

12-2018

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Recommended Citation

Smith, Heather N. (2018) "“We are One Nation”: The Legacy of the Coldwater-Narrows Reserve (1830-1836)," *The Great Lakes Journal of Undergraduate History*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/gljuh/vol6/iss1/5>

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We are One Nation”: The Legacy of the Coldwater-Narrows Reserve (1830-1836)

Heather Smith

The settler history of Simcoe County, Ontario is dominated by stories of hearty pioneers making their mark on early Canada. A glance at the Coldwater Canadiana Heritage Museum reveals a collection of historical narratives built primarily around white settlers of the early nineteenth-century.¹ As historian Claire Campbell has observed, Indigenous peoples are often included in these narratives solely as a means of bolstering impressions of settlers, and their journeys through the “uncivilized” wilderness. These tales of adventure have made Simcoe County a compelling location for cottage country.² While these narratives are significant in the scope of Canada’s history, the stories of Indigenous people have not been sufficiently considered within this framework. One early reserve in particular, located at Coldwater and the Narrows (present-day Orillia), presents a compelling illustration of the successes of Indigenous peoples which deserves more scholarly attention.

Employing a variety of primary sources, including archival maps, correspondence, travelogues, journals, and illustrations, I explore the establishment and dissolution of the Coldwater-Narrows Reserve, and the resettlement of its peoples to Christian Island, Georgina Island, and Rama First Nation.³ I will focus in particular upon travelogues and illustrations of Simcoe County authored in the 1830s and 1840s by two British tourists, Titus Hibbert Ware (1810-1890) and Anna Brownell Jameson (1794-1860). I will demonstrate how the Anishinaabe peoples of the Coldwater-Narrows Reserve were able to negotiate their agency and identity

through the unique interpretation of religion, the careful navigation

of social networks, and the continued expression of Indigenous cultural values. Wherever sources allow, I examine the role of the three Chiefs of the reserve in these negotiations of identity. Additionally, I explore how this ingenuity created a legacy of determination for their descendants, who continued to fight against the terms of the 1836 sale on the reserve land up until 2011, when this claim was at last settled by the Canadian government.⁴ By focusing upon the success stories and resiliency of Indigenous peoples in Canada, I hope to highlight past accomplishments, as well as the legacies that these accomplishments have created.

The Coldwater-Narrows “experiment,” as it was referred to by Coldwater station Superintendent and Indian agent, Thomas Gummersall Anderson, was established by Lieutenant Governor Sir John Colborne in 1830.⁵ The Coldwater Reserve was led by Chief John Aisance (1790-1847), while the two nearby reserves at the Narrows were led by Chiefs William Snake (dates unknown), and William Yellowhead (also known as Musquakie) (d. 1864) (See reserve map, Figure 1).⁶ Roughly 500 Anishinaabe peoples, with a majority Chippewa and a minority Odawa and Potawatomi ancestry, were settled among three parcels of land.⁷ The three Chiefs were all Methodist converts and British loyalists, whose objectives aligned with the British Canadian government’s goals of Christianization and instruction in rural farming as a means of “civilizing” Indigenous peoples.⁸ These two aims were thus the central focuses of the reserve. The “experiment” was abruptly dissolved by the British Canadian government in 1836, when it was determined that Indigenous peoples could not be “civilized” with this social model.⁹ Indeed, the Anishinaabe peoples of the Coldwater-Narrows Reserve did find ways to retain their individuality, which would likely have appeared “uncivilized” to a government bent on assimilation.

The adoption of Methodism through a uniquely Indigenous lens by the Chiefs of the Coldwater-Narrows Reserve demonstrates negotiations of agency and identity. Chiefs Aisance, Snake, and Yellowhead are emblematic of the broader sweeping Methodist

conversion of Chippewa peoples in Southern Ontario in the early nineteenth century.¹⁰ Methodism was accommodated and assimilated by these Chiefs across Southern Ontario, who found many similarities between Methodist tenets and Indigenous beliefs in various forms, such as the Creation story, the Messiah, the Resurrection, and the Last Judgement.¹¹ At first glance, this mass conversion may appear to align with the agenda of Christianization promulgated by the British Canadian government. However, as Donald B. Smith has observed, the appeal of Methodism for many Chippewa peoples at this time was largely rooted in the perceived similarity of its teachings to traditional Indigenous beliefs.¹²

