

Timeline History of Aboriginal Peoples in British Columbia

Selected times and events important in the history of Aboriginal peoples in British Columbia



B.C. Archives G-04989

Pre-contact

Aboriginal settlements with increasingly complex cultures exist in all areas of British Columbia.

1492

...Portugese Corte Real seizes 50 Aboriginals, perhaps Micmac, from the Canadian Maritimes and sells them for slaves in Lisbon, and a French ship brings seven Aboriginal men...to France as curiosities...three Aboriginal men, hawks, and an eagle are taken to England for display..." (Kehoe: 1981, p. 228)

1620

The Recollets, a religious order from France, establish the first residential school near Quebec City.

1763

The Royal Proclamation of 1763 is issued by King George III. The proclamation recognizes Aboriginal tribes as owning their lands under British sovereignty in North America. The Crown must sign treaties with individual Aboriginal nations before acquiring lands for European settlement. (TFN)

1778

Captain Cook lands on the coast of BC and claims the land for Britain.

1793

George Vancouver makes contact with Nisga'a.

1849

Vancouver Island is established as a British colony. The crown grants the land to the Hudson's Bay Company, which becomes effectively wedded to the Crown. (TFN)

1850

James Douglas makes a series of 14 land purchases from Aboriginal peoples. The Douglas Treaties cover approximately 576 square kilometres of land on Vancouver Island. Aboriginal peoples are paid in blankets and promised the rights to hunt on unsettled lands and to carry on fisheries "as formerly." A policy is set to allow no more than 10 acres of reserve land per Aboriginal family—settlers are allowed 320 acres.

1858

Mainland of BC is declared a colony of Britain.

1859

New Westminster becomes the first capital of BC.

1862

Smallpox epidemic ravages Aboriginal people in BC. The Haida are almost wiped out, losing up to 80% of their kin. The Wet'suwet'en and Gitksan lose 30% of their kin. Smallpox spreads from Bella Coala to Nagwuntl'oo. One-third of the people die. The following excerpt appears in the writings of Father Morice. "...I myself saw the graves of perhaps 500 Aboriginals. Two white men...went and stealthily gathered the blankets of the dead, which had been thrown away in the bush, and were therefore infested with smallpox, which they sold out again to the Aboriginal people without revealing their origin, thus causing

a second visitation of the plague, which carried off the second third of the Aboriginal population..." (Morice p. 317).

1864

Tsilhko't'en bands declare war on the white invaders for the spread of smallpox (The Chilcotin War). They kill 13 survey workers and another three packers near Nimpo Lake. Soldiers representing the Colonial government take eight Tsilhko't'en prisoners and bring them to Quesnel BC. As a result, five Tsilhko't'en are executed by hanging (Birchwater) and (Morice, 1978, p. 320).

Joseph Trutch heads Aboriginal Policy and states: "The Indians have really no right to the lands they claim, nor are they of any actual value or utility to them, and I cannot see why they should...retain these lands to the prejudice of the general interest of the colony." (TFN)

1867

British North American Act (BNA) creates Canada, giving jurisdiction of lands and resources to the provinces. The federal government becomes responsible for Aboriginal people. (TFN)

1868

The new Canadian parliament passes an "Act for Gradual Civilization of Indian Peoples". The *Indian Act* becomes a key legislative tool for assimilation:

1. Creating vastly reduced "reserve" lands that do not reflect the traditional tribal territories of the Aboriginal nations.
2. Creating puppet "band councils" which replace and undermine the authority of traditional tribal governments.
3. Defining who is an "Indian" under the *Indian Act*. (Monet et al.)



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1871

British Columbia joins Confederation. (TFN)

1874

Indian Act becomes law. The act consolidates all previous Indian legislation, defines Indian status, and gives the superintendent general administrative powers over many aspects of Indian life.

1878

Canadian government interferes with Aboriginal fishing rights by prohibiting the use of nets in freshwater and by making a distinction between food and commercial fishing. (TFN)

1881

Chief Mountain leads a Nisga'a protest delegation to Victoria.

