

Aboriginal Peoples circa 1823

Abstract

This map shows the distribution of Aboriginal peoples at the height of British rule when the Hudson's Bay Company dominated the fur trade. Ethnohistorical societies are identified on the map by the major linguistic family to which they belong. Ethnohistorical societies are Aboriginal peoples that were known by name and location to Europeans early in the nineteenth century. A linguistic family code identifies each ethnohistorical society on the map and is used to reference specific information for each ethnohistorical society.

ABORIGINAL PEOPLES IN CANADA circa 1823 depicts an early nineteenth century European view of the Aboriginal population in Canada. The year 1823 was selected for this map because unusually complete population and locational data are available for a large part of Canada from a census ordered by the Governor and Committee of the Hudson's Bay Company in 1822.

In the early 1820s the aboriginal population of what is now Canada stood at about 150 000, a significant drop from the 200 000 estimated for the 1740s and 250 000 estimated for the early 1630s. Up to the late 18th century this decline was largely due to epidemic diseases and to a lesser extent warfare. As the 19th century progressed, disease continued to take a dreadful toll across Canada, but starvation increasingly manifested itself in the eastern parts of the country where the spread of European settlement, overhunting and overtrapping were changing the Aboriginal subsistence base.

Hudson's Bay Company 1822 Census of the Aboriginal Population

In 1821, the Northwest Company and the Hudson's Bay Company, the last remaining major fur companies in British North America, merged after many years of fierce competition. This merger made it necessary to take stock of posts, personnel, transportation systems, and fur and food resources in the vast territory now under monopoly control. This reappraisal was needed in order to rationalize the fur trade into a profitable system based on a sustained yield.



The North West Company house on Vaudreuil Street, Montreal. The company was first formed in the 1770s by a group of fur merchants.

Source: Courtesy of National Archives of Canada / C-29925.

One aspect of this reappraisal was a census of the Aboriginal population ordered on February 27, 1822, by the Governor and Committee of the Hudson's Bay Company. In accordance with these instructions, George Simpson, Governor of the Company's Northern Department, issued a directive to the traders in the various districts:

"...to furnish particular reports of the general total of Indians within their jurisdiction; particularizing the Tribes, Chiefs, Heads of Families and followers, with the District of Country in which they hunt..."

By the end of 1823, most officers of the Company had complied; some in astonishing detail. Since the above was made a standing order, additional information was gathered with the expansion of trade into new areas or as traders gained greater familiarity with the various aboriginal groups with whom they had contact. Although the individual enumerations and estimates by the traders were never compiled into a comprehensive report, the data were used by the Company in its planning process.

Distribution and Location of Aboriginal Peoples circa 1823

The period of time covered by the map is one of enormous regional contrasts:

- The Atlantic Coast
- Lower and Upper Canada
- The Western Interior
- Athapaskan Groups in the North
- The West Coast
- The Northeast

The factors that eventually led to the transformation of Aboriginal peoples from self-directed entities to a state of poverty and dependence are plainly visible in the early 19th century, particularly in eastern and central Canada.

In the main, these factors were related to the close relationship all the aboriginal groups had with their resource base. Either singly or most often in combination, the following factors eroded the basis for their traditional lives:

- the destruction of part of their food supply, particularly big game which also provided clothing
- the destruction of valuable fur bearers which could have been exchanged for necessities
- the restriction of seasonal movements due to European settlement
- the lack of opportunity to undertake migration to resource-rich areas
- the painfully slow, often unsuccessful adoption of new subsistence strategies on small parcels of unproductive land

Once the original relationship with the land was broken, and especially once groups lost most of the land they once controlled, they were left vulnerable to social disintegration and transformation.

The Atlantic Coast

Through the European settled parts of Eastern Canada, Aboriginal peoples lived in small groups, had small families and lived on small parcels of land. On the Atlantic coast large game and fur bearers had been destroyed and traditional Aboriginal seasonal movements to alternative resources had been disrupted by European settlement.

Cut off from coastal resources through European settlement, and decimated by disease and hostile encounters with settlers, the Beothuk of Newfoundland were nearing extinction. Shanawdithit, the last-known Beothuk in 1823 was captured with her mother and sister at the point of starvation and brought to St. John's, where all three died from tuberculosis.



