

## VANCEBORO HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

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### Railroad Museum to Open

The MacDonald Railroad Museum project is a labor of love rooted in the community's deep pride in a largely overlooked chapter of railroad history. Vanceboro once sat at the heart of transcontinental rail travel, its impressive station and ten-track yard a legacy the VHS is determined to preserve.



The project took shape when board member Gene MacDonald made a transformative gift: the donation of his 12-by-20-foot railroad museum building, along with a rich collection of artifacts, historic photographs, railway records, display cabinets, a motorized "putt putt" railcar, and an original railroad signal. With grant support from the Morton-Kelly Charitable Trust, a local crew guided the structure up the steep rise of Cobb's Hill to its new home beside the Community Center, which houses the VHS museum. Days later, community members — many with personal and family ties to the railroad — gathered to scrape, paint, wire, and repair the building using supplies donated by Hancock Lumber and S.W. Collins, and sustained by coffee and homemade apple buckle.

This past May brought another wave of volunteers and the gift of a Community Building Grant from Maine Community Foundation. We are so grateful to our funders and for this outpouring of community support, all to ensure the railroad museum is a permanent, interactive tribute to the town's remarkable railroad heritage.

**Please join us for the official dedication of the MacDonald Railroad Museum on Saturday, August 1, 2026.** The event, open to the public, will be held at the Vanceboro Community Center beginning at 11:45 a.m., with a formal program and lunch to follow at 12:15 p.m.



The museum is named in honor of Gene and Elaine MacDonald, who built the building to honor their parents, Bill and Glennie Howland MacDonald and Eldon and Josie McDougal. The dedication ceremony will feature remarks by Gene and the unveiling of the museum's official sign.

VHS president Dan Beers will also recognize Colonel (Ret.) Herbert "Bill" Vernon, recipient of the 2025 Legendary Game Warden of the Year Award. Colonel Vernon was born in Vanceboro and began his long career in the Warden Service in 1958.

Town Select Board member Corinna Wright Cropley will present the Boston Post Cane to Eleanor Dyer, recognizing her as Vanceboro's oldest resident.



Preparing the railroad museum for the move

## Vanceboro and the Railroad: How a Small Border Town Became an International Gateway



Above: Vanceboro Station (1890) -- roundhouses far left, four square Customs House to left and behind the station

For much of its history, Vanceboro has been far more important than its size might suggest. Located on the international boundary between Maine and New Brunswick, the village was once a vital transportation gateway. While many communities grew because of farming, manufacturing, or natural resources, Vanceboro's fortunes were closely tied to the trestle bridge that connected Canada and the United States

From the arrival of the first railway in 1871 to its role on Canadian Pacific's transcontinental route, Vanceboro became a place where local lives intersected with national and international events. Dignitaries visited, passengers and freight crossed continents, and generations of residents found work on the railroad and the businesses that sprouted because of it.

How did this all come to be? The story of Vanceboro is, in many ways, the story of how a small border town became a key link in a much larger world.



## The European and North American Railway: The First "Iron Road"

The arrival of the European and North American Railway in Vanceboro in 1871 marked the beginning of a new era. The line linked Maine and the rest of the U.S. with New Brunswick and its deep-water port of St. John, and opened the region to faster transportation, communication, and trade. What had been a remote settlement suddenly found itself a key link in a much larger world.

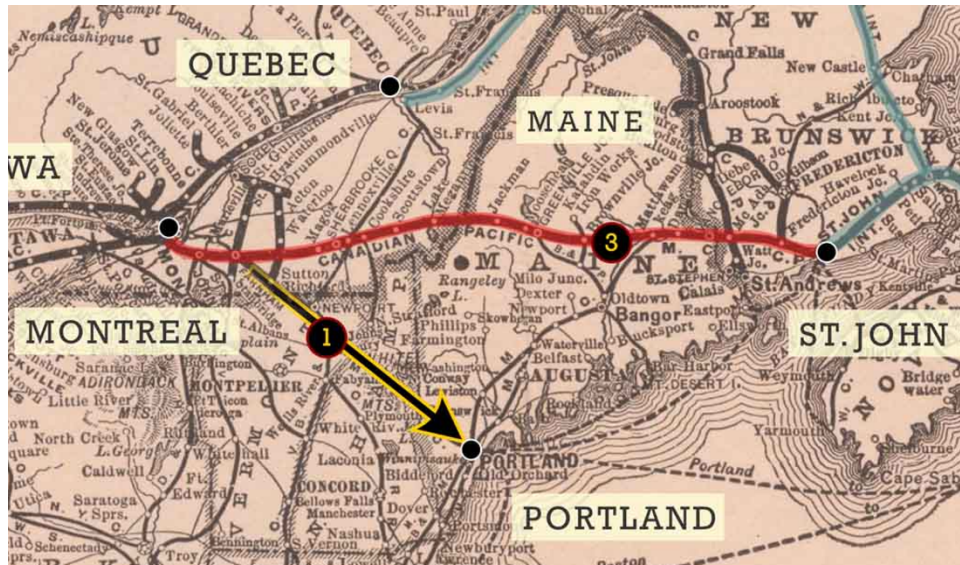
Celebrating the opening of the E&NA Railway, Vanceboro