Perhaps the most significant cue as to how the Chiefs of Coldwater-Narrows Reserve negotiated their agency and identity lies in their chosen names. While they adopted “Christian” first names upon their conversion, they consciously chose to retain their Indigenous names as surnames to mark their identity. This tradition spanned back to 1827, when they had been present for the conversion of 300 Anishinaabe peoples in Southern Ontario.¹³ In addition to honouring their Indigenous names, at least one of the Chiefs was directly involved with determining how Methodism was to be taught on the reserve. Chief John Aisance took primary care of administering to the spiritual needs of the reserve and sought ways of teaching Methodist beliefs that were relatable to Indigenous teachings.¹⁴ Thus, the Chiefs of the Coldwater-Narrows Reserve adopted Methodism in ways that honoured their core beliefs. These methods of identity negotiation can be viewed on a broader level in Southern Ontario.

The writings of Anna Brownell Jameson provide additional insight into the motivations of the British Canadian government at this time regarding the Christianization of Indigenous peoples, as well as how this agenda manifested in the religious climate of Simcoe County. Perhaps inadvertently, her account provides evidence of Indigenous resistance to conversion on British Canadian terms. Jameson published a travelogue of her journey through Simcoe County in 1836, which was originally entitled, *Winter Studies and*

Summer Rambles in Canada, and was later republished as *Sketches in Canada and Rambles Among the Red Man*, in 1852. Her travels through Simcoe County, Toronto, and parts of the United States, were rare for a woman of her social stature, and brought her face-to-face with Indigenous peoples of these regions.

In the chapter entitled “The Indians”, Jameson describes some of the struggles that missionaries of Southern Ontario encountered. It is notable that Jameson frames her analysis of Christian missionary efforts by first stating that, while she believes that Sir Francis Bond Head has a genuine affection for the “Indians”, they should not be treated as mere British subjects and forced into any negotiation of land or cultural custom without their consent.¹⁵ Her statements are ironic in hindsight considering Bond Head’s dissolution of the Coldwater-Narrows Reserve that same year in 1836, and the controversial nature of the land sale terms.¹⁶

In Jameson’s account, the missionaries lament that even among converted Indigenous peoples, various core facets of their culture, such as their belief in personal liberty, persist. One missionary is quoted by Jameson saying, “The Indians are convinced that every man is born free; that no one has a right to make any attempt upon his personal liberty, and that nothing can make him amends for its loss. We have even had much pains to undeceive those converted to Christianity on this head.”¹⁷ The interpretation of Christian beliefs through a uniquely indigenous lens, as well as resistance to conversion on British Canadian terms, can be seen on a broad level in the early nineteenth-century. Thus, Indigenous Chiefs, such as Aisance, Yellowhead, and Snake found creative methods of facilitating Christian conversion while still retaining the basis of their own spiritual beliefs, as well as their Indigenous names. This facet of identity negotiation appears to have been part of a broader pattern among Indigenous peoples who converted to Christianity in British Canada in the early nineteenth century.

The religious affiliations of the three chiefs of the Coldwater-Narrows Reserve additionally shed light on their deft navigation of

social networks as a means of further negotiating their agency and identity. As Janet Elizabeth Chute has keenly observed, the Chiefs of Simcoe County maintained strong social ties with one another and key government officials. Religion was connected closely with their ability to forge relationships with British Canadian officials.¹⁸ Anna Brownell Jameson's first-hand account once again provides detailed insight into relations between the British Canadian government and Indigenous peoples in 1836, with specific mention of Chiefs Aisance, Yellowhead and Snake.

In a passage entitled "Distribution of Presents", Jameson describes travelling to Manitoulin Island, then-named "The Great Manitoulin", to observe the annual distribution of presents by the British Canadian government to Indigenous leaders. Jameson recounts that there were "three thousand seven hundred Indians" on the Island, some of whom had travelled five hundred miles or more to receive the gifts.¹⁹ This mention of visitor volume is significant in that it reveals much about the level of access that the three Chiefs of the Coldwater-Narrows Reserve had to the inner circle of the British Canadian government.

