

Algonquin History and the Ontario Land Claims

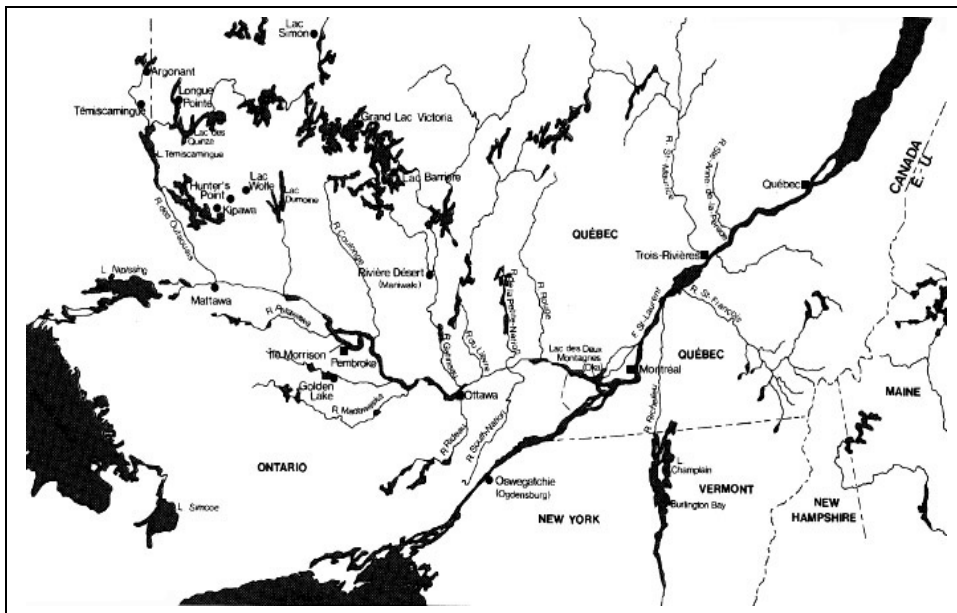
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It is the centre of our nation; a little logging town that became capital by some fluke of fate. In the middle of it, on top of a cliff overlooking the Ottawa River and the rolling foothills of the Gatineaus, stands the green roofed symbol of our country's government. It is sold on postcards and shown on the six o'clock news. It is Canada, and it stands on another nation's soil.

Much confusion surrounds the name of the people who originally inhabited the Ottawa Valley. Many assume that it was the Ottawa (or Odawa) nation that initially held this territory. This would seem obvious given the modern names for the nation and the region. However, in actuality the Ottawa homeland was on the shores of Lake Huron much further to the south-west (Day, 2005). The people of the Ottawa Valley were a different nation entirely. Today they are known as the Algonquins, also spelled Algonkins, and many landmarks and institutions in the Ottawa area are named after them.



Map. 1: South Eastern Ontario

Another factor which adds to the confusion surrounding the Algonquins is the Algonquian language group. This linguistic family is the largest in North America and one of the most diverse the world has ever known. Dialects and languages related through the Algonquian group were once, excluding a small patch of Iroquois speakers in the great lakes region, used throughout the northern part of this continent from the Atlantic Ocean to the Rocky Mountains (Sultzman, 2005). Though members of the same language group, the Algonquian languages were not always mutually intelligible. They were different languages in the way that Spanish and French, though both belong to the Latin language family, are different.

Although Algonquin is accepted today as the official name for the people who originally held the Ottawa Valley and surrounding area, it is not the name by which they first called themselves. The mix-up occurred in the summer of 1603, when Samuel de Champlain met a party of Algonquin who were celebrating a war victory with a group of Montagnais and Malecite. When Champlain asked the Malecite who the Algonquin were he was told they were called Algomuquins, a Malecite word meaning “relatives or allies”. (Day, 2005) Champlain mistook this for the name of the nation and his mistake has been perpetuated ever since. The true name of the Algonquins, the one which they themselves use, is Anishinabeg, which translates to “human being” (Day, 2005). Another name sometimes used for the Algonquin is Adirondack. This is a derogatory name given to them by their traditional enemies the Iroquois. Translated it means “tree-eaters” and mocked the Algonquin’s non-agricultural lifestyle (Day, 2005).

