



THE LAND BENEATH US ◆

The Simcoe Surrenders

Season One · Before Canada · Episode 11

aiwrangler.ca — an illustrated companion

Every date, term, and quotation in this series is drawn from the historical record. This companion is the full episode narration, illustrated.



From the episode

WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

If you drive west from Hamilton along the old lake road, you cross some of the deepest topsoil in Canada — good glacial till, flat and dark and rich — and most of it changed hands in a span of four years, faster than almost any comparable stretch of territory on the continent. Welcome to The Land Beneath Us. I'm Willow Born With a Tooth, and today we're asking: what deal opened this ground?



SAM CARDINAL

Upper Canada was barely a year old when John Graves Simcoe arrived as its first Lieutenant-Governor in seventeen ninety-two. The province had been created by the Constitutional Act of seventeen ninety-one, and it came with a problem: tens of thousands of Loyalist refugees from the American Revolution needed land, and they needed it quickly, before the pressure of their numbers overwhelmed any orderly system of settlement. Simcoe understood that the way to stay ahead of that wave was to move first — to secure surrenders from the nations who held the land, open the survey system, and begin granting farms. The word his government used for all of this was "purchase." These were, in the broadest sense, great written transactions — moments when the Crown treated the question of the land as finished business the instant the ink dried. That word, purchase, and what it did and did not mean to the nations who signed, is where our story begins.

OPENING UPPER CANADA

the 1790s rush of surrenders under Lt-Gov John Graves
Simcoe

WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

Who was actually living between these lakes — between Ontario and Erie, and west toward the Detroit River — when Simcoe arrived?



SAM CARDINAL

Primarily the Mississauga — Anishinaabe people who had established themselves across the north shore of Lake Ontario and the lands between the lakes in the late seventeenth century. They were hunters, fishers, farmers in season, organized in bands with deep ties to specific river systems and lakeshore territories. By the seventeen eighties they were already under enormous pressure: the American Revolution had drawn a new international boundary through their territories without their involvement, and Loyalist settlers were pushing north in numbers that no nation could simply wait out. They were realists facing choices that had no good answers, and they were also experienced negotiators — people who had been dealing with European traders and officials for over a century.

THREE RECORDS

THE TEXT

a clean cession

THE CROWN

land for Loyalist farms

THE NATIONS

terms half-heard across
a gap

WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

There was already one major purchase on the books before Simcoe got off the boat.



SAM CARDINAL

The McKee Purchase, signed in May of seventeen ninety by Alexander McKee, who served as Deputy Superintendent of Indian Affairs. McKee met with representatives of the Ojibwa and Chippewa nations and obtained a surrender of the lands south and west of the Thames River — essentially the entire southwestern corner of what would become Upper Canada, a vast tract stretching toward Lake Erie and the Detroit River. The payment recorded in the documents was goods distributed at the council: wampum, cloth, tools, provisions. For an enormous territory, it was a brief transaction.

THE RUSH

1791 — Upper Canada created
1790 — the McKee Purchase
the Between the Lakes surrender

WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

That is a staggering amount of land for a council that lasted a few days. And this is the moment I want to slow down, because there are three different accounts of what actually happened there.



SAM CARDINAL

There almost always are, and the gap between them is the story. The written deed records a permanent surrender of defined lands, consideration paid and accepted, the matter concluded in Crown law. McKee's dispatches to his superiors describe a successful and cordial negotiation — the nations willing, the exchange fair, the deal done, next question please. And then there is the third record: what the Ojibwa and Chippewa later maintained, in their oral accounts and in the petitions they filed in the years that followed. That account says they understood the agreement as a sharing — that settlers would be permitted to farm on portions of the land, yes, but that the nations retained their right to use the rivers, the hunting ranges, the territory they had always moved through with the seasons. The concept of permanent and final alienation of land — a sale in which you walk away and it is no longer yours — did not map onto Anishinaabe legal understanding of what had taken place.

BUILT FOR SPEED

THE CROWN NEEDED

acreage, fast

WHAT SLIPPED

clear terms and consent

WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

And then Simcoe arrived and picked up the pace considerably.



