



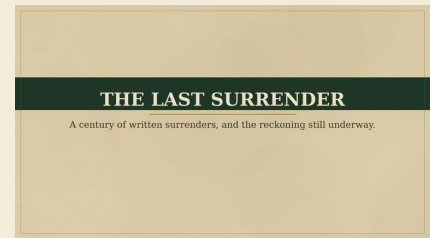
THE LAND BENEATH US ♦

The Williams Treaties

Season One · Before Canada · Episode 16

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

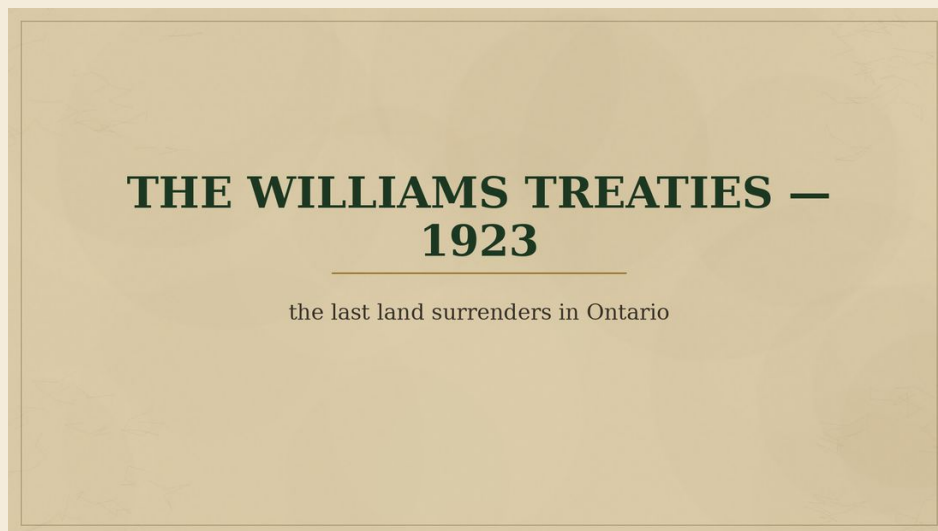
WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

Stand at the edge of almost any dock in the Kawartha Lakes on a summer morning — fishing rods out, boats heading up toward Georgian Bay — and you are standing in the middle of a question that took ninety-five years to even partly answer. This whole corridor of water, from Lake Simcoe north to Georgian Bay and across the Trent River country, was the subject of the last land surrenders in Ontario, signed in the autumn of nineteen twenty-three. Today we are asking what, exactly, was surrendered — and what was not.



SAM CARDINAL

By nineteen twenty-three, the Crown had been making land agreements in what is now southern Ontario for well over a century, and through those agreements, one truth ran constant: the Crown understood it was receiving a complete and finished transaction, while the nations understood they were entering a shared, ongoing relationship with their territory. Most of the major surrenders of that era had already happened, but there were stretches of the Trent-Severn corridor and the lake country to the north where earlier treaties had left the exact boundaries genuinely unclear. The government of Ontario commissioned an inquiry, the inquiry led to a negotiator — Angus Seymour Williams — and what came out of those autumn meetings were two sets of agreements that together bear his name.



WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

Seven First Nations signed. I want to name them, because this matters: Alderville, Beausoleil, Curve Lake, the Chippewas of Georgina Island, Hiawatha, the Mississaugas of Scugog Island, and the Chippewas of Rama. These are nations whose territories surrounded and interlocked across the whole Trent-Severn watershed.



SAM CARDINAL

Each of them had ancestors who had already dealt with the Crown through agreements made decades earlier in the eighteen hundreds — agreements the Crown now said were incomplete, or overlapping, or hadn't fully resolved the question of title to certain parcels. The Williams Treaties were described as tying up loose ends. The nations, however, understood something quite different about what those loose ends actually were — and the difference between those two understandings is the centre of this whole story.

THREE RECORDS

THE TEXT

harvesting rights
extinguished

THE CROWN

tidying old unclear
deals

THE NATIONS

a right never meant to
be given up

WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

So let us put the three records side by side, the way this country deserves. What does the paper actually say?



SAM CARDINAL

The written treaties are blunt. They contain a surrender of all rights, title, and interest in the described lands — and here is where it gets significant — they also include an explicit surrender of hunting and fishing rights across those lands. This was not incidental boilerplate carried over from a standard form; it was a specific inclusion. The Crown read these treaties as extinguishing not just the nations' land title but their right to fish and hunt in the waters and forests they had lived alongside for generations.

