

WHERE HISTORIES MEET: INDIGENOUS AND SETTLER ENCOUNTERS IN THE TORONTO AREA

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Indigenous Christianity

The end of the War of 1812 and peace with the United States transformed the relationship between settlers, the colonial government, and Indigenous people. The non-Indigenous population surged, but new settlers were not prepared or educated for an ongoing relationship with Indigenous peoples. Most had no understanding of treaty relations: they believed treaties were one-time land deals that had freed up Indigenous land without any ongoing obligation or relationship with Indigenous peoples required on their part. There was little concept of ensuring a mutually beneficial coexistence into the future. Indigenous peoples were expected to “die out” or defined as a problem to be ignored, pushed to the margins, relocated elsewhere, or eliminated through cultural transformation. Indigenous people living traditional lifestyles had no place in Upper Canada’s developing economy.

The situation was particularly perilous for the Mississaugas of the Credit because of their proximity to York’s environmental degradation and whisky traders. As a child, Peter Jones experienced firsthand the near disintegration of his mother’s people as poverty, European diseases, trauma, and alcoholism took their toll. The Mississaugas suffered a high number of deaths, including the deaths of their Chiefs Wabakinine, Wahbanosay, and Quinepenon. Their numbers also dwindled as members relocated to Grand River or farther away from European settlers.¹

At this low point, the Mississaugas feared they would not survive as a people. Given their low numbers and proximity to York, their survival strategy was to work with colonial partners to protect their interests as best they could.

In this context, colonial officials and some Indigenous people started to advocate the policy of “civilization”—though not necessarily for the same reasons. Colonial officials promoted civilization as a process of cultural remodelling that would save Indigenous peoples from the supposed dead end of their own cultures and societies. Civilization would also save money by turning hunters into self-sufficient farmers who would not need presents or government support. (This discourse ignored the fact that the Haudenosaunee had been farmers before Europeans arrived.) Conveniently, changing Indigenous land use would also free up “excess” Indigenous land, since, as farmers, they would use only the small plots they could clear.

By “benevolently” encouraging Indigenous people to abandon cultural and economic practices deemed harmful to British agricultural, industrial, and economic development, the British hoped to incorporate them into the colony and the larger British Empire, furthering the “progress” of both. Indigenous peoples, who were aware of the wars and violent land dispossession taking place in the United States, likely considered the British approach the lesser of two evils. As traditional food sources disappeared, there was also the simple question, What would they eat?

After 1815, many Indigenous peoples and settlers shared the belief that Indigenous peoples had to adapt to white society to survive. The goals of governments, some religious leaders, and some Indigenous people were temporarily aligned. In Indigenous communities, what form that adaptation should take would be a matter of considerable debate and soul-searching.

Converting Indigenous Peoples

A key concept of British imperialism globally and North American colonialism specifically was the conviction that Christianity was superior to all other religious and spiritual beliefs and that conversion was essential for the civilization and, hence, the survival of Indigenous peoples. The colonizers’ stance was also defensive—Christianized Indigenous peoples would share a belief system with settlers, rendering them more knowable and trustworthy. Settlers hoped Christian ethics would lead Indigenous peoples to abandon their supposedly warlike ways and live peaceably

in a single nation rather than as threatening independent Nations.

Most missionaries knew little about Indigenous spiritual beliefs and ethical systems, particularly those that prevailed before the havoc wrought by European colonialism. They ignored or devalued millennia of accumulated wisdom and spiritual practice that focused on ethical relationships with other beings and the land. Missionaries characterized Indigenous peoples as ignorantly living in darkness and sin.

I think some of the first buildings on every reserve were churches. And it happened at Rama too . . . The purpose of it was to get our people in there and get them Christianized and colonized . . . The sales pitch was, “This is the way, the only way, and your way isn’t the right way.” So our people went to the church.

