

Les Canadiens

Resettlement of the Métis into the Backcountry of the Pacific Northwest



Douglas County Museum, Roseburg, Oregon

Alexander Dumont, born in 1815 in the old Métis community at Green Bay, Wisconsin. He and trapping partner Joseph Laverdure were among the earliest settlers in Oregon's Umpqua region.

By Robert Foxcurran

HISTORIANS GENERALLY RECOGNIZE the seminal economic role of the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) in Washington history, but the demographics associated with its operations in these northern borderlands are less well understood. As the HBC started to shift its operations slowly northward in 1843, the majority of its former employees—along with their Indian wives and mixed-blood or Métis family members—remained behind in what became United States territory after the Oregon Treaty with Great Britain was signed in 1846. Through the vagaries of politics and United States government policies, this sizeable population of early Pacific Northwest immigrants basically disappeared from history. Their descendants, however, now number in the tens of thousands.



Depicting a somewhat typical Métis family, this portrait includes descendants of Joseph Laverdure and Lizette Walla Walla. Their daughter Angelique (left end of middle row) and her husband John McGinnis (not pictured) remained in the Umpqua region while her parents and four brothers moved to the Umatilla Reservation when allotments were offered in the late 1880s.

Oregon, John (or Jean-Baptiste) McLoughlin, and for Washington, Mother Joseph of the Sacred Heart, founder of the Sisters of Providence mission in the West.

This mixed-blood population still spoke French—along with an Indian language or two and Chinook Jargon, the regional trade language. Families headed by retiring HBC employees initially relocated to fertile lands south of the Columbia River. By 1830 they had begun settling around Champoege and St. Paul along the middle Willamette River, where they lived among the Kalapuya people, a tribe that by 1833 had been decimated by a series of malaria outbreaks. Within a few years Americans, too, began to arrive. Although the Oregon Treaty was signed in 1846, the United States Army did not arrive until three years later, and the HBC did not definitively withdraw or end its influence for another 25 years. It is one thing to draw borders on a map half a world away and quite another to impose those borders on the ground.

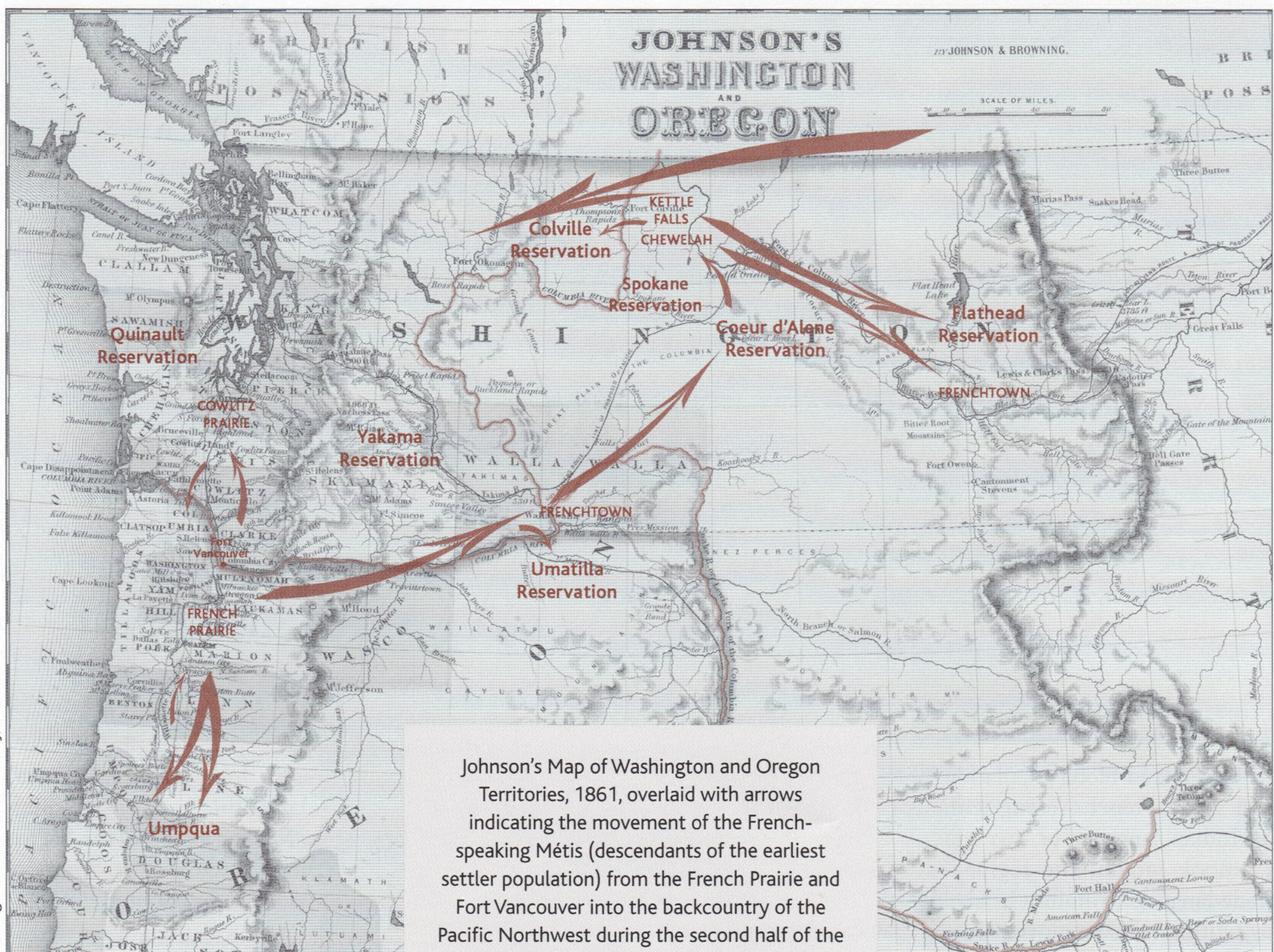
The prevalence of the French language in the region is reflected in the vocabulary of the Chinook Jargon as well as in the modern-day names of towns and geographic features. The list of French place names along the Columbia–Snake River system and its numerous tributaries includes the Boise, Portneuf, Payette, Malheur, Grande Ronde, Touchet, Deschutes, Pend Oreille, and Coeur d'Alene rivers (and lakes for these last two), plus Grand Coulee, and the Frenchman Hills. Pacific Northwest cities, towns, and hamlets that reflect the French influence include: The Dalles, Boise, Coeur d'Alene, La Grande, St. Paul, Charboneau, Gervais, and Disautel.

