



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

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## **Episode 6: The Mississauga and David Ramsay**

The Credit River First Nation called themselves in their own language “Anishinaabe,” or in its plural form, “Anishinaabeg,” “human beings.” The Anishinaabeg belonged to the Algonquian linguistic family, the largest of the approximately dozen First Nations linguistic families in what is now Canada. Members of Algonquian-speaking groups extended from the Atlantic (Mi’Kmaq or Micmac) to the foothills of the Rockies (Siksika or Blackfoot). While Mi’Kmaq and Blackfoot speakers cannot understand each other, the Anishinaabeg of the Great Lakes area speak dialects of a common language, Anishinaabemowin or Ojibwa. About 1700 the Anishinaabeg moved south into present-day southern Ontario from Lakes Huron and Superior. According to the Anishinaabeg’s oral tradition they militarily defeated the Iroquois, or Five (after the 1720s the Six) Nations, about a century earlier, and forced them to leave. The Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) version of these same events denied a defeat. It holds that they had voluntarily withdrawn to their ancient lands south of Lake Ontario.

Peter Jones had been brought up to fear the Haudenosaunee. They were frequently told as young boys that the Haudenosaunee “were lurking about for the purpose of killing some of the Ojebways.”

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After the American Revolution, over two thousand Iroquois who had fought as allies of the British Crown migrated northward. The British made treaties with the Ojibwe (Mississauga) on the north shore of Lake Ontario from the 1780s to 1810s, as they recognized them as the First Nations owners of this area.

In their new homeland, the Algonquians obtained new European names. Most frequently English-speaking people termed the Algonquian-speakers from the north Chippewa (or Ojibwe). The Europeans also used another name for the Ojibwe on the north shore of Lake Ontario: Mississauga. The Credit River First Nation believed they obtained this designation on account of the name of their most predominant clan, the Eagle, pronounced “Ma-se-sau-gee” in the Credit Mississauga dialect of Ojibwa. The Mississauga to the east disputed this. They thought it meant many river mouths. For some unknown reason the Europeans used the term "Mississauga" and, in English, the term stuck.

At the time of their treaties with the British in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the Credit River Mississauga held that their hunting territory ran eastward from Long Point along the shore of Lake Erie to the Niagara River, down the river to Lake Ontario, and then northward along Lake Ontario to just east of present-day Toronto. It extended back into the interior to the ridges dividing Lake Ontario from Lake Simcoe, then along the dividing ridges to the headwaters of the Thames, then southward to the place of beginning on Lake Erie.

In the eighteenth century, the Mississauga at the western end of Lake Ontario followed a seasonal way of life. During winter or “peboon,” the freezing weather, from November to March, the hardest period of the year, families lived in camps on their trapping grounds. When the days once again became longer and brighter, “seegwun” or the sap season, relatives and friends reunited at the sugar bushes for several weeks to tap the maple trees and boil the sap. After sugar-making, families travelled to the Credit River,

which had an excellent spring salmon run. Ducks and geese and flocks of passenger pigeons returned, the pigeons sometimes so numerous that on occasion they darkened the entire sky.

About the first of May, the Credit River Mississauga held their religious festivals, their dances, and games, after which the community broke up into smaller units and returned to their summer encampments along the western shore of Lake Ontario, and by lakes and rivers in the interior. When, as the neighbouring Iroquois said, the white oak leaves had reached the size of a red squirrel's foot, the women planted corn on the river flats. During "neebin" or summer, "the abundant season," the women looked after the crops and collected berries. The men fished and hunted. At the summer's end, the Mississauga harvested their corn on the river flats and gathered the highly nutritious wild rice growing in the shallow lakes and slow streams. With the beginning of fall, or "tuhgwuhgin," the fading season, many returned to the Credit River for the fall salmon run. In late autumn, the annual cycle recommenced, and the Mississauga travelled back into the interior to their family hunting grounds.

As with other peoples throughout the world, the Anishinaabeg wanted to know how they fitted into the universe, and to learn their relationship to the natural world that sustained them. The Mississauga believed in a supreme power, or Great Spirit. As Maungwudaus, an early nineteenth century Mississauga contemporary of Peter Jones, wrote in his *Remarks concerning the Ojibway Indians* (1847), "We worship the Great Spirit, in offering sacrifices to him of beasts, fish, fowls, and every kind of food we receive from his hand, that his anger might be taken away from us in this and in the other world" (page 4). The Mississauga believed in the existence of the Great Spirit, the creator of all things. But they could not rely on the Great Spirit for protection as he already had responsibilities too encompassing. As Peter Jones wrote, the

Creator could not “concern Himself with the follies of poor earthly beings, whose existence lasts only as it were for a day.”

