

Métis Veterans War and Conflict Part 1 (1812- 1945) Slide Deck Notes

Items to consider:

1. There were smaller conflicts that Métis may have been involved with
2. We are focusing on the significant conflicts in Métis communities and official Canadian engagements.
3. An issue in Métis research, in general, is that the Métis were not recognized for most of their history, so often, they would be included under “Indian,” “European,” or “Half Breed.” It is easiest when we find “Half Breed” as an indication that the person may have been Métis. Now that we have citizens who self-identify, we can go back to their ancestors and conclude that those veterans were also Métis.
4. The first session focuses on conflicts that occurred from the height of the Métis influence in the early 1800s to World War 2. With very few World War 2 veterans living, we are left to honour their contributions through oral histories and written records. With technology and the lifting of privacy restrictions more documents are being made public and much easier to access than in past decades.

The second session focuses on more recent contributions. While we have been fortunate not to be involved in such catastrophic conflicts as the World Wars, our modern-day veterans are often overlooked for their contributions and skills. We are also very fortunate in Canada that many of these conflicts have very little impact on our daily lives, thus making us ignorant of the causes and sacrifices that these conflicts entail.

War and conflict have changed greatly since World War 2, and the average Canadian knows very little, and even less, about the Métis experience.

Moreover, privacy laws protect the records of our most recent veterans and families. However, we are so lucky to have our Veterans council here today to provide us an understanding of what modern day service has been like for them.

5. We are always looking for more potential sources. If you have a family member who served or a story that has been passed down that you would like to share, we are always interested in adding to our understanding of the sacrifice and contributions of our Métis people.

6. As we go through the stories of each conflict, please jot down any connections or topics that might interest students in your grade level and subject specialty.

Background- Slide 2

The War of 1812 is the most documented conflict in which the Métis were involved. The Drummond Island migration and the Historic Georgian Bay Métis community are invariably linked to its consequences.

The War of 1812 is an important part of Canadian history. Spanning 1812-1814, the war between the Americans and the British created many of the boundaries between Canada and the United States that exist today. Had it not been for the Métis Voyageurs and other civilians who took up arms with the British in Canada's defence, the Americans would have likely succeeded in defeating the British force. Today,

Canada continues to celebrate the War of 1812 and the involvement of those who defended Canada, including the Métis.

History often focuses on the southern Ontario events of the War of 1812, in particular, the battles and people that played important roles around the lower Great Lakes and the St. Lawrence River. Canada's fur trade and the Voyageurs who were involved played an equally important role in the outcome of the war and had influence on events and battles across Ontario from Fort Mackinac and into the Niagara, southern and eastern regions of the province.

In the early 1800s, the fur trade was an important part of Canada's economy and trade. Métis voyageurs in Ontario, working primarily for the North West Company, transported furs and other trade goods between the east and west of Canada. When war broke out in 1812, these Métis voyageurs became an important asset because of their mobility, knowledge of the land, and resilient hardiness.

Métis voyageurs were involved in many battles and important events between 1812 and 1814. One of the largest contingents of voyageurs was The Corps of Canadian Voyageurs, a military group organized by the North West Company and led by William McGillvray. Others included the Commissariat Voyageurs and Caldwell's Western Rangers.

Though the Métis voyageurs were fighting alongside the British, they were far from the disciplined soldiers who wore red coats. The voyageurs continued to wear their own clothing and usually sold, traded or discarded the pikes, swords and pistols they were issued because the voyageurs could not see a purpose for them in the wilderness.

Sources used for Slides 2-8

MNO War of 1812 Teacher Backgrounder and Lesson Plan

Mackinac Island - Slide 3

Fort Mackinac was an American Fort located near present-day Sault Ste. Marie between Lake Huron and Lake Michigan. Because of its location, it overlooked a crucial section of the waterways connecting the northern and southern Great Lakes. As a strategic outpost, the British organized a force at Fort St. Joseph with seventy war canoes and bateau to overtake the Americans at Fort Mackinac.

The Americans at Fort Mackinac were taken by surprise on July 17th, 1812, by the British and Métis fur traders who landed on the north shore of the island. The news of war had not yet reached the fort, and the Americans surrendered to the British without a shot being fired.

