

# KEY MOMENTS IN INDIGENOUS HISTORY

This timeline is designed to accompany *Historica Canada's Indigenous Perspectives Education Guide*, which includes lesson plans and classroom activities based on the *Historical Thinking Concepts*. Download the Guide at [education.historicacanada.ca](http://education.historicacanada.ca).

Note: This timeline presents key events and developments in Indigenous history in what is now Canada, from time immemorial to present. While no timeline can be exhaustive in its coverage, it provides a broad chronological overview to support educators and students.

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## Introduction

Indigenous nations tell their own stories about the origins of the world and their place in it; all claim their ancestry dates to time immemorial. At the same time, there is considerable archeological debate about when humans first came to North America, though broad assumptions suggest waves of migration from northeastern Asia, by both land bridge and boat, between 30,000 and 13,500 years ago.



18,000–10,000 BCE

Irrefutable archeological evidence of human occupation in the northern half of North America, including in the Tanana River Valley (Alaska), Haida Gwaii (British Columbia), Vermilion Lakes (Alberta), and Debert (Nova Scotia).

10,000–2000 BCE

Settlements and communities are present almost everywhere in what is now Canada. From coast to coast to coast, Indigenous peoples adapt to their surroundings and establish complex religious, artistic, and literary practices as well as economic, social, and political structures.

2300–1000 BCE

Northeast Woodlands Indigenous groups introduce agriculture.

500–1200

Developed communities on the Plains employ treaties to share territory with humans and non-human beings.

c. 1450

The **Haudenosaunee Confederacy** (Iroquois League), organized by **Dekanehwidet** (the Peacemaker) and **Hiawatha**, tries to provide a peaceful and equitable means to resolve disputes among member nations in the lower Great Lakes region.

c. 1500

Estimates for the Indigenous population in what would become Canada range from 200,000 to 500,000 people, though some suggest it was as high as 2.5 million, with between 300 and 450 languages spoken.

1613

The Two-Row **Wampum** (Kaswentha) establishes the **Covenant Chain**, a series of agreements between the Haudenosaunee Confederacy and European representatives. They agree to work toward peace as well as economic, political, and cultural sovereignty; gift exchanges honour promises and renew alliances.

1615

The first European missionaries (**Récollets** and later **Jesuits**) arrive to convert Indigenous populations to Catholicism.

1701

Three dozen Indigenous groups and the French colonial government sign the **Great Peace of Montréal**, forging peaceful relations that end nearly a century of war between the Haudenosaunee and the French (and their Indigenous allies).

1754–1763

The **Seven Years War** begins in North America. Hostilities between the French and English centred in Europe (beginning in 1756), but the fight for control of North America, with Indigenous allies on both sides, starts in 1754.

1763

King George III of Britain declares dominion over North America east of the Appalachian Mountains. His **Royal Proclamation** gives limited recognition of title to Indigenous communities and provides guidelines for negotiating treaties on a nation-to-nation basis.



1791

**Haida** chief Koyah organizes the first of many attacks on the British, who had begun coastal explorations in an emergent west coast fur trade.

1812–1814

The **War of 1812** sees tens of thousands of Indigenous people fight for their land, independence, and culture, as allies of either Great Britain or the United States. In British North America, the Western Confederacy, led by **Tecumseh** and **Tenskwatawa**, plays a crucial role in protecting Upper and Lower Canada from American invasion. By the end of hostilities, almost 10,000 Indigenous people had died from wounds or disease. The **Treaty of Ghent**, which is supposed to return lands and "all possessions, rights and privileges" to Indigenous peoples affected by the war, is ignored.



1828

The Mohawk Institute opens in Brantford, Upper Canada (Ontario), as a day school for boys from the Six Nations Reserve. In 1831, it begins to operate as a **Residential School** with the goal of assimilating Indigenous children. It is the precursor to the more elaborate system of Residential Schools.

1867

The **British North America Act** creates the Dominion of Canada. Colonial responsibility for Indigenous peoples and lands is transferred to the new federal government, under the Department of the Interior.



1871–1921

The 11 **Numbered Treaties** are signed by the Canadian government and Indigenous nations. These treaties, still controversial and contested today, make vast areas of traditional Indigenous territory available for white settlement and development in exchange for a system of reserves (treaty lands), cash payments, access to agricultural tools, and hunting and fishing rights. Elders note that the initial spirit and intent of the treaties have been disregarded.

2000–200 BCE

Indigenous groups on the west coast establish sedentary living, hierarchical chiefdoms, and stratified communities. All have recognizable governments, intellectual traditions, spiritual and educational practices, and sophisticated implements.