Because they lived close to nature the Mississauga did not see any great separation of themselves from the rest of creation. Everything around them was alive and had power. Humans had to stay on good terms with all objects for they had the supernatural power to punish anyone who wasted them. The Anishinaabeg felt the presence of spirits, or manitous, all around them. They had evidence of this. At the Head of the Lake, they frequently heard sounds like explosions or the shooting of a great gun. The elders believed that spirits living in caverns in the escarpment west of Burlington Bay caused the volleys by blowing and breathing. The spirit of the falls at Niagara also shook the air and the earth for many kilometres around it. At the Credit River itself, some had heard the river manitou, who lived at the foot of a high hill where the stream ran particularly deep. There, three kilometres from the river’s mouth, the spirit sang and beat his drum. The Mississauga revered the friendly forces believed to have the greatest power, such as the sun and the moon, and sought their aid. Every evening at sunset, the old men thanked the sun for the day’s heat and light. At the sun’s rising, they sang hymns of praise to welcome its return. Similarly, they held in high esteem the moon, or “night sun,” and the stars that guided them in darkness.

Two great beings or groups of beings added balance to the world. The thunderbirds, gigantic birds related to eagles, lived in the heavens, and had electrifying power. When they flapped their wings they caused thunder, and threw out lightning when they flashed their eyes. Anishinaabeg elders told the story of the young man who once climbed a high hill by Lake Huron, so high that clouds hid its summit. “And when the Indian got to the top, he saw the place where the thunders lived, the thunders’ nest, and there were little ones, young thunders, trying their skills upon the young cedars which grew upon the side of the high hill; and they shot the

bark off them, and they were shooting at the young serpents.” The thunderbirds waged war against their great rivals the underwater monsters. These water spirits or manitous had an awful power. Mishebeshu, the Great Lynx or Cat, both a huge water cat and a serpent, the foremost of these underwater creatures, drew people down to their deaths. It also caused floods. Greatly feared, one could only speak of the Great Lynx in the winter, when it was inactive, being imprisoned under ice. So great was its power that only the thunderbirds challenged it.

Hardly threatening—more of a nuisance—were the Mamagwasewug or elves, who played tricks on humans but never harmed them. Elders had talked to these strange beings, who stood about a metre high. Walking erect, they had human form but faces covered with short hair. After the Anishinaabeg had encountered European traders, the little people loved shooting off guns stolen from the Mississauga or taken from their graves. A community of Mamagwasewug lived on the east bank of the Credit River, about two kilometres from the river’s mouth. Unlike the Mamagwasewug, the Mississauga feared the evil Waindegoos, the most dreaded of all. These terrifying giants, tall as pine trees, pulled down and pushed aside dense forests as humans parted tall grass. Always on the verge of starvation, they never obtained enough to eat. Invulnerable to arrows, or bullets, these monsters devoured people.

By the 1810s, the Mississauga’s world seemed dominated by Waindegoos. As pointed out in Episode 5 (“Peter Jones and Eliza Field”), between the 1790s and 1820s, smallpox, tuberculosis, and measles killed almost two-thirds of the Mississauga at the western end of Lake Ontario, down to barely 200 by early 1820s. The Indigenous literary scholar Deanna Reder of Simon Fraser University in British Columbia summarizes the situation so well in her new book, *Autobiography as Indigenous Intellectual Tradition* (2022). In reference to Peter Jones’s Mississauga contemporary

George Copway, she writes that he “was living in a near-apocalyptic moment; previous Indigenous economic and governance systems were undermined by the encroachment of settlers and the usurpation of land. Food systems were failing” (page 35).

Immense forests still stretched along the northwestern shore of Lake Ontario at the outbreak of the War of 1812. Great trees stood so closely together they formed a canopy shutting out the sunshine and most of the daylight, leaving the ground free of undergrowth. To the east of the tiny settlement of York, population roughly 700, ran a magnificent waterway in a wide valley. The Mississauga called the river the “Wonscotonach,” which meant “back burnt grounds” or “country previously swept by fire.” The Wonscotonach flowed through marshland and extensive coastal wetlands into Lake Ontario. The lower part of the river was navigable by canoe to roughly south of what is today Bloor Street and the Danforth Road, approximately four kilometres inland. As one canoed upstream the marshes gave way to meadow approximately two kilometres inland. The Mississauga had caught trout, bass, and salmon in the Wonscotonach. Farther to the east was the “Chi Sippi” or “Large Creek,” now known as the Rouge River, which marked the eastern boundary of the territory of the Credit Mississauga. The “Cobechenonk” or “Leave the canoes and go back” River, located about a kilometre west of Fort York, marked the beginning of the ancient Toronto Carrying Place, the narrow footpath that led north through the forest to Lake Simcoe, and the water route to the Georgian Bay, Lake Huron, “back” to the Ojibwe’s original home, Lake Superior, that they called “Kechegahme,” meaning in English “the big water of the Ojibwe.” Far to the west, the Thames River, whose shape resembles the antlers of a deer, was called the “Ashahneseebe” or “horn river.” Lake Erie became “Wahbeshkegoo Kechegahme,” “the white-water lake,” from its colour which contrasted so with the green and blue waters of the Upper Great Lakes.

