AN OVERVIEW OF TRANSPORT ISSUES IN THE EASTERN TOWNSHIPS

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_Paper presented at the Eastern Townships Research Centre Symposium: Transport Issues in the Eastern Townships, Bishop’s University, April 8, 1995_

Introduction

For the past two hundred years, since the earliest settlement of the region, residents of the Eastern Townships of Quebec have been acutely concerned with creating a regional transport infrastructure that would best serve their needs. The specific concerns of the people have changed over time in response to shifting economic conditions, altered social and cultural climates and evolving transport technologies. Farmers, lumbermen, miners, manufacturers, clergymen, politicians, tourists and land speculators, amongst others, have at various times been concerned with aspects of the regional accessibility of the Eastern Townships and with the internal transportation network of the area.

The dual problems of accessibility from without and mobility within remain the two principal preoccupations of transport planners in the Eastern Townships.

As in all regions, the physical geography of the Eastern Townships, principally in terms of its topography, hydrology and climate, played a central role in shaping the development of nineteenth and twentieth century transport networks. So too did the Townships’ location relative to the evolving economic and political landscapes of eastern North America play a pivotal and ongoing role in guiding the growth of transportation systems in the region.

The cultural and economic landscapes which have been successively created in the Eastern Townships over the past two centuries have been the direct product of changing levels of economic accessibility and personal mobility within the region and between it and the economic mainstream of Canada and the United States.
The technology of transport systems has passed through several well-defined phases in North America in terms both of the transport of freight and the movement of passengers. Most of these phases have been manifested in the Eastern Townships although the beginning and the duration of a phase, as well as its relative importance as an agent of regional growth, was not always congruent in time with similar stages in neighbouring areas. The transitions from the pre-industrial era to that of iron, steam, and electricity and then later to the dominance of the internal combustion engine is particularly well illustrated by developments in the Eastern Townships.

The pre-railway period

The exploration, exploitation and settlement of eastern Canada up to the coming of railways in the mid-nineteenth century was intimately and often exclusively linked to water transport — river, marine coastal, lake and, latterly, canal. This age of wood, wind and water power, which dominated Canadian transportation until well after the mid-nineteenth century, saw a pattern of riparian linearity imposed on the human geography of the country. Depth of settlement and the opportunity for most forms of economic growth beyond the narrowest of shoreline fringes was minimal. For a region like the Eastern Townships, lying at some remove from the primary commercial artery, the St. Lawrence River, the navigability of its rivers was the critical test of utility which did much to determine both the pace of initial settlement and also the subsequent accessibility to markets for any fruits of the settlers’ efforts.

In this respect the Eastern Townships was not well served by its rivers — the Chaudière, the Becancour, the Nicolet, the Yamaska and the largest of them all, the St. Francis. Numerous rapids and waterfalls, together with shallow and tortuous channels, rendered navigation over any significant distances extremely onerous and impractical for the large-scale movement of freight or passengers.

The inaccessibility of the Eastern Townships from either the American Atlantic seaboard or the St. Lawrence valley by means of its waterways served to slow the rate of the region’s settlement and economic growth prior to 1850. This economic isolation served, in turn, to stimulate in the inhabitants of the Eastern Townships a lively and ongoing quest for some transport technology that would allow them access to the economic mainstream of North America and fan the fires of regional growth.
While the rural road network in parts of southern Ontario adjacent to the shores of the St. Lawrence River and the Great Lakes was adequate for the needs of local farmers and other shippers, the rugged terrain, a frequently inhospitable climate and a sparse and scattered population militated against the construction and maintenance of a road network capable of carrying significant quantities of freight in the Eastern Townships.

With a view to stimulating settlement in the area, the British government of Lower Canada sponsored the construction of colonization roads in the first two decades of the nineteenth century. The two principal examples of this enterprise were the Craig and Gosford Roads which led in a south-easterly direction from Quebec City, the main port of disembarkation for British settlers to the Canadas. Difficulties in finding sufficient labour for their construction and the financial impossibility of maintaining such roads long in advance of the settlement frontier meant that the lines drawn confidently on contemporary maps depicted, in reality, little more than intermittent rough trails cut haphazardly through miles of empty wilderness. These colonization roads provided little stimulus to settlement.

