Module Objective: In this module, the students will be introduced to the history of the Great Lakes Métis (1650-1850).

Historical Timeline: Great Lakes Métis:
- **1600s** Emergence of the Mixed-blood population
- **1700s** Golden Era of the Great Lakes Métis
- **1830-** Emigration of the Great Lakes Métis

The first era of the Great Lakes Métis was the emergence of a mixed-blood population in the region from the 1600s after the French Coureur de bois replaced the Odawa as fur-trade middlemen.

The second era is the golden age of the Great Lakes Métis when they formed a cohesive socioeconomic group around fur trading posts and were on the verge of proclaiming their group identity from the early 1700s to around 1815.

The third era, from about 1830 to quite recently. In this era, the Great Lakes frontier collapsed, and most of the region’s Métis emigrated to the Prairies, with the remainder largely assimilated into the local Aboriginal and Euro-Canadian population.

The origins of the Great Lakes Métis are easy enough to document. Their emergence as a people occurred in the upper Great Lakes or "le pays d'en haut" or the “upper country”. It was here that the largest coupling of First Nations
women with seventeenth century Coureur de bois and eighteenth century Voyageurs took place. The children of these often-illicit unions lived precariously near or at various Great Lakes fur trading and military posts, or with their mothers' bands. These became the first Métis communities.

The Great Lakes produced the first Métis "ethnogenesis" or the emergence of group consciousness. The first self-identifying Métis community in the region would have appeared at least a generation after First Peoples-European Contact. This space of time was needed for the small, isolated and fragile community to develop a sense of itself. They certainly would have been conscious of the fact that they were neither wholly French of First Nations. Almost immediately,

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they would have realized that they were "people in between". This is the origin of Métis identity.¹

The historical record and historiography, or the history of historical writing, regarding these early Métis in the Great Lakes is very sketchy. Surveying the historiography regarding the Métis is problematic because the references to Métis or mixed-bloods are very few. ⁴ One has to distinguish a variety of names given to them by Euro-American chroniclers, most of which had derogatory connotations. These early Métis were called Half-breed, Half-caste, Country-born, Mixed-blood, Natives, British Indians, French Indians, Indian French, Coureur de bois, Chicot, Voyageurs, Hivernants, Canadiens, Canayens, Canadians, Bois des brûlé, Mangeurs du lard, Pork-eaters, and the "Wissakodewinimi" or "half-burnt stick men". ⁵

History and historiography have not been kind to these early Métis. Institutional history has traditionally seen the Métis and all other First Nations peoples as obstacles to the advent of civilization. The dominant view long-held by Canadian and American scholars, from the late-nineteenth to the mid twentieth centuries, was that all Great Lakes First Nations, including the Métis, were "primitive" and "static". Furthermore these Aboriginal nations failed to adapt to the changing nature of the frontier or the advance of "civilization" and were thus doomed to assimilate into Euro-American society. ⁶ The Eurocentric biases of past scholars could not yet embrace such anthropological concepts as

⁴ Peterson, "Prelude to Red River", p.45.
acculturation⁷, reciprocity, and cultural relativism ⁸ because they were stuck in the false savagery-civilization dichotomy. To them, the closing of the Great Lakes frontier was a blessing. This onward march of progress meant the triumph of all that was good in the world – meaning of course, industrial capitalism, order, cultural Anglo-Protestant uniformity – over all that was bad; mercantile capital, “backwards” Indigenous cultures, a blending of races, and wilderness.⁹

The nineteenth-century Francophobe and Indian-hating American historian, Francis Parkman was perhaps the best representative of this line of thinking. His view on métissage or “race-mixing and the development of Coueur de bois-Voyageur-Métis culture is widely known:

...the French became savages. Hundreds betook themselves to the forest, never to return. These outflowings of French civilization were merged into the waste of barbarism...The wandering Frenchman chose a wife or a concubine among his Indian friends...The French empire in America could exhibit among its subjects every shade of color from white to red, every gradation of culture from the highest civilization of Paris to the rudest barbarism of the wigwam. The fur-trade engendered a peculiar class of men, known by the appropriate name of bushrangers, or coureurs de bois, half-civilized vagrants... [who] ...identified themselves with the Indians and sank into utter barbarism...He loved to decorate his hair with eagle feathers, to make his face hideous with vermilion, ochre, and soot...In hunting, in dancing, in singing, in taking a scalp, he rivaled the genuine Indian. His mind was tinctured with the superstitions of the forest...This class of man is not yet extinct. ¹⁰

