

HOW PETERBOROUGH NEARLY GOT ANOTHER RAIL SWING BRIDGE OVER THE OTONABEE.

Ivan Bateman

Editor's note: Gordon Young, of Lakefield Heritage Research, raised interesting questions about why the CPR rebuilt a bridge at Peterborough with two ugly girder spans instead of open truss spans. The first CPR bridge was built in 1882, and thirty years later it was replaced as the following story makes clear. Thanks to Ivan for doing the research and reporting his very interesting findings. Thanks to Gordon for taking the lead on raising the issue and making contacts with the CPR archives.



Picture of the 1882 bridge, looking east from the downtown side of the bridge. (Thanks to the CPR Archives, Montreal)

When the Ontario and Quebec railway (later the C.P.R.) came to town in 1882, the Otonabee was crossed by two bridges east of the George Street station. The first bridge consisted of three sections of through trusses carried on abutments on the west shore and on a small spit of land, as well as two piers in the river. The first section was about

20 feet longer than the others since it bridged the main channel and the pier had to be located in shallower water. The second bridge connected the land spit to the Ashburnham shore and was also about 125 feet long.

Whether the bridges were of steel or iron has not been recorded, neither do we know who manufactured them. Mr. Law, who later started Central Bridge Works, had just come to town and set up a business on Simcoe Street, known as Law, McLean and Brayshaw. A story on their products at that time did not mention bridges.

In June 1913, the *Examiner* reported that J.G. Sing of the Dominion Public Works Department met with the City Council to discuss the possibility of including a swing span in the new rail bridge that the C.P.R. were intending to replace the old bridge. Mr. Sing informed the Council "that considerable dredging had been done on that particular portion of the river, and that it was the intention of the former Government to have the present bridge replaced by a draw bridge in event of a change being made. The present bridge has been in operation for about 30 years. The Otonabee River constitutes part of the Trent waterway," said Mr. Sing, "and the Government shared the wish of the citizens and the City Council, in that a draw bridge be provided for, so as not to interfere with the scheme as evolved by the former government."

On September 8th it was announced that a heavier bridge would replace the old span due to increased loads. Hamilton Bridge Works had the contract and construction would begin in a few days. The new bridge was supposed to be built on piles next to the old bridge and when completed would be slid into place by means of hydraulic jacks. It was suggested that there would be no delay in traffic as the old bridge would be removed and the new one positioned in the three hours between the 11.43 a.m. train leaving the station and the 4.33 p.m. from Montreal. One suspects that the gullible reporter was the victim of a practical joke, considering the difficulty of the undertaking.

Two days later, Council was taking a less optimistic view of the matter and Mayor Bradburn wondered what the position of the Government was with regard to installing a swing section and whether the Department of Railways and Canals had any right to expect the provision to be made. On September 23 the City Clerk received a letter from the Minister of Public Works stating that the C.P.R. had been notified that they would have to put in a swing or draw bridge over the river. This would necessitate a change in the present plans of the company who had already let the contract.

On 26 September the *Examiner* reported that "despite this mandate the construction of the stationary bridge is still progressing" and that "It is evident that the Company has no immediate intention of halting the work with the object of changing their present plans. Mayor Bradburn stated, "The matter is in the hands of the Government and it remains for the Department to take action".

Further doubt about the project was reported in the Examiner on October 15th. "It is understood that work on the western section of the bridge will be indefinitely suspended. It may be a year before the work is resumed as the present plans will have to be altered and a new design provided." On November 13th the paper wrote that workmen were engaged on the western span, apparently engaged in razing it according to the Company's original plans. "Mayor Bradburn did not know the company's intention, and there is nothing definitely known as to what the intentions are."

On November 26th both the Examiner and the Evening Review ran stories about the impasse. Mr. J.H Burnham, the newly elected M.P was being lobbied by Council and they had directly approached the Minister of Public Works in Ottawa and also the C.P.R. The Review reported on the Council meeting as follows:

Mayor Bradburn received a telegram today from Mr. Wanklyn of the C.P.R. saying that the company would put in a swing in the centre span. Quite a spirited discussion took place at the City Council meeting last night in regard to the question of a swing in the C.P.R. bridge. Mr. J.H. Burnham and Mayor Bradburn have gone to considerable trouble to investigate the problem and have the swing placed in the bridge.

Now it appears that the new bridge is being constructed after a temporary halt and that the Council did not know last night whether or not the plans called for a swing in the centre span after the order had been placed for the material, but Mayor Bradburn answered, Mr. Wanklyn of the company (said) that the 33 feet mentioned was not sufficient on account of the current at this point.

Mr. Wanklyn replied that as the City would not accept this offer, the Company had decided not to go ahead with the new bridge.

Operations ceased for a short time but were commenced again.

A CASE OF BLUFF

In the opinion of Ald. Green, the C.P.R. is bluffing. In a letter to the press Mr. Burnham gave his explanation of the matter, in which he claimed that Mr. Bradburn and his engineer wanted the swing on the west end. He believed the offer of the Company to be a fair one but if the City did not think so, the City should take their case to the Government (unreadable).

