

Metis, Mennonites and the 'Unsettled Prairie,' 1874-1896.

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It is quite common for Mennonites to perceive themselves as being both compassionate and generous towards Canada's Aboriginal people. In Manitoba, Mennonite Central Committee's recent solidarity with the Cree people of Cross Lake provides further evidence of Mennonites being a people willing to speak out on behalf of the oppressed.¹ While socially concerned Mennonites may readily acknowledge the devastating impact western colonialism has had on Aboriginal people in Canada, they seem to be less aware of the historical impact of their own arrival in Manitoba.

Histories of the Mennonites in Manitoba have routinely overlooked the issue of whether the Mennonite arrival in Manitoba worsened the plight of Aboriginal people. In his book describing Manitoba's Rural Municipality of Hanover, known in the past as the East Reserve, the first Mennonite settlement in western Canada, local historian Abe Warkentin did not even consider the possibility that the Mennonite immigrants absorbed Native lands or displaced Aboriginal people, although he acknowledged that there were Metis settlements nearby. Furthermore, the chapter describing Lord Dufferin's highly publicized 1877 visit to the East Reserve implies that the Mennonite settlements consisted of land that was previously unoccupied and that there was no friction between the two cultural groups.² C.J.

Dyck's *An Introduction to Mennonite History* is somewhat more concerned with the impact of the Mennonite immigrants on Native peoples in Manitoba. Dyck suggests that at least some Native peoples "rightly sensed that their future was at stake" when the Mennonites began to explore settlement possibilities in Manitoba.³ While Dyck is aware of the negative impact of the Mennonite migration on Native people, at times his historical account still implies, perhaps unwittingly, that the land taken up by the Mennonites was previously unoccupied. This notion is particularly apparent in Dyck's use of a well-known quotation by Lord Dufferin, in which the Mennonites are praised for converting an "absolutely bare, desolate [and] untenanted" land into a successful agricultural settlement.⁴

In contrast to these perspectives, stands the case of fifteen Metis families who claimed to have lost their land to the very first Mennonite settlers in western Canada. The case is found among the Dominion Government's land patent application files.⁵ Between 1879 and 1898 over thirty letters and memorandums were written concerning Metis rights to several sections on the Mennonite East Reserve including land in Gruenfeld, the very first Mennonite village in western Canada. The struggles of these Metis claimants challenge the notion of an unoccupied prairie settled by Mennonite immigrants who were not intruding on others. Furthermore, it suggests that historically Mennonites, like many European immigrants, have played a part in oppressing Canada's Aboriginal people. Evidence from Mennonite sources suggests that so great was the cultural barrier between the occupiers and the former residents that the Mennonites themselves were unaware that their village lands were even contested. Local historian Henry Fast observes the following: "I am not sure that the Mennonites were aware of a problem. There must be well over 100 letters extant written by Gruenfelders during this period of time. None, as far as I know, mentions this problem."⁶