—Ben Cousineau, Chippewas of Rama²

Some Indigenous converts agreed because Indigenous people were, indeed, going through a dark time. They had endured multiple traumas. A high death rate from unfamiliar diseases, loss of land and self-sufficiency, and other colonial dynamics had shaken the confidence of many in traditional worldviews and practices and suggested the need for radical change. Christianity, and especially Methodism, became a point of connection and interaction between many Indigenous peoples and settlers, though it also

created serious divisions within Indigenous communities.

In 1819, the York Bible Society produced a report titled “Thoughts on the Civilization of the Chippewa and Mississauga Tribes of Indians Spread over the Province of Upper Canada.” The report was co-authored by fur trader Peter Robinson, York Indian agent James Givins, and Duncan Cameron, former commander of the York Volunteers at the Battle of Queenston Heights and provincial secretary of Upper Canada. The report asked, “What may be the best practicable mode of civilizing the Indian tribes throughout this Province and communicating to them the Pious knowledge and the blessings of the Christian Faith?” Refuting “the General opinion entertained by those least acquainted with the manner of those Indians, which seems to be that all attempts at civilization will prove abortive,” the report called for missionary activity to ease the inevitable transition to an agricultural life. “He may be a hunter for half a century or more; but European civilization and agriculture surrounding this spot will lessen the game and . . . certainly in the end make him a tiller of the land.”³

The report’s recommendations likely influenced Sir Peregrine Maitland, lieutenant-governor of Upper Canada. A year later, he developed a plan to establish Indigenous settlements with schools to teach basic literacy and useful skills for agriculture and frontier industry. This training would be provided in a religious and moral context provided by Anglican missionaries. The plan was not implemented immediately, however,

because the Church of England was sparsely represented in frontier areas—and the Methodists beat them to it. In fact, although some Indigenous peoples had been exposed to Catholicism through French missionaries in the 1600s and early 1700s, and although many Mohawks were nominal Anglicans, the 1820s and early 1830s witnessed a remarkable surge of conversions to this more egalitarian form of Protestant Christianity.

Methodism had emerged in eighteenth-century Britain as a more experiential form of Christianity, one that stressed personal reformation and a direct relationship with God. Less hierarchical than Anglicanism, Methodism gained many adherents among the poor and disadvantaged and those who sought more equitable social relations in England and North America.

In 1802, Nathan Bangs, an American Methodist saddlebag preacher, preached to Indigenous peoples in Upper Canada. Their positive response made him a strong advocate for Methodist missions in the colony. The Episcopal Methodists, originally based in the United States, became particularly enthusiastic about Indigenous conversion beginning in 1816, following an unprecedented wave of conversions among the Wyandot in Ohio by a Black Methodist lay preacher named John Stewart.⁴ In Upper Canada, this wave of conversions began at Grand River.

The Mission at Grand River

The British and Foreign Bible Society, a non-denominational Christian Bible society, was



Mohawk Chapel, Brantford, built in 1785 | Photo by Norman Einstein, Wikimedia Commons

founded in Britain in 1804. Its first translation project for Canada was the Gospel of John into Mohawk in 1804.⁵ Many colonial officials considered the Mohawks the most civilized of Indigenous peoples, mainly because they lived in settled villages and were horticulturalists (as well as hunters). But to the consternation of would-be civilizers, women, not men, exercised jurisdiction over and cultivated their extensive fields.

The British had a far longer positive association with the Haudenosaunee through the Covenant Chain alliance established in the 1660s than with the Anishinaabek, who had been allies of the French until 1760.⁶ Even before the Mohawks relocated to the Haldimand Tract from their homelands in New York, many Mohawks had converted to the Church of England, adopted European-style clothing and housing, and adopted some European farming practices. In fact, the Mohawk Chapel in the Mohawk Village (now Brantford) was the first Anglican church in Upper Canada, though for years it lacked a regular Anglican preacher. Services were usually led by catechist Henry Aaron Hill (brother-in-law of Joseph Brant). Elderly Mohawk Chief Henry Tekarihogen sometimes read prayers in Mohawk.⁷

