Stratford's Railway Industry

STRATFORD AND THE RAILWAY

The most important factor in the early development of the town of Stratford was the arrival of two different railways in 1856. The railway crossroads created by the junction of these two competing railways, led to Stratford being chosen as the location of locomotive repair shops and as a Divisional headquarters for the Grand Trunk Railway. For many years, the Grand Trunk Railway and the succeeding Canadian National Railways employed about 50% of the workforce in the city. The railway also fostered the growth of key industries in the city and played a large role in creating the standard of living that the city enjoys even today. This railway heritage is still cherished, as almost every family has been associated with the railway at some time.

THE ARRIVAL OF THE RAILWAYS

Stratford was unusually fortunate, because of its location in the heart of south-western Ontario, to have two railways competing to arrive here first. The Buffalo, Brantford and Goderich Railway was first off the mark in the early 1850s, laying track from Buffalo to Stratford, but financial collapse prevented the completion of the line to Goderich. The track lay dormant for a year or more while the company was restructured to become the Buffalo and Lake Huron Railway. Finally the first train from Buffalo arrived in Stratford on December 6, 1856. The rest of the track to Goderich was completed during the next two years.

In the meantime, the Grand Trunk Railway, with a vision of a railway from Quebec City to Chicago, completed the portion from Toronto to Stratford while the Buffalo line was in trouble. Thinking that nothing would happen with the track already laid by the Buffalo railway, the GTR employees merely ripped it out to install their own track. They soon had to provide the proper crossing at Stratford when the Buffalo line was revived. The race for first was, however, won by the GTR who sent a train on a trial run into Stratford on September 3, 1856, with regular service beginning October 8, 1856. The Grand Trunk line was extended to Sarnia by 1860 with a spur line from St. Marys Junction to London (1858). By the early 1860s it was extended to Chicago by the Grand Trunk Western Railroad.

The rivalry between the two companies was soon ended when the Grand Trunk bought up the Buffalo and Lake Huron in the 1860s. Today, these are the only two railway lines remaining in all of Perth County.

GROWTH OF THE RAILWAY

The first plan to build a railway to the north end of the County was begun in 1855 as the Stratford and Lake Huron Railway Company. However, the plans lay dormant for two decades until a new line from the south, the Port Dover and Lake Huron Railway opened its line to Stratford in 1875 with a station on Falstaff and Nile Streets. The Port Dover railway revived the Stratford and Lake Huron proposal and by 1877 had reached Listowel and Palmerston, where it connected with other lines to the lake. The two companies merged and shortly after, in 1881, were taken over by the Grand Trunk Railway. The GTR at Stratford now had lines running in six different directions.

In 1870, the Grand Trunk Railway chose Stratford as the site for its new locomotive repair shops. The GTR continued to grow to become Canada's largest railway by absorbing its rivals. When it took over its main rival, the Great Western Railway in 1888, the latter's locomotive shops in Hamilton were closed and Stratford's shops were enlarged. (*See the panel on the CNR Shops located at Downie and St. Patrick.*)

Other business and industry benefited from Stratford's position as a railway hub as well. Agriculture benefited immediately with grain shipments to Britain during the Crimean War and to the U.S. during the American Civil War. Industries like Stratford Mill Building, Stratford Bridge and Iron Works, and a couple of farm implement manufacturers were able to expand to larger markets. The major beneficiary however was the furniture industry which began in the 1880s and expanded to the largest in Canada in the first three decades of the twentieth century with over ten different factories. (*See the panel on Stratford's Furniture Industry located at the Lakeside Drive Bandshell.*) Stratford furniture was sold all over North America.

ABOVE: ROUNDHOUSE IN YARD 2, CIRCA 1900.
TOP: ENGINE ON TURNTABLE IN ROUNDHOUSE, CIRCA 1900.

