



THE LAND BENEATH US ◆

The Promise and the Paper

Season One · Before Canada · Episode 8

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 on the north shore of Lake Ontario, near the Bay of Quinte, and you are standing on land that in the summer of seventeen eighty-three became one of the first pieces of this country's interior to be written into a document, folded up, and filed. Welcome back to The Land Beneath Us. I'm Willow Born With a Tooth, and this is our season closer.

SAM CARDINAL

And I'm Sam Cardinal. All season, we have traced an era when, in the Indigenous understanding, a treaty was a living relationship between nations — something that required tending, renewal, the ongoing presence of both peoples at council. This episode is about the moment that relationship model began, under enormous pressure, to give way to something different. Something written down. Something that, once signed, one side considered finished.



WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

Eight episodes to get here. So what broke open? What pushed things across that line?

SAM CARDINAL

The American Revolution ended in seventeen eighty-three, and within a few years, roughly forty thousand people who had stayed loyal to the British Crown — the Loyalists — crossed into what is now Ontario. They needed farms. They needed land they could call their own. The Crown needed somewhere to settle them, and it needed it quickly. The careful, ceremonial, reciprocal relationship model that had governed treaty-making with Indigenous nations for generations was suddenly competing with a very urgent demand for acreage.



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Forty thousand people. That is not a trickle. That is a tide.

SAM CARDINAL

It is. And in that tide, a Crown official named Captain William Crawford gathered Mississauga leaders near the Bay of Quinte in seventeen eighty-three and produced what would become known as the Crawford Purchase. The document covered a significant strip of land along the north shore of Lake Ontario. It was brief. The boundaries it described were imprecise enough that disputes about exactly what was included would continue for years. The payment was made in trade goods — blankets, cloth, tools. And the Mississauga leaders who marked that document with an X brought to that meeting an understanding of agreement rooted in everything they had practised for generations.



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Meaning they understood it the way agreements had always worked — through relationship, through shared use, through the spoken exchange between peoples.

SAM CARDINAL

That is exactly it. In the Mississauga understanding, you do not remove yourself from a place because newcomers arrive to share it. The land sustains everyone who lives in relationship with it. You continue to hunt, to fish, to gather, to camp. The presence of settlers does not end your presence. The document they marked, however, used the language of Crown property law — words like cede, surrender, and yield. In that legal tradition, those words meant the land was gone. Not borrowed. Not shared. Permanently transferred. The same meeting produced two completely different agreements, depending on which tradition you understood yourself to be standing in.



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And was there anyone in the room who could bridge that gap? Who could carry the full weight of both traditions across?

SAM CARDINAL

Rarely, and increasingly less so. The interpreters of this era were often traders or missionaries — capable of moving between languages in conversation, but not trained to translate the full legal implications of Crown property terminology into an Anishinaabe framework, or the Mississauga understanding of relationship into something that would hold in a Crown legal document. There is also this: when you have made agreements for generations through ceremony and council, through the spoken word witnessed by your own community, a piece of paper with marks on it does not look like the final word. It looks like one component of the agreement. The spoken exchange at that meeting, the promises made out loud, those were equally real to the Mississauga. The Crown's officials left with the paper. The Mississauga left with the memory of what had been said.



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And then the settlers came, and they treated it as a sale.

SAM CARDINAL

Within years. And when Mississauga people returned to fish a river or camp on land they believed they had agreed to share, they encountered settlers who said the land was no longer theirs to use. When they brought that dispute to Crown officials, the officials looked at the document. Only the document.



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That is the shift, isn't it. Not just in what treaties said — but in what counted as the record of what was agreed.

SAM CARDINAL

That is the deepest part of the shift. And to understand why it happened when it did, you have to look at what else was changing inside the Crown's administration. For a century and more, Indigenous nations had been essential military allies. The relationship model — the reciprocity, the ongoing council — was not simply courtesy. It was strategic. The Crown needed that alliance, and it behaved accordingly. After seventeen eighty-three, that military necessity began to lift. And when the strategic need faded, the relationship began to look, to Crown administrators, like something that could be simplified. Like overhead that could be converted into a transaction and closed.



