

RAILWAY STATIONS OF MANITOBA

An Architectural History Theme Study



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On the cover:

Main elevation drawing of the Canadian Northern Railway Station at St. Boniface, now demolished.

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PREFACE

This booklet has been adapted from a larger publication developed in 1987 by the Historic Resources Branch of Manitoba Culture, Heritage and Tourism. That study, *Railway Stations of Manitoba: A Building Inventory*, should still be available in public libraries.

That original study was intended to assist railway company and municipal authorities to gain a better understanding of the architectural heritage of this building type, and thus to undertake better educational, tourism, designation and conservation programs. To that end, this original work also contained a substantial inventory of 128 buildings in the province. A pdf copy of the original study and another of the inventory are available by contacting the branch:

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This present extract from the 1987 report contains the contextual essay that was developed after a close review of the inventory results, and an examination of documents and information from the various railway company archives. This essay presents the many important and interesting themes that have attended the development of railway station architecture in Manitoba, and will be useful for anyone interested in this important story.

INTRODUCTION

RAILWAYS AND RAILWAY STATIONS are essential aspects of Manitoba's historical development, and a popular focus for heritage attention. In 1987, recognizing the importance of these landmarks, the Historic Resources Branch of Manitoba Culture, Heritage and Tourism undertook a major study of the building type. Through on-site explorations of the 128 extant railway stations across Manitoba, and then a careful review of historical information and academic and popular studies on the subject, the branch developed a study that focused primarily on the physical qualities of these buildings – on their settings, architectural character and material construction. The ultimate purpose of the study was to provide the necessary historical background that would help identify a handful of buildings that could be said to succinctly and effectively sum up the architectural history of the building type in the province. This focus ensures that other important aspects of the history of railways in Manitoba—corporate history, immigrant experience, grain trade, etc.—would more effectively be focused on buildings that are at once interesting and important.

RAILWAYS IN MANITOBA

The development of a sophisticated railway system in Manitoba has proved central for the transformation of what was once an empty pioneer territory into a vibrant, energetic province. The growth of Manitoba's railway system was not actually pre-planned, however, and the circumstances that encouraged the incredible amount of rail construction before World War I deserves some attention. Beginning with the Canadian Pacific Railway, the first of the large rail companies to cross Manitoba (the other two were the Canadian Northern and the Grand Trunk Pacific-National Transcontinental), a brief historical account of each major company will provide the basis for a more detailed discussion of their railway stations.

The Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR), that great national project promoted by John a. Macdonald to link the far-flung territories of the Dominion into a cohesive unit, seemed to be a perpetual stall even before it reached the Manitoba-Ontario boundary. Under Macdonald, in the election of 1872, the contentious railway issue and apparently been resolved by the formation of a new company, the Canadian Pacific, that would build the line without American interests, within ten years, and in repayment would receive thirty million dollars in government assistance and a land grant of fifty million acres of public land.

However, just when it seemed like the railway project would finally proceed, the "Pacific Scandal" of 1873 suddenly upset the CPR's plans and Macdonald's government. The Liberal opposition, led by Alexander Mackenzie, had somehow become aware that the Conservatives had received \$160,000 for election expenses from Sir Hugh Allan, the president of Canadian Pacific. Macdonald resigned in November of 1873 and the railway project continued to flounder.

Under Alexander Mackenzie's cautious approach, the rail project proceeded piecemeal. Rails were extended only gradually as funds became available and local traffic began generating revenue. Mackenzie's caution was not without adherents at this time. There were many people who supported his contention that the construction of a rail link from east to west would not be completed in the ten years that Macdonald had claimed, and furthermore, that a railway traversing the sparsely populated western provinces "would not pay for its axle grease" The entire population of the North-West at that time was only 170,000 and many eastern financiers considered the whole venture a very risky proposition.

Others, however, like John A. Macdonald, were undaunted by any of the more obvious problems. American expansionism, especially, was threatening the tenuous links of Confederation in the West. On the strength of his "National Policy" advocating railways, a new settlement and protective tariff for the development of the country and its resources, Macdonald was returned to power in 1878. The Dominion government assured British Columbia, which was threatening to withdraw from Confederation, that it would begin construction of the line in the spring of 1879. On the Prairies the completion of the section from Port Arthur to Winnipeg was also promised. By 1882, however, at the end of the ten year self-imposed deadline for completion of the rail link with the east, the main line was far from complete. Macdonald's government would be faced with financial ruin if called upon to continue sinking millions of dollars into the railroad and so, once again, it turned to the private sector. Investors willing to undertake the project had finally been found and the government was able to turn over the enterprise to a syndicate that consisted of George Stephen of Montreal and several international investors.