DECLINE OF THE RAILWAY

In 1923, the Grand Trunk Railway, having over-extended itself, was merged in the new government-owned Canadian National Railways. The company continued to have a monopoly on rail lines into Stratford, despite the attempt of the Canadian Pacific Railway to build a line through Stratford between 1904 and 1913. Because this was to run along the river through cherished parkland, the CPR was rejected in a public referendum and never came to Stratford.

With the advent of automobiles, passenger service started to decline, especially in the 1960s. In 1970, the many passenger routes were closed down. The few remaining passenger lines in Canada, including the Northern Main Line through Stratford, now came under a new Crown Corporation, VIA Rail, which still operates passenger service to Toronto and London. The rail lines themselves were sold to the Goderich and Exeter Railway starting in the 1980s. The unused lines were torn up in the 1990s, so that today only the lines from Stratford to Goderich and the Northern Main Line (London-Toronto) continue to exist. Ironically, these were the first to be built.

EDISON WORKED HERE

Thomas Alva Edison, subsequently the famous inventor and entrepreneur, had his first full-time job working for the Grand Trunk Railway at Stratford station as night telegrapher at the age of 16 in 1863. He worked here for a few months until he was held responsible for a near collision at the junction. Rather than wait for the consequences, he took off to Port Huron where his parents lived and spent the next few years working odd jobs in the Midwest. Only in 1868 were his talents as an inventor recognized and he soon (1870) became established in a very successful enterprise which would have world-wide impact.
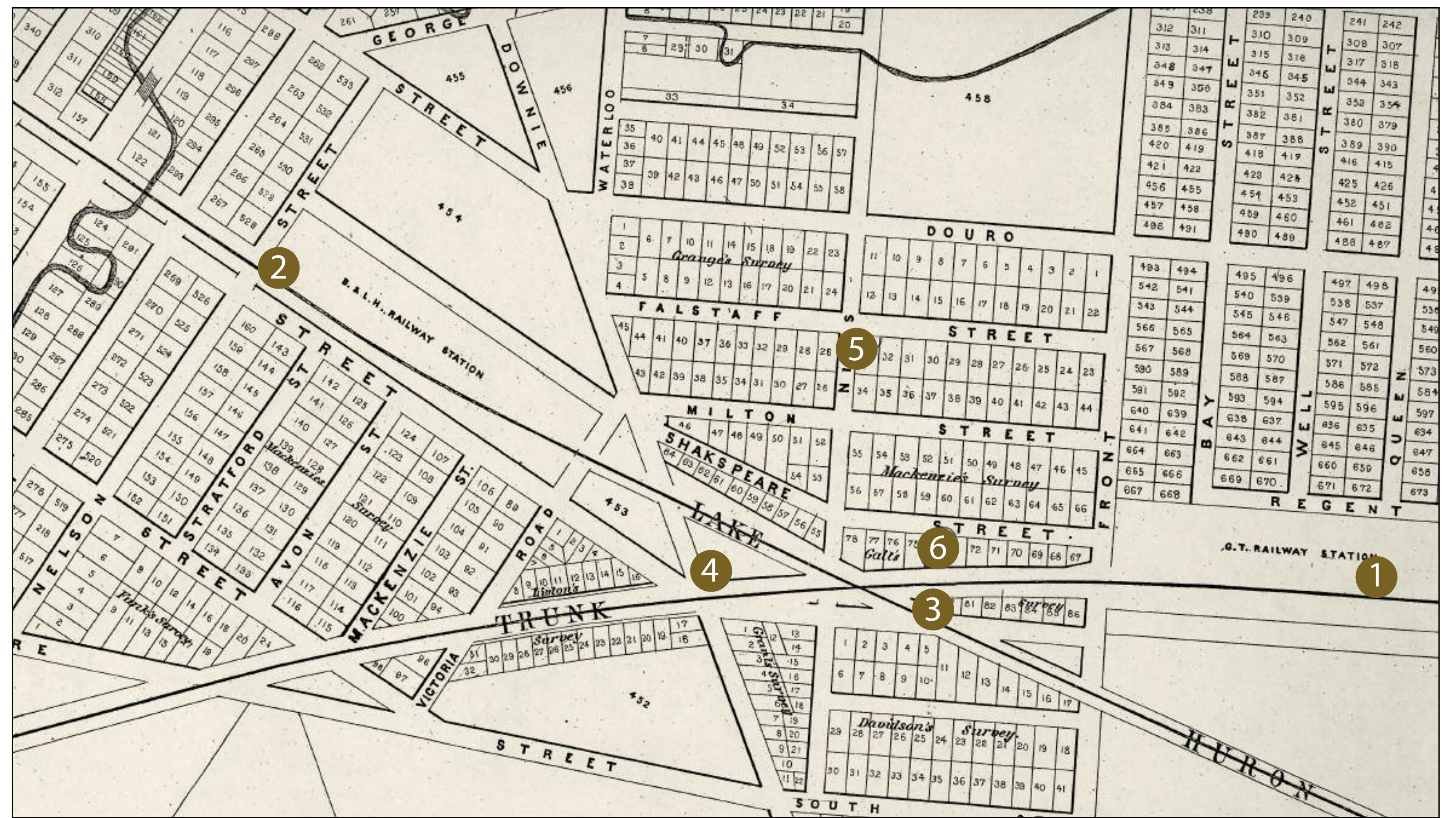
STRATFORD'S SIX RAILWAY STATIONS

