

The Intercolonial Railway turns 150 in 2026

GILLES GAGNÉ

MATAPEDIA – Slightly over 150 years ago, the Intercolonial Railway was inaugurated in Mont-Joli, specifically on July 1, 1876. At the time, Mont-Joli was called Sainte-Flavie Station, and this inauguration completed a project initiated in 1868 to connect Rivière-du-Loup to Truro, Nova Scotia.

In 1868, Lévis and Rivière-du-Loup were already connected by rail, having been in operation since 1860. Halifax and Truro had also been linked by rail since the 1850s. However, the considerable distance between Truro and Rivière-du-Loup remained to be covered.

The context of the time

The railway captivated political circles in the 1830s, a time when needs were numerous, whether economic, social, or military. From that era onward, surveying campaigns were conducted throughout the country's regions to determine potential routes for this mode of transportation of the future.

"It was the equivalent of having high-speed Wi-Fi today. It was the key to development. Those who didn't have the railway in the 19th century were often left behind. Building a railway and achieving development were not easy at the time, but it was easier to develop with the railway. It was the technology of the present and the future," explains Alexander



Historian Alexander Reford explains that the Intercolonial Railway bridges were built to last, as evidenced by the one spanning the Mitis River near the municipal boundaries of Saint-Octave-de-Métis and Price.

Reford, a historian living in Saint-Octave-de-Métis, near Mont-Joli.

"We've seen struggles in Western Canada, and also in the East, though to a lesser extent, to ensure the railway passes through certain locations. Winnipeg exists because



Photos: Gilles Gagné

Engineer Sandford Fleming chose to dig a tunnel to carry the small Tartigou River; near Saint-Noël, a decision that avoided the construction of two bridges.

the railway runs through it. The same is true for Calgary and Edmonton. Here, we can take the example of Sainte-Flavie and Mont-Joli. Sainte-Flavie Station, the site of the former Sainte-Flavie train station, became Mont-Joli and grew larger than Sainte-Flavie. The town shifts to follow the railway," adds Mr. Reford, who is also a railway enthusiast.

A strategic route

The attempted invasions by the United States during the War of 1812 were still fresh in the minds of the leaders of the British colonies that, from 1840 onward, comprised what was called the Province of Canada.

For these strategic reasons, and even though construction of the Intercolonial Railway had not yet been officially approved, Major Thomas Robinson, an engineer, recommended in 1849 the route passing along the south shore of the St. Lawrence River, through the Matapedia Valley, northern New Brunswick, and Moncton, eventually connecting to the existing line between Truro and Halifax. Major Robinson prefers this route to two other scenarios that pass closer to the United States, starting from Rivière-du-Loup.

After an unsuccessful attempt at a meeting of the British colonies in Quebec City in 1862, the decision to build a continuous railway linking the unserved sections between Truro and Rivière-du-Loup was made at the Charlottetown Conference in Prince Edward Island in 1864. This conference sealed the fate of the Canadian federation, granting Canada the status of a country, with Quebec, Ontario, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia as its initial provinces.

In 1864, the American Civil

War was still raging, and the United States had consequently armed itself very seriously. It was in this context that the Canadian government prepared the work that began in 1868.

"This amplified the desire to keep the railway away from the American border. Yes, there were peace agreements between the two countries, but there were doubts that the United States was a solid and lasting ally. Canada had no defenses when the British army ceased to defend it in 1871. One can easily draw parallels with today," notes Alexander Reford, referring to the dubious "solid and lasting ally" that the United States represents in 2026.

The work begun in 1868 was completed in 1874 between Rivière-du-Loup and Sainte-Flavie, in 1872 between Truro and Moncton, and in 1875 between Moncton and Campbellton, New Brunswick. The Campbellton-Mont-Joli section was finished in 1876 and officially opened on July 1, 150 years ago.

