

Electric Railroad Dreams

Lanark County Electric Railway Co., Ltd.

On a warm spring afternoon in April 1898, teamster James Doyle (1849-1936) was recruited to break ground for construction of the Lanark County Electric Railway. He did so by using a road grader to “turn up the sod for about two acres along the proposed route”¹ parallel to the Lanark Road (County Road 511), near Armstrong Corners at Bathurst/Drummond Concession-6.²

GROUND BROKEN. -Mr. James Fowler, of Arnprior, was in town on Tuesday, and while here informed us that his errand was to formally break ground for the County of Lanark Electric Railway, the object being to save the company's charter. The feat was accomplished by Mr. James Doyle, of Perth, and the ground was broken on his farm at Armstrong's Corners. He used his road-grader for the purpose, and turned up the sod for about two acres on the proposed route.

Perth Courier, April 15, 1898

Perth had joined the railway age in January 1859, when a woodburning steam locomotive of the Brockville & Ontario (B&O) Railway, hauling a single passenger car, struggled into town after a seven-hour odyssey plowing through a blizzard from the Grand Trunk Railway (GTR) junction at Brockville. Four decades later a proposal for an electric railroad was floated when the *Perth Courier* of January 22, 1892 reported “a scheme to build an electric railway between Perth and Lanark ... outside parties to furnish capital and own the road. In this age of electricity, we would not be surprised to see such a road go on”.

The ‘outside parties’ who would finance, own and operate the project were a consortium of American and Canadian businessmen. The face of the project was a man named James Fowler, who held the post of United States Consul at Carleton Place and Arnprior. His partners included two of his brothers, W. J. Fowler of Boston, the project’s surveyor, and George A. Fowler, then resident at Ottawa but formerly of Brockville. The group also included John B. Riley, a Plattsburg, New York, lawyer³, then serving as U.S. Consul at Ottawa (the man who had arranged Fowler’s consular appointments); Alex Wendler (b.1863), owner of a Carthage, New York, engineering firm⁴; John A. Houston, Ottawa; Thomas Henry, Montreal; and Alexandria H. Edwards (1848-1933), partner and manager at the Canada Lumber Company Mill in Carleton Place, and soon to be town mayor.⁵

As the effort unfolded, William Clyde Caldwell (1843-1905), politician⁶ and owner of woolen and lumber mills at Lanark, Carleton Place and Almonte, occasionally helped promote the venture, but does not seem to have held a financial stake in the enterprise.

¹ *Perth Courier*, April 15, 1898.

² Since the railway company did not own a right-of-way, James Doyle executed the sod-turning on his own Armstrong Corners farm. Although he owned the farm, he made his living by contracting his team, cart, road grader, etc. to the Town of Perth for street maintenance. On occasion his team also pulled the ‘steamer’ fire engine.

³ Later a Clinton County (Plattsburg), New York, judge.

⁴ Alexander Wendler was born in Germany and studied engineering there before emigrating to the United States in 1888. He founded the Wendler Machine Company at Carthage, New York, in 1892, and in the later 1890s, as the story of the Perth-Lanark Electric Railway unfolded, his firm designed and manufactured equipment for sulphite pulp and paper mills at Pyrite, New York, and Saguenay, Quebec.

⁵ In 1897 Edwards served a single term as Carleton Place Mayor.

⁶ Caldwell was a member of the Ontario Legislature 1872-1875, 1879-1886, 1888-1894, 1898-1905.

In the summer of 1893, preliminary surveys for a route from Perth to Lanark were carried out, and in May 1894 company directors Fowler, Riley, Wendler, Henry and Edwards, all said to be “*practical businessmen*”⁷, formally incorporated the Lanark County Electric Railway Co., Ltd. with a capital stock of \$100,000, divided into 1,000 shares of \$100 each. Although the *Perth Courier* commented that “... *some of these gentlemen are very wealthy*” the paper also made the point that “*a certain amount of encouragement given the company along the line*” would be necessary to see “*the scheme go on*”⁸.