The railroad also helped stimulate local development. In 1869 the Shaw Brothers established their tannery, creating jobs and transforming Vanceboro into a developing company town. The community's growing importance was recognized on October 18, 1871 when President Ulysses S. Grant and the Governor General of Canada, Lord Lisgar, visited Vanceboro to celebrate the completion of the international rail connection. For one remarkable day, this small border village symbolized the promise of rail transportation and economic growth.

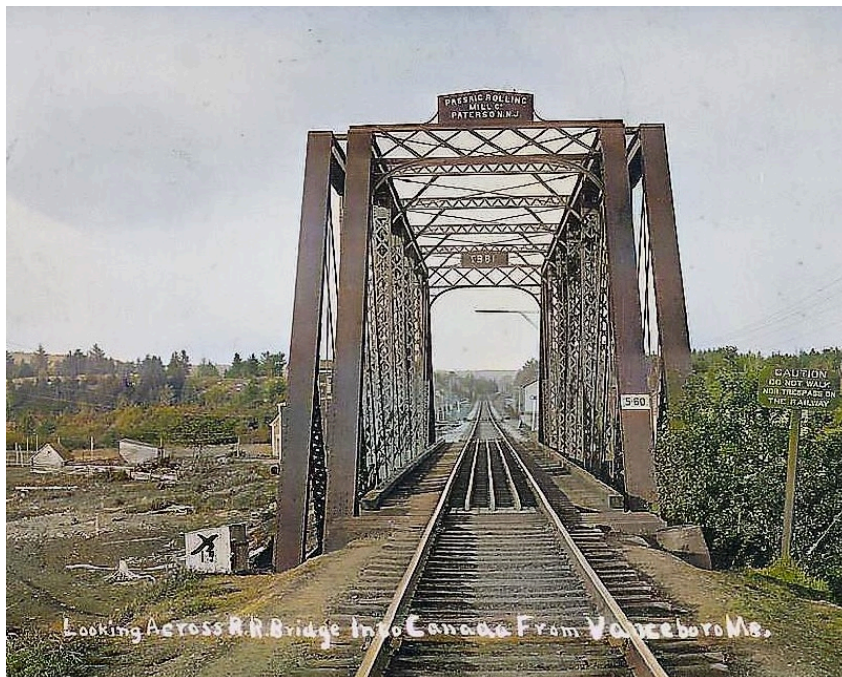
The Vanceboro ceremony included a luncheon, speeches, and a symbolic "last spike" moment at the border crossing between Maine and New Brunswick. Banner in the photo reads: Grand International Rail Road Opening, San Francisco, New York, Bangor, St. John, Halifax, The West Salutes the East. Stereoview photo, The Tides Institute & Museum, Eastport.



## Canadian Pacific and the "Short Line"



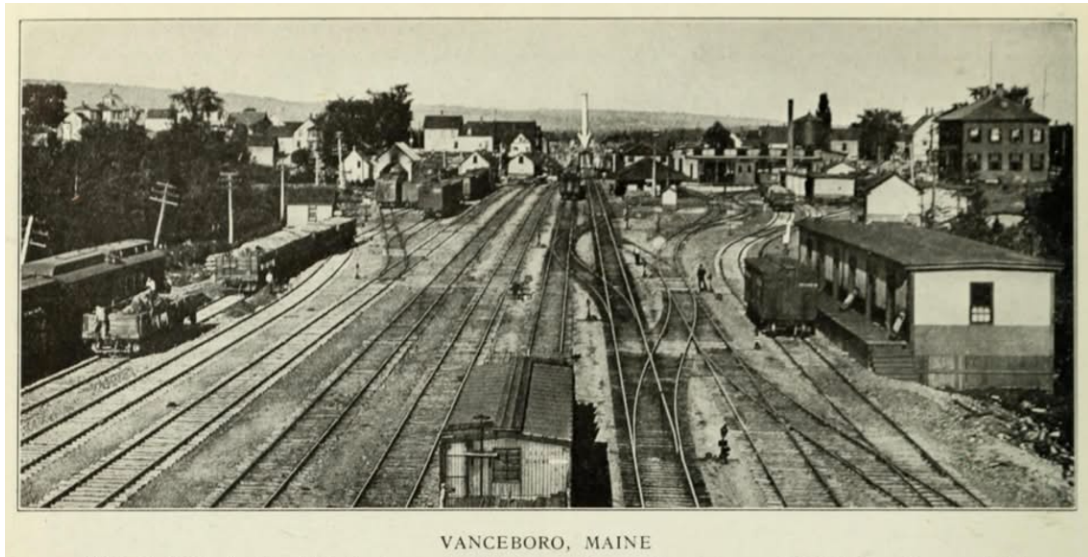
Vanceboro's importance increased dramatically in 1889 when Canadian Pacific completed its "Short Line" through Maine, from Lac Megantic in Eastern Quebec to Vanceboro. The route connected Montreal to the Maritimes, creating the most direct rail link between central Canada and Europe. Vanceboro thus became a strategic point in one of North America's most critical transportation systems.