In the most densely populated southern townships, adjacent to the United States’ border, a rudimentary stage coach system linking the major regional villages of the Townships to Montreal and to American centres to the south did evolve between 1800 and 1850 but it remained throughout the period at best an unreliable and seasonal means of passenger transport. Early overland trans-
port links were often better developed between the Eastern Townships and New England centres than they were to the St. Lawrence lowlands, a reflection, in large measure, of the strong New England influence in the early settlement of the region. The principal contribution of the stage coach to regional development was as a carrier of mails, newspapers and as a means of maintaining tenuous social and cultural linkages with regions beyond the Eastern Townships.

More successful as a means of overland transport was the use of sleighs on frozen waterways in wintertime. In this fashion quantities of high value/low bulk commodities such as potash could be transported seasonally to markets in Montreal, Three Rivers and Quebec and a limited range of consumer goods imported.

In the second quarter of the nineteenth century Canada experienced the effects of the canal building era which had begun in Great Britain in the closing years of the eighteenth century and subsequently spread to the United States where the construction of canals, most notably the Erie Canal in 1825, was instrumental in breaching the Appalachian barrier to westward economic development. In Canada the energies and financial resources of the colonial governments were directed towards the improvement of navigation on the St. Lawrence River and on its major tributaries such as the Ottawa and the Richelieu. Other construction programmes, such as the building of the Rideau Canal system, were undertaken for strategic and political reasons. But the rock-bound channels of Eastern Townships’ rivers did not lend themselves easily to navigational improvement. While there were a number of ephemeral schemes proposed to link waterways within the Eastern Townships, all were essentially frivolous and ill-conceived and none was ever brought to fruition.

Only on Lake Memphremagog, the largest of the region’s lakes, did an ongoing steamboat navigation system, supported by an infrastructure of lighthouses and other navigational aids, appear. For a century, from 1851 to 1951, one or more steamboats plied the waters between Newport and Magog at the lake’s extremities. While this service was a boon to the nascent recreation industry which was based on a number of resort hotels on the shores of the lake, it contributed little to the regional economy beyond providing lakeshore farmers with easy access to local market centres.

By mid-century the Eastern Townships’ forests and minerals remained largely unexploited for commercial purposes, its soils cleared only for small-scale self-sufficient mixed farming, its popu-
lation thinly and widely scattered in comparison to the burgeoning townships of the upper St. Lawrence. So disappointing had been the rate of regional development of the Eastern Townships in the first half of the century that a special committee was appointment by the British government of Lower Canada to inquire into the causes for the region’s stagnation. The committee’s report of 1851 pointed to a variety of factors including political and cultural ones but the fundamental physical limitations of the region for agriculture and its persistent economic isolation and inaccessibility were the primary impediments to higher levels of local prosperity.

The Railway Era

There was little wonder that after watching with envy the economic growth that came to other parts of eastern British North America and the United States in the wake first of canals and then of railways, that the citizens of the Eastern Townships should espouse, with such abandon, the construction of railways in the second half of the nineteenth century. “Railway fever,” the endemic disease of the economically isolated, found an exceptionally receptive host population amongst the New Englanders and British settlers who were scattered in isolated clearings across the breadth of the townships of southern Quebec.

With the advent of the railway as a transport technology and with the dramatic increase in trade between British North America and the United States which was both acknowledged and stimulated by the Reciprocity Treaty of 1854, Eastern Townshippers suddenly found themselves to be in a strategic position astride the routes of railway lines which would be constructed to carry the trade of the upper St. Lawrence to the insatiable urban markets of the eastern American seaboard. The completion, in 1853, of the railway linking Montreal to Portland, Maine, passing as it did through the heart of the Eastern Townships, ushered in a period of fifty years of sustained railway construction.

Canadian railways of the latter nineteenth and early twentieth centuries fell into several distinct functional categories and the Eastern Townships came to have within its borders examples of them all.

Trunk lines, as exemplified by the main line of the Grand Trunk Railway through Upper and Lower Canada and by the Intercolonial Railway which was built to link the maritime provinces to Quebec and Ontario, were intended to join distant points, often for strategic or political reasons as much as for economic ones.
Branch lines, often funded locally, served the interests and aspirations of individual cities, townships or regions which sought to exploit particular local attributes. Such lines were amongst the most ubiquitous and often ill-founded of Canadian railway ventures.

Resource railways were built specifically to tap hitherto inaccessible forest or mineral resources. The Eastern Townships' varied geology and rich natural forest vegetation provided the impetus for several such lines.

Colonization railways, much as the colonization roads of an earlier era, were government-subsidized efforts to “open up” remote areas and encourage the spread of rural settlement. Here, too, the motivation for the construction of such railways was often political as much as economic.