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From ally to expense, in the ledger of empire.

SAM CARDINAL

From partner to administrative problem, I would say. Not uniformly, and not without Crown officials who understood what was being traded away. But the direction was set. The Indian Department, which had been the body that managed alliances, began to shift its purpose toward managing land acquisition and, eventually, toward managing Indigenous peoples on reserved land. That is a very different thing.



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So when a nation signed one of these documents in the seventeen eighties or nineties, what was actually being lost in the translation?

SAM CARDINAL

What was being lost was the ongoing obligation. Every relationship-treaty we have traced this season assumed that the agreement was not complete when it was made — it was the beginning of something. You returned to council. You renewed. You heard what had changed and you responded to it. The paper model made the agreement look like a closed transaction. Once signed, the Crown's position became: the matter is settled, move on. The nations' position was, and remained: we entered into a relationship with you, and a relationship requires that we keep talking, that you keep showing up. That gap — the finished transaction against the living relationship — is the inheritance that flows directly into every written land surrender that follows.



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But the nations did keep talking. They kept showing up.

SAM CARDINAL

They did. And they kept the record. The Mississauga of the Credit River maintained a precise oral account of what their agreements were understood to mean — that they had shared use of the land with settlers while retaining their own right to live on it. That account was carried from generation to generation. It became the foundation of claims brought forward through Canadian courts and negotiating processes more than two centuries after those original meetings. The spoken record did not vanish. It was held, carefully, by the people who had made the agreement. And in some cases — not all, but some — it was eventually heard by institutions that had long refused to hear it.

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It stayed alive. For two hundred years, people carried it.

SAM CARDINAL

Because they knew it was true. And that is what I want to leave with you as we close this season. The great written land surrenders that come next — the treaties that will move across Upper Canada in the decades following this moment, clearing millions of acres for settlement — those negotiations were entered by nations who brought with them everything we have followed this season. The understanding of treaty as a living thing. The expectation that the spoken word carries weight. The belief that agreeing to share a place does not mean agreeing to disappear from it. That inheritance met a system that increasingly said: the paper is the whole agreement, and the paper says you are done. That collision is what the next season of this story is about. And it has not finished playing out. I'm Sam Cardinal.

WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

And I'm Willow Born With a Tooth. The land beneath your feet was shaped by agreements made long before this country had a name — agreements that are still being read, argued over, and in some cases, finally honoured. Thank you for spending this season with us on 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

A note on the Loyalist numbers. The episode says roughly forty thousand Loyalists came into what is now Ontario after 1783. The ~40,000–50,000 figure is the total who left the United States for British North America as a whole; the large majority settled in the Maritimes (Nova Scotia and the future New Brunswick), and only a few thousand reached the future Upper Canada (Ontario) in these years. The pressure this episode describes on the north shore of Lake Ontario is real, but the ~40,000 figure belongs to British North America overall, not to Ontario alone.

The Crawford Purchase of 1783 was a brief document with imprecise boundaries, paid in trade goods; the Mississauga understanding of it as shared use — carried in the oral record of the Mississaugas of the Credit — later grounded land claims resolved generations afterward (the Toronto Purchase / related claims settlement, 2010).

References & further reading

“Loyalists in Canada.” The Canadian Encyclopedia — some 45,000–50,000 Loyalists came to British North America after 1783, the majority to the Maritimes; a smaller number to the future Upper Canada.

The Crawford Purchase, 1783 — Captain William Crawford and Mississauga leaders, north shore of Lake Ontario near the Bay of Quinte; “Upper Canada Land Surrenders,” The Canadian Encyclopedia.

Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation — the community’s oral record of shared use and the land claims (including the Toronto Purchase claim) settled in 2010.

The Treaty of Paris (1783) ended the American Revolution; the influx of Loyalists led to the creation of Upper Canada as a separate province in 1791.

On the shift of the Indian Department from managing military alliances to administering land and peoples: standard accounts in J.R. Miller, *Compact, Contract, Covenant: Aboriginal Treaty-Making in Canada* (University of Toronto Press, 2009).