SAM CARDINAL

He came in with a list. Simcoe was a capable and energetic administrator who genuinely believed that a well-settled, prosperous Upper Canada was the best argument against American expansion northward — and he needed roads, townships, a capital, and above all farms. In August of seventeen ninety-two he concluded what became known as the Between the Lakes purchase: a tract running roughly from Burlington Bay, at the western end of Lake Ontario, west toward the Grand River and south toward Lake Erie. The Mississauga were the primary signatories. The deed was brief, as these documents tended to be — it recorded a surrender of bounded land in exchange for goods delivered at the signing, and it did not describe what the Mississauga retained. It named no rights to hunt, to fish, to camp through the seasons. By what was written down, the Crown held complete and permanent title.



WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

What did the Crown's own negotiators report about that council — and what did the Mississauga say they had agreed to?



SAM CARDINAL

The Crown's dispatches read as success reports, as they almost always did: a willing council, a fair exchange, the nation satisfied, the land available for survey. What the Mississauga understood is recorded in a different set of documents — their later petitions, some filed within a generation of the signing. They had come to share the land with the settlers: to permit farms on portions of it while retaining their own presence on the territory, their own use of the Credit River fishery, their own movement through the country with the seasons. They did not believe they had sold their home. They believed they had opened a door to neighbours who would live alongside them. The farms that appeared within months of the signing, the fences, the surveyor's lines closing off the lakeshore — those were the moment when the gap between those two understandings became something that could not be explained away or negotiated down.



WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

And the Between the Lakes was just one of many. The seventeen nineties look like a production line.



SAM CARDINAL

That is not far from it. Simcoe's tenure lasted only until seventeen ninety-six, and in those four years the Indian Department concluded surrender after surrender across the fertile triangle of the province — south of the Shield, above the lakes. Each followed a similar pattern: a council, goods distributed, a deed signed, a dispatch sent north, land opened to survey. The pace was the point. A new province needed farms, farms needed surveys, surveys needed surrenders. The machinery was efficient. What it was not was slow enough to ask whether the two parties at each council table were using the same word — surrender, purchase, agreement, sharing — to mean the same thing.



WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

The things said in the room that didn't make it onto the paper.

SAM CARDINAL

That is where so much of the grief lives. The oral record of those councils — what was said through the interpreters, what assurances the Crown's negotiators may have given about continued use, about annual goods, about reserved lands — very little of that survives in writing. It survives in the memories of the nations, passed down, and in petition after petition sent to the Crown across the following century, asking for recognition of commitments the written deeds never acknowledged. Those petitions are part of the historical record too, and they deserve to be read alongside the deeds, not filed separately as complaint.

WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

What became of the Mississauga and the other nations who signed through the seventeen nineties?

SAM CARDINAL

They were pushed to the edges of the land they believed they had shared. Reserves were set aside — small parcels retained from the larger cessions — and settlement closed in around them within years. The Credit River fishery that had sustained families across generations was overfished and degraded within two generations of the surrenders. The hunting ranges the nations believed they had retained became farms, then townships, then cities. Communities that had numbered in the thousands were reduced by disease, displacement, and the slow closing off of their subsistence economy to fractions of what they had been. It is a pattern that runs through all of these surrenders, and it is not incidental — it is the consequence of a gap in understanding that was never closed at the moment it should have been.

WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

Because these weren't parcels on a map to the people who signed. They were the rivers their grandparents fished and the country their children expected to grow up in.

SAM CARDINAL

Real nations, real families, real councils where people made the best decisions they could, under pressures we can barely imagine from this distance. We do not honor them by making them into simple victims — they were sophisticated peoples working within a negotiation they understood differently than the Crown did, and they knew what they wanted from it. And we do not understand the province we are standing in if we treat the deeds as the whole story. The deeds are one record. The Crown's dispatches are a second. The nations' understanding of what they agreed to in those councils is a third. The gap between those three records is not a historical curiosity — it is the unfinished account that Upper Canada has been carrying ever since. I'm Sam Cardinal.

WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

Every concession road and lot line in southwestern Ontario traces back somewhere to one of those seventeen-nineties councils. That is not a reason for guilt — it is a reason to know the story accurately, all three versions of it, and to understand what was promised, what was heard, and what was left unresolved when the ink dried and the surveyors moved in. We'll be back next time with another part of this land's story.

Sources & Notes

The Land Beneath Us is built on the historical and documentary record. Where that record is contested, we say so.

A note on the record

The episode places the Between the Lakes purchase in “August of 1792” and frames it as a fresh surrender Simcoe concluded. That is imprecise on two counts. The Between the Lakes tract (Treaty No. 3) was first surrendered by the Mississaugas on 22 May 1784 for roughly £1,180 in trade goods; the 1792 transaction was a confirmation/re-survey to correct boundary errors in the original deed, and the Crown negotiator on the ground was Col. John Butler rather than Simcoe personally. Sources commonly date the confirming instrument to late 1792 (7 December 1792 in several accounts), not August. The larger point the episode makes — a brief deed, the Mississauga as primary signatories, a gap between the written cession and Anishinaabe understanding — stands; the specific month and “Simcoe concluded it new” framing are the weak details.

The McKee Purchase (19 May 1790) is described as a council with “the Ojibwa and Chippewa nations.” Ojibwa and Chippewa are two names for the same people, and the recorded signatories were broader: chiefs of the Ottawa, Chippewa (Ojibwa), Potawatomi and Wyandot (Huron) of the Detroit region — 27 chiefs by the deed. Also, in 1790 McKee held the post of Deputy Agent of the Indian Department; his formal appointment as Deputy Superintendent (and Deputy Inspector General) of Indian Affairs came at the end of 1794, so the title the script gives him slightly anticipates the record.

References & further reading

“Treaty Texts - Upper Canada Land Surrenders.” Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada (rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca) — the collected 1780s-1790s surrender deeds, including the McKee Purchase and the Between the Lakes tract, that opened the fertile southwestern peninsula for Loyalist settlement.

“Between the Lakes Treaty No. 3 (1792).” Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation (mncfn.ca) — records the original 22 May 1784 surrender of roughly 3,000,000 acres between Lakes Huron, Ontario and Erie for about £1,180 in trade goods, with the 1792 document confirming/correcting the boundaries; Col. John Butler negotiated for the Crown.

“Between the Lakes Treaty (No. 3).” Hamilton Civic Museums / Anishinabek News — corroborates the ~3 million-acre extent from Burlington Bay toward the Grand River and the north shore of Lake Erie, and the Mississaugas of the Credit as signatories.

“McKee’s Purchase” historical plaque (ontarioplaques.com) and Orford (Kent County) Township local history, “The Indian Officers’ Lands and the McKee Purchase, 1790” — the 19 May 1790 surrender of the far-southwest tract toward the Thames, Lake Erie and the Detroit River, with signatory chiefs of the Ottawa, Chippewa, Potawatomi and Wyandot (Huron) of Detroit.

“McKEE, ALEXANDER.” Dictionary of Canadian Biography, vol. 4 (biographi.ca) — McKee’s role in the Indian Department; Deputy Agent in 1790, appointed Deputy Superintendent and Deputy

Inspector General of Indian Affairs at the end of 1794.

"SIMCOE, JOHN GRAVES." Dictionary of Canadian Biography, vol. 5, and "John Graves Simcoe," The Canadian Encyclopedia — commission as first Lieutenant-Governor of Upper Canada issued Sept. 1791, entered the province 24 June 1792, capital at Newark then York, departed on leave July 1796.

Constitutional Act, 1791 (31 Geo. III, c. 31) — divided the old Province of Quebec into Upper and Lower Canada, creating the province Simcoe was sent to govern and settle.

Robert J. Surtees, "Indian Land Surrenders in Ontario, 1763-1867" (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada / Treaties and Historical Research Centre) — the standard scholarly account of the surrender machinery: council, goods distributed at signing, brief deed, settlement following, and the recurring gap between the written cession and the nations' understanding of a shared arrangement.