Under the terms of this agreement, signed in October of 1880, the government pledged a subsidy of twenty-five million dollars and a grant of Twenty-five million acres of land. The company was to be exempt from taxes on this land for a period of twenty years. No charters were to be granted for twenty years to any competitors

seeking to build within fifteen miles of the International Boundary. In return the company promised to build the line within ten years.

The new CPR syndicate quickly established itself in Manitoba. It duly took over 162 miles of track built in Manitoba during the Mackenzie years. By December of 1881 the entire section between Winnipeg and Brandon was operational. The close of 1882 saw trains running as far west as Regina and on August 18, 1883 the prairie section of the CPR was completed. By September trains were regularly using the line from Winnipeg to Calgary (Figure 1). Construction of the main line through the forbidding mountains of British Columbia was slower, but in July of 1886, the first train from Montreal arrived at the CPR's western terminus at Port Moody. Canada's first transcontinental was finally completed and its uncontested rule of transport in the West was consolidated.

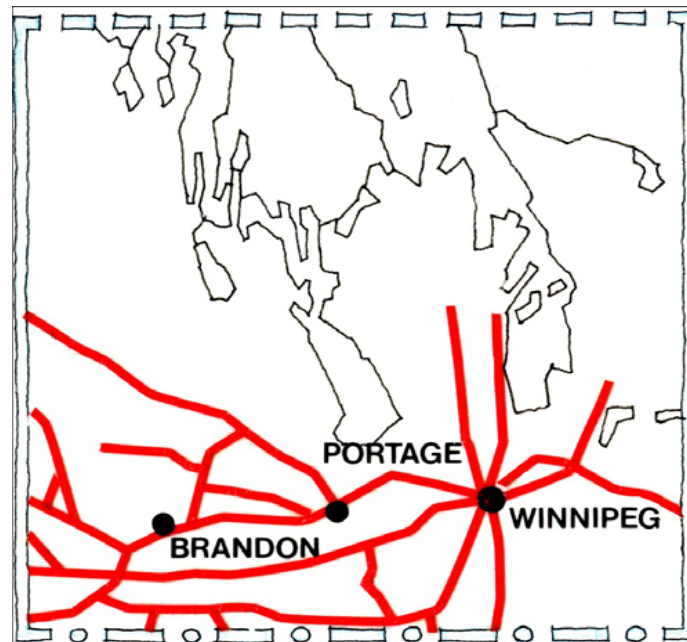


Figure 1
Canadian Pacific Railway
lines in Manitoba, c1900.

By the 1880s it had become clear that the economy of the Prairies was going to depend on the production of cereal grains, particularly wheat. The CPR was in the enviable position of being the only means of transporting this produce to Vancouver or Lake Superior. However, the CPR's high freight rates were frequently denounced and quickly became the source for concern among farmers in the West. Moreover, as the West began to be developed, the CPR's mainline and its few small branch lines were proving inadequate. There were a few locally-financed lines and some Great Northern branches extending into Canada from the United States but, all together, the rail system, as it existed in 1900, could not hope to provide the transportation services needed to develop the Prairies.

This situation was exacerbated by the large increase in immigration into the West during the first decade of the twentieth century. Stimulated by a massive government advertising campaign, the end of the worldwide depression of the 1890s and the introduction of grains better suited to the severe Western Canadian climate, the prairies were becoming a desirable location for settlement. If its promise was to be fulfilled, new rail lines needed to be built.

The first of the new companies in the West, attracted by the promise of fruitful competition with the CPR, was Canadian Northern Railway. Led by William Mackenzie and Donald Mann, Canadian Northern was a Manitoba-based railroad that could more aptly be called a colonization railway. It was built cheaply into areas where traffic could be expected, and did not improve its lines until revenues could justify the cost of upgrading. The very first branch, from Gladstone to Winnipegosis, Manitoba, was completed, with backing from the provincial government, in 1897. A second line from Winnipeg to Port Arthur was completed in 1902. This line was especially important because it created a viable alternative to the CPR for moving wheat to Lake Superior.