This Campbellton-Mont-Joli section was the most complex to build. It includes a fairly short tunnel at Morrissey Rock, before the railway enters the Gaspé Peninsula at Matapédia, following the long inter-provincial bridge spanning the Restigouche River.

"There are some steep gradients and a few rivers to cross. There are also valleys and cuts to get through some obstacles," explains Alexander Reford, whose home in Saint-Octave-de-Métis overlooks one of the major gradients along the route.

The Intercolonial Railway was a government-owned railway. Its construction was a requirement enshrined in the Canadian Constitution and had to begin no later than six months after July 1, 1867.

"It's truly the most impor-

tant infrastructure project undertaken in Canada in the 19th century. This is also the first major cost overrun in Canadian history, a country that lacked stable revenues because taxes didn't exist. It was a considerable investment," notes Mr. Reford.

This railway officially cost \$36 million, which would translate to \$1.49 billion in 2026. "There are cost equivalencies that don't reflect reality. This is one of them," Mr. Reford asserts.

The cost overruns were partly attributable to construction detours, especially in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, to appease communities lobbying for the railway.

"The project engineer was Sandford Fleming. He insisted that the bridges be made of iron and stone. He was heavily criticized for this more expensive choice. These are masonry structures that have lasted to this day and will continue to do so for a long time. Wooden railway bridges sometimes burned down in the 19th century. Sandford Fleming wrote a book in 1876, almost 800 pages long, I believe, explaining why it was important to build better. It was a statement. Maintenance was reduced," explains Alexander Reford.

Opening up several regions

The usefulness of the railway linking Halifax to Lévis and Montreal, however, has never been questioned. In 1867, navigation on the St.

Lawrence River and its estuary was impossible due to ice. Roads were barely passable, and the railway was the only way to efficiently transport people and goods between the Maritime Provinces and central Canada.

From the Intercolonial Railway, numerous branch lines were built. In Quebec, these included the section between Matapédia and Gaspé, completed in 1911; between Mont-Joli and Matane, finished in 1910; and between Rivière-du-Loup and Edmundston, New Brunswick, a line completed in 1889, now dismantled.

Several passenger trains were established between Halifax, Lévis, and Montreal, sometimes covering only parts of the route. The Maritime Express (1898-1964), Scotian (1941-1979), and Ocean Limited (1904-present) have been the mainstays of the network. The Ocean train is the longest-running train of its kind in Canada. It now operates only three times a week following budget cuts at VIA Rail in 2012.

Freight traffic was very heavy on the Intercolonial Railway between the partial opening of its network in 1872 and the present day. However, this traffic declined significantly in 1976-1977 when CN built a 48-kilometre branch line between Pelletier and Saint-André-de-Kamouraska to concentrate its main freight services along the Saint-André-Edmundston-Moncton corridor between Halifax and Central Canada.

Some interesting facts about the Intercolonial Railway

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In 1875-1876, Sandford Fleming decided to dig a tunnel through the rock near Saint-Noël, in the Matapédia Valley sector, to carry the Tartigou River, thus avoiding the construction of two bridges.

Originally, the Intercolonial Railway was to have a track gauge of five feet six inches, or 1680 millimetres, but the Canadian government changed its mind in 1875 to a gauge of four feet eight and a half inches (1346 mm), which was becoming the North American standard.

The Intercolonial Railway played a major role in both World Wars, transporting goods and soldiers mobilized for the war effort.

The Lévis-Rivière-du-Loup Railway was built by the Grand Trunk Railway. Inaugurated in 1860, it was acquired by the Intercolonial Railway in 1879.

The Intercolonial Railway was integrated into Canadian National (CN) in 1918, during the merger of various companies across the country.

Between 1998 and 2008, the Moncton-Rivière-du-Loup line was owned by the Société des chemins de fer du Québec (Quebec Railways Corporation) before returning to CN.

The Matamajaw Museum in Causapsal, in the Matapédia Valley, is presenting the exhibition "Intercolonial Railway: 150th Anniversary of a Technical Marvel and a Human Dream" until August 22.