Even National Statuary Hall in Washington, D.C., hints at the French language presence in the Northwest. Washington and Oregon each chose two historical figures to represent them in the hall. Two of those four representatives were born in Quebec and spoke French as their mother tongue: for

As mid-century approached and American settlers began arriving in the Northwest in large numbers, these proto-Canadians, with their Indian or Métis wives and children, resided in a network of a dozen or so communities throughout the region. The Americans in the Willamette valley did not begin to outnumber French speakers until the wagon trains arrived in 1843. It was not until the end of that decade that English speakers equaled French speakers in what would become Washington Territory. Farther inland, this demographic change from French to English took several more decades, depending on the specific valley.

Around 1860 the Caucasian population began to surpass the Indian population in Washington Territory. The largest set of French-speaking settlements was scattered over an extensive area known as French Prairie, above the falls in Oregon's Willamette River valley. Its component villages were St. Paul, St. Louis, Butteville, Gervais, and Champoege. Their story has been well-researched and incorporated into mainstream Oregon history, but this has not been the case for French-speaking settlements north of the Columbia.

The oldest such settlement in western Washington Territory and the first Catholic church, now called St. Francis Xavier, were established on Cowlitz Prairie at the uppermost point of navigation on the Cowlitz River. This settlement connected the lower Columbia to Puget Sound via a 60-mile overland trek supported by Cowlitz Indian guides, packers, and their horses. There were also a number of settlements on the far side of the



Johnson's Map of Washington and Oregon Territories, 1861, overlaid with arrows indicating the movement of the French-speaking Métis (descendants of the earliest settler population) from the French Prairie and Fort Vancouver into the backcountry of the Pacific Northwest during the second half of the 19th century. By the turn of the 20th century, some 1,500 of these Métis had moved onto three reservations—Flathead, Umatilla and Colville. West of the Cascades, many hundreds more were scattered along the Cowlitz Corridor and in the Umpqua backcountry.

Cascade Mountains within the Columbia River basin. Chewelah and Kettle Falls, for example, were situated in the Colville valley of present-day northeastern Washington.

Two communities among these Washington Territory settlements actually came to be referred to as “Frenchtown” by the Americans—one near what is now Missoula, Montana, and the other near Walla Walla. Each Frenchtown initially served as a refuge in the interior for Métis settlers who found themselves squeezed out elsewhere. In the decades that followed, both Frenchtowns grew more homogeneous with regard to language. On Clark Fork, near Missoula, newcomers were mostly French-speaking Canadians, while the Walla Walla valley became populated mainly with English-speakers of many origins. While the French-speaking community near Clark Fork survived, the one near Walla Walla had thus disintegrated by the turn of the century. [Note: the commemorative Frenchtown Historic Site has recently been established near Walla Walla.]