When representatives of the Electric Railway Company met with the Perth Board of Trade a few days after filing for incorporation, they tabled a plan that sought a \$10,000 ‘bonus’ or subsidy from both the Town of Perth and the Village of Lanark. There was nothing remarkable in this pitch. Just as municipalities attract investment today with tax holidays and other incentives, in the 1890s municipal funds were often granted to infrastructure, industrial and other projects perceived to be of community benefit. “*After some discussion the feeling of the majority of the Board appeared favorable to granting the bonus asked, but on condition that the tolls on the road between this and Lanark be done away with.*”⁹

For a half-century, from the early 1850’s until 1903, four of the road approaches to Perth, including the Lanark-Perth Road, were owned and operated by private companies. As maintenance of these roads often ranged from poor to non-existent, the tolls charged for their use were loathed and detested.¹⁰ In as far as any project might lead to dissolution of even part of a toll-road, it was assured of wide public support.¹¹



Toll gate at Lanark Village

In July 1894, when a town meeting was called at Lanark to debate the bonus question, those attending had to also consider where best to place their bets. In addition to Fowler’s Lanark County Electric Railroad, at least two other schemes were campaigning for bonus agreements with the village. One was the Ottawa, Arnprior and Parry Sound Railway (OA&PS), promoted by an Almonte group led by Andrew Bell (1835-1912), that proposed a line to Lanark from Carp via Almonte.¹² Another was the Irondale, Bancroft & Ottawa Railway (I.B.&O.) of Charles J. Pusey (1836-1899)¹³, that proposed to connect Lanark on a line from Ottawa to Orillia.

⁷ *Ottawa Citizen*, May 17, 1894.

⁸ *Perth Courier*, May 18, 1894.

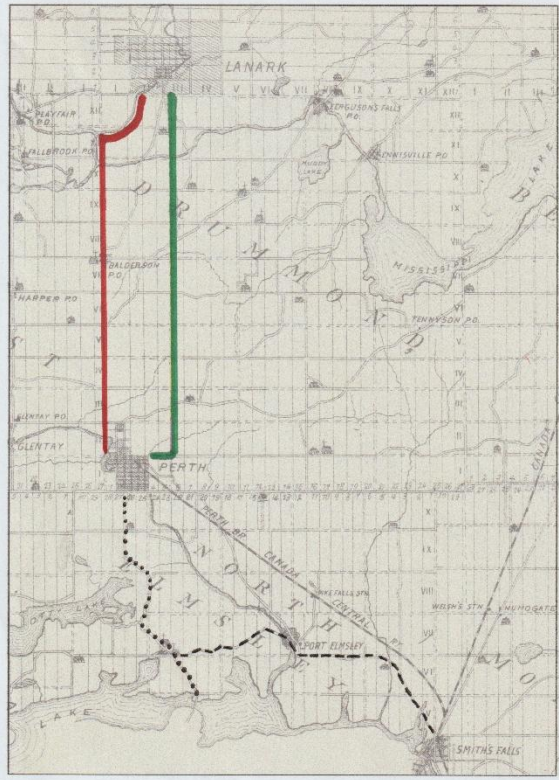
⁹ *Perth Courier*, July 13, 1894.

¹⁰ See *Barbaric Relics* elsewhere on this website <https://www.perthhs.org/documents/toll-roads.pdf>

¹¹ The road from Perth to Balderson Corners had been owned since 1853 by the Drummond & Bathurst Road Company, with toll gates at Perth, Armstrong Corners (Concession-6) and Balderson Corners. The road from Balderson to Lanark was owned by the Balderson & Lanark Road Company, with toll gates at Balderson, the Mississippi River and Lanark Village.

¹² In 1898, Andrew Bell, an engineer and surveyor, with a Dr. Raines and W. Stafford, also of Almonte, proposed a line from the Ottawa, Arnprior and Parry Sound Railway (OA&PS) at Carp, through Almonte and Lanark to Actinolite (then called Bridgewater), Hastings County, where connection was to be made with the Madoc branch of the Grand Trunk Railway (GTR).

¹³ Originally from Pennsylvania, Charles Pusey moved to Ontario in 1880 and formed the Toronto Iron Company. He owned 35,000 acres of land around Snowden and Cardiff in Haliburton County, developed the Howland Iron Mine, built a smelter at Furnace Falls and started work in the IB&O Railway that he hoped would reach Ottawa.



The Lanark County Electric Railway promised that, if Lanark and Perth would each grant the \$10,000 bonus, the company was ready to start construction immediately and would have the railroad operational within in three months. Company spokesman Fowler also assured the Lanark meeting that the company could offer freight rates competitive with any other railroad and would operate one to three cars daily “*according to the amount of business done in Lanark*”.¹⁴

As the electric railway scheme linking to Perth seemed the most likely to materialize first, the Lanark meeting passed a motion of support asking the Municipal Council to endorse Fowler’s request for a bylaw to raise a bonus of \$10,000.

