



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

Presented by Dr. Donald B. Smith
Produced by The Ontario Historical Society

Episode 5: Peter Jones and Eliza Field

After I returned to my Ph.D. studies in Canadian History at Toronto, I first prepared for my comprehensive exams to be completed before work commenced on a thesis. I decided to prepare my thesis on the Mississauga, or Ojibwe, or in their own language, Anishinaabeg, on the North Shore of Lake Ontario in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. To my good fortune, I learned of a cache of writings by a celebrated Indigenous Christian missionary, Kahkewaquonaby (“Sacred Feathers”), known in English as “Peter Jones.” I discovered that a great deal of manuscript material written by his English-born and raised wife, Eliza Field, had also survived. On 15 November 1972, I submitted my proposal for a thesis on “Methodist and Mississauga: The Methodist conversion of the Mississauga (Southern Ojibwa) in the first half of the nineteenth century.” As it turned out I found the perfect field for study. Very rare indeed it is for a scholar to work on the same topic for half a century!

In the early 1970s, Indigenous history was not taught at the University of Toronto. After several false steps, I was able to find a way to do it. The distinguished Canadian historian J.M.S. (Maurice) Careless, who had recently retired as chair of the

History Department, generously accepted to become my supervisor, even though he was the first to admit his knowledge of the Indigenous Peoples was slight. But he had an idea as to how we could proceed. As co-chair of the Archaeological and Historic Sites Board of Ontario (later the Ontario Heritage Foundation), he knew Ed Rogers, chief ethnologist at the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM). Maurice approached Ed, who fortunately agreed to become, in effect, my Ph.D. co-supervisor.

Basil Johnston, a former Toronto high school teacher, worked in the 1970s with Ed and the museum's educational program. The Anishinaabe writer and educator from the Cape Croker community on the Georgian Bay knew Ed extremely well. Dr. Rogers had completed his Ph.D. in Anthropology and had spent a year in field work with the Mistassini Cree in northern Quebec (1953-1954) and another year (1958-1959) with the Ojibwe of Round (Weagamow) Lake in Northwestern Ontario, yet Basil noted he did not present himself as an "expert" on the Indigenous Peoples. As Basil wrote after Ed's death in 1988, "Dr. Rogers sought my advice as well as that of others because he felt that his experience and academic training did not qualify him to interpret Native culture with the degree of accuracy that his principles and his sense of integrity demanded." The ROM's chief ethnologist believed the best qualified to interpret their cultures were the Native people themselves. Often, Basil recalled, Ed would say, "We're here to serve the Natives, and we have to listen" (Basil Johnston, "Dr. Rogers. My Friend," in *Aboriginal Ontario. Historical Perspectives on the First Nations*, ed. Edward S. Rogers and Donald B. Smith (Toronto, 1994), page xvi).

Half a century ago now, Ed introduced me to a First Nations person, who took me into the Anishinaabeg world through its language, Ojibwe or Anishinaabemowin. Fred Wheatley was a member of the University of Toronto community, but he was not a professor, nor a senior graduate student. Originally from Parry

Island on Georgian Bay, he worked as a janitor on campus at Hart House. I took his Ojibwe language course for two winters in the early 1970s. My notes with Fred were mostly taken in his evening class at the old Native Canadian Centre of Toronto on Beverley Street. They are now deposited in the Trent University Archives in Peterborough. With the rigour of a young graduate student, I marked the date on each note card. In class I entered a new world. On 26 October 1971, Fred mentioned that in Ojibwe you do not use “please and thank you” all the time. “Thank yous” and “pleases” are not necessary among friends. “Thank you” is used among strange company. And there is no goodbye, “that is too final.” I see on a note made 2 March 1973 Fred mentioned that the Ojibwe believed that if you did not respect old people, if you did not respect animals, something would happen. The Ojibwe had all kinds of stories about punishment. Earlier Fred explained on 10 November 1970 that Ojibwe storytellers had “very rich descriptions, one is right in the story.” The Ojibwe language has extraordinary depth. Although I missed writing down the actual word itself, Fred told us on 13 October 1972 that the Ojibwe had an expression for a “woman who is pregnant and you can see it in her eyes.” As he explained, Anishinaabemowin is a picture language.