By 1910 Canadian Northern was competing successfully with CPR throughout the Prairies. It had lowered freight rates and opened new areas for settlement with its many branch lines (Figure 2). The company gained considerable popular support in the West with these policies; the Province of Manitoba, in particular, became a strong supporter of Canadian Northern, whose system headquarters during this period was located in Winnipeg.

By the turn of the century, political and economic forces throughout the Dominion were pressing for the construction of a second transcontinental railway. This was not an impractical objective, in spite of the difficulties that had plagued the CPR. In the West, the branches of Canadian Northern were rapidly growing. In the East there was a solidly entrenched system comprised of the long-established Grand Trunk Railway and the Government-owned Intercolonial.

Logic suggested that some sort of agreement be worked out between Grand Trunk and Canadian Northern to create the second transcontinental. However, negotiations between Canadian Northern and Grand Trunk proved fruitless and, despite Prime Minister Laurier's intervention, a compromise could not be reached. The government finally threw support to both enterprises and Canada began the process that would add two more transcontinentals to the already-existing lines of the CPR.

Unlike Canadian Northern, the Grand Trunk Pacific-National Transcontinental (the western section of the Grand Trunk past Winnipeg was known as the Grand Trunk Pacific; the eastern half became the National Transcontinental) was not a colonization road, but was built to rigorous standards right from the start. Indeed, today, almost all the Canadian National mainline from Winnipeg to the Yellowhead Pass makes use of the track originally laid down by the Grand Trunk Pacific.

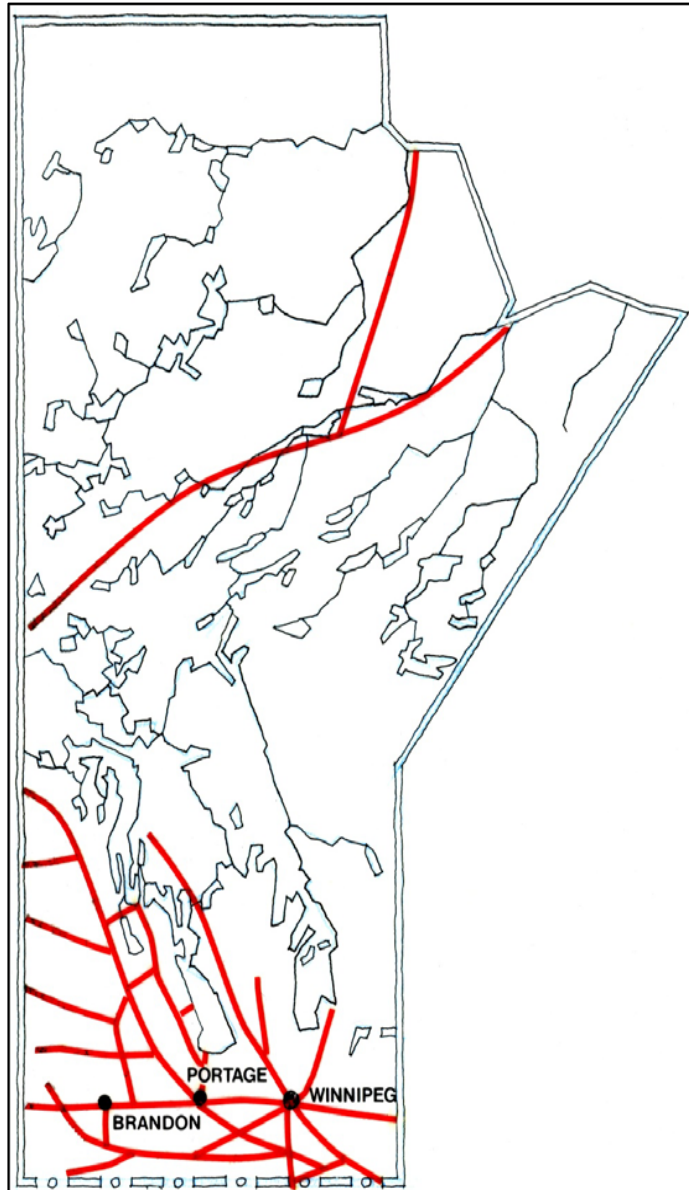


Figure 2
Canadian Northern Railway
lines in Manitoba, c1910.