Whatever their language of origin, people from the Northwest Territories/Canada represented one of Washington's largest immigrant groups throughout the 19th century and into the 20th. As the first Caucasians to settle in the area, their descendants were also the first to blend in and disappear (at least as a self-consciously identified group).

At some point a significant number chose to “blend in” as Indians.

In the early 1840s, to counter the looming diplomatic and demographic offensive of the Americans, the HBC belatedly began recruit-

ing colonists from the Red River Settlement (the District of Assiniboia) in present-day southeastern Manitoba, where a flourishing agricultural colony had developed. Prospective colonists from Red River were hesitant to risk an arduous journey and an uncertain future on leased land. Twenty-three families, most of whom were of mixed blood, assembled in June 1841 for the three-month overland trek to Fort Vancouver. After they had rested at the post for a short time, HBC chief factor John McLoughlin directed 14 English-speaking families to settle at Fort Nisqually and assigned the Catholic Métis families to Cowlitz Farms, where the St. Francis Mission and a small Métis settlement already existed.

The lure of life across the Columbia in the fertile Willamette valley was strong. Some of those who had settled on the rocky soil around Fort Nisqually drifted south of the Columbia by late 1843, while the more favorable conditions at Cowlitz brought an expansion of that colony to 64 people by the same date. The 13 French-Canadian and Métis families at Cowlitz Farms constitute the first settlement founded on a principally agricultural base in what is now Washington.

The Simmons-Bush party of American settlers overwintered at Washougal in 1844 and settled north of the Columbia at what is now Tumwater in 1845. By 1850 the total number of American settlers in the two Oregon counties about to break off into Washington Territory still could not muster a clear majority over former and actual HBC employees. In the early 1850s several thousand Americans arrived and proceeded to develop and subpartition the land, initiating the removal of the far more numerous surviving Indian residents, estimated to be about 14,000 at the time, to a tiny share of the total real estate.

A half-century later, by 1905, a significant proportion of the descendants of this initial Pacific Northwest settler group had been adopted as tribal members. Between the 1830s and 1850s the aging generation of retired HBC employees played the white settler card. By registering their intention to become American citizens, they were able to retain earlier claims under the Oregon Donation Land Act of 1850, which had been enacted to encourage American settlement in the Oregon Country.

Two generations later, their mixed-blood descendants had a chance to obtain free land east of the Cascades—as Indians, not whites—receiving allotments of land under the Dawes Act. A large number of recipients were still members of French-speaking Catholic communities. This opportunity led to a further displacement of the Métis to interior reservations. Three reservations in particular took in significant Métis populations—the Flathead, Umatilla, and Colville. Some individuals still spoke French on these reservations into the second half of the 20th century.

The tribes west of the Cascades with the largest percentage of mixed-bloods were given short shrift in negotiations when it came to compensation, including the preservation of a land base. Villages along the principal transit corridors and portage points of the region experienced a higher level of trade and intermarriage than those situated in peripheral areas and thus also had a higher mixed population. The American authorities made it a priority to clear Indians from these critical corridors. Three of the tribes most heavily impacted by this dynamic were the Cowlitz, the Chinook, and the Cow Creek Band of the Umpquas. None of these three tribes received their own reservations, although recently the federal government gave recognition and token compensation to the Cowlitz and Cow Creek Umpqua people.

The status of the proto-Canadian and Métis settlers had been a major subject of debate at the first two meetings of the Washington Territorial Legislature during the winters of 1854 and 1855. Voting on the new territory's principal ethnic issue, the assembly determined that once settlers in this special category had declared their intention to become United States citizens, they could vote and legally own and inherit property. This law only applied to males who were at least one-half white, a stipulation that also served to separate the mixed-blood families from their Indian neighbors, in-laws, and cousins.

Between 1847 and 1858, the Métis found themselves caught up in Washington Territory's Indian conflicts. This

started with Canadian “half-breeds” and their priests being implicated in both the Whitman Massacre (1847) and the Indian wars of 1855–1858. Though the final clashes occurred in the Spokane River area, earlier fights took place in the Yakima and Walla Walla valleys and in the Puget Sound region. One of the largest conflicts was fought in December 1855 at Frenchtown in the Walla Walla valley between the ranches of Louis Tellier and Joseph Laroque, and resulted in the temporary internment of the Métis and permanent removal of peaceful Indians.

Governor Isaac Stevens declared martial law the following year in Pierce and Thurston counties to deal with foreign-born settlers, including the Canadians, who were assumed to be aiding the “hostiles.” Each time a militia was organized, the Métis of the Willamette valley aligned with the local white majority, contributing their own military unit. In the outlying areas, however, their position was often more tenuous. Here they generally tried to remain neutral, or cooperated minimally as nonbelligerents.

