

OAKVILLE GALLERIES AT GAIRLOCH GARDENS

OUTDOOR ART AND HERITAGE TOUR

FULL INDIGENOUS CONTEXT DOCUMENT



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**Darin Wybenga, Traditional Knowledge and Land Use Coordinator,
Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation, Written 02/27/2022**

Long before recorded history, the earliest people moving through the lands of what would become Oakville, were small family groups of nomadic hunters pursuing game such as mammoth and mastodon. Little is known about these ancient people who ranged throughout the landscape in search of sustenance. Archeology, perhaps, will one day shed further light on this period of Oakville's distant past. Far clearer is the Indigenous history of the land in the two centuries prior to the founding of Oakville.

Prior to the British settlement of the land, the land comprising present day Oakville was occupied and controlled by three different First Nation groups; they were respectively: the Wendat, the Haudenosaunee, and the Mississaugas. Although it is unclear as to when the ancestors of the Wendat first arrived on the north shore of Lake Ontario, it is known that they brought with them the ability to cultivate corn and were agriculturalists. The Wendat were a matriarchal society who established longhouse villages and cleared large areas of land for the cultivation of corn, beans, and squash. The Wendat belonged to the Iroquoian linguistic group and ultimately consolidated themselves, during the late 16th century, in the vicinity of Lake Simcoe, a place they called Wendake. From their vantage point in Wendake, the Wendat were able to control and carry on a lively trade with other First Nations throughout Southern Ontario. The advent of the fur trade with the French during the 17th century, as well as their geographic location, enabled the Wendat to act as middlemen in the trade between the French and First Nations groups farther to the west in the Great Lakes Region.

While the Wendat in Southern Ontario were prospering as intermediaries in the trans-Atlantic fur trade, south of Lake Ontario, in what would become New York State, the Haudenosaunee traded beaver pelts with the Dutch. Like the Wendat, the Haudenosaunee were an Iroquoian, matriarchal society living in longhouse villages and cultivating corn. A shortage of beaver pelts and a desire to command greater control of the fur trade led them to invade Southern Ontario and displace the other First Nations of the region. About 1649-50, the Haudenosaunee invaded Southern Ontario dispersing the Wendat and other First Nations and came to regard the lands, including the Oakville area, as their beaver hunting grounds. The Haudenosaunee established a few villages on the north shore of Lake Ontario- most notably near the Humber and Rouge Rivers, but as events would later prove, their occupancy and control of Southern Ontario would not last long.

The fight for control of the fur trade extended into the Upper Great Lakes and eventually involved the Mississaugas, a sub-group of the Ojibway, inhabiting the north shore of Lake Huron and Georgian Bay. Late in the 17th century, the Mississaugas and other allied Great Lakes Nations moved into Southern Ontario and pushed the Haudenosaunee back into their homelands below Lake Ontario. The Haudenosaunee control of Southern Ontario lasted, at best, some 40 years before the Mississaugas took control of the north shore of Lake Ontario. Mississaugas of the Credit ancestors, in particular, established themselves at the head of Lake Ontario.

Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation (MCFN) ancestors now occupied, controlled and exercised stewardship over approximately 4 million acres of lands, waters and resources in Southern Ontario. Their territory extended from the Rouge River Valley westward across to the headwaters of the Thames River, down to Long Point on Lake Erie and then followed along the shoreline of Lake Erie, the Niagara River, and Lake Ontario until arriving at the Rouge River Valley. The Mississaugas made their homes on the flats of rivers and creeks flowing into Lake Ontario. One creek in particular, the Missinnihe, was a favourite of the people who used it and the surrounding area for hunting, fishing, gathering, healing and spiritual purposes. A trading post established in the vicinity by the French circa 1720, enabled MCFN ancestors to trade the pelts they had gathered over the winter for European trade goods. The Missinnihe was later named the Credit River due to the traders' practice of extending credit to MCFN ancestors in the fall and then being repaid the following spring with the winter's harvest of pelts. The people became known to the Europeans as the Mississaugas of the Credit.

Guided by the passing seasons, the people lived lightly on the land as they harvested its bounty. Small and large game was hunted year-round for food and for pelts; other resources would be gathered as they became seasonally available. Spring found families gathered around sugar bushes to tap maple trees, and later, after the ice had melted from the waters, the people moved to their fishing grounds. Summer was the time to plant gardens that would be harvested in the fall. Berries, mushrooms, and other wild foods were gathered throughout the summer months with the harvesting of wild rice occurring in the early fall. The people congregated again at their fishing grounds in autumn to catch and preserve the fish they would consume over the winter months. Breaking into small family groups, the people would then move into winter camps where the men would harvest the thick winter furs of the woodland animals and await the yearly cycle of movement to begin anew.

The spring fishery at the Credit River, 12 and 16 Mile Creeks, as well as other waters flowing into Lake Ontario, provided an opportunity for the Mississaugas to harvest the salmon that swam its waters. A main source of sustenance, the people caught an abundance of the fish prior to the advent of settlers in the region. Harvesting the salmon was often undertaken in the dark of night when the men would venture onto the river and attract the fish, by means of a lit pine torch, within spearing distance of their canoe. Once the fish were taken ashore, they could be used fresh or dried for

later use. The Mississaugas depended on their fisheries for many years and even supplied salmon to early settlers in the nearby town of York.

