

HOW DID FIRST NATIONS RESPOND TO ASSIMILATION?

As you learned in Chapter 3, in the late 1800s the federal government began to carry out policies to assimilate First Nations as part of the 1876 *Indian Act*. The government's assimilation policies included forcing First Nations to live on reserves, establishing residential schools, and banning traditional ceremonies.

SONGHEES REFUSE TO SELL THEIR LAND

In British Columbia, only a small part of the province had been set aside for First Nations reserves. Many of those reserves were now close to growing cities or were on land rich with minerals. Sir Richard McBride, the premier of British Columbia between 1903 and 1915, recognized that his province was growing rapidly. He thought if the province could gain control of all the First Nations reserve land, there would be more areas for settlement and development.

In McBride's own riding of Victoria, there was a First Nations reserve belonging to the Songhees people. The reserve was in a prime location, right on Victoria's inner harbour. The Songhees used the harbour waters to hunt, fish, and canoe. Examine **Figure 8.14**, a photo of a canoe race organized by the Songhees. How could organizing an event like this help the Songhees people maintain their identity in Victoria?

What short- and long-term consequences do you think these assimilation policies had for First Nations?

FIGURE 8.14 Songhee paddlers competing in a canoe race in Victoria's inner harbour in 1900. **Analyze:** What does the number of teams and spectators reveal about the popularity of this event?



The provincial government had previously tried to persuade the Songhees to move to another location. In exchange for their land, the government offered them small cash payments. The Songhees resisted, rejecting the government's offer, and refused to move. The local media weighed in on this issue. **Figure 8.15** shows a cartoon from the *Victoria Daily Times* on the conflict between the Songhees and the provincial government. Whose perspective does this cartoon represent?

Frustrated with the Songhees' resistance, members of the British Columbia government suggested taking away the Songhees' First Nations status and making them Canadian citizens instead. With this change in status, the Songhees reserve land would no longer be protected. Instead, the land would be divided among Songhees families and owned separately by each family. Read **Figure 8.16**. How could the government benefit from this status change?

"They then become to all intents and purposes white men; they pay taxes and can sell their land."

— William Templeman, senator

FIGURE 8.16 A quote from Templeman in 1910, describing one of the results of taking away the Songhees people's First Nations status. **Analyze:** How does this quote show an attempt to assimilate the Songhees?

NEGOTIATING WITH THE GOVERNMENT

Songhee Chief Michael Cooper actively negotiated an agreeable deal with the British Columbia government. Read **Figure 8.17**, a quote from the *Colonist*. What contributed to the success of this negotiation? Each of the 43 Songhees families would receive a large cash payment in exchange for handing over their reserve land. The Songhees would also be able to move to a new reserve that was chosen by McBride and five Songhees members. The Songhees' moving expenses would also be paid for, and they would have land, fishing, and hunting rights. In May 1911, the deal was finalized, and the Songhees moved to a reserve west of Victoria. They did not have to give up their status as First Nations people. After the negotiations, Chief Cooper spoke of McBride's kindness and even made McBride an honorary Songhees chief.

FIGURE 8.15 A cartoon from May 16, 1910, in the *Victoria Daily Times*. A Songhees man sits in the middle of the road while a car labelled "Progressive Victoria" approaches him from behind. **Analyze:** Infer why the cartoonist uses a car to depict Victoria's progress.



"[The Songhees were] dealt with not as wards [people under the supervision] of the government, but as individuals enjoying certain rights, which they ought to be paid to relinquish [give up]."

— *Colonist*

FIGURE 8.17 A quote from the *Colonist* on October 27, 1910, describing a reason why the negotiations between the government and the Songhees succeeded. **Analyze:** Why would it be important for the Songhees to feel that they were not being treated as wards of the government?

RESISTING RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS

As you learned in the Introduction and Chapter 3, residential schools were another way the federal government tried to assimilate First Nations. John A. Macdonald’s government worked with various Christian churches to create the first residential schools for First Nations children. Read **Figure 8.18**. According to Macdonald, why were residential schools used to assimilate First Nations children?

Consider **Figure 8.18** as you examine **Figure 8.19**. It is a photo of a Salteaux man named Quewich and his children who attended the Qu’Appelle Industrial School. How does this photo show the contrast between two cultures?



FIGURE 8.19 A photo from 1900 of Quewich and his three children taken by the Department of Indian Affairs. All three children attended the Qu’Appelle Industrial School in Saskatchewan. **Analyze:** Why would the Department of Indian Affairs want this photo to be taken?

