

Indigenous Peoples in Toronto: An Introduction

Published 6/13/2025 by [Rei Tang](#)

Read to the end and test your knowledge with a quick quiz at the end of this blog!

Introduction

Toronto is one of Canada's most diverse cities, and home to a significant Indigenous population with deep historical and cultural roots. It is located on Turtle Island (North America).

This land has been home to Indigenous Peoples for thousands of years, who lived here for centuries before the arrival of European settlers in the 1600s. Indigenous Peoples are the original population of what is now known as Canada and Toronto.

The Indigenous Peoples in Toronto include First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities, each with unique traditions, languages, and histories.

It is important to learn about Indigenous Culture and communities in Toronto to educate and foster better understanding among new students about this community that has long inhabited and continues to thrive in this region.

Land Acknowledgement

One of the most prominent ways indigenous cultures is presented to students and staff at Seneca Polytechnic is with a *land acknowledgement* at the beginning of events, classes and other programming at Seneca Polytechnic. Why is this important?

- **Honours Indigenous Presence:** Recognizes that Indigenous peoples have lived on and cared for the land long before colonization.
- **Raises Awareness:** Educates the public about Indigenous histories and territorial rights.
- **Encourages Reflection:** Invites individuals and organizations to consider their role in reconciliation and decolonization.
- **Promotes Respectful Relationships:** Encourages meaningful connections between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities.
- **To learn more** check out Seneca Polytechnic's [land acknowledgement guide](#)

Indigenous Groups

As mentioned, Indigenous Peoples of the Toronto Region are categorized into three main groups: First Nations, Métis, and Inuit. Each group has distinct cultural practices and languages.

- **First Nations:** There are more than 630 First Nations communities that exist in Canada, representing over 50 distinct nations. The Wendat, Anishinaabe, and Haudenosaunee are three significant First Nations groups in the Toronto area.
- **Métis:** The Métis emerged from intermarriages between Indigenous women and European traders. They developed a unique identity, culture, and language (Michif). Métis people have played a crucial role in Canada's history and continue to advocate for their rights.
- **Inuit:** The Inuit primarily originate from the Arctic regions of Canada. While many still live in the north, some have relocated to urban centers like Toronto.

Indigenous History in Toronto

Indigenous presence in what is now Toronto predates European settlement by thousands of years. The land was a key meeting place for trade and diplomacy due to its strategic location near the Great Lakes.

- **Dish with One Spoon Agreement:** An early agreement between the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe that emphasized the shared use of land and natural resources without conflict.
- **European Arrival and Fur Trade:** The arrival of Europeans, particularly the French and British, led to trade relationships with Indigenous communities. However, competition for resources and land led to conflicts and displacement.
- **Treaties and Land Dispossession:**
 - There are different types of treaties. Some friendship treaties were established between Indigenous nations and early settlers. Later, colonial treaties forced Indigenous peoples to sell their land to settlers.
 - The Toronto Purchase (1787, revised in 1805) saw the Mississaugas cede large tracts of land to the British in exchange for inadequate compensation. This transaction was disputed for centuries, culminating in a \$145 million settlement in 2010.

Colonial Policies have had a long and devastating impact on Indigenous Peoples across Canada. The relationship between Indigenous Peoples and the settlers, the Canadian government and other institutions, has been marked by policies aimed at assimilation and

control. Key aspects of this history include:

- **Indian Act (1876):** This legislation sought to assimilate Indigenous Peoples by regulating their status, land ownership, and governance structures.
- **Residential Schools:** From the 19th to late 20th century, Indigenous children were forcibly taken from their families and placed in schools designed to erase their cultural identities. Many suffered physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. The last residential school closed in 1996, but its legacy remains deeply felt.
- **Sixties Scoop:** Thousands of Indigenous children were removed from their families and placed with non-Indigenous adoptive families, further severing cultural ties.

It is important to understand that Indigenous Peoples are not passive victims. They have fought against colonialism for centuries. The indigenous community is incredibly diverse, resilient, and strong. It continues to protect their languages, identities, and cultures from repeated attempts to destroy them by the Canadian government.

Contemporary Indigenous Lives in Toronto

Today, Indigenous communities in Toronto are reclaiming their cultural identities and advocating for their rights. Approximately 45,000–60,000 Indigenous people live in the city, contributing to various aspects of urban life.