1880

An amendment to the **Indian Act** formally disenfranchises and disempowers Indigenous women by declaring they "cease to be an Indian in any respect" if they marry "any other than an Indian, or a non-treaty Indian."

1860s–1900

Inuit across the Arctic suffer from malnutrition and starvation as marine mammals, on which they rely for food, plummet under pressure from European whalers, who also introduce many diseases.



1500–1530s

Continual contact between European fishermen and Indigenous peoples on the Atlantic coast begins.

1600s

Indigenous technology and knowledge of hunting, trapping, guiding, food, and disease prove crucial to the survival of Europeans and early colonial economy and society, particularly in the supply of beaver pelts and other furs. The establishment of alliances gives Indigenous peoples access to European weaponry and other goods.



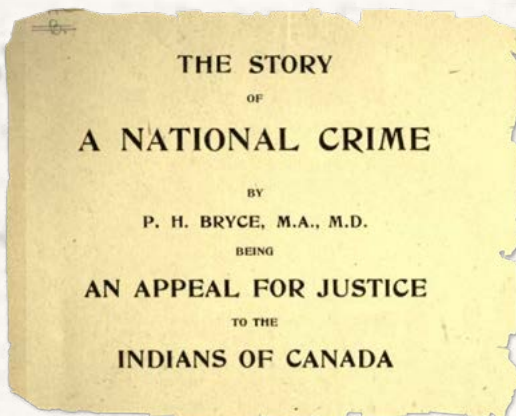
1914–1918

Between 4,000 and 6,000 Indigenous people serve in the Canadian military during the **First World War**. They are denied veterans' benefits on their return, despite many winning military awards, like Francis Pegahmagabow, whose medals are pictured above.



1922

*The Story of a National Crime*, published by Dr. **P.H. Bryce**, Chief Medical Officer for Canada's Department of the Interior and Indian Affairs, argues that Indigenous people's health is being ignored in **Residential Schools** and **Indian Hospitals** in violation of treaty pledges.



1929

Complaints about Inuit not bearing traditional Christian names arise, beginning decades of government labelling strategies to ease the recording of census information and entrench federal authority in the North. Among the failed initiatives are metal discs with ID numbers, and **Project Surname**.



1951

Indigenous lobbying leads to **Indian Act** amendments that give elected band councils more powers, award women the right to vote in band elections, and lift the ban on the potlatch and sun dances. Some soldiers who fought alongside Indigenous men and women support the change.

1954

Elsie Marie Knott becomes the first female chief of a First Nation in Canada when she is elected to lead the Anishinaabe (Ojibwe) Curve Lake First Nation near Peterborough, Ontario. She holds the position for 16 years.



1950s and 1960s

Sled dogs are killed as part of the Sled Dog Slaughter, a government assimilationist initiative to force the Inuit of Northern Québec to deny their nomadic lifestyle and move them away from their traditional lands.

1969–1970

A federal **White Paper** on Indian Affairs proposes abolishing the **Indian Act**, Indian status, and reserves, and transferring responsibility for Indian affairs to the provinces. In response, Cree Chief **Harold Cardinal** writes the Red Paper, calling for recognition of Indigenous peoples as "Citizens Plus." The government later withdraws the proposal after considerable opposition from Indigenous organizations.



1971

The Inuit Tapirist of Canada, renamed **Inuit Tapirit Kanatami** in 2001, is formed as a national organization advocating for self-government, social, economic, environmental, health, and political welfare of Inuit in Canada, and preservation of language and history.

1973

The Supreme Court of Canada agrees that Indigenous peoples held title to land before European colonization, that this title existed in law, and that it continues unless specifically extinguished. Named for **Nisga'a** chief **Frank Calder**, the **Calder Case** forces the government to adopt new policies to negotiate land claims with Indigenous peoples not covered by treaties.



1867

The **Gradual Civilization Act** is passed by the Province of Canada to encourage assimilation of Indigenous peoples to Euro-Canadian values. Indigenous men over 21 and "sufficiently advanced" in their education can be enfranchised and given 50 acres of land. Few take the offer, in part because it means losing their treaty rights.



1974

The **Native Women's Association of Canada** is established to advocate for the social, political, and economic welfare of Indigenous women and girls. It promotes education, challenges discriminatory policies, and works to reduce inequality.