Fred worked at the University of Toronto in the early 1970s. I recall several meetings at Hart House where one of his jobs included the upkeep of rooms for visiting distinguished scholars. At the time he was a custodian or caretaker, or in the University of Toronto language of the day, a “porter.” Although he had never attended university as a student himself, he applied in 1974 when a faculty position teaching the Ojibwe language came up at Trent University in Peterborough, Ontario. A new appreciation of Indigenous Canada was just emerging. Fred received the appointment. He taught in the Native Studies Department until his retirement in the mid-1980s, when he became professor emeritus. As an Elder, he was appointed with the same rank and status as any

other professor. In 1983 the Parry Island Ojibwe Elder won the university's Symons Award for Excellence in Teaching.

Fred's lessons in Anishinaabemowin, Peter Jones's only language to the age of fourteen, added greatly to my understanding of the Mississauga leader. Peter was born in 1802 on Burlington Heights, a long narrow peninsula high above what is now downtown Hamilton. His community spent most of the year at encampments in this area. It was the centre of their seasonal round of hunting and trapping, collecting maple sap, fishing, planting maize and gathering wild rice. Peter later described his birthplace: "Perhaps I may be partial in my judgment, as it was on the romantic Burlington Heights I first drew my breath, and, in my youthful days, was accustomed to traverse the shores of its clear waters in the light birchbark canoe; here I ranged the forest, and shot many a partridge, squirrel and pigeon." He followed his people's seasonal round of spring salmon fishing and corn planting, summer hunting and gathering, fall wild rice gathering, and winter hunting in the interior. The young Mississauga learned how to track animals, how to catch fish at all times of the year, and how to make fire in any kind of weather. He strove for excellence and gained the reputation of being a very good hunter. But in one respect his boyhood was incomplete. Young men at puberty customarily went out on weeklong vision quests. They blackened their faces and fasted alone in an isolated spot. Just before his voice began to change, Sacred Feathers tried, but was not successful. He was not blest with a vision from a non-human guardian.

Peter's father, Augustus Jones, an American surveyor, had settled in Upper Canada in the late 1780s. In his work he met Tuhbenahneequay, Peter's mother. But, as Augustus already had a Mohawk wife and family, he could not live permanently with his Mississauga companion. Left to raise Peter and their older son, John, Tuhbenahneequay and her relatives taught the two boys about their culture and way of life. The War of 1812 placed the

Credit River people in the middle of a major war zone. In 1816, Augustus Jones, seeing the disintegration of the Mississauga community, took his two Mississauga sons to live with his Mohawk family on the Grand River, fifty kilometres to the west. The young Mississauga spent his first fourteen years with his mother's people, and the next seven with his father, with whom he learned how to farm, care for poultry and livestock, and build houses and barns. Although initially indifferent to Christianity, his intense conversion experience at a Methodist gathering in 1823 led him to devote his life to teaching the Anishinaabeg about Christianity.

In the early 1820s, the poverty-stricken community verged on extinction. Several decades earlier, the Mississauga made huge tracts of land available to the Loyalists, the British refugees who fled north after Britain's defeat in the American Revolution. Between 1781 and 1805, the Mississauga of the Credit retained only a large interior tract north of Lake Ontario between the Head of the Lake (present-day Hamilton) and the Etobicoke River (present-day Toronto). Between the 1790s and 1820s, smallpox, tuberculosis, and measles killed almost two-thirds of the Mississauga at the western end of Lake Ontario. The community's numbers fell from roughly 500 to barely 200. In contrast, by 1812, the non-Indigenous settler population of Upper Canada approached 75,000. Now weakened numerically, the Credit River Mississauga consented in 1805, 1818, and 1820, to British demands for additional treaties.

Settlers, after the War of 1812, surrounded the Credit Mississauga. They continued to invade their hunting territories, encroach upon their fisheries, and cut timber on their forested reserve land. The settler population seemed both ignorant and indifferent to the welfare of the Indigenous Peoples. The Credit Mississauga desperately needed economic security. Many Mississauga wanted to adjust to the newcomers' society, but only a small number spoke

even limited English. Who could bridge the European and the Mississauga worlds? Who could tell them how the British thought, or how their government worked? How the Anishinaabeg could adjust to European farming? Peter Jones on his return to the community in the early 1820s became the catalyst for change.

