St. John River


The Good and the Bountiful

**Original Maliseet name:** Wolastoq, meaning 'good and bountiful river'
**Current official name:** Saint John, given by early European navigators
**Source:** Northern Maine, USA
**Mouth:** Bay of Fundy
**Direction of flow:** southeast
**Length:** 673 kilometres
**Main Characteristic:** the thread in a quiltwork of cultures

The Saint John River drains an area larger than Switzerland. Just over 50 per cent of the watershed lies in New Brunswick, while more than 30 per cent is in Maine. Another 13 per cent travels through the province of Quebec. For most of its length, the river is a border between provinces and states. The Saint John River is the Maine, Quebec, and New Brunswick region's common bond.

From beginning to end, the Saint John is rich in history. To the Maliseet Natives, the original inhabitants of the Saint John region, the river was the Wolastoq, the good and bountiful river. The Maliseet kept pace with the changing economy brought by European colonization, war and industrialization. For a time, the Maliseet found an important market for woven baskets wanted by potato farmers to collect their harvest. Today, they are a strong community that still identifies with their river.

Many waterways in the Saint John system have retained their aboriginal names, among them: Chemquasabamticook, Temiscouata, and Nashwaaksis. The Saint John received its present name on June 24, 1604, the feast day of St. John the Baptist, when the expedition of Samuel de Champlain dropped anchor at the river's mouth.

Today's residents of the Saint John valley descend from Maliseet Natives, Acadian colonists, Loyalist refugees from the American War of Independence and waves of immigration from Great Britain.

From deep in the woods of northern Maine to the Bay of Fundy on the New Brunswick coast, the Saint John River travels 673 kilometres. One of the longest rivers on the eastern seaboard of the North America, it is also one of the most beautiful, undergoing several distinct character changes on its journey to the sea.

At first, it is a wilderness river, coursing through great tracts of forest broken only by the lakes, tributaries and deep woods of Maine. For 55 kilometres, one of its branches forms Maine's international boundary with Quebec.

At the New Brunswick panhandle, the Saint John is tame. Farms and towns carved out of the natural forest landscape connect the river's banks, and the river becomes a boundary between New Brunswick and Maine.

Just above Grand Falls, New Brunswick, the river becomes all-Canadian, diving into the rolling hills of one of the country's largest potato-growing districts. Human impact is dramatic on this part of the river, with three hydroelectric dams holding back its flow.
Near Fredericton, the river enters its estuary, where it presents yet another face. Some 130 km long, the estuarial part of the Saint John is wide and placid, drifting among low-lying islands, marshes, pastures, and broad waterscapes. In quiet villages, time still whispers of riverboats that once called at local wharves. Finally, the river reaches the ocean at Canada's oldest incorporated city, Saint John, New Brunswick.

*With thanks to David Folster, Saint John River Society*
Disease and death stalk desperate newcomers

Bron, bron, mo ron - Sorrow, sorrow, my sorrow

The outbreak of famine in Ireland in 1845 caused thousands of people to desperately flee their homeland. Unfortunately, typhus fever, dysentery, measles, cholera, and smallpox would also be passengers on the vessels that carried the desperate migrants across the Atlantic.

At the entrance to Saint John harbour sits the small, wind-swept Partridge Island. British colonial authorities turned the island into a quarantine station for these impoverished, often sick, immigrants during the early 1800s. The immigrants were held under observation for several weeks in hopes that any infection would be detected. The word "quarantine" was adopted from French and means "40 days".

Not all ships respected immigrants' rights to adequate food, ventilation, space, and medicine. The vessels became filthy during the long voyages. New arrivals were shepherded into tents on the southwestern tip of the island for an observation. The cold, damp, wind, and rain made tent-living almost unbearable. If the newcomers proved to be healthy, they were released to start their lives on the mainland.

During the 1840s, as many as twenty ships bearing several hundred immigrants each were sometimes docked at the same time. The newcomers were so numerous that ship sails were used to make extra tents to protect them from the worst cold, damp, and wind of the island.

Despite the quarantine station, disease managed to spread like wildfire to Saint John and up the river valley.

