TERRITORIAL EVOLUTION OF CANADA, 1867 TO 2003

The Atlas of Canada / L'Atlas du Canada

People and places

Canada had a relatively small area when created in 1867, but it then expanded greatly to become, by area, the second largest country in the world.

This map is a composite of 23 Atlas maps which show territorial changes at specific times during the period 1867 to 2003. Not only did Canada as a whole expand over time, but also most of the provinces expanded their areas: only two provinces (New Brunswick and Nova Scotia) had their present boundaries as of Confederation (1867). The boundaries and names of the territories also changed over time; one of the three existing territories, Nunavut, was created as recently as 1999.

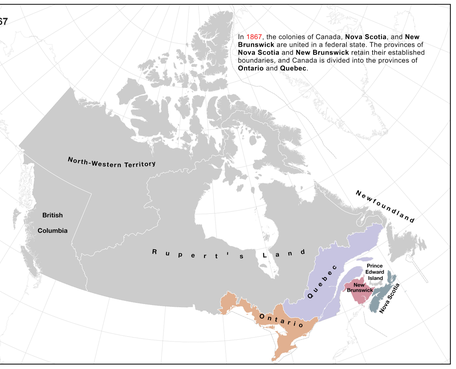
Scale: 1:30 000 000
1 centimetre represents 300 kilometres

0 500 1000 1500 2000 2500 3000 km

Lambert Conformal Conic Projection; standard parallels 49° N and 77° N. Datum: NAD 1983

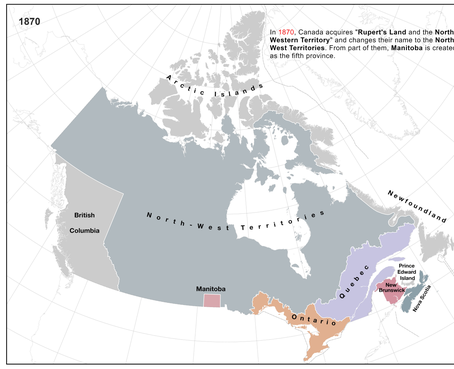
1867

In 1867, the colonies of Canada, **Nova Scotia**, and **New Brunswick** are united in a federal state. The provinces of **Nova Scotia** and **New Brunswick** retain their established boundaries, and Canada is divided into the provinces of **Ontario** and **Quebec**.



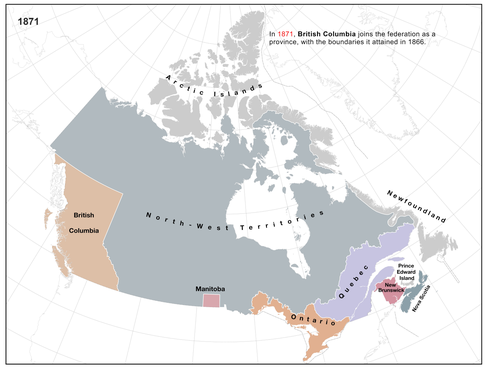
1870

In 1870, Canada acquires "**Rupert's Land** and the **North-Western Territory**" and changes their name to the **North-West Territories**. From part of them, **Manitoba** is created as the fifth province.



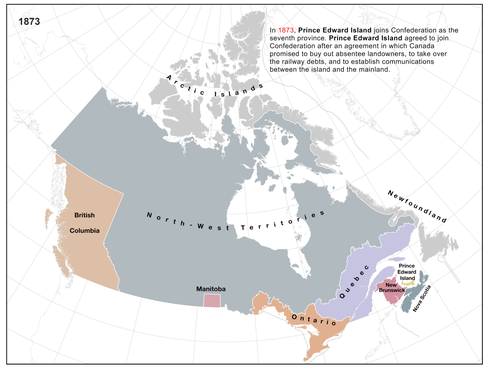
1871

In 1871, **British Columbia** joins the federation as a province, with the boundaries it attained in 1866.