The fort remained under British control for the remainder of the war despite an attempt by the Americans to reclaim the island in July 1814. As part of the Treaty of Ghent, signed to end the war, Mackinac Island was given back to the Americans and the British, and Métis relocated to Drummond Island.

Battle of Stoney Creek - Slide 4

After the Americans, led by General Henry Dearborn, overran Fort George in late May of 1813, they regrouped and followed the British retreat into Stoney Creek. The British received word of the American advance and decided to attack the poorly defended American camp at night despite having less than a third of the men the Americans had.

Using the element of surprise, the British, with a handful of Métis voyageurs, closed in on the American camp. After the initial sentries were taken out, the men let out a cheer that gave away their position. The Americans quickly took up arms and fired upon the British. Despite their small number, Lieutenant Colonel Harvey and his men managed to take advantage of several American mistakes and capture the American artillery, as well as several high-ranking American officers, including General John Chandler.

Despite being the larger force, the Americans fell back to the Niagara River. Reinforcements soon arrived, but the Americans did not advance towards Stoney Creek again.

Battle of Beaver Dams - Slide 5

The Battle of Beaver Dams also follows the American capture of Britain's Fort George in May of 1813.

This second force of American troops planned to continue on and surprise the British forces at their Beaver Dam outpost in early June. The famous Laura Secord heard of the American plan and ran to warn Lieutenant James Fitzgibbon, who commanded the British troops in the area.

The British staged an ambush on the American soldiers with help from their First Nation and Métis allies and defeated the Americans before they arrived at Beaver Dam, taking nearly 500 American prisoners. This battle instilled fear in the Americans because of the ferocity of the First Nations warriors, and few patrols were sent far from Fort George in the future.

Battle of Chrysler Farm - Slide 6

In the fall of 1813, two large American forces made their way up the St. Lawrence River in an attempt to take Montreal and cut off British supply lines. The first part of the American force, led by Wade Hampton, was defeated and turned back to the United States in the Battle of Chateaugay on October 26th.

The second force, led by James Wilkinson, was unaware of Hamptons' defeat and continued on, battling small attacks by British forces. On November 10-11, 1813, the Americans turned to attack the smaller British force of about 1200 head-on. The 4000 Americans were no match for the more experienced British. Led by Colonel Joseph Wanton Morrison, the British forces and their First Nations and Métis counterparts fought one of the bloodiest battles of the War of 1812.

Defeated, the Americans took over 500 casualties and retreated back to the United

States.

HMS Nancy - Slide 7

The HMS Nancy was a British schooner used during the Fur Trade to transport goods across the Great Lakes. During the War of 1812, the Nancy played an important role in transporting supplies, primarily between Fort Mackinac and the Nottawasaga River.

In September 1813, the Americans captured all the British armed vessels during the Battle of Lake Erie except for the HMS Nancy. The British managed to keep the schooner out of American hands for nearly a year until July 1814. With the advance of American ships, Nancy's commander, Lieutenant Miller Worsley, hid the schooner two miles up the Nottawasaga River and built a defence with the help of Métis voyageurs and the Ojibwa to prevent the advancing Americans from taking the ship. The Americans stumbled across its hiding place and attacked. Worsley decided it was better to destroy the schooner than let it fall into American hands and sank the Nancy in the river.

The wreck of the HMS Nancy was discovered in 1911 and has since been recovered and put on display at Nancy Island in Wasaga Beach.

Prairie du Chien - Slide 8

In the summer of 1814, a small American force travelled from St. Louis to Prairie du Chien to build a Fort that would protect the US from the British advance into the US Midwest. Fort Shelby was occupied by mid-June, but shortly afterward, the volunteer service contracts of many men expired, and most travelled back to St. Louis.

A British force of about 600, including many First Nation warriors and Métis voyageurs, left Fort Mackinac to prevent the Americans from succeeding. Led by William McKay, the British force arrived in Prairie du Chien on July 17th before the Americans had completed the Fort's defences. The British and Americans exchanged fire for several days without effect before the Americans ran out of water and ammunition. Following the American surrender and withdrawal to St. Louis, the fort was renamed Fort McKay. After the Treaty of Ghent was signed, the area was returned to the US, and the fort was burned down by the British.