The Methodists viewed the Mohawks' conversion to the Church of England as superficial. In fact, they considered the non-Christian Cayuga and Onondaga "the most moral and orderly of all the Indians": "The Cayugas and Onondagas were very unfriendly to the Gospel on the ground that the Mohawks were no better for it," an observation many Indigenous people also made about white Christian settlers.⁸ Many Senecas, Cayugas, and Onondagas had found an alternative to Christianity in the teachings of Seneca prophet Handsome Lake. His visions reinforced cultural continuity yet also adapted traditional spiritual practices, social structures, and relations to the land to ensure Haudenosaunee survival in the face of dwindling game and a reduced land base. Handsome Lake incorporated some elements of



Jacques Gérard Milbert, engraved by M. Dubourg, *Camp Meeting of the Methodists in N. America*, c. 1819 | Courtesy of Library of Congress, Washington, LC-USZC4-772

Christian belief and European lifeways into his teachings—such as men tilling the land for crops, domesticating animals, and building European-style houses. He also warned against alcohol abuse, selling land, and becoming involved in white men’s wars. His prophetic vision of environmental destruction and the end of the world warned Haudenosaunee to be respectful in their relations with the earth and all beings.⁹ Although many Haudenosaunee eventually converted to Methodism or other Christian religions, it was partly through Handsome Lake’s teachings that the Haudenosaunee were able to preserve many elements of their original culture, languages, and ceremonies for future generations.

The Methodists, who insisted upon sobriety, noted with approval the way Haudenosaunee traditionalists handled cases of excessive alcohol use: “In the case of a drunken member of the tribe, the chief men would summon him to a council meeting, at which united efforts would be made to produce humility and reformation, partly by exhortations and entreaties, and partly by exacting, publicly, certain humiliating ceremonies. In obstinate cases, councils had been held for a fortnight, before signs of contrition appeared.”¹⁰

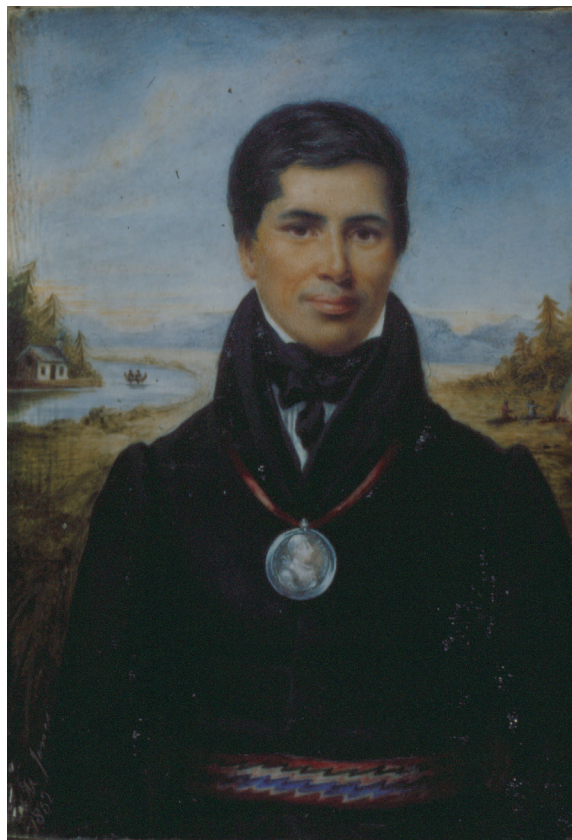
Methodism gained a toehold at Grand River in 1822, when Thomas Davis, a Mohawk Chief “well disposed towards the Gospel,” invited a lay preacher to his home.¹¹ American Methodist

Seth Crawford and missionary Alvin Torry came to Grand River in 1823 and began preaching at Davis' house. Dramatic conversions ensued. Several Mohawks responded strongly to the Methodist emphasis on a direct relationship with the Creator. The highly emotional services led some non-Methodist Mohawks to comment that the preachers used wolves' brains as medicine to make the people cry and shout.¹²

By 1823, the Methodists counted thirty members at the mission at Grand River, which became known as Davisville (after Chief Davis). Following the conversions of Polly Jones (daughter of Sarah Tekarihogen and Augustus Jones) and her Mississauga half-brother Peter Jones at a camp meeting at Ancaster that year, Indigenous Methodism spread rapidly. Camp meetings were "evangelistic, religious, revival gatherings held in frontier forest clearings where enthusiastic preaching, inspired singing, impassioned praying, deep personal reflection and come-to-Jesus conversions were commonplace."¹³ Camp meetings often offered Indigenous peoples and settlers their first positive contact with each other—in some cases, deep and lifelong friendships resulted.