Bridge railway lines linked together the many separate regional networks and provided for the forwarding of freight and passengers before the advent of trans-continental systems. The Eastern Townships provided a gateway for the entry of several American railways into Canada and links were built between them and the original components of the major Canadian systems.

By the time that the last miles of track were added to the regional railway network during World War I, in excess of one thousand miles of railway had been built giving the region one of
the densest railway networks of any part of Canada (an average of 1 mile per 7.2 square miles). Over two hundred stations sprang up in the area’s hamlets, towns and cities providing an unsurpassed measure of regional accessibility. Few locations were more than six or seven miles from a station. With the railway as an enabling factor, the forestry, mining and manufacturing sectors of the Eastern Townships’ economy experienced rapid growth and substantial stimulus and change came to traditional patterns of farming. No longer were the region’s forests and minerals beyond the economic reach of the marketplace. The same waterfalls which had hindered navigation and slowed settlement were now harnessed for their hydraulic and hydro-electric potential. Manufacturers sought out these power sources, assembled pools of labour and factories, each one nurtured by its own railway siding, sprouted in the cores of Townships villages. The region’s farmers found markets for their perishable dairy products just a refrigerator-car journey away.

The economic dominance of railway transport as the medium of regional accessibility in the Eastern Townships lasted for a century. While the total mileage of the railway network peaked by 1916 and the process of retrenchment began as early as the 1920s, road transport of passengers and freight, the next approaching phase of transport technology, was restricted to short distance and intraregional traffic until after 1945.

The automobile era

The transition from rail to road transport as the dominant medium of regional accessibility was a gradual one which effectively began in the 1930s and ended, at least symbolically, in 1965 with the completion of the Eastern Townships Autoroute. While “exotic” industries such as textiles, rubber and tobacco products, which had come to form the basis of the Eastern Townships industrial structure in the latter decades of the nineteenth century, continued to rely heavily on the railway for the importation of raw materials and the export of finished products, regional resource and agricultural industries came to rely, through the transition period, increasingly on road transport, at least in the procurement of raw materials. Similarly the short and medium distance movement of passengers and less-than-carload freight progressively came into the domain of trucks and busses. The succession of transport technologies is particularly well illustrated by the involvement of the railways themselves in the introduction of bus and truck services as cost saving measures. The Quebec Central
Railway is notable for its early introduction of busses, in the 1930s, on many of its light traffic rail passenger routes. This pattern of functional replacement of rails by roads has had general application in Canada and is by no means a phenomenon only of the Eastern Townships.

A simple index of regional accessibility which illustrates the early dominance of the railway and its subsequent replacement by road transport is seen in comparing levels of public passenger transport at selected cross-sections.

### Weekly one-way trips between Montreal and Sherbrooke

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<td>Train</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>6</td>
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<td>Bus (local)</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>(express)</td>
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<td>48</td>
<td>140</td>
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<td>Total</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>244</td>
<td>304</td>
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<td>196</td>
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These data relate merely to frequency of public transport services and are not a measure of total capacity but they do record the substantial mode shift that has occurred in this century from a time of total dominance by the railway to the eventual extinction of that form of public transport and its replacement by a dwindling level of public road transport. It is instructive to note that the population of the city of Sherbrooke increased from approximately 25,000 in 1925 to 90,000 today.

**The post-railway period**

The completion of the Eastern Townships Autoroute in 1965, the construction of two American Interstate Highways (Nos. 89 and 91) at the eastern and western extremities of the Eastern Townships, and latterly the opening of Highway 55 linking the American border with the TransCanada Highway at Drummondville, ushered in a new era in the regional accessibility of the Eastern Townships. Whereas the railway had made the Townships economically accessible, in terms of the movement of commodities in and out of the region, and the galaxy of railway stations that festooned the regional railways had brought public access to many points within the rural landscape, the opening of high speed limited-access highways through the heart of the
region made the totality of the Eastern Townships landscape accessible through the medium of automobiles and trucks in a way that it had not previously been. The regional connectivity of the Eastern Townships in terms of its linkages with the urban population of greater Montreal, as well as with the population centres of the eastern United States, was greatly strengthened.

