

PIONEER TRANSPORTATION IN CANADA

LAWRENCE J. BURPEE, F.R.S.C.

Secretary, International Joint Commission, Ottawa

Pioneer transportation in Canada was very largely water transportation. Long before even primitive roads were available, and long before railroads were dreamed of, the sparse population made its way about by means of the rivers and lakes of the country.

The extraordinary richness of Canada, east and west, in these water thoroughfares, must be apparent to anyone who has studied a map of the Dominion. The St. Lawrence leads directly into the heart of the continent. From the western end of Lake Superior, water routes, involving various portages, enable the traveller to reach Rainy lake, and, by way of Rainy river, the Lake of the Woods, and Winnipeg river, he is brought to Lake Winnipeg.

From Lake Winnipeg he can travel by water, with nothing more than an occasional portage, west to the Pacific, north to the Arctic, north-east to Hudson bay, or south to the Gulf of Mexico. To reach the Pacific, he would ascend the Saskatchewan from Lake Winnipeg, and find passes through the Rocky mountains at the headwaters of both the north and the south branch; or he could by any one of several water routes reach the Athabaska from the Saskatchewan, and get through the mountains by Athabaska pass; or again he could reach the mountains by way of the Athabaska, Lake Athabaska, and the Peace river. West of the mountains, Peace river would lead him to the headwaters of the Fraser, and the other passes to the headwaters of the Columbia. Both the Fraser and the Columbia would take him down to the Pacific, though the former would give him a very tumultuous passage, as both Simon Fraser and Sir George Simpson found in their day.

To reach the Arctic, the most direct route would be by way of the Athabaska, Lake Athabaska, the Slave, and Great Slave lake, to the Mackenzie, which empties into the Arctic. From Great Slave lake he could reach the Arctic by way of Clinton-Colden lake and Backs river, or by Great Bear lake and the Coppermine.

The principal route of the fur traders from Lake Winnipeg to Hudson bay was by Hayes river, but it was also possible, though difficult, to reach the bay by Nelson river, or by using the Cumberland Lake route from the Saskatchewan to the Churchill.

To get to the Gulf of Mexico from Lake Winnipeg, it was only necessary to ascend the Red river and portage over to the upper waters of the Mississippi. The Mississippi could also be reached by various portage routes from the Great Lakes, from Lake Erie by way of the Ohio, from Lakes Michigan and Superior by means of small streams that led to tributaries of the Mississippi.

Also, in the east, the Atlantic coast could be reached by water routes from Lake Ontario to the Hudson, and from the St. Lawrence by the Richelieu river and Lake Champlain to the Hudson. And toward the north, many routes were available, and used more or less by fur traders; from the Great Lakes and the St. Lawrence to James bay, by the Albany or the Moose from Lake Superior; and from the St. Lawrence, by the Ottawa and the Abitibi, by the St. Maurice and the Nottaway, and by the Saguenay and the Rupert rivers.

As this marvellous water system was opened up, a number of portage routes came into use, some of which in time became famous. Probably the most notable of these was the Grand Portage route, which led from Lake Superior over the height of land to waters flowing west into Lake Winnipeg and eventually into Hudson bay. Grand Portage was for many years the connecting link between the east and the west, the doorway to the vast Indian country, the fur-trader's paradise.

Other portage routes from Lake Superior to the westward were by way of the Kaministikwia river, by the St. Louis river, and by Lake Nipigon. The Kaministikwia route lay up the river of that name, at whose mouth the city of Fort William now stands, and thence by a series of lakes and rivers to Rainy lake. The Fond-du-Lac route ran up the St. Louis river, from where Duluth stands to-day, and by way of Vermilion river and Lake Namakan to Rainy lake. The Nipigon route was more roundabout. From Lake Superior, the traveller ascended Nipigon river to the lake of the same name, then westward through a series of lakes and streams to English river, a tributary of Winnipeg river.

The Kaministikwia was the earliest of these portage routes to be discovered. In 1688, Jacques de Noyon followed this route to Rainy lake. La Jemeraye, nephew of the western explorer La Vérendrye, first used the Grand Portage route in 1731, and it continued in use until the beginning of the following century, when the Canadian fur traders, organised as the North-West Company, finding that the authorities of the United States had determined to levy customs duties on goods landed at Grand Portage, decided to adopt the Kaministikwia route, which had been rediscovered by Roderick McKenzie in 1798. It is not known when the St. Louis or Fond-du-Lac route was discovered,

but it was a recognised thoroughfare of the fur trade for half a century or more. The Nipigon route was discovered by Unifreville in 1784, but was never used to any extent.

