From 99 dead when train plunged through swing bridge to Lac-Mégantic: Canada's most deadly rail accidents

Canada's worst rail disaster killed 99 people at Saint-Hilaire, Que., in 1864

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Left, the Almonte, Ont., rail collision that left 39 dead in 1942. Right, the Lac-Mégantic, Que., rail derailment and explosions from 2013, when 47 people died. (Wilma Munro/Wikimedia Commons, Paul Chiasson/The Canadian Press)

As investigators work to determine all of the contributing factors in the Canadian Pacific freight train derailment that took the lives of three crew members Monday near Field, B.C., here's a look back at some of Canada's worst rail accidents.

1. Saint-Hilaire, Que. | June 29, 1864 | 99 dead

Human error caused Canada's deadliest rail disaster, which left 99 dead when a Grand Trunk Railway train plunged into the gap of a swing bridge over the Richelieu River on June 29, 1864. The red light signalling for the train to stop wasn't seen by either the conductor or the engineer. The train was full of German and Polish immigrants, as rail cars piled one on top of the other.
A Grand Trunk Railway train plunged into the gap of a swing bridge over the Richelieu River near Saint-Hilaire, Que., on June 29, 1864, killing 99 people. (Library and Archives Canada)

2. Desjardins Canal, Ont. | March 12, 1857 | 59 dead
An axle of a train headed to Hamilton from Toronto broke as it crossed the Desjardins Canal Bridge on March 12, 1857. The train left the tracks, crashing 18 metres to the freezing water below and killing 59 people. A public funeral drew 10,000 people.
3. Baptiste Creek, near Chatham, Ont. | Oct. 27, 1854 | 52 dead
Several factors led to the collision of a gravel train and an express train that was running late, which resulted in 48 people injured and 52 dead on Oct. 27, 1854 — at the time, the worst rail crash in North America. It happened near Chatham, Ont., in an area known today as Jeannette’s Creek.

4. Lac-Mégantic, Que. | July 6, 2013 | 47 dead
On July 6, 2013, 47 people died when a freight train loaded with 7.7 million litres of fuel rolled unmanned into the downtown core of Lac-Mégantic, Que., and exploded in the middle of the night. A Transportation Safety Board of Canada (TSB) found 18 factors in the crash that killed the victims, who ranged in age from four to 93. Among the factors, the TSB found an insufficient number of hand brakes had been applied. Transport Canada then toughened its standards, requiring companies to have more substantial "physical defences to prevent runaway equipment." There were many opportunities to avoid a deadly crash that killed 47 people in July, 2013.

5. West of Sudbury, Ont. | Jan. 21, 1910 | 43 dead
A passenger train left the tracks near the crossing west of Sudbury, at the Spanish River on Jan. 21, 1910. The first two rail cars fell into the freezing river below, killing 43 people. Speed and a broken rail were considered factors.

6. Almonte, Ont. | Dec. 27, 1942 | 39 dead
During the Second World War, a train carrying troops from Alberta crashed into a passenger train sitting in the station in Almonte, Ont., on Dec. 27, 1942, injuring more than 200 people and killing 39. The passenger train was running behind schedule, with railway staff blaming the delay on stormy weather, icy tracks, a downgraded line and the congestion of holiday traffic. The conductor of the troop-laden train later killed himself.

A passenger train headed west failed to turn into a siding and crashed into an eastbound train in Dugald, Man., on Sept. 1, 1947. Wooden passenger cars were kept in service due to steel rationing during the Second World War and the fire was fed by the wood and the old cars' gas illumination. The crash and fire killed 31 people. Newer, safer railway cars were ordered as a result of the crash.

8. Wanstead, Ont. | Dec. 27, 1902 | 31 dead
A westbound express train headed to Sarnia, Ont., from London increased its speed near the Wanstead station, colliding with a slow-moving eastbound freight train that had been trying to get out of the way. It left 31 dead. Weather conditions on Dec. 27, 1902, had reduced visibility so the two trains couldn’t see each other until it was too late.

A freight train collided with a passenger train between Jasper and Edmonton, leaving 95 injured and 23 dead on Feb. 8, 1986. An inquiry found the crew ignored stop signals and failed to follow established operating rules, while demonstrating a lack of awareness.
In 1986, 23 people died after a CN freight train crashed into a VIA passenger train in Hinton, Alta. Investigators suspect the CN crew fell asleep. (Karen Sornberger/Edmonton Journal/The Canadian Press)

10. Canoe River, B.C. | Nov. 21, 1950 | 21 dead
On Nov. 21, 1950, a train carrying troops for the Korean War crashed with a second train after railway telegraph operator Jack Atherton sent an incomplete message regarding the location of one of the trains. The crash led to the death of 17 soldiers and four crew members. Defended by John Diefenbaker (who practised criminal law before becoming Canadian prime minister from 1957 to 1963), Atherton was found not guilty.