) had inset windows, set in lines from storey to storey. These are varied by a telegrapher's bay on the north side (Figure 17). On the south side, they are confined to a central area, providing some formality.

The composite terminal is a very long irregular building roughly linked by gross massing (Figure 15) and colour. The grey central three storey portion is flanked by original red brick wings. In concept it is vastly more modest and functional than either of its counterparts in London or Vaughan (Toronto).

Functional/Technical Qualities

Until the central portion of this building was constructed in 1975-8, Capreol's "station" was a multi-structure facility composed of an administration building, a TTC and a passenger and freight station. Each of these buildings housed subsidiary administrative offices.

These facilities were regrouped when the middle portion was built. This occurred just as passenger services were ceded to VIA, and the new central tower absorbed offices and freight facilities that had previously been located in the passenger station. VIA leased a portion of the original passenger station until it was demolished in 1985 when the new VIA station was constructed.

Consequently, the terminal building that stands today has never housed passenger services, although it now contains every other function previously situated in the passenger station.

ENVIRONMENT

Setting

This terminal is located on the north edge of Capreol. It stands on Front St. at the foot of Young St., separating the yards from the town. It is situated beside a narrow neck in the middle of CN property through which trains crossing the yard must pass.

Figures 20 and 21 depict CN's extensive Capreol rail yards. They stretch both to the southeast and to the northwest of the terminal. They are built on what was once a ravine which CN filled with gravel when it first obtained control of the property.¹³ The site contains many utility buildings including car shops and a large roundhouse that was first constructed in 1915.

The terminal and the VIA Rail station are located in a narrow line along Front St. Minimal landscaping is used to identify them as independent entities. The administrative east section of the terminal has a narrow lawn near its formal door (Figure 10), on Front St. The VIA station has a garden that occupies the entire foundation of the previous passenger station (Figures 18, 19). It is set off from the terminal property by a landscaped bench with a rail, resembling a fence.

The terminal provides a visual termination point to Capreol's main street, Young St. Figure 4 shows the corner across from the terminal that has been shaped to accommodate the rail yards. Along Front St. directly across from the station is the Capreol Tavern (Figure 22) a longstanding railway institution.

Community Status

Capreol has become the heart of CN's northern Ontario railway culture. Many of its residents are second and third generation railway employees -- members of families who have spent their lives moving from one town to another in CN service. They are representatives of a railway community that remains connected although it has always been geographically diffuse.

CN's railroad community is proud of the role it has played in northern Ontario and the community has commemorated railroad employees¹⁴ in a park just to the west of the Capreol terminal. Prescott Park is a touching memorial. While not extensive, its texts and minutia convey reminiscence of a life style that was obviously rich. Creation of this public park in Capreol was supported by the railroad community across northern Ontario. Its existence confirms that Capreol has already obtained a consensus as the most suitable location to recognize CN's role in northern Ontario. Capreol itself values the terminal as its "main and most significant municipal resource."¹⁵

