

WHERE JOURNEYS BEGIN ANEW: THE SHIP HECTOR SETS SAIL INTO A NEW ERA



Image: The entrance to the updated Ship Hector Interpretive Centre. View from Caladh Ave. Image captured by Valerie Leighton, June 2026.

The dream for the Hector once it is functionally complete is for passengers to enjoy the experience of sailing on the ship through the Pictou Harbour. Before this dream can become a reality however, the ship will need to face the same sea trials as any modern ship over twenty-four metres. It will undergo systems checks, life-saving drills, a distance run, and even a simulated crash-stop maneuver. Meeting Transport Canada's requirements demands careful attention to electrical systems, machinery, masting, fire rating, and every other detail that ensures safety without compromising historical integrity. Thankfully, today's regulatory standards echo those used by Dutch builders in 1673, creating an unexpected harmony between past and present which allows for the eventual use of the Ship Hector as a passenger attraction.

The restoration itself has been powered by people. The many volunteers, donors, craftspeople, and community partners dedication to this project mirrors the determination of the settlers they commemorate. Many of those working on the project give their time freely, and the Society's fourteen-member Board of Directors represents communities across the region. One of the most meaningful partnerships on this journey has been with Pictou Landing First Nation. Together, they have created a Mi'kmaq exhibition area within the updated interpretive centre that highlights traditional place names, territorial boundaries, and the cultural knowledge that shaped early settlement. Without the knowledge gained from the Mi'kmaq people, settlers in the region may not have survived to create the place we call home today. This collaboration ensures that the story of the Hector is told with accuracy, respect, and Indigenous leadership.

The creak of timber, the snap of canvas, and the sheer uncertainty of what lay ahead defined the arrival of Scottish settlers in the Maritimes. 189 of these settlers came across the Atlantic in the late 1700s aboard the Ship Hector with little more than hope, resolve, and the promise of a new beginning. After 11 weeks at sea, the settlers who would one day shape Piktuk (Pictou) first glimpsed the rugged shoreline through mist and salt spray. It was that moment, that mixture of fear and courage, that the restoration of the Ship Hector seeks to honour.

The Restoration

Rebuilding a vessel that no longer exists in its original form is an undertaking as ambitious as the voyage itself. The journey to this point has been anything but simple. Weather delays, the pandemic, rising costs, and shifting tariffs all played their part. Although the project was originally scheduled to begin in 2018, the ship was not hauled from the water until 2020, and it was only in 2022 that the full team could finally resume work in earnest. This first phase of the new restoration was completed with the highly celebrated relaunch into Pictou Harbour in 2025. To achieve this momentous task, restoration workers for the Ship Hector relied on a blend of mediums under the guidance of Master Ship Builder Vern Shea. From the analysis of historical artwork, the written recollections of the lone English-speaking passenger's voyage, and deep expertise in sixteenth-century Dutch merchant ship design, the restoration work has employed production methods that meet the demand of historical accuracy.



Image: A peak inside the updated exhibit entrance. Image captured by Valerie Leighton, June 2026.

Looking Ahead: New in 2026

The 2026 season has marked a period of transformation for visitors. They will be able to explore the newly updated interpretive centre, watch work unfold in a functioning carpentry shop, step into a rigging room, see the blacksmith work area, and experience the new Indigenous heritage section. Later in the season, the installation of the ship's masts and rigging will add another layer of excitement. Admission remains accessible, with rates set at ten dollars for adults, eight for seniors, twenty-four for families, and free entry for youth under fifteen. On July 18, the Society will celebrate the grand opening of the fully renewed interpretive centre, offering free admission for all visitors. Canada Day will also feature free entry, inviting families and travellers to experience the site at no cost and to connect with the stories that shaped the region.



Images: The stern of the Ship Hector visible from the updated dock, showcasing the refurbished ship which includes a fresh paint job inspired by the bright colours which are closely associated with Dutch Merchant ships of the same era. Image captured by Valerie Leighton, June 2026.



Image: A map of Mi'kma'ki which showcases traditional placenames. Image captured by Valerie Leighton, June 2026.

Pictou County Proud

For those working on the restoration, the Hector is far more than a ship. When asked what it means to them personally, the answer comes quickly and without hesitation: "I love it." To the team, the vessel represents the community itself. It's a testament to the volunteers who pour their energy into the project and a symbol of the region's history. It embodies resilience, determination, and the power of collective effort. They hope that when visitors step aboard the restored ship, they feel a sense of wonder, a visceral understanding of the cramped and challenging conditions endured by settlers, and a connection to the courage it took to cross the Atlantic and build a new life. They also hope visitors appreciate the intertwined stories of the Mi'kmaq and Scottish settlers who shaped the Birthplace of New Scotland.

Heidi Sponagle, the Marketing & Visitor Experience Manager, stated that the greatest source of pride comes from "speaking with visitors, hearing their stories, learning where they have travelled from, and witnessing their reactions to the exhibit". These moments affirm the impact of the Society's work and the importance of preserving this history for generations to come.



**THE HECTOR
HERITAGE QUAY**

Pictou, Nova Scotia