

3 Created reserves

1876 TO PRESENT DAY

Reserves were regarded for much of the 19th century as places for Indians to be confined until they became "civilized." Once they had learned "proper habits" of industry and thrift, they could then be released (enfranchised, in the language of Indian legislation from this period) into the general society as full citizens with equal rights and responsibilities, taking with them a proportional share of reserve assets.

A reserve is a tract of land set aside under the *Indian Act* and treaty agreements for the exclusive use of an Indian band. At least that's how a reserve is described on paper. In reality, reserves were created as a means of containing and controlling Indians while providing European settlers full access to the fish and game, water, timber, and mineral resources that had formerly sustained Indian life and culture.

Early examples of reserves date back to attempts by French missionaries in 1637 to encourage Indians to settle in one spot and embrace both agriculture and Christianity. The settlers wanted to establish farms and communities and began cutting timber to open up the land for agriculture and availing themselves of fish and game. It became apparent to the authorities that an effective means was needed to ensure the most fertile land and access to resources was available to European farmers.

Two of the goals of the government under John A. Macdonald were to lure European settlers to Canadian soil and to build a railway linking the west coast with Ottawa. The government needed access to the land for

settlement and development. Standing in the government's way were hundreds of Indigenous communities comprised of thousands of people living their traditional lives on their traditional lands. Reserves met the government's need to contain and relocate communities that stood in the way of making room for settlers. In a letter to Adams George Archibald, the Lieutenant-Governor of Manitoba, on November 18, 1870, Prime Minister John A. Macdonald wrote:

Sir, We are looking anxiously for your report as to Indian titles both within Manitoba and without; and as to the best means of extinguishing [terminating] the Indian titles in the valley of Saskatchewan. Would you kindly give us your views on that point, officially and unofficially? We should take immediate steps to extinguish the Indian titles somewhere in the Fertile Belt in the valley of Saskatchewan, and open it for settlement. There will otherwise be an influx of squatters who will seize upon the most eligible positions and greatly disturb the symmetry [organization] of future surveys.¹⁴

Reserves were either a portion of Indigenous Peoples' traditional land or they were tracts of land far away from their traditional lands. There wasn't a consistent formula for designating land to a band. For example, Treaties 1 and 2 used the ratio of 160 acres per family of five; Treaties 3 to 11 allocated 640 acres per family of five. In British Columbia, the ratio was an average of 20 acres granted per family. Moses Smith of the Nuu-chah-nulth Nation in Port Alberni, BC, expressed his frustration with the reserve system to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal People:

We got absolutely the short end of the stick. And to quote what was said, what was said of us, we, as Nuu-chah-nulth people, "These people, they don't need the land. They make their livelihood from the sea"... So, here we have just mere little rock piles on the west coast of Vancouver Island, the territory of the Nuu-chah-nulth Nation. Rock piles! Rock piles!¹⁵

The reality for the bands under the reserve system was they lost land, which constricted their ability to hunt, trap, fish, and harvest traditional foods to sustain themselves. The scarcity of traditional foods combined with the introduction of foreign foodstuffs, the change in lifestyle, and exposure to European viruses and diseases caused Indians' immune systems to weaken and made them more vulnerable to malnourishment and disease.

Indigenous people were also forced into European style homes that were inappropriate for the traditional concept of family and often inappropriate for the climate. Traditional dwellings were contingent on the environment and on food-gathering or hunting traditions. The European, single family-style housing was counter to the tradition of community collectivity of many Indigenous cultures in which a number of families lived together with open space for meeting, eating, and practising spirituality. It must be understood that the houses are owned by the federal government, not the people who live in them.

Some communities were removed altogether from their traditional lands, breaking their connection to the land that was part of their history, culture, and identity. In other words, all they had known all their lives was gone

and they were left facing a future impoverished, malnourished, vulnerable to disease, and controlled by the Crown.

4 Encouraged voluntary and enforced enfranchisement

1876 TO 1985

The ultimate purpose of enfranchisement (loss of status rights) was to encourage assimilation and to reduce the number of Indians the federal government was financially responsible for—to get “rid of the Indian problem.” It needs to be recognized that “status Indians” were not considered “people” according to Canadian laws and did not become “people” until the *Indian Act* was revised in 1951.

Prior to 1951, the *Indian Act* defined a “person” as “an individual other than an Indian.” An Indigenous person’s only avenue to being recognized as a “person” was to give up their Indian status, which was known as voluntary enfranchisement. Once they were “people” they assumed all the rights other Canadians enjoyed, but it also meant they gave up associated legal rights, benefits, and restrictions of being a status Indian. A less apparent objective of enfranchisement was to break up reserve land, undermine the collective worldview of the people, and promote the adoption of a European worldview of individual rights. It had the potential to be a slow dismemberment of land and culture.

Indian men over the age of 21 who were deemed sober and industrious could apply for enfranchisement. If they qualified, they would receive an allotment of land carved from their home reserve; after three years, they would