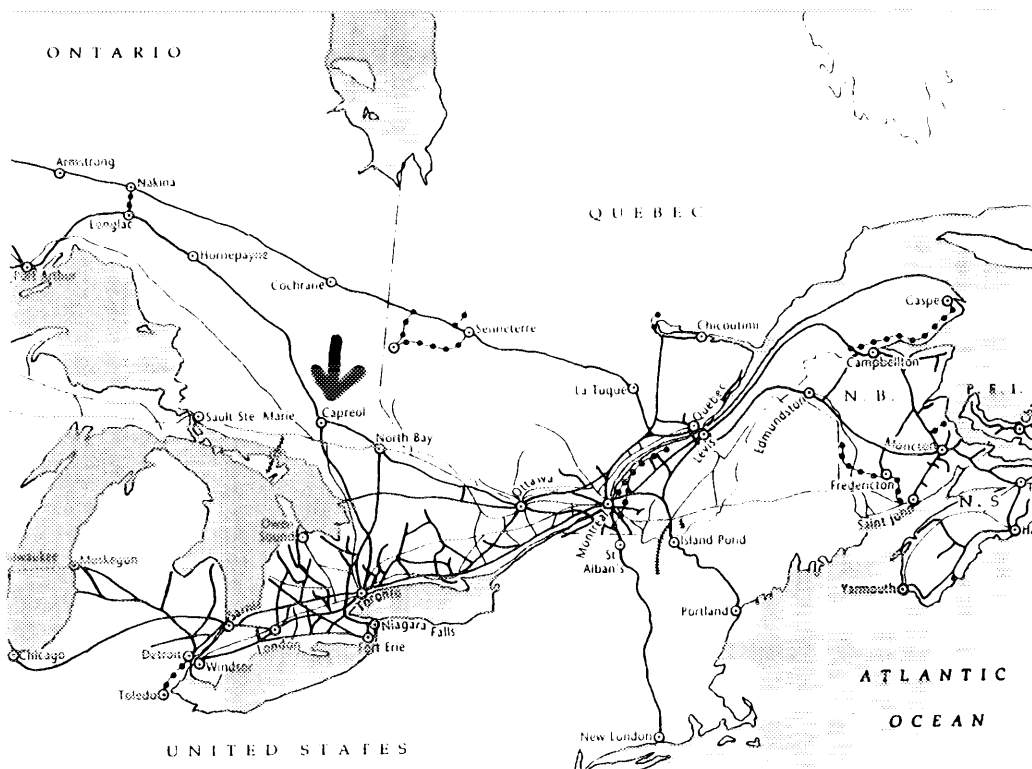
Endnotes

- 1 Donald MacKay, The People's Railway: A History of Canadian National (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1992), p.215-16.
- 2 "Push Railway-Modernizing Despite Costs, Shortages," Financial Post (8 January 1949), p.8.
- 3 Capreol: The First 75 Years (Capreol: Capreol Public Library, 1993), p.18.
- 4 C.D. Edsforth, "Rail Service- Meeting the Challenge of Change," Industrial Canada (July 1958), p.218.
- 5 George Hancocks, "CTC in Northern Ontario: The CNR's Progress," Canadian Transportation (August 1960), p.24.
- 6 Donald MacKay, p.216.
- 7 "Railways Studying Patterns," Financial Post (12 September 1959), p.64.
- 8 "Blueprint for Reorganization," Keeping Track (September 1960), Vol.3, No.8, p.5.
- 9 Capreol: The First 75 Years (Capreol: Capreol Public Library, 1993), p.1.
- 10 Capreol, p.6,7.
- 11 Capreol, p.24.
- 12 David E. Scott, Ontario Place Names (Vancouver: Whitecap Books, 1993), p.36.
- 13 Capreol, p.2.
- 14 Capreol, p.19.
- 15 Interview with Edgar Bérubé, Clerk, Town of Capreol, 25 March 1996.

