



# In Hindsight: Half a Century of Research Discoveries in Canadian History

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## Episode 8: Nahnebahwequay (1824-1865), “Upright Woman”

Before the twentieth century, little personal data survives in English or in French on the lives of First Nations women in Canada. Men recorded much of the limited information available. Early accounts by and about Indigenous women remain rare, which makes the mid-nineteenth century writings of, and references to, Nahnebahwequay or Catharine Sutton (1824-1865) so valuable. An extensive and varied documentary collection survives on Nahnebahwequay’s life, from Indian Department records in Library and Archives Canada to Methodist and Quaker publications and correspondence. As well, census and land records in the Archives of Ontario provide valuable supplementary detail. The richest source of all consists of “Upright Woman’s” and her husband’s writings, which her descendants generously donated to the Grey Roots Museum in Owen Sound, Ontario.

Thanks to her schooling at a Methodist Indigenous mission, her visit to England as a young woman, and later her marriage to an English immigrant, as an adult Nahnebahwequay had great social ease with non-Indigenous people. The Anishinaabe woman dressed like the European settlers, spoke English, and ate their foods. She practiced the Methodist faith. Yet despite increasing state and non-

Indigenous missionary influence, she held to her Ojibwe language, and she championed the need for justice for First Nations people. In 1860, this strong and confident Indigenous woman crossed the North Atlantic, while seven months pregnant, to present land petitions to Queen Victoria at Buckingham Palace. She also advocated for the restoration of Indian status to First Nations women like herself who had lost it because they had married non-Indians.

What a contrast her life as a female is to the model favoured in Upper Canadian settler society. Egerton Ryerson, for example, a relatively progressive individual by the standards of his day, still presented females as frail and fragile, needing protection. Although he opened entrance to the normal, or teacher training, schools to women, regulations discouraged communication with men. In fact, women and men were not allowed to speak, bow, or even wink at one another, at the risk of expulsion. In the mid-nineteenth century, many British Canadians considered it dangerous to educate young men and women in the same classrooms at a time when they were reaching sexual maturity.

Nahnehahwequay (Upright Woman), known to her friends as “Nahnee,” was born in the autumn of 1824 on the river flats at Missinnine (or Misinnihe), the “trusting creek” or the Credit River as it was known in English. One year after Nahnee’s birth, her parents became part of a revolutionary movement amongst Methodist Anishinaabeg who willingly and enthusiastically embraced change, acceptance of living in a settlement, and adopting European style agriculture. From the age of two, Nahnee lived at the Methodist mission on the west bank of the Credit, a community of about 200 in number. In her youth the Credit people still spoke and thought in Anishinaabemowin and remained self-governing. In its formative years, the enthusiastic Indigenous Christian community sent out 24 of its members throughout the

larger Anishinaabeg world as missionaries, interpreters, and schoolteachers.

Nahnee's father Bunch Sunegoo, or Tyetiquob (1804-1842), belonged to the Eagle doodem or clan, the most numerous amongst the Credit River people; and Nahnee's mother, Polly, or Mary Crane, or Myarwikishigoqua (1806-189?), to the Otter. Clan membership was inherited and passed down through the father from one generation to the next. Nahnee, for example, belonged to the Eagle doodem. Nahnee referred to Peter Jones, or Kahkewaquonaby ("Sacred Feathers"), as her "uncle," but more likely, by the European system of kinship terminology, he was a first cousin of one of her parents. (By Ojibwe descent rule, first cousins and siblings are equivalent and share the same kinship terms.)

Nahnee's parents reached adulthood in probably the worst decade in the history of the Credit River Mississauga. They had hoped in return for sharing their territory with the British that the British would help them. They also believed the Anishinaabeg had retained the right to hunt, fish, and gather on their former territory. The newcomers proved ungrateful. After clearing and fencing their farms and preventing access for hunting, they wanted more land. Between 1818 and 1820, the British obtained the last large remaining tract at the western end of Lake Ontario still in Mississauga hands. The Credit River Mississauga retained only three small reserves at the mouths of the Credit, Oakville (Sixteen Mile), and Bronte (Twelve Mile) Creeks. Bitterly Nahnee later wrote that the British took advantage "of our weakness and ignorance, so that our fisheries, hunting-grounds, and lands and homes are taken from us, whether we like it or not." The establishment of the Credit Mission in 1826 marked a new beginning.

