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The impact of railways on Stanstead: 1850 to 1950

by J. Derek Booth

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Le D^r J. Derek Booth a fait ses études à l'Université McGill; il est actuellement professeur émérite de géographie à l'Université Bishop's. Il a beaucoup écrit sur l'histoire des chemins de fer du Québec. Le présent article est basé sur une conférence que Derek Booth a prononcée lors de l'ouverture de l'exposition « Arrival and Departure: the Regional Train », à la Société historique de Stanstead à l'été 2005.

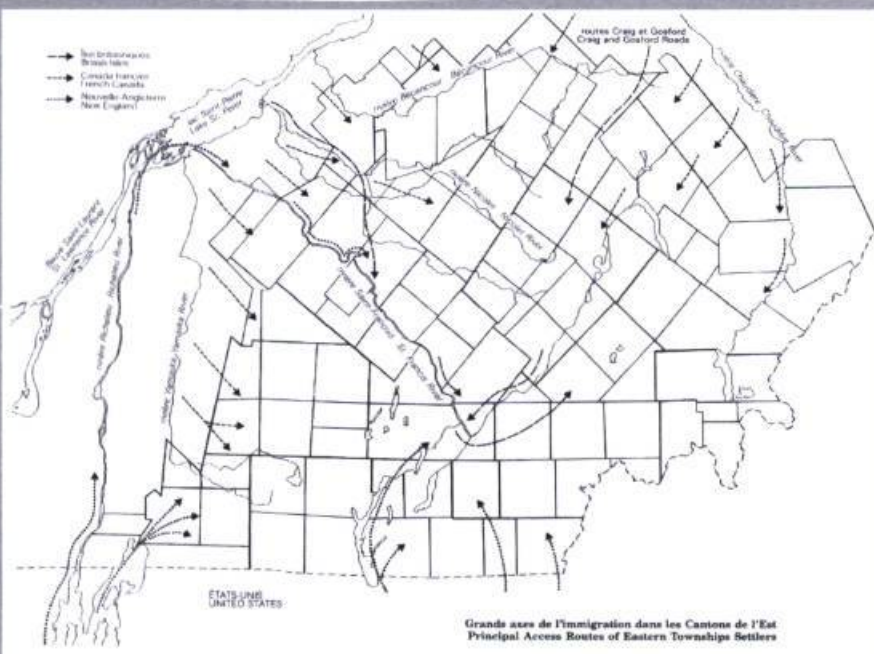
For almost a century, from 1850 to 1950, the railway dominated all other forms of transportation in Canada. All of the economic, social and geographic patterns that were created throughout the country during this period were influenced by the railway as an enabling factor.

In the period before the coming of the railways, the patterns of settlement and economic growth in Canada were tied exclusively to waterways and to canals. In

the Maritimes, the distribution of population was largely confined to the coastal regions; in Quebec, it was in valleys of the St. Lawrence, Chaudière and Richelieu Rivers; and, in Ontario, farms and villages stretched along the shores of the St. Lawrence River and of the lower Great Lakes. In every region, there was little settlement or economic activity beyond a narrow fringe lying inland from navigable waterways. Between 1825 and 1850, a flurry of canal building activity

in Canada (which included the opening of the first Lachine Canal in 1825) sought to enhance and to extend the reach of Canada's waterways. Overland travel in inland regions remained difficult. Some new form of transportation was required to provide access to the vast regions of North America that lay at some distance from navigable waterways.

The solution to this transport conundrum was the railway. The development of the steam engine and its application to pulling wagons along fixed lines of rails held out the promise of a new transport technology that suffered from none of the limitations of water transport. In the first instance, it was relatively independent of topography; it could go where no navigable rivers flowed and thereby make accessible vast tracts of land not hitherto economically accessible. It moved faster than any ships plying seas, rivers or canals. It could carry prodigious tonnages of freight, unlike its overland predecessors, the stagecoach and buckboard wagon. And it could do all of these things year round while Canadian water craft languished through the long frozen winter months.



Grands axes de l'immigration dans les Cantons de l'Est - Principal Access Routes of Eastern Townships Settlers. (Source : BOOTH, J. Derek, Musée McCord, Université McGill, Montréal, 1984, p.23)

In the years after 1825, an epidemic of 'Railway Fever' swept over Western Europe and North America. It started in England, spread to the United States and then moved northward to Canada. By the 1840s it was endemic in the Eastern Townships. The railway was hailed as the new and universal cure for economic depression, isolation and as the means to achieve a wide variety of economic and social objectives. Among the people most susceptible to this epidemic were politicians, businessmen, landowners, speculators and mayors. Farmers were often less sympathetic to its effects. Locally, Moses Colby and Ralph Merry, among many others, were affected.