The toll of immigrant deaths climbed to 2,000. The victims were buried in shallow mass graves on Partridge Island. The only thing that ended this tragedy was an eventual tapering off of immigration by 1850.
St. John River: Company Town


Boss Gibson's Marysville

New Brunswick's economy has been dominated by a succession of powerful business owners. The Irving family's power in oil, newspapers, and politics is legendary. More recently, the McCain family has built an international empire in food processing from their base in tiny Florenceville in the midst of the province's potato-growing region.

In the mid-19th century, everyone wanted to join the Industrial Revolution. New Brunswick's first giant of business was Alexander "Boss" Gibson. Remembered as much for his fatherly generosity as for his industrial accomplishments, Alexander Gibson planned the town of Marysville, outside of Fredericton, right down to the bricks of its buildings.

Gibson rose from poverty and went to work in a sawmill. Eventually he purchased a mill of his own. Business was good and Gibson also became a shipbuilder, a railway baron, and a king of cotton. He even opened a brickyard to supply construction materials for the big cotton mill he opened in 1885.

Marysville had a geographically ideal location. Wood could be cut upstream on a tributary of the Saint John and floated down to the town, ready to be turned into lumber to build ships. Then the ships could sail down the Saint John River to the ocean.

His enterprises thrived as Marysville grew to become Canada's first "company town." He built the town around his businesses, and named it Marysville to honour his wife. The company owned all the houses and rented them to the workers. The town was well-planned, and Gibson took care of his workers like family, from cradle to grave.

By 1889, Gibson was the wealthiest man in New Brunswick, with $3 million in assets. During the worst of economic times, the "Boss" would forgive the debts of his employees at the local store. He donated land for church and schools.

By the early 1900s, the mill could not compete with cotton mills in the United States and Quebec. Gibson lost his fortune, sold the mill and died - poor once more.

Gibson's cotton mill finally stopped producing cotton cloth in 1980. It was taken over by the provincial government which, a century after it was built, reopened it as a modern complex of government offices. Marysville remains largely intact today, with its brick cotton mill, imposing homes built for the owner's family, and blocks of row housing for the workers.
St. John River: Fiddleheads


Natural delicacy of the river valley

Fiddleheads are the tightly-spiralled sprouts of ferns. They were harvested for food by the Maliseet before being adopted by settlers from Europe and the United States.

Fiddleheads grow in rich, moist soil. The fiddlehead plant has a shoot that coils upward with tightly-coiled leaves that are reminiscent of the tuning head of a violin.

In recent years, these ferny fronds have been harvested commercially, frozen and then shipped to other parts of North America.
Forests are vital to New Brunswick's economy

The Acadian Forest has always been a sustaining force of economic life in New Brunswick. Only 15 percent of the province is unforested. But very little of the forest is original growth. Most of it has been logged at one time or another.

Only the tallest, straightest white pines were used for the masts of the sailing ships built along the Saint John river in the 18th and 19th centuries. Today the forest provides products ranging from hardwood floors, fine furniture and high quality paper to maple syrup products and Christmas trees. Nearly 12,000 New Brunswickers are employed in forest-related industries.

New Brunswick forests have 32 native species of trees. Softwoods, used for construction and papermaking, include white pine, spruce, fir and cedar. Hardwood species, used for furniture and flooring, include birch, maple, oak, and butternut.

With the decline in the shipbuilding industry and the timber trade towards the end of the 19th century, the focus of the forest industry gradually shifted from the production of lumber to the production of pulp and paper. The rise of pulp and paper mills also spurred the development of hydroelectricity.

Most pulp and paper mills export their products to the United States and other countries. Efforts are being made by laboratory scientists in the pulp and paper industry to reduce pollution almost completely and to use forest resources more efficiently. Wood chips, second-grade lumber, and other wood by-products from sawmills now provide much of the fibre that is used to make pulp and paper.
**St. John River: Fries to Go**


**Fast food for the world**

The Saint John River wanders through New Brunswick's best potato-growing country. Inside a modern processing plant at Florenceville, tonnes of potatoes are washed, peeled by steam, sliced, cooked, and frozen.

