

# Intercolonial Railway



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Construction of the Intercolonial Railway began shortly after Canada became a country in 1867. It would be Canada's first National infrastructure project.

Hector Francis McDougall was a champion for the rail line across Cape Breton. He was elected federally in 1883 to represent a Conservative seat for Cape Breton County. His maiden speech in the House of Commons requested the rail line be extended across Cape Breton. With a majority of Conservative caucus in support the construction of the line was initiated in 1887. McDougall's next goal was for the railway to go through Central Cape Breton and to have a rail bridge built across the Barra Strait.

In 1887 Robert Gillespie Reid was awarded the contract. Reid was a Scottish stonemason who developed a reputation for constructing bridges in the most difficult places. The construction was complex due to the water depth of 164 feet between Grand Narrows and Iona, and the Strait's erratic currents and heavy ice in the winter. The swing bridge was built to allow both rail and water traffic to pass. The piers were built in the summer of 1889. The seven spans were built and placed the summer of 1890 by the Dominion Bridge Company. In 1890 the longest rail bridge in Nova Scotia (1,700 feet) was completed for \$530,000.

In October 1890 the first train to cross the Grand Narrows Bridge was Intercolonial Railway's locomotive No. 166 with Lord Stanley, then Governor-General of Canada. The first passenger train left Sydney for Grand Narrows in November 1890.

The Grand Narrows Bridge was upgraded in 1915 by Reid. The spans were replaced and built on the original piers. This was necessary as the trains became heavier, likely with shipments of iron and steel from the Sydney and North Sydney steel plants.

The Grand Narrows Station was abandoned in September 1980 and demolished in January 1982. Howard MacKinnon was the last stationmaster at the Grand Narrows Station, having worked there from 1958 to 1979.

Operators of Cape Breton's rail line discontinued operation in the fall of 2014.



The Grand Narrows Train Station was built in 1890.



Intercolonial Railway's locomotive No. 166 driven by Governor General Lord Stanley in October 1890.

Images provided courtesy of the Beaton Institute, Cape Breton University



The original train bridge that was built in 1890.



New train bridge spans assembled in 1915.



McNeil Brothers' Dining Saloon was built by John C. McNeil, next to the Grand Narrows Station. For over 20 years, the train would stop to give passengers a chance to dine.