For the next fifty years, loud voices were raised within the Eastern Townships in favour of building railways and, by 1920, scarcely a hamlet in the region was without its railway station. In the Eastern Townships, as elsewhere in Canada, railways and politics became inextricably intertwined.

The Eastern Townships – Regional Anomaly

The Eastern Townships was arguably the largest area of agricultural settlement in Canada that lay at any distance from a navigable waterway. By 1850 the region had a population of over 80 000, with strong southward ties to the United States (and hence with an increased susceptibility to Railway Fever). But because of the absence of any commercially navigable waterways and of the complete inadequacy of the road network for moving large quantities of agricultural or resource commodities,

the regional economy was largely isolated from the mainstream of North American economic life. Great internal pressure for the construction of railways which would link the region to the outside world came from within the Eastern Townships, from people like Moses Colby, C.C. Colby, A.B. Foster, L.S. Huntington, A.T. Galt and Ralph Merry. Each had his own particular vision.

With an increasing amount of trade in forest and agricultural products moving out of Canada to the United States and to Great Britain, the port of Montreal, lying at the junction of the Ottawa and St. Lawrence Rivers and their respective western hinterlands in Ontario, emerged as the transport hub of eastern Canada. One of the major limitations of the rivers and of the canal systems, however, was their seasonality. For the winter months, they were inoperative and the volume of goods now moving for export demanded a year-round means of transport.

A railway was the obvious solution and in the 1840s a strong movement grew in Montreal mercantile circles to promote the

construction of a railway to an ice-free port on the American east coast in order to be able to maintain year-round export (and import) of goods and raw materials. New York, Boston and Portland, Maine were the three primary contenders and, through a variety of more or less colourful exercises involving sleighs racing through the winter forests with sacks of mail, Portland was eventually chosen as the terminus for Montreal's railway.

At the same time that a desire was expressed in Montreal circles to build a railway that would inevitably have to pass through the Eastern Townships, there was also much interest from within the region to have such a railway built. All that remained was to choose the precise route and to find the money for the project. The history of chartering, planning and building of railways in Stanstead County, in Stanstead Township and in the Town of Stanstead, in the period between 1850 and 1890, reflects many aspects of the complicated processes by means of which railways were conceived, planned, promoted and sometimes built.



Locomotive of the Central Vermont Railroad on the Waterloo & Magog Railway at Magog, circa 1880. (Source : Derek Booth collection).

Stanstead County's First Railway

In 1845, the St. Lawrence and Atlantic Rail Road – later Railroad – was chartered, along with its American counterpart, the Atlantic and St. Lawrence Railroad, to build a line of railway joining Montreal and Portland, Maine. If Montreal and Portland were the two fixed ends of the line, an equally fixed point on its route was the town of Sherbrooke. It was the headquarters of the British American Land Company and home to Alexander Galt, one of the principal backers of the railway.

There were loud voices in Stanstead, among them that of Moses Colby, who wanted the railway to pass through the Town of Stanstead. To this end, surveyors were hired to find a practicable route that passed through the town, and then Colby and his associates set about to convince the railway company to adopt it. Unfortunately, the most practical route from an engineering point of view for a railway leading south from Sherbrooke lay up the valley of the Coaticook River, through the town of Coaticook, and not over the uplands of Hatley and Stanstead Townships. Furthermore, on the American side of the border, the mountainous topography of much of the route of that railway reduced the choices of the railway engineers, and the most practical route from Portland was the one that brought the line to Island Pond, Vermont.

Despite Colby's best efforts, the topographical realities dictated that the railway follow the Coaticook River and not the Massawippi and Tomifobia River

valleys. Consequently, when the line was completed in 1853, while Stanstead County had its first line of railway passing through the Townships of Barnston and Barford, the Township and the Town of Stanstead were left to one side. The aspirations of its citizens to get a railway of their own were left unfulfilled for the time being.

The Stanstead, Shefford & Chambly Railroad

When the St. Lawrence and Atlantic was completed from Montreal to Portland, in 1853, its route largely bypassed the most densely settled parts of the Eastern Townships in the counties of Missisquoi, Shefford, Brome and Stanstead. The choice of this route by the SL&A underscores the reality that this was a railway built primarily to stimulate the export trade in Canadian raw materials and agricultural commodities. It was not built, in the first instance, for the express benefit of the Eastern Townships (with the notable exception of Sherbrooke and the British American Land Company).

