

Esgenoopetitj First Nation

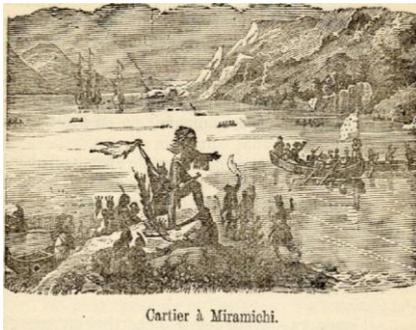
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The Esgenoopetitj First Nation formerly known as Burnt Church, is a Mi'kmaq community located in the district of Sikniktewaŋ or Sikniktuk. Sikniktuk is translated into English as "the land where the water drains". Mi'kmaq territory, known to Mi'kmaq as Mi'kma'kik, was split into seven (7) Districts. Sikniktuk is the second largest of the seven (7) Mi'kmaq Districts. Esgenoopetitj is translated into English as "a lookout". It is the sixth largest Mi'kmaq First Nation Community in Mi'kma'kik with a total population of 1,929 registered band members, three quarters of which reside on-reserve.

Esgenoopetitj First Nation was called Burnt Church for many years. The name also referred to the name of the French Village that was built just north of the original Mi'kmaq Village that sat there for thousands of years. The village is located on the western shores of the Miramichi Bay, 5 km south of the present-day community of Lagacéville and 38 km North East of the town of Miramichi. Early written accounts by the French during the 1600's, has "Esgenoopetitj" spelled "Eskinowobudich". This shows that the village held this name even before the arrival of Europeans.



Between 1504 and 1534 Mi'kmaq of Esgenoopetitj were regularly in contact with Basque, Breton, British, Normans, French and Portuguese Fisherman and fur traders. However, after the French explorer Jacques Cartier dropped anchor near their shores in 1535 to trade for furs, a mysterious epidemic swept through the Mi'kmaq throughout the Miramichi Bay. Even after an epidemic swept through their region, the Mi'kmaq still maintained a village at

Esgenoopetitj. Oral tradition states that the Esgenoopetitj was considered as a main village site during precolonial times. In 1658 Nicholes Deny reported that the village of Esgenoopetitj had a population at around 500 individuals and counted over 80 wigwam and lodges in the village. Later his son Richard Deny would marry a Mi'kmaw woman from Esgenoopetitj.

The Esgenoopetitj village sat in the same location long before European adventurers first explored the Atlantic Coast of Canada. According to Historian William Francis Ganong who translated Samuel de Champlain memoirs in 1918, one Champlain's maps depicts a Mi'kmaq village in 1727 in the same location as present day Esgenoopetitj First Nation. At the time of

Ganong's translation in 1918, Esgenoopetitj was still a favorite Mi'kmaq settlement and was considered one of the largest in all New Brunswick. However, by the end of the follow year of 1919, over 30% of Esgenoopetitj's population died from the Spanish influenza.

The Acadian village of Burnt Church and the Esgenoopetitj village got the name "Burnt Church" after a British expédition sailed from Louisburg on August 29th, 1758. The expedition was led by Colonel James Murray. Their mission was to expel the French from the territory and destroy any Acadian settlements in the Miramichi region. When the British troops arrived off the shores Esgenoopetitj they attacked the village, setting both Mi'kmaw lodges and nearby Acadian homes ablaze including the Church that Father le Clercq helped them build years prior. After this incident Esgenoopetitj and the nearby Acadian village was often referred to as Burnt Church. Throughout the 1800's, Esgenoopetitj (Burnt Church) was a favorite resort of the Mi'kmaq and was, therefore, included in one of the very earliest Indian reserve locations set aside by New Brunswick. The reserve was officially established on March 5, 1805 and 2,058 acres we set aside for the Mi'kmaw of Esgenoopetitj.



The Mi'kmaq of Esganoopetitj were considered to be giants of the Mi'kmaq Nation. According to Father Pierre Biard, Grand Chief Henri Membertou was originally from this area. In their



description both Father Biard and French attorney of law and historian Marc Lescarbot describe Chief Membertou as being close to 7 feet tall. Father Biard wrote "he was head and shoulder above all the souriquois in his village". Jacques Cartier describe the Mi'kmaq in the Miramachi "as a giant among men". Father le Clercq stated that "the Geneishes, the Julians, and other Mic-Mac families of the Miramichi produced scions of whom any race might well be proud, each of whom was a Hercules in moccasins."

One famous giant Mi'kmaq from Esgenoopetitj was Chief Pierre Martin. His grandmother was Anne "Petitous" Martin, Grand Chief Membertou's granddaughter. Chief Pierre Martin was thought to be over 7 feet tall and was extremely powerful. It was said he could rip a man's head off with his bear hands. Chief Martin was murdered by British troops in 1777 after he along with over 30 other Mi'kmaq Chief's were tricked to coming aboard a ship bearing an American Flag just off Bartibog "Ngbeltook" Island in the mouth of the Miramichi. All the Chiefs around Siknigtuk were holding a Grand Counsel on the island to speak on the war between the newly found American colony and the British.