Able to speak Anishinaabemowin, and knowledgeable about Anishinaabe culture, Peter made the new faith comprehensible, and helped his people adjust to European agriculture. The young Mississauga's great asset was that he could both preach and give counsel in Ojibwe. Wisely, he first stressed the similarities he identified between the ancient Hebrew customs and those of the Anishinaabeg. The talented interpreter translated into Ojibwe lively hymns that brought out common Christian and Anishinaabeg religious beliefs. The Wesleyan hymns taught the same ideals of right dealing and honesty that the Mississauga had learned from childhood. The egalitarianism of Jesus' teachings appealed to the Anishinaabeg.

The Mississauga believed in a single Creator but had no concept at all of the Creator's Son. According to Peter Jones, his Credit River female relatives first heard of Jesus a decade or so before their conversion. One evening, after the women returned to the wigwam from selling baskets and brooms, they related an incredible story. A settler woman had just told them about the "Son of the Great Spirit." "A long time ago the Great Spirit sent his Son into this world, in order, as they understood, to make the white people good and happy, but that the wicked people hated him, and after he had been here a little while, they took and killed him." Everyone listened intently. When the story ended total silence followed, until one person spoke with a heavy sigh: "O, that the Son of the Great Spirit had not been killed, for it might have been if he had lived to this day, he would have had mercy upon us poor Indians as well as the white people—But now we are so poor!!!"

By 1825, the bilingual and bicultural church worker had brought one half of the Credit community into the Methodist church (today the United Church of Canada). He worked first amongst his own relatives: his mother, uncle, and cousins. The values of the Christians seemed compatible with their own: generosity, caring for others, sharing. In addition, the Methodists taught them how to farm, and care for livestock. The women learned sewing, knitting, and hygiene. The instruction provided in weights and measures, and on money and debt, helped the Credit people deal with the traders. Finally, Methodism's strict temperance stance allowed many converts to escape from substance abuse.

Able to communicate well in English, the Indigenous evangelist and his Methodist missionary allies convinced the governor of Upper Canada in 1826 to construct a permanent village, using the Mississauga's own funds (according to the provisions of the treaty of 1818, the government made an annual payment to the Mississauga for their territory). They selected a site on the crest of the western embankment of the Credit, above the river flats, three kilometres from the river mouth. By the end of 1826, almost all the members of the Credit River Mississauga had joined the Methodists. The Credit Mission was completed in the winter of 1826-27. Peter was received on trial for the Methodist itinerancy in 1827, and six years later became a fully ordained Methodist minister.

A revolution occurred in the community's leadership. In a society that respected the elderly, to whom they looked for direction, young people—Peter Jones and young Indigenous Methodist Mississauga—now guided the community. The stationing of capable non-Indigenous missionaries at the Credit, such as Egerton Ryerson, later renowned as the founder of the modern Ontario school system, also assisted.

The Mississauga Methodists still faced difficult conditions. In 1829, the Credit Mississauga sent a petition to the provincial

government. It protested the conduct of “some wicked white men” toward them: “They come in the fall and spring and encamp for many weeks close by our Village, they burn and destroy our fences and boards in the night, they watch the salmon and take them as fast as they come up, they swear and get drunk and give a very bad example to our young people and try to persuade them to be wicked like themselves.” More problems arose as other strangers went “to the mouth of the River and catch all the salmon, they put the offals of salmon in the water to keep the fish from passing up.” The provincial government passed legislation in 1829 to protect the fishery. This improved the situation, but the enforcement problem remained. Squatters, individuals without any right to reside on reserve land, also harassed other First Nation communities in Upper Canada.

Schools were central in Peter’s vision. The Mississauga wanted to remain a distinct people, retain their language, and continue to be self-governing. To raise money for the mission schools, Peter participated in the 1829 Canadian Methodist tour of the northeastern United States. His later missionary tour of Britain in 1831/32 proved even more successful. As he wrote back to his brother, John, “When my Indian name, *Kahkewaquonaby*, is announced to attend any public meetings, so great is the curiosity, the place is sure to be filled.” During his year abroad, attired in his Anishinaabeg costume, he gave more than 150 addresses and sermons, and collected over £1,000 for the Methodist church’s mission work. As well, he petitioned the Colonial Office concerning Ojibwe land interests. He attracted great attention and on 5 April 1832, shortly before his return to Upper Canada, was granted a rare honour, a private audience with King William IV.