CANADIAN NATIONAL RAILWAY TERMINAL, CAPREOL, ONTARIO

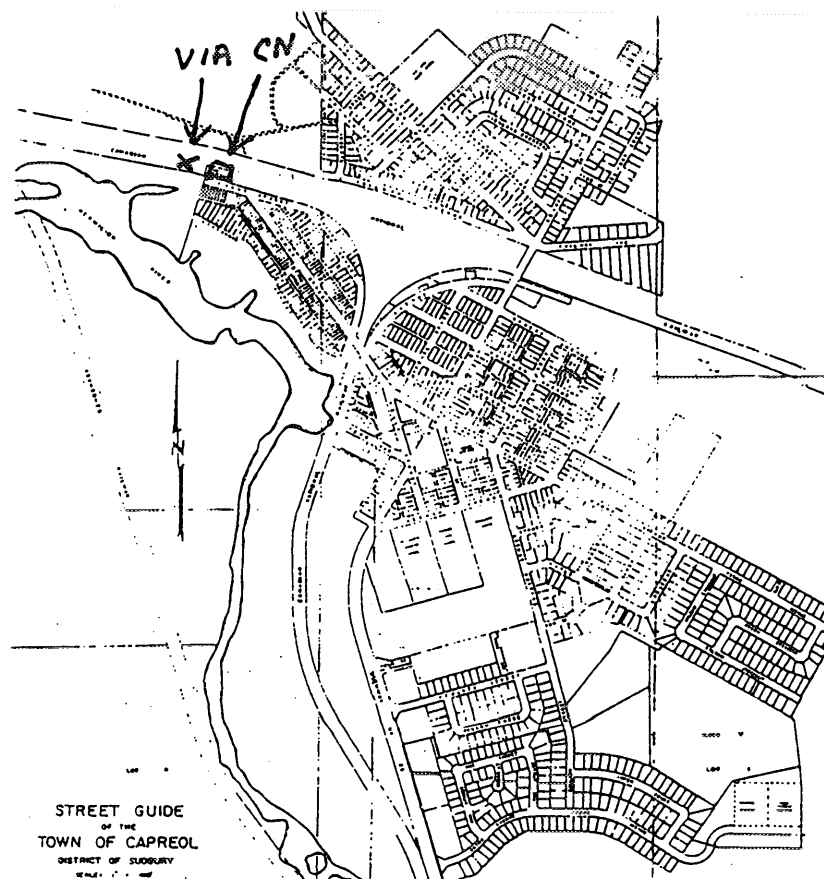


- 1 CN Terminal, Capreol, Ont. Built in three parts, 1959-1976. (M. Carter, Heritage Research Associates Inc., 1995.)



- 2 CN lines in 1950 showing location of Capreol (Donald Mackay, The Peoples Railway [Vancouver: Douglas and MacIntyre, 1992], p.179.)

CANADIAN NATIONAL RAILWAY TERMINAL, CAPREOL, ONTARIO



- 3 Location of the station in Capreol. (Lane and Lane, "Street Guide of the Town of Capreol", 1971.)

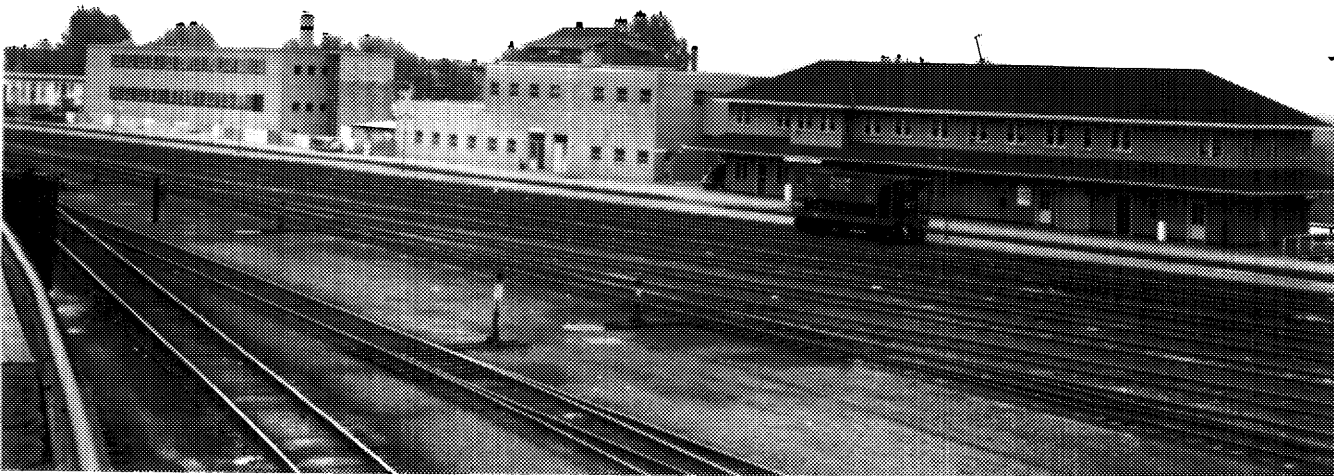


- 4 The main street of Capreol in 1959, just as construction of this station began. (CN Montreal, Album X124, neg. 54953-14.)