In the early settlement period, English names replaced those of the Indigenous Peoples. The First Nations used designations that described how they used the country, or how it looked physically, rather than names honouring individuals, or places in other lands. Lieutenant Governor John Graves Simcoe, the first governor of Upper Canada as then called, renamed the “Wonscotonach” the “Don,” after a major watercourse in northeastern England. The “Cobechenonk” became the “Humber,” after an English waterway near the Don. The British governor renamed the large lake located between the north shore of Lake Ontario and the Georgian Bay. “Ashuniong,” or “the place of the calling” in Ojibwe, became “Lake Simcoe,” after his father, the late Captain Simcoe of the Royal Navy. The escarpment east of the town site became the Scarborough Bluffs, after the Scarborough cliffs in North Yorkshire, England. Simcoe officially changed the name of his new settlement from “Toronto” to “York,” in honour of the Duke of York’s victory over the French in Flanders in 1793. Only four decades later did the town fathers reverse his decision, and re-establish the Iroquois name, “Toronto.” The older name was restored in 1834 on account of the confusion of “York” with “New York” and other “Yorks.” Iroquois people told Peter Jones that the meaning of the word was “looming of trees.” The English traveler Anna Jameson learned in 1836 that “Toronto” meant “trees growing out of the water.” As late as the mid-nineteenth century when you looked south from Queen Street to Ashbridge’s Bay on the lakefront, you could easily see trees that looked as if they were growing out of the water.

The 1790s onward proved a challenging time for the Mississauga. In 1800, Chechalk, one of the Credit Mississauga chiefs, told the British in council that their coastal hunting grounds were “becoming confined and not fit for hunting.” In the War of 1812, the armies of Britain and the United States ravaged the western end of Lake Ontario. The day after the Stoney Creek clash at the Head of the Lake in early June 1813, Peter and his brother John crossed

the battlefield full of corpses. Later he wrote how horrified they were at seeing dead bodies, “greatly mangled with cannon balls.” Tecumseh’s death at the Battle of Moraviantown that October marked a turning point in Great Lakes Indigenous history. Until October 1813 the Great Lakes First Nations had constituted a formidable fighting force, but with Tecumseh’s demise his Confederacy ended. The continued arrival of more and more immigrants after the War of 1812 reduced the Indigenous peoples to a tiny minority of the population of Upper Canada.

In the winter of 1793 David Ramsay, a bizarre British trader who spoke Anishinaabemowin, wrote the complaints of the Mississauga in a memorial to Lieutenant Governor Simcoe. My finding of this document in the Simcoe Papers in the Ontario Archives now dates back half a century ago. This strange character who 20 years earlier had killed eight Anishinaabeg now became their champion, recording in his primitive English their grievances. The Europeans intruded “on our hunting ground which is our farm.” At the First Nations’ fisheries, and in the settlements, “when white peoples sees anything that they like they never quit us until they have it... The taking or stealing from us is nothing, for we are only Massessagoes...” Who was this sailor turned fur trader?

David Ramsay, a Scot, enlisted as a ship’s boy in the Royal Navy and served in the sieges of Louisbourg in 1758 and Quebec in 1759. A hardened character, from young manhood he had been well-exposed to the rough life of the sailor in the mid-eighteenth century: the overcrowding, scurvy, squalor, the heavy drinking and brawling common in the navy. Having been posted in 1763 to a British patrol vessel on Lake Ontario, he chose to remain in North America upon his discharge in 1765. At first, he worked for an unnamed Montreal fur trader, journeying as far as the upper Great Lakes. In 1768, he was arrested by the commandant at Fort Niagara for troublesome behaviour, and was sent to Montreal, where he was held in the guardhouse for several days.



