

Stepping Stones



FORCED RELOCATION OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES IN CANADA

Planning your learning journey

*What are some examples
of forced relocation of
Indigenous Peoples across
what is now known as
Canada?*



An image of a scrip coupon for 160 acres issued to
Andrew McAuley.
Source: LAC RG15, Volume 1408

FIRST STEPS



Indigenous Peoples have lived on the land now known as Canada for thousands of years.¹ When Europeans first arrived, Indigenous Peoples provided assistance to help them survive in unfamiliar environments. In some areas, Indigenous Peoples maintained their distance from European newcomers, while in other areas closer bonds formed. Conflict also occurred, and Indigenous populations were decimated by new diseases to which they had no immunity. The diversity among nations meant that each had a different experience with European newcomers, and each was uniquely impacted.²

The Doctrine of Discovery originated in Europe in the 1400s. It was based on the supposed “racial superiority” of Christian Europeans, was used to justify the taking of Indigenous land by Europeans and ignored the inherent rights of Indigenous Peoples.³ Indigenous Peoples were viewed as nonhuman because they were non-Christian, thus making the land *terra nullius* in the eyes of European explorers.⁴ *Terra nullius* claims that no one owned the land now known as Canada prior to European assertion of sovereignty. However, the Supreme Court of Canada has ruled that this never applied in Canada, as confirmed by the Royal Proclamation of 1763, which recognized Indigenous title.⁵ It was the Royal Proclamation that necessitated the making of treaties and other land agreements between Indigenous Peoples and the Crown, and later Canada.⁶

In spite of this, the Crown and Government of Canada enacted many policies and engaged in many practices that displaced Indigenous Peoples from their original homelands. The lasting impacts of this forced disconnection from the land are still being felt by Indigenous Peoples today.





Land is culture... The land connects us to our language and our spirituality, our values, our traditions and our laws of mino bimatasiwin, which is the good life. In short, the land personifies who we are. It is the heart of our identity. It is our very lives, our souls, which are connected to the land of our ancestors.

—Doris Young, Member of the Indian Residential School Committee⁷

FORCED RELOCATION OF FIRST NATIONS PEOPLES

From the time of contact, European settlement spread westward and impacted First Nations people along the way. Europeans first came to present-day Alberta due to the fur trade. Indigenous Peoples played a central role as trading partners, interpreters and mediators.⁸ As the economy began to shift from a focus on the fur trade to agriculture and the Crown promoted European settlement into the Prairies, First Nations were forced to adapt to the changing conditions.⁹ This settlement led to increased interaction with settlers as well as infringement on Indigenous Peoples' lands and ways of life. As a result, the Crown deemed it necessary to make treaty in order to gain access to these lands.¹⁰

Treaty 6 (1876), Treaty 7 (1877) and Treaty 8 (1899) cover most of Alberta. The spirit and intent of treaties includes an intention of mutual benefit and an agreement to share on a nation-to-nation basis.¹¹ The Crown's interpretation of the Treaties led to the creation of many of the reserves in Canada. In some instances, nations

had input into where their reserves would be located, but in other cases they were chosen by missionaries or the Crown's representatives.¹²

Reserves were used as a method of managing and controlling First Nations populations in order to make way for European settlement. As well, the reserve system was used to force First Nations peoples to transition to an agricultural way of life.¹³ By forcing them onto small plots of land rather than the vast territories on which they customarily traversed, the Crown and later Canadian government were engaging in a policy of "aggressive assimilation."¹⁴

Some examples of forced relocation of First Nations peoples in the land now known as Alberta include the Papaschase First Nation from southwest Edmonton,¹⁵ Michel First Nation from northwest of Edmonton and Stoney First Nations from Banff.¹⁶

With the increase of population and increase of value of land, there necessarily comes some clash of interest between the Indian and the white man.

—Frank Oliver, Minister of the Interior, 1910.¹⁷

Frank Oliver was one of many democratically elected officials that actively worked toward the forced relocation of Indigenous Peoples from their lands, and this work was supported by broader Canadian society.¹⁸

FORCED RELOCATION OF MÉTIS PEOPLES

In 1870, the *Manitoba Act* set aside 1.4 million acres for

Métis land grants "towards the extinguishment of the aboriginal title," as recognized in the Royal Proclamation. This land was to be given to the "children of half-breed heads of families."¹⁹ The Half-Breed Scrip Commission issued scrip as either 140 or 260 acres or dollars, depending on the situation of each individual applicant. This process, known as Métis Scrip, was marked by widespread fraud and coercion.