Mica Bay - Slide 9

After the War of 1812, the Canadian government quickly sought to expand settlement by offering land grants to newcomers from the eastern provinces and the British Isles. The expansion of settlers also saw the growth of prejudicial social attitudes toward Métis and First Nations. Commercial profiteers also looked to displace the Métis from the land to be used for mining, timber and the continuation of the fur trade.

Between 1845 and 1850, the Province of Canada began granting parcels of land for these companies, one of which included the Ojibwa and Métis settlement at Garden River.

As they began extracting copper, not only were they seen as trespassers, but were being denied the economic gains from this development. After their grievances were left ignored in November 1849, a group of Métis and Ojibwa forcefully took over the Quebec Mining Company at Mica Bay.

In response, the government sent 100 soldiers to stop the uprising. Métis and Ojibwa peacefully gave up control and turned themselves in. 4 leaders were put on trial, but the charges were dropped, and the judge determined a treaty was needed for the operation to continue.

The government negotiated with the First Nations, creating both the Robinson-Huron and Robinson-Superior treaties, but did not include the Métis. Also, in 1853, the Canadian government passed a law that made it a crime to encourage First Nations and Métis to disturb the peace.

Red River Resistance (1869-1870) - Slide 10

The community of Red River, near the present-day site of Winnipeg, Manitoba, was the largest Métis community in Rupert's Land in 1869. The Red River settlement was located at the fork of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers and served as a major stop along fur trade routes. For generations, Métis people had built their homes along these two rivers. Homesteads were organized on long thin strips of land in the French seigneurial system in order to ensure that everyone had access to the water.

In 1869, under pressure from Great Britain, the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) sold Rupert's Land, to the newly formed Government of Canada, for £300,000. Unfortunately, the land Canada was planning to expand into was not empty. The main residents of this eight million square kilometre land mass were the Métis and First Nations people. They had not been consulted about the land sale to Canada. Great Britain and Canada did not even bother to communicate their plans to the Métis or the First Nations living in the North-West.

In the eyes of the government, the Métis people were squatters if there were no written agreements to provide proof of ownership. The Métis believed that they were the owners of the land, and it was their right to buy, sell, share or trade their land according to their customs. They did not believe the HBC had a right to interfere with their customary practices. When news of the land being sold to Canada reached Red River, Métis families were worried they would lose the lands that they had called home for generations. Realizing that surveyors would soon be sent to assess the land for new settlers, the Métis organized patrols and a militia to dissuade surveyors. In October 1869, Louis Riel rallied the people in Red River to come together to prevent the sale of Rupert's Land. In November, Riel and 120 armed Métis men captured the HBC trading post at Upper Fort Garry in a bloodless coup. In fact, the doors of the fort had been left wide open. Within the fort were enough provisions and supplies, some £100,000 worth (over \$20 Million Canadian dollars today), to ensure the Métis militia of four hundred men could protect themselves in the coming months.

One week after the transfer of Rupert's Land, Louis Riel sent a document to Ottawa entitled *Declaration of the People of Rupert's Land and the Northwest*. It argued that under international law, the people living at Red River had the right to govern themselves. Immediately afterwards, Riel helped to form a Provisional Government, first taking on the role of secretary and later president. A provisional government is also called an interim or transitional government and is usually set up to handle emergency or transitional situations, such as the creation of a new nation or the failure of the previous government. For months the Provisional Government tried to discuss the situation with the Canadian government, to no avail. Tensions were growing between those supporting Riel and groups of English-speaking Protestants belonging to the Orange Order, and the Canada First movement, which rallied for settler expansion into the West and wanted to resettle Métis and First Nations land.

Time were getting tougher as the Red River community suffered from drought and famine. In the mix, the surveyors arrived to study the land. Among them was Thomas Scott, a road worker, who, along with his cronies, attempted to blow up the Métis that were still holding the Fort. Scott was arrested, escaped prison, captured and then unanimously found guilty of insubordination and treason. He was sentenced and executed by firing squad. This was the catalyst for the exile of Louis Riel and his officers, While some of his supporters were on their way to Ottawa to negotiate a Bill of Rights and have the territory of Assiniboia recognized, the Canadian militia was mucking through the treacherous roads of Ontario with the goal of establishing order in the west and Louis Riel was on the run to the United States.