Nahnee grew up in the mid-1820s and 1830s, in the period of great enthusiasm at the Mission. Many of the old ways remained. Her

parents encouraged self-reliance and initiative, both traditional values of the Anishinaabeg. Non-interference remained the rule. Through silent observation and imitation of her mother, Nahnee learned how to make the family clothing. She became skilled in Anishinaabeg women's crafts. Her mother taught her how to make moccasins and how to weave quills into the round lid of a birchbark box. (The Grey Roots Museum still has examples of her work.) As did her mother before her, Nahnee learned herbal remedies of Anishinaabeg women healers. The Christian Mississauga continued to value the old herbal medicines. Christian converts also instructed their children to speak Ojibwe with absolute correctness.

The Mississauga used their old names but now acquired English ones. At home and with her friends she remained Nahnee, but at church and in school she became Catherine Brown Sunegoo, after Catherine Brown, a revered Cherokee Christian convert. Domestic living arrangements changed. The Mississauga moved from wigwams scattered over a wide area to log homes set closely together in a straight line. By leaving their lodges on the river flats the converts abandoned communal living. Two families shared each of the 20 dressed-log cottages, with a wall dividing each from the other's room. Each Mission family had their own vegetable garden by their cottage, access to pasture, and land to clear for their own individual farm away from the village.

Men and women acquired new roles. Formerly the men's domain was the forest and the women's the lodge. The warriors hunted and fished. The women built the wigwams, butchered meat, tanned hides, cooked, took care of the children, gathered firewood, prepared the fires, and planted Indian corn. In the Christian era, a great deal changed: men put up the log cabins, planted the fields, chopped wood, and made the fires. Daily conduct also changed. The Mississauga washed off the fish oil they had daubed on their faces, hair, and arms to protect themselves from the swarming

blackflies and mosquitos. With the oil went their acrid odour on hot days, as well as their relief from insect bites. As good Methodists they swore off alcohol, dressed plainly, and constantly clothed themselves. Pressure arose to ignore the taboo against marriage between members of the same doodem. As many traditional spiritual practices now had to be done in secrecy, it is hard to assess to what degree they continued.

As a young girl Nahnee assisted her mother with cooking, the laundry, and supervising her younger brothers and sisters. In the summer, the girls joined their mother in picking berries and helping in the garden. The Methodist church began a school. William Lyon Mackenzie, editor of the *Colonial Advocate* (who seven years later became renowned as the leading instigator of the Rebellion of 1837 in Upper Canada), visited and made a detailed description in 1830. He reported that the large building contained “tiers of raised benches (like a gallery)” in the rear. On one side sat the boys and on the other the girls. Around the schoolroom lay Bibles, New Testaments, English and American books, a handsome map of the world, arithmetic figures, and a pasteboard clock used to introduce European concepts of time. Mackenzie then added that school walls “are adorned with good moral maxims, and I perceived that one of the rules was rather novel, though doubtless in place here: It was ‘No blanket to be worn in School.’”

By the time Nahnee reached her teenage years, the Credit people had made great progress. They had faced a multiplicity of challenges. In just one decade the Mississauga, by their own labour, had built a hospital, a mechanic’s shop, and eight barns to accommodate their stock and crops, and had added over 20 log houses to the original 20. Several families had their own orchards. The villagers had enclosed for pasture and cleared for farming 400 hectares (900 acres), or nearly one-third of the reserve. They raised wheat, oats, peas, Indian corn, potatoes, and other vegetables. The

band ran two sawmills. They were nearly self-sufficient in their own milk and butter, potatoes, beef, and pork. At the river's mouth they laid out the village of Port Credit and sold the town lots.

In the Christian era death remained a feared presence. As a young girl in the 1820s and early 1830s Nahnee lost most of her siblings through disease. Her only surviving brother drowned in the Credit River. Once she herself almost died from an illness. After the loss of his children, her father broke his pledge and again began to drink heavily. But her mother, granite-like, held firm and remained a pillar of the Methodist community. Peter Jones and his well-educated English wife, Eliza Field, who came to the mission after their marriage in the fall of 1833, took an interest in the bright, talented Nahnee. Initially Eliza found her niece's independent behaviour annoying. Her first comment in her diary about her nine-year-old niece on 22 December 1833 reads: "Attended the Sunday School but felt discouraged by the impudent and idle conduct of C.B." But the relationship improved. The next reference to Nahnee, a year later, mentions the evening she spent caring for her sick aunt. A grateful Eliza noted: "She was a quiet attentive nurse."