Unlike its two main competitors the Grand Trunk Pacific had received no land grants from the government. Nevertheless, the company ventured into the real estate business, purchasing land for its own use as well as for the purpose of reselling it to prospective settlers. In 1906 a wholly-owned subsidiary was incorporated under the name of Grand Trunk Pacific Town and Development Company. Following this, dozens of townships were laid out on the Prairies, spaced in an orderly fashion every ten or fifteen miles along the projected route of the railway. Surveyors marked out the streets and located the station house and all major public buildings on their maps before moving on to the next site. The proposed communities were christened alphabetically; in Manitoba the place names progressed from Bagot to Wattsville (Figure 3).

Notwithstanding the heroic accomplishments in building their new transcontinental lines, both Canadian Northern and Grand Trunk Pacific were unable to adjust to oncoming traumatic political and economic events. Colonization of the Prairies had reached a threshold and, more significantly, the wheat boom had taken a downturn. By the onset of World War I, Canada could no longer support three separate trunk line systems.

Canadian Northern was the first to collapse. In spite of valiant efforts on the parts of Mackenzie and Mann to garner capital for their transcontinental, the desired volume of traffic never materialized. Heavy interest payments on past loans could no longer be met. Finally, the outbreak of the Great War and the diversion of British and American capital to the war effort accelerated the demise of Canadian Northern. Negotiations began in 1917 and 1919 Canadian Northern officially became part of the new Canadian National system.

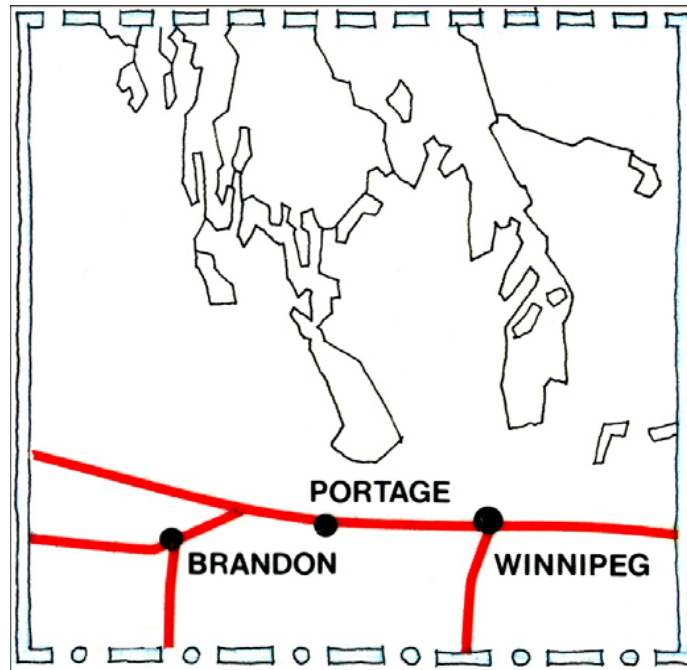


Figure 3

The mainline of the Grand Trunk Pacific-National Transcontinental with its branches to North Dakota, c1910.

Financial difficulties also plagued the Grand Trunk Pacific and its parent, the Grand Trunk throughout the War. The choice of Prince Rupert as the Pacific terminus proved to be a mistake. It never gained prominence over Vancouver as a shipping port. In the West, where few branch lines were built, the single main line was simply unproductive. Like the Canadian Northern, the Grand Trunk Pacific had over-extended itself at precisely the moment when settlement and production in the Prairies were both declining. In 1920, the Grand Trunk Pacific was transferred to the Dominion. The collapse of the Grand Trunk Pacific also pulled down the Grand Trunk, which itself became part of the new Canadian National in 1923.

The sort, but exciting, era of settlement and of railway construction was over. After the Great War the face of Canada was dominated by the two remaining railways, the privately-owned CPR and the Government's new CNR. This reduction in competition did not, however, end either company's problems. Faced with new and competitive transportation modes, both CN and CP have been forced to cut further at the once vigorous rail system of Western Canada, including that of Manitoba.

RAILWAY STATIONS IN MANITOBA

The competition between the three main rail companies between the late 1890s and just before World War I resulted in the construction of hundreds of railway stations throughout Western Canada. These depots were, primarily, the place where a railway could sell its services. The all-important grain shipments were processed through the station and the grain elevator. Newspapers, non-local produce, hardware and other manufactured items were all handled by the station agent and crew before ending up on the shelves of the general store. Mail came and went by rail, sometimes three or four times a day. Both incoming and outgoing telegraph messages were transcribed by the agent. In short, very few facets of life in a rural community were not in some way connected to the local railway station and its agent.