Portrait of Demasduit (Mary March), Painted in 1819 by Lady Hamilton

Demasduit was one of the last-known Beothuks in Newfoundland. She was captured in 1818. During the capture her husband was killed. Brought to St. John's she died of tuberculosis in 1820 before she could be returned to her people. She was the aunt of Shanawdithit.

Source: Courtesy of National Archives of Canada, Ottawa, Ontario and Dr. Ralph Pastore, Memorial University of Newfoundland, St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador.

With few exceptions, the Micmac and Maliseet were destitute and confined to reserves or to undesirable areas where the transition to agriculture was difficult, especially for a people who had no prior experience in such a spatially-restrictive way of life. Winter starvation and freezing were common because game animals, the traditional source for winter food and clothing, were gone.

Lower and Upper Canada

Along the St. Lawrence River, in the settled parts of Lower Canada, Aboriginal conditions were marginally better than those in the East Coast because most groups practiced some agriculture. In contrast to the St. Lawrence lowlands and the Atlantic Coast where Aboriginal groups were of similar linguistic origin and had lived in these areas for hundreds of years, in Southern Ontario all but the Ojibwa groups and some of the Ottawa and Wyandot were refugees from the newly-created United States.



Sketches of Algonquian Indians working with a canoe and beaver trap along Lake Huron, Ontario

Source: Courtesy of T.M. Martin / National Archives of Canada / C-90370.

Most of the southern Ontario groups were traditionally agriculturists. Part of their food quest, the part contributed mainly by men through hunting, fishing and trapping, was gradually being curtailed by European settlement. The more mobile Algonquian groups began to practice some agriculture, but, for the most part, they still moved seasonally north of the settled areas for fishing and hunting. Still master of their land, the Algonquian groups of northern Ontario and Quebec had been involved in the fur economy for over 200 years.

The most complex of the Upper Canada settlements was the Six Nations Reserve which contained large fragments of what had once been nine distinct societies speaking three different languages and a number of dialects. Among their many problems, these groups also had to develop social and political institutions that would permit them to live together with a minimum of strife.

By the early 1800s, fur and game resources were exhausted creating severe winter food shortages. In central Quebec, seasonal movements were undertaken to northern caribou grounds, and in both areas the Aboriginal peoples turned increasingly to small game.

These changes in the resource base required that winter hunting groups become smaller and operate in greater isolation from one other. Along the international border west of Lake Superior, the Ojibwa were expanding along the fringe of the forest toward the large game resources of the grasslands, a movement fiercely resisted by the Dakota.

The Western Interior

In the western interior, food animals were still plentiful enough to be hunted on the prairie (bison, elk and pronghorn antelope), and on the tundra (caribou). On the Prairie edge and in the northern woodlands overhunting was beginning to cause a decline in bison, moose and caribou. Beaver stocks were dangerously low everywhere except in the Athabasca country.



Blackfoot Indians Crossing the Bow River, Alberta, by S.P. Hall

Source: Courtesy of S.P. Hall / National Archives of Canada / C-13016.

Cree-Assiniboin expansion along the northwestern edges of the prairies and into the headwaters of the Athabasca River caused some population dislocations of resident Athapaskan speakers. Their increasingly long movements into the grasslands for bison, brought them into frequent and often bloody contact with the fiercely independent Blackfoot.

Although the plains groups had been subject to variety of epidemic diseases, their populations were still resilient enough to recover. Their social institutions were also strong enough to combine a traditional way of life with a trade based on hides, grease and pemmican.

Athapaskan Groups in the North

By the late 18th century, trapping had become an important activity among the more southern Athapaskan groups, and by the 19th century, among the groups along the Mackenzie River. Northwest of this area into what is now Yukon Territory, Aboriginal inhabitants were still outside direct European contact. Throughout the country of the Athapaskans, all Aboriginal groups followed a fairly traditional way of life based on hunting (principally caribou) and fishing, to which trapping had been added as part of the normal seasonal cycle.



Photograph of Athapaskan women's costumes and ornaments

Source: Courtesy of Treasury Gallery, Museum of Civilization, Gatineau, Quebec.

The West Coast

On the West Coast and in the mountainous interior, European contact was relatively recent. The lucrative trade in sea otter pelts had all but disappeared as the animal had been hunted to near extinction, but food resources based on fishing along the coast and fishing and hunting in the interior were still plentiful.



An Indian salmon weir and dugout canoe on the Cowichan River, 1866, a typical native food system along the Pacific coast

Source: Courtesy of Frederick Dally / National Archives of Canada / C-65097.