At the Jones's home Eliza taught Nahnee and other Mississauga girls about Christianity, as well as how to sew, knit, and undertake other household skills. Years later Nahnee thanked Eliza in a warm personal note, written in her own distinctive spelling: "Dear sister when I was a child you gave me clothes to were not because I was nakaid but because you want to do me good and tell me that Jesus died for me [...] you taught little Indian girls in that little house a cross the road and you taught them how to sew and many other things [...] As for my part I thank you for what I now know but more to that God that sent you at the Credit to instruct the poor Indian girls in the way to heaven. [...] how good you were to C B Sunegoo who once lived at Credit what a naughty girl she was not to now you kindness." Peter and Eliza marked Nahnee's coming of age by taking her with them to London. The 13-year-old spent

approximately one year in England, travelling to London via New York City with Eliza in the early summer of 1837. Peter joined them overseas in the fall. London, a city of over 1,500,000, the largest and richest city in the world, must have amazed the young Mississauga girl from a village of 250 people. London alone had a population greater than that of Upper and Lower Canada combined. As her uncle Peter noted during his first visit in 1831, here the people “are as thick as musquitoes.” While in London, Nahnee stayed at the large home of her aunt’s wealthy family in Lambeth, not far from the family’s soap and candle factory. At Norwood, ten kilometres to the south of the city, they had an attractive country home.

In England Nahnee discovered a winter much milder than in Canada, and a summer much cooler. The English mist or fog combined with the continuous rain contrasted with the welcome clean air of home. From her uncle’s public talks, and his explanations to Eliza’s family of the First Nations’ need of title deeds, Nahnee learned about British legal concepts of land. She must have heard references to the Royal Proclamation of 1763 which set forth the procedures for Indian land surrenders. Land could only be transferred to the Crown with the consent of a majority of community members at a public meeting. Without the First Nation’s consent the surrender had no legality. The young girl absorbed information quickly. Her youthful impressions of how her uncle fought authority would serve her well two decades later in another struggle for Ojibwe land rights. Peter Jones regarded his bright young niece as his “adopted daughter.”

Nahnee returned to the Credit much better versed in English, less shy, and far more at ease in the British settlers’ world. Shortly after her arrival she met William Sutton, a hardworking and pious English shoemaker, a Methodist, who had immigrated to Canada nine years earlier. He had a great interest in Indian affairs. They decided to marry. Although the age gap was 13 years—he was 27

and she 14—her family, especially her influential uncle, approved. Peter Jones himself performed the ceremony in early January 1839. Despite the difference in their ages, the two proved extremely compatible, with similar interests and a common religious outlook. Years later, Nahnee wrote of her husband that he “had gone over to Canada, when in his teens, from a sense of duty towards the Indians, and had become an Indian that he might be useful to them.” Peter and Eliza gave the couple their full support.

The English shoemaker and carpenter had many talents. In Canada he became a skilled farmer and a Methodist lay preacher. As an older man he served on township council. Years later William wrote this wonderful sketch of Nahnee: “... she was a general favourite among both Indians & white people their was something in her natural apearance & behaviour wich at once introduced her to the notice & atention of all with whom she came in contact without any effort of her own [...] she was equaly at home among all classes of People whither in the Mansions of the Rich, the Poor Man’s Cottage, the back woods shanty or the Bark or rush Wigwam of the Indian [...] she was kind to all a special frend to the Poor and sufering [...] she loved Jesus [...] her attachment was noble & strong towards the Methodist church [...] to whom she was indeted for her Christian Education...”

Nahnee and William began a family shortly after their marriage, raising their eight children as Anishinaabeg. Following the Crown’s refusal to grant the Credit people title to their lands at the mouth of the Credit, the Suttons, along with three other families, moved northward to Nawash, an Anishinaabeg community near the small settlement of Owen Sound on Georgian Bay. The Nawash Anishinaabeg welcomed the Suttons. By 1847 Nahnebahwequay and her family farmed a 200-acre lot, until the early 1850s when they relocated to Sault Ste. Marie where William worked as a farm instructor at the Methodist mission at Garden River. Three years later, the family moved across the border to



Shawville, where they spent two years working with the Ojibwe Methodist Mission in Michigan. Nahnee often interpreted for the missionaries.

