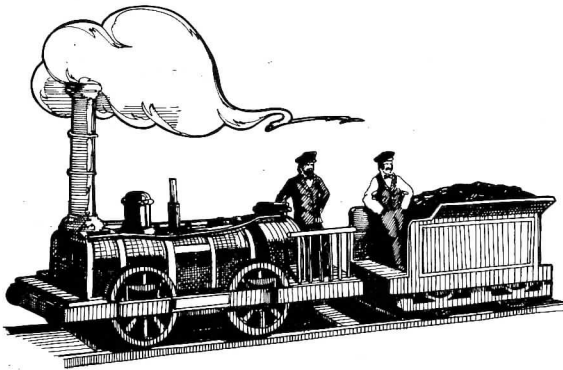




# The story of the Dorchester and Canada's first train



On July 21, 1836, our  
first train puffed into  
history and began the  
process which would open  
up a continent and unite  
a new nation.





*From the painting owned by the Royal Bank of Canada.*

One of two well-known paintings, by Sherriff Scott, shows the inaugural run of Canada's first train in 1836.

# They helped to found a nation

Planning for Canada's first railway began in the early 1830s.

**J**ULY 21, 1836. It's not a date that's been celebrated much recently. Yet it turned out to be a most momentous day in Canada's history. On that date, 300 people set off from Montréal on an excursion aboard the brand-new steam ferryboat *Princess Victoria*. They were bound for Laprairie on the south shore of the St. Lawrence River, the starting point of the inaugural run of Canada's first railway, to Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu, Québec, as shown above.

This little-known event will be celebrated in 1986 as a central focus of the sesquicentennial of passenger rail in Canada.

The Champlain and St. Lawrence Railroad Company, operator of this first train, was by modern standards a very small railway indeed. Its rails stretched only 14.5 miles from Laprairie to Saint-Jean on the Richelieu river. (Passengers travelled between Laprairie and Mont-

réal by ferryboat.) It was basically a "portage" railway, following an old trail used to transport freight from the St. Lawrence to the Richelieu River and its connecting waterways, Lake Champlain and the Hudson River.

However, seen in the context of its time, this railway was a giant step forward in Canada's transportation industry, a step that would eventually lead to a massive transcontinental passenger and freight railway system. This would bind the separate parts of the new land into a cohesive national force that would become the Dominion of Canada with Confederation in 1867, 30 years later.

In fact, railways became such an integral part of the founding of the Canadian nation that provision for the building of an Intercolonial Railway linking Halifax to Montréal was embedded in the British North America Act of 1867.

Planning for Canada's first railway

began in the early 1830s. A bill entitled "Making a Rail Road from Lake Champlain to the River St. Lawrence" was tabled in the Lower Canada (Québec) Legislature in 1831 and it received royal assent February 25, 1832.

At that time in Canada's history, travel in British North America was inconvenient, uncomfortable and only undertaken if necessary. Modes of transport were the horse, boat, sleigh and carriage. Roads between communities were virtually non-existent. Severe winter conditions restricted water travel part of the year. And carriages of that era were to be recommended only if passengers enjoyed a bumpy ride and the prospect of bruises. One-horse open sleighs weren't much better.

This lack of incentive to travel also somewhat resulted in isolation from the rest of the world. Mails from Bytown (modern-day Ottawa) reached Montréal

only three times a week. Transatlantic news came in by ships arriving from Liverpool with English newspapers. Overseas items for local papers were copied from these journals, and from New York newspapers when the English papers were delayed in transit.

The railway, then, was hailed as a means of making travel more attractive and comfortable. It was a way of speeding and increasing passenger and freight traffic between Montréal and the Lake Champlain waterways to the United States. It was seen as a step towards reducing the barriers of time and distance.