Throughout the area sedentary village life was common, some with populations up to 1500. Although, epidemic diseases had already reduced some of the aboriginal groups along the coast, this was still the most densely populated area of Aboriginal peoples in Canada.

The Northeast

Only the Inuit groups on the Labrador coast, eastern Baffin Island and the Caribou Inuit south of Chesterfield Inlet had steady contact with Europeans. Hunting of sea mammals was important everywhere, supplemented regionally by caribou and fishing. It is doubtful if direct or indirect contact had much of an impact on any of the Inuit groups at this time except for those on the Labrador coast and the shores of Hudson Bay. Similarly, the Naskapi in the northern interior of Quebec, who were mainly caribou hunters, had very little contact with Europeans.



Seal hunting by the Inuit included waiting and listening at seal-holes on the ice, as portrayed by Captain G. Lyon during a search for the North West Passage, 1821 to 1823

Source: Courtesy of George Francis Lyon / National Archives of Canada / C-1044.

Map Sources

Distribution of Ethnohistorical Societies circa 1823

The location of the ethnohistorical societies was determined primarily through nineteenth century written accounts and maps. Natural Resources Canada. 1990. Canada-Native Peoples 1823 [map]. Fifth Edition, National Atlas of Canada.

Extent of Areas Known to Europeans circa 1823

The approximate extent of the areas known to census takers. Most of the census data is from a census ordered by the Governor and Committee of the Hudson's Bay Company in 1822. Areas outside represent the extent of areas unknown to Europeans. Natural Resources Canada. 1990. Canada-Native Peoples 1823 [map]. Fifth Edition, National Atlas of Canada.

Major Linguistic Families circa 1823

The major linguistic families are mapped using graduated circles to represent their estimated population circa 1823. Their location was determined primarily through nineteenth century written accounts and maps. Natural Resources Canada. 1990. Canada-Native Peoples 1823 [map]. Fifth Edition, National Atlas of Canada.

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Previously known as the National Inventories, provides access to information on millions of museum objects, natural history specimens and archaeological sites. (Artefacts Canada)

Canadian Museum of Civilization. First Peoples. The Haida
<http://www.civilization.ca/aborig/haida/haindex.html>
The Haida: Children of the Eagle and the Raven by Dr. George F. MacDonald.

Canadian Museum of Civilization. First Peoples. The Inuvialuit of the Western Arctic: From Ancient Times to 1902
<http://www.civilization.ca/aborig/inuvial/indexe.html>
History of the Inuvialuit of the Western Arctic.

Canadian Museum of Civilization. Virtual Museum of New France

<http://www.civilization.ca/aborig/inuvial/indexe.html>

The Virtual Museum of New France (VMNF) sponsored by the Canadian Museum of Civilization has information of that period of history in which the French explored North America and founded there the colony of New France.

Canadian Museum of Civilization. Virtual Museum of New France. People. Coureurs-de-bois

<http://www.civilisations.ca/vmnf/popul/coureurs/index-en.htm>

Information on the people involved in the fur trade in New France. (Canadian Museum of Civilization)

Government of Canada. Canada's Digital Collections. Aboriginal Digital Collections

<http://collections.ic.gc.ca/e/adc.asp>

Gateway to web sites of Canadian Aboriginal images and information, created by Aboriginal youth with funding from Industry Canada.

Government of Canada. Canada's Digital Collections. The Acadian Odyssey: History of Acadia

<http://collections.ic.gc.ca/acadian/intro/intro.htm>

The history of Acadia and the Acadian Experience in Canada

Government of Canada. Indian Land Claims Commission

<http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/al/ldc/ccl/index-eng.asp>

Includes information on treaties and other important Aboriginal documents.

Library and Archives Canada. Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online

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Location Maps of Hudson Bay Company's Posts

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Post-Contact Beothuk History

http://www.heritage.nf.ca/aboriginal/beo_hist.html

History of the Beothuk post-European contact. (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador and Memorial University)

The Boyd's Cove Beothuk Site

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Archaeological site in Newfoundland. (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador and Memorial University)

The Mi'kmaq (Micmac)

<http://www.heritage.nf.ca/aboriginal/mikmaq.html>

Information on the Micmac. (Newfoundland and Labrador Heritage)

Municipal Government

The Beaver

http://www.gov.edmonton.ab.ca/comm_services/city_op_attractions/fort/1846/made_beaver_system.html

History of the beaver as a form of currency of the Fur trade. (City of Edmonton, Alberta)

Other

1755 - The French and Indian War

<http://web.syr.edu/~laroux/index.html>

This site is dedicated to the French Soldiers who came to New France between 1755 and 1760 to fight in the French and Indian War. This conflict was fought, in the most part, in the Lake George, Lake Champlain region of New York, at Québec (City), and at Montréal.

