



The Halifax Ocean Terminals and Rail Cut Project

These extracts from Murray Hodgins' thesis tell the story of how the Federal Government forced the largest project that Halifax had even seen on the city, while ignoring all objections and alternative proposals, resulting in the destruction of some of the city's most beautiful areas and financial hardship for the municipality. The preparation and adoption of a comprehensive plan laying out the city's goals and objectives for future development may or may not have helped mitigate the impact to some degree, but City Council refused to even consider this.

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Lead-up to Federal Government Proposal

1880's – Saint John's business community convinces the City to subsidize the development of new port facilities. A CPR terminus is established at Saint John. Portland, Maine decides to concentrate on tourism rather than shipping.

1890's - the CPR proposes to build an outlet at Halifax to complement its base at Saint John. New Brunswick's federal cabinet minister Andrew Blair blocks the project. In contrast with Saint John, Ottawa remains responsible for port development in Halifax. City's role is merely to cooperate with city boosters to persuade Ottawa to initiate development.

1895 – there is a fire at the Deep Water Terminus at the foot of Cornwallis Street. The Terminus is rebuilt to service 12 steamships. Demand on the railway and steamship terminals is growing annually, and the Board of Trade is soon dissatisfied.

1904 - proposal to relocate the Dockyard vacated by the British Admiralty to Dartmouth

1905 – Sir Wilfred Laurier’s Royal Commission on Transportation of Canadian Products through Canadian Ports emphasizes the need for port development. The government responds with improved funding. There is gradual improvement of the terminal facilities. Dockyard re-location plan goes nowhere.

1906 – Opposition leader Robert Borden states commitment to a government owned railway and to public ownership of natural resources, franchises and utilities, including ports.

June 1910 – Halifax delegation meets with railway officials and members of Liberal government. Mr. John Kennedy, consulting engineer of the Montreal Harbour Commission, is asked to visit Halifax to prepare a report and draft a comprehensive plan for major terminal improvements.

1911 – another delegation from Halifax Board of Trade and City Council goes to Ottawa to meet with ministers of Finance, Railways and Canals, and Trade and Commerce.

Kennedy report proposes 4 new 800X235 foot piers costing \$2 million.

Michael Dwyer, president of Board of Trade, claims such enlargements are already obsolete, and Government appropriation of adjoining property – dockyard and/or commercial waterfront south of Deep Water – is needed.

Mr. C.C. Longard, member of Board’s Transportation Committee and of Civic Improvement League, proposes new passenger station south of the Ordinance Yard, in the “red light district”, with a right-of-way through the dockyard and piers along the Dockyard waterfront. The problem with this is that a new Canadian naval base is being proposed for Halifax.

November 1911 – Borden visits his home riding as Prime Minister. Minister of Railways and Canals, Frank Cochrane, says he is determined to find a comprehensive solution to Halifax’s railway and steamship terminal problems.

Spring 1912 – R.M. Hattie of Civic Improvement League runs for Alderman in civic elections. His platform, and that of the so-called “Citizens’ Civic Party”, includes the formation of an industrial policy for Halifax, port development, consideration of the problems created by military properties, and comprehensive planning for the future improvement and development of the city.

May 1912 – Cochrane returns to Halifax to follow up on his assurances. The Board of Trade urges the City of Halifax to cooperate fully with its efforts in pursuit of harbour development. At a luncheon reception, Colonel Sam Hughes, Minister of Militia and

Defence, gives his opinion that the whole of the commercial waterfront – but not the Dockyard – would have to be expropriated to realize the development of the port.

October 25, 1912 – secret meeting is held between a select committee of the Board of Trade with Federal officials. The resulting rumour was that \$35 million was to be spent on a project involving the entire waterfront, including the Dockyard, with a tunnel under the city and a breakwater at Greenbank. Leading Tories “in the know” are reportedly buying up properties expected to increase in value.

Announcement and Debate

October 30, 1912 – Cochrane announces government intentions for the port at a luncheon held at the Halifax Hotel. Features of the design are:

- A 2000-foot bulkhead on which they would build new immigration facilities, sheds, a grain elevator and a Union Passenger Station
- 6 piers stretching 1 ½ miles along the shore, and capable of accommodating 30 ships
- Union Station at Freshwater
- Piers to extend south from Freshwater to Black Rock Beach in Point Pleasant Park
- Railway would reach the new terminus by a deep trench cut from Fairview, where freight yards would be located on land reclaimed from Bedford Basin
- Trench would run along the eastern shore of the Arm and across the peninsula to intersect with the harbour near Greenbank

Where new industries were to locate was not made clear

The Board of Trade unanimously endorses the government’s proposal. The Herald echoes the Board’s enthusiasm. The Chronicle gives only conditional approval, showing concern about the consequences for the South End residential areas, and offers to contribute towards getting a second engineer’s opinion.

One letter to the editor suggests handing over Point Pleasant Park to the CPR as a hotel as in Quebec, constructing an Armside driveway or footpath, and purchasing the shoreline from Fleming Park to York redoubt as parkland. The Chronicle writes that the City would be foolish to allow the finest part of the Park to be lost forever for a facility that might be obsolete within 50 years. It criticizes a decision process which excludes all but business interests, and urges readers to bring other concerns forward to government.

Nov. 6, 1912 – Chronicle prints a letter by Alderman G. Mackenzie proposing an alternative – relocating the Dockyard to Dartmouth and expanding the Deep Water terminals south to the Ordinance Yard and north to the Narrows. It leaves the south end alone, incorporating acute angled piers, a sorting yard at Africville, and a passenger

station in the “red light district” of Argyle Street, and able to accommodate 50 steamships.

