



THE LAND BENEATH US ◆

The Huron Tract

Season One · Before Canada · Episode 12

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 into Goderich, Ontario — right on the shore of Lake Huron — the first thing you notice is that the streets fan out from a central square in an eight-pointed pattern, like the hub of a wheel someone drew with a compass. Somebody designed this town deliberately, in eighteen twenty-seven, and shipped thousands of settlers into a landscape that had been home to Anishinaabe people for generations. The question I always ask is the same one: what deal put this here?



SAM CARDINAL

These are the great written surrenders of Upper Canada — the moment treaty-making became a paper transaction the Crown considered finished the instant it was signed. The one we're looking at today is the Huron Tract Purchase of eighteen twenty-seven — more than two million acres of southwestern Ontario, the largest single land cession in the province's young history up to that point. To understand it, you have to understand that it wasn't just the Crown on the other side of the table. There was a private company, with a charter and a business plan, and a Scottish novelist turned land developer named John Galt.

THE HURON TRACT — 1827

more than two million acres, surrendered to open the Canada
Company's lands

WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

A novelist? Running a land company?



SAM CARDINAL

John Galt was a writer — he would go on to publish a novel called "Bogle Corbet" about exactly this kind of emigration scheme — but in eighteen twenty-four he helped found the Canada Company, a joint-stock corporation chartered by the British Crown to purchase and develop Crown lands in Upper Canada. The company's pitch to British investors was straightforward: buy wilderness cheaply, sell it to settlers at a profit, and use the proceeds to build roads and towns to make the whole enterprise self-sustaining. Galt became the company's first superintendent in Canada and arrived in the province in eighteen twenty-six ready to turn two million acres of the southwest into productive British farmland. The company's headquarters in the Huron Tract would be a brand new town on Lake Huron — Goderich — and Galt personally walked into the forest and chose the spot.



WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

But the land the Canada Company was buying from the Crown — who held it before the Crown said it could be sold?



SAM CARDINAL

The Anishinaabe peoples — the Chippewa and their relatives who had lived in the river valleys and along the Lake Huron shoreline of the southwest for generations. They fished the lake, hunted the forests along the Thames and the Maitland rivers, gathered in council along shores that the Canada Company's maps were now marking as available. These were not empty lands; they were the home territories of nations with their own governments, their own histories, their own understanding of what the land was and what a relationship with it meant. Before a single Canada Company settler could break ground, the Crown had to extinguish — in law, at least — whatever claim those nations held.

ONE SURRENDER

1827 — the Huron Tract Purchase
more than two million acres
the London and Huron districts opened

WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

So how did that happen? What does the actual surrender document say?



SAM CARDINAL

The written treaty — the document the Crown called a surrender — was concluded in the summer of eighteen twenty-seven. In the language the Crown used for these instruments, the Chippewa and their allied nations agreed to cede, release, surrender, and yield up the territory to the Crown forever, in exchange for certain payments. The boundaries described enclosed something over two million acres — the London and Huron Districts, a tract reaching from the Thames River drainage up to the eastern shore of Lake Huron. What the document does not say — what these surrender documents almost never say — is what the people sitting across from the Crown's negotiators believed they were agreeing to.

THE CANADA COMPANY

a land company selling the surrendered southwest

WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

And what did the Crown's negotiators report back? What's in their record?



SAM CARDINAL

The Crown's account describes willing signatories, a fair consideration paid, and a transaction properly concluded. The government's position was that the nations had understood the terms, accepted the compensation, and that title to the land now rested cleanly with the Crown and, through it, the Canada Company. That account served the Crown's purposes and the Canada Company's prospectus — and it was the version that went into the legal record and stayed there for generations. It is also, as you might expect, the thinnest of the three records.

A COUNTRY, SOLD ON

Two million acres moved from a people to a company in one deal.

WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

Three records. So what's the third?



