



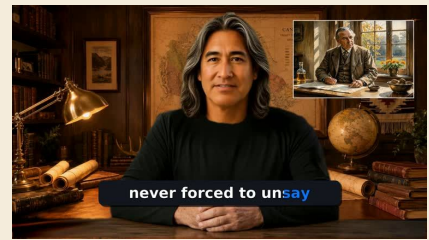
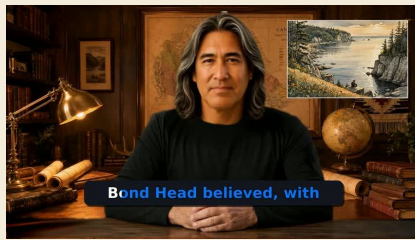
THE LAND BENEATH US ◆

Manitoulin Island

Season One · Before Canada · Episode 14

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 take the Chi-Cheemaun ferry across Lake Huron and watch Manitoulin Island rise out of the water, there is a moment where the whole thing seems inevitable — this place is too large and too present to be anything but permanent. What you might not know is that in eighteen thirty-six, the British Crown stood on that shore and made a promise that it would be permanent, for exactly the people who had always lived there.



SAM CARDINAL

Manitoulin is the largest freshwater island in the world — more than two thousand six hundred square kilometres of rock, forest, and Georgian Bay shoreline. The Anishinaabe — Odawa, Ojibwe, and Potawatomi peoples — had lived there and around it for thousands of years. For many of them it was sacred ground, the island of Gitchi Manitou, the Great Spirit. When Lieutenant-Governor Sir Francis Bond Head arrived at Manitowaning in the summer of eighteen thirty-six, he arrived with a plan he genuinely believed would protect all of that.

REFUGE, THEN SURRENDER

set aside in 1836, then largely given up in 1862

WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

And that plan was, in a word, removal — but removal dressed as refuge. Bond Head's idea was to get the Anishinaabe off the mainland and onto the island, where the Crown would shield them from the settler tide coming in from the south.



SAM CARDINAL

Bond Head believed, with a sincerity that made him genuinely dangerous, that the Anishinaabe could not survive living alongside an oncoming settler society. He was not trying to destroy them — he believed he was saving them. His solution was to press the mainland Ojibwe and Odawa to give up their lands there and relocate to Manitoulin, which the Crown would set aside exclusively for Indigenous peoples, a place no settler could enter. This was the great land surrenders era, when treaty-making across Upper Canada had shifted from a living relationship into a paper transaction the Crown considered finished the moment it was signed — and Bond Head was about to add a new chapter, not a surrender this time, but a promise.

THREE RECORDS

THE 1862 TREATY

a voluntary surrender

THE CROWN

a loose end to resolve

WIKWEMIKONG

never the Crown's to
take

WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

So what did the eighteen thirty-six agreement actually say?



SAM CARDINAL

The document set Manitoulin Island and the islands of Lake Huron aside — in the Crown's own words — for the use of the Indian tribes of the said lake. It declared the island a home for Indigenous people, not subject to settler occupation. The chiefs who gathered at Manitowaning signed with the understanding their communities carried forward for generations: that the Crown was formally recognizing a permanent home, a covenant no future government could revoke. Bond Head wrote back to London that the arrangement was a great success, that the chiefs were grateful, and that this had settled the matter.

REVERSAL

1836 — set aside as a refuge
1862 — the Manitoulin Island Treaty
Wikwemikong refuses to sign

WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

He did not ask them what they planned to tell their own people.



SAM CARDINAL

He did not. And what they told their communities was something different from what Bond Head wrote in his reports. They said the Crown had acknowledged at last what had always been true: this island belonged to the Anishinaabe. Not a gift. A recognition.

WIKWEMIKONG

SIGNED

most of the island

REFUSED

the eastern peninsula, still
unceded

WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

That gap — between what the Crown believed it had done and what the communities understood had been agreed — is where every hard question in this story waits. Because twenty-six years later, the Crown came back.