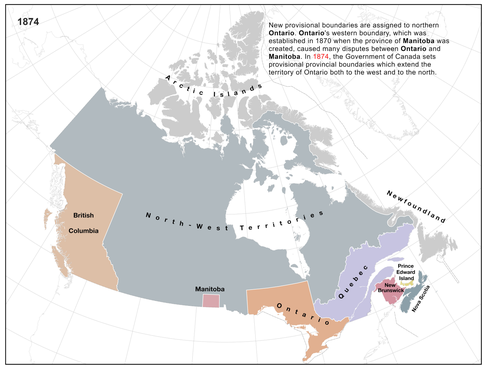
1873

In 1873, **Prince Edward Island** joins Confederation as the seventh province. **Prince Edward Island** agreed to join Confederation after an agreement in which Canada promised to buy out absentee landowners, to take over the railway debts, and to establish communications between the island and the mainland.



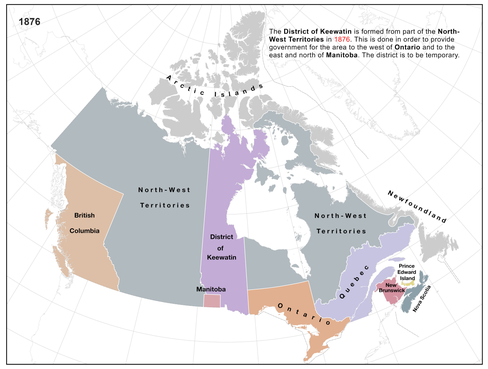
1874

New provisional boundaries are assigned to northern **Ontario**. **Ontario**'s western boundary, which was established in 1870 when the province of **Manitoba** was created, caused many disputes between **Ontario** and **Manitoba**. In 1874, the Government of Canada sets provisional provincial boundaries which extend the territory of Ontario both to the west and to the north.



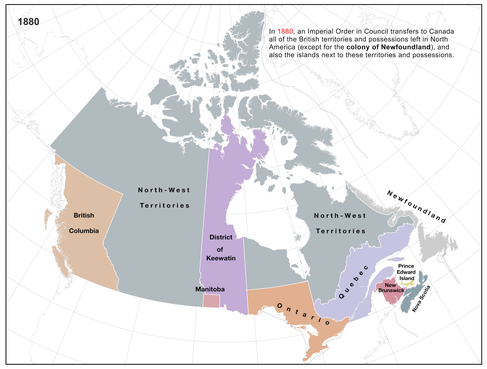
1876

The **District of Keewatin** is formed from part of the **North-West Territories** in 1876. This is done in order to provide government for the area to the west of **Ontario** and to the east and north of **Manitoba**. The district is to be temporary.



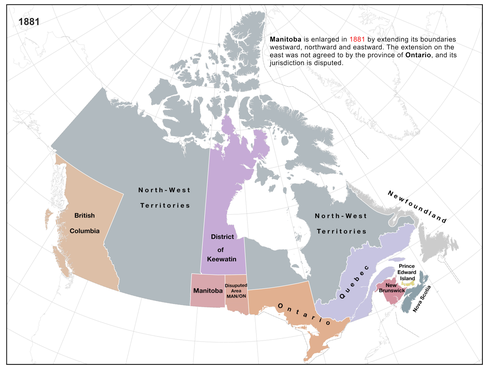
1880

In 1880, an Imperial Order in Council transfers to Canada all of the British territories and possessions left in North America (except for the **colony of Newfoundland**), and also the islands next to these territories and possessions.



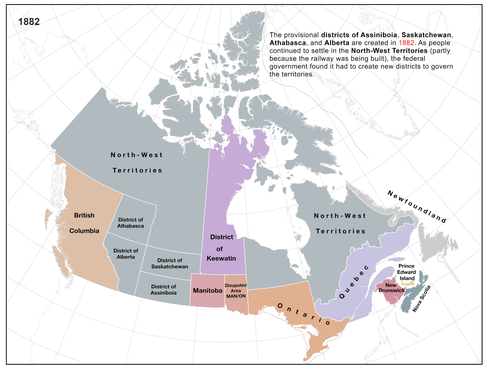
1881

Manitoba is enlarged in 1881 by extending its boundaries westward, northward and eastward. The extension on the east was not agreed to by the province of **Ontario**, and its jurisdiction is disputed.



