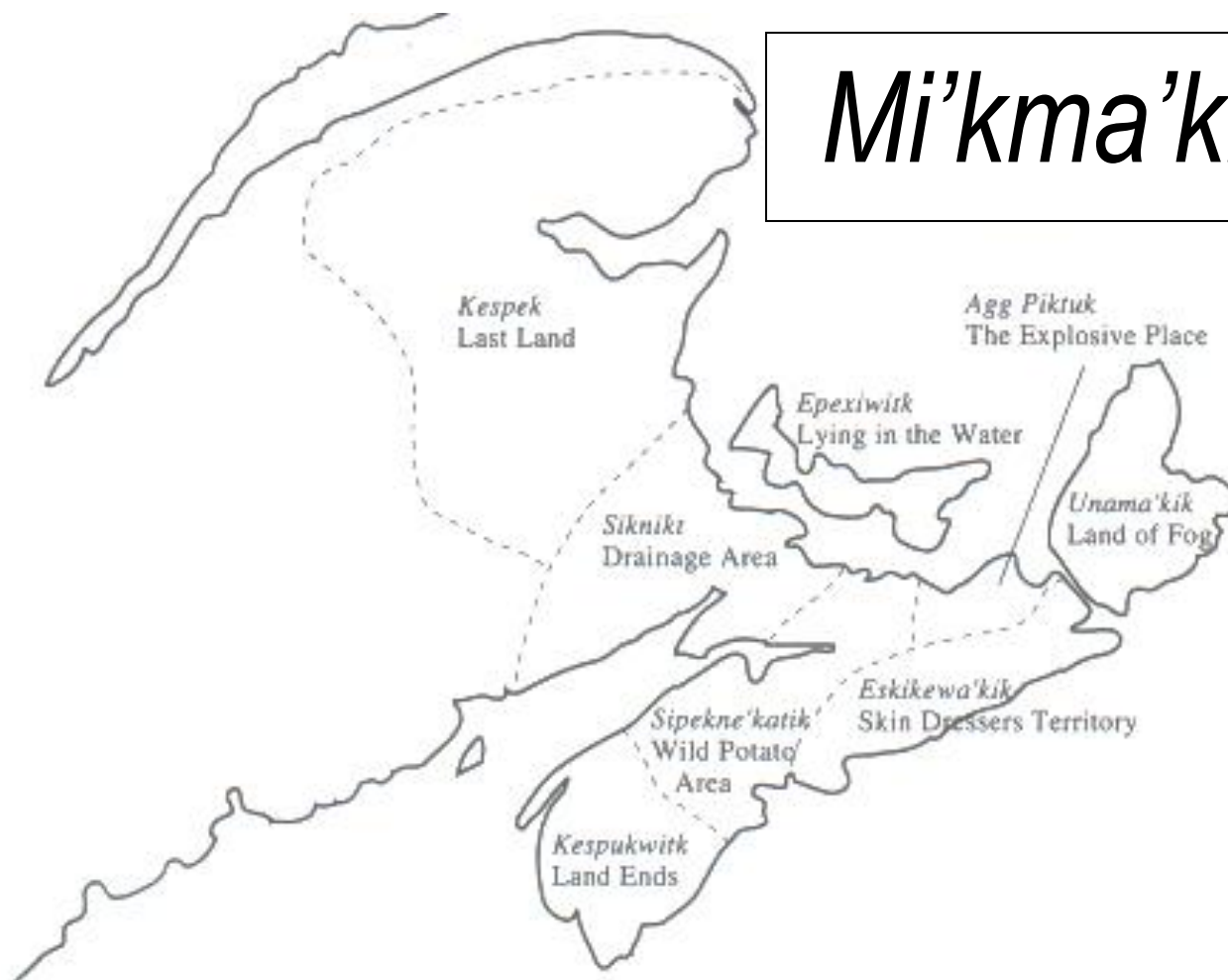


Unama'kik (Mi'kmaq) **Ceap Breatainn (Scottish Gaelic)** **Cap-Breton (French) or Île Royale (historic)** **Cape Breton Island**

Based on writings from the website of Cape Breton University (Unama'ki College)¹

The Mi'kmaq first appeared in their homeland approximately ten thousand years ago. They call the region Mi'kma'ki. Archaeological evidence indicates that these first inhabitants arrived from the west and lived as hunters and gatherers attuned to the shifting, seasonal resources of the area. During the summer months they hunted and fished, sometimes venturing out to sea to hunt whales and porpoises. Their winter camps were inland, built along rivers and lakes so that they could augment their hunting by spearing and trapping eels and other water creatures.



