

THE IRON BRIDGE

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Esquesing Historical Society

An engineering marvel

Have you ever traveled from Georgetown to Toronto by train? Have you ever looked out of the train window, especially in the fall, and marveled at the beauty of the Credit River Valley as you travel over the long, high, trestle bridge locally referred to as The Iron Bridge? Have you ever given a thought to the age and construction of that piece of railway? Even today, 154 years after it was first opened, it is considered to be an engineering marvel.

Settlement in what would become Georgetown started around 1819, and by the 1850s it was starting to grow and prosper. By that time, railways were an obsession and in 1852 it was decided to construct a route from York (Toronto) to Guelph. However, it gave engineers a challenge in the building of a spectacular trestle over the Credit River, just outside

the town limits.

Originally, it had been planned to build the bridge from wood, but because of the expanse over the valley it was decided to use stone. That stone "of a very beautiful quality of sandstone of fine close and hard grit, and of a very agreeable warm colour" was cut and hauled from a quarry just outside of the town. The bridge consists of eight spans of 96 feet each, and a structure length of nearly 1,000 feet, plus the embankments on each side. It sits 115 feet above the water line, and the weight of the iron girders at the time of building was 405 tons.

It is hard to even imagine in this day and age, the difficulties endured by the workers in the actual physical construction—no automated machinery or vehicles to transport men, equipment, or the stone!

The building of the railway brought much change to the town. Workers, who were mainly Irish, flocked to the area to work on the bridge, and were not popular among the local residents. In fact, one Toronto newspaper carried a headline reading "Riot at Georgetown" and talked about a group of rampaging drunken workers who smashed up a local tavern. During the construction, one Irish workman fell to his death. Perhaps though, we have this Irish fellow to thank for the longevity of the bridge. There is an old Egyptian superstition that if a building is to be built to last forever, blood must be spilt on its construction. Perhaps that is why the 'iron bridge' has lasted so well. Blood was spilled during its construction!

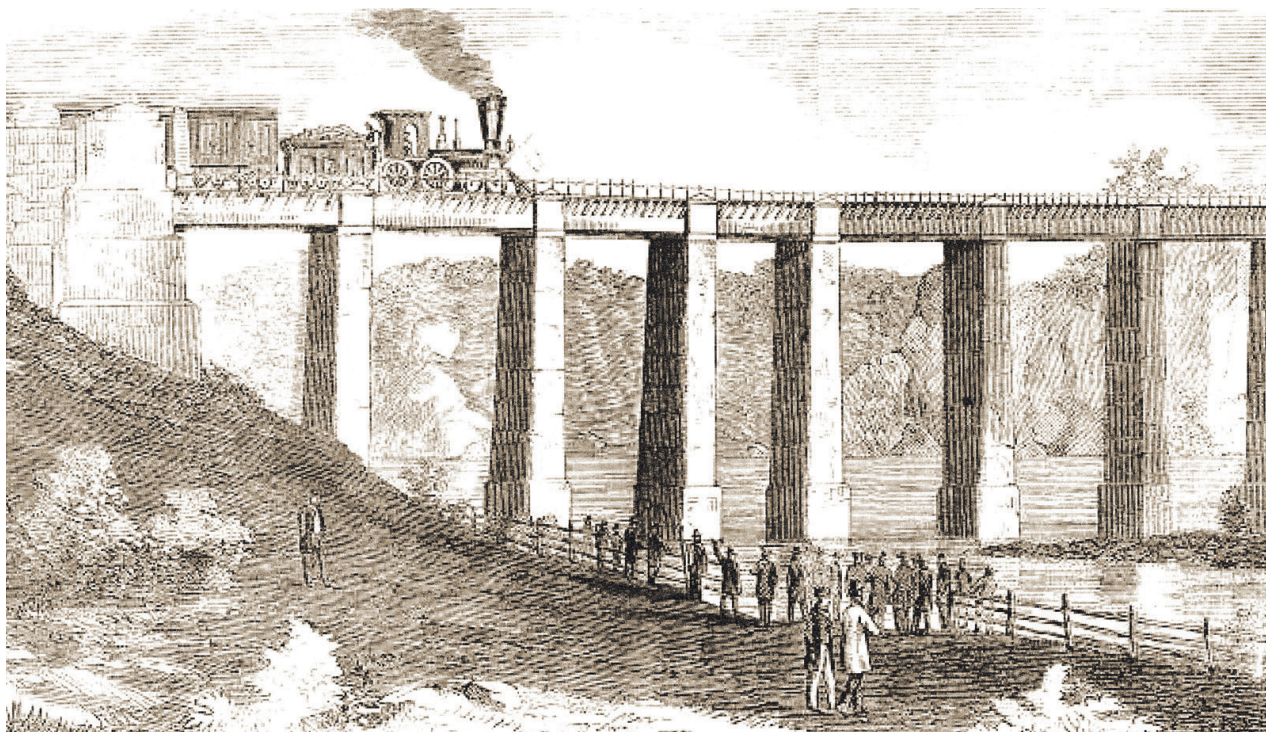
The first 'official' train passed over that bridge on June 20, 1856, carrying officials and dignitaries from Toronto to opening ceremonies in Guelph where a grand ball was held. Another ball was held in Montreal, which was attended by at least a few local people. In 1860, the train stopped at the bridge so His Royal Highness Prince Edward, Prince of Wales, could have an up-close look at the marvelous structure.

By February of 1864, trains had been using the line for eight years, carrying all manner of freight and passengers, and adding greatly to the prosperity of Georgetown. That same year, Georgetown was incorporated as a village.

The morning of Feb. 9 dawned crisp and cold and as a freight train was approaching the bridge heading from Sarnia to Toronto, it was discovered that an axletree on one of the rear cars was broken.

Notice was signaled to the engineer, but owing to ice on the track, the speed of the train and the fact that it was on a downward grade, the brakes did not catch. The front half of the train kept going and safely crossed the bridge. The last two cars did not, and they plunged down over the embankment, into the banks of the river valley below.

This was witnessed both by the engineer, and by a young local boy, Charles Young, who was out squirrel hunting.



An 1860 sketch showing the Georgetown Iron Bridge.



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