1884

An amendment to the *Indian Act* prohibits the potlatch and the sundance. The first conviction under the law comes in 1890, and it is enforced on a large scale in the 1920s. The law is rescinded in 1951.

1889

The *Federal Fisheries Act*, prohibits Aboriginal people from selling fish or owning fishing licences. Aboriginals who work for fish companies are paid five cents per fish; whites are paid ten cents a fish (Monet et al.).

1893

Assimilation of Aboriginal people of Canada continues through the residential school system. The superintendent of Aboriginal Affairs makes clear the federal

government's intent to destroy Aboriginal language and lifeways. "...in boarding or industrial schools the pupils are removed for a long period from the leading of this uncivilized life and receive constant care and attention. It is therefore in the interests of the Aboriginal people that these institutions should be kept in an efficient state as it is in their success that the solution of the Aboriginal problem lies." (Monet et al.)

1899

Treaty 8 is signed with the Beaver, Cree, and Dene Indians located in the Peace River District of the province.

1906-1913

Delegations from several Native nations travel to Victoria, Ottawa, and London, England, regarding land rights.

1912

The federal and provincial governments agree that a Royal commission should re-examine the size of every reserve.

1913

The *McKenna-McBride Commission* is established to address the question of Indian reserves. Hereditary chiefs insist on talking about their territories and reject the idea of reserves. Reserve lands are downsized, becoming known as "cut-off lands." (TFN)

1915

Aboriginal groups of British Columbia form Allied Tribes of BC to pursue Aboriginal rights. (TFN)

1920

McKenna-McBride recommendation is implemented.

1921

The Judicial Committee of the Privy Council, the highest court of Canada, rules that Aboriginal title is a pre-existing right that "must be presumed to have continued unless the contrary is established." (TFN)

The Dene people sign *Treaty 11* in the Northwest Territories after white owners from South Africa (Boer War veterans) are awarded scrip, get a court order to remove Wet'suwet'en Jean Baptiste from his land, near Tyee Lake, at Telkwa BC. He barricades himself in his home and threatens to kill anyone who tries to remove him. As a result, the Department of Indian Affairs creates Jean Baptiste Reserve No. 28 (Monet et al.).

1922

The RCMP seizes over 600 objects in a "potlatch" raid at Alert Bay, on Vancouver Island and divides the spoils between the Royal Ontario Museum, in Toronto, and the National Museum, in Ottawa (Monet et al.). Some of the participants are jailed.

1927

A joint parliamentary committee in Ottawa finds that land claims have no basis. The committee also recommends a prohibition on the raising of money for land claims.

1931

Native Brotherhood of BC is formed.



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B.C. Archives E-03012



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1947

Returning Aboriginal war veterans are denied the benefits their non-Aboriginal counterparts receive. Having left their Aboriginal group of origin to fight for Canada, they are stripped of their Aboriginal status and become known as non-status Indians. They are therefore denied standard Department of Indian Affairs benefits. (TFN)

1947

BC Indians receive the right to vote in provincial elections. Frank Calder is elected to the provincial legislature.

1950

The *Indian Act* is amended, and laws prohibiting the potlatch, the sundance, and land claims activities are repealed.

1955

Nisga'a Land Committee is re-established as Nisga'a Tribal Council.

1960

Aboriginal people are given the right to vote in federal elections.

Phasing out of Indian residential schools begins.

1969

Jean Chretien and Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau put together the White Paper policy, which proposes to repeal the *Indian Act* and amends the Canadian Constitution to eliminate all references to Aboriginal people. Because of organized Aboriginal resistance, Trudeau is forced to shelve the White Paper, and consult with Aboriginal people about their rights. (Monet et al.)

1973

The Supreme Court of Canada, in the Calder decision rules that the Nisga'a held Aboriginal title before settlers arrived, but the court is split evenly on the questions of the continuing existence of that title. The Canadian government adopts a comprehensive land-claims policy.

