

Modern History

Meanwhile, land cession treaties chipped away at Aamjiwnaang's territory. Treaty 2 was signed in 1790 ceding a large tract of land along the north shore of Lake Erie from Catfish Creek to the Detroit River extending as far north as the Thames River. Treaty 6 and 7 were signed in 1796. The Colonial Government informed us they wished to move the capital city from York to the forks of the Thames. Treaty 6 was signed for this purpose ceding a tract of land that became London Township. However, the capital was moved to Ottawa instead. They also said they wished to create a reserve for an expected influx of First Nation allies from America. Treaty 7 created the Shawanese Reserve which later became Sombra Township. The expected exodus never occurred so both tracts were opened up for white settlement.

The Treaty of Detroit was signed in 1807 ceding all of our territory in Michigan to the Americans. This treaty created two reservations. The Swan Creek Reservation was a tract of land located in St. Clair County on Lake St. Clair at the mouth of the Swan Creek. The other reservation contained two tracts of land at the mouth of the Black River in what today is downtown Port Huron. These two reservations were ceded in 1836 because of the American Removal Policy.

In 1822 Treaty 25 was signed for the Longwoods Tract near London leaving the Huron Tract along Lake Huron from just north of Goderich to the St. Clair River bounded on the south by the Thames River and Sombra Township.

Aamjiwnaang chiefs and principle men travelled to Amherstburg in 1818 to hear a proposal to cede the Huron Tract which included some 2.1 million acres. Little Thunder, now very old, and his son Red Sky attended the council. They agreed to the cession and Treaty 29 was signed on July 10, 1827. This created four reserves. One reserve was located along the south boundary of what today is St. Clair Township. Another reserve was located at Sarnia on the St. Clair River just below the rapids. The other two were on Lake Huron at Kettle Point and the mouth of the Au Sauble River. The two on the St. Clair River were named the Lower St. Clair Reserve and the Upper St. Clair Reserve at first. The Lower St. Clair was ceded in 1843. The Upper St. Clair Reserve became known as the Sarnia Reserve, but later took the original name Aamjiwnaang.

Aamjiwnaang originally contained 10,280 acres. In the 1840s a tract of land one mile wide and four miles long on the east end of the reserve was transferred to land speculator Malcolm Cameron by an illegal transaction circumventing legal requirements for land transfers of reserve lands. This resulted in a law suit in the 1990s known as the Cameron Lands Litigation. It has yet to be fully settled. Various other cessations took place in the last half of the nineteenth century as the Town of Port Sarnia encroached upon Aamjiwnaang lands reducing the size of the reserve another 1,257 acres.

The Indian Act was amended in 1911 by legislation that became known as the Oliver Act. It allowed for expropriation of reserve lands if the reserve was located beside a city with a population of more than 8,000 or if the land was needed for the greater good of the wider community. In 1919 the City of Sarnia approached Aamjiwnaang to cede 1,184 acres required to build a steel plant. Two votes were held to cede and both failed. The City threatened to invoke the Oliver Act and expropriate the whole reserve. A third vote was held and the cession was passed under duress. The city also promised not to use the Oliver Act for five years.

Today Aamjiwnaang First Nation has succeeded in building a relationship with its neighbours that is built upon friendship and mutual respect despite the difficulties of the past. It is located in the middle of

Canada's 'Chemical Valley' and has integrated well with the industry that surrounds us. This has provided ample job prospects for band members. However, there has also been adverse health effects. Aamjiwnaang is a progressive community with a bright future. Governed by a democratically elected Chief and Council Aamjiwnaang First Nation has all the services and amenities of other modern communities.

(Courtesy of David D. Plain)