- **Cultural Revitalization:** Indigenous languages, ceremonies, and traditions are being revived through education, community programs, and artistic expression.
- **Two-Spirit Community:** Indigenous LGBTQ+ individuals, known as Two-Spirit people, play a significant role in cultural and spiritual leadership within their communities.
- **Economic and Social Contributions:** Indigenous entrepreneurs, artists, and professionals are making meaningful contributions to Toronto's economy and cultural landscape.

Understanding Indigenous perspectives is essential for fostering respectful relationships, cultural awareness and relationship building. Key elements of cultural awareness include:

- **Respect for Indigenous Knowledge:** Indigenous ways of knowing emphasize interconnectedness, environmental stewardship, and oral traditions.
- **Avoiding Stereotypes:** Indigenous Peoples are diverse and should not be generalized or romanticized.
- **Supporting Indigenous Initiatives:** Engaging with Indigenous-led organizations, businesses, and cultural events helps strengthen relationships and mutual understanding.

Truth and Reconciliation

Reconciliation efforts aim to address past injustices and create a more inclusive future and helping to build and repair relationships and move forward. Steps for building positive relationships include:

- **Learning About Treaties:** Understanding the historical agreements that shape Indigenous-settler relations today.
- **Participating in Indigenous Events:** Powwows, storytelling sessions, and workshops offer opportunities to engage with Indigenous cultures firsthand.
- **Advocating for Indigenous Rights:** Supporting policies that recognize Indigenous sovereignty and address social inequities.

Indigenous Peoples have a profound and enduring presence in Toronto. Despite centuries of colonial challenges, they continue to assert their rights, preserve their cultures, and contribute to the city's vibrancy.

Newcomers to Toronto are encouraged to learn about and support Indigenous communities, fostering a city built on mutual respect and shared histories.

Adapted from: [Indigenous Peoples in Toronto: An Introduction for Newcomers](#)

Indigenous Learning at Seneca



Seneca Polytechnic is a leader in Indigenous education and learning. Based at Newnham Campus, [First Peoples@Seneca](#) is located at Odeyto.

Odeyto —the Anishinaabe word for “good journey”—is a space where First Nation, Metis and Inuit students can gather not only to practice their traditions, but also to find new friendships and family when away from their communities.

- The space references indigenous culture and history in many ways. The canoe-like form docks alongside the contrasting rigid lines of the existing precast concrete building.
- Striking when viewed from the outside, the building's curves also create a warm,

womb-like interior.

- The structure alludes to the Haudenosaunee longhouse, a traditional reference that is further reinforced by glass entrances on the east and west, aligned to the summer solstice.
- The red doors honour the missing and murdered indigenous women.

First Peoples@Seneca also creates a welcoming and beautiful space for non-indigenous students and staff to visit to learn about Indigenous culture and history.

Local Organizations & Cultural Centers

There are many excellent resources in Toronto and online that students can access to learn about Indigenous culture and history:

- **Native Canadian Centre of Toronto (NCCT)** – Offers cultural programs, workshops, and events open to all.
- **Toronto Council Fire Native Cultural Centre** – Provides educational programming and community events focused on Indigenous culture.
- **Indigenous Arts Festivals** – Held at Fort York, this festival showcases Indigenous music, dance, and storytelling.
- **Aaniin Community Centre** – Located in Markham, the centre features Indigenous art, learning opportunities, and cultural events.

Museums & Heritage Sites

- **Woodland Cultural Centre** – Located near Toronto, this museum offers exhibits on Indigenous history, including residential schools.
- **The Bentway Indigenous Programming** – Hosts Indigenous art installations and educational experiences.
- **Royal Ontario Museum (ROM)** – Features exhibits on Indigenous art, history, and archaeology.
- **Fort York National Historic Site** – Showcases Indigenous contributions to Canadian history.

Books & Online Resources

- **The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) Reports** – Essential reading for understanding residential schools and reconciliation.
- **CBC's Indigenous Section** – Provides news, culture, and history from Indigenous

perspectives.

- **The Witness Blanket Project** – A digital and physical art installation sharing residential school survivor stories.

Test your knowledge!

Take this short quiz to test your knowledge of Indigenous Culture and History!

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Indigenous Peoples Quiz by Seneca Student Services

(written by Sophie Pether)

tags : international-students, internationa-student, ISS