

The Metis Infinity Flag

Some Metis people believe that the symbol on the Metis flag is based upon the Plains Indian sign language for “Metis” which used the sign for “cart” followed by the sign for “Man,” a consequence of the long association (from 1801) of the Metis with their Red River Carts. The sign for cart is formed by forming two circles with thumbs and forefingers joined, with the hands held together. This does look very much like an infinity sign.



Brian Cyr demonstrates the sign for “Cart”.



Metis infinity flag

The more common interpretation is that the Metis infinity flag is based upon one of the world’s oldest flags, the Saltire flag of Scotland, traditionally dating back to the 9th century. The flag of Scotland features a white saltire, a *crux decussate* (X-shaped cross)

representing the cross of the Christian martyr Saint Andrew, the patron saint of Scotland, on a blue field. It is named the Saltire or the Saint Andrew's Cross. In heraldic language, it is called a blazoned Azure, *a saltire argent*. However, history records that the Saltire was used on both red and blue backgrounds.



Flag of Scotland

According to Metis history, North West Company partners at the Qu'Appelle Valley gave the red infinity flag to them in the spring of 1815 [as described by James Sutherland]. Later, Peter Fiddler describes the Metis flying the blue infinity flag on May 31, 1816:

At half past noon about 48 Halfbreeds, Canadians, Freeman and Indians came all riding on Horseback, with their flag flying blue about 4 feet square and a figure of 8 horizontally in the middle, one beating an Indian drum, and many of them singing Indian songs, they all rode directly to the usual crossing place over the river where they all stopped about two minutes, and instead of going down the bank and riding across the river they all turned suddenly and rode full speed into our yard—some of them tied their horses, others loose and fixed their flag at our door, which they soon afterwards hoisted over our East Gate next the Canadian house—Cuthbert Grant then came up to me in the yard and demanded of me to deliver to him all the keys of our stores warehouses and I of course would not deliver them up—they then rushed into the house and broke open the warehouse door first, plundered the warehouse of every article it contained, tore up part of the cellar floor and cut out the parchment windows without saying what this was done for or by whose authority - Alex. McDonell, Serephim, Bostonais, and Allan McDonell were at their house looking on the whole time.¹

The Glasgow *Herald* of writes about the Metis flag in its review of the BBC documentary called *Highland Empire*:

The documentary covers the history of the fur trading industry in Canada when droves of Highlanders, many of them wealthy chiefs of the old clan system, fled from Scotland after their Culloden defeat² and created the North West Company, which struggled for supremacy with the English-run Hudson's Bay Company.

¹ H.B.C.A. B/22/A/19, p. 36.

² April 16, 1746

The men were entrepreneurial, and the women they chose as partners for these frontier ventures were the natives of the north-west region, the Cree, Ojibwa and Saulteaux people who lived in hunting communities. The children they sired were the Metis, of whom more than 400,000 now exist in Canada.

And they are still fiercely proud of their Scottish heritage which has survived in their fiddle music, the soft bannocks that they make and their own blue and white flag, based on the Saltire but with a looped infinity symbol instead of a cross.³

According to legend, in 832 A.D. King Óengus II (or King Angus) led the Picts and Scots in battle against the Angles under King Aethelstan of East Anglia near modern-day Athelstaneford. King Angus and his men were surrounded and he prayed for deliverance. During the night Saint Andrew (who was martyred on a saltire cross) appeared to Angus and assured him of victory. On the following morning a white saltire against the background of a blue sky appeared to both sides. The Picts and Scots were heartened by this, but the Angles lost confidence and were defeated. This saltire design has been the Scottish flag ever since.

In 1385 the Scottish Parliament decreed that Scottish soldiers should wear the saltire as a distinguishing mark. The earliest surviving Scottish flag consisting solely of the saltire dates from 1503: a white cross on a red background. By 1540 the legend of King Angus had been altered to include the vision of the crux decussata against a blue sky. Thereafter, this saltire design in its present form became the national flag of Scotland.

James Sutherland records the Metis flying the infinity flag with a red background:

Freeman and Half Breeds forming two distinct companies. [Alexander] Macdonell led one of these consisting of Canadians with colours flying, the other Company were Half Breeds headed by Cuthbert Grant, a Half Breed who has been regularly educated at Canada and has acted for several years as clerk, and still continues to act as such, to the N.W. Co. This tribe had another Flag hoisted of what Nation I know not. It is red with a figure 8 placed horizontally in the middle of it and is said to be a present from the N.W.Co. along with some Swords and a few pairs of Pistols to these deluded young men, the Half Breeds as a recompense for their exertions against the colony, [in the] Spring of 1815.⁴

Thus, as a symbol of nationhood, the Metis infinity flag predates Canada's Maple Leaf flag by about 150 years. The Red Infinity flag is generally considered to be the flag the Metis flew while on the hunt. For the Metis, the white infinity symbol has two meanings:

- The joining of two cultures.
- The existence of a people forever.

³ *The Herald*, "Sailing on in the bold battle for equality": May 18, 2007.

⁴ P.A.M., Selkirk Papers, James Sutherland's Narrative, pp. 1946-1947.

Reference:

Racette, Calvin. *Flags of the Metis*. Regina: Gabriel Dumont Institute of Native Studies and Applied Research, 1987.



Compiled by Lawrence Barkwell
Coordinator of Metis Heritage and History Research
Louis Riel Institute