

The de facto Crown: The Hudson Bay Company

The **Hudson Bay Company** was chartered on May 2, 1670 and was a consortium of British shareholders including Prince Rupert, cousin to King Charles II. The "Governor and Company of Adventurers of England trading into Hudson Bay" were granted wide powers, including exclusive trading rights in the territory drained by rivers flowing into Hudson Bay. This vast region was named Rupert's Land, an area covering over one-third of today's Canada, and encompassing the ancestral territories of the Cree, Dene, Anishinaabe and other First Nations.

Shortly after its founding, the Company established a small chain of forts along Hudson Bay, and waited for First Nations trappers to arrive each spring with a season's worth of furs. Competition from independent traders and the North West Company forced the Company off the shores of the Bay. They built their first inland fort at Cumberland House in 1774.

First Nations were integral to the success of the Hudson Bay Company from the onset. Traditional First Nation methods of harvesting, preparing, and transporting furs became Company procedure.

Baymen like Henry Kelsey, Samuel Hearne, David Thompson, and Dr. John Rae relied on the support of local First Nations and journeyed with them as part of their seasonal movements. The success and survival of the HBCo. was dependent on the expertise, hard work, and goodwill of First Nations

For two hundred years, 1670 to 1870, the Company expanded their fur-trading empire. Each of the Company's posts, factories, and forts was staffed by a chief factor (head trader) and a variety of salaried employees based on the post's size.

The original charter gave the Company a monopoly over the fur trade in Rupert's Land and they set the 'laws' that governed relationships between the various employees at Company posts and their interactions with First Nations.

By 1821, the Bay's power over Rupert's Land was not just centred on the fur trade. At varying times and in different locations in Western Canada, the HBCo. was given authority over implementing English common law, immigration and settlement, the selling and industrial development of land, resource exploitation, and the construction of transportation infrastructure.



RUPERT'S LAND, 1670

In 1869 the Hudson Bay Company's territories, which comprised virtually all of present-day Canada except for the Maritime Provinces and part of Ontario and Quebec, were sold to the Canadian government in exchange for £300,000. The Company retained blocks of land around its posts and title to 1/20th of the fertile lands (including mineral rights) in western Canada.

I see a monias

For many First Nations in western Canada, the first Europeans they met were fur traders, many who worked for the Hudson Bay Company.

Imagine seeing a European for the first time?

Historians, archaeologists, and oral tradition tell us that at the time of contact in the late 1500's and early 1600's, the average European was shorter than the average First Nations man and was more prone to diseases of poor diet and sanitation.

First impressions of Europeans often described their fair skin, blue eyes, hairy faces, and foul smells.

The terms First Nations used for Europeans can offer us a glimpse of who they met and their views of these newcomers:

Gichi-mookomaan ...
Aninshinaabe
'Big Knife', bayonet, or American

Mooniyaa ...
Aninshinaabe
Newcomer, Caucasian

Bahlei/Balei ...
Denesuline
European, Whiteman

Monias ...
Ininiwak
Newcomer

Moniyawiniw ...
Ininiwak
European, 'Money People', those from Montreal

Mithistowiwak ...
Ininiwak
'hairy-faced', a descriptor used for Europeans

Treaties and the HBCo



The story of the Numbered Treaties is linked inextricably to the HBCo.

Treaty No. 1 was made at Lower Fort Garry in 1871. The Treaties that followed were modelled after it.

Between 1871 and 1877 seven Treaties were negotiated between First Nations and the Crown. Treaties Nos. 1 through 6 were all made at Hudson Bay Company posts.

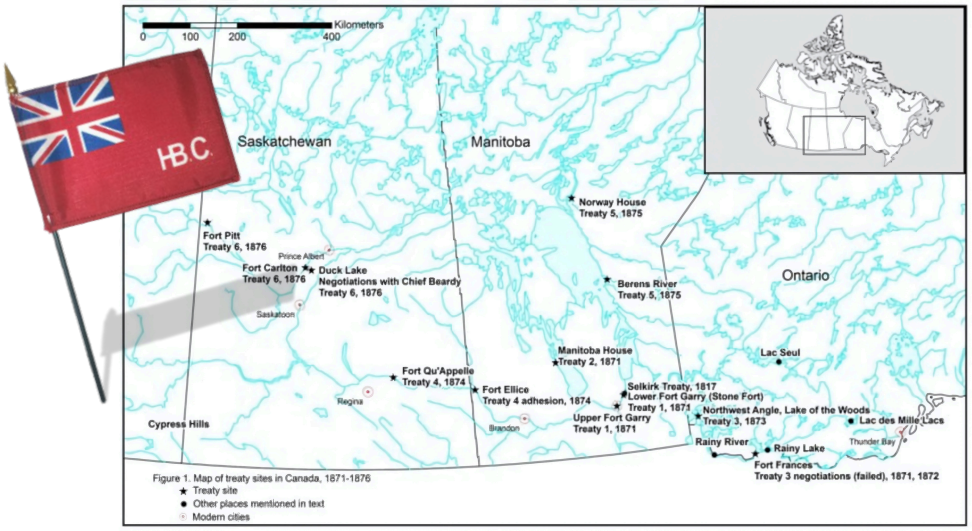
Several of the Commissioners had direct ties to the HBCo. Wemyss M. Simpson, Commissioner at Treaty No. 1 and No. 2, was the cousin of the Company governor, George Simpson. James McKay, present at Treaties No. 1 and No. 5, was an ex-Bayman.

