

HISTORIC MÉTIS COMMUNITIES IN ONTARIO

THE HISTORIC NORTHERN LAKE SUPERIOR 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 Michipicoten, Pic River, Fort William, Nipigon House, and Long Lake (collectively, the “Historic Northern Lake Superior 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.

Northern Lake Superior Timeline

- 1679** French traders establish the first trade post in the Lakehead region, near the mouth of the Kaministiquia River.
- 1684** A French trading post is constructed on Lake Nipigon.
- Late 1600s** The Lake Nipigon area was integrated into both the English trade to James Bay and the French trade to New France, and represented a strategic point in both networks.
- 1714** The French establish the first fur trade post at the mouth of Michipicoten River.
- 1716** A “Canadian” post was opened at the mouth of the Nipigon River on Lake Superior, with an outpost at Michipicoten.
- 1730s-1740s** Trading and transportation work continues out of the established posts at Kaministiquia, Michipicoten, Sault Ste. Marie, Michilimackinac, and posts south of the Upper Lakes, as well as many transient trading sites around Lake Nipigon and the north shore of Lake Superior.
- 1778-1779** Independent trader Ezekiel Solomon operates a number of trading sites in the region including Lake Minnitaki, Pashkokogan Lake, Lake Escabitchewan, Lac Seul, Shikag Lake, and Sturgeon Lake. Pays Plat serves as a main rendezvous point, with travel through Lake Nipigon at Wabinosh Bay.

- 1790** "Fort Pic", the permanent post at Pic River, is established by the North West Company (NWC) sometime prior to 1790.
- 1792** The Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) engages John McKay, a former trader for the independent company "Cotté and Shaw" to open a post on Lake Nipigon.
- 1797** The HBC establishes a post on the north bank of the Michipicoten River opposite the NWC.
- 1800** By 1800, the NWC has established a post on Long Lake in order to intercept trade that would otherwise have gone to Henley House - an HBC post approximately 140 miles northeast, on Albany River. The NWC post is supplied by a post at Pic.
- 1807** The Kaministiquia post was renamed by the NWC as "Fort William". A short distance from Fort William the HBC operates a small post known as Point Meuron.
- 1814** The HBC establishes a post near the northern tip of Long Lake as an outpost of Henley House. Until 1863, Long Lake post was operated as an outpost of the Pic Post.
- 1816** The HBC re-establishes its post at Michipicoten, after having abandoned it by agreement with the NWC in 1803.
- 1821** The HBC and the NWC merge, leading to a re-organization of the posts.
- 1850** The Robinson-Superior Treaty is negotiated and signed.
- 1859** The HBC establishes a post at Red Rock.
- 1880s** European settlement in the areas north of Lake Superior increases, the fishery begins to become more regulated, and the railroad continues to develop through the area.
- 1883** Fort William is closed.
- 1887-1888** The HBC moves its Pic business to Montizambert when the Canadian Pacific Railway is built.
- 1904** Michipicoten Post is closed.

Demographics

There were corporate and economic ties between the fur trade posts within the Lake Superior district; the men engaged in that trade were required to travel between posts both seasonally and for specific tasks. The historic record shows a stable and consistent population of traders and their families consistently being identified as 'half-breeds' as opposed to being identified as "Indians" over successive generations. There were also documented inter-group kinship ties and marriages between these Métis families who worked for periods of time or settled at these posts.

Before the negotiation of the Robinson-Superior Treaty in 1850, the Crown began to take stock of the population in the lands north of Lake Superior, noting the extent of both the "Indian" and "half-breed" populations. The census taken by the Crown in 1849 for the entire north and east shores of Lake Superior reported "eighty-four half-breeds". At this time, one HBC servant with

intimate knowledge of the area (who was Métis himself and was married to a Métis woman) wrote, “I am not certain whether the Government will acknowledge the rights and claims of the half breeds, to a share of the payments to be made for the lands about to be ceded by the Indians of Lake Superior...” highlighting that the Indians and “half-breeds” in the area were considered distinct populations.

After the signing of the Robinson-Superior Treaty, the Crown did not preclude “half-breeds” from living on the reserve lands set aside pursuant to the treaty, or from receiving treaty annuity payments as “half-breeds”. As a result, one of the primary demographic record sources for the persistent Métis population following the making of Robinson-Superior Treaty are annuity pay-lists which list both Indian and “half-breed” annuitants. For example, the pay-list for Fort William in 1850 includes 14-16 half-breed families.

Throughout much of the latter half of the 1800s, many of these same known Métis families continue to be identified as “half-breeds” on treaty annuity pay lists for the Fort William, Red Rock, and Nipigon Bands. Censuses for 1871, 1881 and 1891 also identify the same “half-breed” families in various locations as distinct from “Indians” and “whites” (i.e., Rossport, McDiarmid, etc.).

Vocation and Cultural Practices

The Historic Northern Lake Superior Métis Community shared a number of customs, traditions, and common vocations, including:

- The Métis populations in both Lakehead and Nipigon engaged in fishing; making maple sugar; and trapping small game, and hunting as a part of provisioning the posts. At Fort William, some of these Métis families are noted as gardening. Fishing in particular was crucial to post-provisioning by Métis.
- Métis employees tended to occupy similar positions within the post establishment which were distinctive from the roles of both the company gentry and the local Indian population. Those positions included: blacksmith, tinsmith, cooper, boat/ canoe builder, and occasionally apprentice postmaster.
- The record shows that Métis—as a part of their canoeing and portaging travel—participated various religious and cultural rites, such as the “baptism” of newcomers by dunking them in the water, making offerings or prayers at dangerous sites or places of their journeys, and taking a ceremonial “dram” at the completion of some long portages or sections of a journey (shot of liquor);
- The post employees’ manner of dress was also noted as distinctive, including the voyageur’s woven belt, blanket coats, and red milled caps.

Distinctive Collective Identity

The requirements and characteristics of the fur trade, including interaction of First Nations and European people, the necessity of certain skills (such as canoe building), the need for mobility between post locations, and long-distance canoe travel, resulted in the development of a fur trade culture. Overtime, these features became somewhat synonymous with Métis culture.

In the early to mid-19th century, discriminatory HBC policies towards the “half-breeds” contributed to a sense of “other-ness” and resulted in collective opposition to these policies. HBC records also reflected other distinctions between the Métis and other local populations, for example, noting that brawls occurred between “half-breeds” and “sailors”, and noting the celebration by the “half-breeds” of St. Andrew’s Day.

The Crown also viewed the “half-breeds” as distinctive from other local populations, for example, one Crown official noted that “half-breeds” in this area: live in houses instead of wigwams or huts like the Indians; pursued a somewhat different lifestyle; have mainly French-Canadian origins; are practicing Catholics; and maintain distinctive surnames.

In the 1880s, a joint petition made to the Crown identified the petitioning “half-breeds” and “Indians” separately, indicating the groups saw themselves and each other as distinct.

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.