

# The Tunnel That Almost Never Was

## *A Brief History of the Brockville Railway Tunnel*



THE BROCKVILLE RAILWAY TUNNEL runs from Brockville's waterfront to the exit just north of Pearl Street, four blocks away. A solid structure, it served the community for over 100 years.

In April 1853 the Brockville and Ottawa Railway Company was chartered to construct a rail line from the St. Lawrence River at Brockville to Sand Point on the Ottawa River near Pembroke, with a connection at Smiths Falls on the Rideau River and a branch line from Smiths Falls to Perth. The rail line's total distance was to be 130 miles.

The estimated cost of the road was 930,000 pounds sterling. It was to be completed in three years. Sykes, DeBergue & Co., a contracting firm from Sheffield, England, was hired in December 1853, and clearing of the right-of-way began in the new year.

### THE TUNNEL — TO BE OR NOT TO BE?

The contractor wanted to build a tunnel under the knoll in the centre of Brockville, as a symbol of the success of the line and a way of better competing for tight railway funding from Britain. However, the supervising engineer, Samuel Keefer, insisted a tunnel was an unnecessary expense. He said a line could be run in cooperation with the Grand Trunk Railway (GTR), then being built from Montreal. This surface line would run through the western part of Brockville, around the knoll, to the waterfront at half the expense and in half the time.

Sykes, DeBergue & Co. prevailed, and on Saturday, September 16, 1854, crowds gathered at the Court House for the parade to the tunnel excavation site. In a ceremony performed by the Free Masons, the tunnel cornerstone was laid.

All that fall, digging of the trench at the southern end of the tunnel continued. The construction crew of Yorkshiremen, under John Booth and Son of Yorkshire, England, opened Water Street in October, installed the tunnel lining, and regraded the formerly level street to rise over the tunnel arch. The stonemasons were hoping to reach Main Street (now King Street) before winter so they could start underground blasting of the granite section of the tunnel.

### FURTHER TUNNEL WORK DELAYED TWO YEARS

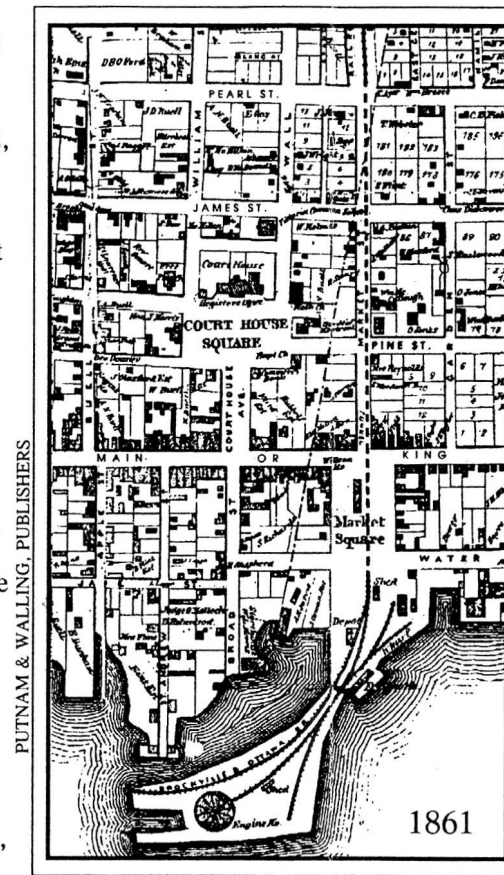
However, financial problems caused a two-year delay. Sykes, DeBergue needed refinancing, but the municipalities, which had loaned 350,000 pounds sterling for the venture, did not want to cooperate. They felt they were losing control of their investment. Indeed, by March 1855 only 143 yards of the 600-yard tunnel were completed. The Booths had already spent a great deal of their own money to pay their workers and refused to continue. In April the workers, already short pay that was due them, in frustration attacked the carriage of the B&O company secretary when he visited the site.

Work stopped, and as time passed the citizens of Brockville complained loudly about the dangerous conditions at the abandoned tunnel site. Meanwhile, in November 1855, the Grand Trunk Railway, linking Montreal to Toronto, reached Brockville, completing

the first major section of its line. The resulting fanfare orchestrated by the GTR officials only reminded Brockvillians of the troubles they were having with their own railway.

In 1856, after a company re-organization, the enterprise got back on track with a new contractor and subcontractor.

The fate of the tunnel project was still being hotly debated by Brockville's town council, but in late fall 1856 the GTR decided against putting a water depot at



*Railway and tunnel in downtown Brockville, 1861.*

Brockville and so withdrew its support for the combined B&O and GTR western route through town. In December, Samuel Keefer supported the tunnel project for the first time. Finally, in June 1857, after two years delay, work at the neglected site began again.

On January 13, 1859, the first passenger train left Brockville's GTR station and travelled along the snow-clogged track to Smiths Falls and on to Perth. Because of the snow and cold, what should have been a 2.5-hour return trip from Perth to Brockville took 7.5 hours. A much more successful trip ran in February, and the railway was in business.

### FIRST TRAIN USES THE TUNNEL

On December 31, 1860, six years after tunnel construction had begun, the first train ran to the waterfront through the tunnel. In celebration a fifteen-gun cannon salute was fired at the old blockhouse on the island. Next to its ruins rose the roundhouse for the railway, a huge structure with a turntable and ten pits.

The Brockville & Ottawa Railway merged with the Canada Central Railway in 1878. Once the CCR extended its line to Mattawa to join the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) in 1881, the entire system, including the original B&O line, was transferred to the CPR.

### THE END OF THE LINE AND BEYOND

By 1956, only two engines were small enough to get through the tunnel. The last ceremonial train went through in 1969, and in 1976 the tracks were removed and the line abandoned. In 1983, with its purchase by the City, the tunnel got a new lease on life as a premier tourist attraction for Brockville. It was officially re-opened in 1988, and in 1992 both the north and south entrances of the tunnel were designated as historic sites by City council.



*The CP rail routes in eastern Ontario, 1930.*