1976

The federal government begins negotiations with Nisga'a peoples.

1982

The *Canadian Constitution, Section 35*, affirms existing Aboriginal and treaty rights. (TFN)

1985

Bill C-31, enacted by Parliament, restores to native women status and band membership, lost under section 12(1) (b) of the *Indian Act*. The bill also restores status to their children. Bands gain control over membership.

1987

Native Affairs Secretariat is created by the Government of BC.

Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en tribal nations launch a legal action in the BC Supreme Court, claiming right of ownership jurisdiction to their ancestral lands. The case is known as Delgamuukw.

1988

Native Affairs Secretariat becomes BC Ministry of Native Affairs.

1990-1991

The chief justice of the Supreme Court of British Columbia, Allen McEachern, dismisses most of the plaintiffs' claim in Delgamuukw, and agrees with the BC government's counterclaim. In a 400-page "Reasons for Judgement," Chief Justice McEachern writes that the Wet'suwet'en and Gitksan Chiefs have a romantic view of the past, and that the life of the people, prior to European arrival, was "nasty, brutish, and short." An appeal is launched at the B.C. Court of Appeal. (TFN)

1992

BC Canada, and First Nations Summit establish BC Treaty Commission agreement. (TFN)

April 1993

A United Nations Human Rights Commission report condemns Justice McEachern's 1991 ruling as having an "ethnocentric" bias. The UN report on Aboriginal treaty rights says the BC Judge's ruling is proof that "deeply rooted Western ethnocentric criteria are still widely shared in present-day judiciary reasoning." The report's author, a UN human rights investigator, says in an interview with *Globe and Mail* that the McEachern decision is "'unfortunate,' one-sided, and based upon misunderstanding of Aboriginal culture." "This (misunderstanding) is something that has to be destroyed systematically," he says. (TFN)



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June 1993

Five judges at the BC Court of Appeal overturn McEachern's ruling that Aboriginal Rights were extinguished, and rules that Aboriginal Rights were not extinguished before or after confederation, and that they are protected by the constitution. (TFN)

1996

The Nisga'a Agreement in Principle is initialled and signed by representatives of the Nisga'a Tribal Council, and the federal, and BC governments. (TFN)

1998

Supreme Court ruling on Delgamuukw: A new trial must be held because the oral histories of the Gitksan-Wet'suwet'en are not assessed correctly.

An apology comes from the federal government for its treatment of Aboriginal peoples, based on the recommendations of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal peoples.

The Nisga'a Final Agreement is initialled. (To become a treaty, the agreement must be ratified by the Province of BC, the Nisga'a Tribal Council, and the Government of Canada).

2001

BC Treaty Referendum. Despite the protests of BC's Aboriginal leaders and the federal government, in Spring 2002, British Columbians received a mail-in ballot from the Campbell government, asking them to vote Yes or No on eight questions related to the treaty process.

2008

Prime Minister Stephen Harper, official apology to the former students of Indian Residential Schools, on behalf of the Government of Canada, June 11, 2008.

2009

Prime Minister Harper claims, "We also have no history of colonialism," at a press conference during the G20 Summit in Pittsburgh, USA.

2010

Bill C-3 restores status under the Indian Act to grandchildren of Aboriginal women who lost their status through marriage to non-Aboriginal men.

2011

While other churches issued formal apologies for their participation in the Residential School System between 1986 and 1994, the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops continues to refuse to issue a formal apology.

2012

The interim report of the TRC reveals a lack of cooperation on the part of federal government and its failure to provide full access to documents requested by the commission.

2015

The final report for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission is released at the closing ceremony in Ottawa. "I think as commissioners we have concluded that cultural genocide is probably the best description of what went on here [in Canada]."

"It is precisely because education was the primary tool of oppression of Aboriginal people, and mis-education of all Canadians that we have concluded that education holds the key to reconciliation."

—The Honourable
Justice Murray Sinclair

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