

Brief History of Fort Providence

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A first Fort Providence was established near the present-day city of Yellowknife in 1786 by the North West Company and later operated by the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC). Old Fort Providence was as important as a supply centre for other posts, as it was as a trading site; Dene sometimes complained about the inadequacy of goods to trade at that site, although the post served as a supply post for John Franklin's first Arctic expedition. This post was abandoned in 1823.

Present-day Providence was chosen as a mission site in the early 1860s by the Roman Catholic Oblate Bishop Grandin, so-named because the mission was intended to sustain and act as a centre for the rest of the Mackenzie District missions. This was one of the few occasions when a mission preceded a trading post in the Northwest Territories, but it also freed the bishop from seeking permission from the HBC for the post (the Oblates at the time were in steady competition with the Anglican Church which had close ties with the HBC). By 1868, the HBC had moved its post at Big Island to Providence and the settlement became known as Fort Providence.

Although not as substantial a Metis community as Fort Resolution (on the south side of Great Slave Lake), Metis families played a key role in Aboriginal settlement at Fort Providence. Two Metis families, the Bouviers and Forciers, wintered at Providence in 1863-64, in part to help Grandin build the new bishop's residence. Catherine Bouvier was the daughter of a Metis man named François Beaulieu from Salt River (in today's Wood Buffalo National Park near Fort Smith). Beaulieu's mother was Chipewyan and Cree and her family raised François. His father was from Quebec. Joseph Bouvier (Catherine's husband) was a Metis from Red River, Manitoba. Catherine and Joseph's family thus connected the 18th century Metis of the Athabasca region with the newer Metis from Red River who had come north in the 19th century. They also were core to the new settlement at Providence, which the Metis call "Home of the River People" or Deh Gah Got'ie Koe (Deh Gah Got'ie means 'By the River' in Dene; Koe means 'Home or Houses').

The other Dene name for Fort Providence is Zhahti Koe which means 'mission house.' This speaks to the historical importance of the Oblate mission at this site, which was reinforced when, in 1867, Grey Nuns established a boarding school and orphanage here. Some Aboriginal families took advantage of the new school, including the Bouviers – sending their son to attend the school the first year it opened. Other children were brought to Providence from across the north, with many coming as orphaned survivors of the devastating 1865 scarlet fever epidemic. Grey Nuns operated the school, teaching the children reading, writing, and elementary arithmetic, although central to the school's purpose was religious instruction and evangelization. Children at the school laboured in the gardens to help provide for their own subsistence. Girls were typically put to work berrying while boys hoed the potato fields or cut hay. The children put to work in the school gardens learned agricultural skills rather than those more applicable to life in the bush and thus this labour contributed to alienating Dene and Metis children from their heritage and traditional relationships to the land.

That nuns had been chosen for this educational work was a product of both the fact that Oblate priests were not married (and therefore, unlike the Anglicans could not rely on their wives to run mission schools), and because young Dene and Metis girls were perceived as critical to the acculturation of indigenous northerners – and girls, in the 19th and early 20th centuries, could only be taught by women. Instruction was in both English and French: many of the Metis children of the Mackenzie spoke French, as well as Cree; the children of HBC employees at the school typically spoke English; and the nuns themselves were primarily drawn from Quebec.

The 1920s were bracketed by two major historical developments. The first was the signing of Treaty 11 in 1921. This treaty was provoked by the discovery of oil further north at Norman Wells and was the last of the numbered treaties that would extend across much of western and northern Canada. Unlike earlier numbered treaties, the federal government had little intention to negotiate Treaty 11, seeking instead swift extinction of Aboriginal title over resource-rich northern lands. The 1921 treaty process began at Fort Providence, with the treaty commission reaching the community on June 24 that year to find many Dene and Metis awaiting their arrival. The Trout Lake (later known as the Kakisa Lake) Dene arrived shortly after the treaty party and joined in the negotiations. Oral histories conducted with elders present at the negotiations emphasized that Dene only agreed to treaty based on promises made by the commissioners that they would retain complete freedom to hunt, trap, and fish. The treaty was signed on June 27 and was followed by a great feast and celebration. Treaty 11 would govern relations between Aboriginal people and the federal state for much of the twentieth century, until the most recent (1980s and 1990s) renewal of discussions regarding land claims and governance driven in large part by greater Dene and Metis political activism from the 1970s forward.

The 1920s ended with a major flu epidemic in 1928 that travelled down the Mackenzie River, largely spread by the movement of the HBC supply ship the *SS Distributor*, but also more widely disseminated by the movement of people down smaller rivers and across the land. The Mackenzie District was spared by the better-known 1918 Spanish flu epidemic, but this likely contributed to the severity of the 1928 outbreak. Close to 10 percent (500 people) of the regional population perished. Fifty deaths were recorded at Providence, from an official population of 328 (in other words, about 15.2% of people living in the community died). Many of those who died were children at the residential school, including orphans, local children, and children who had been sent to Providence from across the Mackenzie and as far away as Aklavik. The 1928 epidemic is memorialized today in the community on a large grey gravestone. This gravestone notes that this had been the site of the community graveyard prior to 1929, and included many of those who died in the “great flu epidemic.” A new cemetery was located elsewhere in the community after this, although the only bodies relocated to the new site were those of eight missionaries. The original cemetery site was ploughed over in 1948 and used as a potato field after that.

The 1950s brought further significant changes to the community. In 1959, as part of a shift across the North that saw the federal government take over

responsibility for education from the missionaries, a new federal day school was established. The next year, the Sacred Heart Mission School closed down and was converted to a nursing station (the Grey Nuns had also long provided nursing and health care in the community – although this was changing at this time as well). In this decade the Mackenzie Highway was completed. By 1960 it connected northern Alberta highways to Yellowknife, although without a fixed link across the Mackenzie River until the construction of the Deh Cho Bridge, opened to traffic in 2012. The road construction project in the 1950s provided important employment opportunities to many Dene and Metis men. The completion of the highway changed the regional geography, isolating communities (like Fort Resolution) that were not along the route, while making places like Fort Providence important stops for gas and food. Many of those Dene and Metis who continued to live more bush-oriented lives moved to Kakisa Lake, while many with employment on the roads or more settlement-oriented lives moved into Fort Providence, although time spent on the land remained important for all First Nations in the area.