CANADIAN NATIONAL RAILWAY TERMINAL, CAPREOL, ONTARIO

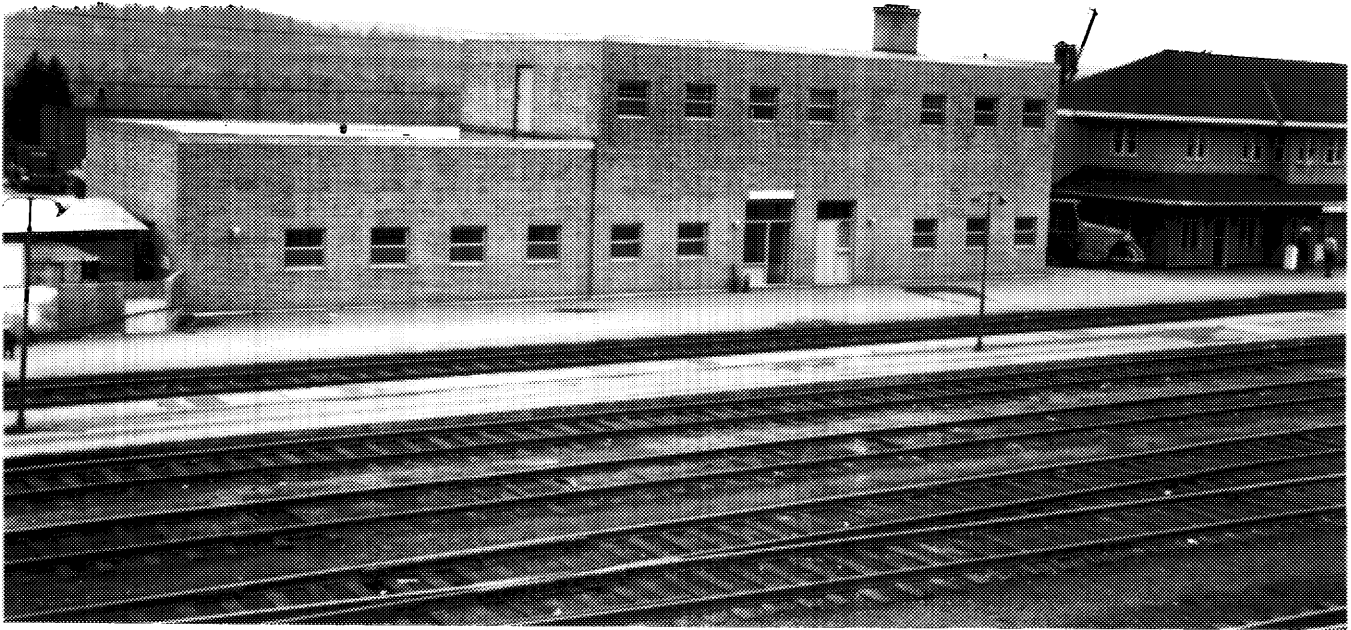


5 The Canadian Northern (CNOR) Station in Capreol c1915.
(Capreol: The First 75 Years, 1918-1993 [Capreol: Capreol
Public Library, 1993], p.16.)



6 The three parts of the original complex. The new terminal
(1961, at left) was constructed beside the 1959
communication building (centre). At right is the former
passenger station, since demolished. (CN Montreal, Album
X124, neg.54953-26.)