Disregarding a number of minor portages, on the various routes between Lake Superior and the Lake-of-the-Woods, and on the Winnipeg river, the next notable portage is at Grand Rapids, where the Saskatchewan discharges its waters into Lake Winnipeg. Ascending the Saskatchewan, about midway between its mouth and the confluence of the North and South Saskatchewan, a portage route leads north by way of Cumberland lake. Trading posts were built on this lake in the early days of the fur trade, by both the Hudson's Bay Company and the North-West Company. Joseph Frobisher, one of the traders from Montreal, first discovered and named Frog portage, long known as Portage de Trait  (or Trait ), which connected the Churchill with the Saskatchewan, in 1774. Peter Pond, following Frobisher's lead, turned up the Churchill to its source in Lac-la-Loche, and discovered Methye portage or Portage la Loche, in 1778. This portage, noted for its beautiful scenery, which has been described by Mackenzie, Franklin, Back, and other northern travellers, leads from the Churchill over to the Clearwater, and so to the Athabaska and the vast systems of northern and western waterways that lie beyond. Another important key to the water systems of the west was Giscome portage, leading from the headwaters of the Parsnip, a branch of the Peace river, to the upper waters of the Fraser.

The earliest of Canadian travellers, who were sometimes explorers, sometimes fur-traders, and often both, adopted the birchbark canoe of the Indian as the most efficient means of transport on North American waters. Because of the vital part this type of vessel played in the early history of Canada, and particularly of what is now western Canada, it seems worth while to quote the description in Keating's *Narrative of an Expedition to the Source of the St Peters River*:

"We were divided into three bark canoes, known by the name of 'canot du nord'. Although these are made nearly on the same model, yet there is great difference in their speed, burden, soundness, etc., according to the skill manifested in their construction. A canoe of this kind is generally constructed of ribs of cedar bent so as to impart to it its proper form, the ends being secured to a band that forms the superior edge of the vessel, and acts as a gunwale; over these ribs the birch bark is laid in as large pieces as possible, generally so that there shall be but two longitudinal seams, and two or three transverse; between the bark and the ribs very thin splints of cedar are placed, so as to prevent the bark from splitting; all the joints are sewed with long threads obtained by splitting the roots of a tree called by the

voyageurs *épinette*, and which is probably a spruce. To this thread the term *wattap*, used by the Chippewas, is applied by the Canadians; the seams as well as the cracks are covered with pitch (called by the Chippewas *peke*) made of the gum of the *épinette*; this is applied hot and renders the canoe water-tight. In this manner a little vessel is obtained, very well calculated for travelling on these waters, as it will carry a burden of upwards of 3,000 pounds. . . . Those which we used were 30 feet long by about 4 feet wide in the middle, and perhaps 30 inches deep. A number of transverse bars serve to keep the canoe in its proper shape. The seats of the paddlers are suspended to the gunwale. The bow and stern are sharp and turned upward."

How these canoes were navigated on all sorts of waterways, large and small, deep and shallow, is very well described by Peter Grant, of the North-West Company, in one of the narratives included in Masson's *Bourgeois de la Compagnie du Nord-ouest*:

"When arrived at a portage, the bowman instantly jumps in the water, to prevent the canoe from touching the bottom, while the others tie their slings to the packages in the canoe and swing them on their backs to carry over the portage. The bowman and steersman carry their canoe, a duty from which the middlemen are exempt. The whole is conducted with astonishing expedition, a necessary consequence of the enthusiasm which always accompanies their long and perilous voyages.

"It is pleasing to see them, when the weather is calm and serene, paddling in their canoes, singing in chorus their simple melodious strains and keeping exact time with their paddles, which effectually beguiles their labours. When they arrive at a rapid, the guide or foreman's business is to explore the waters previous to their running down with their canoes, and, according to the height of water, they either lighten the canoe by taking out part of the cargo and carry overland or run down the whole load.

"It would be astonishing to an European observer to witness the dexterity with which they manage their canoes in those dangerous rapids, carrying them down like lightning on the surface of the water. The bowman, supported by the steersman, dexterously avoids the stones and shoals which might touch the canoe and dash it to pieces, to the almost certain destruction of all on board. It often baffles their skill, when the water is very high, to avoid plunging in foaming swells on the very brink of the most tremendous precipices, yet those bold adventurers rather run this risk, for the sake of expedition, than lose a few hours by transporting the cargo overland.

