Nunavut History*

The Flag of Nunavut

The blue and gold colors are symbolic of the riches of the land, sea and sky. The *inuksuk* is a symbol of the stone monuments that act as guides for people traveling on the land that also indicates sacred and special places. The North Star is a traditional reference for navigation and also alludes to the leadership of elders in the various communities.

Image of *inuksuk* at Sundown
NUNAVUT SANGINIVUT means "Nunavut our strength".

There was once a world before this, and in it lived people who were not of our tribe. But the pillars of the earth collapsed, and all were destroyed. And the world was emptiness. Then two men grew up from a hummock of earth. They were born and fully grown all at once. And they wished to have children. A magic song changed one of them into a woman, and they had children. These were our earliest forefathers, and from them all the lands were peopled.

— Tuglik, Igloolik area, 1922
Nunavut means “our land” in the Inuit language of Inuktitut.
Population (2006 census): 30,800m
Total Area: 1,994,000km
Date of creation of the territory: April 1, 1999

**Nunavut**

*Early History*

The earliest people to inhabit the region now known as Nunavut were the Tuniit (Dorset) people, believed to have crossed the Bering Strait—then a land bridge—from Russia approximately 5,000 years ago. The Tuniit were the sole occupants of the land until about 1,000 years ago, when the Thule, the ancestors of today's Inuit, began appearing in the area. The Thule, who eventually displaced the Tuniit, relied on whales as their main source of food.
and necessities, and had a trading relationship with the Norse through which they acquired metal tools. About 500 years ago, for unknown reasons, the Thule abandoned the high Arctic and their whaling ventures for the smaller living groups and the caribou and seal hunts that characterized the Inuit way of life at the time of European expansion into the Canadian Arctic.

The Inuit's early contact with Europeans, other than the Norse, was probably with the Basque and Portuguese whalers working off Newfoundland and Labrador shores. As well, there were the explorers who sought the Northwest Passage. Both groups had minimal influence on the Inuit way of life. The whalers were integrated into the barter system of trade that the Inuit had already established, and the explorers tended not to stay in the Arctic for extended periods of time.

**Later History**

Europeans began exerting a more long-lasting influence in the Arctic with the formation of the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) in 1670. Rapidly establishing a commercial network throughout the Arctic, the HBC relied on the Inuit to supply furs and hides in return for tools and food. This caused substantial changes in Inuit culture: on one level, the focus shifted from hunting entirely for food, clothing and other needs, to supplying outsiders with desirable goods. Traditional trade and migration patterns were altered, as the Inuit began trading almost exclusively with the HBC, abandoning their seasonal migrations to remain near trading posts. This influence continued into the twentieth century. When the Canadian government began asserting its sovereignty over the Arctic, the HBC acted as a de facto government agency. Unfortunately, when the fur market collapsed in the 1930s, the Inuit were left without the means to continue a way of life to which they had grown accustomed.

The years during and following World War II brought even more disruption. The war had exposed the Inuit's economic situation to many in the south for the first time and other nations criticized Canada for not providing enough assistance. As a result of this pressure, the Canadian government made the Inuit wards of the state in 1941. Then, in the 1950s, the government relocated many of the Inuit to centralized villages, in areas where they would supposedly have a greater degree of prosperity, an action that may also have been meant to solidify Canadian sovereignty in the Arctic by spreading the population throughout the area. Children were taken from their families and placed in residential schools. Not only did these actions force the Inuit to
rely almost totally upon others for their livelihood, they seriously injured the
traditional social structure by breaking up families, or by forcing them to
relocate. Various social programs, while well intentioned, also fostered
dependence. The government, which administered the area directly from
Ottawa, was perceived as distant and out of touch with Northern concerns.
Exploration of the natural resources in the Arctic was conducted with little,
if any, consultation with the Inuit who lived on the land. Developers
traversed the area in various vehicles, sunk wells and dug mines without
considering the environmental effects of their actions.

There was a change in the system of government in 1967 with the
establishment of the territorial government at Yellowknife, but in reality
there was little difference to the people. Although Yellowknife was closer
than Ottawa, its location in the western Arctic was still perceived as remote
by those in the eastern half of the territory. The government itself was
dominated by people who were more interested in transferring the Southern
style of government to the North, than in adapting it to the needs and
circumstances of the region.