CANADIAN NATIONAL RAILWAY TERMINAL, CAPREOL, ONTARIO



7 New CN telegraph and telecommunications building (TTC),
Capreol, 1959. (CN Montreal, Album X124, neg. 54953-24.)



8 New CN divisional headquarters, Capreol, 1961. (CN Montreal,
Album X124, neg. 54953-24.)

CANADIAN NATIONAL RAILWAY TERMINAL, CAPREOL, ONTARIO



9 East end crew entrance, CN Capreol. (M. Carter, Heritage Research Associates Inc., 1995.)

CANADIAN NATIONAL RAILWAY TERMINAL, CAPREOL, ONTARIO



10 Corporate (east) end, town (south) side, Capreol terminal. (M. Carter, Heritage Research Associates Inc., 1995.)



11 Office addition, town (south) side, Capreol terminal. (M. Carter, Heritage Research Associates Inc., 1995.)

CANADIAN NATIONAL RAILWAY TERMINAL, CAPREOL, ONTARIO

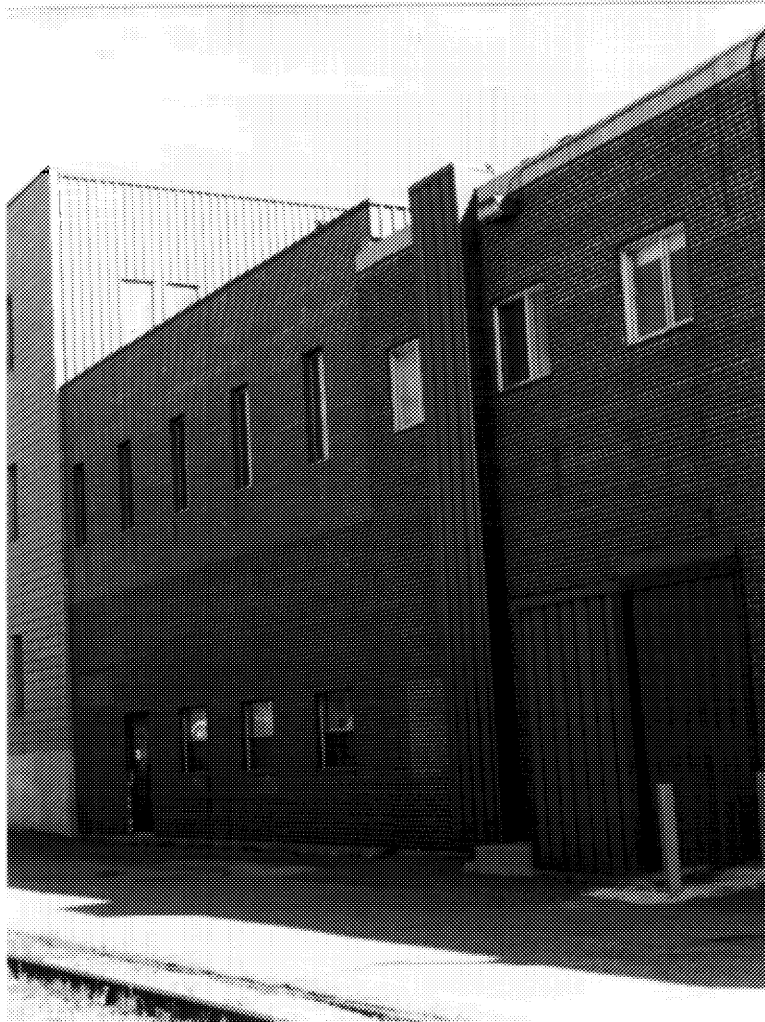


12 South (town) facade from the west end communications area. (M. Carter, Heritage Research Associates Inc., 1995.)

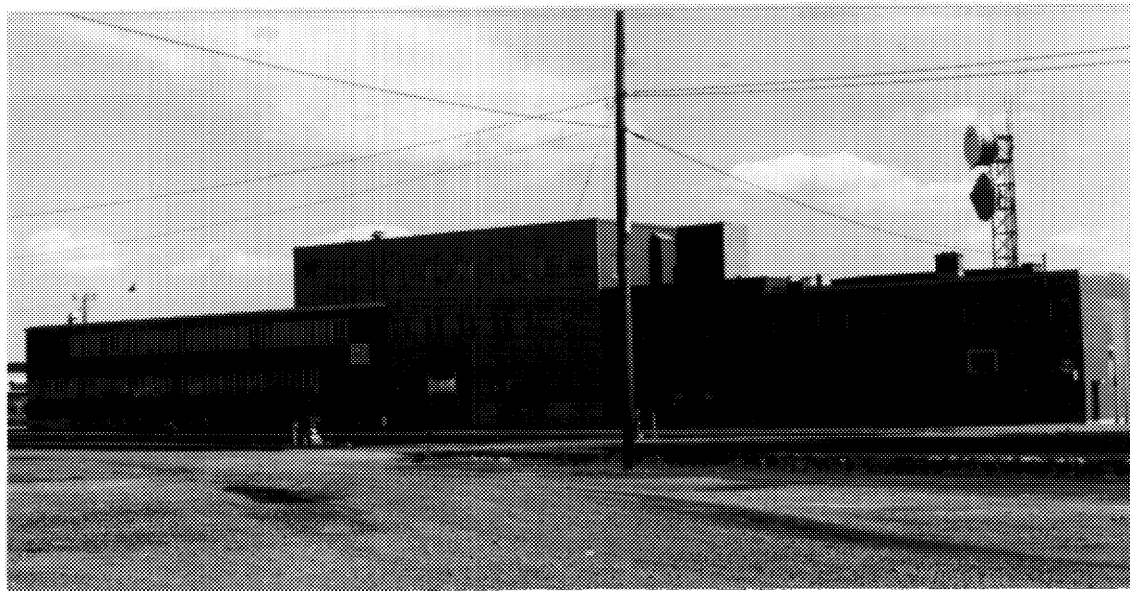


13 North (track) facade from the west end. (M. Carter, Heritage Research Associates Inc., 1995.)

CANADIAN NATIONAL RAILWAY TERMINAL, CAPREOL, ONTARIO



- 14 Communications area, north facade showing the form of the original building. Note the ground floor windows on the left side are the same as those on the portion on the right. (M. Carter, Heritage Research Associates Inc., 1995.)