"When they are obliged to stem the current in strong rapids, they haul up the canoe with a line, all hands pulling alongshore and some-

times wading through the water up to their middle, except one man, who remains in the stern of the canoe, in order to keep it in the proper channel; this part of their duty is always accompanied with much labour. When the wind favours, they always carry sail, and in a fresh gale will generally go eight or nine miles an hour."

Before leaving this primitive yet highly-developed vessel, it will be convenient to give a description of the method of carrying trading goods and fur packs over a portage, in the days of the North-West Company. Says John Johnston, in *Masson's Bourgeois*:

"Carrying the canoes, goods, and provisions (across the portage) is done by means of leather straps or thongs, the middle of which is broad and fitted to the forehead of the carrier. The first bale or piece is tied so as to lie a little above the *reins*, the second is lifted over the head and deposited, without tying, on the first, and, thus loaded, the *engages*, as they are called, trot off to the place chosen for a deposit, which they call a *pose*, and which in large portages are from two to three miles apart. This they repeat till the whole is transported; they then set off for the canoe, which they carry on their shoulders. They so go on till night, only stopping once for their meal, and once or twice for lighting their pipes. The packs are from 80 to 120 pounds weight, and he is not looked upon as 'a man' who can not carry two; there are many who even take three and outrun their fellows. This is the mode of carrying all over the Northwest."

The Hudson's Bay Company, with characteristic conservatism and preference for things that were substantial and strong, never took very kindly to the light and fragile canoe, although it was used to some extent after, and even before, the union of the Hudson's Bay and North-West Companies in 1821, but preferred, wherever it could be used, what was known as the York boats, so named after York Factory, on Hudson bay. Captain Butler describes one of these boats in 1870:

"The boat in which I now found myself was a large, roomy craft, capable of carrying about three tons of freight; it had a single tall mast carrying a large square lugsail, and also possessed of powerful sweeps, which were worked by the men in carrying positions, the rise of the oar after each stroke making the oarsman sink back upon the thwarts only to resume again his upright attitude for the next dip of the heavy sweep. This is the regular Hudson Bay boat, used for the carrying trade of the great fur company on every river from the Bay of Hudson to the polar ocean. It looks a big, heavy, lumbering affair, but it can sail well before a wind, and will do good work with the oars, too. . . . My crew numbered seven hands."

So much for the smaller craft. On the larger inland waters of Canada sailing craft were introduced at a very early date. One of the first of these was La Salle's *Griffon*, built in 1679 on what is now the United States side of the Niagara river, near the mouth of Cayuga creek. The vessel was of forty-five tons burden, and was equipped with five small cannon. These, like the unwieldy anchor, had been brought across Lake Ontario from Fort Frontenac, and hauled painfully up the Niagara escarpment. The *Griffon* was launched in the spring, and in August, 1679, made her first and only voyage, through Lake Erie, the Detroit river, Lake St. Clair and the St. Clair river into Lake Huron, and, after remaining some time at Michilimackinac, sailed into Lake Michigan and over to the entrance to Green bay. From here La Salle sent the boat back laden with furs. She was lost on the way; no one ever discovered how or where.

A little over half a century later (1732) the French Governor of Canada, Beauharnois, wrote the Court that Louis Denys, Sieur de La Ronde, proposed to build two barques at his own expense, one on Lake Huron and the other on Lake Superior, to be used in transporting copper from Lake Superior to Niagara for trans-shipment to Quebec and France. The following year the French King approved the project. The barques were evidently built, or at any rate that on Lake Superior, as in La Ronde's memoir of 1738 he says, "I returned in my vessel to Sault Ste. Marie," and enters at length into the ambitious plans for developing copper mines. These plans came to nothing in the end, probably because of the excessive cost of transportation.

It is, of course, not practicable here to give a comprehensive account of the development of shipping on the inland and coastwise waters of Canada. All that can be attempted is to touch very briefly on a few outstanding facts that may serve to suggest the general course of that development. After Canada became a British possession, for instance, and the fur trade expanded from Montreal throughout the region of the Great Lakes and far into the prairie country beyond, sailing vessels were built and operated on all these waters for the purpose of carrying up supplies and bringing down furs. One of the most famous of these vessels was the *Nancy*, a schooner built at Detroit in 1789 for the XY Company, and taken over by the North-West Company in 1804. She was used as a transport during the war of 1812-14, and in the latter year was destroyed by her crew to prevent her from falling into the hands of the Americans.