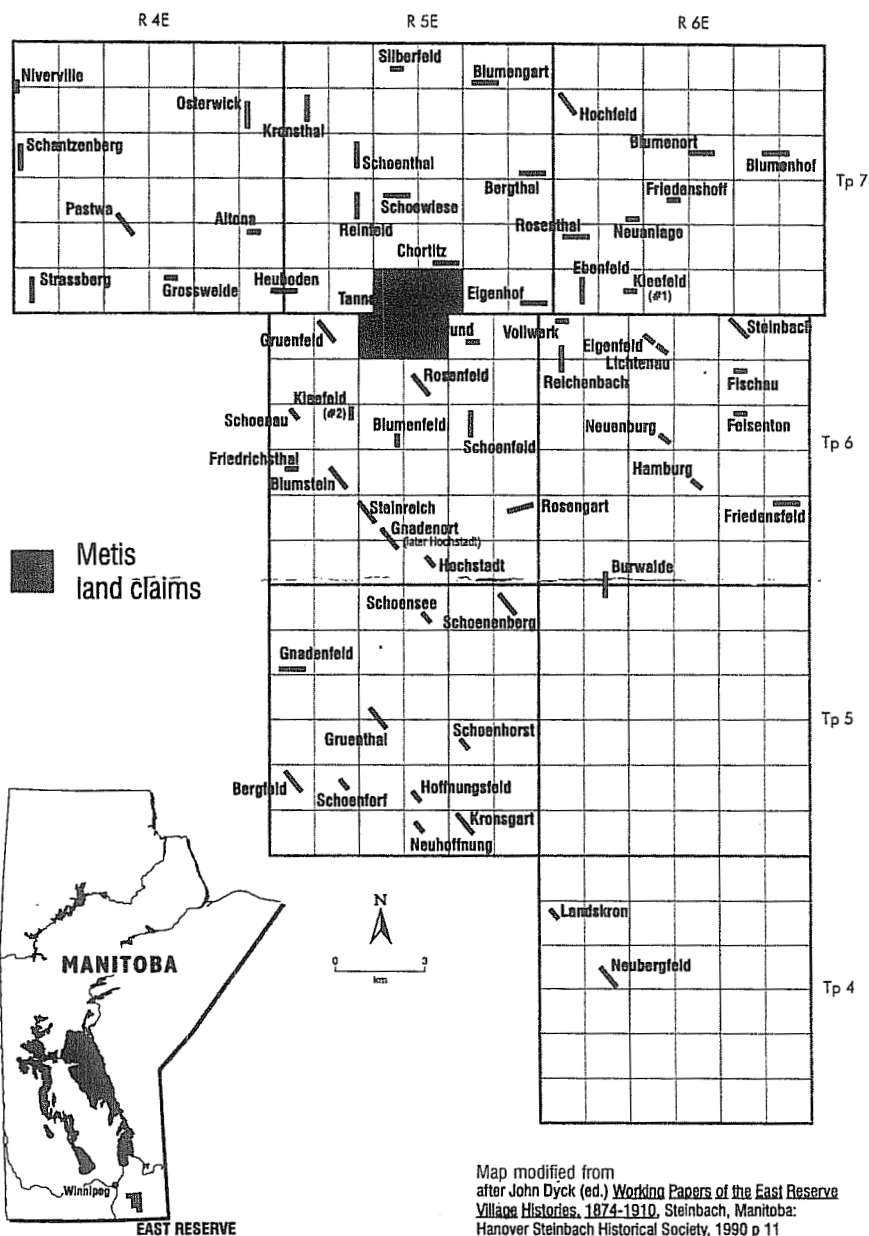
In and around 1870, Manitoba's Metis people faced a rapidly changing world. One of the major changes came as a result of the disappearing buffalo. With the buffalo population in decline, a significant part of the Metis' livelihood soon became obsolete and they became increasingly dependent on farming to sustain their existence. In addition to this enormous change, Rupert's Land was transferred from the ownership of the Hudson's Bay Company to the control of the government of Canada in 1869. Shortly after the transfer, the Canadian government began the arduous task of surveying the prairies, hoping to entice a host of foreign farmers and eastern Canadians to settle in the Metis' midst.

Many Metis were skeptical of this transfer to Canadian rule and feared losing their land to the incoming settlers. Under the leadership of Louis Riel, many Red River Metis joined together and demanded that the government of Canada acknowledge their land rights before the outsiders arrived. The Canadian government's response to the protest was expressed in the Manitoba Act of 1870. The legislation not only promised the Metis title to the lands they currently farmed,⁷ but also guaranteed them the rights to an additional 1.4 million acres of land for their children. The Manitoba Act was seen as a great victory for the Metis people, securing their status under the new government and ensuring that their rights would be respected for years to come.⁸