Last night at Council meeting the Clerk read the following telegram which had been received by Mr. Burnham and passed on to the Council:

Montreal, Nov. 25th

J.H. Burnham, M.P.
Peterborough

"Telegram received. To remove suggested 100 foot swing span from the centre to the west end of the bridge would be most inconvenient and expensive. Two additional piers would be required and would narrow up west channel about twenty feet costing \$3000 plus ten thousand dollars for the one hundred and twenty-five fixed span now ready to be placed in position. Would the Government be willing to assume this cost?
(signed) F.L. Wanklyn"

Mayor Bradburn had a bundle of correspondence and telegrams with the C.P.R. and the Government and (unreadable). He said that he did not suggest that the swing should be at the west end. Members of the Council felt that in view of the large amount of money spent above the bridge and the amount of dockage, it was up to the Government to say that a swing should be provided. Accordingly a committee was appointed to see Mr. Burnham this morning and Mr. Bradburn was authorized to send a deputation to Ottawa, if necessary and interview the Government.

The statements last night of His Worship the Mayor and of the other guardians of the city's interests so far as they appear by the newspapers are correct. I just wish to say one or two things in reply.

1. When C.P.R. agreed to give us a swing why did not we, I mean the City Council, find out from some practical barge or canal men where we should have it? The C.P.R. says? that our selection is unreasonable. It is certainly up to us to prove that it is not
2. Ald. Butler did not attempt to override anybody except perhaps himself in his interview with me, As an Alderman it is no doubt his duty to learn what he can, and do what he can. But I (Mayor Bradburn) warned from the start that as I had not the power given me by the Council to act for them in the choice of a suitable swing, I would not be responsible for Council's action in that part of the affair, and I will not. It is much easier for me to get out from under at the start than after the trouble is here, and that is why I defend myself in the newspapers, as it looked to be coming.
3. I will, of course, do all I can in the city's interests, but surely we must interview the C.P.R. first to show them why we cannot accept their offer, if such be the case, and why we must have something else.
4. The waterway and water-side are not governmental property. The right of way over the water and the short line are both ours, and that is why we, and not the government must (unreadable).
5. I was afraid that since we refused the C.P.R.'s offer, if it proved to be reasonable, and our demand proved to be unreasonable, the C.P.R. would have the right to go on and build a fixed bridge, and we would have nobody to thank for our loss but ourselves, of the blame coming my way likely.

The Examiner account quoted Ald. Gordon as being somewhat startled at the position assumed by Mr. Burnham in his release to the press in respect to the bridge in that it was “a high-handed piece of business and I don’t think that there is any use in Mr. Burnham trying to shift responsibility on the City.”

At this point it appears that Mr. Burnham was placing the blame for the impasse on the City whereas some aldermen had doubts about the Mayor’s enthusiasm. He in turn appeared to place the responsibility on the government for failing to push the C.P.R into changing the work plan to accommodate the wishes of the City. The C.P.R. were holding the City to account for their unreasonable demands with respect to the location of the swing section.

On the following day the Review reported a softening of the positions of the various parties. The headline and account read:

**Suitable Swing in C.P.R. Bridge Now Seems Certain.
Offer of the Company is Satisfactory to the Council**

The telegram received from the C.P.R. by Mayor Bradburn saying that the company would place a swing in their bridge, was read at the committee of the whole Council last night, as follows: “Telegram received. Company willing to provide serviceable swing, centre span on Otonabee bridge, giving about 37 feet clear. Opens both sides of pivot pier”

“That’s about good enough” remarked Ald. Duncan.

A letter from Mr. Burnham was also read as follows:

Gentlemen,- I had the pleasure of meeting your committee this morning with regard to the C.P.R. bridge. A telegram having come from the C.P.R. to the Mayor this morning agreeing to put in a 37 foot swing, opening in the middle span, has proved, I understand, acceptable to your committee. So far as the government is concerned, we all must assume that what is to be done meets with their approval with regard to their rights and privileges as guardians of the public interest.

I am glad that your committee is content with the assumption that what suits the government will do well enough for the city also.

Yours truly,

J.H. Burnham

After a short discussion it was decided to send two telegrams, the copies of which read like this:

Hon. R. Rogers

Minister of Public Works,

Ottawa

Have received telegram from C.P.R. saying that they are willing to provide swing in centre span, Otonabee River bridge, giving about 37 feet clear opening both sides of pivot pier. If, in opinion of government this will serve purpose of navigation, City Council is satisfied.

MAYOR

F.L.Wanklyn

Executive Assistant C.P.R.

Montreal.

Your telegram received. Have telegraphed Minister of Public Works that if in opinion of Government, a swing in centre span giving 37 feet clear opening, both sides of pivot pier, will serve purpose of navigation, The City Council is satisfied.

MAYOR.



That was not the end of the matter. On 23 December 1913, the Examiner reported: “The work on reconstructing the new C.P.R. bridge across the Otonabee River is practically completed. A few men have been retained to make the final adjustments to the structure. A temporary span has been placed in the middle of the bridge. This will be superseded by a swing span some time next year.”

No further reports have been found in either paper to the end of June 1914. The temporary span probably became a permanent fixture and this would explain why today’s bridge is a combination of truss and plate girder. There is no sign that a swing span was ever built. The proposal by the C.P.R. for a centre swing section would have required a pier in the middle of a deepened channel upon which the bridge would swing. There is no trace of this pier. If one had been provided, it would

have been much larger than existing piers in order to provide a stable platform for the swing. Further, it is doubtful that it would have been removed when the bridge was subsequently fixed to the present state since it would not have impeded navigation.

The C.P.R. archives make no reference to a swing bridge and the need for canal access to the industries upstream would have lessened over time. A further constraint may have been the outbreak of the First World War in August 1914 which changed national priorities.

Today, the two plate girder spans remain as a mute reminder of a century-old argument.