

RIBBON OF STEEL

The railway helped to make Canada a country, but along the way there were winners and losers, shady deals and amazing achievements

The first true railway in Canada was the Champlain and Saint Lawrence Railroad, built in 1836. It was barely 25 kilometres long and ran from La Prairie to Saint-Jean in what is now Quebec.

In the 1850s and 1860s, small railway lines were being built all over Ontario, Quebec and the Maritimes. Most carried freight such as lumber or coal, often to be loaded onto ships. Some ran less than 10 kilometres.

JD Kelly

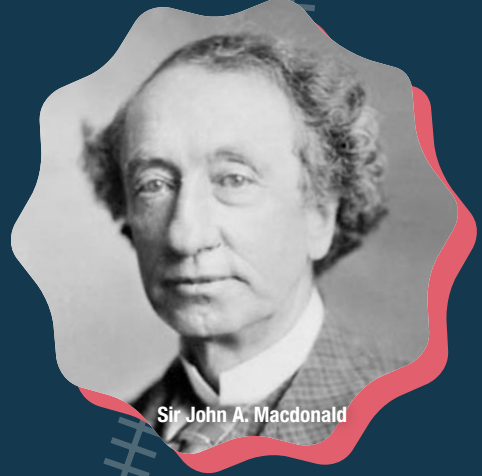
MAKING TRACKS





When British Columbia joined Canada in 1871, there was a huge condition: A railway to connect it to the rest of the country had to be started within two years and finished within 10.

The Intercolonial Railway connected the first Canadian provinces: Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Quebec and Ontario. Discussed as early as the 1830s, it was something the Maritime provinces wanted in exchange for joining the new country. It was started just after Confederation in 1867 and ran from 1872 to 1918.



Sir John A. Macdonald

Plans for a national railway started in 1872. It would be a huge job — and a huge money-maker — for whichever company won the contract to build it. After a fierce competition, the winner was a company headed by Sir Hugh Allan. But it soon turned out that he had just happened to give \$350,000 (more than \$7 million today) to Sir John A. Macdonald's re-election campaign. It became known as the Pacific Scandal. Allan's company lost the contract and Macdonald was forced to resign as prime minister in 1873.



1830

Canada's first railway opens in Pictou, N.S., for carrying freight only



1836

Canada's first public railway opens in Quebec



1853

The Grand Trunk Railway between Montreal and Portland, Maine becomes North America's first cross-border railway

After the Pacific Scandal, plans fell further and further behind and it started to look like the railway might never be built. Many people worried the United States would move in if Canada couldn't connect its eastern and western provinces.

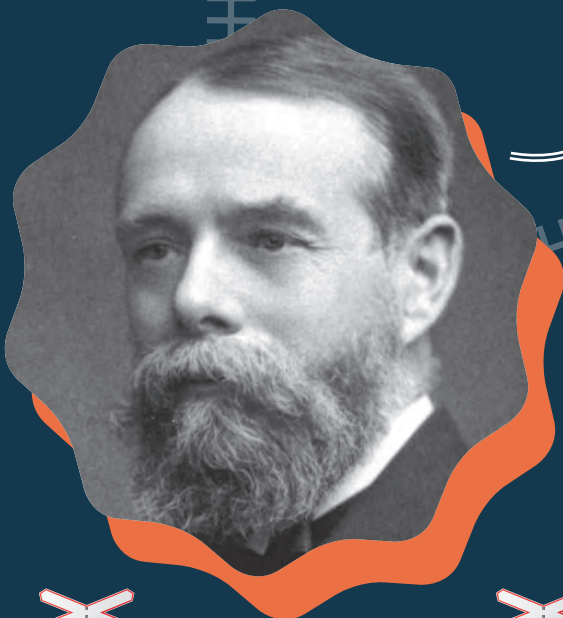


In February 1881, a group of Scottish-Canadian businessmen set up the Canadian Pacific Railway Company. It took over the contract to build the national railway.



DONALD SMITH

A Hudson's Bay Company man for more than 50 years, he worked with his cousin George Stephen to form the company that would build the railway.



GEORGE STEPHEN

This Scottish-born banker from Montreal was the first president of the CPR.

The CPR's first year didn't go well. After just 211 km of track were built, the men in charge were fired. American William Van Horne was brought in to push construction west. By 1883, he had overseen completion of the portion from Winnipeg to Calgary.



1867

Confederation:
New Brunswick,
Nova Scotia, Quebec
and Ontario join to
create Canada



1871

British Columbia joins
Confederation after
being promised a
railway to the rest of
Canada



“Next summer, or latest next fall, the railway will be close to us, the whites will fill our country and they will dictate to us as they please.”

