

Joseph William McKay (1829-1900)

Joseph McKay was the son of HBC clerk William McKay¹ and Mary Bunn² both Metis. On June 16, 1860, he married Helen Holmes in Victoria, British Columbia. Joseph had extensive fur trade connections. He was the grandson of John Richards McKay and his uncles were John Bunn and John Richards McKay. At age nine, he was sent to the Red River Academy for five years of education. While there, he boarded with his maternal grandfather, Thomas Bunn. He then joined the HBC at age fifteen. Governor Simpson sent him to serve as an apprentice seaman on a Pacific coast vessel in 1844. He served at Fort Vancouver, Washington and was involved in the reconnaissance of the Oregon Territory. In 1846, he was transferred to Fort Victoria shortly after its establishment and remained there until the discovery of coal at Nanaimo. There he helped Chief Factor James Douglas to negotiate the Fort Victoria Treaties. In the 1850s, Douglas sent McKay to explore the Cowichan and Comox valleys and establish a salmon fishery and sheep station on San Juan Island.

In 1849, he moved to Nanaimo when coal was discovered. McKay, who was an amateur geologist, was instrumental in this discovery and was sent there to superintend operations. 1852, he took possession of the Nanaimo coalfields on behalf of the HBC. In 1854, he quit the HBC and opened a sawmill. He returned to them in 1855 and worked at Fort Victoria. Later he was elected to the house of assembly of Vancouver Island. In 1860, he was made chief trader of the Thompson district, having previously scouted a route to the goldfields in that district. In 1865, he surveyed the area between Williams Creek and Tête Jaune Cache in anticipation of the proposed telegraph line from Fort Garry.

Between 1866 and 1878, McKay was in charge of operations at Fort Yale in the Kootenay district. During this time he gained promotion to factor in 1872 and became Justice of the Peace in 1876. In 1878, the company dismissed him, largely because of his considerable outside business dealings (gold mines, salmon canneries and timber leases). During the next twenty years, the Dominion government employed him as census commissioner and Indian Agent. It is noteworthy that he personally inoculated 1,300 Indians with smallpox vaccine between 1886 and 1888. In 1893, he was made Assistant Superintendent of Indian Affairs for British Columbia. During his last years in Victoria he lectured and wrote articles on the fur trade and on the Indians of British Columbia.

McKay was one of the few people who spoke the Chinook (Tshinuk) Jargon fluently and was trusted by the Native people generally as one who could understand them and redress their grievances.

¹ William was born in 1818 at Beaver Creek, the son of John Richards McKay and Harriet Ballendine.

² Mary was the daughter of Thomas Bunn and Sarah McNab



Joseph W. McKay (Royal B.C. Museum, BAC D-04541)

Reference

Mackie, Richard. "Joseph William McKay." *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, Vol. XII (1891-1900). Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990: 641-643.



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