Peter Jones, the Mississaugas, and the Methodists

Kahkewaquonaby / Peter Jones had lived with his father's Mohawk family at Grand River since 1820. He was given the Mohawk name Desagondensta (He Stands People on Their Feet) and, at the urging of his father, was baptized into the



Matilda Jones, *Portrait of Kahkewaquonaby, Reverend Peter Jones*, 1832. Matilda Jones, an English portrait artist (no relation), painted this portrait during Jones' first visit to England | Victoria University Library (Toronto)

Anglican Church. But Jones remained skeptical of the truth of Christianity: Christian settlers were "drunk, quarreling, fighting and cheating the poor Indians, and acting as if there was no God."¹⁴



Rev. James Spencer, M.A., *Chief [Joseph] Sawyer of the Credit*, c. 1846 | Toronto Public Library, John Ross Robertson Collection, JRR 4 [Framed]

After his heartfelt conversion to Methodism at Ancaster, Jones became an extraordinarily effective exhorter and lay preacher. In 1827, he was the first Indigenous person to be granted a licence as an itinerant Methodist preacher. He became a fully ordained Methodist minister six years later. Over a decade as preacher and minister, he converted hundreds of Indigenous people, especially Anishinaabek. Jones spoke to the Mississaugas and other Anishinaabek in their language and

translated and interpreted Christian concepts, hymns, and sections of the Bible so they were comprehensible within Indigenous worldviews. His sincerity was palpable, and he spoke with personal knowledge of the deep pain and trauma people were experiencing on multiple fronts.

He really goes for Christianity in a big way. And it's a very moving conversion experience you read in his diary. The man never loses his devoutness. Even when I read his diary and stuff, I'm thinking, okay, give it a rest sometimes. You don't have to be that religious. But nevertheless, he is, and I kind of admire him for that. Right to the very dying end.

—Darin Wybenga, Mississaugas of the Credit¹⁵

A key element of Methodism's appeal was its insistence on abstinence from alcohol. Jones detested drunkenness for the “evil it had done to my poor countrymen, many thousands of whom have had their days shortened by it, and been hurried to destruction.”¹⁶

Peter Jones' mother, Tuhbenahneequay, became one of the first Credit Mississauga converts. When Jones returned to the Credit River to tell his Mississaugas relatives of his conversion, his mother accompanied him back to Davisville and was baptized “Sarah Henry.” She then brought her nephew David Sawyer to be converted. David walked back fifty miles to tell his father, Joseph Sawyer (later Head Chief), and his mother. Both converted.¹⁷ Peter's brother John and his wife,

Christiana Brant (granddaughter of Joseph Brant), also joined the Methodist church. As word spread, more and more Indigenous people came to Davisville to see for themselves “whether the truth had been told.”¹⁸

In 1824, the first Indigenous Methodist church was formally established at Davisville mostly by Indigenous converts. Peter Jones and Seth Crawford preached, and Thomas Davis offered his house for a school. Among its trustees were Augustus Jones and Peter’s brother John Jones.