The passage following "Distribution of Presents", which is left untitled, details a council meeting which takes place during these five days on Manitoulin Island. Of the three thousand seven hundred Indigenous peoples present on the island, only seventy-five Chiefs are present at the council meeting. Among these, Jameson specifically mentions John Aisance (whom she calls Aisence, meaning "clam shell"), William Snake (herein referred to as Snake-Tail), and William Yellowhead (referred to as the Yellowhead). Jameson highlights John Aisance, William Yellowhead, and Shingwaukonse (Little Pine), as three of the most distinguished Chippewa chiefs in British Canada. She makes a point of mentioning that they are Christians. While she does not include William Snake in this "distinguished" group, he is nevertheless present at the meeting and is mentioned directly after Aisance and Yellowhead, perhaps indicating that he was near the two other Chiefs at the meeting.²⁰

That a somewhat distant observer, such as Jameson, would have had knowledge of the religious affiliations of the Chiefs reveals much about close ties between religion and access to the British Canadian government at this time. This is additionally evinced through the presence of religious officials at the council meeting. Jameson mentions that three Methodist missionaries and two Catholic priests are in attendance. The tone of the meeting is condescendingly paternalistic by modern standards. Yet, in spite of the rhetoric of “father” (the British Canadian government) and “children” (the Indigenous Chiefs), this meeting and its exclusivity nevertheless demonstrates that the three Chiefs of Coldwater-Narrows Reserve had access to the top levels of the British Canadian government and communicated first-hand with individuals such as Thomas Gummingsall Anderson, and Samuel Jarvis, who later became Chief Superintendent of Indian Affairs in 1837.²¹ Jarvis’s speech to the Indigenous Chiefs speaks volumes as to how highly the British Canadian government valued religion as a tool of “civilizing” at this time.

Jarvis proclaims: “Children! There are many clergymen constantly visiting you for the avowed purpose of instructing you in religious principles. Listen to them with attention when they talk to you on that subject; but at the same time keep always in view...that they have nothing whatever to do with your temporal affairs.”²² The reference to clergymen “constantly visiting” speaks to the widespread governmental mandate to Christianize. As Janet Elizabeth Chute has observed, there was a level of prestige afforded to Chiefs of Southern Ontario who actively supported the British Canadian government’s aim of Christianizing Indigenous peoples.²³ That the Chiefs were already Christian converts may have greatly improved their social standing and political access. Thus, the Chiefs of Coldwater-Narrows Reserve were able to navigate social networks with the highest levels of government through their religious affiliations. These affiliations had led to the establishment of the reserve in 1830, and resulted in a level of respect afforded them. This access was key in negotiating their agency and identity, enabling them to have a seat at the proverbial table of

important council meetings, such as the annual exchange of gifts on Manitoulin Island.

Though they were technically landless by 1844, Chief John Aisance had already begun to set the wheels in motion for his tribe to resettle by orchestrating the move of a neighbouring Potawatomi tribe to Christian Island, in effect reserving this land for his people.²⁴ However, Indigenous peoples maintained a significant presence on the former reserve land of Coldwater and the Narrows long after its official dissolution.²⁵

The illustrations of Titus Hibbert Ware provide a rare window into various modes of cultural expression, which continued after the dissolution of the Coldwater-Narrows Reserve. These facets of expression can once again be viewed as negotiations of agency and identity. Ware was a barrister from England who travelled to Simcoe County in 1844 to survey the terrain's feasibility for the founding of a law firm.²⁶ The trip produced a collection of rare artistic depictions of Indigenous peoples at Coldwater. As the illustrations were drawn after the Coldwater Reserve had been dissolved in 1836, they provide compelling material evidence as to the considerable presence that Indigenous peoples continued to have in Coldwater as late as 1844.