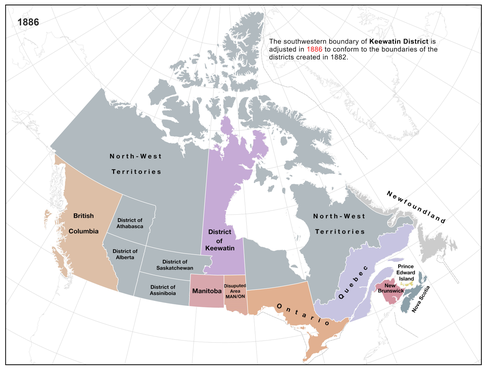
1882

The provisional **districts of Assiniboia**, **Saskatchewan**, **Athabasca**, and **Alberta** are created in 1882. As people continued to settle in the **North-West Territories** (partly because the railway was being built), the federal government found it had to create new districts to govern the territories.



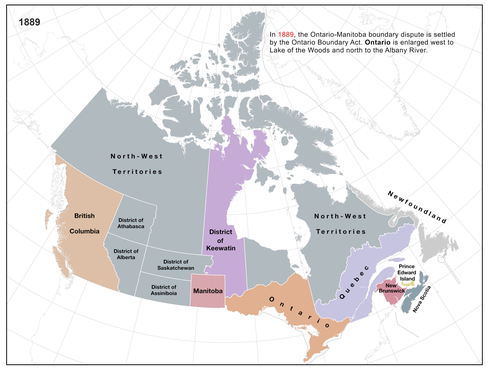
1886

The southwestern boundary of **Keewatin District** is adjusted in 1886 to conform to the boundaries of the districts created in 1882.



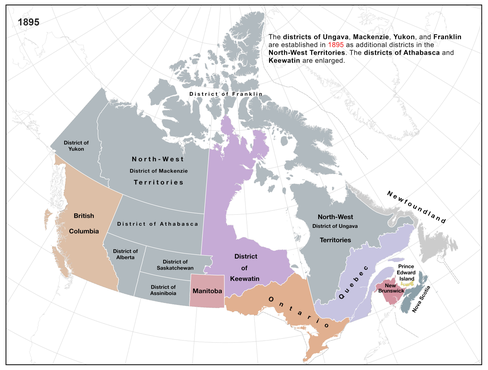
1889

In 1889, the Ontario-Manitoba boundary dispute is settled by the Ontario Boundary Act. **Ontario** is enlarged west to Lake of the Woods and north to the Albany River.



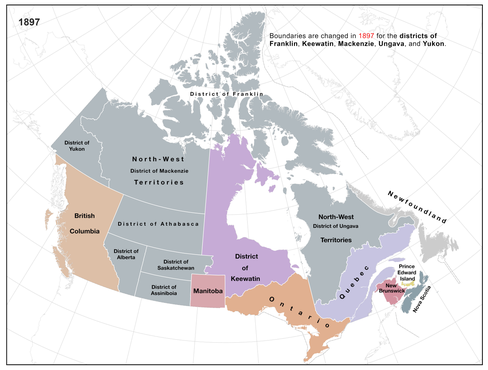
1895

The **districts of Ungava**, **Mackenzie**, **Yukon**, and **Franklin** are established in 1895 as additional districts in the **North-West Territories**. The **districts of Athabasca** and **Keewatin** are enlarged.



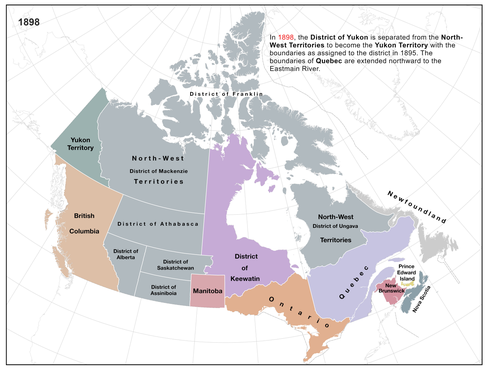
1897

Boundaries are changed in 1897 for the **districts of Franklin**, **Keewatin**, **Mackenzie**, **Ungava**, and **Yukon**.



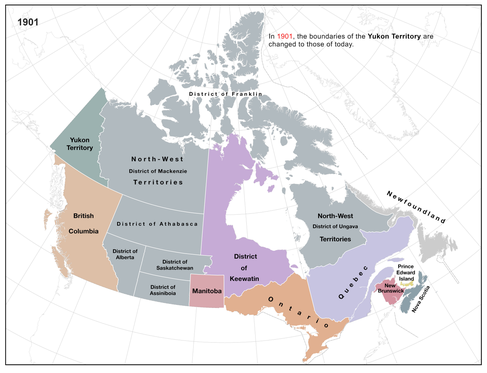
1898

In 1898, the **District of Yukon** is separated from the **North-West Territories** to become the **Yukon Territory** with the boundaries as assigned to the district in 1895. The boundaries of **Quebec** are extended northward to the Eastmain River.



