

# ACO Stratford-Perth County

## More Than Bricks and Mortar

[www.stratford-perthcountybranchaco.ca](http://www.stratford-perthcountybranchaco.ca)

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Newsletter Team: Carole Huband and Allan Tye

### St. Marys' Railway Heritage

by Dan Schneider

St. Marys has reason to be proud of its wealth of railway heritage. Thanks to a strong appetite for preservation and repurposing, most of it survives today: two old stations, two railway viaducts, an active railway line (still with passenger service), and two abandoned ones, converted to trails. Let's take a tour.



St. Marys Junction Station (yes, that is a wrecking yard across the tracks)

Approaching St. Marys from the east, on the so-called North Main Line connecting Toronto and London, the first thing you'll see is the 1858 Junction Station.

This national historic site is the original station built by the Grand Trunk Railway as it pushed through its main line west to Sarnia with a branch line to London. The limestone structure has an association with Thomas Edison who, as a very young man, worked here for a short while as a controller (and, according to one story, fell asleep in the night resulting in a near-accident, which might explain the brevity of his stay).

The station's location on the edge of town, and the active line it sits beside, has made repurposing a challenge. The town acquired the property at some point and the building was secured and mothballed, awaiting a new use — which happily it has finally found! Broken Rail Brewing, a craft brewery, opened last month (for curbside sales for now).

Two railway lines once forked off from the "junction" — one southwest to London, still in operation, and one west to Sarnia, now closed. Both lines had to cross broad and deep river valleys, which entailed the construction of trestle bridges. Described at the time as "the greatest ornament in engineering to any town in Canada West", these surviving stone viaducts from 1858-59 — aptly named the London Bridge and the Sarnia Bridge — are major landmarks in St. Marys.

Probably the more spectacular of the two is the Sarnia Bridge. In 1989, after 130 years of service, the line was abandoned and the corridor sold off to neighbouring landowners. The fate of the Sarnia Bridge was in doubt.



Sarnia Bridge across the Thames River



Sarnia Bridge, countryside view

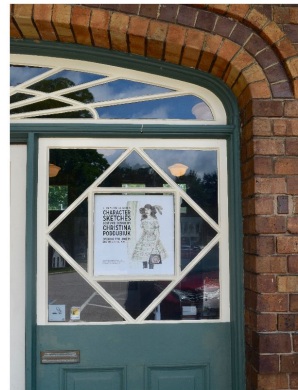
Fortunately, the Town of St. Marys stepped in, acquiring the railway right-of-way within the town limits including the bridge. As impressively, local citizens rose to the challenge, creating a group to fundraise and work with the municipality to transform the right-of-way into a public trail and adapt the bridge for pedestrian use with a boardwalk deck.

The Grand Trunk Trail opened in 1999. Its centrepiece is the Sarnia Bridge with its panoramic views of the town to the south and largely unspoiled countryside to the north.

Near the London Bridge, just off the main street and more conveniently located than the Junction Station, sits the current station, also now owned by the Town. These days the 1907 shingle-style building serves not one but three functions: Via ticket office and waiting room, gallery, and clock repair shop.



St. Marys Station, east façade



St. Marys Station, detail of west façade

About the time the current station was built a second railway appeared in town — a CPR branch line from Embro that came in from the south along the Thames River. Opening in 1908, the line terminated in St. Marys. After 90 years of operation, in 1998 the trackage from the St. Marys Cement plant to the centre of town was abandoned and the old frame CPR station was removed.

Foreshadowing the intervention that led to the Grand Trunk Trail years later, the Town acquired this section of the line and the picturesque Riverview Walkway opened in 1992.



CPR cement tunnel under current CN line



Riverview Walkway with the Thames on the right



A lesser known vestige of St. Marys' railway past is an underpass in the industrial south end of town where the old CPR line once crossed under the CN line to London. It too has found new use as a hiking trail.

End of tour. Come see for yourself!

Dan Schneider is a St. Marys-based writer and blogger. A former editor of Acorn magazine, he started his long career in heritage in 1979 as a summer student working for Stratford LACAC and archivist Jim Anderson. Now a professional heritage consultant, Dan is a founding member of the Stratford-Perth County ACO branch and a former coordinator of the branch's plaque program.

#### Interested in Volunteering?

Do you like to write? We need people to write articles for our newsletters. The word count should be from 250 to 400 words. The topic? Something concerning the buildings in Stratford and Perth County and the stories that they tell. Contact Carole Huband [hubandca@rogers.com](mailto:hubandca@rogers.com)

Interested in information about researching or having a plaque made? Get in touch with our plaque coordinator Mark Yakabuski [yakster@rogers.com](mailto:yakster@rogers.com)

Interested in advocacy for Heritage Conservation Districts? There is a group looking into this for Hamlet Ward. Get in touch with Mary Walton [mmwalton1997@gmail.com](mailto:mmwalton1997@gmail.com) or Richard Wood [rwoodn618@rogers.com](mailto:rwoodn618@rogers.com)