SAM CARDINAL

By the eighteen fifties, settler ambitions had reached Lake Huron. The island's harbours, its timber, its farmable interior — all of it had become visible to people who had been told for a generation it was off limits. Within the new Province of Canada, voices began arguing that Manitoulin was too large for the number of Indigenous people actually living on it, that it was being wasted. The refuge had become, in the eyes of the government, an inconvenience.

STILL UNCEDED

Wikwemikong said no in 1862 and was never made to unsay it.

WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

In eighteen sixty-two, a Crown official named William Spragge arrived on the island. His mission was a surrender treaty.



SAM CARDINAL

Spragge held councils with the various bands through the summer and fall of eighteen sixty-two. The treaty he placed before them offered each band member a grant of land and annual payments in exchange for surrendering the bulk of the island to the Crown. The written treaty was straightforward in its terms: the signing bands relinquished their claim to Manitoulin in exchange for lots and annuities. It was signed on the sixth of October, eighteen sixty-two. What it did not say — what no written treaty of this period ever said — was that this reversed a promise made by the Crown to the same people less than three decades before.



WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

Most of the bands signed. But not all of them.



SAM CARDINAL

Some signed reluctantly, under the pressure of neighbours who had already agreed, under the calculation that holding a portion might be better than losing everything. But the Odawa, Ojibwe, and Potawatomi community on the eastern peninsula of the island held their own council and came back to Spragge with a refusal.



WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

Wikwemikong.

SAM CARDINAL

Wikwemikong. Their leaders said, in terms that Spragge's own reports acknowledge without fully understanding: we remember what eighteen thirty-six meant. This island was not given to us by the Crown to be held at the Crown's pleasure — it was recognized as ours. We did not sell it then, and we will not sell it now. Spragge noted the refusal in his paperwork and moved on, treating the unceded eastern peninsula as a loose end to be resolved later, rather than a principled answer to a question his treaty was not prepared to face.

WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

Let me set those three records side by side, because that is where this story lives. The written treaty of eighteen sixty-two says the signing bands voluntarily surrendered the island. Spragge's own reports say the negotiations were orderly and the holdouts were simply an unresolved matter. And the Wikwemikong account says the entire premise was wrong — the island had never been the Crown's to redistribute in the first place.

SAM CARDINAL

The gap between those three records is not a misunderstanding. It is a disagreement about the nature of what was agreed in eighteen thirty-six. The Crown read that earlier arrangement as a temporary administrative measure it could revise when policy changed. The Anishinaabe read it as a covenant — a recognition of inherent right that no later administration had the authority to undo. When Wikwemikong refused to sign in eighteen sixty-two, they were not simply being stubborn. They were applying the logic of the original promise to the moment of its reversal, and finding the reversal illegitimate.

WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

And the island that was supposed to be the refuge — what happened to it after eighteen sixty-two?

SAM CARDINAL

The surrendered portions were surveyed and opened to non-Indigenous settlement through the eighteen sixties and the years that followed. Towns were established. Farms were cleared. The island became exactly what Bond Head had explicitly promised it would never become — a mixed settlement where the Anishinaabe held only fragments of what had been guaranteed to them whole. And Wikwemikong sat on its uncaded peninsula, surrounded by all of it, unchanged.

WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

Wikwemikong Unceded Indian Reserve. That word "unceded" is still right there in the name, on every road sign, every piece of correspondence.

SAM CARDINAL

It is not a technicality or a relic. In a province where most of the land passed through a chain of written surrenders — each one declared final by the Crown the moment the ink dried — Wikwemikong stands as the community that said no in eighteen sixty-two and was never forced to unsay it. Today several thousand people live there, with their own governance, their own language programs, their own cultural institutions. The refusal held. And what it held was not only land — it was the position that a promise, once made, does not expire because it grows inconvenient.

WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

I want that to land with the weight it deserves. The Wikwemikong decision wasn't made in the abstract. It was made by people watching their neighbours sign, watching the island they had been promised change around them, and choosing the harder answer.