Stanstead County did have its railway but, from the viewpoint of the residents of the Town of Stanstead and of Stanstead Township, it was in the wrong place. Undaunted, Moses Colby and his associates (including Wilder Pierce) promptly obtained, in 1853, a charter for a new line of railway, the Stanstead, Shefford and Chambly Railroad. As the name implies, it was intended to be built from the St. Lawrence River in Chambly, through the County of Shefford to the American border in Stanstead County, where a link with an American railway would be made.

The problem was to find the money for railway construction from within the communities through which the line was to pass. Not everyone was as enthusiastic for railways as were the Eastern Townships entrepreneurs and politicians. Farmers living close to Montreal on the lowlands saw no great advantage in a railway since they had access to the urban market and they already had a railway in the form of the Champlain and St. Lawrence Railroad which ran between St. Johns (St-Jean) and Laprairie.

The first indication of financial difficulties on the part of the SS&C was the change of its western terminus from Chambly (effectively Montreal) to St. Johns on the Richelieu River. With this move the SS&C abandoned any pretense of becoming an international line in its own right. The line between St. Johns and Montreal was controlled by the Grand Trunk Railway.

Furthermore, the Grand Trunk Railway (which took over the Montreal-Portland line in 1854) was not anxious to have a competing line of international railway within the Eastern Townships. But the GTR held two trumps. In addition to controlling the Champlain and St. Lawrence Railroad and through it, access to Montreal, the GTR also would have, after 1859, when the Victoria Bridge was completed, the only railway bridge over the St. Lawrence River. The Victoria Bridge remained the only rail bridge until 1887, when the Canadian Pacific Railway's bridge was completed at Lasalle. Three years later the Canada Atlantic Railway crossed the St. Lawrence at Coteau.

Not even the farmers of Shefford and Stanstead County proved ready to subscribe the large sums required for the construction of a railway. The SS&C was completed from St. Johns to Farnham, Granby and Waterloo by 1861. In 1862, when construction had reached Frost Village, the funding ran out. The railway had been operated from the beginning by the Vermont Central Railroad and that company, like the Grand Trunk, did not want another competing international railway in its immediate hinterland. Consequently, the VCR was in no hurry to see the line completed to Stanstead. This meant that for a second time, the plan to bring a railway to Stanstead Township and to the Town of Stanstead had been thwarted.

The Massawippi Valley Railway

Attention now shifted to a new railway proposal. Through the 1850s, C.C. Colby (Conservative MP for Stanstead, 1869-1891) had campaigned vigorously for a railway through Stanstead Township and in 1862 he was instrumental in the chartering of the Massawippi Valley Railway. In 1863, the Connecticut and Passumpsic Rivers Railroad had reached Newport, Vermont and it was looking for a northern connection to Canada. As the prospect of the SS&C ever reaching Stanstead faded, Newport interests embraced the MVR as their best hope of securing a Canadian link. The MVR would run down the valley of the Tomifobia River to Lake Massawippi, along the eastern shore of the lake, and then down the valley of the Massawippi River to Lennoxville and a junction with the Grand Trunk. The effect of having this

new railway join the Grand Trunk at Lennoxville was that the GTR would be in a position to control any and all traffic on the MVR, much in the way they were able to do so at St. Johns with the SS&C. In the bargain, the GTR would also effectively control another international railway.

None of these considerations dampened the enthusiasm in Stanstead for the new railway. Construction proceeded through the late 1860s and on July 1, 1870, the Massawippi Valley Railway was officially opened. Stanstead Township finally had its railway. Even though the main line of the MVR passed through Beebe, a three-mile spur line to Stanstead and Rock Island was built at the same time. The Colbys' dream of bringing a railway to the Town of Stanstead was now within one mile of finally being fulfilled.

The Waterloo, Magog & Stanstead Railway

But not everyone in Stanstead County was happy. Ralph Merry and his associates in Magog were still without a railway. And because of its water power potential on the Magog River, Magog

held the very real prospect of benefiting directly from the arrival of a railway, in terms of the manufacturing industries that it might stimulate.

