



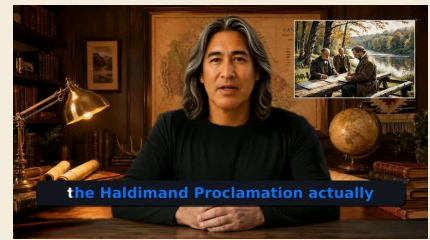
THE LAND BENEATH US ♦

The Haldimand Grant

Season One · Before Canada · Episode 9

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

I'm standing on the bank of the Grand River in what is now southern Ontario, and the question I carry everywhere on this show is the same one I'm asking right now: what deal put this land beneath my feet? I'm Willow Born With a Tooth, and what happened here is one of the most specific, most documented, and most unresolved land stories in the country.



SAM CARDINAL

When the American Revolution ended with the Treaty of Paris in seventeen eighty-three, the Crown drew a new international border through Haudenosaunee territory without consulting the nations who lived there. The Six Nations — the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca, and Tuscarora — had fought alongside the British for nearly a decade, and in exchange they received a peace treaty that left their homelands, the Mohawk Valley, the Finger Lakes, all of it, on the American side of a line they never agreed to draw. These were the great written transactions of Upper Canada, moments when a living relationship between nations was folded into a document the Crown considered settled the instant the ink dried — but the people who signed them carried a very different understanding home.

THE HALDIMAND GRANT — 1784

six miles deep on each side of the Grand River, granted to the
Six Nations

WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

So the Crown owed the Six Nations something real. And in seventeen eighty-four, it tried to pay.



SAM CARDINAL

Governor General Frederick Haldimand signed a proclamation that October granting the Six Nations and their allies a tract of land along the Grand River in what would become the province of Upper Canada. The language was precise: six miles deep on each side of the river from its source all the way down to its mouth at Lake Erie. At full extent, that was more than six hundred thousand acres of forest, river bottom, and good land. The document said the Six Nations were to hold it and to quote enjoy it forever close quote. Those words were written and signed by a senior British officer who, by all the evidence, meant them.

THREE RECORDS

THE GRANT

a homeland for wartime
allies

THE CROWN

a gift it could regulate

SIX NATIONS

land to hold forever

WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

Six miles on each side, the full length of the river. That is an enormous piece of ground. So who was the man who brought the Six Nations to that table and made sure there was a table at all?



SAM CARDINAL

His name was Joseph Brant — Thayendanegea in Mohawk — and he was among the most consequential figures of his generation in this country. He was a Mohawk war captain and a diplomat who had traveled to London twice, met the King, and read the documents placed in front of him with a sharp and trained eye. He had led Six Nations warriors through some of the fiercest fighting of the Revolution, and when the war ended badly for their alliance, he was the one who stood up and said: we kept our word, now keep yours. He spent years pressing the Crown for a land grant before the Haldimand Proclamation was finally issued, and he understood very well the difference between a gift of land and a place merely to shelter.

A TRACT THAT SHRANK

1784 — the Haldimand Proclamation
the whole Grand River valley
leased and sold away over a century

WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

So Brant read the proclamation and understood what it said. What did the document actually say about the Six Nations' rights over the land — could they sell it, lease it, govern it?



SAM CARDINAL

That is precisely the question the document left unanswered, and that silence is where the entire subsequent history lives. The proclamation named the river, described the depth, and said the Six Nations would enjoy it forever. It said nothing about who held authority over transactions — whether the Six Nations could lease parcels to non-Indigenous settlers, whether they could sell portions, whether the Crown retained a supervising role over any of that. The grant created the right but refused to define the edges of the right, and that gap was not an accident of drafting — it reflected a genuine difference in how each side understood what had just been agreed.



WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

And this is where the three records come apart. What did the Crown think it had given, what did its own men report, and what did the Six Nations understand?