This new historical canon maintains that the resistance of the Great Lakes First Nations and Métis to the assimilative impulse of Euro-Americans and the methods employed to prevent their spiritual, mental, and material conquest were legitimate and hardly "savage" since they were fighting for their cultural survival. This "resistance" also occurred on a relatively equal technological and

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⁷ Acculturation is the process, which allows one group to become like another through the borrowing of certain cultural traits. The acculturation process usually involves one hegemonic culture either forcing or facilitating its cultural norms on a culture less able to resist. Source: Richard White, The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815, Cambridge University Press, 1991, p.x.

⁸ For an excellent analysis of cultural relativism and other current anthropological techniques as they are employed in the social sciences see Bruce G. Trigger, "Hyperrelativism, Responsibility, and the Social Sciences" Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology, Vol. 26, No. 5 (1989), pp. 776-797.

⁹ Trigger, "The Historian's Indian", p. 320.
cultural footing: only the vast multitude of Euro-American settlement overwhelmed them and prevented their success. The end result was predictable – they abandoned the frontier or were put on reserves in order to be isolated and ultimately assimilated."

Unfortunately, ethno-historical ideas are taking a great deal of time to filter down to the popular level. Many of the old stereotypes persist. The civilization/savagery dichotomy and even the idea that the spiritual conquest of these "heathens" or "pagans" by martyred Jesuit Fathers still lingers on in popular circles in both anglophone and francophone America. It will take some time before an ethnocultural view of this society becomes public domain. However, the efforts of such scholars as James Axtell, Jacqueline Peterson, Olive Dickason, Richard White, Bruce Trigger, and Cornelius Jaenan in overturning the etnocentrism rampant in most American and Canadian history departments has proved successful.

These scholars collectively maintain that the Great Lakes fur-trading and missionary frontier was a "Middle Ground" in which First Nations, Mètis and Europeans lived similar lives, used the same technology, believed equally in a supernatural presence within nature, regarded each other as equals, intermarried and borrowed from and acculturated to the cultural patterns of each group. It was only after this frontier collapsed and the Mètis and other

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11 Harriet Gorham, "Families of Mixed Descent in the Western Great Lakes Region", in *Native People, Native Lands*, pp. 51.

12 Trigger, "The Historian's Indian", pp. 319-23.

First Nations were no longer needed, that racial, cultural and linguistic hierarchies emerged. This was when they became the "other" to Euro-Americans.\textsuperscript{14} The history of this essentially Métis frontier was not a story of continual cultural struggle between civilized man and his primitive self, but was rather one of mutual accommodation, acculturation and adaptation to continental conditions by all of its players.\textsuperscript{15}

Acculturation in the Great Lakes frontier was reciprocal between all interacting cultures. First Nations, French, Canadien, and Métis borrowed readily from each other and, in the process produced a unique frontier culture. This blending of old and new world traditions produced the first Métis culture.\textsuperscript{16} In most respects, First Nations, Canadien and Métis were indistinguishable in this Middle Ground.\textsuperscript{17} Each group brought different cultural legacies into this mélange and not every First Nations or French tradition was embraced. By doing this, these individuals rejected the materialism, class struggles, and religious intolerance endemic in Euro-America. Paradoxically, some of these fur-traders (Métis

\textsuperscript{14}This thesis is best articulated by Richard White, an American historian of Aboriginal-European relations in the Great Lakes region, in his well-documented and highly readable monograph, \textit{The Middle Ground}. White argues that this Middle Ground was a unique cultural experiment. "The Middle Ground is a place in between: in between cultures, peoples, and in between empires and the non state of villages. It is a place where many of the North American subjects and allies lived. It is the area between the historical foreground of European invasion and occupation and the background of Indian defeat and retreat. On the Middle Ground, diverse peoples adjust their differences through what amounts to a process of creative and often expedient, misunderstandings. People try to persuade others who are different from themselves by appealing to what they perceive to be the values and the practices of those others. They often misinterpret and distort both the values and the practices of those they deal with, but from these misunderstandings arise new meanings and through them new practices -- the shared meanings and practices in the Middle Ground. White, \textit{The Middle Ground}, p.x.