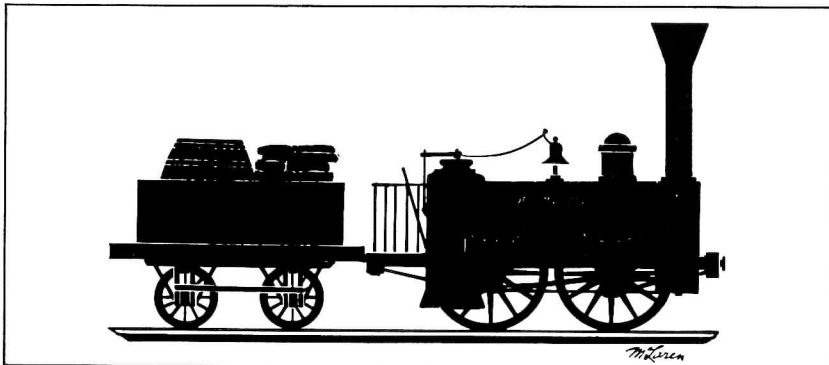
Montréalers were enthusiastic about the new project, but few shares were sold until Peter McGill, president of the Bank of Montréal, became the first of 754 subscribers to the charter of the new railway. Second on the list was John Molson, founder of Molson's Brewery and president of the Bank of Montréal until 1832. He was an early supporter of the project, having realized, as far back as 1829, the advantages of replacing his stage line between Laprairie and the Richelieu River with a railway. (His son, John Junior, was first president of the railway and his son William was one of the founding directors.) Further down was Jason C. Pierce, a New Englander captured in the War of 1812-15. He remained in Canada in Saint-Jean, Québec, where he became a prominent citizen. Pierce was a prime mover in getting the railway project moving, persuading John Molson alone to subscribe £9,000, more than one quarter of the estimated £33,500 cost of the railway. (See page 5 for portraits of the founders of Canada's first railway.)

### They began to build

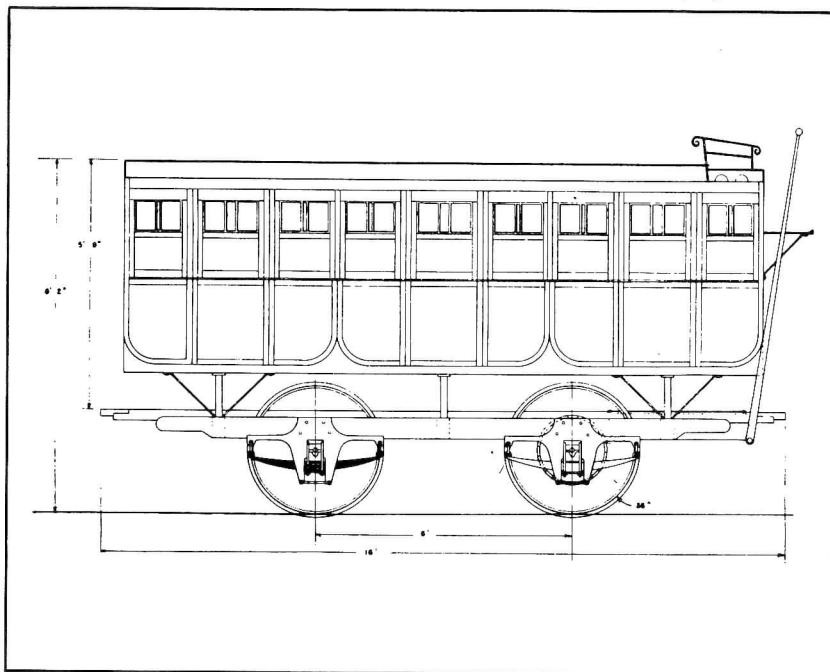
Construction of the new railway began in 1835. By December, the management committee was able to report that the grading, masonry, bridges and the ferry wharf at Laprairie had been completed. A locomotive to be named *Dorchester* in 1837, had been ordered from Robert Stephenson in England, the son of the great railway pioneer George Stephenson, builder of the famous "Rocket". First- and second-class passenger coaches would come from the U.S. and freight cars were being built in Montréal (See page 5.)

Railway infrastructure in those days was very different from today's steel rails on a specially-built roadbed. The rails then were wooden six-inch pine squares anchored to the ties by triangular blocks and joined at the end by iron splice

## How that first train may have looked



Canada's first locomotive, the *Dorchester*, shown in silhouette.  
—From *Canadian National Railways* by G.R. Stevens



The Champlain and St. Lawrence's coaches were built in Troy, New York and are thought to have resembled this one built for the Mohawk and Hudson Railroad around the same period.