Interestingly, an early attempt at territorial division was discussed just prior
to the transfer of government, during the period between 1959 and 1963,
when the territorial council contemplated creating the Mackenzie Territory.
The motivation for this was more economic than socio-political; those who
supported division felt that the more populous and diverse western half of
the Northwest Territories (NWT) would develop more quickly if separated
from the eastern half. Neither the opinions of the Inuit, nor indeed those of
anyone from the eastern Arctic, were considered. Still, the campaign for
division progressed far enough that in 1963 federal legislation was
introduced to create the territories of Mackenzie (western NWT) and
Nunassiaq (eastern NWT). The matter stalled, however, when it became
clear that the idea was not supported in the eastern NWT, and had only scant
support in the western NWT; the legislation died with the dissolution of
Parliament in 1963. In the aftermath of this debate, the Carrothers
Commission of 1966 concluded that while division was probably inevitable,
discussion of the idea should be delayed for ten years. The Commission also
stated that the Inuit would be isolated, with little if any political power, if
division were carried out in the wrong way.

**Early Aboriginal Claims**
There were several cases in 1973 that brought the concept of Aboriginal land
title and rights to national prominence. One of these was the "Calder Case," a grievance brought by the Nishga Indians of northwestern British Columbia against the provincial government. This case was the first to use the terms "Aboriginal rights" and "land claim," acknowledging that Aboriginals did have some original claim to land, albeit in a narrow sense. The Inuit and Cree of Northern Quebec also began their grievance (reaching a settlement in 1975) against the James Bay hydroelectric project, which they claimed was in violation of their Aboriginal rights. As well, the Dene of the Western Arctic were given leave to file an Aboriginal claim in the NWT. These cases demonstrated to the Inuit the possibility of success in making their own such claim in the Eastern Arctic.

The early 1970s also saw the creation of the Inuit Tapirisat of Canada (ITC), formed in 1971 from a meeting of Native leaders at Coppermine, NWT, with Tagak Curley as its founding president. The first conference, held at Carleton University in Ottawa, brought together thirty delegates from all regions of the NWT, as well as Inuit from Quebec and Labrador. The ITC would become an important force in the quest for Nunavut.

The ITC was in fact heavily involved in the preparation of the first Inuit claims proposal, submitted to the federal government in 1976. It proposed not only a land claim, but also the creation of a new territory, suggesting a new form of government and infrastructure, with Inuktitut as the official language. The guiding principle of these recommendations was that land claims and political development had to be settled at the same time. The proposal was later withdrawn, however, because of complexity, lack of community input and a general feeling that it had been too much influenced by its Southern advisors.

In the wake of this proposal, the NWT Inuit Land Claims Commission (ILCC) was formed in 1977, to focus exclusively on claims negotiations. That same year, it submitted a claims proposal, which—while similar to that of 1976—was much less complex. While the ILCC was able to negotiate with these principles for some time, discussions eventually stalled on the question of the Inuit political future: the Inuit wished to settle this matter before moving on to land claims, and the federal government did not wish to make political matters part of a claims discussion. The ILCC eventually disbanded over the deadlock, in 1979, and the Nunavut Land Claims Project (NLCP) took over negotiation of claims matters.
1979

1979 proved to be an important year in the development of Nunavut. The NWT election of that year saw Inuit leaders agree to participate for the first time. As a result, a majority of Inuit members were elected to an assembly that became much friendlier towards the idea of Aboriginal rights. One of this government's first acts was to create a special legislative committee to study the question of division. Concurrently, the NWT was divided into two federal electoral districts, with the new eastern district of Nunatsiaq roughly corresponding to the proposed territory of Nunavut. The first member elected in that district, Peter Ittinuar, was also the first Inuk to sit in the House of Commons. At that year's ITC meeting, the members drafted Political Development in Nunavut, a claims proposal that blended elements of earlier proposals. Like the earlier claims, this one asserted that settlement had to be accompanied by a commitment to division of the NWT; it outlined a fifteen-year schedule for achieving this goal. The same meeting was attended by a federal representative, marking one of the first times that the federal government actively solicited Inuit opinions on constitutional change.

1982

Another landmark year for the Nunavut claim was 1982. At the national level, it saw the patriation of the Constitution, which included a clause protecting Aboriginal land claims. At the territorial level, the recommendations made two years earlier by the committee examining division were acted on and a plebiscite was held on the question. Though there was only a moderate voter turnout, 56 percent of those who did vote were in favour of division; moreover, in the eastern Arctic, where the Inuit population was highest, the percentage in favour of division was around 80 percent.