In the fall of 1771, Ramsay undertook a trading expedition with his 17-year-old brother George. They travelled from Schenectady, New York, to the mouth of Kettle Creek, on the north shore of Lake Erie, and from there went some kilometres upstream to winter with a group, mainly Mississauga Ojibwe. Exactly what occurred during the winter is not clear, but Ramsay obviously did not get along with his clients. He later claimed that the Indians had repeatedly threatened to kill him if he did not give them rum. The Anishinaabeg said that he had been “drunk and mad” all winter. In March, Ramsay killed and scalped a warrior named Wandagan and two women while the rest of the band was absent. The brothers then fled as far as Long Point, on Lake Erie, where some Mississauga caught up with them. The First Nations tied them up but then began drinking. Getting loose, Ramsay killed and scalped five of the party, including a woman and a child. He and his brother proceeded to Fort Erie, where Ramsay was arrested and sent to Fort Niagara and then to Montreal.

David Ramsay claimed that he had acted in self-defence but the British authorities responsible for the west knew better. Sir William Johnson, superintendent of northern Indians, bitterly observed, “Killing a Woman and Child, and then Scalping them afterwards is inexcusable, and the Circumstance of his being able to do all this, is an evident proof that he was not in the danger he represents, and that the Inds. were too much in Liquor, to execute any bad purpose.” Johnson knew well, however, of the ways of non-Indigenous juries in cases of crimes committed against Indigenous people: “I don’t think he will Suffer, had he killed a Hundred,” he wrote, and Ramsay did not. Despite the efforts of the British commander-in-chief, Thomas Gage, who informed Johnson, “I am trying all I can to get Evidence, for if what is related concerning his Cruelty is true no wretch ever more deserved the Gallows,” a Montreal jury acquitted him for want of evidence.

During the American Revolution Ramsay served again in the Royal Navy, but once that conflict ended, unbelievably, he returned to live among the relatives of the Anishinaabeg he had killed. The Mississauga resented his presence, but fearing British retaliation if he were harmed, they simply insisted that he pay the relatives of his victims a certain amount in goods and rum. When the Anishinaabeg were drunk, however, they still threatened revenge. In 1793 at the rapids of the Miami River in Ohio, a son of one of his victims intended to kill him, and he was put on a boat for Detroit by Indian agent Alexander McKee.

Ramsay's relationship with the Mississauga was indeed extremely complex. Although he remarked to Patrick Campbell, a Scottish traveller for whom he was a guide in 1792, that "there was no dependence to be placed in an Indian," he wrote out the petition on behalf of the Mississauga in the winter of 1793. As late as 1795, he was reported to be living among them, presumably on the sizeable tract of land between present-day Hamilton and Oakville that he had persuaded them to give him in 1789. Moreover, following the murder of Mississauga chief Wabakinine by a British soldier in 1796, Ramsay did write a letter in support of his sons' petition for compensation in land.

In the non-Indigenous community, Ramsay enjoyed a measure of respect. When Campbell met Ramsay, he was earning his living carrying dispatches and money for people in the Niagara area. In July 1791, the Executive Council had approved his application for a grant of 600 acres and in 1801 he acquired lands in Kent County. When in 1810 he made out his will in New York City he reported he owned a brig, the *Thames of New York*. Even in Ramsay's own lifetime the story of the killings had entered local folklore, and the form it took says much about the attitudes towards the First Nations held by early English-speaking settlers. According to a traditional account that lived on in the Long Point area until the 1890s at least, a party of nine Indians made an unprovoked attack

on Ramsay one night at Long Point in 1760. Becoming drunk on his liquor, they decided to wait until morning before burning him, but while they slept, Ramsay got free and killed them all. Although settlers remembered “brave” Ramsay’s heroic self-defence, the First Nations thought differently. Joseph Brant, the distinguished Mohawk chief, termed him a “mischievous fellow” and an “unworthy rascal.”

### **Bibliographical Notes**

My biography of Peter Jones, *Sacred Feathers* (Toronto, 1987), reviews the background to the history of the Mississauga in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. I have written two biographical articles on David Ramsay. I am most grateful to Helen Burgess, then editor of *The Beaver* magazine, the predecessor of today’s *Canada’s History*, for publishing “The Mississauga and David Ramsay” in their Spring 1975 issue, pp. 4-8; and later, in the 1970s and 1980s, accepting five additional articles of mine on the Anishinaabeg of southern Ontario. My second article on David Ramsay appeared in the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* and is available at: [http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/ramsay\\_david\\_5E.html](http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/ramsay_david_5E.html). For details on Anishinaabeg governance in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, see Heidi Bohaker, *Doodem and Council Fire. Anishinaabe Governance through Alliance* (Toronto, 2020).