\textsuperscript{15}Ibid., pp.518-23.

\textsuperscript{16}Certainly, the French Coureur de bois, most of whom were peasants or lesser bourgeois, adapted First Nations clothing and technology in order to ply their trade; however, they also borrowed Aboriginal ideas, including a world view that was egalitarian, and liberal. Arguably, the freedom of the frontier and its distance from the conformist and hierarchical society of orders (estates -- ancien régime) France and Canada had three estates: the nobility, the clergy and everybody else) of the Canadian colony appealed to him. It is also probable that among the natives he found kindred spirits who practiced a cyclical and animistic spirituality, which was not all that different from the ancient folk religion of France with its pantheon of Saints and ceremonial rituals, leftover from pagan times. This culture was remarkably similar to if not the same as Métis culture. Acculturation, of course, also applied to First Peoples. The Natives became reliant to the French fur-trade, consumer goods and the alliance. Some even converted to Catholicism, synthesizing it with their own spiritual concepts. Lyle M. Stone and Donald Chaput, "History of the Upper
included) became so affluent that they could afford to own African and Native-American slaves. Their world was mutually comprehensible, and from about 1650 to 1815, they didn’t see each other as exotic, alien or as the "other" as they would after this epoch.

The Great Lakes frontier was also remarkably liberal. For all these "gens de libre", "free men" or "free spirits", the strictly hierarchical order-based society in the St. Lawrence colony was unappealing. From the very start, the Coureur de bois, natives and Métis resisted efforts by the French colonial state to tame or compel them to conform to the cultural norms of the St Lawrence colony. The sedentary life of the Habitant and the genteel refinements of Montreal, Trois-Rivières and Québec found no resonance with the Great Lakes population, although some Métis engaged in rudimentary agriculture around various supply and military posts.  

Great Lakes Métis culture was allowed to flourish at this time because it developed under very special conditions. It was one of many mixed-race communities, which existed along the whole length of the frontier. However, these communities, be they African/First Nations, European/First Nations or African/European were overwhelmed by the Anglo-American melting pot. Ironically, this Métis culture's eventual survival would come through emigration to the plains. Most Great Lakes Métis emigrated from their villages to the

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17 White, The Middle Ground, p.x.
Prairie region, where they expanded their population by absorbing, through marriage and adoption, many Cree.  

Before the rise of racialist discourse and laws preventing miscegenation (in America), these Métis used their various identities depending on the situation. This was particularly evident in war: the Métis were more enthusiastic in supporting the European alliance in times of conflict than their First Nations relatives. Familial ties could not always overcome the calculated best interests of tribal or national affiliations.

Settlement and marriage patterns provide conflicting evidence as to whether or not these early Métis actually had an ethnic or an economic identity. These Great Lakes Métis almost always had exogenous marriages as is evident by existing marriage and baptismal records for such fur-trade posts as Michimacinac, La Baie (Green Bay), Detroit, and Sault Ste. Marie. Exogamy or marriage outside of a small cultural group, within a particular population does not usually indicate group solidarity. These Métis obviously preferred to marry outside of their population rather than marrying their fellow mixed-bloods, the individuals most accustomed to their common semi-nomadic fur-trading culture. It was only when there were no First Nations or European partners available that they married other Métis. There are probably two reasons why this would be so: the early Métis pattern of marrying First Nations rather than other Métis was likely a function of the fur-trade, which allowed them to expand and cement trading and kinship ties and it prevented inbreeding.

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The fur-trade frontier fostered the growth of a number of Great Lakes communities made up of a small number of extended families. Patrilineal and, in some instances matrilineal marriage patterns emerged in these fur-trading communities. Some of these extended Métis families or clans, such as the Cadottes in Sault Ste. Marie and the Langlades in Sault Ste. Marie and Green Bay dominated the fur-trade in their locales, becoming quite affluent in the process. When the frontier was overwhelmed after 1815, all these families either emigrated to the Red River colony or to the American plains, or were largely assimilated into the Anglo-American mainstream. This was particularly true of those Métis living in the Ohio country: after the territory was incorporated into the United States, they served their new government in a number of capacities and were absorbed as prominent families into the melting pot. Even though the actual population of these Métis communities, about 10-15,000 in the 1820s, was minute when compared to the rest of the First Nations population in this region, they did, however, constitute a small but recognizable “urban network” based on seasonal habitation.