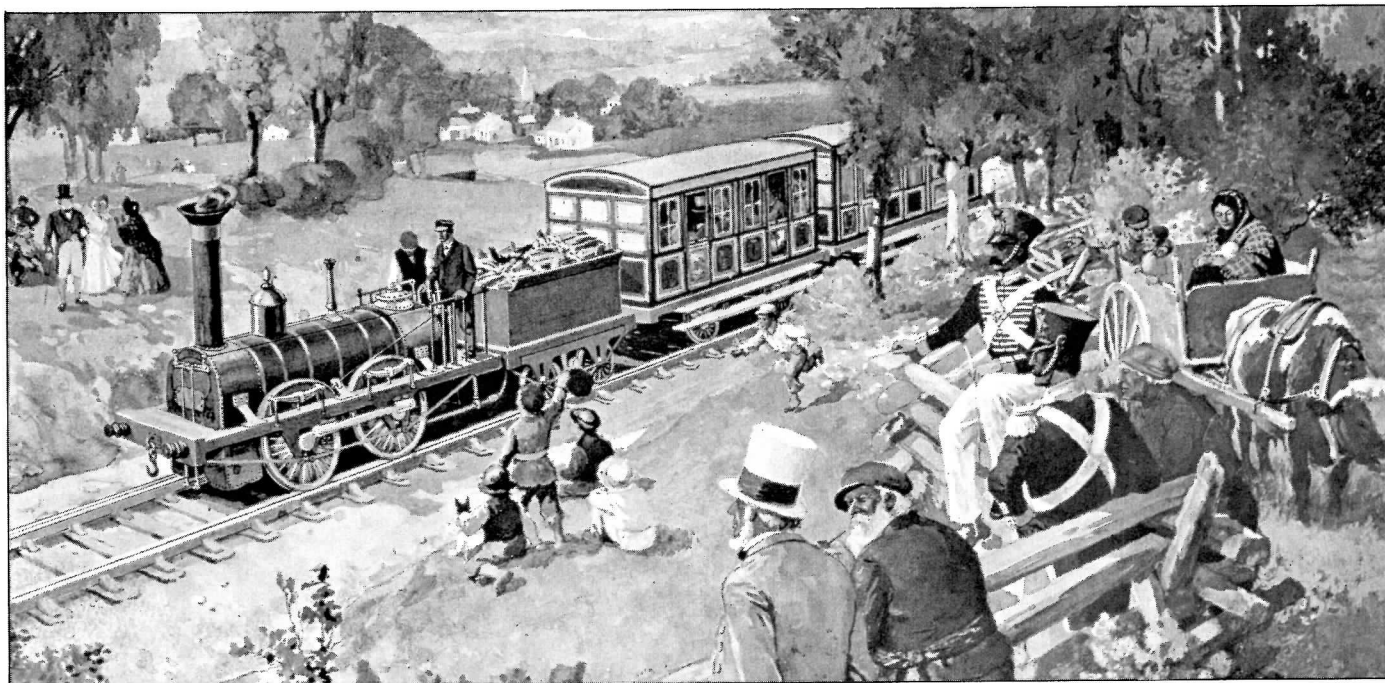
(*The American Railroad Passenger Car*, John H. White, Jr.)

plates. The upper surface of the rail was protected by an iron strap three inches wide and half an inch thick, fastened to the rail by countersunk spikes. The rail junctions were the main points of weakness. When sufficient play developed, the iron strap often broke and its jagged ends curled upwards, striking the axles, wheels and undersides of the rolling stock as they passed over. Consequently, these rails were sometimes known as "snakehead" rails. The rails were laid to the standard or "Stephenson" gauge of four feet, eight and a half inches. They rested on cross-ties, varying from nine to ten feet in length. These ties, in turn,

were supported by longitudinal stringers. Ballast as we know it was not used.

On April 26, 1836, the new railway issued its first freight schedule. It consisted of rates for barrelled ashes, beef, pork, flour, meal, boards and timber.