Ware's three illustrations are entitled "Chippewa Indians at Coldwater County Simcoe near Lake Huron", "Indians and Canoe – Coldwater River near Lake Huron, County Simcoe U. [Upper] Canada 1844", and "Indians at Coldwater near Lake Huron Upper Canada 1844" (See Figures 2, 3, and 4) All of the illustrations feature Indigenous peoples wearing a fusion of British Canadian and Indigenous clothing, which appears to have been surprisingly uniform. This liminal period was on the cusp of the migration of the Coldwater and Narrows tribes to other parts of Ontario. It is highly likely that the individuals depicted were still part of the Aisance, Snake, and Yellowhead tribes. Notably, Ware distinguishes one illustration as "Chippewa", as opposed to the others, which are generically labelled "Indians". This could point to his having con-

tact with this group before drawing them, though he does not mention this in his diary.

At first glance, the two men portrayed in the foreground of each of the three illustrations might appear to be the same. However, upon closer inspection, there are slight differences in colours of belts, pants, and scarves, as well as facial features, between the three illustrations. Additionally, the location of each drawing is different (See Figures 2, 3, and 4). As historian Donald B. Smith has observed, these illustrations reveal the cultural melding of traditional Anishinaabe dress with British Canadian dress.²⁷ All of the men depicted appear to be wearing British Canadian coats and European style hats with their traditional moccasins and sashes. Conversely, the woman depicted in the third illustration is dressed more traditionally in full-body shawl and moccasins.²⁸ As Chippewa Methodist missionary Peter Jones remarked, Chippewa women's dress tended to be more traditional than men, particularly among Methodist converts.²⁹

These clothing choices may at first appear insignificant. However, they reveal another compelling facet of identity negotiation. Adopting this “uniform”, at least among male members of the Indigenous community, reveals a collective negotiation of aesthetics. It denotes the conscious—and highly visible—choice of the degree to which they were willing to conform to British Canadian modes of dress, and hence, cultural modes. It is unlikely that Ware would have had cause to untruthfully depict the portrayal of the clothing he observed. The emphasis throughout his diary, which accompanies the illustrations, is upon the settlers and the extent to which the Simcoe County terrain has been “civilized” by them. As such, he would arguably have been likely to emphasize the “uncivilized” dress of Indigenous peoples.³⁰ Thus, while these illustrations are somewhat limited in scope, they provide a rare glimpse into continuing negotiations of agency and identity by the peoples of the Coldwater-Narrows Reserve after its official dissolution. This once again demonstrates how the Anishinaabe peoples negotiated their collective agency and identity.

The most enduring example of how Aisance, Yellowhead, and Snake negotiated agency and identity lies in the legacy of perseverance they created by protesting the conditions of the land sale of the Coldwater-Narrows Reserve. Soon after the reserve agreement was terminated, the sale of the land was contested by the Chiefs as unlawful on the part of the British Canadian government. In 1842, John Aisance and the other two Chiefs appealed to Sir Charles Bagot, the Governor General of British North America from 1841 to 1843, stating, "When Sir F. Bond Head insisted on our selling this Land and the bargain he had previously drawn out for us to sign, we were not made sensible of the full purport, so that we knew not the nature of the bargain." Aisance, Snake, and Yellowhead further asserted that they had not received annuity payments arising from the 1836 treaty.³¹

The Archives of Canada provide a detailed 21-page record of the complaint by an ancestor of John Aisance, Chief Samuel Assance lodged in 1892, wherein Assance claims, once again, that his people were never compensated for the sale of reserve land in Coldwater. The key word throughout the file appears to be "compensated." Assance is continually interpreted as meaning that his people had never been "paid" for the 9800-acre land sale of the Coldwater-Narrows Reserve. However, when placed in the context of the protests of Aisance, Snake, and Yellowhead, "compensation" could have meant a variety of things, including that the terms of the agreement had not been lawful, and thus compensation had reflected these false terms.