At this time Canadian shipping on the Great Lakes had developed into quite respectable proportions, sufficient at any rate to supply the needs of the sparse population of Upper Canada. But its most notable

development was in ocean tonnage. While shipbuilding was a recognised industry on the St. Lawrence, it was one of paramount importance in the maritime provinces. Yarmouth, Nova Scotia, claims the credit of having started the industry as early as 1761, when a small schooner, the *James*, was built and launched. From that time onward the industry grew steadily in the ports of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, the maritime fleet increasing from decade to decade not only in numbers but in individual tonnage. A century and a quarter after the launching of the *James*, Yarmouth, for instance, produced the *County of Yarmouth*, a full rigged ship of 2,154 tons. The industry reached its zenith about the time of the Crimean war, when Nova Scotia counted over three thousand vessels, with a tonnage of considerably more than half a million, scattered over the seven seas. With the advent of the iron sailing ship, followed by the tramp steamer, the Canadian shipbuilding industry was doomed. It left behind it, however, some notable achievements, for one of which at least it has never had much credit. One hears a good deal about the clipper ships of New England, their speed and their seaworthiness. As a matter of fact many of the finest of this type of vessel were built in Nova Scotia, and the most notable of the clippers that flew the Stars and Stripes were built in New England yards by "Bluenoses," such as Donald McKay, a Nova Scotian, who built the *Lightning*, *James Buines*, *Flying Cloud*, and many other famous clippers.

Pioneer transportation in Canada by water may be said to have ended with the introduction of steam. The first steamer in Canadian waters was the *Accommodation*, built by John Molson and David Bruce of Montreal, and which made its initial trip from Montreal to Quebec November, 1809. Seven years later the steamer *Frontenac* was launched at Ernestown, on Lake Ontario. It was not until 1843 that the first iron steamer was built in Canada, the *Prince Albert*, of Montreal.

In 1831 the *Royal William* was launched on the St. Lawrence, near Quebec, and towed up to Montreal to receive her engines. Two years later she made a transatlantic trip, reaching Gravesend in September—the first vessel to cross the Atlantic by steam-power alone. In 1834 the *Royal William* was sold to the Spanish government, and became Spain's first war steamer.

One of the shareholders of the *Royal William*, Samuel Cunard of Halifax, gave his name to the famous line of transatlantic steamships. Thomas Chandler Haliburton and Joseph Howe are credited with having conceived the idea in 1838. They took it up with Cunard and William Crane of New Brunswick, obtained a mail subsidy from the British government, and two years later the first Cunard mail steamer,

the *Britannia*, sailed from Liverpool for Halifax and Boston. She was followed by the *Acadia*, *Caledonia*, and *Columbia*.

In 1816 the first steamer appeared on the St. John river, New Brunswick, the *General Smyth*. In 1834 the *Beaver* was launched on

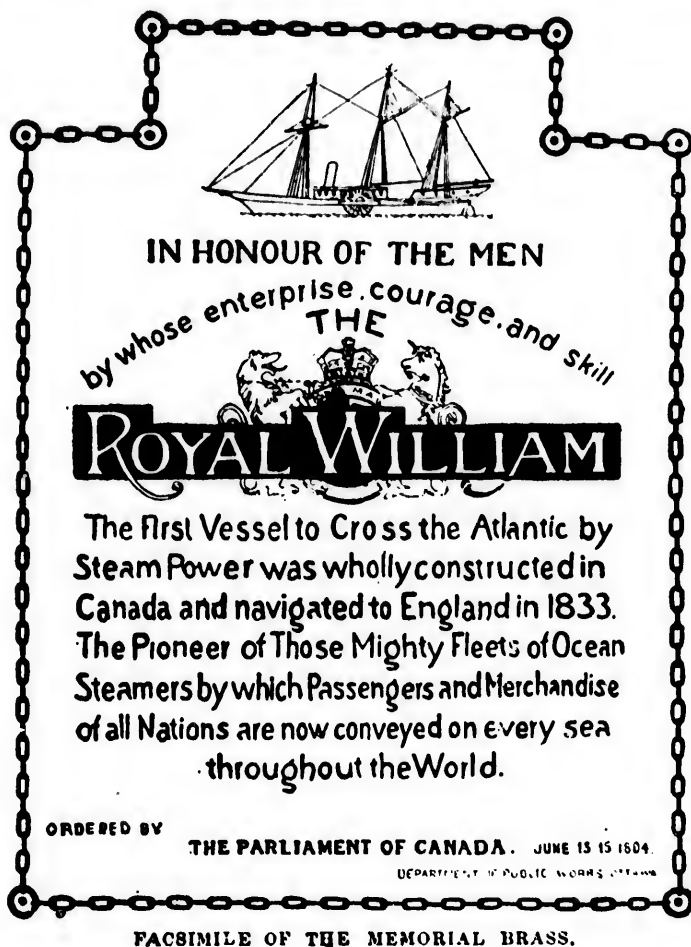


FIG. 13. THE TABLET ERECTED BY CANADA TO COMMEMORATE THE "ROYAL WILLIAM"