Merry's first attempt, in conjunction with Lucius Seth Huntington, to secure a railway for his town, was to charter the Waterloo, Magog & Stanstead Railway in 1866. The basic purpose of this line was to complete the original objectives of the SS&C and extend that company's line beyond Frost Village, at least as far as Magog and, preferably, all the way to Stanstead. When the WM&S was chartered in 1866, however, the attention and the energies of most railway promoters in Stanstead Township were focused on the Massawippi Valley Railway, and they had little time or financial support to give Merry in his undertaking. Furthermore, the Vermont Central remained reluctant to see this line extended. Consequently, the charter was allowed to lapse and the WM&S remained one of the many Canadian paper railways which existed in charter form but which never became operating railways.



*View of the Quebec Central Railway yards in Rock Island in 1927.
(Source: Canadian Pacific corporate archives).*

The Waterloo & Magog Railway

Undaunted, in 1871 Merry, along with A.H. Moore and others, applied for another railway charter, this one for the Waterloo & Magog Railway. As its corporate name implies, this railway had a more limited objective of simply getting Magog a link to the railhead of the SS&C at Frost Village. The VCR placed no objections in the way of this limited venture; sufficient funds were raised locally and by subscription in England and, by 1878, the town of Magog finally had its railway. The railway map of Stanstead County was nearing completion.

The Canadian Pacific Railway

The next chapter involved the calculated extension of the W&M by the Vermont Central to Sherbrooke. Through the early 1880s,

as the prospect of the Canadian Pacific Railway extending its network through the Eastern Townships increased, the attitude of the Vermont Central towards its ramshackle subsidiary, the W&M, changed dramatically. The VCR undertook to continue the line of the W&M beyond Magog and all the way to Sherbrooke in order to create an asset that the CPR would have to acquire as part of its new line through the Eastern Townships. The W&M reached Sherbrooke in 1884 and, just as planned, the CPR bought the entire line from Waterloo to Sherbrooke just three years later. Most of the line of the W&M, having been built hastily and to minimal construction standards, was abandoned outright. Only small parts and certain major structures, like the trestle in Sherbrooke connecting the W&M to the Quebec Central Railway,

were retained. The CPR built an entirely new line of railway between Brookport and Lennoxville, to be part of its new "Short Line" through the state of Maine to St. John, New Brunswick, which was opened in 1889.

Consequently, in 1889, the town of Magog found itself not at the end of a bucolic branch line operated by an indifferent parent company, but on the main international line of the CPR connecting central Canada to Maritime ports.

Stanstead at Last

The last piece of railway construction in Stanstead County (with the exception of an industrial spur to Graniteville) took place in 1896, more than fifty years after attempts were initiated to get a railway to the Town of Stanstead. While the Massawippi Valley Railway's spur line from Beebe Junction (then called Stanstead Junction) did indeed bring the rails to Rock Island in 1870, they stopped a mile short of the town of Stanstead itself. This deficiency was rectified when the Boston & Maine Railroad (which operated the MVR) built a mile-long line up the steep slope from the rail yards in Rock Island to a new station located directly in the Town of Stanstead. The dream of the Colbys was finally realized.

The Post-Railway Landscape

It is difficult to overstate the nature of the transport revolution that railways represented. Virtually overnight, they made possible a range of economic and social activities that had been



Wreck on the Boston & Maine Railroad near Stanstead Junction (Beebe Junction), October 4, 1900. (Source : Derek Booth collection).

unthinkable before their arrival. Nevertheless, railways are best thought of as enabling factors (or catalysts) rather than as the direct cause of economic or social changes. It took more than the appearance of a line of railway to effect changes in a regional economy. The existing economic landscape, the availability of capital, labour and natural resources, as well as entrepreneurial initiative and political factors, all had roles to play. In the Eastern Townships, the railways made their appearance in a landscape that already had been settled and developed for over half a century. Most of the villages were in place, the outlines of the agricultural frontier were well established and an internal road network of a rudimentary nature was in place. Consequently, the impact of the railway took place within a landscape whose broad outlines were already established. In contrast, in the Canadian west, where railways largely preceded settlement, the agricultural landscape that was subsequently created was directly and intimately linked to the railway.