Sault Ste. Marie: An Early Métis Community

Before the rise of John Jacob Astor’s Fur Trade Company of America, the intra Great Lakes fur-trade was controlled by such independent Métis trading families as the Cadottes, who dominated much of the trade in the Wisconsin country. The Cadottes and the other Métis fur-traders resisted incursions into their hinterlands by outsiders, most likely their Anglo-American competitors. The

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26 Ibid.
same impulse undoubtedly forced J. -B. Cadotte to persuade the Sault Ste. Marie Métis to not rise up against their new British Sovereign during Pontiac's Resistance in 1763 lest a wide-scale Indian war put a moratorium on the fur-trade and destroy their common fur-trade lifestyle.  

Jacqueline Peterson indicates that Sault Ste. Marie had very few Métis inhabitants prior to 1800. In 1761, a year after the British Conquest of Canada, the settlement had only four homes, one of which the Métis interpreter Jean-Baptiste Cadotte inhabited and his Ojibwa wife and their children. By 1800, with the reorganization of the continental fur-trade by the North West Company and by independents in the Ohio country, a number of homes straddled both sides of the St. Mary's river. The community now included Métis, Canadien, and Celtic traders and their First Nations or European families, as well as British regulars and traders. Almost from the start, the community's First Nations and Métis' populations were more heavily Europeanized than their backwoods compatriots were. Sault Ste. Marie also had the highest rate of corporate marriage out of any fur-trade centre in the Great Lakes region. It also had the least amount of occupational diversity out of any of these communities.

Two early Sault Ste. Marie Métis – Charles de Langlade Sr. and Jr. – lead heroic lives, and resisted the Americanization of their way of life. These Métis warriors resisted, along with all the Métis and most other First Nations, American designs on their territories and way of life during the Seven Years War (1754-1763), the American Revolutionary War (1775-1783), and the War of 1812 (1812-1814). They instinctively knew that American victories in either of these conflicts would rob

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them of their lands and identity. Thus, the new colonial giant had to be resisted; although this would be a losing battle. The Métis and First Nations therefore sided with the French and British Crowns against the Americans out of self-interest.

**Charles-Michel (Mouat) de Langlade [1729-1800]**

Charles Michel de Langlade should be better remembered than he is currently. Although an opportunist, who exploited his mixed Odawa and Canadien heritage whenever it suited him, he was nonetheless a brave warrior and a brilliant military strategist and had the respect of his contemporaries, European, First Nations, and Métis. Langlade, born in 1729, to an Odawa (Ottawa) chief's sister and a Canadien Voyageur, was brought up in both First Nations and Baroque French Creole culture, and his education was extraordinary for the time. He was taught by both Elders and by the Jesuits. The young Métis was highly regarded by his Anishinabe tribe: it was believed that he possessed a special soul given to him by the Manitou. By the age of 10, he was already a warrior and even assisted in a joint French-Odawa assault on a Chickasaw village. In his teens, he received training in the French colonial army. During one of those infrequent periods of peace in early colonial times, on July 1752, Langlade commanded 240 Métis, Canadien, Ojibwa and Odawa guerillas and subsequently took the British-Miami town of Pickawilly, killing 31 of its inhabitants. Following the conclusion of the melee, Langlade and his guerillas ritually ate the Miami chief La Demoiselle as retribution for abandoning the French alliance for

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30 Ibid., p.59.  
31 Ibid.

the British and their superior trade goods. In the process, the British fur-trade in the Ohio valley was destroyed until 1763.\textsuperscript{32}