Within a few days of the Lanark gathering, Perth Mayor Duncan Kippen (1831-1926)¹⁵ also called a public meeting to discuss the railway bonus question. At that gathering promoters James Fowler and John Riley posited great economic

benefit, not only to Perth and Lanark, but also to the farmers along the track, who would be afforded a cheap and quick mode of shipping and transport to the market towns.

When pressed for details about the precise route, Fowler and Riley outlined two possibilities that were under consideration.

One was a route running along the Perth-Lanark toll-road (now County Road 511), on the verge between the telegraph poles and the fence, from Perth to Balderson and then directly onward following the town line between Bathurst and Drummond Townships, across the Mississippi River east of the Clyde River mouth and along the east bank of the Clyde River into Lanark.

Some concern was expressed that a rail line laid so close to the toll road might interfere with horse-drawn traffic; but Fowler dismissed “*fears that horses would be frightened by the trolley cars ... they were not in other places, as there was no puffing or smoke from an electric car, and but little noise*”.¹⁶

The alternate route under consideration followed what was known as the ‘Swamp Road’, along the undeveloped side-road allowance between lots five and six across Drummond Township from Perth to Lanark.

¹⁴ *Almonte Gazette*, July 20, 1894.

¹⁵ Duncan Kippen, building contractor, constructed Perth Town Hall, Bank of Montreal, Lanark County Registry Office, St. Paul’s Church Manse, etc., Perth Postmaster 1896-1914, Reeve 1864, Mayor 1893-1894.

¹⁶ *Perth Courier*, August 17, 1894.

The Swamp Road, a narrow unimproved trail so-called because it traversed a large swamp, was used almost exclusively as a route to avoid the toll-road during the winter months when delivering firewood to Perth. It was not considered viable by those attending the meeting and was *“looked upon with decided disfavor [but] the former, providing it embraced the abolition of the tollgates, was more open for discussion”*.¹⁷

Some attendees thought that if the toll-road owners were bought-out and the road made free, Perth would benefit greatly from increased trade; but a significant minority were of the opposite opinion, contending that the electric railroad would prove a great injury to the town. On one issue, however, all agreed, *“unless the toll-road is made free as part of the scheme, a bonus to the electric railway will be snowed under by the freehold vote of the town”*.¹⁸

At a follow-up meeting a week later, a large majority supported a resolution recommending that Perth Town Council submit a bylaw to the ratepayers to raise the sum of \$5,000, not \$10,000, as a bonus payable to the Lanark County Electric Railway Company. It was also recommended that the bonus to be paid only when the railroad was complete, and cars running on it, and that the bonus be conditional on the road tolls between Perth and Balderson being abolished.

When company partner Riley visited Perth a few days later, he told the Board of Trade that he was disappointed. He said he had hoped Perth would provide a bonus of \$10,000, but indicated the company could accept a \$5,000 bonus if relieved of any condition to abolish the toll-road. He pointed out that the company could not afford to both build a railway and buy-out the toll-road company. Riley also offered to cover the cost of submitting a bylaw to the ratepayers, provided the by-law was approved, so that should the railroad not be completed the municipality would have incurred no expense.

When a second town meeting was held at Lanark in late September, it too voted a resolution recommending that the Village Council present a bylaw to the ratepayers seeking authorization to pay a bonus to the Lanark County Electric Railway Co., Ltd., but for the full \$10,000 requested. On February 7, 1896, Lanark Village Council put their by-law to the ratepayers and the scheme was approved by a vote of 83 to 29.

Lanark’s evident enthusiasm for the electric railway immediately prompted another public meeting at Perth. With Mayor Joseph MacKenzie Rogers (1860-1908)¹⁹ in the chair ...

*... speeches pro and con were earnestly listened to. The consensus of opinion seemed to be that Perth should grant the bonus, not because the railroad would be much of a benefit in itself to Perth, but judging from the enthusiasm shown in Lanark in the passing of the by-law there, that village was determined to have a railroad anyway, and should Lanark be connected by railway with any town other than Perth [i.e. the OA&PS and I.B.&O. schemes], Perth would lose patronage that she now enjoys ...*²⁰

¹⁷ *Perth Courier*, August 2, 1894.

¹⁸ *Perth Courier*, August 2, 1894.

¹⁹ J. M. Rogers was a lawyer, Perth Mayor 1895-1896, Lanark County Warden 1904, and led the movement to have Lanark County join the ‘Good Roads Association’ leading to the County buy-out of the toll-road companies.

²⁰ *Lanark Era*, March 4, 1896.