The land application files mentioned earlier, describe the process by which a group of Metis people came to possess lands on the future East Reserve. A letter written on behalf of these Metis to the Department of the Interior suggests that the lands were possessed "in conformity with the Hudson's Bay Company's recommendations on or around the 1st of

EAST RESERVE

(Villages and Place Names Used in 1874-1910)



Map modified from
 after John Dyck (ed.) *Working Papers of the East Reserve
 Village Histories, 1874-1910*, Steinbach, Manitoba:
 Hanover Steinbach Historical Society, 1990 p 11

June [18]70.”⁹ It would seem that these Metis did their best to claim the land according to the recommendations they were given and the legislation of which they were aware. One might think then that the Manitoba Act would have solidified the Metis’ ownership of these lands; yet as foreign settlers began to flood into the prairies, this group of Metis found their right to the land questioned.

Starting in 1874, the Canadian government welcomed about 7,000 Mennonites to the Manitoba prairies, initially allotting them numerous townships on a land bloc that came to be known as the East Reserve. Unfortunately for the group of Metis mentioned earlier, the land promised to the Mennonites included the very land they had claimed four years earlier: sections 33 and 34, in township 6, range 5 East, along with several adjoining sections in township 7, range 5. The first section, 33, and the southwest quarter of section 34, lay within the confines of the village district of Gruenfeld, later called Kleefeld. The remainder of section 34 and the adjoining land on township 7-5 belonged to the village district of Tannenau, the location of the East Reserve’s first store. Section 27 belonged to the village of Rosenfeld.¹⁰

In the summer of 1874, Roger Goulet, a Metis surveyor,¹¹ was sent by the Agent of Dominion Lands to locate the Mennonites on their land reserve. It is not clear whether Goulet arrived in the company of the Metis or whether he met them on site. In any event, upon arriving in the district the Metis pressed their claims to Goulet personally. In a memorandum almost twenty years after the event, Goulet writes:

While I was locating the Mennonites, and they, the [Metis] claimants took me on their claims — they were so far as I remember: Boniface Nault, Romain Nault & Edouard Ellemont, who came with me, they showed me all the claims that were besides theirs, those of J.B. Plouffe, of Joseph Riel & Charles Riel & others I do not remember now, anyway, at that time, all the land which composed their claims was not given to the Mennonites & was entered in the books at the Dominion Lands office in pencil.¹²

Much to the dismay of the Metis, the claims entered on their behalf had little permanence. Within a year of the 1874 encounter, the Metis entries were denied and the land was given over to the Mennonite settlers.¹³ Even though the land in dispute concerned lands within the village boundaries of Gruenfeld, few historians have mentioned the conflict.¹⁴ However, the land patent application files clearly reveal significant tensions between the Metis families and government officials over the land surrounding Gruenfeld as well as neighbouring Tannenau and Rosenfeld.

In 1879, a petition concerning the East Reserve land reached the office of the Department of the Interior in Ottawa.¹⁵ The petition was signed by Maxime Goulet along with nine other Metis, many of whom shared kinship ties with surveyor Roger Goulet.¹⁶ The petition pleaded that the land “they had took up and improved, subsequently granted to the Mennonites, may be again restored to them, or an equivalent compensation therefor.”¹⁷ In the petition, the Metis laid claim to sections 27, 33 and 34, in township 6, range 5 East, along with adjoining lands in township 7, range 5 East. While the office in Ottawa did request the Winnipeg branch to look into the matter that same year, the petition did not lead to any immediate action or investigation.

This story supports the argument of historian Doug Sprague, who suggests that the Canadian government deliberately avoided Metis land claims by stalling.¹⁸ Whether the stalling was a deliberate avoidance of the East Reserve land claims is uncertain. Still, the time line of the letters indicates that the dispute was not handled with much urgency.