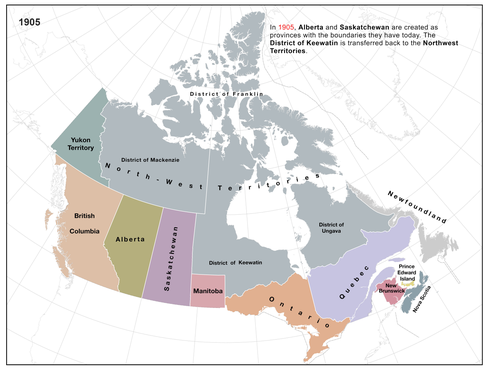
1901

In 1901, the boundaries of the **Yukon Territory** are changed to those of today.



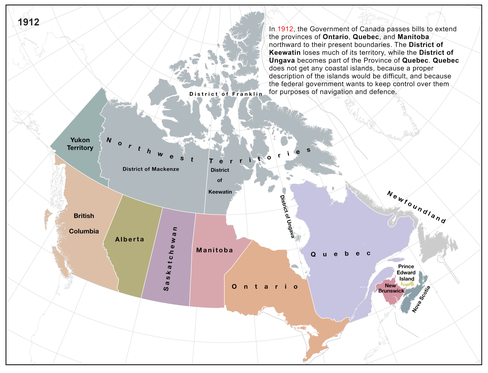
1905

In 1905, **Alberta** and **Saskatchewan** are created as provinces with the boundaries they have today. The **District of Keewatin** is transferred back to the **Northwest Territories**.



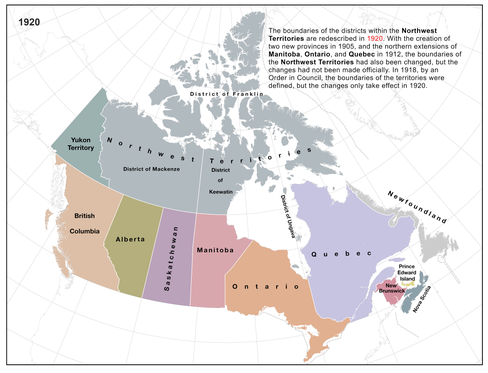
1912

In 1912, the Government of Canada passes bills to extend the provinces of **Ontario**, **Quebec**, and **Manitoba** northward to their present boundaries. The **District of Keewatin** loses much of its territory, while the **District of Ungava** becomes part of the Province of **Quebec**. **Quebec** does not get any coastal islands, because a proper description of the islands would be difficult, and because the federal government wants to keep control over them for purposes of navigation and defence.



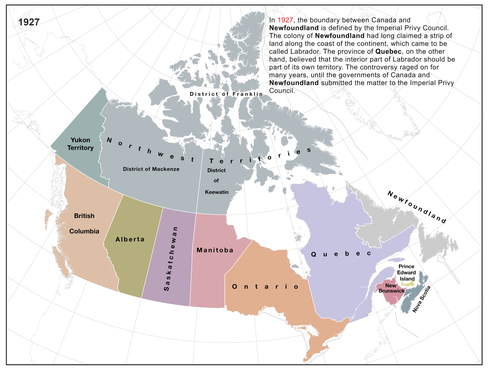
1920

The boundaries of the districts within the **Northwest Territories** are redescribed in 1920. With the creation of two new provinces in 1905, and the northern extensions of **Manitoba**, **Ontario**, and **Quebec** in 1912, the boundaries of the **Northwest Territories** had also been changed, but the changes had not been made officially. In 1918, by an Order in Council, the boundaries of the territories were defined, but the changes only take effect in 1920.