The file includes paperwork dating back to 1850, when the original three Chiefs reiterated their claim to William Robinson at a council meeting in Sault Ste. Marie in 1850. Robinson writes that he and Thomas Gummingsall Anderson believe the claim to be without merit, but they will investigate it.³² Twenty-six years later, in the ensuing document, a frustrated William Plummer writes that the Coldwater-Narrows land was improperly included in the Robinson Treaty. Plummer implores the department to settle the claim as it is "a continual source of anxiety and irritation to the Indians inter-

ested therein.”³³ This entreaty was unsuccessful as the next document in the series then skips ahead to 1892, where the matter is raised by Samuel Assance, then-Chief of Beausoleil First Nation. Assance is dismissed with a letter stating that his people have been fairly compensated through the payment that was distributed among the Rama, Georgina Island, and Christian Island Reserves at the time of the land sale in 1836.³⁴ This must have been exceedingly frustrating for Assance, who was not in fact disputing that the sale had happened, but that the terms of the sale had been unlawful. The land at Coldwater Reserve continued to be contested by the Beausoleil First Nation, Georgina Island First Nation, and Rama First Nation under the amalgamated title of the “Chippewa Tri-Council”. This joint resilience at last led to a \$307 million-dollar settlement agreement with the Canadian government in 2011.³⁵

In spite of increasingly coercive practices by the British Canadian government, the Anishinaabe peoples of Coldwater and the Narrows were able to negotiate their agency and identity through the unique interpretation of religion, the careful navigation of social networks, and the continued expression of Indigenous cultural values.³⁶ The Chiefs of the Coldwater-Narrows Reserve set an example of remarkable resilience and determination. This legacy has endured in the Beausoleil, Georgina Island, and Rama First Nations, who stood by their descendants’ claim to their land for nearly two centuries. “We are one nation,” John Aisance had said of the Chippewa peoples, and indeed, given the enduring alliance of his descendants, his statement was to prove highly prophetic.³⁷

References

- ¹ “History,” Coldwater Canadiana Heritage Museum, accessed October 17, 2017, <http://www.coldwatermuseum.com/history/>
- ² Claire Elizabeth Campbell, *Shaped by the West Wind: Nature and History in Georgian Bay* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2005), 109.
- ³ Due to the scope of this paper, and the availability of sources, I have chosen to focus to a slightly greater degree on the Coldwater segment of the Coldwater-Narrows Reserve. However, this his-

tory necessarily intersects with the Chiefs of the Narrows, and their joint land claim with the descendants of the Coldwater Reservation, as the amalgamated Tri-Council.

[4](#) Darrel Manitowabi, *From Fish Weirs to Casino: Negotiating Neoliberalism at Mnjikaning* (Ann Arbor: Proquest Dissertations Publishing, 2007), 9.

[5](#) *Ibid.*, 113, and Anthony J. Hall, “Aisance (Aisaince, Ascance, Essens), John,” *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, accessed October 12, 2017.

[6](#) Anthony J. Hall, “Aisance (Aisaince, Ascance, Essens), John,” *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, accessed October 12, 2017. http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/aisance_john_7E.html, and “Musquakie (Mayawassino, Waisowindebay, also known as William Yellowhead),” *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, accessed October 12, 2017, http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/musquakie_9E.html.

[7](#) *Ibid.* I have chosen throughout this paper to refer to the three chiefs and the people of the Coldwater-Narrows reserve as “Chippewa” instead of Ojibwa, as this more closely reflects how they identified themselves at the time, as well as how they were identified by governmental officials. The descendants of this segment of the Anishinaabe peoples at Georgina Island and Chippewas of Mnjikaning (Rama) still refer to themselves as Chippewa, while those at Beausoleil Island now prefer Ojibwe. Additionally, I sometimes refer to the Chiefs solely by their Indigenous surnames as seems to have been a common convention of the time.

[8](#) Darrel Manitowabi, *From Fish Weirs to Casino: Negotiating Neoliberalism at Mnjikaning* (Ann Arbor: Proquest Dissertations Publishing, 2007), 113.

[9](#) *Ibid.*, 9.

[10](#) Donald B. Smith, *Mississauga Portraits: Ojibwe Voices from Nineteenth-century Canada*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 278.

[11](#) *Ibid.*, xxi.

[12](#) *Ibid.*

[13](#) Darrel Manitowabi, *From Fish Weirs to Casino: Negotiating Neoliberalism at Mnjikaning*, 109.

