By River, By Land and By Rail - Travel & Transportation in East Gwillimbury

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East Gwillimbury has always been a place for travel and trade. The Holland River, in particular, has played an important role in commerce since the 1600s. First Nations groups fought to control it, it was written about by Samuel Champlain in 1615, and Father Jean de Brebeuf reported that the river was "dangerous" in 1635. By 1688, there was a brisk trade happening between the First Nations and French traders and shortly after 1700, the river was in the control of the Chippewa, they named it Escoyondy.

In 1793, Lt. Governer John Graves Simcoe was tasked with finding the best route between what is now known as Lake Simcoe, and Georgian Bay as the British determined it would be very strategic militarily. On his way north, Simcoe travelled the western branch of the river which was a difficult journey, but on the advice of someone he referred to as "Chief Big Sail", he returned south via the eastern

Travelling on the Radial Railway.

branch of the river, arriving on October 11 at Soldier's Bay. After he reached Fort York a short time later, Simcoe renamed the waterway Holland's River after Major Samuel Holland, the Surveyor General of Canada.

A survey of this newly traversed area was commissioned in 1794, and completed by Augustus Jones. A main route was selected and the Queen's York Rangers were commissioned to strip and complete the building of a road. This road was named Yonge Street after Sir George Yonge, Secretary of War. This road not only increased travel and trade, it also brought settlers. In 1803, it was declared a Public Highway and funds were allocated from the Treasury to maintain it.

Around this same time, the first survey of "Gwillimburys" was completed. The land was split into three townships, East, West and North Gwillimbury – all named after Major Gwillim, Simcoe's father-in-law, an aide-de-camp to General Wolfe who died in the battle on the Plains of Abraham. According to Gladys Rollings' book, "East Gwillimbury in the Nineteenth Century" the surveying of East Gwillimbury was done by foot, laying chains to

determine distance. They worked through the winter in order to measure out the marshy land which was frozen. The measurement of the concessions differ slightly because of this method, and that is why many of the roads jog the way they do.
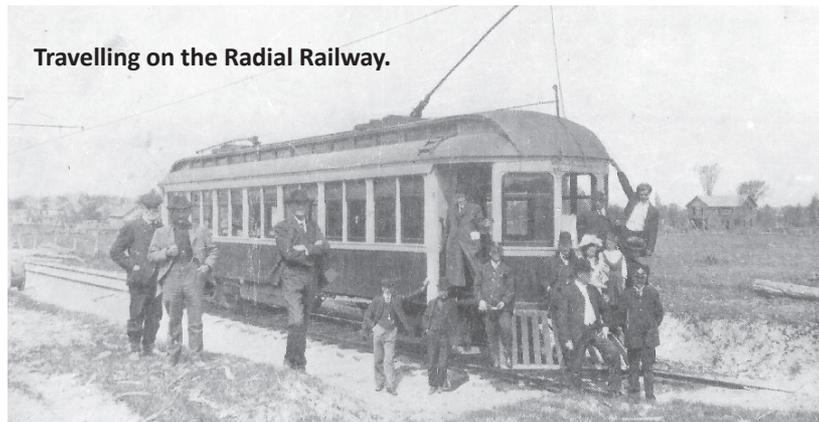
By 1816, wagons and stagecoaches were regularly seen traveling between communities. In 1885, the Metropolitan Street Railway Company started a horsecar company traveling between Toronto and Lake Simcoe. They would arrive twice a day taking about seven hours to travel 35 kilometers. So, inns and hotels were often the first major structure to be built along these travel routes and settlements would crop up around them. Many of these inns and hotels saw overnight guests who were on their way by stagecoach to steamboats traveling from Holland Landing across Lake Simcoe. Peter Robinson and his brother William, opened a company offering tours around Lake Simcoe to ports in Barrie, Thorah and Georgina. The business did so well that within five years, they were operating two steamers.

As the century changed, so did the way people travelled. By rail and by car, people came from the 'big city' to visit the farm land and cottage country. The Metropolitan Street Railway Company were purchased by the Toronto and York Radial Railway and the horsecars were retired in favour of electric cars. With stops at Sharon, Doane Road, Queensville and Boag Road, the Radial Railway was in operation until 1930. It transformed the way passengers and goods traveled. Without it, the Sharon Temple would not have been saved and the early days of the museum would not have been the success that it was.

Megan Houston is the Education and Outreach Co-ordinator at the Sharon Temple Museum. Megan is available for onsite tours and outreach within the community. If you are interested in booking a school field trip, group tours or a talk for your organization, please call: (905) 478-2389.