The present Stratford Railway Station, that can be seen from here, was built in 1913 on Shakespeare Street by the Grand Trunk Railway in Prairie style and is well preserved on the exterior, although the original tower was removed in the 1950s. In 1923, the GTR became the Canadian National Railways. Today the station is operated by VIA, the successor to CN's passenger service. In June 2005, the building was designated under the Ontario Heritage Act and a plaque was unveiled near the platform entrance during the fourth annual Railway Day (*no. 6 on the map*).

However, Stratford had five previous railway stations prior to the present one. The first two were built in 1856, one for the Grand Trunk Railway line from Toronto to Sarnia, and the other for the Buffalo and Lake Huron Railway line from Fort Erie to Goderich. Unlike later stations on these two lines, these were not near the junction. The original GTR station was located on Queen Street at Regent Street (well east of the present station), while the B&LHR station was at Nelson and St. David Streets (at the west end of the later shops) (*no. 1 and no. 2 on the map*).
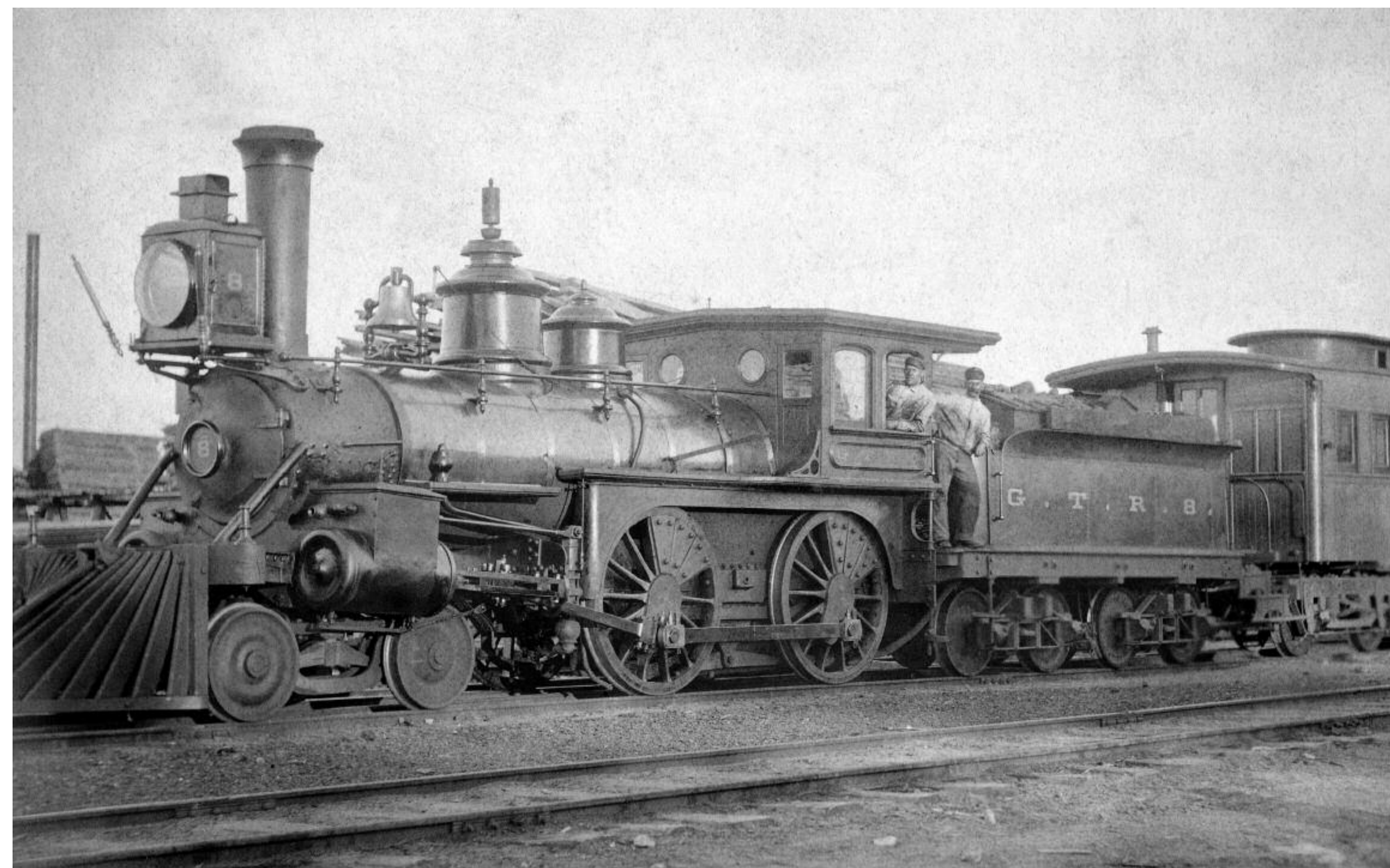
In 1861, the Buffalo line built a new "Union Station" near the junction of the two lines, between the tracks east of Nile Street, in order to facilitate the transfer of people and luggage from one railway line to the other. Pressure was on the GTR to do the same, but in 1863 the GTR took over the operation of the B&LHR and its union station (*no. 3 on the map*).

Finally, in 1870, a new frame union station was built at the corner of Guelph and Downie Streets (across from the Dominion Hotel which still stands today). It was enlarged with a baggage room in 1872. Another building (for the dispatchers) was added between the two lines by 1882. These buildings were removed after the present station was built in 1913 (*no. 4 on the map*).

The other station which existed in Stratford was on Falstaff Street near Nile Street and was built in 1875 for the Port Dover railway and its extension, the Stratford and Huron Railway, which ran north to Palmerston. These two railways were taken over by the GTR in the 1880s and this station was closed in 1922, although the spur line to National Grocer's (now Bradshaw's) warehouse continued to exist for years afterward. Only in recent years have houses been built on the former station lands along Falstaff Street (*no. 5 on the map*).