During the Seven Year's War Langlade was a tenacious partisan of the French. Until 1757, he lead his troops in a number of ambushes, which so weakened the seasoned but European-trained army of British general Braddock, that general John Burgoyne called him "the author of Braddock's defeat".\textsuperscript{33} Later in that same year, he marched from Fort Duquense, and later attacked and defeated British armies at Crown Point and Fort William Henry, where he was involved in a "massacre" of prisoners.\textsuperscript{34} However, France's days as the continent's preeminent power were clearly numbered, and Langlade and his forest warriors fought desperately to prevent the conquests of Quebec in 1759, Montreal in 1760, and Macinac in 1761. Canada was henceforth a British colony. Langlade fought with the British during the American Revolutionary War, however, his victories were few because his First Nations allies, like the Canadiens, were content to let the British and Americans solve their "family quarrel" amongst themselves.\textsuperscript{35} The First Nations must have concluded that Britain could not prevent the cession of the rebelling colonies from the Empire.

He believed that harmony between the governing colonial power and the First Nations and the Mètis was needed if his people were to maintain their indigenous lifestyle. Before his death in 1800, he served as a broker between the various Great Lakes tribes and with the Crown. Among First Nations and Europeans he was highly regarded: the Menominee called him "Akewangeketawso" or "he who is fierce for the land", and a French officer


\textsuperscript{33} Heard, \textit{Handbook of the American Frontier}, p.194.
wrote that he was "...very brave, to have influence on the minds of the savages...[and was] very zealous when ordered to do anything". 36 That he was culturally ambivalent contributed to his legacy. He thought of himself as both an Odawa and a Canadien, and he married a Canadienne, Charlotte Bourassa – a most unusual marriage for a male Métis to make at this time. 37 Today he is recognized as the "Father of Wisconsin". 38

During the War of 1812 the Métis and First Nations sided with the British Crown against the Americans because they considered the British more respectful of their indigenous culture and way of life. The War of 1812 reconfirmed the role of the Great Lakes Métis as partisans of the British Crown. The infusion of Celtic traders into the continental fur-trade after 1763 established many close bonds between them and the Métis, as did the realization that if the Americans were victorious, they would control the North-American fur-trade. Already, the American fur-trading companies were attempting to force the Métis independents out of the Ohio valley. 39 Necessity dictated that the region's Métis fight with the British against the Americans. The British were certainly the lesser of the two evils since they tacitly recognized that they desired the preservation of the First Nations and Métis way of life to serve as a bulwark against American expansion in the Northwest. More importantly, the British wished to see corporate coffers filled in Montreal and London with profits from the fur-trade.

34 Ibid.
35 Ibid.
37 Ibid.
38 Heard, Handbook of the American Frontier, p.154.
Britain’s first victory during the War of 1812 came when Captain Roberts and some of the local First Nations, Métis and Canadians captured Fort Michilimacnic. The Americans retaliated by burning much of Sault Ste. Marie to the ground, including the Northwest Company post where many Métis were employed.

Charles de (Mouat) Langlade Jr.
Charles de Langlade Jr. was one of many Great Lakes Métis who fought with the British and Canadians against the American invaders. He was a warrior in the same mould as his father, had the same militaristic ethos, and engendered the same respect among his contemporaries. He also had the same desire to ensure that Britain would remain the protector of the region’s Métis and First Nations people. Little is known of his exploits except for a few references left by Euro-American observers. The British major John Norton, an adopted Iroquois, wrote that the young Métis warrior was "...a brave young man [who] ...along with thirty Ottawas from Miciminac and thirty or forty Chippewas of Miessiaga (sic) was slightly wounded in the arm" after an attack against American soldiers.40

The conclusion of the War of 1812 inaugurated an era, which saw the decline of the Métis traditional fur trading lifestyle. Métis resistance in this era was limited because Sault Ste. Marie was on the verge of being flooded with British-Canadian and Anglo-American settlers. With the collapse of the southern fur

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40 Schmautz, The Ojibwa of Southern Ontario, p.112-113. For an overview of Aboriginal involvement in the War of 1812, see George F. G. Stanley’s "The Indians in the War of 1812," in J. R. Miller, editor, Sweet Promises: A Reader On Indian-White Relations in Canada. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991, pp. 105-27. This remains a controversial legacy since the Métis and first Nations’ relationship with the British was often poor. In fact, J.-B. Assignack, a francophile Odawa chief and likely Métis, lived as an American from 1800-1812 until American intolerance towards his Macinac band forced him to side with the British and Métis and Canadians against America. The British alliance was not as passionate as the French one; reluctant self-interest forced the Métis together, as did the kinship and business ties between Métis, Celtic and Canadien fur-traders. See also: Cecil King, “J.-B. Assignack: Arbiter of Two Worlds”, Ontario History, Vol. 86. No.1. (March 1994), pp. 36-37.