Before modern icebreakers, the Port of Montreal often closed during the winter. Saint John, with its ice-free harbor, became Canadian Pacific's principal winter port, allowing freight and passengers to move year-round. Trains carrying goods from western Canada and beyond passed through Vanceboro on their way to the rest of the world.

## WWI and The Vanceboro Bridge Bombing

In the early hours of February 2, 1915, Vanceboro unexpectedly found itself at the center of an international incident. As World War I raged in Europe, a German army officer named Werner Horn arrived in Vanceboro with a suitcase full of dynamite. His target was the Canadian Pacific Railway bridge spanning the St. Croix River, a vital transportation link carrying troops, supplies, and commerce between Canada and the Atlantic coast and on to Europe in support of the allies.



Above: Vanceboro's 10 track yard at the time of the bombing. The arrow points to the bridge



Werner Horn and  
Deputy Sheriff  
Geo. W. Ross

X marks the spot (above) where Horn placed explosives on the bridge and detonated them shortly after midnight. Fortunately, the damage was limited and rail service resumed quickly.

Horn was arrested by Deputy Sheriff George W. “Pooch” Ross at the Exchange Hotel. The event attracted international attention and remains one of the few acts of foreign sabotage ever carried out on North American soil. The bombing underscored Vanceboro's strategic importance and demonstrated how events unfolding thousands of miles away could impact a small border town in Maine.

## Vanceboro and the Railroad at Their Peak



During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Vanceboro and nearby Lambert's populations grew steadily, reaching nearly 1000 residents combined. Vanceboro thrived after the Shaw tannery closed because the railroad supported a bustling, well-connected community: stores, taxidermy shops, moccasin and wooden ware factories, a blueberry processing plant. Railroad employment, lumbering, river driving, and border commerce all contributed to a vibrant local economy. The station hosted a hotel, a twenty-four-hour restaurant, baggage room, waiting room, Immigration and Customs offices, and a telegraph station operating all three shifts. Travelers heading east or west waited on the wide wooden platform, salesmen in from Bangor hawked their wares and shared news from afar. Locals dropped in to pay bills and send telegrams to friends. Vanceboro boasted a winning baseball team, a 20-piece brass band, a village expansive enough to host carnivals and plays, crowd a roller rink, and pack a silent movie theater.



The Methodist Church, c. 1900

At its peak, Vanceboro supported businesses, churches, schools, and community organizations. Railroad families settled in the community and local events drew people from both sides of the border. Although the population has declined since those years, photographs, stories, and artifacts preserved by the Vanceboro Historical Society remind us of a time when this small border town played a much larger role in the life of the region.

## World War II and the Railroad's Continued Strategic Role

The strategic value of the Vanceboro bridge had already been demonstrated during World War I and during World War II, security was tightened once again. Guards were stationed at the bridge and railroad facilities to protect against sabotage and ensure the uninterrupted flow of wartime traffic.

Following the war, the Maine Central–Canadian Pacific route through Vanceboro experienced some of its busiest years. The postwar economic boom generated enormous demand for



passenger and freight transportation, and the line became a vital artery for moving consumer goods, forest and agricultural products between Canada, New England, and Atlantic ports.

←The Gull passenger train out of West St. John on its way to McAdam and Vanceboro where Maine Central would take over to Portland and the B&M would handle the remainder of the run to Boston.

A 1945 article in Maine Central Employees Magazine titled “The Hottest Single Track in America?” describes a heavy schedule of 24-32 passenger and freight trains each day. During the late 1940s and early 1950s, the Vanceboro gateway was among the most heavily used international rail crossings in the Northeast. Ironically, the railroad reached this peak just as technological and economic changes were beginning to reshape the industry.