BY L. RIEDSTRA, STRATFORD-PERTH ARCHIVES
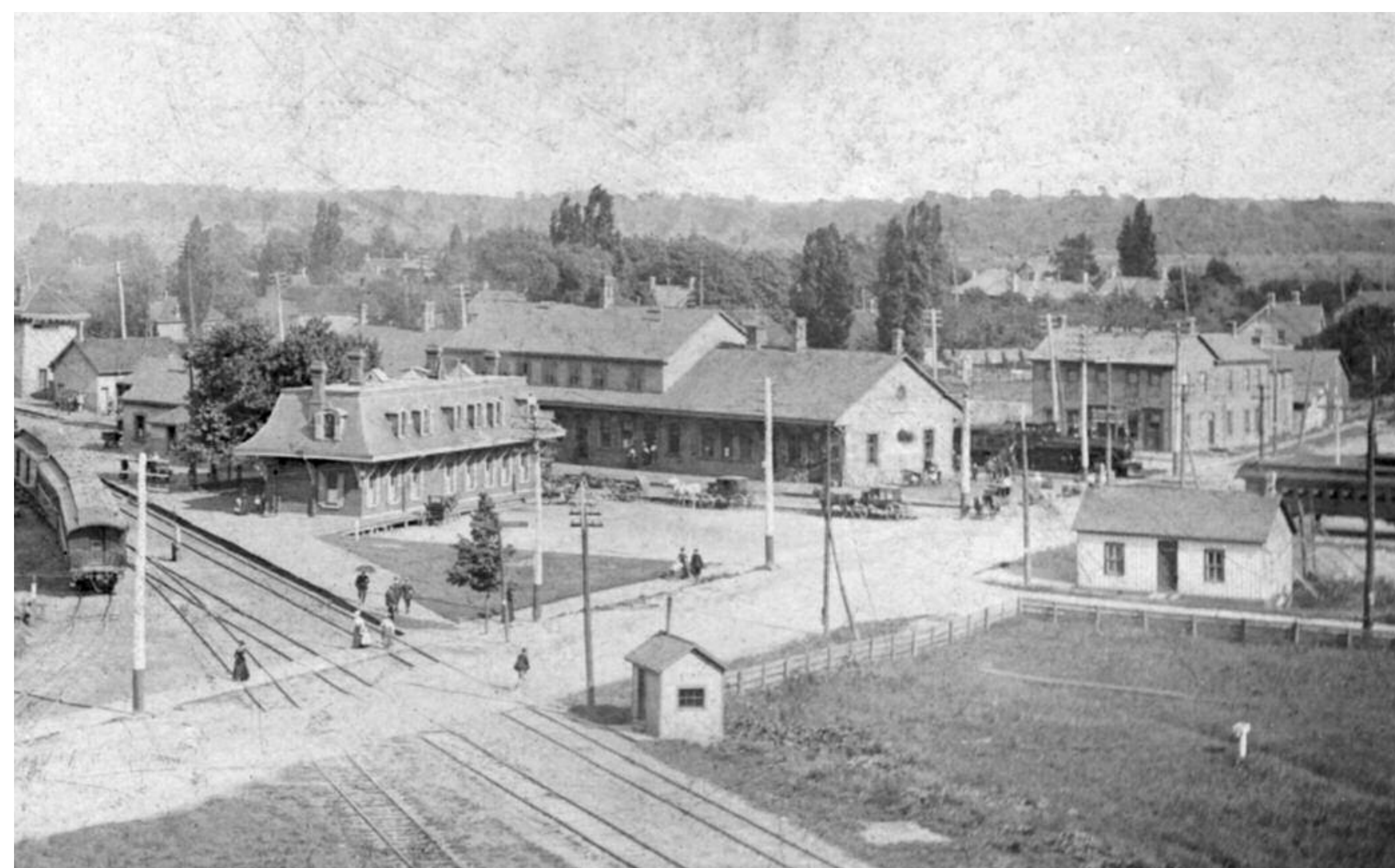
TOP TO BOTTOM:

MAP OF THE TOWN OF STRATFORD, 1857, SHOWS THE OPTIMISM OVER SURVEY BROUGHT ABOUT BY THE COMING OF TWO RAILWAY LINES IN 1856.

ENGINE "GTR 8", CIRCA 1880.

THE OLD RAILWAY DEPOT AT GUELPH AND DOWNIE STREETS IN THE 1880S.