¹ Johnson, Eleanor, "Mi'kmaq Tribal Consciousness in the Twentieth Century" in Paqtatek, ed. Stephanie Inglis and Joy Manette (Halifax, Nova Scotia:Garamound Press, 1990); Knockwood, Isabelle, Out of the Depths (Lockport, Nova Scotia: Roseway Publishing, 1992.

By Patrick Johnson, Cape Breton University, Sydney, N.S. writing in The Encyclopedia of North American Indians, 1996, Houghton Mifflin Company, New York, Frederick E. Hoxie, ed. pp.376-378.



Meeting of the Mi'kmaq Grand Council at Nova Scotia's Government House. Grand Keptin Antle (Andrew) Denny is shown standing next to the Honourable Arthur J. LeBlanc, Lieutenant Governor of Nova Scotia (seated to his right). October 2nd, 2018.

The territory included all of what is now Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island, the Gaspé Peninsula of Quebec, the north shore of New Brunswick and inland to the Saint John River watershed, eastern Maine, and part of Newfoundland, including the islands in the Gulf of Saint Lawrence as well as St. Pierre and Miquelon. The Mi'kmaq neighbors recognized their territory and rarely violated its borders. Mi'kmaq people thought of their homeland as containing seven districts: Kespukwitk, Sikepne'katik, Eski'kewa, Unama'kik, Piktuk aq, Epekwitk, Sikniktewa, and Kespe'kewa. A keptan orsaqmaw (district chief) presided in each jurisdiction, doubling as local ruler and delegate to the Grand Council Sante' Mawiomi.

The Grand Council was the governing body of the nation and was led by several officers, including a kji'saqmaw (grand chief), a putus (treaty holder and counselor), and a kji'keptan (grand captain, advisor on political affairs). The Sante Mawiomi determined where families might hunt, fish, and set up their wumitki (camp). More importantly, the Grand Council managed relations with other aboriginal nations. The Mi'kmaq were members of the Wabanaki Confederacy, a loose coalition that included the Maliseets, the Pasamaquoddy, the Penobscots, and the Eastern and Western Abenakis of present-day Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont. At its peak, this confederacy influenced tribal life from the Gaspé Peninsula to northern New England.

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First contact with Europeans did not surprise the Mi'kmaq or alter their worldview. A legend in which one of their spiritual beings traveled across the Atlantic to “discover” Europe taught that blue-eyed people would arrive from the east to disrupt their lives. Mi'kmaq people also knew the story of a woman who had a vision of an island floating toward their lands; the island was decked out with tall trees on which were living beings. Thus the Mi'kmaq were not startled by the appearance of early explorers in sailing ships. Instead, they greeted the newcomers, set up a brisk trade with them, and looked forward to incorporating the strangers' new technologies into their own culture.

Relations with outsiders grew more complex when the Mi'kmaq began converting to Catholicism. This process occurred over a seventy-year period, beginning with the conversion of Grand Chief Membertou in 1610. The Mi'kmaq Nation's first treaty with a European nation was an agreement with the Vatican and the Holy See. This treaty was symbolized by a wampum belt at whose center stood a black-robed priest, a cross, and a Mi'kmaq figure holding a pouch, representing the incorporation of Mi'kmaq spirituality within the context of Roman Catholicism.

In the eighteenth century, the Mi'kmaq established a series of treaties with the British Crown that gave Britain an alliance with the Wabanaki Confederacy and security across the region. During this era, the Mi'kmaq adopted the eight-pointed star as a representation of their part of this alliance. Seven of the points represented the seven districts of Mi'kma'ki, with the eighth point standing for Great Britain and the Crown.

The first of the series of treaties between the British Crown and the Mi'kmaq Nation was signed in 1725. All were reaffirmed in 1752, and culminated in the Treaty and Royal Proclamation of 1763. The main thrust of these treaties was an exchange of Mi'kmaq loyalty for a guarantee that Mi'kmaq would be able to continue hunting and fishing in their territory. These treaties have been recognized by the Supreme Court of Canada as legal and binding through its decisions in cases that have extended well into the present century.