SAM CARDINAL

The third record is what the Anishinaabe and Chippewa nations themselves carried forward — in their oral histories, in their later petitions, in what their leaders said when they began to see what the deal actually meant on the ground. What they understood, consistent with the logic of every agreement in this era, was not a permanent sale of the land beneath their feet. They understood a sharing — settlers would come, yes, and farm their portions, but the nations would go on living in the territory, hunting and fishing as they always had, maintaining their relationship with a landscape that was, in their understanding, not anyone's to sell in the first place. The gap between "cede and surrender forever" and "share the country with us" is not a small gap. It is the size of two million acres.



WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

Two million acres in a single transaction — what does that actually look like on a map?



SAM CARDINAL

Imagine drawing a shape that takes in most of what is today Huron County, Perth County, parts of Middlesex and surrounding districts — a block of southwestern Ontario roughly the size of a small European country, all transferred in a single instrument in eighteen twenty-seven. The Canada Company wasted no time. Galt had Goderich surveyed and began settling it that same year; Guelph, the company's other planned town, was founded in the spring of eighteen twenty-seven as well. Within a decade, tens of thousands of settlers — many of them Scottish and Irish emigrants — were farming land that Anishinaabe families had known for centuries. The transformation of that landscape was among the fastest and most complete anywhere in British North America.



WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

And the compensation the nations received for more than two million acres?

SAM CARDINAL

The compensation flowed through the Crown, which received a substantial payment from the Canada Company and was meant to hold a portion in trust for the nations. What actually reached the Anishinaabe communities was a fraction of what the land was worth even at the prices the Canada Company charged its settlers, let alone what it would be worth as the region filled and the towns grew. The annuities promised — modest annual payments in goods and money — were inconsistently delivered, and over time the communities that had surrendered the Huron Tract found themselves increasingly confined to small reserves, watching a landscape they had agreed to share become one in which there was very little room left for them.

WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

That's what strikes me — the nations didn't disappear after eighteen twenty-seven. They were still there. They still petitioned, still appeared before Crown officials, still said: this is not what we agreed to.

SAM CARDINAL

They did, and those petitions are part of the historical record, and they matter. The Chippewa communities of the southwest spent generations navigating a colonial system that had already decided the transaction was closed. Some of those communities are still here — on the Thames River, along the Lake Huron shore — and the questions those petitions raised have never been fully answered. The land itself was gone; what remained to be negotiated, decade after decade, was the meaning of what had happened and what obligations, if any, the Crown still carried. That conversation is still alive in Canadian courts and at negotiating tables today.

WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

John Galt, for his part, didn't last long in the role he'd built. He was dismissed from the Canada Company in eighteen twenty-nine, went back to Britain, and ended up in debtor's prison. The company he left behind kept selling land in the Huron Tract for decades.

SAM CARDINAL

Galt's personal story is almost a parable about what the Canada Company actually was — a financial instrument first, a colonization project second, and the lives of the people who already lived on that land came a distant third if they appeared in the ledger at all. What strikes me, sitting with this history, is not the villains in it — there are people in this story who did what their era expected of them and felt entirely justified. What strikes me is the structural fact: a private British corporation could obtain a charter, negotiate with a Crown that claimed to hold the title, and transfer two million acres of Anishinaabe territory to settler farmers, while the nations most affected had no seat at the table where the Canada Company's prospectus was written. The surrender ceremony happened on the ground in eighteen twenty-seven. But the real decision had been made in London boardrooms before anyone set foot in the Huron Tract.

WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

So when you stand in Goderich today — in that octagonal square, watching the sun go down over Lake Huron — you are standing at the exact centre of a transaction that was designed in every detail before the ink on the surrender was dry.