– Poundmaker, Cree chief, Jan. 1, 1882



Work didn't just advance from east to west. Track-building took place in several areas at once.



SIR WILLIAM CORNELIUS VAN HORNE

Not only did Van Horne get construction on the CPR moving, he also started a company that built beautiful castle-like hotels such as the Château Frontenac in Quebec City and the Banff Springs Hotel.

The builders of the CPR saw the land where they wanted to build tracks as empty, even though First Nations had used it for thousands of years. Sometimes First Nations were promised money for the land that was taken. Sometimes they signed treaties giving the land to the government in exchange for money and food. Sometimes they were forced into agreements when the government, in the words of Sir John A. Macdonald, refused to give them food until they were “on the verge of starvation” and gave up their land to move to reserves where they would be fed.

One of the first uses for the not-quite-finished CPR was to bring North West Mounted Police to fight the Métis at Batoche, Sask., in 1885. The government wanted Métis land as farms for settlers and for building the railway. It said the Indigenous and Métis fighters were rebels. The government put Métis leader Louis Riel to death and threw Cree leaders Big Bear and Poundmaker in jail. Before the battle at Batoche, the CPR was broke. Afterward, the grateful Canadian government loaned the railway money to finish construction.



1876

The Intercolonial Railway from Halifax to Quebec City is completed



1881

The Canadian Pacific Railway Company is formed and construction begins on the CPR



As the CPR pushed into the mountains, the work got much harder. There weren't enough workers available, so the company hired people from other countries. About 15,000 people came from China to work on the railway between 1881 and 1884. About two-thirds of workers on the B.C. section of track were Chinese.

Chinese workers were looked down on and were often given the hardest, most dangerous work, like setting explosives to blast rock. At least 600 Chinese workers died of disease or were killed while helping build the CPR.



1885

Donald Smith hammers in The Last Spike



1886

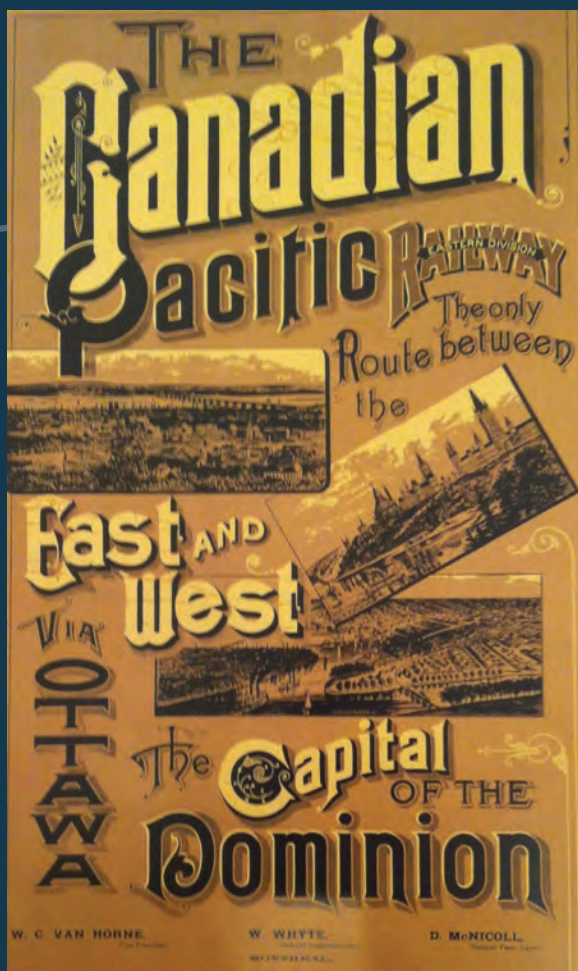
The first train travels from Montreal to Port Moody, B.C.



1903

The Canadian government approves the building of the Grand Trunk Pacific from Winnipeg to Prince Rupert, B.C., and the National Transcontinental from Winnipeg to Moncton, N.B.

In this famous photo, Donald Smith hammers in the official Last Spike on Nov. 7, 1885 near Craigellachie, B.C. The world's longest, most expensive railway was complete. Canadians could travel by train from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific.



Trains brought immigrant families to western Canada. They carried kings and queens across the country on royal visits. They took soldiers to war. They transported grain, lumber, coal, oil and more. Canada's cross-country railways came at a huge cost in money and lives. Our country wouldn't be the same without its train tracks.



1919

The federal government combines the Intercolonial, Canadian Northern, National Transcontinental and Grand Trunk Pacific companies to form the Canadian National Railway, known as CN



1977

The government-owned passenger service VIA Rail is created