SAM CARDINAL

The written proclamation says enjoy forever — that much both sides could read. The Crown's administrators, in their letters and reports from the period, treated the grant as a resettlement — a gift of place, yes, a generous one, but subject to Crown supervision when it came to dealings with non-Indigenous parties. Their position was that any lease or sale to a settler required Crown approval before it was legally binding. The Six Nations understood something fundamentally different. They had given land, labor, fighting men, and years of loyalty in the Revolution. The Grand River tract was, in their understanding and in what their councils said at the time, compensation paid to a nation — and a sovereign nation decides for itself what to do with its own territory.

STILL CLAIMED

The Haldimand Tract land claim is still unresolved.

WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

A supervised resettlement versus a sovereign homeland. Those are not just different words. They are different worlds.



SAM CARDINAL

They are, and Joseph Brant saw the difference clearly. Beginning in the years after seventeen eighty-four, he negotiated leases with non-Indigenous settlers — not sales, but long-term leases — generating income for the community while the Grand River was being settled around them. He believed this was entirely within the Six Nations' right as the land's owners. The colonial administration disagreed. Their position was that Brant had no authority to make those arrangements without Crown approval, that the leases were legally irregular, and that the income should flow through Crown-managed trust accounts rather than directly to the community. That dispute — over who had the right to administer the land — would define the next century of the Haldimand Tract's history.



WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

So the Crown gave the land, and then disputed the right to use it. What did that actually mean on the ground — what happened to all those acres?



SAM CARDINAL

The tract shrank. Some of the leases Brant negotiated were eventually formalized as purchases, with the Crown acting as intermediary and holding the proceeds in trust for the Six Nations. Other parcels were surrendered through formal transactions in the early eighteen hundreds. The trust fund that was supposed to generate income for the community was frequently mismanaged, disputed in the accounts, and drawn down in ways the Six Nations councils later said they had never properly authorized. By the middle of the nineteenth century, a territory described in seventeen eighty-four as six miles deep along the full length of the Grand River had been reduced to a small fraction of that original grant — and the reductions had happened not through one single act but through decades of transactions whose legal validity was contested at every step.



WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

This wasn't one dramatic moment of loss. It was a long, slow erosion — deal by deal, decade by decade.

SAM CARDINAL

Yes, and the contested question at the bottom of each transaction was always the same one the Haldimand Proclamation had left unanswered: were the Six Nations a sovereign nation with full authority over their territory, in which case some of Brant's leases were valid and the Crown had been interfering in Six Nations governance, or were they a Crown-grant community subject to Crown supervision, in which case the colonial administration had some legal standing for what it did? Depending on which answer you accept, the history of the Haldimand Tract reads entirely differently — either as the mismanagement of a trust, or as the systematic erosion of a sovereign claim the Crown never intended to honour in full.

WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

And the answer to that foundational question — it is still being argued.

SAM CARDINAL

The Six Nations of the Grand River filed a comprehensive land claim in nineteen ninety-five. It covers the full arc of the Haldimand Tract — the Brant-era leases, the surrenders, the trust fund, the management failures — and it argues that the Crown did not fulfil its obligations and that large portions of what left Six Nations hands were never properly surrendered at all. The territory named in the claim encompasses much of what is now Haldimand County and the surrounding region — land on which cities, towns, farms, and roads have sat for generations. It is one of the largest outstanding specific claims in Canada, and it remains unresolved.

WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

So if you're in Caledonia or Brantford or anywhere along that river and you ask what deal put this ground beneath me — there is a specific, documented, and still-open answer.

SAM CARDINAL

There is. And I want to be fair to what the Haldimand Proclamation actually was, because it was not a trick. It was a genuine attempt by the Crown to honour a genuine debt — owed to real nations who had sacrificed enormously for an alliance the Crown itself had sought. Frederick Haldimand wrote those words to enjoy it forever and there is good evidence he meant them. What followed was not a betrayal that anyone planned on day one. It was something slower and in some ways harder to account for: the creeping assertion of Crown authority over how the enjoyment could work, the steady accumulation of transactions whose legitimacy Six Nations councils disputed, and a trust fund that was never adequately managed. A promise can begin honestly and still be broken by degrees.

WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

Broken by degrees. That phrase does something to you when you're standing on this ground.