At the close of the meeting the participants voted 51-13 to recommend that Town Council submit a railway bonus bylaw for ratepayer approval. The Town Fathers agreed, but the bylaw they drafted drove a stiff bargain. The \$5,000 bonus was dependent upon,

Construction beginning by April 1, 1897 and being completed by April 1, 1898, and was payable only after construction was complete and the railway fully operational.

The railway was to continue operations for 10 years or pay council \$1,000 for every year, or proportional portion thereof, when it was out of service.

The track was to run through Perth on Gore Street *"to a point at or near the southern boundary, and a station erected at that point"*²¹. The railway company headquarters and workshops were also to be established in Perth.

The service schedule would include a minimum of two daily trains each way, except Sundays, and a weekly *"market or excursion train"*²² at a reduced fare.

Fares could not exceed 3 cents per mile for adults and 1 ½ cents for children, with babes in arms travelling free. (Roundtrip fares of about 66¢ and 33¢).

Steam locomotives were prohibited from the line.

The railroad company was required to pay \$75 toward the cost of conducting the plebiscite.

The bylaw made no mention, however, of eliminating the hated road tolls as the final choice of route, toll-road vs swamp road, had not been determined.

On Tuesday May 12, 1896 Perth voters went to the polls to pass judgement on the electric railway bonus question.

*... it was taken for granted that people generally favored the bonus, there was no excitement, and but little enthusiasm except among very few. The leading supporters of the by-law went quietly but energetically to work and proceeded to get the vote out. The opposition did very little work to defeat it"*²³.

When the count was in, the bylaw had been overwhelmingly approved 224-87, leading the *Perth Courier* to comment that it only remained

²¹ *Perth Courier*, June 12, 1896.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Perth Courier*, May 15, 1896.

*... for the company to go to work and do their part ... there is not a very great deal of time to get things into shape for an undertaking of so much relative magnitude; but the money from Lanark and Perth will be there for them when the conditions are fulfilled, and if they do not proceed neither place can lose anything beyond the prospective benefits. We must hope the work will go on and the road be running by the 1st of September.*²⁴

In at least one important way Perth was an ideal terminus for a successful electric railway. Two years earlier the Tay Electric Light Company²⁵ had installed generators at the Haggart Island dam to produce electrical power for the town, and plans were afoot for additional electricity production capacity at two additional sites near Glen Tay.



Patterson and Corbin Electric Streetcar 1895

Although entirely coincidental, the electric rail cars proposed for the Perth-Balderson line owed much to the creative engineering of Perth native George Ephraim Patterson (1838-1894). In 1887, as a partner in the firm of 'Patterson & Corbin Carriagemakers' he had helped design and build the first electric street cars for the city of St. Catharines' (a leader in electric railway technology) and for many years Patterson & Corbin were the only builders of electric street cars in Canada.²⁶

Less than a month after the bonus question had apparently been settled, the Perth newspaper was taking a pessimistic view of developments. The project seemed

*... to have fallen dead. For a railway that is bound to be constructed and running by the first of September, there is certainly a faraway look about it; and to afford some sort of satisfaction to the people of Lanark and Perth who have voted bonuses, the projectors ought to enlighten them on the subject ...*²⁷

When the railroad developers did provide some enlightenment, it was learned the company's application to the Government of Ontario for a Perth-Lanark Railroad charter had foundered. Their application had been filed under the Road Companies Act, but a part of that legislation prohibited electric railways from extending more than three miles beyond a town. Company spokesman Fowler described the reverse as little more than a technicality, however, and offered assurances that the company would secure a "special charter" without difficulty.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ The Tay Electric Light Company president was John Graham Haggart (1836-1913), Perth miller, MP 1872-1813, Postmaster General 1888-1892, Minister of Railways and Canals 1892-1896.

²⁶ See *Streetcar Pioneer* elsewhere on this website <https://www.perthhs.org/documents/Street-Car-Pioneer-Patterson.pdf>

²⁷ *Perth Courier*, June 5, 1896.

Nevertheless, the delay dictated a request to the Councils of Perth and Lanark to extend the effective dates of the bonus by-laws by one year. Fowler promised everyone that *“the money has been secured”* and announced that the scheme had attracted a new investor, Brockville brewer Charles F. Bate (b.c.1831).²⁸ He also promised that the company would *“buy the necessary ties and material for building this winter and build the piers for the bridge across the Mississippi before spring”*.²⁹

When Perth Town Council met in August 1896, *“all expressed themselves as having no great faith in the scheme or its promoters but thought it should get one more chance”*. It was agreed that, as the by-law had been carried by a large majority, *“it would be no sacrifice to the town to have the time extended ... provided that the company furnish a guarantee of the bona fides of the said company in carrying on the work”*.³⁰



Examples of 1890s Electric Railway Rolling Stock

Nevertheless, little action followed and, as Christmas 1896 approached, the *Lanark Era* was struggling to keep hope alive.