Applicants did not have a say in where the land was located, and they had to uproot their lives and travel hundreds of kilometres from their homes to find the land they had been promised; therefore, Métis individuals either sold or did not pursue this promised land. Many Métis fell victim to land speculators such as Richard Secord and Frank Oliver who closely followed the Half-Breed Scrip Commission. They would offer to pay cash for the piece of paper that often destitute Métis people had in hand or use people to impersonate the Métis individual who the scrip coupon belonged to, and many took them up on the offer, receiving much less than the actual value of the land. In response to the widespread fraud being committed during the scrip process, the Criminal Code of Canada was amended to create a three-year statute of limitations on Métis land claims, effectively leading to no prosecutions or settlements relating to scrip.²⁰

As a result of landlessness due to the fraudulent scrip process and encroachment of settlers, Métis began to establish communities in road allowances throughout Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta. Road allowances were 10-foot-wide spaces along roads,

railways and other Crown lands that were left in order to allow for maintenance or future growth.²¹ Homes were typically one- or two-room shacks with tar paper roofs, and these communities often popped up wherever employment could be found.²² Métis usually did labour on local farms or became farmers themselves. They survived by hunting and trapping until a law made this illegal,²³ and many continue this way of life today. Traplines are often handed down from one family member to another.

Some examples of forced relocations of Métis include Moccasin Flats in Fort McMurray²⁴ and the land now known as Jasper National Park.²⁵ St Paul des Métis is one of the most prominent cases of forced relocation. Alberta initially had 12 land-based Métis settlements, and 4 were rescinded for economic development: Wolf Lake, Malboro, Touchwood and Cold Lake.

FORCED RELOCATION OF INUIT

Ausuittuq (Grise Fiord), on Ellesmere Island, is the northernmost community in North America. In 1953 and 1955, families from Pond Inlet and Inukjuak were moved to the area as part of a government-sponsored relocation program.²⁶ The official reason given was that food supplies were dwindling and wild game would be plentiful in the new location. However, archival documents show that Arctic sovereignty during the Cold War was Canada's primary motivation for relocating these 17 families.²⁷ Those who left their homes were promised that they could return in two years if they

wanted, and that a better life awaited them. What they found was a completely foreign environment, climate and landscape lacking most of their usual food sources such as Canada geese and cloudberry.²⁸

Inuit in Labrador were also relocated in the 1950s to reduce administrative costs. According to the director of Northern Labrador Affairs, Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, "Civilization is on the northward march, and for the Eskimo and Indian there is no escape. The last bridges of isolation were destroyed with the coming of the airplane and the radio. The only course now open, for there can be no turning back, is to fit him as soon as may be to take his full place as a citizen in our society. There is no time to lose." The community of Hebron was closed. The families who lived there were told they would have to choose how they would be separated according to quotas on how many families each host community would accept. These new communities were a mixture of Inuit and non-Inuit, but the architects of the relocations did not consider the cultural and social diversity among Inuit. This, along with disconnection from the land, caused extreme hardship for the relocated families.²⁹

Continuing Your Learning Journey

a) *How can educators learn more about specific stories of forced relocation?*

b) *How does the legacy of forced relocation fit into the larger journey of reconciliation?*

NEXT STEPS



Disconnection from the land has had devastating and lasting impacts on First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples in Canada. According to the Interim Report of the Standing Senate Committee on Aboriginal Peoples, "Assimilation affect[s] Indigenous groups differently depending on the region and their relationship with the Crown, although the effects of relocation and dispossession [are] especially devastating for all, given the importance of the land as a source of identity, spirituality, governance and sustenance. These policies and the loss of lands have contributed to a complex intergenerational legacy that continues to affect Indigenous communities today. This legacy has led to disparities in such areas as health and education, and the overrepresentation of Indigenous Peoples in the child welfare and criminal justice system, among others."³⁰ As educators, it is important to be aware of the forced relocation of Indigenous Peoples as these events have ongoing implications today.

NOTES

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