Railway stations were not only the economic, but also the physical and often the social foci of most rural towns. An early town plan proposal most rural towns. An early town plan proposal suggested by Canadian Pacific surveyor, Sandford Fleming, though never implemented, demonstrates that the station was the intended central focus of these plans (Figure 4). The actual town plan of Belmont, Manitoba, reveals similar focal intent (Figure 5). In fact, many railroad stations in Manitoba were tellingly situated at the corner of Main Street and Railway Avenue.

For incoming settlers the railway station played yet another role. It offered them the first physical evidence, as they descended from the train, of the kind of community they were entering. The impressive architectural statement the station itself made on the open prairie provided a note of reassurance to the apprehensive, if not frightened, immigrants. According to Archie Warren, a local historian in Tyndall, Manitoba, the station agent himself had a definite social responsibility for these new arrivals. He and his family introduced the newcomers to the rest of the townspeople and often found them accommodation. It is not surprising, then, that the design of station buildings, besides imparting a sense of importance, often conveyed a sense of hospitality as well.

J. Edward Martin, who wrote about Canadian Northern's earliest stations, has suggested that, in total "the station set a tone of quiet robustness, sensible economy, and welcoming friendliness that would be carried on in future depots of the company".

While there was often a desire to create, in the railway station, an object of civic pride, most railway stations in Western Canada were built according to various standard plans, with the size and importance of the town dictating which station design was to be used. Where a large community was already established, like Selkirk or Winnipeg, the railways were expected to provide stations of appropriate size. In many cases, however, the eventual size and importance of a town, and indeed its existence at all, was decided by the railroad's planning engineers. A typical rail line might consist of large stations at each terminal point, medium-sized stations relatively evenly distributed along the line and smaller stations filling in the gaps at ten mile intervals. These short intervals were deemed necessary to provide adequate service for the vast expanses of the West, where it was difficult for a farmer to go more than five or ten miles with his wagonload of grain.

To be sure, a "typical" line would be difficult to locate, owing to local deviations. A stone quarry at a strategic location, for example, or a good, reliable water supply for the steam engines often disrupted any theoretical organization. Nevertheless, this approach to settlement organization was common, as another CPR surveying proposal by Sandford Fleming indicates (Figure 6).