*The Electric R.R. between Perth and here has not yet materialized. Like Christmas, however, it is coming, though perhaps not quite so soon. Some progress has been made. Ties and material are being contracted for, the route has been surveyed and decided upon, and a charter will be asked for at the next session ...*³¹

The Lanark County Electric Railway charter issue could not be resolved, however, until the Ontario Legislature re-convened, and it was not until April 1897, eight months after Perth had extended the bonus by-law for one year, that the matter came before the Provincial Railway Committee. In the course of its deliberations the committee struck out a clause in the charter *“keeping alive the bonus granted by the Perth Corporation”*³². As the bonus by-law extension of 1896 would expire in less than four months, it was agreed, in consultation with Perth Mayor James Alexander Allan (1859-1921),³³ that an alternative clause would be substituted requiring *“a fresh submission of the bonus by-law to the ratepayers”*.³⁴ The charter was then approved, as amended.

²⁸ Charles Bate was a dealer in butter and cheese, built the first cold storage facility in Canada at Brockville and was a partner with Robert Bowie in the Brockville Brewery & Malt House.

²⁹ *Perth Courier* July 24, 1896.

³⁰ *Perth Courier*, August 14, 1896.

³¹ *Almonte Gazette*, December 11, 1896.

³² *Perth Courier*, April 9, 1897.

³³ Perth Mayor 1897-1898.

³⁴ *Perth Courier*, April 9, 1897.

In addition to chartering the Perth-Lanark line, the approved charter included clauses providing the “*power to extend to Oliver's Ferry [Rideau Ferry] and Smith's Falls, on the south, and Almonte or Carleton Place, on the north*”.³⁵

With a charter in hand at last, James Fowler immediately petitioned Perth Town Council to increase the previously approved \$5,000 bonus to \$10,000 or to purchase a \$25,000 first mortgage at 5%. His appeal fell on deaf ears.

As dictated by the Electric Railroad charter, on June 26, 1897, the ratepayers of Perth were summoned to the polls once again to vote on another bonus by-law. This time the proposition was defeated 201-149. Disappointed by the outcome, the *Lanark Era* complained that “*the defeat of the measure was accomplished by a dozen or so Perth citizens, who, although it would not make a dollar's difference to them, worked like Trojans against it*”.³⁶ Opposition to the scheme was led by the owners of Perth's livery stables.

The Perth-Lanark Electric Railway was seemingly dead, slain by the ratepayers of Perth, but unwilling to completely abandon the scheme, James Fowler took his electric railway pitch to the Town of Carleton Place, including a plan to develop “*a summer resort on the north side of the Mississippi River*”³⁷ on the town's outskirts.

A well attended August 12, 1897 meeting held in the Carleton Place Opera Hall, chaired by Carleton Place mayor Alexandria Edwards, a stakeholder in the railroad company, and attended by the Lanark Village Reeve Robert J. Stead (1845-1919), unanimously agreed that Fowler should formally lay his revised scheme for a Carleton Place-Lanark electric railway before Town Council. The *Lanark Era* thought developments,

*... again, caused hopes to rise. Should the line be run to Carleton Place, the results would be more beneficial to our town, in that Carleton Place, being a junction town³⁸, affords shipping facilities greatly superior to those of Perth, besides being more convenient to the traveling public and giving us a much better mail service. That the road would also benefit Carleton Place ... no one would doubt for an instant”.*³⁹

In October 1897, Carleton Place Town Council gave first reading to a by-law authorizing a bonus of \$15,000 to the Lanark County Electric Railway, payable on completion of the project. The by-law never reached second reading, however. When the Railway Committees of Carleton Place and Lanark could not persuade James Fowler to post a \$1,000 completion bond, and the town's lawyer, Colin McIntosh, questioned the legality of the by-law as drafted, the matter sunk like a stone.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ *Lanark Era*, June 30, 1897.

³⁷ *Ottawa Citizen*, September 20, 1897.

³⁸ Junction of the Brockville & Ottawa, from Brockville to Almonte, and the Canada Central Railway, connecting Carleton Place to Ottawa.