SAM CARDINAL

You are. And that is not a reason for guilt, or for paralysis — it is a reason for clear eyes. The Anishinaabe and Chippewa nations who signed in eighteen twenty-seven were not defeated peoples offering up a conquered land. They were nations making what they understood to be a negotiated accommodation with a powerful newcomer, in the belief that their own continued presence in the territory was a given, not a question. The Crown made a different record, and the Canada Company built a different landscape, and for nearly two centuries the gap between those two understandings has been the ground Canadian law and Canadian policy have tried, imperfectly, to stand on. I'm Sam Cardinal.

WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

The streets of Goderich still fan out from that central square the way John Galt drew them in eighteen twenty-seven, and the Lake Huron shore is still beautiful, and the Anishinaabe and Chippewa communities of the southwest are still here. The land beneath us holds more than one story — and knowing which ones we are standing on is the first step toward understanding what we owe each other. I'm Willow Born With A Tooth. We'll see you next time.

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 uses "two million acres" for both the 1827 surrender and the Canada Company's holding, which conflates two different figures. The 1827 surrender itself (Treaty 29) is described as covering roughly 2.2 million acres (some sources put the surveyed total higher still, up to ~2.75 million). The block the Canada Company actually acquired and sold to settlers — the Huron Tract proper, or "Huron Block" — was about 1,000,000 acres, roughly half the ceded territory. So "more than two million acres" is correct for the surrender, but the Company did not turn a full two million acres into farmland; its own tract was about a million.

The script dates the Canada Company's founding to 1824 and calls it "chartered by the British Crown" in the same breath. Galt was involved from 1824 (appointed the company's secretary), but the company was formally incorporated by royal charter on 19 August 1826; Galt served as its first Canadian superintendent 1826-1829. The 1824 date marks the venture's beginnings, not its charter.

References & further reading

"Huron Tract, Treaty 29, 1827." Treaty 29 (the Huron Tract Purchase) was signed 10 July 1827 with eighteen Chippewa chiefs and principal men; the written treaty describes roughly 2,200,000 acres and designated four reserves. *Whose Land / Upper Canada Treaties*.

"Upper Canada Land Surrenders" (Treaty Texts). Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada (rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca) — the Huron Tract cession is registered among the Upper Canada Land Surrenders as Crown Treaty No. 29.

"John Galt." The Canadian Encyclopedia — Scottish novelist; secretary of the Canada Company from 1824 and its first superintendent in Canada (1826-1829); founded Guelph (1827) and, with Tiger Dunlop, Goderich (1827); recalled and dismissed in 1829.

"Canada Company." Wikipedia / Britannica — joint-stock company incorporated by royal charter 19 August 1826 to develop Crown lands in Upper Canada; acquired about 1,000,000 acres of the Huron Tract ("Huron Block") on the eastern shore of Lake Huron plus scattered Crown reserves, and settled it with mainly Scottish and Irish emigrants.

"Huron Tract." Wikipedia — the Canada Company held roughly 1,000,000 acres of the Huron Tract; the ceding nations were the Chippewas of Chenail Ecarté (Walpole), the St. Clair River (Sarnia), and the Aux Sable / Ausable River (Kettle and Stony Point); the lands span the counties of Huron, Perth, Middlesex and present-day Lambton.

Indian Claims Commission and specific-claims record on the Chippewas of Kettle and Stony Point — the Huron Tract cession, negotiated across the mid-1820s and concluded in 1827, ceded some 2.2 million acres east of Lake Huron; compensation was set at roughly £2 10s per person, paid as annuities, and the communities were left on four small reserves.

John Galt, "Bogle Corbet; or, The Emigrants" (London, 1831) — Galt's novel drawing on his emigration-scheme experience; Galt was committed to the King's Bench debtors' prison in July 1829 after his dismissal from the Canada Company and discharged that November.

Goderich, Ontario — laid out in 1827 under John Galt and Tiger Dunlop on Lake Huron, with its distinctive octagonal (eight-radial) central square ("The Square"); the town served as the administrative seat and port of the Huron Tract. Huron County Museum / town heritage records.