Some of the Great Lakes Métis engaged in a passive resistance to the assimilative policies meant to eliminate their civilization. The lamentable but defiant words of a Minnesota Voyageur, documented in the 1850s, best articulated the resistance of the Great Lakes Métis.

Where do I live? I cannot say. I am a Voyageur -- I am a Chicot mister. I live everywhere. My grandfather was a Voyageur: he died on the voyage. My father was a Voyageur: he died on the voyage. I will also die while on voyage and another Chicot will take my place. Such is the course of our life. 41

With the collapse of the frontier a unique way of life forever ended. It was in this "Middle Ground" that a Macinac Michigan Métisse, Madame Laframboise, could become a fur-trade bourgeoisie, and employ and command the respect of her First Nations, Métis and Euro-American employees. It was this frontier that allowed her to move in between two worlds, become a respected member of high society, own slaves, compel the monopolistically-minded Fur-Trade Company of America to merge with her company on her terms, and have her beautiful daughter, Josette, become the sister-in-law of Franklin Pierce, the future President of the United States (1852-56). 42

Euro-American and Canadian settlement made the old notion of Métis consciousness irrelevant in the Great Lakes region. The dénouement of the Middle Ground – where the Métis flourished, established an identity based on a mixed racial heritage, and their common socio-economic status as fur-trade provisioners – ended abruptly in the 1820s and 1830s. Many of these Métis left

41 Peterson, "Many Roads To Red River", p.64.
for the Prairies or reverted en masse to their mothers' Anishinabe bands. Once in these Indian bands, the Métis would have been acculturated to the conditions of being a Treaty or a non-Treaty Indian.

The American surveyor, Thomas McKinney, has provided an idyllic description of the life of the Sault Ste Marie Métis and Ojibwa, during the early 1840s. In one instance, the author marveled at how these people could consistently "shoot through" the rapids and yet survive.

*It is not possible to look at these fisherman Indians and Canada French, and even boys and girls, flying over these rapids, and reaching out this pole with a knot to it, without a sensation of terror. Yet it has scarcely ever happened that any of them are lost; and I believe never, unless they have been drunk.*

Of course, this idyllic vignette would be shattered soon after treaties were signed in 1850 on the Canadian side of Sault Ste. Marie and in 1842, on the American side. With Métis and First Nations title to the land extinguished, colonization could thus begin since the Métis and other First Nations in the area were now "obsolete". The Métis and First Nations population of the Great Lakes, and indeed throughout the Americas, were labeled as the "other" by the 1850s, and an impediment to settlement and an obstacle to the successful exploitation of staples resources. The conclusion of the extended revolutionary period, 1763-1815, not only ended the American and British-Canadian contest for continental hegemony, it also ended Canada's need for First Nations allies against the numerically superior Americans. The Métis and other First Nations were no longer necessary as distinct and easily identifiable groups. Therefore, they had to be assimilated. Thus an imperialist era ended and was replaced by a

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64 Thomas L. McKenney, *Sketches of a Tour to the Lakes, of the Character of the Chippeway Indians and Incidents Connected with the Treaty of Fond du Lac*. Barre, Massachusetts: Imperial Society, 1972,p.158.
65 Rogers, *The Southeastern Ojibwa*, p. 763.
colonialist regime, which attempted to undermine those things vital for the proper maintenance of Métis identity: their group consciousness and status as a people of mixed First Nations and European heritage and a means to financially support themselves.

It took some time before the colonization of the Sault Ste. Marie Métis and First Nations to begin. Nineteenth-century North-American society needed to intellectually and morally justify the dispossession of Métis-First Nations identities and lands. The Romantic era and Enlightenment concept of the "Noble Savage" had to be thoroughly expunged from public domain. This would be achieved in both popular and intellectual circles by mid-century. Darwin's "revolution" regarding evolution made this possible. Assimilation was to be achieved through the Church-run residential and missionary school system and urbanization.

