

Fact of the Month:

Historic Crown Recognition of Métis Communities

For generations, Crown governments have encountered, recognized, and acknowledged Métis or “Half-Breed” communities in northern Ontario and surrounding the Upper Great Lakes that were culturally distinct and politically independent from their First Nations and Euro-Canadian neighbours.

In 1847, for example, an Indian agent in southern Ontario noted the presence of a distinct Métis population to the north in the Upper Great Lakes, drawing clear distinctions between First Nations, mixed ancestry individuals, and the distinct Métis or “Bois brûlé” people, noting:

“on Lake Huron and other places where I have had the opportunity of meeting the ‘Bois brûlé’ and full bred Indian, a marked difference is to be seen between the two.”

On many occasions, Crown governments also recognized that these distinct Métis communities also held unique rights, including to their customary land holdings. In 1850, for example, while negotiating the Robinson-Huron Treaty, Treaty Commissioner William B. Robinson affirmed that the Métis were in “free and full possession of their lands” and in so doing promised that the Sault Ste. Marie Métis Community’s River Lots along the St. Mary’s River would be respected and protected by the Crown.

In some cases, Crown representatives also acknowledged the deep kinship and political connections between Métis communities in northern Ontario and those farther west. As Canada prepared to negotiate Treaty 9 in the James Bay region, for instance, Indian Commissioner J.A. McKenna fought to eliminate discriminatory policies that limited “Half-Breed” scrip eligibility to Métis in certain western regions while denying it to their relatives in what is now Ontario, noting:

“The consequence is that Halfbreeds living on the Keewatin side of the English River are recognized as having territorial rights and get scrip, scrip which they may locate in Manitoba or any part of the North West Territories, while the Halfbreeds on the Ontario side who naturally comes and makes claim has to be told that he has no territorial rights.”

Crown acknowledgement of these distinct Métis communities was also ultimately enshrined in formal nation-to-nation agreements. For example, Treaty 9 in the James Bay region includes an explicit promise that signatory First Nations would “maintain peace” and respectful relationships

with their Métis neighbours as they had done for generations prior. The 1875 Halfbreed Adhesion to Treaty No. 3, signed by members of the Northwestern Ontario Métis Community, also remains the only time that a Métis community entered into one of Canada's historical numbered treaties as a distinct and independent Métis collective.

This long history of Crown recognition of distinct Métis communities in northern Ontario and surrounding the Upper Great Lakes has continued to the present day, culminating in their formal recognition in 2017 as a means of supporting the Crown's comprehensive and enduring fulfillment of their constitutional obligations to them.

For more facts, visit OntarioMetisFacts.com.