On his first tour of England, by chance Peter met his future life partner, Eliza Field, a member of an affluent family. As a young girl she had “spent eight happy years” in a boarding school in Surrey, England, where she exhibited a talent for painting. After

her mother's death in 1820, she returned home to assist in raising her six younger brothers and sisters. An intensely religious individual, she worshipped with her family at the evangelical Anglican Surrey Chapel and began teaching Sunday school there in 1823. Although she led a comfortable life, throughout her youth she felt "impatient" to do God's work, and as she recorded in her diary on 2 July 1832, she wanted "to be more useful – to be more entirely employed for the benefit of others." In June 1831, she met the man with whom she would undertake this endeavour.

In June 1831, Eliza visited the home of friends in Bristol where Peter Jones was recuperating from illness. After he recovered, he resumed his work and visited her in London. They saw one another constantly during the winter and in February, on Valentine's Day, Peter proposed. Deeply in love with the handsome Ojibwe and anxious to assist him in converting the North American First Nations to Christianity, Eliza eagerly accepted. Her father and stepmother as well as many of her friends opposed her decision but, with the aid of character references for Peter, including one from his friend Egerton Ryerson (who was in England in 1833), the objections of her parents were eventually removed. After being separated for more than a year (Peter had returned to Canada in April 1832), the two were married in New York City on 8 September 1833.

Peter and Eliza took up residence in a small cabin on the Credit River Indian Reserve. Eliza's first years proved difficult. Wherever she went out in public with her husband, the inter-racial couple aroused great curiosity. Her diary entry for 6 September 1834 suggests her distress: "I desire to be enabled to feel charity to such who from the want of education or refined delicacy towards the feelings of a stranger make me an object of general observation." Life was challenging for Eliza in these first years in Canada. A small woman, of delicate health, she frequently came down with fevers and between 1834 and 1836 she suffered two miscarriages

and two still births. Nevertheless, she continued to instruct the children on the reserve in Christianity and taught the girls sewing. Eliza also helped her husband copy out his translations of the scriptures into Ojibwe, as well as council minutes and correspondence.

Peter and Eliza visited England with his niece Catherine Sunegoo, or Nahnebahwequay (“Nahnee”), in 1837-38. After their return Eliza gave birth to a son, the first of four who survived infancy. Family life now took much of her time, but she still did all she could to assist her husband. Overall, her only voiced complaint about Peter, who otherwise she loved dearly, was his parenting style. Eliza later wrote that “he ruled by love, perhaps too much like Eli: a little firmer rein might have been occasionally for the advantage of his sons.”

In 1841 Peter was posted to the Muncey mission near London, Upper Canada, where they remained until 1849. It was a demanding post with three First Nations under his charge: Ojibwe, Munsee Delaware, and Oneida, all speaking different languages. His health began to deteriorate. For months at a stretch the best-known Mississauga leader of the day made no entries in his diary. As a young man, Peter had spent a great deal of his time taking notes for a history of the Ojibwe, but now he devoted little time to his manuscript. Even his third missionary tour of Britain, in 1845, failed to revive his spirits. He again attracted huge crowds, particularly in Scotland, but the constant travelling began to depress him. On 23 October he wrote to Eliza from Glasgow, “I am getting heartily tired of begging.” The British public was, it seemed to Peter, only interested in him as the exotic Kahkewaquonaby dressed out in his “odious” native custom, and not as Peter Jones, the “civilized” Indian that he had worked so hard to become.

Following a brief stay of two years in London, Peter and Eliza moved into a substantial brick house, Echo Villa, in Brantford in

1851. Despite his weakened physical state, Peter continued to work for his community, which now was located at New Credit adjacent to the Six Nations territory south of Brantford. Under the pressure of non-Indigenous settlement, the scarcity of wood, and most important of all, the uncertainty surrounding their claim to land at the Credit, they had decided in 1847 to move. They had done everything it seemed they could to adjust to the dominant settler culture. The Credit Mississauga had become Christians, taken up farming, and settled in permanent homes, but this was not enough. The British would not give them title to their remaining lands at the mouth of the Credit.