Shortly after the resistance at Red River, the Manitoba Act was passed in 1870. It resembled the Bill of Rights that the Métis had delivered to the Canadian Government. However, they soon realized that they would not be the beneficiaries of this new province. A new uprising was on the horizon.

Sources:

MNO TRC 8.2 Red River Lesson Plan (sources available there)

Canadian Encyclopedia- Red River Resistance-

<https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/red-river-rebellion#>

Teillet, Jean. *The North West is our Mother*. Harper Collins: Toronto. 2019.

North West Resistance (1884-1885) - Slide 11

After the events of the Red River Resistance in 1870, many Métis families moved farther west to live in the Northwest Territories (now Saskatchewan and Alberta). One such community was Batoche which was established in 1872 by displaced Red River Métis. The hope was that there would be more buffalo herds and fewer European settlers. Homesteads were laid out in the seigneurial system as in Red River, allowing everyone access to water.

At the same time, Europeans were moving westward to claim free land. The new settlers were promised a better life for their families by the Canadian government and were escaping difficult, if not desperate, situations in their country of origin.

By 1880, many Métis in the Batoche area were convinced that the only way to protect their lands from settlers was to acquire the title to it. They began petitioning the government and sent over 15 letters to Parliament, all of which were ignored. They had sent eighty-four petitions between 1878 and 1885. In 1879, Archbishop Taché wrote to the government arguing that there were 1,200 Métis families living in the Northwest Territories and that they should be given reserve land where they could all live together to maintain their culture. This was also ignored. In other communities, settlers began arriving and were allowed to build houses on lands occupied by the Métis.

In the winter of 1883-1884 Métis leaders in the Northwest Territories sat down to discuss what their options were with regard to land and the encroaching settlers. After much deliberation, it was decided that they would, once again, write down their grievances and send a delegation to Ottawa with their petition.

On March 19, 1885, Louis Riel announced the creation of another Provisional Government at Batoche. Gabriel Dumont was the head of the provisional government at St Laurent settlement along the Saskatchewan River. Together Riel and Dumont were able to bring together Métis people and form a cohesive government and military. Riel had along resume as a political leader, and Dumont was a skilled horseman and military strategist.

As the Métis continued to petition the government, organize and demand the surrender of the HBC post at Fort Carlton, they began to militarize, expecting a clash with police. However, with the help of the newly created Canadian Pacific Rail, almost 5,000 Federal militia were sent to destroy the resistance.

On May 9, 1885, approximately 800 troops arrived near Batoche. Métis militiamen had been preparing and digging rifle pits around the community for protection. The communities of Duck Lake, Fish Creek and Batoche would see armed conflict. The Battle of Batoche lasted three days with 300 Métis community members using ambush attacks to defend their homes. While the Métis were familiar with the land and used strategic points around the community for protection, they were not prepared for Middleton's use of the Gatling gun. The Gatling gun, which had been used during the American Civil War, could fire anywhere between 200 and 900 rounds of ammunition per minute, depending on the calibre used. The Canadian military grossly outnumbered the Métis in man and in firepower.

Riel had hoped that the Métis would win the battle, however, within three days of the defeat, he turned himself in, perhaps hoping that this would result in leniency towards the others. His hope was that he would have a fair trial and be given the opportunity to tell the story of the Métis. However, he was arrested and charged with high treason. He went to trial in Regina, appealing the verdict twice, but was eventually hanged on November 16th, 1885.

It is estimated that over 50 Métis and First Nations people died during the Northwest Resistance. Today, the community of Batoche is a National Historic Site

that commemorates the efforts of the Métis to protect their way of life. The Métis do not acknowledge the government's claims that Riel and other Métis were engaging in a rebellion against the government during this time. Since the Northwest Territories was not a part of the Confederation, they could not have been rebels against the Canadian government. The Métis prefer to call this the Northwest Resistance for this reason. The Canadian government granted amnesty to the participants of the North-West Resistance in 1886. There have been unsuccessful attempts to exonerate Louis Riel over the years.