One of the key strategies of the residential schools was that children would be removed from their families and stay at the school. Read **Figure 8.20**, a quote from Edgar Dewdney, commissioner of Indian affairs. Why was separating First Nations children from their families important to the government?

“When the school is on the reserve the child lives with its parents, who are savages; he is surrounded by savages. Indian children should be withdrawn as much as possible from the parental influence.”
— Prime Minister Sir John A. Macdonald

FIGURE 8.18 A quote from Macdonald on May 9, 1883, in a House of Commons debate regarding residential schools. Macdonald uses the word *savages* to refer to First Nations, which was common at the time. Today, this word is racist. **Analyze:** Why do you think Macdonald uses “he” when both male and female schoolchildren attended residential schools?

“Our policy is to keep pupils in these institutions until trained to make their way in the world. [Therefore] taking children in for short terms and letting them go again is regarded perhaps as worse than useless.”
— Edgar Dewdney, commissioner of Indian affairs

FIGURE 8.20 A quote from Dewdney in 1891 during his time as commissioner of Indian affairs between 1888 and 1891. He states why First Nations children should not visit their families while in residential school. **Analyze:** What is the significance of Dewdney using the word *institutions* rather than *schools*?

RESISTANCE FROM FAMILIES

First Nations families resisted the government’s early efforts of taking children from their families. In 1884, only 27 students were attending the three existing residential schools. Read **Figure 8.21**. What does this quote say about attendance at residential schools?

First Nations families tried to resist some residential school policies in the early 1900s. In 1902, some First Nations chiefs were able to get residential school officials to agree not to baptize young children without their parents’ consent. First Nations parents also objected to not being able to see or visit their children. Some schools did support family visits after these protests. In most cases, the schools did not respect or cooperate with the children’s families. Why would family visits, as shown in **Figure 8.22**, be important for First Nations children staying at residential schools?

Despite resistance from First Nations families, the government continued to open more residential schools. The schools taught students household, farming, and trade skills, but did not provide them with much of an academic education. Conditions grew increasingly worse, especially in the 1920s. Some students were stripped of their birth names, which were replaced with numbers. Teachers were sometimes abusive and punished students severely. Students usually did not receive enough food, and many times were given rotten food. They were made to feel ashamed of their culture and were not allowed to speak their own language. They also became increasingly isolated from their families and communities. Many students died from the residential school experiences in the early 1900s. They died from illness, abuse, taking their own lives, and while running away from the schools. Families continued to protest, but they were mostly ignored.

The last residential school in Canada closed in 1996. However, the effects of the abuse still have an impact on former students today. In 2008, the federal government made an official apology to former residential school students. From 2008 to 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) gathered and organized evidence for a report that detailed the experiences of residential school survivors. The TRC also educated Canadians on what happened in the residential schools. The TRC continues to work to build respectful relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities.

“[The First Nations families] send their children to school when it suits them to do so, and keep them at home for the same reason. The only exception to this rule is, the children are allowed to please themselves whether they go or not.”
— Diocese of Calgary

FIGURE 8.21 This is an excerpt from a 1906 letter by the Diocese of Calgary, pleading with the government to require attendance at the schools. **Analyze:** How much control did First Nations families have over their children’s education at this time?

FIGURE 8.22 This photo, taken in approximately 1885, is of the Qu’Appelle Industrial School. Tents, carts, and teepees of students’ families are set up outside of the school fence. **Analyze:** How does this photo show First Nations resistance of their children attending residential schools?



COMMUNICATE

You have now evaluated your information and drawn conclusions. The next step is to communicate and share your findings with others.

When communicating your findings, include

- your inquiry question
- the evidence you found
- your conclusion
- a delivery that will engage your audience

Think about who your audience is. Once you have determined who your audience is, you will need to decide how you will present your findings clearly to them. Consider the following questions to help you choose an engaging format for your audience: What language and format are appropriate for my audience? Am I using correct historical terms? Am I citing my sources of information correctly? **Figure 8.23** lists different formats you can choose to communicate your findings.

Type of Communication	Examples
Written	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Essay• Poem• Speech• Slide show• Blog
Visual	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Photo essay• Infographic• Artwork• Poster• Video presentation
Performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Oral report• Dance• Skit• Song

FIGURE 8.23 These are a few examples of ways to communicate your findings. **Analyze:** If you were presenting information about residential schools to Grade 5 students, which format would you choose? Why?