W.J. Christie, the Commissioner for Treaty 4, was an ex-Chief Factor. At Fort Ellice, Company officer Archibald McDonald, oversaw the proceedings.

The Company's steamer, Colvile was used to transport the Commissioners to the communities who entered Treaty 5. When the two Treaty trips were completed, the Commissioners wrote that they were indebted to the HBCo. officers at the various posts.

The immediate years following the making of the Numbered Treaties, First Nations assembled at standing Hudson Bay Company posts to receive Treaty annuities and strengthen and renew the Treaty relationship between First Nations and the Crown.

Steamboat Colvile moored at Norway House, Manitoba, about 1880



Treaties 1 – 6 were made at or near Hudson Bay Company posts.

No. 1: Lower Fort Garry

No. 2: Manitoba House

No. 3: Northwest Angle/Fort Frances

No 4: Fort Qu'Appelle, Fort Ellice

No. 5: Norway House

No. 6: Fort Carlton, Fort Pitt

LOWER FORT GARRY

Treaty No. 1 was made at Lower Fort Garry on August 3, 1871. A National Historic Site, Lower Fort Garry was built for HBCo. Governor George Simpson between 1831 and 1846. Schooners linked Norway House to the Fort which was a focus for industry and transport in the lower Red River Settlement. After 1870 the Fort was used as a federal prison and the first training base for North West Mounted Police.

FORT ELLICE

Fort Ellice was built in 1831 by the Hudson's Bay Company replacing early posts built by the rival North West Company. Manitoba First Nations signed an adhesion to Treaty No. 4, which was entered into at Fort Qu'Appelle in September 1874, at Fort Ellice. The area today is managed by the Nature Conservancy of Canada in cooperation with Waywayseecappo First Nation.

NORWAY HOUSE

Norway House was designated a National Historic Site in 1954. It was established between 1825 and 1826 as the Bay's principle inland depot. In 1875 Treaty No. 5 was made there. It was also the site where the Rev. James Evans created the Cree Syllabic System. Surviving buildings including the Archway Warehouse (1839-1841), the Gaol (1855-1856), and the Powder Magazine (1837-1838).

In 2002, Cree attorney Sharon H. Venne wrote when the Rupert's Land transfer took place, chiefs sent a message to the Crown:

> 'They stated that the Hudson Bay Company could not gain control of their lands through its trading activities. These lands belonged to the Indigenous Peoples who demanded that the Crown respect their rights before moving into their territory. ... They wanted the Crown to determine the exact nature of its agreement with the Hudson Bay Company, which was undertaken without the consent of Indigenous Peoples...'

Looking back today, we know that the Hudson Bay Company was a major player in the making of the Numbered Treaties. We also know that there are important unresolved issues in both law and history. Questions surrounding sovereignty, inherent rights, and boundaries, that began before Treaty No. 1 continue to have lasting impacts in the 21st century.

Sources:
Frances Anne Hopkins, *Shooting the Rapids* (1879), Library and Archives Canada, Acc. No. 1989-401-2;
Northern Pacific Views published by F. Jay Haynes, Fargo, D.T. (Reproduction from Hudson Bay Company Archives);
Sheldon Krasowski, *Mediating the Numbered Treaties: Eyewitness Accounts of Treaties Between the Crown and Indigenous Peoples, 1871-1876* (2011), University of Regina
Sharon H. Venne, "*Understanding Treaty 6: An Indigenous Perspective*," in Michael Asch, ed. Aboriginal and Treaty Rights in Canada: Essays on Law, Equality, and Respect for Difference (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1997, 2002), p. 184.

Share Your Understandings

Complete the questions below as instructed. Be sure to use complete, detailed sentences and explanations.

1. Treaties were made between First Nations and the Crown. 'The Crown' is the legal name for the British and later Canadian federal, provincial and territorial governments.

- Define the word *de facto*.

- In what ways was the Hudson Bay Company the de facto government in western and northern Canada between 1670 and 1870?

2. Give examples of how First Nations were integral to the success of the Hudson Bay Company.

3. Make a list of ways that the HBCo and the making of the Numbered Treaties are connected. Share your list with a partner.