the Thames, in the presence of William IV. Built for the Hudson's Bay Company, she sailed around the Horn and reached Fort Vancouver in 1835. Another pioneer steamer was the *International*, a stern-

wheeler which afforded communication between Fort Garry on the Red river and the international boundary.

Before leaving this side of the subject, a word may be said about canals. The earliest lock canals in Canada, or in North America, were built by the Royal Engineers on the St. Lawrence, around the Coteau and Cascades rapids between 1779 and 1783. In 1798 a small canal was built by the North-West Company at Sault Ste. Marie. A canal on the Richelieu river, to connect the St. Lawrence with Lake Champlain and the Hudson river, had been advocated as early as 1775, but was not actually built until 1831. The first Welland canal was commenced in 1824, and the Rideau canal two years later.

So much for transportation by water. Pioneer transportation by land in Canada, up to the advent of the railway, was for the most part a painful experience, as the available roads were few and very primitive. Benjamin Franklin stated before a committee of the House of Commons in 1766 that the only post-road then in Canada was between Montreal and Quebec. This was a relic of the French régime, having been completed in 1734. The distance was divided into twenty-four stages. The *maîtres de poste* were obliged to keep four calèches and four carioles, "and to be ready at a quarter of an hour's notice to forward the traveller, who was usually received with much ceremony on alighting after each stage." The *maîtres de poste* had the exclusive right of passenger transport by land. The journey from Quebec to Montreal occupied three days, and the charge amounted to about fifteen dollars.

In 1791 the post-road extended eastward to New Brunswick and westward as far as Kingston. The first parliament of Upper Canada passed, in 1793, an Act placing the roads under overseers. The inhabitants were required to put from three to twelve days' labour on the highways, and to provide their own tools. Owners of carts and teams worked at least six days. The provincial revenue was so small that it was not until 1804 that any surplus was available for roads. Nevertheless some considerable progress was made. Governor Simcoe, in 1794, had, with the help of the Queen's Rangers, made a beginning with that since famous highway Yonge street, which starting at the lake front runs north through Toronto and for thirty-odd miles to Lake Simcoe. He also built Dundas street, from the village of Dundas on Lake Ontario (later extended to Toronto) to the site of what later became the town of London, which he thought of making the capital of the province. In time the intermediate links were completed, until main roads were available from Quebec to the Detroit river, and by way of Yonge street to Georgian bay.

PURCHASED ^{11th} May 1926
FROM *Thorburn Alball*
PLACE OF PURCHASE *Ottawa*
PRICE, 35-

LATER CATALOGUED PRICES



FIG. 14. RED RIVER CARTS
Half-breed hunters' camp near the "Three Buttes".

1842 a daily line was put in operation throughout the province. Similarly by slow degrees a system of roads was built up throughout the maritime provinces, and stages afforded communication between the principal towns.

In western Canada roads of any description are a comparatively recent development. So far as the prairie provinces are concerned, they were almost superfluous, as it was possible to ride or drive almost anywhere across the treeless plains; while in that sea of mountains, British Columbia, the building of any kind of road was such a difficult and expensive undertaking that it was not attempted until it became indispensable. Such an emergency arose in 1858 when gold was

wheeler
 Red rive
 Befc
 canals.
 were bui
 Coteau :
 canal w:
 A canal
 Champl
 but was
 commen

So
 by land
 part a j
 primitiv

House of Commons in 1766 that the only post-road then in Canada was between Montreal and Quebec. This was a relic of the French régime, having been completed in 1734. The distance was divided into twenty-four stages. The *maîtres de poste* were obliged to keep four calèches and four carioles, "and to be ready at a quarter of an hour's notice to forward the traveller, who was usually received with much ceremony on alighting after each stage." The *maîtres de poste* had the exclusive right of passenger transport by land. The journey from Quebec to Montreal occupied three days, and the charge amounted to about fifteen dollars.