- 15 North facade showing massing of composite building. (M. Carter, Heritage Research Associates Inc., 1995.)

CANADIAN NATIONAL RAILWAY TERMINAL, CAPREOL, ONTARIO



16 Original office portion, north facade. (M. Carter, Heritage Research Associates Inc., 1995.)



17 Infill office, north facade. (M. Carter, Heritage Research Associates Inc., 1995.)

CANADIAN NATIONAL RAILWAY TERMINAL, CAPREOL, ONTARIO



18 West end of Capreol terminal. The fenced elevated area is the site of the former station. (M. Carter, Heritage Research Associates Inc., 1995.)

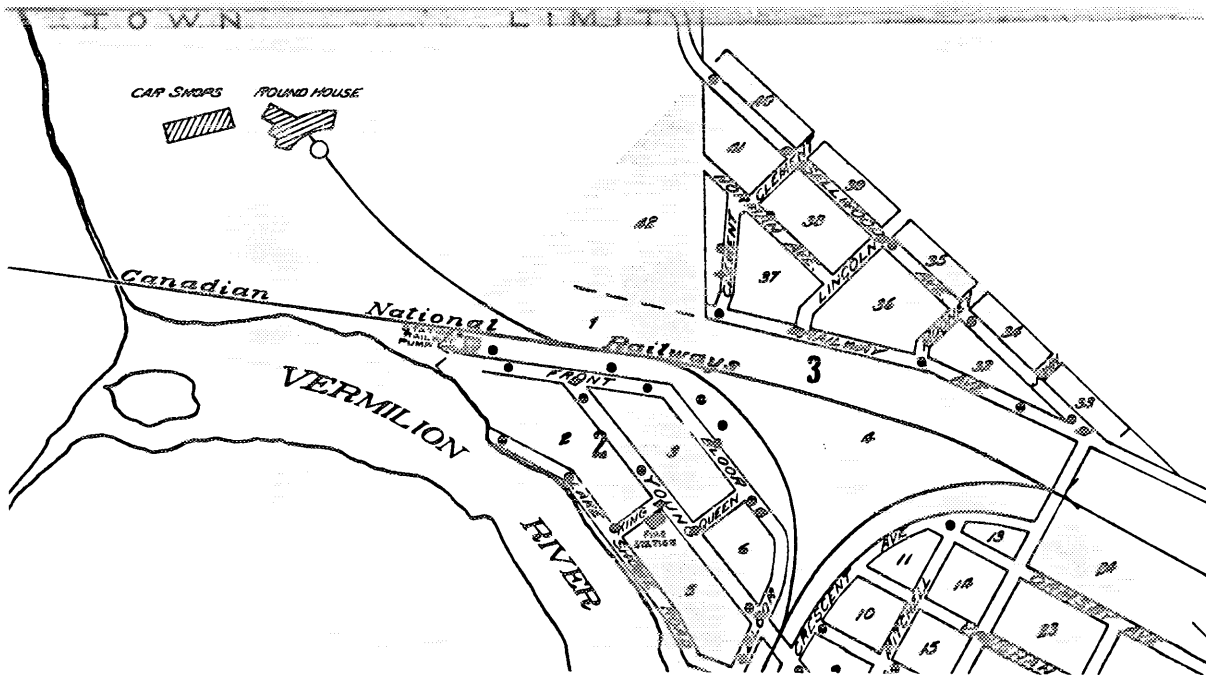


19 This, the first VIA station, stands on part of the former station site. (M. Carter, Heritage Research Associates Inc., 1995.)

CANADIAN NATIONAL RAILWAY TERMINAL, CAPREOL, ONTARIO



20 CN yards, Capreol, from the roof of the terminal building. (M. Carter, Heritage Research Associates Inc., 1995.)



21 Site plan, CN Capreol. (National Archives, NMC 9346.)

CANADIAN NATIONAL RAILWAY TERMINAL, CAPREOL, ONTARIO



- 22 This longstanding railroad tavern across from the terminal is older than any part of the terminal itself. (M. Carter, Heritage Research Associates Inc., 1995.)



- 23 CN memorial just west of the terminal commemorates the age of steam and the importance of rail in community life. (M. Carter, Heritage Research Associates Inc., 1995.)