³⁹ *Lanark Era*, August 18, 1897.

Down, but not out, Fowler immediately went to work generating another Carleton Place petition in favor of putting yet another bonus by-law to the electorate; one, according to Fowler, that would be “without defect - bullet-proof, in fact”.⁴⁰ His challenge, however, was described by the *Almonte Gazette* as,

*... an uphill road to travel ... to which the Khyber and Afridi and Chilkoot passes are easy gradients, so to speak, asphalted and macadamized, and with soda water booths all along. In putting the big stone on an up-grade Sisyphus had a leisurely and halcyon time in comparison.*⁴¹

In the spring of 1898, with the Lanark Electric Railway Company’s charter of 1896 about to lapse for lack of performance on the ground, James Fowler was back in Perth. On April 13th, he hired James Doyle and his road grader to turn over a few yards of sod five miles north of Perth near Armstrong Corners. ‘Technically’, construction of the Perth-Lanark Electric railway was at last underway, and the charter had been complied with.

No one was much impressed by the furrow in a cow pasture, but Fowler also brought new assurances that financing was again in place and promised that real work could begin if Perth would agree to pay a bonus of \$7,500 rather than \$5,000. The increase was to help the company purchase a right-of-way along the town line toll-road. As that plan would effectively put an end to the much-hated tolls between Perth and Balderson, the bonus question was back on the Perth Town Council meeting agenda for July 1898.



Horse-drawn Road Grader c1900

The company also agreed to pay all the expenses related to conducting the by-law plebiscite, whether the ratepayers carried it or not, and to deposit a performance bond of \$500 in cash, to be forfeited to the town in case the by-law was carried and the road not built. Feeling it had little to lose and perhaps still something to gain, council agreed to put yet another by-law before the ratepayers, one that was, excepting the increased bonus, essentially the same as the version defeated in June 1897.

⁴⁰ *Lanark Era*, November 10, 1897.

⁴¹ *Almonte Gazette*, November 12, 1897.

Meanwhile, Fowler was at work in Lanark. He organized another public meeting at which he agreed to accept a reduced bonus of \$7,500 rather than the \$10,000 approved by the prior by-law, provided that the pending Perth by-law vote succeeded. During the debate some attendees expressed doubt the company would carry freight at a lower rate than it could be delivered by wagon, and others contended that experience with similar schemes elsewhere showed that the smaller town was almost invariably ruined by the larger, but a resolution was agreed requesting that the Village Council submit a by-law required to raise the necessary bonus. When the council met the following week, however, the decision was taken to await the outcome of the Perth vote before calling another plebiscite at Lanark.

On August 5, 1898, when the freeholders of Perth went to the polls for the third time to decide the issue of a bonus to the Lanark Electric Railway project, the proposed by-law was defeated by a margin of only three votes, 161 to 158.

There was little excitement over the matter, though the liveries were all at work, mostly, though not all, in the interests of the opposition. Mr. Fowler, promoter, was active in getting out the vote in favor of the by-law, and in this he was assisted somewhat by local friends of the railway, but the enthusiasm, either for or against was not very apparent. It is quite evident the people of the town, as a whole, are either indifferent or opposed to granting a bonus of this amount to the road.⁴²

The August 1898 'no-vote' of Perth's ratepayers laid the dream of a Perth-Lanark electric railroad to its final rest. With Carleton Place already out of the running, Lanark had no reason to engage in another bonus plebiscite, and the potential for additional lines to Almonte or Oliver's Ferry and Smiths Falls (mentioned in the company charter) had never been a serious proposition.

The dream of a comfortable rail car replacing the bone-shaking, muddy, potholed Perth-Lanark toll-road evaporated. Travellers and teamsters would continue to pay the hated tolls until 1903 when, with financial assistance from the province, the County of Lanark bought-out the toll-road owners and made the route a much-improved County Road.

Electric railroad promoter James Fraser moved on to new opportunities. Two years later a brief mention in the *Perth Courier* reported that,

Mr. Fowler, formerly of Carleton Place and Arnprior, once so well known as the promoter of the Perth and Lanark Electric Railway scheme, is on a directorate of capitalists at Toronto, who are promoting a million-dollar company for the manufacture of beet root sugar in Ontario.⁴³

- Ron W. Shaw (2025)

[*Electric Railway Dreams* draws in part upon research posted on Colin Churcher's Railway Pages, <https://churcher.crcml.org/>]

⁴² *Perth Courier*, August 12, 1898.

⁴³ *Perth Courier*, September 13, 1901.