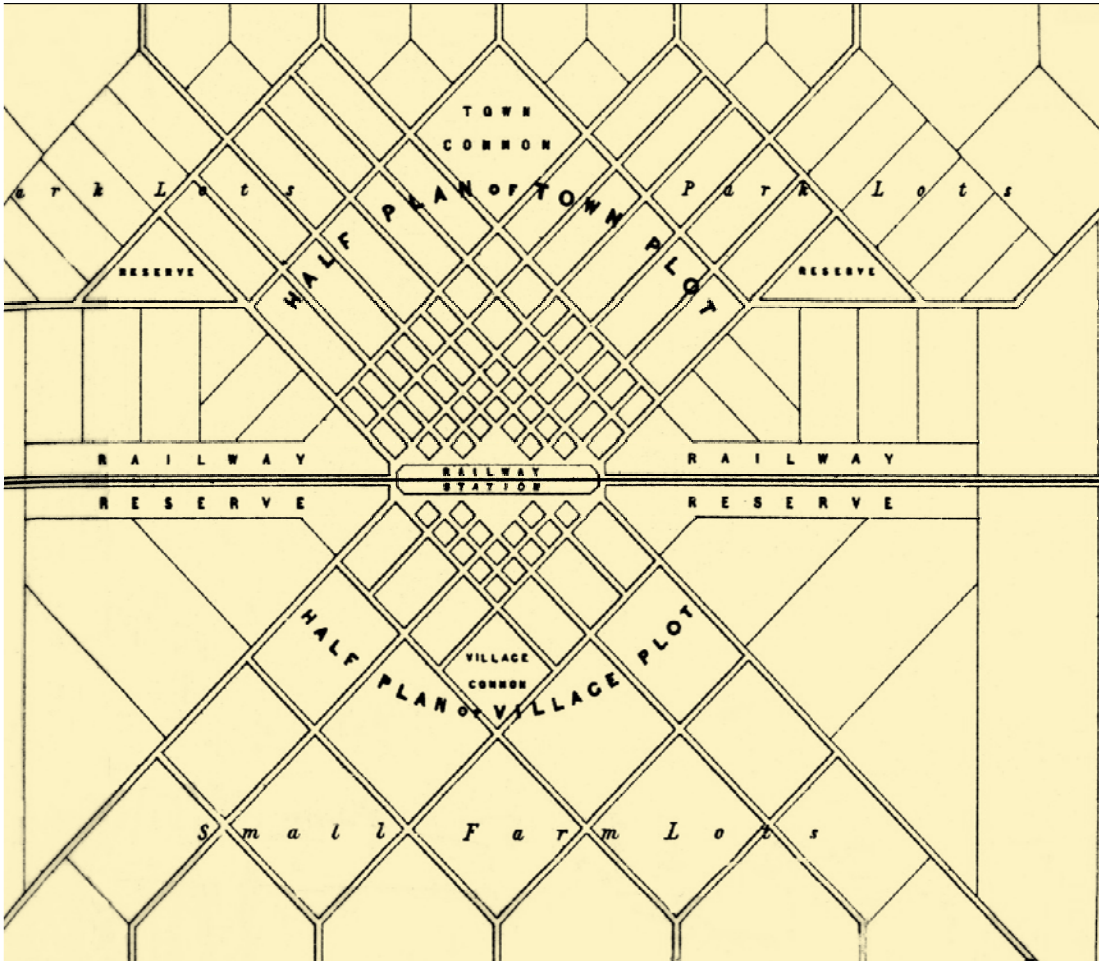


Figure 4
Sandford Fleming's
CPR town plan proposal.

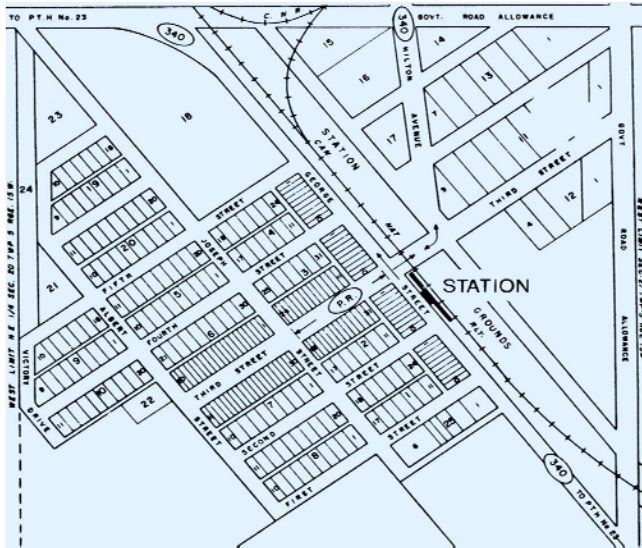


Figure 5

Belmont town plan.

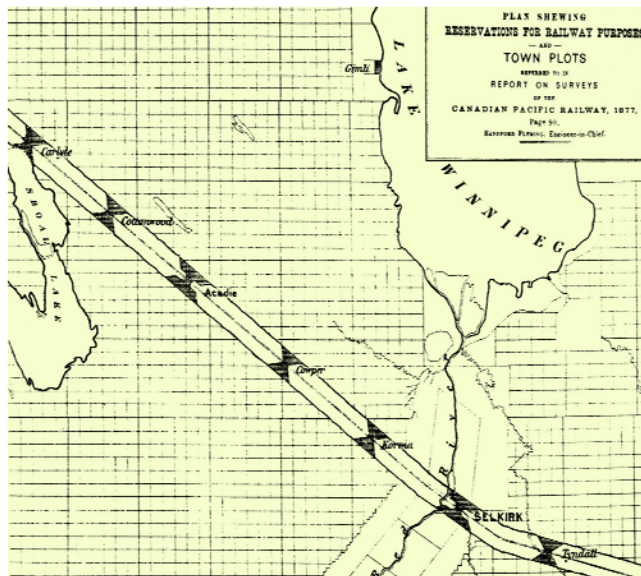


Figure 6

Settlement planning proposal 1877. The smaller, simpler symbols indicate where a village was to be; the larger symbols denote a town. Typically, the latter would have had larger more imposing stations.