Sources:

MNO TRC 8.4 Northwest Resistance Lesson Plan (sources included)

Canadian Encyclopedia- North West Resistance.

<https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/north-west-rebellion>

The Nile Crisis (1884) - Slide 12

“When First Nations, Inuit and Métis Nation were recruited in 1914 to fight in the First World War, enlistees were not aware of the new reality of 20th-century warfare. As a prelude to the First World War, in 1884, approximately 56 Kaniienkenha:ka (Mohawk), 30 Ojibway and 19 Métis men were recruited for Britain's six-month Nile expedition in Egypt, totalling 400 men. The men were chosen for their strength, endurance, and skill in handling boats and rafts—qualities that were needed to navigate up the numerous cataracts and rapids of the Nile River. They did not see active battle, as they arrived two days after the city of Khartoum, Sudan, had fallen, and British Major Charles G. Gordon had been killed. The expedition returned with the loss of 16 men and stories of what they had seen. Along their journey on the Nile, they saw monolithic temples and statues carved out of hillsides at Abu Simbel, the Sphinx of Giza, the pyramids, exotic markets and Egyptian life in Cairo.”

Sources:

Chatfield, Sara and Kawenaa, Elizabeth. *Might Indigenous Warriors: From Egypt to the First World War*. Library and Archives Canada Blog. November 8, 2019.

<https://thediscoverblog.com/tag/mohawk/>

Boer War (1899-1902)- Slide 13

During the 1800s many of Africa's nations had been colonized by European powers. In the late 1800s Great Britain had been expanding their territories in the region of South Africa to much resentment by the Boers of that region. In defence, the Boers launched resistance against their British colonizers. Canada, being a new nation but still under the rule of the British monarchy, was called upon to support the empire. While most British Canadians supported the war effort, French Canadians were not. To prevent conflict within the new nation, Laurier did not force enlistment but rather sent a battalion of volunteers.

While Métis did serve, it had an eerily similar politics to the Northwest resistance—one of the British empire seeking to control over territory and people that had been there long before them.

Research is lacking on the involvement of Ontario Métis in this war.

Most of the Métis who participated were members of the various regiments of the Canadian Mounted Rifles. The most notable was William Hackett, who was Métis but opposed Louis Riel during the Resistance.

World War 1 (1915-1918) - Slide 14

It is important to note that after the resistance in the west, the Métis went underground, and it was not safe to identify as Métis. Because of this, Métis, half-breed breeds etc., are not found in historical records. Anecdotal and family histories have been the primary source of information. Now that more records are being released to the public, we are able to refer back and set the record straight on the involvement of Métis in both of the World Wars.

Over 650,000 Canadians fought in the 1st World War, and 66,000 and 172,000 were killed and injured. This was a massive contribution to the war, considering at the time Canada had a population of just 8 million people. It was during this war that Canada made a name for itself as small but very, very mighty. Throughout our military history we have continued to leave that legacy of providing highly skilled armed forces to a variety of causes.

This was no different for Métis veterans. Their observation and understanding of the environment and their hunting skills made them highly sought after as sharpshooters and snipers. Enlistment ratios for the Métis were high during both world wars. However, we are not certain of how many Métis people served Canada in war; many if not most, were listed as French or English Canadians. Furthermore, no government or religious and private agency has ever completed a thorough enumeration of Métis enlistees and conscripts.

- Henry Norwest- Sharpshooter from Fort Saskatchewan, Alberta, notable service at Vimy and Amiennes and a sniping record of 115 shots. After 3 years of service, he was killed by an enemy sniper just 3 months before the war ended.

Sources:

Government of Canada. *Private Henry Louis Norwest*. Canadian Virtual War Museum. 2022.

<https://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance/memorials/canadian-virtual-war-memorial/Detail/308861>

World War 2 (1939-1945) - Slide 15

Photo (Middle)- Taken at the 75th Anniversary of the Dieppe Landing Commemoration in Dieppe, France. Métis Veterans shown here are Bryan Cyr (Manitoba) and Bob Thibeau (Manitoba).