In the Suttons' absence pressure for additional land surrenders increased. In half a century Upper Canada's population had grown tenfold to over a million, while the First Nations' population in the colony in the 1850s remained only 12,000 or so. Bending to intense pressure, and after being promised once more that this surrender would be the last, the Saugeen Peninsula Anishinaabeg signed a treaty with the British. In 1854, they ceded most of their remaining lands on the Saugeen Peninsula (renamed the Bruce Peninsula after the treaty of 1854), retaining only five small reserves. This surrender proved far from the last. Clearly against their promise in 1854, and against the spirit of the Royal Proclamation of 1763 itself, the Indian Department returned in 1857 to ask for more land. In the middle of winter in Toronto, a small group of Anishinaabeg surrendered the Newash or Owen Sound reserve, one of the five parcels of land remaining to them after 1854. The tract included the Suttons' land, as well as the farms of two other former Credit Mississauga families. The government would not revoke the agreement. Overlooking the Royal Proclamation's requirement that surrenders needed majority consent at a public meeting held in the territory itself, it regarded the Toronto treaty of 1857 as valid.

Nahnee protested on the grounds that those who surrendered the title were not authorized to do so. She described the government's land policies as "wholesale robbery and treachery." In response, she drafted a letter to the government, in which she argued that government officials had been unfair and arbitrary in their application of their own laws. She wrote that "the department has made this excuse for robbing me and my children of our birthright, which I inherited from my forefathers before the white man ever set foot on our shores." During the back and forth over her right to

purchase her land, the Department insisted that Nahnebahwequay and her children were not legally considered Indians since she married a non-Indigenous man. In retrospect, one can easily imagine Nahnee's frustration. Eliza Jones belonged to the Mississaugas of the Credit, as did Peter and her four sons. She was "legally" an Indian. She had status. In contrast, the Indian Department regarded Nahnee in terms of her legal status as "white" not "Indian." None of this made sense to Nahnee, a First Nations woman, who knew her Indigenous language, and the Anishinaabeg's history and culture.

Several fruitless trips to Government House in Toronto followed. A petition to the Canadian Parliament also produced no results. The Anishinaabeg communities around Georgian Bay and Lake Simcoe promised their support. At a council at Rama in 1859, they asked Nahnee to take their land grievances, as well as her own, to Queen Victoria. Although several months pregnant at the time, the determined Mississauga woman prepared in early 1860 to visit England with her grievances. William gave his life's partner his total support. He knew his wife's strength, a woman, he wrote, who could travel "under almost all circumstances wither by the noble steamer, the swift canoe, or the slow coasting of small row boats, or bivouacking for the night on the wild uncultivated shore of our Northern Lakes."

Nahnee travelled overland to Collingwood, by train to Toronto, and then on to Rochester, New York. She had little money, and only letters of introduction for England, mainly to Methodist church leaders in London. But, as she later wrote, "my trust was in God and the justice of my cause." In Rochester members of a local church befriended her. The "Upright Woman," without knowing anyone in New York City, found help as fortunately the Quakers came forward to assist her. In Toronto the *Globe* called her an impostor and claimed that "Indians" could indeed purchase land in Upper Canada where they were well-treated. It accused her of

“trying to humbug the Rochesterians,” and then to fool the Quakers in New York City. A committee of Quakers disagreed. After examining her credentials and investigating her story, they agreed to help. They raised money to pay for her passage. Upon her arrival in London, Robert and Christine Alsop, English Quakers, welcomed Nahnee into their home.

