

# HISTORIC MÉTIS COMMUNITIES IN ONTARIO

## THE HISTORIC GEORGIAN BAY MÉTIS COMMUNITY

Based on the existing research on Métis communities in Ontario and the criteria established by the Supreme Court of Canada in *R. v. Powley* (“*Powley*”), a historic Métis community developed from the inter-connected Métis populations at Penetanguishene and Parry Sound and environs (the “Historic Georgian Bay Métis Community”).

### Identifying the Historic Métis Communities in Ontario

In *Powley*, the Supreme Court of Canada held that Métis rights—protected by section 35 of the *Constitution Act, 1982*—exist in Ontario. This case established the framework for the recognition of Métis rights.

The Métis within section 35 refers to distinctive peoples or communities who, in addition to their mixed First Nation and European ancestry, developed their own customs, way of life, and recognizable group identity separate from their forebearers.

In order for a contemporary Métis community to possess section 35 rights it must have its roots in an identifiable historic Métis community that emerged prior to the time when Europeans established effective political and legal control in the area. It is therefore crucial to identify such historic Métis communities.

Identifying a historic Metis community requires demographic evidence that the population was identified as distinctive, evidence that the community had its own collective identity, and, evidence that the community had its own shared customs, practices and traditions.

### Georgian Bay Timeline

The formation of the Historic Georgian Bay Métis Community largely resulted from the migration of Métis families from Michilimackinac to Penetanguishene, and is based on the following brief timeline of historic events:

- 1670-1761** The French hold forts at Michilimackinac on south side of Mackinac Straits. In 1761 the British military gains control of Fort Michilimackinac, and a civilian population begins to develop around the Fort that includes many families of mixed First Nation-European ancestry.
- 1779-1781** The British military moves the fort from Michilimackinac to Mackinac Island and the garrison town was relocated as well.
- 1796** The Jay Treaty of 1794 comes into force and Mackinac Island comes under American control. At this time the British garrison moves to St. Joseph Island, taking part of the garrison town population with it.
- 1812** In the War of 1812, the British (assisted by 180 voyageurs) re-take Mackinac Island.
- 1814** The Treaty of Ghent cedes Mackinac to Americans; Americans burn down a British fort on St. Joseph Island; the fort along with its civilian population moves to Drummond Island.

- 1828-1829** Drummond Island is ceded to Americans and the British military, along with a civilian population of approximately 288 (75 families), including many Métis families, relocate to Penetanguishene Bay.
- 1830s** Tiny Township became home to a number of the Drummond Islanders, many of whom were known to be Métis.
- 1840-1850s** This decade saw a migration of the farming class French Canadians (*habitants*) from Quebec into the Penetanguishene area, however, they remain separate from the Drummond Island Métis families and take up local lands for farming, adjacent to the Métis population. During this period, some members of the Métis population petition for lands because of increasing settler encroachments.
- 1850s** This decade is the beginning of the lumber boom in the Penetanguishene area, leading to rapid settlement and development.
- 1869** Parry Sound is connected by road to the south, and is surveyed and subdivided ahead of a large influx of settlers between 1870 and 1877.
- 1873** The Guelph Lumber Company moves into the Parry Sound area with resulting increase in settlement and development.

## Demographics

The civilian population that migrated from Drummond Island to Penetanguishene in 1828/29 was primarily the same population that had followed the relocations of the British military from Michilimackinac to St. Joseph Island and Drummond Island. Historic records documenting this population migration identify specific Métis families within it.

By the 1840s, in addition to the significant Métis population at Penetanguishene and environs, some of these families had also established up the eastern shore of Georgian Bay to Parry Sound and environs for fishing as well as other economic and trading opportunities at various posts in the area.

By the 1850s, the Penetanguishene neighbourhood known as the French Settlement was largely inhabited by Métis. Tiny Township also became home to a number of the Drummond Islanders, many of whom were known to be Métis, by the late 1830s. Penetanguishene Métis marriage patterns (circa 1835 to 1900) show a large degree of inter-group marriage (Métis marrying Métis), rather than marrying into other groups in the area, such as the French habitants families who lived in nearby locations.

The historic records shows the fur trade continues to be a key source of employment for Métis individuals into the 1860s.

The 1901 census records for a district of Simcoe East, Baxter and Byng Inlet (near Parry Sound) indicated that, 25% of the Baxter Township self-identified as “French Breed” with surnames from the historic Penetanguishene Métis population.

## **Vocation and Cultural Practices**

This inter-connected Métis population shared a number of customs, traditions, and common vocations, including:

- **Fur Trade:**

Several Métis families participated in the fur trade prior to moving from Drummond Island to Penetanguishene in the early 1800s. The fur trade continued to be a key source of employment for Métis people into the 1860s.

- **Guides and Interpreters:**

Métis were employed as interpreters and guides for hunting expeditions and numerous government survey expeditions throughout Georgian Bay.

- **Surveying (Axemen and Chain-Bearers):**

Métis were employed by provincial surveyors throughout the Penetanguishene and Parry Sound regions.

- **Naval and Military Establishments:**

Métis were included on military paylists in Penetanguishene in various roles and positions.

- **Hunting and Fishing:**

Métis fishermen (including commercial fishermen) worked throughout the Georgian Bay region from early 1800s. Métis received fishing licenses in Georgian Bay through the 1920s and 1930s.

- **Dress:**

Outsiders visiting the area in 1830 described the “prevalent costume” of the “Canadian half-breeds” as “a handkerchief twisted around the head, a shirt and pair of trousers, with a gay sash...”

## **Distinctive Collective Identity**

The distinct collective identity of the historic Georgian Bay Métis Community is seen through residency patterns (*e.g.*, distinctive Métis neighbourhoods), social status and social roles (*e.g.*, fur trade and laboring jobs) as well as endogamy patterns (*e.g.*, extensive in-group marrying and kinship relations).

In addition, the community identified themselves as being distinctive through political advocacy and were recognized by others as a distinctive group. For example, in a January 27, 1840 petition to the Governor General, the Métis identified themselves as a “the ... half breeds residing in Town of Penetanguishene”. The writers highlighted that they did not share in any advantage from presents issued to the “Indians” from nearby communities. While the government did not formally respond, one Indian Agent Officer commented that both the First Nations and the Métis community he spoke to advocated for the interests of the Métis community, illustrating that each group viewed the Métis as a distinctive group with its own interests.

## About this Document

This summary was prepared collaboratively by the Métis Nation of Ontario (“MNO”) and the Ontario Government (“Ontario”). It is based on historical research currently available on Métis in Ontario. Many of the reports reviewed and relied on to create this summary are available online at: <http://www.metisnation.org/registry/citizenship/historicresources/>. The parties will consider additional historic information as it may become available.

Identifying historic Métis communities is a necessary part of the legal requirements for establishing Métis rights, protected by section 35 of the *Constitution Act, 1982*, however, the identification of historic Métis communities alone does not define contemporary rights-bearing Métis communities, determine who in Ontario is Métis, who holds Métis rights, or define Métis harvesting areas or territories.

This summary does not necessarily address the claims of other self-identifying Métis communities not represented by the MNO. The conclusions in this summary do not limit the potential for other historic Métis communities to be identified or the expansion of recognition historic Métis communities in the future based on additional historic research.