These activities changed the relationship between the Mississaugas and the Haudenosaunee—at least among those who converted to Methodism. Methodist commentator George Playter later commented that mutual mistrust and suspicion between the two Indigenous Nations persisted long after the war between them ended around 1700: “From that time, the two great bodies never entered into confederacies, never mingled in general councils, nor pitched their tents, nor held their festivals together. But since their Christian profession this animosity has ceased. The Mohawks, who possess the fertile flats of the Grand River, have invited their Missisauagah Brethren to occupy their lands, and reside among them. They now both plant in the same fields, send their children to the same school, and worship in the same assembly.”¹⁹

Many of the Mississaugas of the Credit moved to Grand River. In 1825, they began planting corn and potatoes on land lent to them by Thomas Davis. In their annual report for that year, the Episcopal Methodists painted a glowing picture

of these changes: “Their fields of corn have been pretty well cultivated, and promise a good harvest. Having signified to the Government their wishes to settle on their lands for civilization, they have received assurances of encouragement and aid, beyond their highest expectations, and they hope to be enabled to commence an establishment on the Credit in the course of another season.”²⁰

Mississauga Conversions on the Humber and Credit

In July 1825, the Mississaugas returned to their lands on the Credit in advance of receiving their annual presents and payments for surrendering their lands. While there, Peter Jones preached to a large crowd, and his words made a deep impression:

The people flocked from all directions to hear me preach on the flats by the river side; we assembled here on the green grass that all might have an opportunity of hearing. I should judge there were about 300 people, Indians and whites. I spoke to my people first in Indian, and then exhorted in English; the power of the Lord came upon some of the Indians so that they fell to the earth, some rejoicing, and others crying for mercy. The congregation behaved very well, and a number of the gentry present expressed their surprise at what they saw and heard. Before sunset I held a class meeting with

the Indians; they spoke very feelingly of the dealings of God to their souls, and it was a time long to be remembered by us all. There were two of my nation present who joined with us to serve the Lord today—Bluejay and Benjamin Crane.²¹

Jones was especially gratified to convert Bluejay, “the most inveterate drunkard of the tribe.”²²

Although expressed through Christian imagery, Anishinaabe Methodism echoed older Indigenous revitalization movements. Prophets such as Neolin, who had inspired Pontiac, and Tenskwatawa, brother of Tecumseh, had reinvigorated Indigenous societies at critical moments. These movements likewise called for a ban on alcohol and a return to sober living. Like them, Methodism acknowledged the harm done to Indigenous peoples and did not stigmatize them as degenerates or “savages” fully responsible for their own misery, as many settlers did. Faced with colonial dynamics that reduced their agency as Nations, converts saw Methodism as a viable route to social equality because it stressed the personal reformation of both Indigenous and white sinners.

Methodism, as interpreted through Jones and other converted Mississaugas, explained current afflictions and losses. Its focus on confessing sins and praying for personal and communal redemption and salvation restored a sense of agency and hope. At a time when so many loved ones were dying, it promised an afterlife in a better place. Jones was exceptionally effective because he drew out the similarities between Indigenous spirituality and Christianity, affirming that

both worshipped the same Supreme Being.²³ For a time, and in a bid to survive and reconstruct their devastated societies, many Mississaugas and other Anishinaabek embraced Methodism as a necessary, if revolutionary, social experiment. In doing so, some gained the strength to survive the cumulative effects of colonialism over the previous decades.

Yet conversion meant repudiating deeply held beliefs and practices, such as the beliefs that elements of the natural world were imbued with spirit and that one could be offered guidance by Guardian Spirits. Although Methodism acknowledged some aspects of the Mississaugas’ historical and cultural experience, it denied others. Missionaries shamed and denigrated those who did not convert, depicting them as ignorant, sinful, inferior, and less civilized than the British or Indigenous converts. They warned of eternal hellfire—actions that today would be regarded as a form of spiritual abuse. They created division within Indigenous communities by giving converts resources, privileges, and protection and denying them to non-Christians. Pressure to convert made it less of a free choice and more of a necessity for survival.

The Mississaugas took up the . . . I’ll say the white man’s way . . . very early at the whole promotion or advocacy of Peter Jones because he says, right in the book, he’s quoted as preaching to his people, saying that “if we don’t act like them, they’re going to kill us.” So it was a concerted effort to convert them to be like

them. He says that he never wanted to lose the language, but they did.

