

Proud of Our Past, Focused on Our Future

On December 1, 2005, Labrador Inuit celebrated the beginning of the Nunatsiavut Government. As of that date, we have turned the page on one of the most remarkable chapters in the history of our people. But the story of Labrador Inuit goes back much further...to a time over 5,000 years ago.

We are Inuit. Our people have occupied the circumpolar regions of the world for more than 5,000 years – from Russia east across Alaska, across Canada's North to the coast of Greenland. We are descendants of the prehistoric Thule, hunters who were drawn to Labrador because of its abundance of whales and other wildlife. We are a maritime people, deeply connected to our environment. We are one of the founding peoples of Canada.

Little was known about the Labrador Inuit way of life until the 1760s. Our earliest ancestors lived mainly on the north coast and travelled widely to harvest the resources of land and sea. For thousands of years, we had little or no contact with European cultures. In the 16th Century, we first encountered Basque whalers and, later, a growing settler population.

In the 1760s, Moravian missionaries became the first Europeans to establish a presence north of Hamilton Inlet, and our way of life began to experience sweeping changes. Our nomadic and communal lifestyle was discouraged, and disease decimated our population. Over time, Inuit life became more sedentary, and more connected to the emerging trade economy of Newfoundland and Labrador.

The demise of trade in the 1920s brought further social and economic upheaval. The Hudson's Bay Company and, later, the Commission of Government, took control of the Moravian stores with little success. After Confederation, the Moravian Church, the Grenfell Mission and the provincial government suspended services to the northern communities of Hebron, Okak and Nutak. Residents were abruptly resettled, and the trauma of that move continues to resonate in the present day.

A New Beginning for Labrador Inuit

In the 1970s, a new era dawned for Labrador Inuit. We formed the Labrador Inuit Association (LIA) and filed our land claim with the Government of Canada. For the next several decades, we worked hard to promote our culture, our health and well being, and our Constitutional, democratic and human rights. We began the long road to establishing self-government.

Members of the Newfoundland and Labrador House of Assembly passed provincial legislation on December 6, 2004 to give effect to the Labrador Inuit Land Claims Agreement Act. It received Royal Assent the same day.

The Agreement was ratified in when it received Senate approval and received Royal Assent on June 23, 2005 from Canada's Governor General. Our transitional government came into effect in December of that year, and we began preparations for the first ever Nunatsiavut elections, which took place the following fall. The first elected Nunatsiavut Assembly was sworn in on October 17, 2006.

From prehistory to modern government, the epic story of Labrador Inuit is one of resilience in the face of great change. We are proud of our past. And now, more than ever, we are focused on our future.

WHO ARE THE INUIT?

Inuit are the aboriginal people of Arctic Canada. Inuit live primarily in Nunavut, the Northwest Territories and northern parts of Labrador and Quebec. The word "Inuit" means "the people" in Inuktitut and is the term by which Inuit refer to themselves. Using the term "Inuit people" is redundant. The term "Eskimo," applied to Inuit by European explorers, is no longer used in Canada.

SOURCE: *Words First: An Evolving Terminology Relating to Aboriginal Peoples in Canada*, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, September 2004



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