CASE STUDY: PAULINE JOHNSON’S CAMPAIGN AGAINST ASSIMILATION

In this case study, you will learn about Pauline Johnson (Tekahionwake), a writer and performer of Mohawk and English descent.

As you read the case study, consider the following inquiry question: Why might Johnson have chosen poetry and performance to communicate the challenges faced by First Nations peoples?

Johnson was born in 1861 on the Six Nations Reserve near present-day Brantford, Ontario. Her father was a Mohawk chief and her mother was an English American. After her father passed away in 1884, Johnson began writing to earn a living. Her poems and stories communicated the experiences and struggles of First Nations peoples and their resistance against assimilation.

Read **Figure 8.24**, an excerpt from Johnson’s 1885 poem “A Cry from an Indian Wife.” What is Johnson suggesting in this excerpt?

“They but forget we Indians owned
the land
From ocean unto ocean; that they stand
Upon a soil that centuries ago
Was our sole kingdom and our right alone.
They never think how they would feel to-day,
If some great nation came from far away,
Wresting [taking] their country from their
hapless braves,
Giving what they gave us—but wars
and graves.”

— *Pauline Johnson, writer and performer*

FIGURE 8.24 These lines are from Johnson’s poem “A Cry from an Indian Wife” based on the 1885 Northwest Resistance. **Analyze:** Who is Johnson referring to when she says “they”?

Now read **Figure 8.25**, a poem written by Duncan Campbell Scott. Scott was the deputy superintendent of the Department of Indian Affairs from 1913 to 1932. Compare the two poem excerpts. How do they differ?

“The race has waned and left but
tales of ghosts,
That hover in the world like fading smoke
About the lodges: gone are the dusky folk.”

— *Duncan Campbell Scott, writer and deputy superintendent of the Department of Indian Affairs*

FIGURE 8.25 These lines come from Scott’s 1898 poem “Indian Place-Names.” Scott refers to First Nations people as “dusky folk” because of their generally darker skin. **Analyze:** What does this excerpt reveal about what Scott believes to be the fate of First Nations?

In 1892, Johnson was invited to read her poems to an audience. It was her first public performance. She wore a costume that included moccasins, a leather dress made from rabbit pelts, and a beaded belt made from porcupine quills and moose hair. It was what an audience at that time expected of someone of mixed race. Her dramatic recital of her poetry greatly impressed her audience. This began her highly successful 17-year performing career. Examine **Figure 8.26**, a poster from her tour in London, England. How might a tour like this help or hinder First Nations peoples’ resistance to assimilation?

From the late 1800s to her death in 1913, Johnson became one of the most popular writers and public performers in Canada. Her poetry was known throughout Canada, the United States, and Britain. Her work continued to be collected and printed in books and magazines long after her death in 1913. Today, there are schools in Ontario and British Columbia that are named after her.

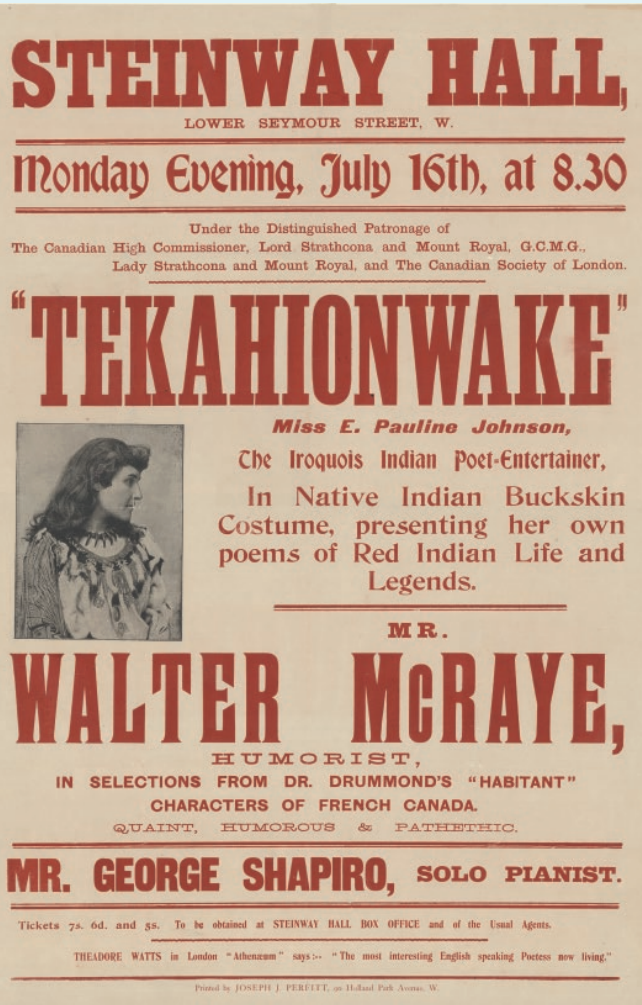


FIGURE 8.26 This 1906 poster announces Johnson’s performance in Steinway Hall in London, England. **Analyze:** Why do you think she uses her Mohawk name so prominently?

