

South Slave Métis Nation Declaration

We, the indigenous Métis of the South Slave, affirm that we are a distinct Métis Nation within Canada, with Aboriginal rights to lands, resources and governance throughout our traditional territory.

We hold these rights because we are direct descendants of First Nations and Métis peoples of the Mackenzie and Athabasca river basins. Our Dene and Cree ancestors lived on these lands, which the Creator gave them, and governed themselves according to their own laws and customs, from time before memory.

We have always lived in harmony with nature, in accordance with the Great Law that was given to our Aboriginal ancestors by the Creator. We also lived in harmony with our Dene and Cree relations. We honor our Aboriginal ancestors and relations.

Clearly, we are distinct from First Nations peoples. We, the indigenous Métis of the South Slave, are also direct descendants of the first people of European heritage to reach this region, well before Canada became a nation in 1867.

Before the fall of Québec in 1759, French and mixed-blood "coureurs de bois" traveled into the Athabasca country, living with Dene and Cree families on the land. When North West Company traders explored north to Great Slave Lake in the 1780s, they met the family of the French/Cree "coureur de bois" Francois Beaulieu I and his Chipewyan wife Ethiba.

This family was only one of several Métis families established in the region in the 1700s. Because of their presence, trading companies set up posts in the area of what is now Fort Resolution, beginning in the 1780s. All of the South Slave Métis are descended from one or more of these families.

Beaulieu and his son, Francois Beaulieu II, along with other early Métis families, including the Mandeville, Cayen, Houle, Poitras, Tourangeau, St. Germain, Mercetti and Lafferty families, were vital players in building the country that was to become Canada. Métis played a nationally significant role in northern exploration, the fur trade and Treaty-making. At the same time, our ancestors were creating a new nation of Métis.

Francois Beaulieu I was one of Alexander Mackenzie's voyageurs on his epic journeys down the Mackenzie River to the Arctic Ocean in 1789 and, in 1792, up the Peace River and over the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific Ocean. His brother Jacques was interpreter for explorer/trader Peter Pond.

Francois Beaulieu II and Francois Baptiste "le Camarade" de Mandeville were advisors, guides, hunters and interpreters for Sir John Franklin's successful expeditions to Great Bear Lake and the Arctic Coast. Beaulieu mapped the route to the mouth of the Coppermine River for Franklin, via the Marton and Camsett Rivers and Great Bear Lake. Beaulieu also brought Father Faraut, the first priest north of 60°, to Fort Resolution in 1852.

Beaulieu resisted the Hudson's Bay Company monopoly in Rupert's Land, traveling to trade as far as the Red River settlement in what is now Manitoba. He and his clan were based at Salt River, from where they hunted buffalo, extracted salt from the salt plains for trade, and farmed, as well as operated the trading post. Beaulieu was considered a leader of the Dogrib people north of Great Slave Lake, as well as a trade chief of the Chipewyan south of Great Slave Lake. He traded with the Yellowknives, and as far west as Fort Simpson.

Métis knowledge of the waterways of the region and development of its transportation routes and methods have a solid foundation in Canada's history. We were famous long-distance canoe men, who showed traders new and shorter routes to the fur country. After 1826, we were York boatmen, and captains of brigades. And, from 1883 when steam boats came to the region, we were boat-builders, woodcutters, trackers, deckhands, and pilots like the legendary Johnny Berens.

Some of our ancestors fought in the battles for Métis rights to protect their traditional land on the Prairies. Most of the indigenous Métis of the South Slave were not part of the Red River. Métis resistance, but regarded it as important and kept in touch with events. Maryred Métis statesman Louis Riel is said to be our relative, through the Bouchers, a Chipewyan family of Ile a la Cross, Saskatchewan.

Many times, our Dene and Cree relatives have honored our people by selecting them as spiritual, trade, war or talking chiefs. In 1899 at Fort Chipewyan, influential Métis trader Pierre Mercredi interpreted the Chipewyans' conditions for accepting Treaty 8. In 1900, at Fort Resolution, Michel Mandeville was the interpreter. There, the Chipewyans put forward another respected Métis leader, Pierre Beaulieu, to be their chief. The Treaty Commissioner refused to allow this, because he was Métis and because he refused to accept extinguishment as a condition of the Treaty.

Pierre Mercredi interpreted again during the 1920 Treaty boycott in Fort Resolution, and is credited with using his good offices to help resolve the crisis. This action was typical of the role Métis played throughout our history, as intermediaries and diplomats between the Aboriginal peoples and the Canadian state. Two Métis men, Napoleon Lafferty and Patrice Mercredi, became the only native northerners to be ordained as priests in the Mackenzie-Atlabasca district.

Other Métis helped Canada establish its presence in our territory by working to carry the mail hundreds of miles by dog-team and as buffalo rangers and special constables, enforcing the law in Wood Buffalo National Park and as far east as the Thelon River valley in the Barren Lands. Many of us fought for Canada in the two World Wars and the Korean war, including members of the Louit, Heron, Sanderson, Mercredi and Evans families. More recently, South Slave Métis have been members of the Canadian forces in the Gulf war and Bosnia, and have served as well in peacetime.

We are direct descendants of those people who signed Treaty 8 at Fort Chipewyan, Smith's Landing and Fort Resolution. However, we have never been accorded the benefits of Treaty 8 or recognized as a First Nations people.

We have suffered many of the same wrongs as our First Nations relatives, including attempts by the Government of Canada to take over our lands and resources; to govern our people without consultation and consent; and to eradicate our languages and way of life. Métis suffered as much from government neglect, as interference. Our rights and our very existence as an Aboriginal people were never acknowledged.

We hold the federal government to account for creating inequity in our communities, where none existed before. When Status Indians were permitted by regulation to continue harvesting in Wood Buffalo National Park, we were not. When Status Indians and Inuit had their medical treatment paid for, we did not. We have supported institutions like the Church, the education system and by taking wage employment, but we found ourselves subject to racism and discrimination, often enshrined in government policy. As a result, many of our people were forced to live in hardship. Even now, Métis post-secondary students must either pay taxes on their education grants, or accept a loan, while Status Indian students receive non-taxable grants.