1980–1981

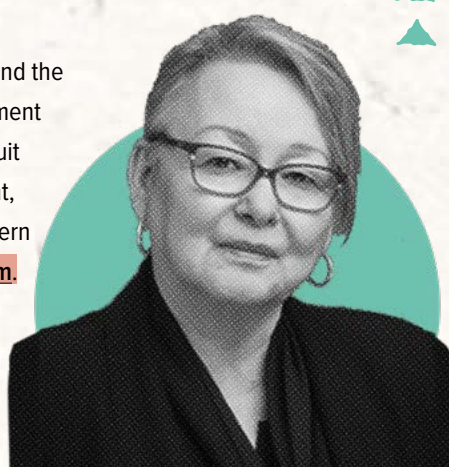
Activists travel by train from Vancouver to Ottawa aboard the "Constitution Express" to raise awareness about the lack of recognition of Indigenous rights in the proposed Canadian constitution.

1982

The **Assembly of First Nations** is formed out of the National Indian Brotherhood to promote the interests of First Nations in the realm of self-government, respect for treaty rights, education, health, land, and resources.

1984

The **Inuvialuit** and the federal government sign the Inuvialuit Final Agreement, a massive Western Arctic **land claim**.



1985

The **Indian Act** is amended to address discrimination faced by First Nations women who face the loss of their Indian status if they marry non-status Indians. This change occurs when **Sandra Lovelace Nicholas**, a **Wolastoqiyik (Maliseet)** woman from New Brunswick, brings her case to the UN Human Rights Committee.

1980s–1990s

Several politically charged standoffs occur on disputed lands. More than 800 people are arrested during the "War in the Woods" when **Tla-o-qui-ah** and environmentalists fight to protect ancient forests from loggers in **Clayoquot Sound**, British Columbia. The **Oka Crisis** sees Mohawk activists clash with Québec provincial police for 78 days. Tensions over the Kettle and Stony Point First Nation occupation at **Ipperwash** Provincial Park contribute to protestor Dudley George's death at the hands of an Ontario Provincial Police officer.



1883

Prime Minister John A. Macdonald authorizes the creation of **Residential Schools**, run by Christian churches, to force Indigenous children to assimilate to Euro-Canadian culture and practices.

1885

The **Métis** and their First Nations allies lead the five-month **Northwest Resistance** against the federal government in what is now Saskatchewan and Alberta. Anxious about white settlers and government encroachment on their lands, the Métis form a second provisional government in the region, again led by **Louis Riel**. The Métis Bill of Rights demands improved treatment for all residents of the region, including land rights, political representation, and better education. As calls go unheeded, the Métis, led by **Gabriel Dumont**, take military action, but federal troops prevail. Riel is hanged for treason and Cree chiefs **Mistahimaskwa (Big Bear)** and **Pitikwahanapiwiyin (Poundmaker)** are imprisoned.



1970s–2000s

The Supreme Court makes several key decisions respecting Indigenous people, including but not limited to: 1) a 1997 ruling that traditional Indigenous land rights and title cannot be extinguished by the British Columbia government and validating oral testimony as a source of evidence; and 2) a 2003 ruling prescribing three conditions for Métis status: self-identification as a Métis individual; ancestral connection to a historical Métis community; and acceptance by a Métis community.

1993

Inuit and the governments of the Northwest Territories and Canada sign the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement, the largest in Canada's history. A new territory, Nunavut, is created from the central and eastern portions of the N.W.T. in 1999.

1996

The final report of the **Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples** is published. It recommends a public inquiry into the effects of Residential Schools and calls for improved relations between governments, Indigenous peoples, and non-Indigenous Canadians.

2000

The terms of the **Nisga'a Final Agreement** come into effect, granting the Nisga'a \$196 million over 15 years plus communal **self-government** and control of natural resources in parts of northwestern British Columbia.

2006

The Nunavut Inuit Land Claims Agreement comes into effect, addressing ownership of land and resources in James Bay, Hudson Bay, Hudson Strait, and Ungava Bay, as well as part of northern Labrador.

2008

Prime Minister Stephen Harper issues a statement of apology to former students of Residential Schools in Canada for the harm caused by assimilationist goals, abuse, and cultural loss. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau extends the apology in 2017 to students of Residential Schools in Newfoundland and Labrador.



2015

Supreme Court of Canada Chief Justice Beverley McLachlin notes that the mistreatment of Indigenous peoples is the "most glaring blemish on the Canadian historic record." She further states that assimilationist efforts constitute "cultural genocide."

2016

In *Daniels et al. v. Canada*, the Supreme Court rules that Métis and non-status Indigenous peoples are "Indians" within the meaning of s. 91.24 of the **Constitution Act**, 1867. Like the Inuit, they are not included under the **Indian Act**.

2016

Canada officially signs the 2007 UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which recognizes Indigenous peoples' rights to self-determination, cultural practices, land, and security.