It was not until Provencher MP, A.A.C. LaRiviere,¹⁹ got involved in the dispute in 1892 that a serious investigation took place. That year, thirteen years after the first petition, LaRiviere wrote an informal letter to the Deputy Minister of the Interior in Ottawa asking whether anything could be done about the claims of J.B. Plouffe, one of the Metis claimants.²⁰ LaRiviere's letter appears to have created quite a stir both at the Department office in Ottawa and at the office in Winnipeg. Numerous letters and memorandums now explained why nothing had been done with regard to the East Reserve land claims.

Most of the explanations in the letters and memorandums have to do with certain amendments made to the Manitoba Act. Sprague suggests that when the Act was originally passed, Metis people claimed land simply by driving stakes into sections of land that appeared to be desirable. Many Metis assumed that this action would be enough to mark the land as a part of the 1.4 million acres promised to them by the Canadian government.²¹ However, in the years to come several amendments to this act made it increasingly difficult for Metis people to gain legal ownership of this staked land.

According to Sprague, Metis land claims were usually dismissed on account of three major amendments:

First, they [the Metis] did not exhibit the 'continuous occupation' required by the amendments of 1874 and 1875. In the second place, they were not covered by the Hudson's Bay Company survey required by Order in Council in 1876. And finally, they did not show the 'really valuable improvements' demanded by executive memorandum in 1877.²²

Several of the letters and memorandums written in response to LaRiviere's inquiry deny the Metis claims on the basis of the first and third amendments mentioned by Sprague. Roger Goulet described the Metis claims as being "second class staked claims," a classification used to describe claims that involved unimproved land, not worthy of consideration by the Department.²³ Several other documents refer to the Metis claimants as being "squatters," a term that implied that they had taken up no permanent residence on the land they claimed. In 1892 Goulet wrote about the Metis claimants in a stern manner, stating that "although these people are thinking to get them [the Mennonite lands] free or some other land in lieu of it, without living on them, they are mistaken."²⁴

Furthermore, several letters and memorandums dismissed the Metis claimants on the basis of an Order-in-Council passed in 1881. According to Sprague, this law was intended to end the many land disputes that had arisen since the creation of the Manitoba Act. At the time of the Order-in-Council, the government claimed that all the land disputes that deserved attention had either been settled or disposed of. Therefore, it was no longer necessary for the Department to reconsider any decisions that had previously been made.²⁵

Roger Goulet noted that at the time of the 1881 Order-in-Council, the dispute between the Metis and the Mennonites was among the many that had been settled and therefore it needed no further investigation.²⁶ As the "final word" on the dispute, the land agent invoked

the Order-in-Council, thus ending the discussion concerning all claims that had once been denied, settled, or perhaps simply ignored.

Another letter written from the Department of the Interior in Winnipeg to the Ottawa branch in 1892 also seems to have relied on the 1881 Order-in-Council. While the letter acknowledged that the Metis claims were likely "third class staked claims," a classification worthy of consideration, it pointed out that "the applicants [Metis claimants] cannot legally urge their demands for the reason that no provision is made for the recognition of the third class staked claims in cases where the lands claimed have been disposed of."²⁷ Claims that had been "disposed of" seem to have been those that had been dismissed at or before the time of the Order-in-Council in 1881. Thus, it appears that the Metis had no legal right to further pursue the disputed land and the Department had no legal obligation to reconsider the claims after the Order-in-Council was passed.

It is also possible that the Metis' claims were overlooked because the Canadian government felt obligated and pressured to fulfill its promise to the Mennonites. A letter to the Deputy Minister of the Interior in Ottawa alludes to these feelings of obligation, explaining that the land was eventually given to the Mennonites because it had been promised to them as a part of their reserve.²⁸ One document suggests that the Mennonites themselves were "pressing their rights to it [the Gruenfeld, Tannenau and Rosenfeld land] as part of their Reserve."²⁹ A letter from the Department of the Interior in Ottawa to the Winnipeg branch supports this idea, stating that several applications and affidavits concerning the land were submitted by the Mennonites sometime before 1879, none of which made mention of previous Metis improvements or occupation.³⁰ With the century drawing to a close the Canadian government was desperate to convince experienced farmers like the Mennonites to come to Canada, and it is likely that the government did not want to disappoint its valuable settlers or discourage others from immigrating by withholding promised land.