Likewise, Ottawa is another corruption. It comes from the name the Algonquin's had for the river, *adawe*, which means "to trade". The Ottawa River was used to ship goods and foster commerce long before the white man came to North America (Day, 2005).

Algonquin tradition says that their ancestors came to the upper St. Lawrence Valley from the east. This probably occurred around the year 1400. Certainly they were living there during the early French period. When they came they drove out the Iroquois who had formerly inhabited the area (Sultzman, 2005). There is archaeological evidence of people living in the valley up to 5000 years ago, but this evidence has been poorly preserved due to the acidic soil of the Canadian Shield, and there is no way to link these ancient people to the modern Algonquins (McMillan, 1995).

When Champlain first met the Algonquin people they had an estimated population of 6000 (Sultzman, 2005). Due to the high-latitude of their territory, and its consequentially harsh, seasonal climate, the Algonquins were not an agricultural society. They were hunter-gathers who came together in the summer to socialize and exploit the season's rich resources. With the coming of winter they would split again into smaller groups that would not overstrain the less-plentiful winter environment. (Sultzman, 2005) As one Algonquin who remembered the traditional ways said "Our country was a big garden. It grew twelve months of the year, and we just reached out and took what we needed. We didn't plant, and we didn't waste" (Day, 2005).

The coming of European traders brought a change to Algonquin lifestyles. In exchange for the beaver pelts, which were so highly prized across the sea, Europeans

would trade guns, knives, kettle etc. As one Montagnais chief put it: “The Beaver does everything perfectly well, it makes kettles, hatchets, swords, knives, bread; and, in short, it makes everything” (McMillan, 1995). As early as 1630 European clothes were replacing traditional garments and birch bark cooking vessels were obsolete (McMillan, 1995). It was a time of change and progress as two people came together and shared technology and commerce. It was not to last.

The British Empire, before its decline in the late 1800s, had a tradition of meeting the peoples it intended to assimilate as equals; provided they were useful economically and/or possessed the power to fight back if oppressed (McLeod, 2005). After the defeat of the French, British traders, at first, treated the Algonquins as equals. Beavers were a valued commodity, and the Algonquins were a strong nation.

By the early 1800s the beaver was all but extinct in the St. Lawrence Valley. The previous centuries of commerce with the French and English had brought a change to the Algonquin lifestyle. Instead of subsiding wholly off the land they had become partially dependent on bought goods. Without beaver skins to barter with they slipped into poverty (McMillan, 1995). This, combined with disease, war, and a steady loss of territory had disastrous results. By 1768 British estimates put the Algonquin population at a mere 1,500. With nothing left to offer, and no line of defense the previous paradigm of a relationship between equals flipped and a steady trek towards oppression began.

The Algonquin people should have an important position in modern Canadian politics. They were among the first people to be met by fur traders. Their relationship with Canada’s European settlers dates back to the seventeen century. Canada’s current seat of government, Parliament Buildings and capital city, are all built on unsundered

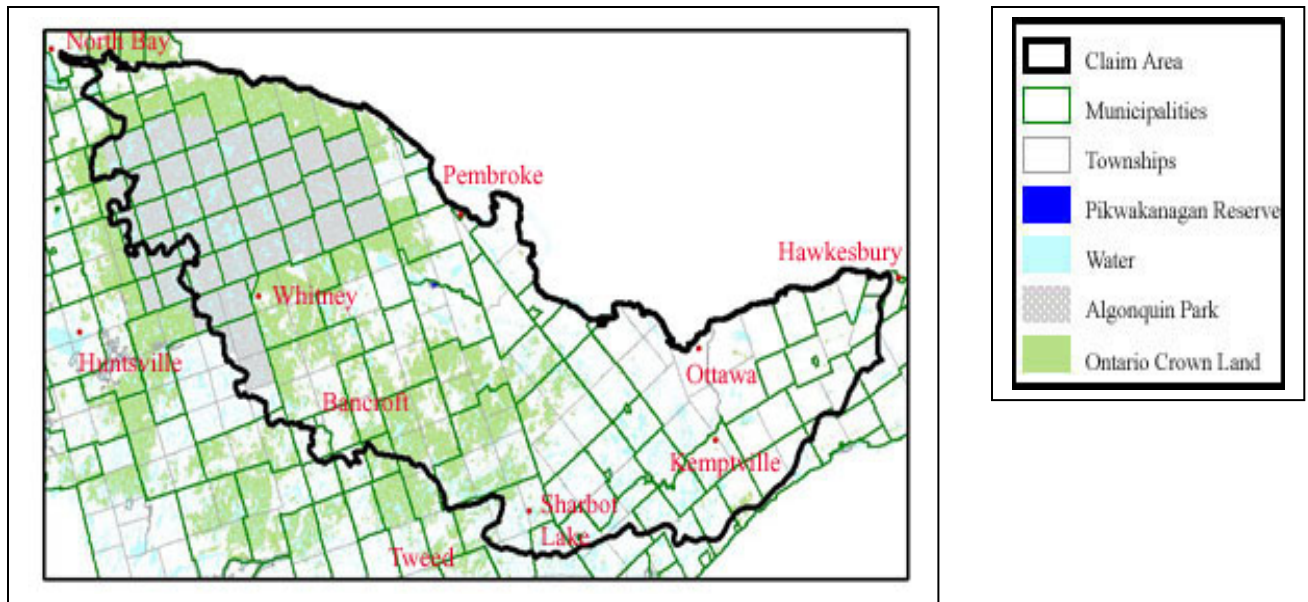
Algonquin land. (Gehl, 2005). The cards of Canadian politics should be stacked in the Algonquin's favour, unfortunately someone cheated. The Algonquins are as marginalized as most of the America's original peoples.