On May 12, amid the cheers of "an immense concourse", the steam ferry belonging to the railway company was launched. Mrs Peter McGill, wife of the Bank of Montréal president and the railway's chairman, christened it *Princess Victoria* (after the Heir Presumptive who would become Queen of England the following year). After gliding gracefully into the water, the boat was towed



From the painting owned by Confederation Life.

In another painting of the 1836 inaugural run of the Dorchester, by J.D. Kelly, Saint-Jean is en fête...

## The first railway timetable in Canada



### The Champlain & St. Lawrence Railroad Company,

**I**N connection with the Steamer *Princess Victoria* is now prepared to convey Passengers between MONTREAL and ST. JOHNS as follows :—

STEAMER.	CARS.
<i>From Montreal, precisely</i>	<i>From Laprairie.</i>
8 o'clock, A. M.	9 o'clock, A. M.
2 o'clock, P. M.	
5 o'clock, P. M.	6 o'clock, P. M.

CARS.	STEAMER.
<i>From St. Johns.</i>	<i>From Laprairie.</i>
7 o'clock, A. M.	6 o'clock, A. M.
2 o'clock, P. M.	9 o'clock, A. M.
	4 o'clock, P. M.

#### ON SUNDAYS

The Steamer and Cars will leave as follows :—

STEAMER	CARS
<i>From Montreal, precisely</i>	<i>From St. Johns.</i>
10 o'clock, A. M.	7 o'clock, A. M.
5½ o'clock, P. M.	3 o'clock, P. M.

And from LAPRAIRIE, the Steamer will leave on arrival of the Cars, and the Cars, on arrival of the Steamer.

#### FARE.

To and from St. Johns the same day...7s. 6d.

To or from St. Johns only.....5s.

Children half price.

August 6, 1836.

The Champlain and St. Lawrence Railroad posts its schedule in 1836.

into port to receive its engines. The trial voyage was on July 9 — only 12 days before the scheduled inaugural run of the fledgling railway.

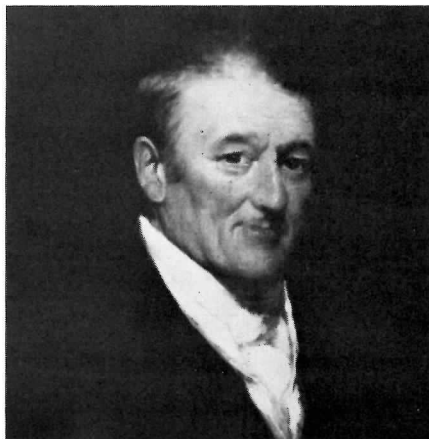
Inauguration Day, July 21, 1836 — almost 150 years ago — was marked by a large gathering of noteworthy persons of the time. This included the Governor-in-Chief of British North America, the Earl of Gosford (who was currently heading an inquiry commission into the political situation in Lower Canada). With him were his fellow-commissioners, Sir Charles Grey and Sir George Gipps. Members of the Legislative Council and the House of Assembly of Lower Canada, soldiers, merchants and many "respectable strangers" are said to have attended as well.

Among the guests was Speaker of the Assembly Louis-Joseph Papineau. (In the following year, Papineau was destined to flee from Canada with a price on his head as a result of his part in the 1837 Patriotes' rebellion. He would pass into Canada's history along with his counterpart rebel in Upper Canada, William Lyon Mackenzie. He would reappear, after exile, as an honoured guest on yet another inaugural run — that of the Montréal and Lachine Railroad Company — in 1847.)

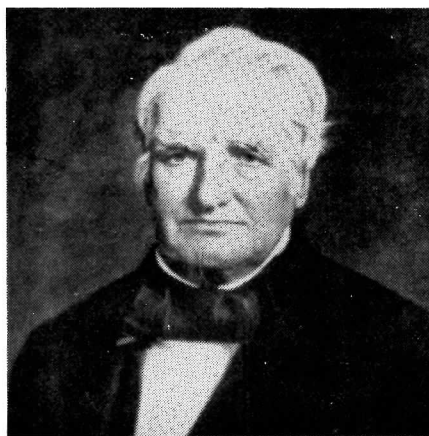
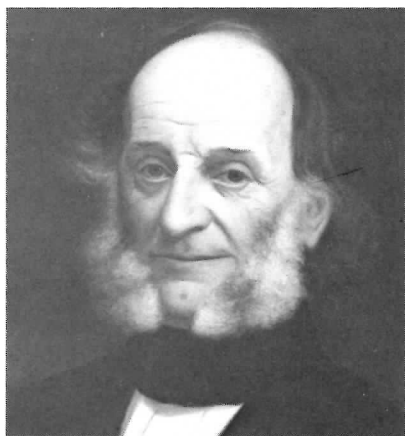
The 300 people loaded down the *Princess Victoria* and it took 50 minutes to make the river crossing. At Laprairie, two trains had to be made up. The new locomotive, even though built by a