NINETY-FIVE YEARS

1923 — the Williams Treaties
seven First Nations
2018 — settled and apologized for

WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

And what did Commissioner Williams report back to Ottawa?



SAM CARDINAL

Williams reported a successful and orderly set of negotiations. His accounts describe the nations as willing participants, the compensation as fair, and the agreements as clear and complete. The Crown paid lump sums — not large ones, even by the standards of nineteen twenty-three — and considered the matter closed. From Ottawa's perspective, the last loose thread in the Upper Canada surrender era had been tied off, quietly and finally.

1923 TO 2018

1923

rights read as surrendered

2018

Canada settles and apologizes

WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

Now. What do the nations say they agreed to?



SAM CARDINAL

The nations say — and said from nearly the moment the ink was dry — that they agreed to clarify the land boundaries, and nothing beyond that. They did not understand themselves to be giving up their right to fish and hunt. Fishing those lakes, hunting those forests, was not a recreational preference or a side arrangement; it was how families fed themselves and how nations maintained their living relationship with their territory. The notion that you could surrender those rights in a brief negotiation, the way you sign over a surveyed lot, did not correspond to anything the nations understood themselves to be agreeing to.

THE LAST SURRENDER

A century of written surrenders, and the reckoning still underway.

WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

And the record suggests there were real problems with how the treaty terms were communicated — particularly that specific clause about hunting and fishing rights.



SAM CARDINAL

The oral record from all seven nations is consistent on this point. The negotiations were conducted in English, with interpreters of varying quality, and the legal meaning of permanently extinguishing hunting and fishing rights — not seasonally, not conditionally, but forever — is not a concept that travels cleanly across languages and legal traditions in a brief meeting. Whether it was a genuine failure of translation, a failure of disclosure, or something harder to excuse than either, the gap between what was in the document and what the nations believed they had agreed to was real and it was wide.



WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

And they did not stay quiet about it. The nations began raising the hunting and fishing rights issue almost immediately.



SAM CARDINAL

They did. For decade after decade, the seven nations pushed through whatever channels were available to them — petitions, correspondence, formal complaints — arguing that the surrender of hunting and fishing rights had not been part of the agreement they made. For most of that time, the Crown declined to revisit the question. The treaties, as far as Ottawa and Queen's Park were concerned, were valid and final. It is a long time to be told that the agreement you know you made is not the agreement you signed.



WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

How long? Ninety-five years.

SAM CARDINAL

Ninety-five years from signing to settlement. The specific claim the seven nations brought forward moved through the federal process, and in twenty eighteen, Canada and Ontario reached a major agreement with all seven nations. The settlement included substantial financial compensation — compensation the Crown acknowledged was far more than what had been paid in nineteen twenty-three. And it included something that does not always arrive with a settlement: a formal apology from both the federal and provincial governments, acknowledging that the Crown had failed to meet its obligations and had not fairly compensated the nations for what had been taken.

WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

I want to pause on that apology, because it was specific. It was not simply an expression of regret about how things turned out. It was an acknowledgment that the Crown had gotten it wrong.

SAM CARDINAL

That specificity is not a small thing. The apology named the failure directly: that the compensation paid in nineteen twenty-three did not reflect the true value of what the nations had surrendered, and that the handling of the hunting and fishing rights question had been inadequate. That is the Crown stating, on the record, that the gap between what was written and what the nations understood was a real gap — and that the nations' ninety-five years of saying so were not a misreading on their part.

WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

I keep thinking about what it means that the Williams Treaties came at the very end — nineteen twenty-three, long after the major surrenders of the previous century. In some ways they read like a summary of the whole era.

SAM CARDINAL

They are exactly that. By the time Williams sat down with those seven nations, the machinery of land surrender had been running for well over a hundred years, and the template was practiced and polished. Yet the same gap that had opened in the earliest of these agreements was still there at the finish: the Crown receiving what it called a final transaction, the nations entering what they understood as a living arrangement. The Williams Treaties did not just close the surrender century. They carried its central problem all the way to its last page.

WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

And does the twenty eight settlement close that problem?

SAM CARDINAL

A settlement closes a legal claim. Whether it closes a problem is a different question, and the nations themselves are best placed to answer it. What the settlement does is place on the permanent official record that the story the Crown told about these treaties for ninety-five years was incomplete — that the nations had not been heard fairly, and that what they surrendered was worth far more than what they received. That is not nothing. It is, in fact, precisely the kind of acknowledgment they had been told, for most of those ninety-five years, they would never receive.

WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

The Trent-Severn Waterway runs through this whole territory today — the locks, the provincial parks, the fishing boats, the summer cabins. It is one of the most visited corridors in Ontario.

