

The Earliest Inhabitants

The first evidence of humans in the region dates back approximately 12,000 years to a time when nomadic peoples hunted these lands as the glaciers retreated from southern Ontario. As the climate continued to warm, populations of Indigenous peoples began developing new technologies for hunting along the Lake Ontario shoreline, which varied substantially from where it exists today.

A revolutionary new technology, the bow and arrow, was introduced about 2,000 years ago and radically changed hunting techniques. However, the populations of the time remained quite mobile with no evidence in the landscape of substantial structures or lengthy occupations.

This all changed around 700 C.E. with the introduction of Maize (corn) to the area and the development of horticulture as the predominant subsistence base. The continued availability of food gave rise to permanent villages and resulted in a tremendous population increase.

In the centuries that followed, small-scale warfare between various Indigenous nations and the depletion of resources along the Lake Ontario shoreline drove many communities northward towards Georgian Bay.

By the mid-to-late 1600s, Iroquois-speaking (Haudenosaunee) nations began establishing villages along the north shore of Lake Ontario and used this territory to hunt game and obtain furs for exclusive trade with European explorers. However, by the end of the 1600s, Algonquin-speaking (Anishinaabeg) nations began challenging for the dominance of the area and displaced their predecessors.

As European settlement arose in the late 1700s, efforts were made by the British Crown to negotiate with Indigenous populations for control of a large tract of land on the northern shore of Lake Ontario stretching between Etobicoke Creek and the Trent River. The Johnson-Butler Purchase of 1787–88 (also known as the “Gunshot Treaty”) opened these lands to British occupation. However, there were many questions about the legitimacy of the terms of the land cession.

In 1923, 135 years following the initial negotiations, the Williams Treaties were implemented to settle the various issues of unceded land, including those encompassing present day Ajax along on the northern shore of Lake Ontario. Disputes about outstanding compensation continued until 2018 when the First Nations involved in the Williams Treaties and the Governments of Ontario and Canada came to a final agreement, settling litigation about land surrenders and related harvesting rights.

In 2020, the Town of Ajax worked with the local Indigenous community to develop the following land acknowledgement:

We acknowledge that the land on which we gather is situated within the traditional and treaty territory of the Mississaugas. More specifically, the Mississauga's of Scugog Island First Nation, signatories of the Gunshot Treaty of 1788 and the Williams Treaties of 1923. This land is, and will continue to be, home to the Indigenous Peoples. Let us acknowledge the mistakes and traumas of the past through authenticity and support truth and reconciliation. Let us engage and celebrate Indigenous communities by being leaders of action in acknowledging the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's recommendations towards truth and reconciliation. Let us keep these principles close, as we continue towards truth and reconciliation and as we move forward with kindness and respect as a community.