In today's lexicon, the term 'globalization' has been coined to describe the various processes by means of which improved communications of all sorts have brought the farthest corners of the world into close social, economic and political contact. In the context of the nineteenth century, and on a smaller scale, railways brought a similar effect to North America. The term 'continentalization' might be applied to this phenomenon. Railways linked communities and economies together across the breadth

of Canada and the United States; they broke the isolation imposed by a generally poor road system; they 'opened up' areas to outside influences. They also increased competition in all social and economic sectors and they were the harbingers of accelerated change in every region that they touched. In Stanstead County and in the Eastern Townships in general, the impacts that the railways had in the latter nineteenth and early twentieth century were many and varied. Often they brought changes that were unforeseen by the eager promoters.

Urbanization and Industrialization

From the 1890s to the end of the first World War, a wave of industrialization swept over the Eastern Townships bringing with it substantial urban growth in cities such as Sherbrooke, Granby, Magog, Coaticook, Drummondville and even to smaller centres such as Beebe and Rock Island.

Many of the new factory industries were 'exotic' in the sense that they both imported their raw materials and exported their finished products (rubber, tobacco, textiles). The factors that drew these industries to the region were available labour, power in the form of hydro-electricity, and railway accessibility.

The arrival of the CPR in Magog coincided with the rapid growth of the textile industry in the town and a parallel growth in the population, from 2100 in 1891, to 5159 by 1921. Similarly, Coaticook benefited from its easy rail access to United States markets and its textile sector grew in response. Its population grew from 1160 in 1871, to 3554 by 1921.

Mining

Throughout the Eastern Townships, whose complex geology held much promise for mineral development, the mining industry, involving the movement of



*Northbound Quebec Central Railway freight train at North Hatley, May 10, 1955.
(Source : D.S. Robinson photo, Derek Booth collection)*



*Quebec Central (Canadian Pacific) train at Ayer's Cliff, August 29, 1954.
(Source : Jim Shaughnessy photo, Derek Booth collection)*

relatively large tonnages of finished products, was one of those industries whose development on any large scale had to await the arrival of railways. Such was the case for the granite quarrying industry around Graniteville, for the complex of copper mines and smelters at Capelton and Eustis, as well as for the extensive asbestos mining in the Thetford Mines and Asbestos regions.

Within Stanstead County, the granite quarrying industry, centred in the Graniteville-Beebe area, was the most conspicuous beneficiary of railway access. It was only a few years after the completion of the Massawippi Valley Railway that large-scale quarrying operations began and a 2.1-mile railway spur was built from Lineboro to Graniteville to facilitate the export of granite products.

Forest industries

In the Eastern Townships as a whole, the principal beneficiary

of the coming of the railways was the pulp and paper industry and, to a somewhat lesser extent, the sawmilling industry. Railways like the Quebec Central tapped vast unsettled forest areas in the more northerly townships of the St. Francis and Chaudière river valleys and the movement of forest products was their lifeblood.

In many of the more southerly long-settled parts of the Eastern Townships, however, like Stanstead County, railways produced little stimulus for the forest industry. Much of the forested land in these townships had already been cleared for farming by the time the railways arrived and the remainder was often fragmented into small farm woodlot holdings. In Stanstead Township, over half of the total forested area of the township had already been cleared by the time the Massawippi Valley Railway was built.

Tourism and Outdoor Recreation

The scenic beauties of the Eastern Townships had been recognized and widely praised long before the railways appeared. However, the arrival of the railway on the shores of the region's major lakes, coupled with the advent of steamboats on these same lakes (Memphremagog, Massawippi, Brome and others), made it possible for potential tourists, living as far away as the American eastern seaboard cities, to travel easily and comfortably to enjoy the region's outdoor attractions. The era of resort hotels, such as the Mountain House hotel at the foot of Owl's Head Mountain, began in the latter quarter of the nineteenth century.

Railways also played a major role in providing transportation for regional recreational and sporting activities. Excursion trains of all sorts were operated regularly by all the railways, providing mobility to the general public in the pre-automobile era.

Agriculture

The effect that the railways had on agriculture was rather more subtle than in the cases of tourism, mining or manufacturing. It is in this area that the railways 'continentalizing' influence was most strongly felt. For over half a century, a self-contained, largely self-sufficient type of mixed farming, based on relatively small farms, had grown up in the Eastern Townships. The lack of good transportation facilities to markets in Montreal or elsewhere can be seen as isolating the region, but it can also be

seen as protecting a particular agricultural system from outside competition. Railways gave Eastern Townships farmers access to markets beyond the region, but they also gave farmers elsewhere in Canada and the United States access to local markets. With vast new agricultural areas coming into production in the second half of the nineteenth century and up to World War I, many of them more productive than the Eastern Townships farms, local farmers found themselves competing in national and international markets rather than merely in regional ones.