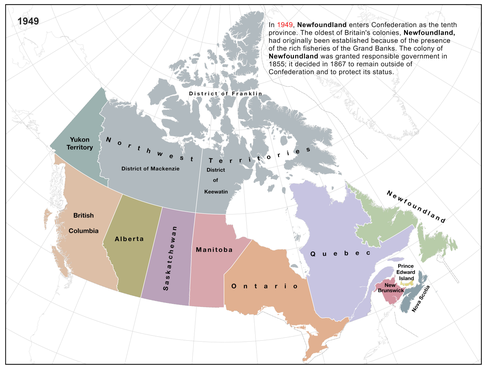
1927

In 1927, the boundary between Canada and **Newfoundland** is defined by the Imperial Privy Council. The colony of **Newfoundland** had long claimed a strip of land along the coast of the continent, which came to be called Labrador. The province of **Quebec**, on the other hand, believed that the interior part of Labrador should be part of its own territory. The controversy raged on for many years, until the governments of Canada and **Newfoundland** submitted the matter to the Imperial Privy Council.



1949

In 1949, **Newfoundland** enters Confederation as the tenth province. The oldest of Britain's colonies, **Newfoundland**, had originally been established because of the presence of the rich fisheries of the Grand Banks. The colony of **Newfoundland** was granted responsible government in 1855; it decided in 1867 to remain outside of Confederation and to protect its status.



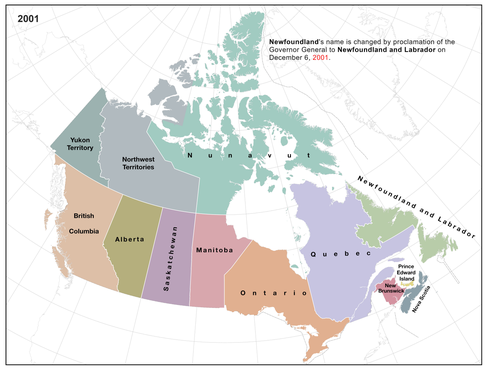
1999

Nunavut becomes Canada's third territory on April 1, 1999.



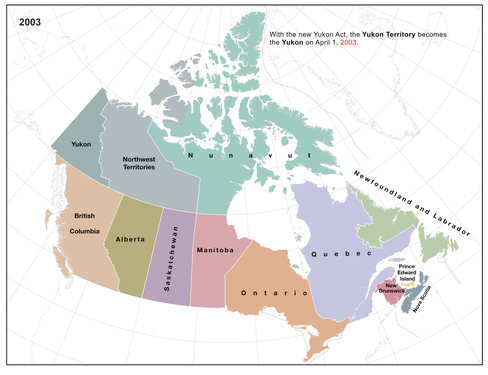
2001

Newfoundland's name is changed by proclamation of the Governor General to **Newfoundland and Labrador** on December 6, 2001.



2003

With the new Yukon Act, the **Yukon Territory** becomes the **Yukon** on April 1, 2003.



This map, Territorial Evolution of Canada, represents the history of the political boundaries in Canada, from Confederation in 1867 to 2003.

Canada's boundaries are dynamic political structures that reflect the changing political, economic, and cultural conditions of the country through time. Canada's long and diversified settlement history is reflected in the two distinct patterns of boundaries that differentiate eastern and western Canada. In the east, the Atlantic provinces' boundaries are the outcome of 200 years of colonial competition for both land and resources. Similarly, Quebec and Ontario grew from frontier settlements to industrialized economies between 1760 and the early 1900s. As well, the boundaries of eastern Canada closely conform to natural features such as drainage basins.

In contrast, the boundaries of western and northern Canada reflect the administrative organization of these lands by, first, the Hudson's Bay Company and, later, the Government of Canada. Here, geometric lines radiate northward from the 49th parallel, creating boundaries that often divide communities and regions into two different provincial jurisdictions. Each of the western provinces has a unique history and rationale for their boundaries. Manitoba evolved from the first Riel Rebellion as a postage-stamp province, and only later achieved its present-day boundaries. Alberta and Saskatchewan earned provincial status with an eye to creating equal land areas. On the Pacific coast, the British colonies had to act quickly in response to the explosive gold mining frontier to organize and solidify their territorial claims to present-day British Columbia, and later to help establish the Yukon Territory in response to American encroachment.

In the North, the boundaries of the existing territories were redrawn in 1999 to create Nunavut. The boundaries of the most recent territory respect the traditional Aboriginal concept of territoriality.

Produced by the Canada Centre for Mapping and Earth Observation, Geoscience and Earth Monitoring Sector, Natural Resources Canada, 2026. This Atlas of Canada map, *Territorial Evolution of Canada*, supports the *People and Places* theme, one of the Atlas of Canada's five core themes, and promotes discovery of related Atlas products. For more information, visit www.atlas.gc.ca.

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