SAM CARDINAL

They understood what the pattern looked like. They had watched the mainland territories go. They had watched a promise of refuge harden into a pressure campaign. And they decided that if the Crown's word could not hold for twenty-six years, there was no logic in accepting a new word in its place. The story of Manitoulin Island is the story of a promise made in the language of refuge, reversed in the language of administration, and answered — in one community's case — in the language of a refusal that has outlasted every argument made against it. I'm Sam Cardinal.

WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

And I'm Willow Born With a Tooth. Manitoulin Island is a real place you can visit this summer — take the ferry, drive the highway, stop in Wikwemikong. The word "unceded" on that sign isn't decoration. It is a legal fact and a living one, more than a hundred and sixty years after a community decided that a promise meant what it said, and held to that through everything that followed.

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 names "a Crown official named William Spragge" as the man who arrived in 1862 and held the surrender councils. Spragge (William Prosperous Spragge, Deputy Superintendent General of Indian Affairs) was indeed a commissioner present at Manitowaning and did conduct councils, so the episode is not inventing him. But the 1862 treaty is conventionally called the McDougall Treaty (Treaty 94): the senior commissioner and the treaty's namesake was William McDougall, Superintendent General of Indian Affairs, who led the negotiation alongside Spragge. Attributing the mission to Spragge alone understates McDougall's leading role.

The episode's framing of the 1836 arrangement as "not a surrender this time, but a promise" reflects the Anishinaabe understanding, and the script correctly presents that reading as contested. It is worth noting for balance that the 1836 document (Treaty 45) itself had the resident Odawa and Ojibwe "relinquish [their] respective claims" so the islands would become the property of all Indians the Crown allowed to reside there, under Crown control — the very ambiguity (recognition of pre-existing right vs. a Crown-administered set-aside) that the episode builds its argument around.

References & further reading

"Manitoulin Island Treaty 1836." The Canadian Encyclopedia. The treaty (also called Treaty 45 or the Bond Head Treaty), signed 9 August 1836 at Manitowaning, set Manitoulin and the Lake Huron islands aside as a refuge for First Nations; Lieutenant-Governor Sir Francis Bond Head's aim was to relocate mainland Ojibwe and Odawa to the island, away from settler society.

"Manitoulin Island Treaty 1862." The Canadian Encyclopedia. Also known as the McDougall Treaty or Treaty 94, signed 6 October 1862; commissioners William McDougall (Superintendent General of Indian Affairs) and William Spragge (Deputy Superintendent) sought the surrender to open the island for settlement; the eastern-peninsula community refused, leaving Wiikwemkoong uncaded.

"History." Wiikwemkoong Unceded Territory (official community site). The people of the eastern peninsula declined to sign the 1862 treaty; their lands remain uncaded aboriginal territory to this day, with the community's own governance, language, and cultural institutions.

Robert J. Surtees, "Treaty Research Report: Manitoulin Island Treaties" — Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada (rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca). Detailed account of the 1836 set-aside, the 1862 surrender councils held at Manitowaning by McDougall and Spragge, the terms (individual land grants and annuities funded from proceeds of the surrendered lands), and the exception of the eastern (Wikwemikong) peninsula.

Manitoulin Island Treaty of 1862 (Treaty No. 94), full text — Library and Archives Canada / aboriginalhistory.ca. The signing bands surrender their claim in exchange for lots and annual

payments; the document expressly excepts the eastern portion of the island occupied by bands that would not consent.

Ontario Heritage Trust, "Manitowaning / Manitoulin Treaties 1836 and 1862" (provincial plaque). Summarizes Bond Head's 1836 refuge arrangement and the 1862 surrender that opened most of the island to settlement while the Wikwemikong peninsula remained unceded.

Allyshia West, "Indigenous and Settler Understandings of the Manitoulin Island Treaties of 1836 (Treaty 45) and 1862" (MA thesis, University of Victoria, 2010; IPinCH). Scholarship on the divergence between Crown and Anishinaabe understandings of what was agreed in 1836 and reversed in 1862 — the interpretive gap at the center of the episode.