The plebiscite campaign saw the formation of the Constitutional Alliance of the Northwest Territories (CA). After the results of the vote were known, the CA agreed to create two forums, intended to provide a medium for formal debate and planning: the Nunavut Constitutional Forum (NCF) for the eastern Arctic and the Western Constitutional Forum (WCF) for the western, with the CA acting as moderator. At the same time, the Tungavik Federation of Nunavut (TFN) was formed to pursue actual claims negotiation, taking over these duties from the NLCP.

The NCF began meeting in September of 1982; all proceedings were open,
with the media having full access. Among its activities were the production of a "history" of Nunavut, and many studies about matters affecting its creation. Within a year, the NCF had drafted a comprehensive working proposal, entitled "Building Nunavut." A revised and expanded edition followed two years later.

**Negotiations**

Early successes with negotiations included agreements on an Inuit role in wildlife management (reached in 1981), on offshore rights, and on a wide-ranging resource management system that included a prominent role for Inuit in the decision-making process.

There were difficult areas, however; one of these was the negotiation of a boundary. Although Inuit lived primarily in the eastern Arctic, and the Dene-Métis in the western Arctic, there were overlapping areas in the central part of the territory where both claimed traditional rights. A tentative agreement, endorsed by both the NCF and WCF, was reached in 1985; however, it fell apart at the last minute when the Dene-Métis refused to ratify it. A similar fate befell the Iqaluit Agreement of 1987. Finally, John Parker, a former territorial commissioner, was appointed to decide on a boundary in 1991. Though this proposed line was also disputed, it was passed in a territory-wide plebiscite with a narrow majority.

The concept of Nunavut itself also presented difficulties. The Inuit were adamant that it be incorporated directly into the claims agreement, as an embodiment of Aboriginal rights. Federal representatives, on the other hand, stated that it was inappropriate to use an Aboriginal land claim to create a public government that was meant to serve all people, including the white minority, within the proposed territory. A compromise was reached by including a clause in the claim. This clause committed the government to negotiating a political accord that would provide for the creation of the new territory, without actually making division part of the claim.

**Nunavut Agreement**

Source: "An Act respecting an Agreement between the Inuit of the Nunavut Settlement Area and Her Majesty the Queen in right of Canada" (short title: Nunavut Land Claims Agreement Act).

An agreement-in-principle was finally reached in 1990, a final version of
which appeared in December of 1991. Members of both the TFN and federal negotiating teams signed this document, the "Nunavut Land Claims Agreement" (NLCA), in September of 1992. It was then put to a plebiscite in October of 1992, and saw a record turnout of voters. The Agreement passed the plebiscite with an overwhelming majority of 84.7 percent. Once past this hurdle, matters moved quickly. The *Nunavut Land Claims Agreement Act*, ratifying the agreement, and the *Nunavut Act* [laws.justice.gc.ca/en/N-28.6/index.html], which created the new territory, were both passed on June 10, 1993.

**Towards 1999**
After ratification of the two acts in 1993, attention turned toward implementation; a deadline of April 1, 1999, had been fixed for the completion of all arrangements. Jack Anawak was appointed Interim Commissioner of Nunavut. The Nunavut Implementation Commission (NIC) formed to undertake planning for the new government; it was a nine-member committee, overseen by Chief Commissioner John Amagoalik. To ensure the integrity of the NLCA, Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated (NTI) was created, with Jose Kusugak as its president. It assumed what had previously been the responsibilities of the TFN. Both organizations had much to do in a relatively short span of time, and had to face many challenges: a vast territory to cover, new departments to create, and employees to train. Added to these were the desire to decentralize the new government as much as possible, and the commitment to employing a percentage of Inuit representative of the general population.

An election also had to be held in order to choose the nineteen members of the new legislative assembly; this took place on Feb. 15, 1999. After the election, the new members chose Paul Okalik as their premier. On March 26 of that year, Helen Maksagak was appointed as the first Commissioner of Nunavut by the federal government.

**Celebration!**
As with the ratification of the Nunavut Act in 1993, the actual birth of Nunavut on April 1, 1999 became an international news story. Parties, speeches, fireworks, traditional Inuit games and dances, and other activities marked the occasion.
Sources


*The above information is from the following archived page: Nunavut – Bibliothèque et Archives Canada.*

URL:  [www.collectinscanada.gc.ca/confederation/023001-3090-e.e.html](http://www.collectinscanada.gc.ca/confederation/023001-3090-e.e.html)