The overall result of the railways opening up Eastern Townships farming to outside competition was to force the region's farmers to specialize in those types of farming best suited to the region. The pioneer mixed farming economy which produced a wide variety of products, primarily for regional markets, gave way to specialization centred around dairying.

This specialization introduced two new patterns to Eastern Townships farming. Through most of the nineteenth century, the forests had been steadily pushed back to produce ever more farmland. By the closing decades of the nineteenth century, this trend had been reversed all over the Townships. Farm land was abandoned at a rapid rate as marginal land was allowed to revert to forest. That process has continued to the present day as about one half of all the land originally cleared for farming has returned to forest of one sort or another. At the same time, the number of farms began

to decline and individual farms became larger to accommodate the needs of the new commercial dairy farming.

Population movement

In addition to making vast new areas in Canada and the United States accessible for farming and for other economic activities, the railways brought new attitudes about personal mobility. It became possible for large numbers of people, in the Eastern Townships and elsewhere, to seriously contemplate long-distance moves and wholesale changes in economic lifestyle. And many of the newly accessible parts of the American Midwest and the Canadian west were very attractive to Townshippers.

When the first railway passed through Stanstead County in 1853, the population of the county stood at just over 10 000. By 1881 it had risen to 15 556 and it had reached 23 380 by 1921. However, in those seventy years,

significant changes had taken place in both the distribution and the cultural composition of the population. At mid-nineteenth century, Stanstead's population was over 80 % rural and agricultural and over 90 % English-speaking. At the end of the 'railway era', its population was composed of approximately 50 % urban dwellers while English-speaking residents accounted for less than 50 % of the population. Furthermore, the English-speaking population had experienced a substantial absolute decrease over its mid-century levels.

This remarkable demographic shift was experienced all over the Eastern Townships as the region became more urbanized and the number and acreage of farms declined. Accompanying the rural to urban shift was a culture change. The spread of railways through the Eastern Townships coincided with the beginning of a massive out-migration of English-speaking Townshippers and a parallel immigration of



*Quebec Central Railway way freight at Beebe Junction, December 24, 1948.
(Source : Philip R. Hastings photo, Derek Booth collection)*

French-speaking Quebecers, the latter destined largely for the growing manufacturing towns. Approximately 50 000 English-speaking Townshippers left the region between 1860 and 1920, while an even greater number of French speakers arrived. It cannot be said that railways directly caused these population changes. But they helped to create the right conditions for them to occur.

The Shrinking Railway Network

Because of the strategic location of the Eastern Townships in terms of international rail lines and also because of the intense local demand for branch line railways to serve individual communities and townships, the Eastern

Townships developed, in the period up to 1920, one of the densest railway networks of any part of Canada.

However, as railways lost many of their former transportation functions to road transport during the twentieth century, passenger service ended and many hundreds of miles of railway in the Eastern Townships were abandoned. Stanstead has not escaped this phenomenon. Passenger service to the Town of Stanstead ended in 1928; on the rest of the former Massawippi Valley Railway it ended in 1951. The last passenger train to Coaticook operated in 1978 and Magog saw its last passenger train in 1979. The one-mile spur leading to the town of Stanstead was removed in 1956 and the rest

of the Massawippi Valley Railway line, from Lennoxville to Newport, was abandoned in 1990.

Stanstead County's first railway, the St. Lawrence & Atlantic, is still operating, as is the former CPR line through Magog (now the Montreal, Maine & Atlantic Railway), although neither is now a Canadian company. Elsewhere across the Eastern Townships the railway map has become skeletal. Throughout the region, many miles of former railway rights-of-way have been converted into recreational trails. This has been the case with the portions of the Massawippi Valley Railway lying between Lennoxville and North Hatley and between Ayer's Cliff, Beebe and Stanstead. The creation of recreational trails on abandoned railway roadbeds has not been without controversy, but a strong case can be made for the merits of preserving multi-purpose corridors in the landscape. They have been used across Canada to fulfill a multitude of useful functions.

With railways playing such a diminished role in the Eastern Townships of today, it is often difficult to appreciate the full extent to which they dominated the transportation scene within the region and across Canada for the better part of a century. The economic and social landscapes of the Eastern Townships were shaped and drastically altered during that Railway Era.



Quebec Central (Canadian Pacific) train at the North Hatley station, May 1954.
(Source : Jim Shaughnessy photo, Derek Booth collection)