Nevertheless, the Sault Ste. Marie and other Great Lakes Métis tried to adapt to these changing circumstances. Métis activism was evident before and after the signing of the Robinson Superior and Huron Treaties in 1850. In 1840, the Métis of Pentanguishene, originally from Sault Ste. Marie and Drummound Island, petitioned the Governor General indicating their desire to be included in the annual payments to the local Indians. These annuities were initially given to ensure First Nations loyalty to the Crown, but developed into humanitarian aid after the Indians became sedentary. The Métis in this region did not receive such charity. The Métis petitioners stressed their loyalty to the Crown – many were members of the militia – their indigence and desire to receive assistance to which they were entitled as First Nations peoples. In essence, they were fighting for their First Nations rights. After pleading their case, these Métis
were granted the annuities, however, government officials doubted the wisdom of such a policy because they believed it would encourage race mixing between French Canadians and Indians.  

The 284 Métis signatories of the 1850 treaties also had difficulty negotiating for their Aboriginal rights. During these negotiations, Chiefs Shinguacouse (a Métis) and Nebenaigoching refused to sign unless their Métis charges on the treaty list were given a hundred acres of free land.  

In response, the Province of Canada’s negotiator, William Benjamin Robinson, argued that the "half-breeds" could not be given free land, and any land given to them would have to come from the reserves. Rather than receiving a secure land base these Métis were to be listed on the annuity paylists for the Indian bands in those treaty areas and registered as "half-breeds".

By 1885, "[f]ederal government policy for Métis in Ontario became a policy of exclusion based on a doctrinaire view of Indians as a homogenous race which should not include people of mixed ancestry". During these treaty negotiations in 1850, and in 1873 in Rainy River, and 1905 in Keewatin, the Métis served as bureaucrats, chiefs, interpreters, and liaisons between the state and First Nations communities. Thus, they were given no identifiable land base to maintain and evolve a Métis identity. Historian Douglas Leighton argues that the treaty process put Ontario Métis in a precarious legal situation in the mid and late 1800s.

The Métis population of the province fell into a legal limbo between the status of a citizen and that of an Indian. Unrecognized in legislation, they were sometimes

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48 Ibid. p. 61.  
49 Ibid., pp.61-63.  
50 Ibid. p. 59.  
51 Ibid.
included in treaty discussions. One of the concerns of the Indians signing the Robinson Treaty in 1850, for example, was the fate of their half-breed relatives. W.B. Robinson felt that if band leaders wanted to include such people on their lists, they should be free to do so. His position in a sense reflected the legal and social reality of the Mètis: they had to choose whether they would be Indian or White. Once the choice was made, they in many ways ceased to be people "in between". Their dilemma was not an enviable one: either choice meant giving up something of their unique inheritance. Politically, they remained extremely vulnerable, being utterly dependent on the good will of band leaders for their positions on band lists. Legally, they had no distinct existence. 52

Questions and Activities:

1) What happened to the Great Lakes Mètis?
2) How and when did the Great Lakes Mètis emerge?
3) What differences do you think led to the development of a solid Mètis identity in what's now the Prairie Provinces of Canada, but not in the Great Lakes after 1830?
4) How were the Mètis involved in the Treaty process in what's now Ontario? Was this similar to or different from that on the Prairies?
5) Why did the Mètis side first with the French and then the British? Was this similar to what local First Nations did? Why or why not?
6) Why did the Great Lakes Mètis fail to intermarry?
7) Why is Great Lakes Mètis identity harder to reconstruct than Prairie-Mètis identity?
8) How did past historians portray the region's Mètis? What does this say about the society from which the historians came from?
9) Draw a map of the Great Lakes and put a number of Mètis settlements on them. Do you notice a settlement pattern? Did the Mètis settle along major waterways? Why would this be advantageous?
10) Write a brief report comparing Michel de Langlade with Gabriel Dumont. How were these two Mètis warriors different? How were they similar? Was their struggles essentially the same or were they different?

Supplementary Bibliography:

For other books and articles related to this topic, consult the following:


52 Ibid.