With the completion of these regional access links, the priorities in transport planning within the Eastern Townships shifted to questions of internal mobility and congestion. A rural road infrastructure, which had evolved in response to the location patterns associated with light density movement of agricultural commodities over short distances to regional market centres, was in many instances ill-designed to accommodate the growing flood of road vehicles that each year circulated on the area’s by-ways. The rural road system, much of which was in place in rudimentary form by 1860, was designed to link villages and hamlets to one another, not to by-pass them. Rural roads commonly became Main Street when they passed through the retail and commercial cores of towns. The fact that virtually all Eastern Townships villages, towns and cities are located on water power sites now adds to the potential for congestion by introducing such elements as narrow river valleys, numerous bridges, and steep grades. Furthermore, most Eastern Townships towns once served as agricultural service centres for their immediate hinterlands and, as such, they frequently occupy crossroads situations making them vulnerable to traffic flow problems such as those that plague the town of Lennoxville.

Through the 1970s and 1980s attempts were made to alleviate downtown congestion in some Eastern Townships towns by building by-passes or ring-roads which allowed through traffic to avoid the congested Main Street (Cowansville, East Angus, Granby, Farnham, Stanstead, partially Sherbrooke) but there remain many points of chronic traffic congestion. In rural areas many miles of secondary roads were paved and otherwise upgraded so as to accommodate the increased volume of vehicular traffic. Most highway planning has been reactive in nature.

The recent emphasis placed on the development of the region’s tourist and recreation industries has been a significant factor in the increased traffic flows recorded on Township’s roads. In addition to the nodal concentrations associated with developments like downhill skiing facilities, such as those at Bromont, or in the vicinity of Orford Provincial Park, the explicit marketing of the region in terms of its overall scenic, historic and cultural interest and the des-
ignation on tourist maps of areas of particular scenic value has resulted in the widespread diffusion of recreational travellers throughout the region. While it might be supposed that this pattern of dispersed tourist travel might alleviate nodal congestion problems, it has instead placed a heavy stress on many parts of the rural and village road infrastructures far beyond the levels that they were designed to accommodate. Indeed, where once railways and steamboats limited access to the landscape to a pattern of lines and points, with little penetration of interior hinterlands, the automobile has brought all Eastern Townships landscapes within its orbit.

**Summary**

The problem of overall regional economic accessibility was largely resolved by the construction of the nineteenth century railway network of the Eastern Townships. The area’s resources, human and physical, could be exploited as part of the increasingly integrated economies of Canada and the United States. But the technology of railway transport resulted in a pattern of linearity. Goods and passengers moved in significant quantities only between nodes within the railway network.

The gradual improvement of the road infrastructure after 1945, which culminated in the construction of several high-speed limited access highways through the region, brought not only renewed levels of regional linkage to an increasingly road-oriented economy but also a high level of personal accessibility to the Eastern Townships, particularly for tourism and recreational purposes. With the advent of significantly increased volumes of traffic in many areas, problems of internal mobility have replaced concerns about regional accessibility. As a concomitant of the development of the Eastern Townships’ recreational potential, additional forms of outdoor recreation activity involving personal mobility have appeared. Trail systems for cross-country skiing, snowmobiling, hiking and cycling have been added to the regional transport infrastructure. In the Eastern Townships, as elsewhere, substantial portions of the now-abandoned railway network have been converted to bicycle trails, not without creating some instances of local traffic congestion and raising concerns amongst Eastern Townships residents about perceived excessive levels of public access to the region. The conversion of rails to trails is perhaps an apt metaphor to describe the shift from a linear to a dispersed pattern of regional accessibility. Where once railways provided access at nodal points (stations), their rights of way have now become
corridors of penetration which provide the opportunity to individuals for dispersion at any point along their route.

Despite shifts in agriculture which have resulted in a substantial reduction in both the number of farms and the acreages under cultivation and pasture, the countryside and the townscapes of the Eastern Townships are becoming increasingly crowded. The region’s historic problems of accessibility to external economic influences have largely been overcome. The efficiency with which the highway system allows the movement of persons and their vehicles into the region, both for recreational and other economic purposes, has shifted the focus of transport planning towards internal mobility and the maintenance of appropriate levels of road traffic particularly in towns and other congestion points.

RESUME

L'accès à une région et sa mobilité intérieure ont constitué les deux principales difficultés en marge du transport dans les Cantons de l’Est dès le tout début de la colonisation. Tout d’abord économiquement isolés durant la première moitié du XIXᵉ siècle, les Cantons de l’Est entrent de plein pied au cœur de l’économie nord-américaine grâce au chemin de fer. L’effet dominant de la montée du transport routier des cinquante dernières années a d’une part amélioré l’accès à la région mais a entraîné d’autre part la nécessité de réétudier les problèmes de la mobilité à l’intérieur de la région en même temps que de les confronter.
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