As president of the Board of Trade, Michael Dwyer bases unqualified support of the Government proposal on the argument that fear of change had scared off the CPR when it choose Saint John as its eastern terminus in the 1880’s – despite the fact that it was political interference from Minister Blair that finally convinced the CPR to drop its plan to extend its line to Halifax in 1901.

South end residents are forced to either support the city’s business leadership or else risk being accused of pursuing pure self-interest at the expense of the broader community. There is no comprehensive plan in place to balance the social impact of the project against purely economic efficiency arguments.

Analysis:

Letters to the editor supporting the proposal avoid the central issue: why is there no flexibility in the location ?

The Halifax project is the centrepiece of Borden’s national transportation policy. It is announced before the 1912-1913 session, suggesting that Halifax is a test case, the basis upon which all the rest is to be built. Any questions the city raises might fuel criticism of the overall policy at the national level or in the Conservative party, either of which might endanger the project or at least cause delay. The “Halifax Platform” imposes Borden’s national political agenda on his own constituency. An important element of the Halifax business elite recognizes how much Halifax stands to gain, no matter how well- or ill-founded the project, and therefore promises their support.

Nov. 1912 – Hattie writes a personal letter to Prime Minister Borden suggesting the government hire an expert such as Thomas Adams to prepare a plan for Halifax. Frank Cochrane replies with an indignant letter indicating that a landscape architect had already been hired, without mentioning comprehensive planning.

November 12, 1912 – City Council defeats Alderman G. Mackenzie’s motion which expresses dissatisfaction with the government’s proposal, calling for information and other options to consider. The Civic Improvement League files a report basically in favour of the government’s design.

January 1913 – meeting is held at Technical College to discuss comprehensive planning.

Spring 1913 – Hattie has been elected to Council, but retires after his proposal that the City borrow \$4000 for a comprehensive plan is defeated for the fourth time.

April 1913 – a visit by the Prime Minister and key railway men. Borden defends his government’s proposal. A capacity of 32 steamships would be required within 10 years at

present rates of growth. The south end is the only site which could accommodate that level of traffic..

One unspoken advantage of the south end location is that it allows the government to proceed without the involvement of external departments or governments – specifically the Dept. Of Militia and Defence with respect to the Dockyard. To solicit input from other sources would expose the government's plan to broad scrutiny, with the threat of delay to the project and to the implementation of the government's national transportation policy.

May, 1913 – Cochrane visits Halifax to announce that work would begin that summer, in July.

One writer in the opposition press argues that the preferable direction for growth of the Halifax business district is northerly rather than southerly, so that a south end terminus is ill-conceived. Expansion to the north would allow the business section to grow in the direction of Dartmouth in anticipation of a bridge being built across the Narrows

Other arguments: place the Union Station as proposed, but leave the freight piers to expand near their present location. Reach the passenger by a tunnel under the city. Another: a north end location reached via Dartmouth would lessen grades and shorten the route.

June 17 – a public meeting is held to hear out the opposition, but Cochrane has already approved the plan and called for tenders for its construction long. Senator Power objects that the site selection is based entirely on its suitability for the needs of the transportation companies, and not on the needs of the city of Halifax, and that the trans-shipment of goods 5 months per year is of no appreciable benefit to the city.

Analysis:

The most sensible option is the removal of the dockyard to Dartmouth and conversion of the old site to piers and sheds. This is complicated by confusion about the actual status of those lands with respect to the British War Office, and by the attitude of the Dept. Of Militia and Defence, which is determined to prevent encroachments on military lands. Borden promises to find a solution.

He consults with the city's business leadership, then his government announces a grand development plan, which is the creation of Cowie and a team of federally sponsored engineers. It is as much a response to Borden's political needs as to those of the city of Halifax. Borden's plan is to make the Intercolonial Railway and the port of Halifax the foundation of a new national transportation network. The city has next to no involvement in decisions affecting the nature or location of the terminals, or their effects on the city.

Aftermath and Impact

December 1913 - the beginning of a new Curnard Line service between Halifax and Southampton, signalled by the arrival of the Ascania

1914-1915 - Expropriation awards are finalized for 175 properties required for the terminals and tracks. 200 families are rehoused.

1917 – completion of work on the railway cut, after slow progress through the war years.

1918 - work on the station and docks starts after the Richmond depot is demolished in the Explosion. It is already clear that the full complement of docks will not be needed, evidence of just how optimistic Borden's projections had been. Finally, the amalgamation of the Intercolonial with the Canadian Northern to form the Canadian National Railway Company, a government railway, indicates that the national system would now be centralized.

Analysis:

Physical Impact

1. *Point Pleasant Park lost 14 acres of its best waterfront.*
2. *Freshwater and the elite neighbourhood at Greenbank were demolished.*
3. *Tracks encroached very close to the houses on the Armside estates "The Bower", "The Oaks", "Blenheim", "Armdale", and Borden's own "Pinehurst".*
4. *William Cunard's "Oaklands" was bisected and the mansion lost to fire during its removal from the railway's path.*
5. *The majority of estates were subdivided and sold for building lots within ten years. In part due to the uncertainty brought by the presence of the railway cut and the ocean piers, real estate interests experienced very little success in developing any part of the south end for the next quarter century.*

Financial Impact

The terminals removed even more taxable property from the city's assessment than was already exempt in the Dockyard and the many other military installations. A request from the City for a government grant in lieu of taxation of government properties was rejected.

The city was now faced with expensive works projects resulting from displacement of residents and urban expansion brought about by the Ocean Terminals.