# The farsighted men who founded our first railway



Peter McGill, president of the Bank of Montréal, left, chaired the first railway. Brewery pioneer John Molson (*centre*) helped finance it. His son John was president. Molson senior died before the first run.



William Molson, John senior's son, was a director of the Champlain and St. Lawrence. Another director (*centre*) and sparkplug for the venture was Jason Pierce, once an American prisoner-of-war from the War of 1812 who settled in Saint-Jean (then St. John's and previously Dorchester). He persuaded John Molson senior to invest £9,000 – more than a quarter of the railway's £ 33,500 total cost. The directors bought their first locomotive from the British railway pioneer (*right*).

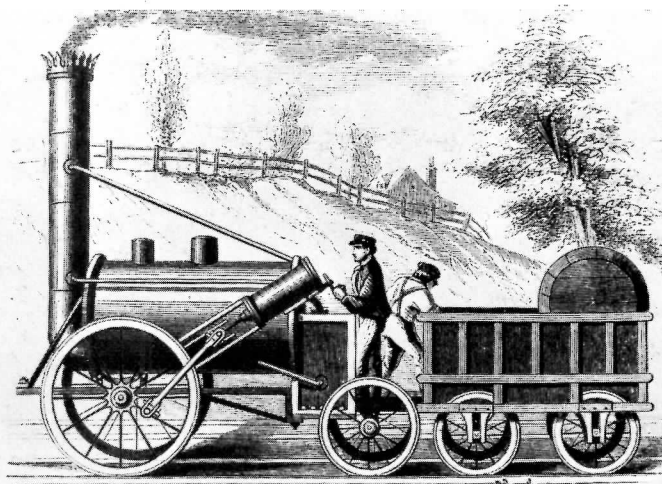
**...and the engineer who sold them their first engine**

Robert Stephenson, son of the pioneer George Stephenson.

## The railway pioneer



George Stephenson, father of Robert, built famed "Rocket".

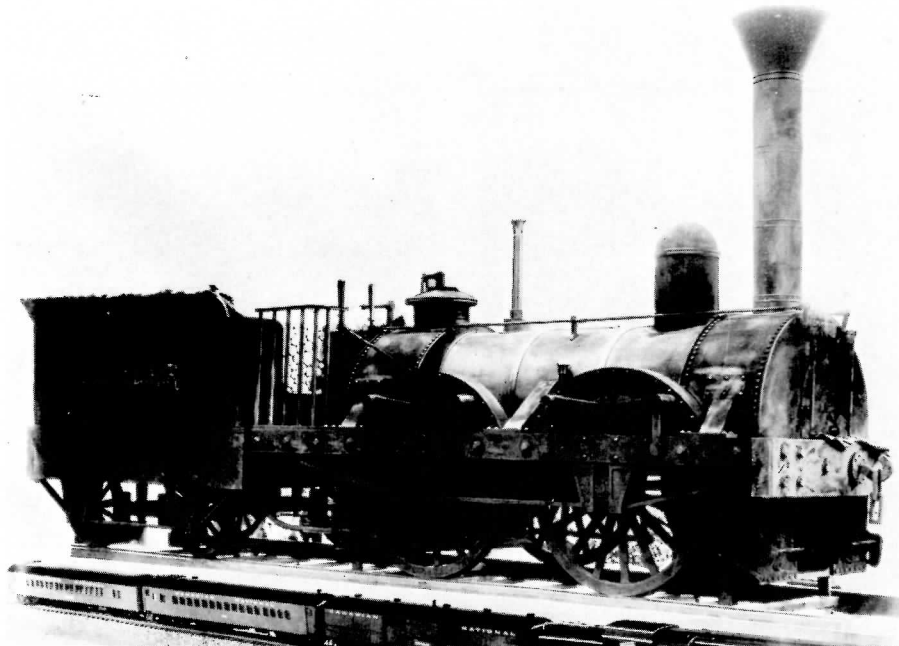


Fame of first locomotive, the Rocket, made the Stephenson name.