TRY IT

1. Analyze the evidence from this case study to answer the inquiry question. Choose an audience and an appropriate format to communicate your findings. Using the criteria on page 236, write a plan, outlining the information you will share.
2. Prepare your presentation and share it with a partner. Use your partner’s feedback to improve your presentation.



FIGURE 8.27 A painting by Gordon Miller from 1997 entitled ‘Myth House’ Potlatch, Kiusta. It shows Haida Chief Albert Edward Edenshaw in a black sealskin cloak waiting to greet his guests.
Analyze: According to this painting, what was involved in greeting guests of a potlatch?

potlatch a ceremonial feast practiced by First Nations of the Pacific Coast in which gifts are offered or destroyed in a show of wealth

RESISTING THE POTLATCH LAW

Many First Nations communities protested the government’s assimilation efforts by defying laws that banned their traditional ceremonies. In 1884, the federal government passed a law forbidding potlatch. A **potlatch** was an important gift-giving ceremony practiced by many First Nations of the Pacific Coast. It also gave First Nations communities a chance to strengthen relationships with other First Nations.

The celebrations were large and elaborate and usually lasted several days. The events often included a large feast, dancing, and singing. Guests were given valuable gifts such as blankets, dishes, or canoes. In some cases, the host would destroy the gifts in a spectacular ceremony to show his community’s superior status over rivals. Potlatches also gave communities a chance to pass on meaningful traditions to younger generations and announce important events. Examine **Figure 8.27**, which shows the start of a potlatch on the Kiusta reserve of the Haida people in British Columbia. What does the number of people and the details in this painting tell you about the importance of the potlatch to the Haida?

The government, however, did not understand the importance of potlatches and viewed them as reckless and wasteful. From 1884 to 1951, potlatches were banned as part of the *Indian Act*. Anyone who was caught holding a potlatch was jailed for two to six months, and sometimes ceremonial and sacred objects were taken away.

Read **Figure 8.28**, a quote from Duncan Campbell Scott, the deputy superintendent of the Department of Indian Affairs. What reasons does he give for the potlatch ban? Then read **Figure 8.29**, a quote from a Haida chief in 1896. How does the chief defend the potlatch?

Why is it important to understand how First Nations thought and felt about the potlatch?

“The giving away of gifts on a lavish scale was one of the most prominent features of the potlatch. Before the advent of the White man the plan undoubtedly served a useful purpose and was adequate to the needs of the people. Obviously, however, with the introduction of the new money system of economics, engagement of the Indians as wage earners in industry, the effects of the potlatch, if the practice were unchecked, would be disastrous.”

— Duncan Campbell Scott, deputy superintendent of the Department of Indian Affairs

FIGURE 8.28 A quote from Scott in 1931, explaining why the potlatch was banned.
Analyze: How do you think the First Nations people may have responded to this ban?

“We will dance when our laws command us to dance, we will feast when our hearts desire to feast. Do we ask the white man, ‘do as the Indian does’? No, we do not. Why then do you ask us ‘do as the white man does’? It is a strict law that bids us dance. It is a strict law that bids us distribute our property among our friends and neighbours. It is a good law. Let the white man observe his law, and we shall observe ours.”

— A Haida chief

FIGURE 8.29 A quote from a Haida chief in 1896 in response to the potlatch ban.
Analyze: What other customs does the chief defend in this quote?

Many First Nations communities resisted the ban by holding potlatches in secret. The Haida held potlatches disguised as Christmas, Easter, or other European holidays. The insistence of the many First Nations to hold onto their traditions even won support from some Christian missionaries. After the ban was lifted in 1951, many First Nations communities continued to hold potlatches, but not on the grand scale that they once did.

What was the significance of the potlatch for First Nations?

CHECK-IN

- 1. FORMULATE QUESTIONS** Write a question that would help you investigate a particular active act of resistance by First Nations against assimilation.
- 2. HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE** What do you think was the most important act of resistance by First Nations during this time period? Use evidence to support your answer.