The many explanations provided by the Department of the Interior did not end the demands for justice by the Metis claimants. In fact, as the 1880s gave way to the 1890s, the claimants gained the attention of several significant advocates. A letter issued by the law firm Elliott and McCreary on behalf of the claimants, again requested the Department to do something about this important dispute. The letter explained to the Deputy Minister in Ottawa that the Metis' situation had gained the sympathy of "Mr. Laurier," who had since recommended that "the matter be dealt with as speedily as possible."³¹ The letter was written only months after Wilfrid Laurier was elected prime minister in 1896, and since it attributed much significance to Laurier's comments, one might speculate that even Canada's prime minister was a moderate advocate for the Metis claims regarding the East Reserve lands.

In addition to Elliott and McCreary and Laurier, the claimants were soon to be backed by W. J. Robinson of Winnipeg. It remains uncertain just what position of power Robinson had.³² Nevertheless, several documents written near the time of the final settlement make reference to his bold requests. Robinson demanded that the Department of the Interior grant a "free entry for any quarter-section of land open to sale or homestead entry" for each of the Metis claimants.³³ While the final settlement was less generous than Robinson hoped, it would seem that his demand made a strong impact on the eventual settlement.³⁴

In addition to reiterating Robinson's demands, a memorandum written in 1898 to the

Deputy minister in Ottawa further supported the Metis claimants. It argued that the 1881 Order-in-Council was unfair and therefore the Metis' claims were wrongfully ignored. The memorandum went on to say:

The evidence shows that each claim has been staked out prior to the date of the Transfer and had the claimants not been interfered with no one can say that on the 25 February, 1881 when the Order-in-Council was passed each claimant would not be living on the land, in which case the claim would have been a 1st class one and the claimant entitled to patent.³⁵

The 1898 memorandum led to the final settlement between the Department of the Interior and the Metis claimants. The claimants did not receive their claimed land back, but after a struggle of more than twenty years the fifteen Metis claimants were offered "the privilege of selecting 160 acres of available Dominion Lands, and obtaining letters-patent for the same on payment therefor at the rate of \$1 an acre."³⁶ After this offer for land elsewhere than on the East Reserve, petitions and requests of the Metis claimants ceased.

This case calls both informed historians and reflective Mennonites to reconsider some common perceptions of the Mennonite\Native relationship. Clearly, the notion of the unoccupied prairie and the nonintrusive Mennonite immigrant requires a significant re-evaluation. The case revealed here provides strong evidence that at least some of the land taken up by the Mennonites was highly valued and persistently claimed by numerous Metis people. Whether similar land disputes occurred elsewhere between Mennonites and their Native neighbors has yet to be investigated. Nonetheless, the story demands significant consideration, especially since the dispute it describes occurred in the area of the first Mennonite village in western Canada.

This case should help change our view about Mennonite identity. While Mennonites may be perceived as spokespeople for the oppressed, the story told above suggests that Mennonites have also played a part in oppressing Manitoba's Native people. It requires Mennonites to realize that along with hydro corporations, the Canadian government and the early British\French settlers, they too have benefitted from the injustices done to Native people. Historically speaking, Mennonites would be well advised to consider themselves not only as a voice for the oppressed but also in some cases as a cause of oppression.

Notes

¹ MCC has recently declared its support for the Cree people of Cross Lake in their long drawn out dispute over the Northern Flood Agreement.