The frozen french fries are packaged and loaded into freezer trucks for delivery to restaurants and food stores across Canada.

In 1957, two brothers, Wallace and Harrison McCain, used $100,000 of their inheritance of the McCain family seed potato business to build their first frozen french fry plant. Today, from its world headquarters in Florenceville, the company operates 50 processing plants on four continents. The geographical expansion of its operations around the world has been accompanied by a mushrooming of its product line to include vegetables, pizza, desserts, fiddleheads, and other foods.

The company’s success demonstrates how the right mix of local resources, modern technology, and ambition can bring prosperity to entrepreneurs and their communities.
St. John River: Home Children


Tragic chapter in our immigration history

Saint John was the scene for one of the most shameful chapters of Canadian labour and immigration history. In 1826, a London police magistrate named Robert Chambers concluded that there were too many poor children in the English capital. These victims of their parents' hopeless lives, became homeless, street urchins who slept in the gutter and roamed the streets.

Chambers recommended that the "surplus" youngsters be sent to Canada as domestic and farm labour. Canada was considered to be a place where these children would find a "better life" - a promise which was often not fulfilled.

Thomas John Barnardo was a principal figure in this policy. He set up "refuge" centres in London where 30,000 unfortunate children were rounded up and shipped to Canada over the following decades. Once in Canada, they often ended up on farms, doing hard labour for nothing but poor food and a rough bed.

These young servants, who were more like indentured slaves, were sometimes victims of severe abuse and died without official notice. They were usually not adopted and were rarely paid the allowance that was to be set aside for their education. What's more, if a child was deemed less than fit, strong, agreeable, and intelligent, that child could be sent back to Britain.

By the turn of the century, a whole child labour industry had sprung up, with dozens of organizations involved in shipping youngsters overseas. Most of the children were eight to 16 years old, but some were as young as four years of age.

It was only by the 1920s that the morality of child immigration was put into question. The numbers of immigrant children began to decline, and opposition to the immigrant child labour program mounted. The Canadian economy began to weaken, and consequently the demand for cheap child labour simply dwindled.
Foghorn is invented for Partridge Island

The foggy entrance to Saint John harbour was a hazard to big sailing ships. Captains often could not see the shore and depended on sound to help them find their way. A cannon was placed on Partridge Island in 1791 and fired to guide incoming ships through heavy fog for which the harbour was known. However, an acceptable level of marine navigation safety had not yet been achieved.

Scottish immigrant, Robert Foulis, arrived in Saint John, New Brunswick in 1821 to pursue his career as an engineer. He was a multi-talented genius and inventor who helped design the first steamboats for use on the Saint John River.

It was while perfecting his invention of a gas lamp for lighthouses that Foulis thought of using steam to power a whistle loud enough to penetrate miles of fog. Foulis also invented, among other things, a method of using the whistle as a means of receiving and transmitting messages or telegraphy.

In 1859 Foulis' foghorn, which used a system of coded blasts, was erected at the western end of Partridge Island. In 1860, when it first echoed out to sea, it was just in time to make the harbour safe through a thick fog that lasted for more than 65 days.
Bald eagles recover old nesting sites

Fifty years ago, the basin of the lower Saint John was an important nesting spot for bald eagles, an enduring North American symbol of power and dignity.

They made their nests in tall, strong, white pine, elm and maple trees. The branches were the perfect camouflage for their colouring. Preferring to breed near water, the Saint John River allowed them to be close to a good supply of fish.

The birds suffered a dramatic decline in the mid-1900s. Only one pair was seen in the 1970s.

One belief is that the farm poison, DDT, prevented the eagle eggs from hatching. DDT is an insecticide that tends to accumulate in ecosystems, having a toxic effect on many types of wildlife. Another theory says that the birds were simply shot by irresponsible hunters.

By the 1970s, DDT use was banned and the chemical started to slowly disappear from the fish and animal populations from which the eagles harvested their food. At the same time, education and legislation reduced the irresponsible killing of wildlife. The eagles began to reappear.