After the start of the American Revolution and the Mi'kmaq had signed the Watertown Treaty in July of 1776. In the Watertown Treaty, the Mi'kmaq promised to aid the Americans in their fight against the British. One of the Chiefs that signed the treaty was from the Miramichi. The Chiefs were told in the summer of 1777 that an American gunship bearing the name Lafayette would come and pick them up so they can fulfill their promises made in the Watertown Treaty. However, the ship was intercepted in the Gulf of the Saint Lawrence by the British warship "HMS Viper". The captain of the Viper, Sir Eliab Harvey, discovered from one of the surviving American sailors on the Lafayette of their plans to meet with the Chiefs. Once hearing this new Captain Harvey started making plans to ambush the Chiefs.



Captain Harvey sent one of his sailors posing as an American to the shore to invite the chiefs on board the ship for a feast. Once on board, the Chiefs were giving food and drink. When they were all relaxed and their guard was down, the British attacked the Chiefs. During the struggle it was said that Esgenoopetitj Chief smashed through a secured door and killed two British soldiers with his bear hands even after he was repeatedly stabbed with British bayonets. After the struggle only 16 Chiefs survived the ambush and were locked up in chains and taken to Halifax. No one knows what happened to the Chiefs but only 6 of the 16 captured ever made it back to Sikniktuk.

In recent years, Esgenoopetitj First Nation members have fought strenuously for their traditional lobster fishing rights, culminating in the Burnt Church Crisis with the provincial and federal governments as well as local non-native fishermen. As Indigenous people, Mi'kmaq



claimed the right to catch and sell lobster out of season. The non-Aboriginals claimed that if this is allowed lobster stocks (an important source of income) could be depleted. Throughout the conflict, hundreds of native traps were destroyed and both parties suffered injuries and damaged property.

The conflict occurred between the years of 1999 and 2002. The dispute in Esgenoopetitj First Nation was sparked by the Marshall decision of the Supreme Court of Canada, which recognized the treaty rights of Mi'kmaq people to fish and prompted the entry of Mi'kmaq fishers into the lobster fishery outside of the regulated season. The "fishing dispute" in Esgenoopetitj (Burnt Church) was not simply a conflict over access to the lobster fishery, but a result of the deeply contested nature of the lands along the shores of the Miramichi Bay. The dispute in Esgenoopetitj First Nation was just one illustration of the larger dilemma of the conflicts between indigenous and settler communities across Canada.

The crisis concluded in 2002 when an Agreement in Principle was signed with Esgenoopetitj (Burnt Church) that allowed them the right to fish for subsistence purposes. Today Esgenoopetitj relies on fishing as a major economic driver in the community. The band owns 34 lobster licenses which were handed out to band members to fish themselves.

Snow crab is the biggest earner with 100% of the profits going back to the community. There are 3 large community crab boats with 100% of deck hands being band members and a Mi'kmaq captain. The band maintains a crab contract with 10 non-native crab boats that sell 100% of the catches each season to the band. All crab purchased by the band is sent to the band-owned fishing processing plant in Caraquet, New Brunswick. The Baie Chaleurs Fisheries processing plant also processes herring and soon will include a lobster pound. The processing plant has been 100% owned by the band since 2009. The processing plant employs over 100 people with 60% of them being non-natives from neighboring communities. Esgenoopetitj also has a salmon assessment program that employs 6-8 seasonal workers from the community.



Employees who work at the processing plant, travel the 100 km commute or stay in the band owned accommodations. Built in 2016, the 20-room bunk house in Caraquet has two beds per room and houses 40 band members to stay during the season to work at the processing plant. The new dormitory was built in 8 weeks and cost \$400,000. The band employs a full time cook and a janitor at the bunk house, both of whom are band members. Each season the band members who work at the processing plant can work enough hours to be able to collect employment insurance during the off season.

The Band owns a large Petro Canada attached to a little strip mall that also houses a Robin Donuts owned by the band. There is a walk-in clinic, wellness center, and medical marijuana dispensary. The band has their own cannabis cultivation operation which houses 1500 plants. It is expected to expand to twice that amount. 100% of the employees in these business operations are band members. The band also earns profits from the its forestry contracts.



The band has a large gaming room which houses a bingo hall and restaurant with take-out. Bingo operates 5 nights per week. All the employees in the gaming center are band members. There are also 6 privately owned businesses from gaming rooms to convenience stores.

Although not a band-owned enterprise, PLATO Testing is a startup launched to bring meaningful training and employment to Indigenous people in the software testing industry across Canada. PLATO Testing provides outsourced testing solutions to clients throughout North America, with a focus on projects that would have previously been sent offshore. Sister company and industry leader, PQA Testing supports PLATO Testing by leading the Aboriginal



Software Tester Training program. Keith Joe from Esgenoopetitj First Nation was one of the first PLATO Testing employees and is now a team lead in the Miramichi office. Keith expresses,



“PLATO Testing has brought me a career I can be proud of and make a difference in. The opportunity for me to work closer to home at the Miramichi office with other Aboriginal people in a high-tech industry has given me a great sense of purpose and drive for the future. I think this is a great opportunity for my people and I hope to be a role model for upcoming Aboriginal testers in the industry.”

Esgenoopetitj First Nation has had a long continuous impact on the Miramachi since time immemorial and it seems they will continue to have an impact in the years to come.