In 1791 the post-road extended eastward to New Brunswick and westward as far as Kingston. The first parliament of Upper Canada passed, in 1793, an Act placing the roads under overseers. The inhabitants were required to put from three to twelve days' labour on the highways, and to provide their own tools. Owners of carts and teams worked at least six days. The provincial revenue was so small that it was not until 1804 that any surplus was available for roads. Nevertheless some considerable progress was made. Governor Simcoe, in 1794, had, with the help of the Queen's Rangers, made a beginning with that since famous highway Yonge street, which starting at the lake front runs north through Toronto and for thirty-odd miles to Lake Simcoe. He also built Dundas street, from the village of Dundas on Lake Ontario (later extended to Toronto) to the site of what later became the town of London, which he thought of making the capital of the province. In time the intermediate links were completed, until main roads were available from Quebec to the Detroit river, and by way of Yonge street to Georgian bay.

In 1816 a stage was put on the route from Montreal to Kingston, and the following year another one was established from Kingston to York. During the season of navigation these stages were discontinued between Prescott and York, as the available traffic was taken care of by a steamboat. Various attempts were made in the early part of the nineteenth century to open a stage route from York to the Detroit frontier, but this was not finally established until the 'thirties. In 1827 the first stage was started between York and Niagara, and in



FIG. 14.

RED RIVER CARTS

Half-breed hunters' camp near the "Three Buttes".

1842 a daily line was put in operation throughout the province. Similarly by slow degrees a system of roads was built up throughout the maritime provinces, and stages afforded communication between the principal towns.

In western Canada roads of any description are a comparatively recent development. So far as the prairie provinces are concerned, they were almost superfluous, as it was possible to ride or drive almost anywhere across the treeless plains; while in that sea of mountains, British Columbia, the building of any kind of road was such a difficult and expensive undertaking that it was not attempted until it became indispensable. Such an emergency arose in 1858 when gold was

found on the upper waters of the Fraser river and in the Cariboo district. Between that year and 1865 Governor Douglas completed what has been described as "the boldest undertaking in road-building ever launched by any community of twenty thousand people". It was eighteen feet wide and over four hundred and eighty miles long, and many miles of it were built by cribwork and blasting through the wild canyon of the Fraser, hundreds of feet above the river.

The first charter for a Canadian railway was granted in 1832, shortly after the news reached Canada of the success of the London and Manchester line. This pioneer Canadian railway, built in 1835-36,

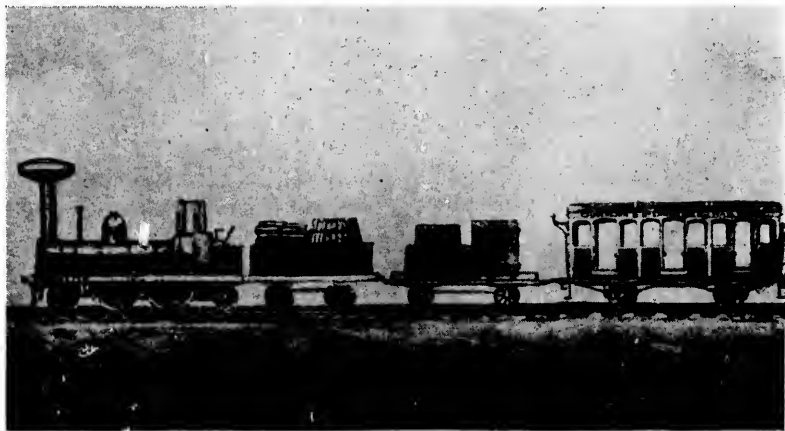


FIG. 15. THE FIRST RAILWAY ENGINE IN CANADA
Champlain and St. Lawrence Railway, 1837. From a print in the Château
de Ramezay.

ran between Laprairie on the St. Lawrence and St. Johns on the Richelieu, from which point the river was navigable to Lake Champlain. The distance was sixteen miles. The road was opened with horses in 1836 and with locomotives the following year. The first railway in Upper Canada was built between Queenston and Chippawa, on the Niagara frontier, in 1839. The grades were so steep, however, that locomotives could not be used, and horses were substituted. In the late 'forties and the 'fifties a large number of railways were built in what was then Canada, and somewhat later in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. Most of these were afterwards absorbed by the great Canadian systems, the Grand Trunk, the Canadian Pacific, and the Intercolonial.¹

¹For bibliography see appendix.