foremost railway pioneer, had behaved skittishly in trial runs (they called it the "Kitten"). On one of these trials, the boiler water was allowed to get too low, resulting in some burned tubes. There was not time to repair the damage and the tubes were plugged. So it was decided that since its power was diminished, that the engine would haul only two coaches and the balance would be hauled by horses. The run to Saint-Jean that day took two hours. After a "collation" at the station there, the party returned to Laprairie. On that return run, the locomotive redeemed itself by hauling four coaches and made the run in 59 minutes. Unfortunately, the passengers were forced to spend the night in Laprairie after the ferry boat grounded. They returned to Montréal on the morning of July 22.

A few days later, the locomotive was temporarily withdrawn from service so that the burned tubes could be replaced. When it returned to service, it completed its season successfully.

The Dorchester was the 127th locomotive built by the pioneer British railway firm of Robert Stephenson and Company in England. It arrived at Molson's Wharf in Montréal in June 1836 and was assembled in Molson's Machine Shop. It cost £1,500, weighed 12,544 pounds, was 13 feet, six inches in length and had four driving wheels 48 inches in diameter. Experience with the locomotive in its first season proved that a second locomotive was necessary. This locomotive, with a single pair of driving wheels and a four-wheeled leading truck, was built by Norris of Philadelphia, and delivered in 1837. With two engines on the property, it became necessary to distinguish between them, and the British



### A model for posterity

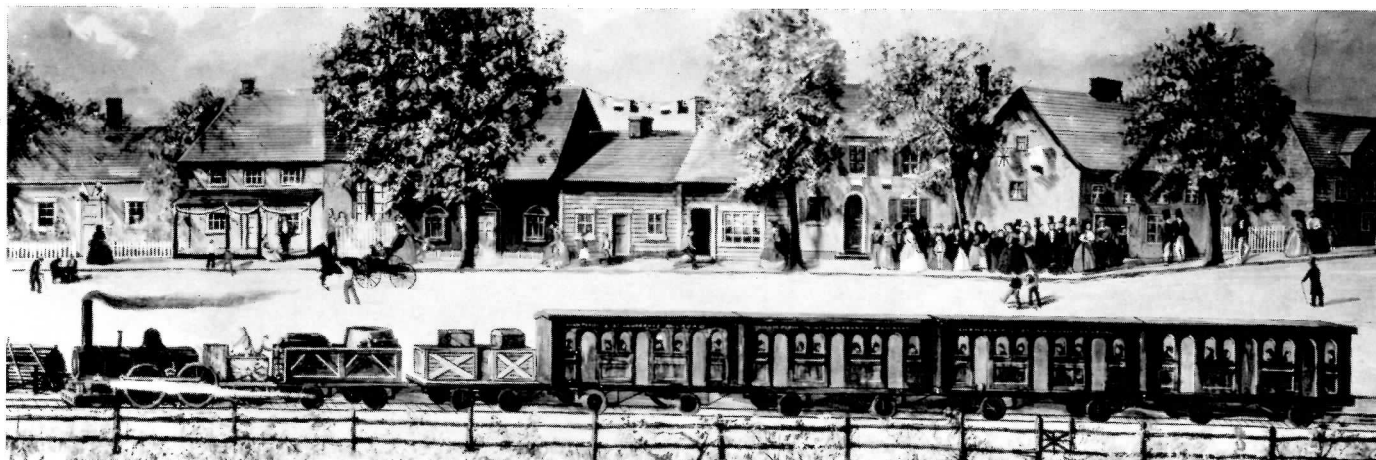
Full-size model of the Dorchester, built for 1936 centennial by apprentices of Canadian National Railways. Two models are now in museums.

locomotive was named "Dorchester" and the "Yankee" was baptized "Jason C. Pierce". The Pierce proved to have superior running qualities on the uneven wooden track and Dorchester was converted a year or two later to the same wheel arrangement, by substituting a leading truck for its foward pair of drivers.