SAM CARDINAL

Joseph Brant died in eighteen oh seven, still writing letters to the Crown, still insisting that what had been given could not be reclaimed in pieces. He never received a definitive answer. The Grand River still runs through it all — the same river named in the proclamation, moving through land that was promised forever in the fall of seventeen eighty-four on a document every party could read and no two parties read the same way. I'm Sam Cardinal.

WILLOW BORN WITH A TOOTH

Six Nations of the Grand River is home to the largest First Nations population in Canada today. The river is still there, the people are still there, and the claim is still alive. Whatever you think the paper said, the people it was written for have never stopped saying what they understood it to mean — and that conversation is not finished.

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 script describes the tract at full extent as “more than six hundred thousand acres.” This is not false, but it understates the figure most sources use: the Haldimand Tract is standardly given as roughly 950,000 acres (six miles deep along each side of the Grand River from Lake Erie to its source). The Six Nations’ own materials, the Government of Ontario, and the 1995 statement of claim all cite about 950,000 acres, of which less than five per cent (roughly 46,500 acres) remains in Six Nations hands. A conservative figure exists because the Crown later disputed whether the upstream (headwaters) portion was ever validly conveyed by the underlying Mississauga surrender, but the widely-cited full-extent number is ~950,000, not ~600,000.

Frederick Haldimand is called “Governor General” in the script. His formal office was Captain-General and Governor-in-Chief of the Province of Quebec (1778–1786); the modern federal title “Governor General” is an anachronism, though the loose usage is common.

References & further reading

Haldimand Proclamation, 25 October 1784 (Sir Frederick Haldimand, Governor of the Province of Quebec). Text authorizing the Six Nations “to take Possession of, and Settle upon the Banks of the River commonly called Ours [Grand] River ... Six Miles deep from each Side of the River beginning at Lake Erie, and extending in that Proportion to the Head of the said River, which them and their Posterity are to enjoy for ever.” Reproduced by Six Nations Lands & Resources, sixnations.ca/LandsResources/HaldProc.htm.

“Haldimand Proclamation / Six Nations of the Grand River.” The Canadian Encyclopedia — the 1784 grant of approximately 950,000 acres along the Grand River to the Six Nations for their alliance with the Crown in the American Revolution.

“Thayendanegea (Joseph Brant).” Dictionary of Canadian Biography, vol. V (Toronto/Laval: University of Toronto/Université Laval). Mohawk war captain and diplomat, b. c. 1742–43, d. 24 November 1807 at Burlington/Wellington Square; two voyages to England where he was received at court (George III); central to securing the Grand River grant and to the later leasing of tract lands.

Charles M. Johnston, ed., *The Valley of the Six Nations: A Collection of Documents on the Indian Lands of the Grand River* (Toronto: The Champlain Society / University of Toronto Press, 1964) — the standard documentary record of the Haldimand grant, the Brant-era leases, the surrenders, and the trust-fund administration.

Six Nations of the Grand River Band of Indians v. Attorney General of Canada and Attorney General of Ontario — statement of claim first filed 1995 (Ontario Superior Court of Justice); alleges the Crown failed to fulfil its Haldimand Tract obligations and that large portions were never validly surrendered. The liability phase remains unresolved, with trial scheduled to commence 5 October 2026.

Government of Ontario, “Six Nations of the Grand River” (ontario.ca/page/six-nations-grand-river) — confirms the ~950,000-acre 1784 grant and that the present reserve (~46,500 acres) is under five per cent of the original tract.

Treaty of Paris, 3 September 1783, ending the American Revolutionary War; the new international boundary was drawn through Haudenosaunee territory (Mohawk Valley, Finger Lakes) without the consent of the Six Nations, leaving their pre-war homelands on the American side of the line.

Sidney L. Harring, *White Man’s Law: Native People in Nineteenth-Century Canadian Jurisprudence* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press / Osgoode Society, 1998) — analysis of the competing sovereign-nation vs. Crown-supervised-reserve understandings of the Grand River lands and the contested legal status of the Brant leases and subsequent surrenders.