

HISTORIC MÉTIS COMMUNITIES IN ONTARIO

THE HISTORIC MATTAWA/OTTAWA RIVER 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 Mattawa and spanning the Ottawa River from Lac des Allumettes (Pembroke) to Timiskaming and environs (the “Historic Mattawa/Ottawa River 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.

Mattawa/Ottawa River Timeline

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| 1720s | The decade marks the official establishment of Compagnie du Nord post on Lake Timiskaming, as well as posts Lake of Two Mountains, Carillon and Long Sault. |
| 1760 | The British conquest of French interests in Canada occurs and is followed by the reopening of the fur trade by Britain in 1761. |
| 1784 | The North West Company (NWC) is created. |
| 1795 | Fort Timiskaming becomes a separate NWC department, employing 1 partner, 6 clerks, an interpreter, and 18 winterers. |
| Early 1800s | Fort Laronde is established at the mouth of the La Vase River between Mattawa River and Lake Nipissing, representing the first permanent fur trade post of the NWC in the region. By 1802 the NWC “Grand River Department” installations in the Ottawa River watershed employ 24 men at 4 posts. |
| 1821 | The amalgamation of Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC) and NWC occurs. HBC takes over Fort Laronde and renames it Nipissing Lake Post. |

- 1828** Mattawa is viewed by the HBC as the gateway to the Timiskaming fur trade, and the HBC sends seasonal traders into the Mattawa area to cut off independent traders.
- 1834-1839** In 1834, the HBC establishes a post on Lake Temagami, and at Mattawa in 1836. By 1839, winter transport extends up the Ottawa River to Mattawa, which now supplies posts as far north as Abitibi.
- 1840s** A number of independent traders establish stores and trading sites near Mattawa, which by this time was a year-round post.
- 1871** Mattawa is opened for settlement. At this time the population in the Nipissing District was 400.
- 1873** The boom in the timber industry reaches this area and Mattawa was divided into lots to prepare for further settlement.
- 1881** The railway reaches Mattawa.
- 1891** By this time, the population in the Nipissing District has jumped to 12,000.
- 1904** The HBC sale shop in Mattawa closes.
- 1908-1909** The HBC closes operations in Mattawa altogether and moves to North Bay.

Demographics

Flowing from the historical events set out above as well as the strategic location and migration of Métis families into the Mattawa area, a distinctive community developed in this area and along portions of the Ottawa River to the north and south.

By 1802, approximately 540 men were employed by the NWC each summer to transport company supplies and furs between Montreal and the head of Lake Superior via the Ottawa River-Lake Nipissing passageway. Many of these NWC employees were identified as Métis and some begin to settle and move amongst the posts in the region in the early 1800s. Certain Métis family surnames begin to appear in the area, which persist into the early 20th century.

By the 1840s, a Métis population largely comprised of local NWC employees that stayed and had families in the area as well as post employees that retired to the area following the NWC/HBC merger (mostly coming from the Temiskaming area) was in place. Notably, Mattawa became a preferred retirement location after the the HBC eliminated support for moving ex-servants and their families to the Red River Settlement in 1843.

The kinship ties of the Métis at Mattawa included other families along the Ottawa River, including Timiskaming and Lac des Allumettes. The records show that the Métis population in Mattawa tended to settle on the north side of the Mattawa River where the HBC establishment stood.

In 1875, an Oblate priest counts the population at Mattawa as 113 “sauvage ou métisse”. In 1881, an Oblate priest counts the population that frequents the Fort William mission site as 250 souls “sauvage ou métisse”.

The 1901 census also reveals a number of Métis individuals in the Mattawa area, almost entirely clustered within one polling station where they made up 26 of 61 families and 159 of 433 total

individuals, or 37% of the polling station's population. Notably, many of the same Métis family surnames from the beginning of early to mid 1800s continue to appear in these records.

Vocation and Cultural Practices

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

- **Language:**

Primarily French and Indigenous languages (Algonquin, some Ojibway).

- **Religion:**

There was almost universal adherence to Roman Catholicism in the area, including participation in religious rites, baptism, and god-parenting.

- **Music and Dance:**

The records document jigging and fiddle music as being a part of community gatherings with outside observers commenting that a Christmas meal was followed by “a kind of jig with a mixture of Scotch, Irish and Indian movement” as well as fiddle music being played at neighbourhood gatherings in the 1850s.

- **Harvesting:**

Often Métis individuals identified in the record would supplement their post income with a subsistence lifestyle, including fishing, harvesting blueberries, maple sugaring, and trapping.

- **Fur Trade Employees:**

The Métis individuals were generally either officially employed by the NWC/HBC or as independent or “petty” traders. Many fur trader retirees continued to work at the post in other capacities, such as in construction, or as post carriers.

- **Timber Industry:**

After the decline of the fur-trade, some former employees became shanty labourers, and participated in hewing, hauling, and river driving.

- **Guiding:**

With the introduction of the railway in 1881, Mattawa became a destination for big-game hunting and tourism. Métis expertise related to local waters and wildlife made them uniquely suited to guiding and they were identified as such in records.

Distinctive Collective Identity

The distinctive nature of the Mattawa Métis population is documented through their internal and external identification as distinctive from other nearby First Nations or settler communities.

Of note, intermarriage was common among historic Métis families in the region. For example, one historical report shows 1142 individuals living in the Mattawa area between 1861 and 1921 who were identified as Métis. Of those, 1027—or 89.92%—were connected to one another through immediate kinship links (parentage, marriage, sibling relationships) or “fictive” kinship links (god

parenting). The small percentage not related to one another immediately were attached to the wider network through extended kinship (as uncles, aunts, cousins, etc.).

The fur trade companies tended to identify Métis as separate from other employees and First Nations individuals. The NWC referred to them as “countrymen” employees while HBC referred to them as “half-breeds”. While the instructions for the 1861 census did not allow for designations as “half-breeds”, hand-written notations were inserted by several families noting that they were “mixed with Indian” or “mixed up with Indian”. In addition, annuity paylists differentiated between First Nation beneficiaries and “half-breeds”. Métis individuals were either not allowed to live on reserve or to live on reserve under special conditions.

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.