² See: Abe Warkentin, *Reflections on our Heritage: A History of Steinbach and the R.M. of Hanover from 1874* (Steinbach: Derksen Printers, 1975), 361, 362. See chapter one and chapter sixteen, as both deal with Mennonite beginnings in Manitoba. The notion that the Mennonite East reserve was previously unsettled by Aboriginal peoples and that it was free of conflict is also apparent on page 22. The notion of the unoccupied prairie is also apparent in chapter 27, especially in Lord Dufferin's remarks concerning the Mennonite settlements. Here, Warkentin quotes Lord Dufferin describing the

land making up the Mennonite East Reserve as being "absolutely bare, desolate, [and] untenanted" before the Mennonites arrived in 1874.

³ Dyck makes these comments in reference to the "Metis incident," where an angry group of Natives confronted Mennonite delegates from Russia in 1873. In his rendition of the incident, Dyck implies that the Natives were angry because they recognized the potential immigrants as a threat. See: Cornelius J. Dyck, *An Introduction to Mennonite History: A Popular History of the Anabaptists and the Mennonites*, third edition (Waterloo: Herald Press, 1993), 200-201.

⁴ Ibid., 208.

⁵ The letters and memorandums referred to by this study can be found at the Provincial Archives Manitoba (PAM), under sections 33 and 34, township 6, range 5, East, of the Land Patent Application Files, microfilm roll 78.

⁶ Henry Fast to Royden Loewen, 2 March 2001.

⁷ Note that these lands were often long lots along the Red River.

⁸ Margaret Conrad and Alvin Finkel, *History of the Canadian Peoples: 1867 to the Present*, 2d ed. (Toronto: Copp Clark, 1998), 38-40.

⁹ Elliott and McCreary, Winnipeg, to Department of the Interior, Ottawa, May 4, 1897.

¹⁰ Department of the Interior, memorandum to Deputy Minister Jas. A. Quart, Ottawa, May 6, 1897. See map. The relationship of the land claim to early East Reserve village districts was made by Local Historian Mr. Henry Fast, Steinbach, Manitoba.

¹¹ Roger Goulet was born in 1834 in St-Boniface and lived until 1902. Goulet had served as a member of the Council of Assinaboia from 1866-1869 and was one of the most prominent Metis in Red River. According to Gerhard Ens, Goulet was among several Metis that had been in opposition to Riel during the Riel Resistance of 1869-1870. He should not be confused with the more widely known Roger Goulet who was born in 1867 and who gained significant attention for his role as a schools inspector. The former was a nephew to the Roger Goulet referred to in this study. See: Collection Generale, Personnages Goulet (famille), 1/405, Societe Historique de Saint-Boniface Archives; and Genealogical Database, Societe Historique de Saint-Boniface Archives. See also: Gerhard Ens, *Homeland to Hinterland: The Changing Worlds of the Red River Metis in the Nineteenth Century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 133 and 138.

¹² Roger Goulet, Winnipeg to Department of Interior, Ottawa, May 23, 1892.

¹³ Elliott and McCreary, Winnipeg to Department of Interior, Ottawa, May 4, 1897.

¹⁴ For a reference to this incident see: Royden Loewen, *Family, Church and Market: A Mennonite Community in the Old and New Worlds, 1850-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 82.

¹⁵ Maxime Goulet et al., Winnipeg to Department of Interior, Ottawa, 1979.

¹⁶ Genealogical Database, Societe historique de Saint-Boniface Archives.

¹⁷ Department of the Interior, Ottawa, to Dominion Lands Agent, Winnipeg, February 18, 1879. This letter represents the request of the original petition.

¹⁸ D.N. Sprague, *Canada and the Metis 1869-1885*, (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1988), 107.

¹⁹ LaRiviere served as a Dominion Land Officer in Manitoba (1871-1875), MLA for St. Boniface (1878-79), provincial secretary in 1881, provincial treasurer in 1887, MP for Provencher (1889-1904), and as a senator (1911-1917). See: J. M. Bumstead, *Dictionary of Manitoba Biography* (Winnipeg: The University of Manitoba Press, 1999) and Franuss G. Halpenny, *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 11 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990) 646.

²⁰ A.A.C. LaRiviere, Ottawa to A.M. Burgess, Deputy Minister of the Interior, Ottawa, April 14, 1892.