The sight of these soaring raptors is, once again, becoming an everyday occurrence. There are now an estimated 30 breeding birds the lower Saint John River valley.
St. John River: The Sand and the Fury


The complex ecology of the Fundy tides

Twice a day, the Saint John River loses a struggle with the incoming tide. The river flow is forced to flow backwards through a narrow gorge known as the Reversing Falls.

The Bay of Fundy tides are the world's highest, rising as much as 16 metres. The funnel shape, volume, and depth of the Bay is responsible for the unusually powerful tides. The falls are evidence of the powerful push that forces the river to change its direction.

Scientists have determined that the powerful movement of water circulates nutrients and promotes high biological productivity. The Bay of Fundy is a vast web of delicate biological connections regulated by the tides.

At high tide, seabirds by the hundreds of thousands swoop down to fatten themselves on fish. When the tide goes out, it exposes fresh mudflats which teem with life. The birds turn their attention to tiny, squirming mud shrimp.

Whales and porpoises gather in the bay in summer to feast on herring. Biologists are worried by the number of whales that show propeller-damage to their tails. They have seen some whales suffer a slow, painful death from collisions with boat traffic.
Loyalists seek refuge from revolution

Inhabitants of the former Thirteen Colonies on the eastern seaboard of United States, who left their homes to come to Canada at the end of the American Revolution, were known as United Empire Loyalists.

Loyalists came to Canada from every class, race, occupation, religion, and geographical area. They supported British colonial rule for reasons ranging from loyalty to the monarchy to fear of what life in post-revolutionary society would be like in the United States.

During the Revolution, the so-called "Tories" (British sympathizers) suffered at the hands of the revolutionaries. Many had their property confiscated. Some were coated with hot tar and feathers. Others were banished, imprisoned, or murdered.

At the end of the Revolution, many of the surviving Loyalists did not want to remain in the newly-created United States. They became political refugees, looking for new homes. The majority sought new settlement in the other British colonies throughout North America.

About 50,000 Loyalists emigrated to British North America. Halifax, Saint John and the Saint John River valley were the favoured locations. New Brunswick was established in 1784 as a separate British colony.

The preparations of supplies for the Loyalists' arrival were very poor, and most Loyalists suffered a great deal in the early years of rebuilding their lives.

Kings Landing was established in the early 1960s to illustrate the Loyalist experience in their new homes. About 40 kilometres from Fredericton, it includes more than 70 restored buildings, including homes, carpenters' shops, a store, a school, a blacksmith's forge, and the largest water-wheel driven sawmill in Canada.

Kings Landing is a living portrait of daily life on the Saint John River from the Loyalist era to late Victorian times. Costumed students assuming the roles of the Loyalist settlers show that there were no idle hands in an early rural settlement. Cooking over an open hearth, spinning flax, and churning butter were essential daily chores to maintain life in those times.
The unique cultural mélange of Madawaska

So proud and independent is the northwestern corner of New Brunswick that its residents like to call it the “Republic of Madawaska.” Natives called it, Madoueskak, or “land of the porcupine” - still a fitting name for a region that continues to depend on trees for its economic well-being.

Squeezed into a nook between Quebec and the state of Maine, the Madawaska region is a unique cultural blend of English-speakers from New Brunswick and Maine, and French-speaking Quebeckers and Acadians.

In 1764 the Acadians, who had been expelled from Nova Scotia in 1755, were allowed to return to the British colonies. But all their farms had been given to English-speaking settlers and the Acadians could not go back to their former homes. Many came to New Brunswick but were not given full legal rights. As Roman Catholics, they were not allowed to vote in New Brunswick until 1810, or sit in the Legislature until 1830.

At the time of the Loyalist influx at the end of the 18th century, a group of Acadians relocated from Fredericton to a remote site in Madawaska. They named it “Petit Sault,” meaning Little Falls.

The character of the town changed with an influx of English-speaking settlers and it was renamed Edmundston. Since then, a steady flow of French-speaking settlers from neighbouring Quebec has strengthened the French-speaking character of la République de Madawaska.