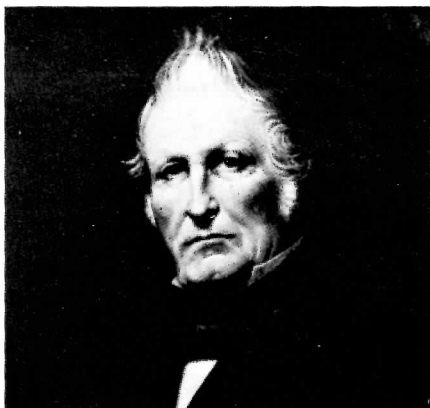
It is interesting to note that the early railway pioneers of Canada saw the potential of that first railway, not just for moving freight, but for passenger travel as well. Already they were farsighted enough to recognize the public appeal of easier travel, reduced travel times and

more comfortable travel. In a sense, they may be said to have launched Canada's tourism industry, as well as its railway industry. One might say they introduced the first railway excursions to Saint-Jean and points beyond.

From the beginning, the railway was very popular with day-trippers from Montréal. This popularity increased when the S.S. Burlington went into service between Lake Champlain ports and Saint-Jean. Montréal families could not resist a combined ferry-train family outing which took up most of the day. It only cost seven shillings and sixpence, children going half price. Such excursions



Calm street scene in Saint-Jean as pioneer train arrives in terminus. Settlement had the alternative "garrison" name of "Dorchester" for a time. The artist took a few liberties with his view of the locomotive and cars.



## First passenger?

Louis-Joseph Papineau, Speaker of the Lower Canada Assembly, was a honoured guest on the first run of the first train. Later he led the 1837 rebellion of Patriotes.

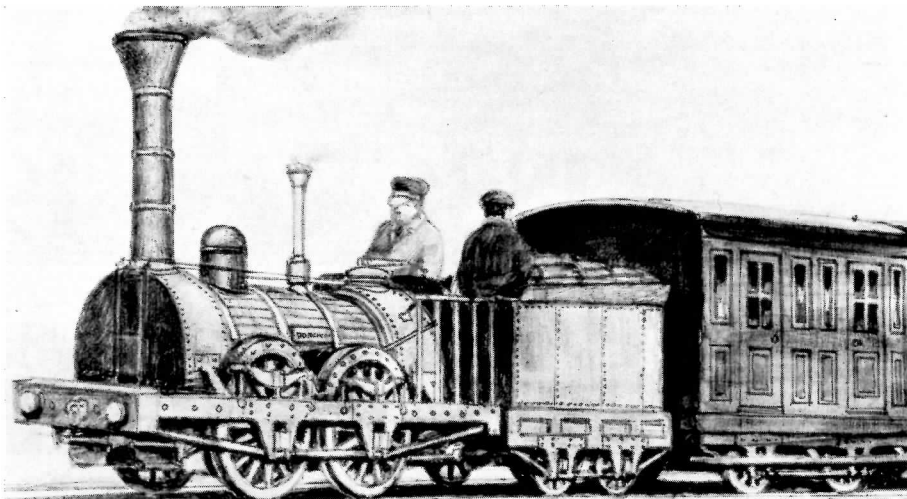
were so numerous that the head of the operations department complained that his daily train frequently ran late because picnickers unpacked their luncheon baskets and sat on the rails eating.

The company soon found itself obliged to curb the carefree habits of passengers. New rules stated that no seats could be occupied unless a ticket had been bought on the ferry. No dogs were allowed in first-class compartments. Anyone mounting the engine or walking on top of the moving railway carriages was liable to fines of 10 to 25 shillings respectively.

In one respect Canada's first railway was notable. It made a profit every year, averaging 40 per cent over the first 15 years of operation. It was paying dividends of nearly 16 per cent annually. By 1850, a dividend of 36 per cent was paid. During a financial panic in August 1837, it even issued its own currency.