## **From Steam to Diesel**

For generations, steam locomotives were the heart of railroad life in Vanceboro. Steam engines required engineers, conductors, and firemen to maintain the fire, monitor the boiler, and help operate the locomotive. Roundhouses, water tanks, coal facilities, and maintenance crews all supported steam operations, creating jobs for local residents.



The Gull (1956)

That era ended with the introduction of diesel locomotives, which were more reliable, less expensive to maintain, and required far fewer workers. Maine Central's last regularly operated steam locomotive made its final run in 1954, marking the close of a chapter that had defined the railroad in Vanceboro for nearly a century.

Railroad unions fought to retain firemen on diesel locomotives, arguing that they continued to serve important safety and operational functions. Railroad companies countered that the position was no longer necessary. Although some firemen remained for a time through union agreements, the job gradually disappeared. For towns like Vanceboro, the end of steam meant not only new technology but a loss of many skilled railroad jobs that had supported families and the local economy for generations

## **The End of Passenger Trains**

By the mid-twentieth century, automobiles, improved highways, trucking, and air travel gradually reduced the demand for passenger rail service. In 1960, Maine Central operated its

last passenger train, The Gull, through Vanceboro. The CP Atlantic (VIA Rail) stopped at Vanceboro until it was discontinued in the early 90s, but the train was "sealed" across the U.S. and escorted by U.S. Customs officers between Vanceboro and Jackman. With no passenger service in Vanceboro, the station transitioned from a major passenger hub to a strictly freight-focused operation. The once bustling station was largely dismantled. Customs operated out of what was once the baggage room.



Vanceboro's second station, built in 1905



The Dismantled station, 1974

The decline in passenger service was accompanied by broader changes in railroad employment. In 1960–1962, officials in both Maine and New Brunswick debated whether customs operations could be consolidated in McAdam rather than maintained on both sides of the border. While freight traffic continued, Vanceboro's participation in the railroad industry was gradually diminishing.

## Changing Hands



Even as Maine Central became freight-only, CP exercised trackage rights over the Maine Central's Vanceboro line and eventually purchased it outright in 1974. In 1988, Canadian Pacific sold its Maine rail lines to the Canadian Atlantic Railway, a subsidiary created to manage the system. In 1994, J. D. Irving Ltd. purchased the rail corridor from Vanceboro to

Brownville Junction and incorporated it into what became the New Brunswick Southern Railway and Eastern Maine Railway systems.



Once a key segment of a transcontinental route linking the Pacific Ocean to the Atlantic, the line became part of a regional freight network. Although the railroad's role had changed, trains continued to operate through Vanceboro, preserving a connection to the community's railroad heritage and ensuring that the tracks remained an active part of the landscape.

## **The Present**

The railroad no longer dominates life in Vanceboro, yet its legacy is everywhere. The tracks still cross the town, and the bridge over the St. Croix River remains a powerful symbol of Vanceboro's role as a gateway between nations. Historic photographs, railroad artifacts and family stories all testify to a period when the town played an outsized role in regional, national, and even international transportation.

The story of Vanceboro's railroad is ultimately a story of connection—between Maine and New Brunswick, between local lives and global events, and between past and present. Though the era of a bustling passenger station and hundreds of railroad workers has passed, the railroad remains central to understanding how Vanceboro grew, prospered, adapted, and endured.

Lyn Mikel Brown  
Editor, VHS Newsletter  
June 10, 2026

## **Please Support Us**

The Vanceboro Historical Society is entirely volunteer run and we count on your membership dues and donations. To make a tax-deductible donation, please use our secure online system at: <https://vanceborohistorical.org/> and click “Donate” or mail a check to Vanceboro Historical Society, Box 48, Vanceboro, ME 04491. *Any donation of \$25.00 or more will count toward an annual membership*



### **Call for Contributions**

It's amazing what you can find in a hall closet, a box in the attic, a basement trunk. If you discover historical photographs, books, artifacts, papers or records, please consider donating to VHS or dropping by to allow us to photograph or scan. You can email us at [vanceboro.hs@gmail.com](mailto:vanceboro.hs@gmail.com) or find our donation form on the VHS website homepage <https://vanceborohistorical.org/>

← This kerosene lantern is typical of the lighting used by Vanceboro railroad workers for signaling, switching, and night operations during the early 20th century.

### **Join Vanceboro Historical Society's Mailing List**

We are gathering contact information from VHS members and friends so we can keep you in the loop about events, museum openings/updates, newsletters, fundraisers, and everything Vanceboro! If you are willing, please provide your information using this link:

<https://forms.gle/QBqxpZ2CcKahAiCHA>

Thank you!



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