Born in a wigwam, Peter Jones, clearly a man of two worlds, spent his last years in Echo Villa. Invited by his good friend Egerton Ryerson and his wife to consult medical specialists, Peter and Eliza spent four weeks in the spring of 1856 at the Ryerson home in Toronto, but there was no cure. In mid-June he returned to Echo Villa. The New Credit Mississauga suggested bringing in “a noted Indian doctor” from Rice Lake near Peterborough. But it was too late. Peter Jones died at age 54, on 29 June 1856. In his lifetime Peter Jones worked for a full and equal partnership between the non-Indigenous settlers and the Mississauga. Before his conversion to Methodism, the Mississauga at the western end of Lake Ontario were on the verge of disintegration, weakened by disease and alcohol abuse, forced off their land by tens of thousands of non-Indigenous settlers, and neglected by the Indian Department. Peter Jones’s intervention helped the Mississauga on the north shore of Lake Ontario to get back on their feet. Change came about due to their own initiatives and under their own leaders.

Two years after Peter’s death Eliza married a non-Indigenous farmer. The marriage proved unhappy, in such contrast to the first. They eventually broke up. In one of her notebooks Eliza recorded “my own tastes, & feelings & sympathies, were not and never could be in union with my husbands” who did not have Peter’s

“natural refinement & amiable qualities.” Continuing to make trips to England, she taught painting in Brantford, in addition to her writing, before she lost her sight about 1880. The last years of her life were spent in Lambeth Cottage, her home in Brantford, where she died on 17 August 1890.

In her *Toronto Sunday Star* column “Book World” on 29 November 1987, Beverley Slopen captured the freshness of one of my most important research moments. She recorded my description of the moment Patricia Appavoo of the Victoria University Library at the University of Toronto showed me an 1832 portrait of Peter Jones. Thirteen years later it would grace the cover of my biography *Sacred Feathers*. I told her: “I just stared at it. I must have gazed at it for half an hour. He was 30 years old, on the brink of his career, and he was courting Eliza. I saw a very approachable, dedicated person. There is a softness in his eyes and a sense of humor.” The Victoria University Library also had a portrait of Eliza by the same artist. I described to Ms. Slopen the effect of seeing both portraits together: “I had been studying them for so long it was like meeting someone. They just sort of stepped out of the portrait frame.”

Further Reading

For two full-length studies of Peter Jones and the Mississauga, see: *Sacred Feathers. The Reverend Peter Jones (Kahkewaquonaby) and the Mississauga Indians*, first appeared in 1987, second edition in 2013. The sequel, *Mississauga Portraits, Ojibwe Voices from Nineteenth-Century Canada*, was published in 2013, also by the University of Toronto Press. My three-part series on the couple appeared in the mid-1970s: “The transatlantic courtship of the Reverend Peter Jones,” *Beaver*, outfit 308 (summer 1977): 4-13; “Eliza and the Reverend Peter Jones,” *Beaver*, outfit 308 (autumn 1977): 40-46; “Peter and Eliza Jones: their last years,” *Beaver*,

outfit 308 (winter 1977): 16-23. An excellent study of Peter and Eliza's third son, who became a medical doctor (Queen's University) and later succeeded his father as a chief at New Credit, is Allan Sherwin's *Bridging Two Peoples. Chief Peter E. Jones, 1843-1909*, published by Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2012.

My general comments on the Ojibwe language, from Fred Wheatley's course, appear in my 2013 introduction to the second edition of *Sacred Feathers* (Toronto, 2013), pp. xviii-xx. The American scholar Michael D. McNally confirms the power of Ojibwe Christian hymns in *Ojibwe Singers. Hymns, Grief, and a Native Culture in Motion* (2000). After Peter's death Eliza arranged for the publication of his diaries and an unfinished history of the Ojibwa; *Life and Journals* appeared in 1860 and *History of the Ojibway Indians* followed in 1861. In contrast to her publication of his diaries, she compiled and shaped the historical volume that Peter had not completed. For a full study of Eliza's own surviving diaries, see Jennifer Lund, "Negotiating Race and Gender in the Diaries of Eliza Jones, British Wife of an Ojibwa Missionary in Upper Canada, 1823-1883" (Ph.D. thesis, Women's Studies, York University, 2010).