The American Revolution (1775-1783) was to have far reaching consequences for the Mississaugas of the Credit. The defeat of the British in 1783 brought a flood of Loyalist refugees to the remaining British possessions north of the nascent United States. The Loyalists' hunger for land was great and the Mississaugas agreed to eight treaties with the British Crown between 1781 and 1820. Intending to share the land with the newcomers, the Mississaugas were dismayed to learn the British saw the treaties as outright purchases of their lands. The influx of settlers led to the rapid depletion of fish and game that the people depended on for food. The Mississaugas, hoping to move about their lands freely as they had always done, soon found their pathways blocked by fences and angry farmers that regarded them as trespassers. The erosion of the Mississaugas' land base led to the inability of the people to sustain themselves from their lands and to the collapse of their traditional economy. Additionally, the settlers brought diseases unknown to the Mississaugas that took a heavy toll on their population. The population of the Mississaugas declined by over 60% since the signing of the first treaty in 1781 and the final treaties of 1820.

The negotiations for the Toronto Purchase Treaty, No. 13, were completed on August 1, in 1805; on the very next day negotiations began for the lands that encompass much of Oakville. Known as the Head of the Lake Treaty, the lands covered by this treaty consisted of approximately 71000 acres of land bounded by the present day eastern municipal boundary of Mississauga and the western municipal boundary of Burlington, and a northern boundary that ran six miles back from the shoreline of Lake Ontario. The Mississaugas did reserve for themselves, however, the sole right of fisheries at 12 Mile and 16 Mile Creeks along with the possession of each creek's flats. In addition, they reserved the sole right of fishing on the Credit River and were to retain a one mile strip of land on each of its banks.

It was during the Head of the Lake Treaty negotiations, that Chief Quenepenon, the spokesperson for the Mississaugas, first expressed his people's dissatisfaction with treaty making: *...while Col. Butler was our Father we were told our Father wanted some Land for his people it was some time before we sold it, but when we found it was wanted by the King to settle his people on it, whom we were told would be of great use to us, we granted it accordingly Father- we have not found this so, as the inhabitants drive us away instead of helping us, and we want to know why we are served in that manner... Colonel Butler told us the farmers would help us, but instead of doing so when we encamp on the shore they drive us off and shoot our Dogs and never give us any assistance as was promised to our old Chiefs.* Despite their misgivings, the Mississaugas acquiesced and signed the agreement with the Crown for the some of £1000 of trade goods; the agreement was ratified a year later as Treaty 14.

Hardship continued to dog the Mississaugas in the following years. In 1812, war between Great Britain and America broke out with many of the battles occurring on

Mississaugas of the Credit territory. Fighting on the side of the British, the Mississaugas helped to successfully defend Upper Canada, but nothing could successfully defend them against increasing poverty, sickness, and a continuing decline in their population. In 1818, the Crown approached the Mississaugas for a tract of 648 000 acres lying north of the Head of the Lake Treaty lands. Noting their impoverished state, Chief Ajetance, on behalf of the Mississaugas, signed the treaty that bears his name in exchange for a £522.10 annuity that would ward off starvation for his people. With the signing of the Ajetance Treaty, No. 19, the Mississaugas had only their lands remaining at 12 Mile Creek, 16 Mile Creek, and the Credit River.

In 1820, the Crown once more approached the Mississaugas, but this time the negotiations were for their remaining lands. The mouths of 12 and 16 Mile Creeks and the Credit River had been used as village sites and as important locations to harvest salmon by the Mississaugas since their arrival on the north shore of Lake Ontario during the late 17th century. The Crown promised to hold the lands in trust and apply the proceeds from any future sales of the land to the maintenance and religious education of the Mississaugas. The Mississaugas, in dire straits and having no leverage to vigorously negotiate the terms of Treaty 22 and Treaty 23, signed away the lands. Upon concluding the negotiations for Treaties 22 and 23, the Mississaugas had only two hundred of the original four million acres they had acquired upon their arrival in Southern Ontario. The two hundred acres remaining to them on the Credit River were to be used for a future village site. With slightly less than two hundred members, it seemed likely that the people would eventually vanish as a First Nation.

Averting extinction was accomplished by the Mississaugas by transitioning from their traditional ways to an agrarian lifestyle that more closely resembled that of their settler neighbours. Converting to Methodism during the late 1820s, the Mississaugas established a Christian Mission Village at the Credit River in 1826. During their time at the village, the Mississaugas were able to build successful farms and a village that included a school, hospital, chapel, mechanics' shops, and forty settler style homes. Learning about business as well, the Mississaugas were the major shareholders of the Credit River Harbour Company and the owners of their own schooner. Continued encroachment by settlers, diminishing resources, and the inability to gain title to their lands, eventually forced the Mississaugas to relocate their settlement to their present location in 1847. Today, the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation is located on 6000 acres of land straddling Brant and Haldimand Counties and has a current population of 2600 members.