Later in the century, when reservations were being “opened up” for settlement in the interior, the federal government

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Opening of the Flathead Coeur d'Alene & Spokane Indian Reservations



750,000 Acres Homestead Land Open for
Settlers in Montana-Idaho-Washington

Registration July 15 to August 5

At

Kalispell-Coeur d'Alene-Spokane

Reached by



In the late 1880s the opening of the Umatilla Reservation through an allotment process drew away many original Métis families from the nearby Frenchtown. Other reservations underwent a similar allotment process in the early 20th century, attracting more Métis; the remaining land was sold to white settlers, as the 1909 promotional booklet above indicates.

reversed its position on separating the Métis from their Indian relations, deciding that the example of their mixed-blood cousins might encourage the tribes to settle down and become good Christian farmers and ranchers. Unlike the older, more autonomous Métis communities of eastern Montana, many of the French-speaking mixed-bloods were still close enough to the local Indians to graft themselves onto the reservations, although the burden of proof increased over time. The eastern Montana Métis had been isolated in the interior for a longer period of time. Far from their Chippewa and Cree origins, they had thereby coalesced into new autonomous tribes, competing with other tribes for buffalo, an ever more scarce resource. The long-established northern plains tribes tended to view them as enemies and successfully resisted attempts to relocate the Métis to their reservations.

Parenthetically, it was the Métis, especially those of Cree extraction from northerly regions now lying on the Canadian side of the border, who had contributed many of their daughters as wives accompanying the first wave of Northwest Company and HBC employees crossing over northern Rocky Mountain passes and down the Columbia. Employees who had come west as bachelors tended to marry local women—choosing from among the Pacific Northwest tribeswomen or, later, the Métis daughters of the first wave.

There was one major exception to this sequence involving tribes that had been resettled on the Flathead Reservation. On their own initiative, from early in the 19th century, this confederation of tribes led the way in establishing a policy of adoption and intermarriage with the French-speaking fur trade employees of Iroquois and European extraction in order to supplement their depleted ranks. The Kootenai, Kalispell, Pend Oreille, Spokane, and Flathead tribes had previously developed an alliance to face down Blackfoot Indians during buffalo hunting expeditions east of the Continental Divide. Moreover, these same tribes—along with another buffalo hunting ally, the Nez Perce—had initiated the original call for missionaries from the Pacific Northwest in the early 1830s.

After these tribes were able to obtain their own collective reservation centered on the St. Ignatius Catholic Mission in the mid 19th century, they continued to adopt French-speaking mixed-bloods. The reservation extended from Flathead Lake south to the ridge above the Clark Fork of the Columbia, near



Lavadour family collection

Narcisse and Martha Josephine Lavadour (Laverdure) and their son Nelson. In 1883, 43-year-old Narcisse moved with his family from their Umpqua area farm to the Umatilla Reservation, adopted by his mother's tribe—the Walla Wallas.

where Missoula and Frenchtown now stand. Broken out linguistically, there were the Kootenai, displaced from the river valley of the same name, plus several interior Salish tribes relocating from downriver—the Catholic bands of the Kalispell (known as the Pend Oreille), many of the Spokane tribe's Catholic members, and the Flathead people from the Bitterroot valley.

There was one final surge in adoption of Métis in the early 20th century when local freebooters were able to cajole the federal government into opening the gates of the Flathead reservation to white settlers through an allotment program. This offered one last chance for Métis cousins living off-reservation to join their relations. By the early 20th century, over half of all Métis descendants in the Pacific Northwest who had been gathered onto a reservation were situated on the south side of Flathead Lake.

By the time the Oregon Treaty went into effect, most of the French-Canadians who had emigrated west found themselves living on the United States side of the border. West of the continental divide, their descendants are more numerous in the United States than in Canada. All across the continent the French-Canadian frontier repeatedly found itself on the United States side of the border. Though a similar dynamic is widely recognized in the southern half of the trans-Mississippi West that was swallowed up by an expanding America absorbing the Hispanic mestizo population in place, it is not so recognized in the northern borderlands with *les Canadiens*. When they went west, they fell out of Canadian history and were often overlooked in United States history.

In Washington history the Métis are being rediscovered. The works of historian John C. Jackson have laid the groundwork, bringing the story of the Pacific Northwest Métis up through the 1850s and "dispersal." Research and publications by historians on the Flathead and Umatilla reservations and in British Columbia have filled out much of the story since. Even so, there is a great deal of research and interpretation to be done to bring the history of this French-speaking segment of our Northwest heritage out of obscurity. ❁

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