With the assistance of the Alsops and their fellow Quaker, reform politician John Bright, Nahnee reached several of the highest government officials in the Empire. She spoke in mid-May to a large gathering of the Aborigines Protection Society in London, where the *Toronto Globe's* London correspondent noted, “she gained many sympathizers among our philanthropic men and women.” Nahnee met the Colonial Secretary, the Duke of Newcastle, and shortly thereafter had an audience with Queen Victoria at Buckingham Palace. On 19 June 1860, the Queen wrote in her journal that her Indian visitor spoke English “quite well,” and that she came to present a land petition on her peoples' behalf. (Queen Victoria's Journal, excerpt sent to me by Pamela Clark, Deputy Register, The Royal Archives, Windsor Castle, Berkshire, England, 2 February 1994, with the gracious permission of Her Majesty the Queen.) Curiously, the Queen made no mention of Nahnee's pregnancy. In her ninth month it must have been quite obvious. Just three weeks after meeting Queen Victoria, Nahnee gave birth at the Alsops' to a boy. She named him Alsop Albert Edward Sutton: Alsop (after her hosts), Albert (after the Prince Consort), and Edward (after the Queen's eldest son).

At Buckingham Palace, and throughout her overseas trip, Nahnee wore European dress. As she informed the English press: “This is the way we dress [...] we are not pagans [...] we try to be like white people [...] and do what we can to be like the civilised people.” Although she travelled throughout Britain dressed like a Canadian settler, wherever she went Nahnee presented herself as First Nations: “I am an Indian, the blood of my forefathers runs in my

veins, and I am not ashamed to own it; for my people were a noble race before the pale-faces came to possess their lands and home.” Thanks to press references, and to the only known surviving photograph of her, apparently taken about this time, a physical description of her can be made. The 36-year-old woman was tall, had a dark complexion, black hair, and sharply defined facial features. Her voice was “clear, natural and rather melodious.” Although English was not her mother tongue, she spoke it well.

In the end, Nahnee did not obtain her Indian status back, nor receive the right to purchase her farm. Finally, the Indian Department did make one small concession. It allowed her non-Indigenous husband to buy the land originally given to them in 1845, on which they still lived and wanted to remain. Her family was eventually permitted by the Indian Department to purchase the land, but only in the name of William Sutton. Nahnee kept up her struggle for First Nation rights. In the early 1860s she and her husband advised the First Nations of Manitoulin about their land title. They helped the Anishinaabeg of the Saugeen Peninsula with their claim to fishing rights in Lake Huron. She criticized as “wholesale robbery” the government’s attempt in 1861 to purchase Manitoulin Island for non-Indigenous settlers.

Following the birth of her final child in 1864, Nahnee’s health steadily declined. She died at the age of 41 from an asthma attack in September 1865. William survived his wife by nearly 30 years. He never remarried and died on the farm they had both fought so hard to keep. At Cape Croker, where descendants of many of Saugeen Anishinaabeg relocated, memory of the “Upright Woman” lived on. When anthropologist Rosamund Vanderburgh of the University of Toronto undertook field work in the community in the mid-1970s, she found that the older people interviewed “were very proud” of Nahnee.

## Research Note

The text for this episode is largely based on my chapter on her in *Mississauga Portraits. Ojibwe Voices from Nineteenth-Century Canada* (Toronto, 2013), pp. 68-97. The life of this extraordinary Anishinaabe woman is also reviewed by John Steckley, “Nahnebahwequay (Upright Woman) or Catharine Sutton,” in John Steckley, *Beyond Their Years. Five Native Women’s Stories* (Toronto, 1999), pp. 140-193; and in two articles by Celia Haig-Brown, “Seeking Honest Justice in a Land of Strangers: Nahnebahwequa’s Struggle for Land,” *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 36, 4 (2002): pp. 143-170; and “The ‘Friends’ of Nahnebahwequa,” in Celia Haig-Brown and David A. Nock, eds., *With Good Intentions: Euro-Canadian and Aboriginal Relations in Colonial Canada* (Vancouver, 2006), pp. 132-157. Still admirable for its clarity on the status question is an older study, Kathleen Jamieson, *Indian Women and the Law in Canada: Citizens Minus*, Advisory Council on the Status of Women, Indian Rights for Indian Women (Ottawa, 1978).

Susan Staves Schank, a direct descendant of Nahnee, has written “Nah ne bah wee qua (Standing Upright Woman) and Native Land Rights,” *Ontario History*, 96,2 (Autumn 2004), pp. 109-114. I love her last paragraph in which she writes her ancestor was buried in her garden on their farm. “Catherine made sure that she was buried on the very lot for which she had been trying to get a deed. This certainly was one way they could not remove her. One way or another she was staying.”