[14](#) Catherine A. Sims, “Exploring Ojibwa History Through Documentary Sources: An Outline Of The Life Of Chief John Assance,” The Champlain Society , https://digi-coll.library.utoronto.ca/champlain/gdw_sims2.htm.

[15](#) Anna Brownell Jameson, *Sketches in Canada and Rambles Among the Red Man*. London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1852. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/35224/35224-h/35224-h.htm>.

[16](#) Darrel Manitowabi, *From Fish Weirs to Casino: Negotiating Neoliberalism at Mnjikaning*, 9.

[17](#) Ibid.

[18](#) Jane Elizabeth Chute, *The Legacy of Shingwaukonse: A Century of Native Leadership*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 66.

[19](#) Anna Brownell Jameson, *Sketches in Canada and Rambles Among the Red Man*.

[20](#) Ibid.

[21](#) Jameson, *Sketches in Canada and Rambles Among the Red Man*.

[22](#) Ibid.

[23](#) Jane Elizabeth Chute, *The Legacy of Shingwaukonse: A Century of Native Leadership*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 66.

[24](#) “Indian Claims Commission: Moose Deer Point First Nation Inquiry Pottawatomi Rights,” March 1999, accessed November 15, 2017. http://sclaimswp.bryanschwarz.com/wpcontent/uploads/images/stories/specific_claims_docs/03-ICCCRIDocs/ICCP-ACRI/Volume11/MooseDeerPointFirstNation.pdf, 73.

[25](#) Peter S. Schmalz, *The Ojibwa of Southern Ontario* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1991), 13

[26](#) Su Murdoch, “The Titus Hibbert Ware Diary of a Journey from Liverpool, England to Orillia, Simcoe County 1844,” in *East Georgian Bay Historical Society* , 1 (1981): 38.

[27](#) Donald B. Smith, *Mississauga Portraits: Ojibwe Voices from Nineteenth-century Canada*, 58.

[28](#) Ibid.

[29](#) Ibid., 36.

[30](#) Examples include Ware's description of the front of Simcoe Lake having a "wild uncleared appearance", while Orillia is described as having a "good road" and the land being generally "good", meaning cleared and maintained by settlers. Su Murdoch, "The Titus Hibbert Ware Diary of a Journey from Liverpool, England to Orillia, Simcoe County 1844," in *East Georgian Bay Historical Society* , 1 (1981): 42, 46.

[31](#) Catherine A. Sims, "Exploring Ojibwa History Through Documentary Sources: An Outline Of The Life Of Chief John Assance," *The Champlain Society* https://digi-coll.library.utoronto.ca/champlain/gdw_sims3.htm.

[32](#) "Penetanguishene – Chief Samuel Assance Of The Chippewas Of Christian Island Claims That His People Have Never Been Paid For Surrender Of Land On Georgian Bay From Cold Water To Moose Point And Across From Cold Water To Orillia." Online Mikano. 2064480. Library and Archives Canada. http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=gen-item.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=2064480, 3-4.

[33](#) *Ibid.*, 11.

[34](#) "Penetanguishene – Chief Samuel Assance Of The Chippewas Of Christian Island Claims That His People Have Never Been Paid For Surrender Of Land On Georgian Bay From Cold Water To Moose Point And Across From Cold Water To Orillia." 13-21.

[35](#) For a reaction to the settlement from an Indigenous perspective, see "AFN National Chief Acknowledges Major Land Claims Settlement Offer in Ontario – Citizen Engagement Crucial in Final Step," *Assembly of First Nations*. <http://www.afn.ca/2011/05/31/afn-national-chief-acknowledges-major-land-claims-settlement-offer-in/>, and "Canada Offers 307M for Coldwater Claim," *Anishinabek News* , <http://anishinabeknews.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/2011-6.pdf>.

[36](#) Jane Elizabeth Chute, *The Legacy of Shingwaukose: A Century of Native Leadership*, 66.

[37](#) Catherine A. Sims, "Exploring Ojibwa History Through Documentary Sources: An Outline Of The Life Of Chief John Assance," *The Champlain Society* , https://digi-coll.library.utoronto.ca/champlain/gdw_sims2.htm.