—Carolyn King, Mississaugas of the Credit²⁴

Through conversion, the Mississaugas of the Credit, who numbered less than two hundred people, gained important political allies. White Methodists were involved in the humanitarian movement gaining ground in England and the United States. Many Methodists believed history and culture, not genetics, were responsible for the differences between nations. In their view, members of “primitive” and “savage” societies at the bottom of the hierarchy of nations could be redeemed through education, sobriety, conversion to Christianity, and the adoption of agriculture and private property in a civilizing process they believed was universal. The colonial secretary, Lord Glenelg, told Peter Jones, “Our forefathers the ancient Britons were once as barbarous as the North American Indians are; and as Christianity has made the nation what it is, surely it will do the same for the Indian tribes.”²⁵ Over the next decade, humanitarians agitated against slavery and called for the protection of Indigenous peoples from the worst effects of colonialism, including the loss of their land rights and exploitation by alcohol traders—a benevolence that also, paradoxically, legitimized British colonial rule.²⁶

Methodism thus offered the Mississaugas a new way to view their own culture and history while at the same time allowing Euro-Canadians to see the missionary brand of colonialism as a gift.

Presents, Prayers, and a Promise at the Humber

Peter Jones’ 1825 letter to Indian Agent James Givins marked the first time a literate Mississauga wrote to an official in Upper Canada:

By the request of Capt. John [Cameron] and others of the Missessagues in those parts, I take the liberty to write a few lines to you wishing you to send an information respecting their presents to what times you will be ready to issue them, or to what time would wish them to come down, there are about fifty of the Nation who have planted corn and potatoes, and who have embraced Christianity, and are attending to the means of education; they not wish to come down till they get a sure word from you, for they are at present busy hoeing their corn.²⁷

After Jones preached to the settlers and Mississaugas gathered at the Credit, Givins requested that the Mississaugas come to the Council Fire at the Humber River, 19 kilometres east of the Credit, to receive their annual payments and presents. Arriving the night before, the Mississaugas set up their wigwams and assembled for prayers at sunset. Jones preached. Some Mississaugas listened, and others mocked the Christians. Among the mockers was a wife, now the widow, of Peter Jones’ late grandfather Chief Wahbanosay. She later converted and became a devout Christian.²⁸

The next day, Colonel Givins, some military officers, the Reverend Dr. John Strachan, his wife,

and several “gentlemen” from York came to visit the Christian Mississaugas and view their progress while the presents were being distributed. Jones described the proceedings:

While they were cutting and dividing the goods, I got the children together, and selected two hymns for them to sing. The Doctor, Colonel [Givins], and Lady Strachan were highly pleased. When the issue was over I assembled all the Christian Indians together; two of them read in the Testament and some in easy reading. The Doctor then spoke to us, expressing his happiness in seeing the work of the Lord among us. He then gave us some advice, thinking it would be best for us to settle on the Credit and erect a village, saying he thought the Government would assist us, and wished us to consult about the matter. After this he concluded with prayer. When the Doctor and Colonel left us we talked the subject over, and it was unanimously agreed that it would be best for us to take the Doctor’s advice and settle ourselves at the Credit the next Spring.²⁹

The Indian agent usually gave alcohol to those gathered for presents, but that day, “the Christian men had all agreed not to take the fire water . . . and begged the agent not to offer them to any of the Indians . . . For the first time, perhaps, the kegs were carried away from an Indian camp untasted and unopened . . . and the Christian Indians were never offered ardent spirit by the government agents afterwards.”³⁰

After these meetings, a large number of Indigenous people accompanied the Christian Mississaugas back to Grand River “to see and hear the great things spoken of.” Settler Methodists took note: the Newmarket Branch Missionary Society sent 10 pounds to support “sending the Gospel to new and remote Settlements, and to the Indian Nations.”³¹

In fall 1825, the lieutenant-governor, Sir Peregrine Maitland, promised to build twenty houses and a schoolhouse at the Credit River before spring. After wintering at Grand River, the Mississaugas returned to the Credit, but the houses were not yet built.