This marginalization stretches far back, notable examples include the British Crown displacing the Algonquin people to provide land for British Loyalists after the American War of Independence (Sultzman, 2005). My own great, great grandparents were among those given Algonquin land along the St. Lawrence Valley. This land was bought by the government, not from the Algonquin's who lived there, but from a Mississauga chief named Mynass. In 1822 the Algonquin's remaining holdings in the Ottawa Valley were sold, again by the Mississauga. No one consulted the Algonquins, and they received nothing for the sale of their land; land they had never relinquished their claim on (Sultzman, 2005).

Eventually, through treaties and purchases, the Canadian government established reserves for the Algonquin people. A case of too little too late, these reserves covered only a tiny portion of the Algonquin's original homeland (Sultzman, 2005). The Canadian government also established new names to classify the Algonquins and other Indigenous peoples. Out of all the culturally distinct groups which once inhabited the area, today only Ottawa, Ojibwa and Algonkin are legal designations for Canadian bands (McMillan, 1995).

The government's classification of the Algonquin continues as the group fights for their land rights in modern times. Only Algonquins from within the government allotted tribal boundaries, this excludes Quebec, are included in negotiations. The borders

presented from the government are a distortion of actual Algonquin territory. Also, the government insists on holding all treaty meetings in this territory, despite the displacement they caused decades earlier, which forced the Algonquin people away (Gehl, 2005).



Map. 2: Algonquin Land Claim Map

Still, a claim has been filed based on assertions of Aboriginal rights. This claim is trying to address matters such as possible rights and title to land and natural resources, including the future exercise of hunting, fishing and gathering rights. The claim area stretches between the watersheds of the Ottawa and Mattawa Rivers. It covers 36, 000 square kilometers which include public and privately held land, national parks, and the national capital – including the Parliament Buildings. This makes it the largest, and one of most complex, land claims in Canada (Ontario Secretariat for Aboriginal Affairs, 2006).

According to the 2001 censuses 13,485 individuals of Aboriginal descent make their homes in Ottawa (Census Data Products, 2001). Not all of these people are Algonquin. As a major urban center and the nation's capital, Ottawa attracts people, and the modern Aboriginal person does not necessarily spend their entire life on a reserve. A person of Native background may be as fixed or fluid in their movements as a person from any other background. Ottawa is a gathering place today, as it always was. It is a seat of government and home to nearly one million people. The fate of the Algonquin land claim affects every one of those people. Though to the average Ottawan it might seem that First Nation's people make up an insignificant part of the population; 13, 485 out of a million. It must be recognized that percentages do not matter. The Prime Minister of Canada makes up less than 0.0001 percent of the population, yet his authority is not questioned. The Algonquin land claim is one of the most important legal debates in Canada, and yet it is largely unknown to the general public. Claims like this and others must be brought to the notice of people outside the negotiation rooms. Ottawa is a place of trading. It is about time the government started trading some information with the public, and told them whose land Canada is really built on.

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