Aboriginal Languages of Canada

<http://www.ethnologue.com/>

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A History of the Northwest Coast

<http://www.hallman.org/indian/.www.html>

First person accounts from the European/Indian contact period on the NW Coast. (by Bruce Hallam)

Algonquin

<http://www.tolatsga.org/alg.html>

History of the Algonquin. (Compact Histories of Native Tribes of the U.S. and Canada)

An Introduction of Ojibwa Culture and History

<http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Acropolis/5579/ojibwa.html>

Written by Kevin Callahan. (University of Minnesota)

Canadian Heritage Gallery

<http://www.canadianheritage.com/index2.htm>

The Canadian Heritage Gallery is a very extensive collection of historical Canadiana on the Internet.

Compact Histories of Native Tribes of the US and Canada

<http://www.dickshovel.com/up.html>

When completed these "histories" will encompass approximately 240 tribal histories (from contact to 1900). They include histories of many Canadian Aboriginal Peoples.

Dakota

<http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Acropolis/5579/dakota.html>

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Fox

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Gros Ventre

<http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Troy/6045/textpage1.html>

Short history of the Gros Ventre. (The Gros Ventre of Montana)

Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump Interpretive Centre. Blackfoot History

<http://www.head-smashed-in.com/black.html>

Brief history of the Blackfoot.

Historical Atlas of Canada Online Learning Project

<http://www.historicalatlas.ca/website/hacolp/>

This site is still under development but promises to be an excellent site for historical maps of Canada. All maps shown on the site have been adapted from the printed version of three-volume Historical Atlas of Canada.

Huron

<http://www.tolatsga.org/hur.html>

History of the Huron. (Compact Histories of Native Tribes of the U.S. and Canada)

Iroquois

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Oneida

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Brief history of the Oneida Indians. (Oneida Indian Nations)

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Information on the trade of pemmican in the western interior. (The Métis Nation)

Petun

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<http://www.rom.on.ca/programs/activities/longhouse/longhouse1.php>

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<http://www.humanities.mcmaster.ca/~pjohnson/six.html>

Brief history of the Six Nations. (McMaster University)

The Canadian Institute for Historical Microreproductions (CIHM)

<http://www.canadiana.org/marc/>

The Canadian Institute for Historical Microreproductions (CIHM) was established in 1978 to locate early printed Canadian materials (books, annuals, and periodicals), to preserve their content on microfilm, and make the resulting Early Canadian Research Collection available to libraries and archives in Canada and abroad.

The Fur Trade - The Hudson's Bay Company and Northwest Company

<http://www.geocities.com/SoHo/Atrium/4832/hudson3.html>

Concise history of the two rival trading companies. (The Metis Nation)

The Hudson's Bay Company Archives

<http://www.gov.mb.ca/chc/archives/hbca/index.html>

The HBCA offers a wealth of information on the human and natural history of western and northern Canada and the western USA. Whether you are an historian, genealogist, ethnologist, environmental scientist or land claims researcher, the HBCA may be able to help.

The Iroquois Wars

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University of Waterloo. Faculty of Arts. Department of Anthropology. Archaeology in Arctic North America

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Site includes information on Thule and Dorset Culture. (University of Waterloo, Ontario)

University of Western Ontario. Faculty of Social Science. Association of Canadian Map Libraries and Archives (ACMLA)

<http://www.ssc.uwo.ca/assoc/acml/>

ACMLA actively serves as the representative professional group for Canadian map librarians, cartographic archivists and others interested in geographic information in all formats.

University of Western Ontario. London Museum of Archaeology

<http://www.uwo.ca/museum/>

The London Museum of Archaeology is a unique Canadian museum devoted to the study, display, and interpretation of the human occupation of Southwestern Ontario over the past 11,000 years.

Winnebago History

<http://www.dickshovel.com/win.html>

History of the Winnebago. (Compact Histories of Native Tribes of the U.S. and Canada)

Wyandot

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Information on the Wyandot nations of Kansas. (Wyandot Nation of Kansas)