In provinces west of Ontario, there are better records of both Indigenous and specifically Métis veterans. Whether out of the need to hide their Métis culture or to protect themselves from reliving the trauma of the war, it has been difficult to uncover the experiences of Ontario Métis. And now, with most of our World War Two

veterans gone from us, we rely on families to piece together any stories that were passed down. As with the First World War, it was not acceptable, nor did Métis soldiers have the opportunity to identify as Métis legally.

So why did they sign up? Many Métis families were landless and in extreme poverty due to prejudicial policies exacerbated by the Great Depression. The Canadian Armed Forces could pay almost double the average rate at that time. Once again, the highly skilled Métis hunters were sought after as sharpshooters and snipers in various battles. Western Métis such as Charles (Checkers) Tomkins were hired as Cree Code Talkers to communicate vital details and keep them secret from the Germans.

For many, the CAF was a place that bridged racial divides, where all fought in the name of a common cause and in brotherhood. However, upon returning home, First Nations, Métis and Inuit veterans realized that nothing had changed.

The post-war era saw a revival of a Métis youth movement. Those who had fought for Canada received a pittance compared to their fellow non-indigenous brothers, and there was a sense that no group of people should suffer the indignity of racial prejudice like European Jews had. The 1950s, 60s and 70s saw the growth of civil rights movements such as the United Nations, American Civil Rights, American-Indian Movement and the Indigenous Rights Movement here in Canada.

Sources:

Teillet, Jean. *The North West is our Mother*. Harper Collins: Toronto, 2019.

Veterans Affairs Canada. *Indigenous Veterans: The First World War*.

<https://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance/people-and-stories/indigenous-veterans>

Resources - Slide 16

War of 1812

- War of 1812 Teachers Guide
- War of 1812 Poster
- HMS Nancy https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZAJ1B_anlwQ
- Chartrand, René. "CANADIAN VOYAGEURS DURING THE WAR OF 1812." *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research* 72, no. 291 (1994): 184–86. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44229970>. (Funny recollection of the contrast between the Corps de Voyageurs and the British Military)

Red River Resistance

- <https://indigenouspeoplesatlasofcanada.ca/article/red-river-resistance/>
- <https://library.usask.ca/archives/exhibitions-digital/exhibitions/northwestresistance.php>
- <https://tvolearn.com/pages/grade-8-history-and-geography-creating-canada-learning-activity-5>
- This Place. 150 Years Retold Podcast. Episode 2 Annie of Red River

North West Resistance

- <https://indigenouspeoplesatlasofcanada.ca/article/1885-northwest-resistance/>
- <https://tvolearn.com/pages/grade-8-history-and-geography-creating-canada-learning-activity-5>
- <https://raventrust.com/this-feb-21-louis-riel-doesnt-need-exoneration-canada-does/>
- Barkwell, Lawrence. Veterans and Families of the 1885 Northwest Resistance. Gabriel Dumont Institute: Saskatoon. 2011.
- Barkwell, Lawrence. Batoche 1885: The Militia of the Métis Liberation Movement. Manitoba Métis Federation: Winnipeg. 2005

Junior/Intermediate Novels:

- Bell of Batoche- Jacqueline Guest
- Outcast of River Falls (sequel)- Jacqueline Guest
- The Rebel Gabriel Dumont (Graphic novel)- David Alexander Robertson
- Dear Canada- Blood upon our Land- Maxine Trottier

Reference:

- The North West is our Mother- Jean Taillet- I/S/PS
- The Battle of Batoche- Walter Hildebrandt- J/I/S

The Nile Crisis

World War 1

- MNO Veterans Council Book
- Métis Veterans of Manitoba: From Buffalo to Battlefields- A. A Brian Cyr CD
- Métis Veterans Council, Métis Vets 2017 Video
<https://Métisveterans.ca/videos/elementor-1804/>

World War 2

- Indigenous Soldiers- Foreign Battlefields
<https://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance/those-who-served/indigenous-veterans/native-soldiers>
- Métis Veterans of Manitoba: From Buffalo to Battlefields- A. A Brian Cyr CD