SAM CARDINAL

And the seven nations of the Williams Treaties are still here, in those same communities along that same water — Curve Lake, Hiawatha, Alderville, Beausoleil, Georgina Island, Scugog Island, Rama — fishing the same lakes, maintaining the same relationship with their territory that no lump-sum payment in nineteen twenty-three actually ended. That is worth holding: what the Crown believed it had extinguished, the people simply kept living. The relationship with the land outlasted the paper that claimed to sever it.

WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

The Crown always assumed that signing the document was the end of the story.

SAM CARDINAL

But a nation is not a document. A relationship with a territory is not a title deed. The Williams Treaties are the closing chapter of the Upper Canada surrender era, and what they tell us — what the twenty eighteen settlement finally confirmed — is that a signature is not the same as an agreement, and a closed file is not the same as a finished account. Ninety-five years is how long it can take for the official record to catch up to what the people already knew. I'm Sam Cardinal.

WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

The land beneath those fishing docks, beneath the Trent-Severn locks, beneath Georgian Bay itself — it holds that entire reckoning in it, right up to today. Seven nations held their understanding of what they had agreed to for almost a century, and the record eventually had to come to them. That's the land beneath us.

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

NAME ERROR IN SCRIPT: the episode calls the commissioner “Almon James Williams.” The treaties are named for ANGUS SEYMOUR WILLIAMS (A.S. Williams), a Department of Indian Affairs solicitor who chaired the commission. He was not a lone negotiator: the 1923 commission had three members — A.S. Williams (chair, for Canada), and R.V. Sinclair and Uriah McFadden. The given name should be corrected before broadcast.

The episode frames the 2018 settlement as financial compensation plus an apology, but underplays its central substantive term: the settlement expressly RECOGNIZED the seven nations’ right to hunt, fish and trap on their traditional territories (and provided for up to 11,000 acres of reserve additions per nation). That harvesting-rights recognition — not just money — is the core of what the nations had fought for since 1923.

References & further reading

“Williams Treaties.” The Canadian Encyclopedia — two treaties signed in 1923 surrendering over 20,000 sq km; the written texts extinguished hunting and fishing rights guaranteed under earlier treaties; seven First Nations: Alderville, Chippewas of Beausoleil, Chippewas of Georgina Island, Chippewas of Rama, Curve Lake, Hiawatha, Mississaugas of Scugog Island.

“Treaty Research Report: The Williams Treaties (1923).” Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada (rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca) — confirms the three-member commission (A.S. Williams, chair, Departmental Solicitor of Indian Affairs; R.V. Sinclair, whose involvement dated to the 1916 investigation; Uriah McFadden, a Sault Ste. Marie lawyer) and the commission’s finding that the nations’ claims were valid.

Williams Treaty texts, RCAANC-CIRNAC / Anishinabek (anishinabek.ca) — two separate treaties dated October 31, 1923 (Chippewas of Beausoleil, Georgina Island, Rama) and November 15, 1923 (Mississauga: Alderville, Curve Lake, Hiawatha, Scugog Island), each containing an explicit surrender of hunting and fishing rights outside reserve lands.

“Canada and Ontario advance reconciliation with historic apologies to the seven Williams Treaties First Nations communities.” Government of Canada / CIRNAC news release, November 17, 2018 — formal apologies delivered by Minister Carolyn Bennett (Canada) and Minister Greg Rickford (Ontario) for the negative impacts of the treaties.

“Williams Treaties First Nations Settlement Agreement.” CIRNAC (rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca) — the 2018 settlement of the Alderville litigation: \$1.11 billion total compensation (\$666 million from Canada, \$444 million from Ontario), recognition of treaty harvesting (hunt/fish/trap) rights, and an entitlement of up to 11,000 acres of reserve-land additions per First Nation; out-of-court talks began March 2017, ratified by members June 2018, announced September 13, 2018.

“Revisiting the Williams Treaties of 1923: Anishinaabeg perspectives after a century.” The Conversation (2023) — documents the gap between the written surrender and Anishinaabeg

understanding, including the recollection that the signatories were assured they would keep their hunting and fishing rights, and the decades of protest that followed.

“100 years of the Williams Treaties in Ontario.” The Narwhal (2023) — centenary reporting on the surrenders, the extinguishment of harvesting rights, the 95-year fight, and the 2018 settlement and apologies.

“A Brief History of the Williams Treaties” (Treaties Recognition Week), Ontario Tech University — overview corroborating the 1923 signing, the seven nations, the loss of off-reserve harvesting rights, and the long path to the 2018 resolution.