²¹ Sprague, *Canada and the Metis*, 1988, 94.

²² Ibid., 133, 134.

²³ Roger Goulet, Winnipeg to Department of Interior, Ottawa, May 23, 1892. For a description of the different classes of land claims see: Sprague, *Canada and the Metis*, 1988, 117.

²⁴ Ibid. It may seem somewhat odd that Goulet, as a Metis who shared kinship ties with the claimants, would be so stern. Still, one must recognize that Goulet was an employee of the Department of Interior, a Department which existed basically to promote western development. See: Arthur J. Ray, *I Have Lived Here Since the World Began: An Illustrated History of Canada's Native People* (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1996), 205.

²⁵ Sprague, *Canada and the Metis*, 1988, 136.

²⁶ According to Goulet, the settlement reached at the time of the 1881 Order-in Council granted the Mennonites the disputed land and told the Metis to take up land elsewhere in the "half breed" reserve. See Roger Goulet, Winnipeg to Department of Interior, Ottawa, May 23, 1892.

²⁷ Department of the Interior, Winnipeg, to the Department of the Interior, Ottawa, May 23, 1892.

²⁸ Department of the Interior, Ottawa memorandum to Jas. A. Quart, Deputy Minister of the Interior, May 6, 1897.

²⁹ Roger Goulet to the Department of the Interior, Ottawa, May 23, 1892.

³⁰ Department of the Interior, Ottawa to George A. Elliott, Winnipeg, May 25, 1897.

³¹ Elliott and McCreary, Winnipeg, to the Department of the Interior, Ottawa, May 4, 1897.

³² There is probably a connection between Captain William Robinson as reported on in Schofield, *Story of Manitoba*, vol. 2 (Winnipeg: The S.J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1913) 453, 454 and the W.J. Robinson in the Dominion Land letters. Captain William Robinson, son of William and Jane Robinson, was a successful businessman and banker in the Winnipeg area around the turn of the nineteenth century.

³³ Department of the Interior, Ottawa, memorandum to the Deputy Minister, February, 1889.

³⁴ For further reference to Robinson's significance see: Department of the Interior, Ottawa, to W.J. Robinson, Winnipeg, March 10, 1898; R. Goulet, Dominion Lands Office, to Secretary Dominion Lands, Ottawa, April 26, 1898; Department of the Interior, Ottawa, to Roger Goulet, Agent of Dominion Lands, Winnipeg, May 2, 1898; Department of the Interior, Ottawa, to Maxime Goulet, St. Boniface, July 10, 1898.

³⁵ Department of the Interior, Ottawa, memorandum to the Deputy Minister, February, 1889.

³⁶ Department of the Interior, Ottaswa, to numerous Metis claimants, mantiboa, August 31, 1898. A copy of this letter was sent to the following: Department of the Interior, Ottawa, to numerous Metis claimants, Manitoba, August 31, 1898. A copy of this letter was sent to the following names: Jacques Tourons, Mrs. Charles Sauve, Moise Racette, Joseph Riel, Paul Proulx, Jean Baptiste Plouffe, Romain Neault, Benjamin Neault, Boniface Neault, Charles Neault, Alfred Neault, Maxime Goulet, and Edouard Elemont of St. Vital, as well as to Dumass Morou of St. Anne and Louis Desrouieres of St. Pierre. Department of the Interior, Ottawa, to numerous Metis claimants, Manitoba, August 31, 1898. A copy of this letter was sent to the following names: Jacques Tourons, Mrs. Charles Sauve, Moise Racette, Joseph Riel, Paul Proulx, Jean Baptiste Plouffe, Romain Neault, Benjamin Neault, Boniface Neault, Charles Neault, Alfred Neault, Maxime Goulet, and Edouard Elemont of St. Vital, as well as to Dumass Morou of St. Anne and Louis Desrouieres of St. Pierre.