Traffic expanded and new locomotives were added in 1847, 1848 and 1849. The wooden rails were replaced by iron T rails at the same time.

In the 1850s, the railway was forced to expand to maintain a competitive edge in the transportation business during a period when many small railways began to spring up in the area. Accordingly, the line was extended 28 miles from Saint-Jean to the international boundary with the United States at Rouses Point in 1851. Here it made a connection with the Vermont and Canada Railroad and direct rail connections through to Boston and New York. To mark the first international rail link between Canada and the U.S., a



## Steaming into history

Canada's first train is a part of history. It set in motion a great movement, which was to unify a country and contribute to its growth.

"Railroad Jubilee" was held in Boston that summer. Hitherto the Champlain and St. Lawrence had operated in the warmer months only, closing in winter when the rivers were frozen and connecting steamboats laid up. The international rail connection made it necessary to operate all year, and a new terminal at the Montreal end was opened at St. Lambert in January, 1852, with a nine-mile new rail connection. The St. Lambert-Montreal ferry operated throughout the winter. Fierce competition, in particular with the Montréal and New York Railroad, plagued the railway. This resulted in a merger in 1857 between the Champlain and St. Lawrence and the Montréal and New York to form the Montréal and Champlain Railroad Company. This railway, much of whose line still exists, eventually became part of the Grand Trunk system in 1872. This in turn became part of Canadian National in 1923.

So Canada's passenger railway, VIA Rail, today traces its origins historically back to that first distant ancestor 150 years ago.

As for Canada's first locomotive, Dorchester, it continued in service to 1849. Then it was sold to British North America's fourth steam-operated public railway, the Compagnie du Chemin à Rails

du St. Laurent et du Village d'Industrie which ran between Joliette and the St. Lawrence River, a distance of 12 miles. The Dorchester was in service there until 1864 when its boiler exploded and it was subsequently scrapped.

Interestingly, the Jason C. Pierce, along with the Champlain and St. Lawrence's original passenger and freight cars and its strap iron rail were also sold to this same railway in 1850. The Industrie Railway opened on May 1, 1850, and is Canadian Pacific's oldest operating ancestor.

Replicas of the Dorchester were built for the 100th anniversary celebrations in 1936 of the Champlain and St. Lawrence Railway — the first railway in Canada. One belongs to Montréal's Chateau de Ramezay Museum, but is on loan to the Canadian Railway Museum in Saint-Constant, Québec. The other is in the Lachine Museum. The former was built by Chateau staff and the latter by CN apprentices. (*See opposite page.*)

All that remains of the original Dorchester today is its nameplate, which was found in a farmer's field near Joliette, Québec. It is now in the collection of the Musée d'Art de Joliette — a last relic of a pioneer and far-reaching Canadian venture. (*See below.*)



Last relic of the Dorchester — its nameplate — found in a field.



# The symbol of 150 years' passenger train service

On July 21, 1836 Canada's first train set out from Laprairie to Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu, Québec and the history of Canada's passenger railway began...

**I**T was the beginning of Canada's long love-affair with the train. A small, primitive locomotive and two coaches puffed into the history books as Canada's first railway went into business 150 years ago.

From that early beginning, Confederation was brought into being by a growing railway network and then the great eastern and western transcontinental trains, which began by binding a country together and ended by settling its broad lands with immigrants.

Passenger trains are part of every Cana-

dian's heritage and in 1986, we will pay tribute to the part they've played in all our lives — and the part they still play.

The symbol above stands for a century and a half of history, from that first train to the national network we are now rebuilding.

Throughout 1986, celebrate 150 years of passenger rail with us. See our exciting exhibit at Vancouver Station during Expo '86. And come ride the trains of VIA, as Canada passes by your window. Come feel the magic: take the train, over Canada's historic rails.



Canada  It's our year!

*VIA Rail wishes to acknowledge the following photo credits: Canadian National, Bank of Montreal Archives, Molson Archives, Musée du Québec, Canadian Railway Museum.*

*VIA also wishes to convey its warmest appreciation for the invaluable assistance offered by Omer Lavallée, corporate historian and archivist, Canadian Pacific Ltd.*