

Potlotek First Nation

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The Potlotek First Nation formerly known as Chapel Island, is a Mi'kmaq community located in the district of Unama'kik. Unama'kik is translated into English as "the land of fog". Mi'kmaq territory, known to Mi'kmaq as Mi'kma'kik, was split into seven (7) Districts. Potlotek is translated into English as "Chapel Island".

Potlotek First Nation is located 75 kilometres southwest of Sydney on the southern shores of the Bras d'Or Lakes. Bras d'Or Lakes is an inland saltwater lake made up of bays, inlets, and deep basins located in the centre of Cape Breton Island in the province of Nova Scotia. This large inland lake was known to the Mi'kmaq as Pitu'pok or Pitu'pa'q. Pitu'pok is translated into English as "the great long salt water", while Pitu'pa'q is translated into English as "Inner Sea". The two names to describe the area were used coextensively amongst the Mi'kmaq of the region. For over 10,000 years the Mi'kmaq people have maintained permanent summer village



sites along the shores of Pitu'pok. Pitu'pok was abundant with resources such as oysters, lobster, eel, gaspereau, herring, cod, flounder, smelt, salmon, and mackerel. They were used as the primary transportation route between hunting and fishing grounds and for spiritual gatherings in all seasons.

The island just off the shores of Potlotek First Nation was known as "Miniku". Miniku was a site of deep spiritual attachments for the Mi'kmaq long before any Europeans arrived on the shores of Mi'kma'ki. It was also the main meeting place for all the Chiefs around Pitu'pok to come and sit in grand counsel with their head *Kji'saqmaw* or District Chief each summer to assign hunting and fishing territories amongst the Clans. The Chiefs would also settle disputes and allocate punishment for any infractions committed.

In 1714 the French built a garrison in present day Saint Peters known as Port Toulouse. The French missionaries from Port Toulouse would come and sit in council with the Chiefs in Miniku. The Christian missionaries called the island Isle de la Sainte Famille or Island of the Holy Family and established a mission on Miniku in 1741. In 1742 Roman Catholic Priest Father Abbé Pierre

Maillard held his first mass on Miniku. In 1750 Father Maillard started building the first church on the island and construction was completed in 1751. After the French fort in Louisbourg fell to the British in 1758, the British destroyed most of the French settlements around Pitu'pok and burnt down the Church on Miniku. Father Maillard fled to the Mariachi.

In 1792 Grand Chief Michael Thomas petitioned the new Nova Scotian colonial government for Miniku be signed over in a land grant to the Mi'kmaq. His request was approved on July 01, 1792. One of the main purposes of the grant was that a new mission church could be built on the island. In 1819, Chief Peter Tomah, acting on behalf of the Mi'kmaq on and around Miniku



pressed the British colonial government to “secure to them” the lands around Miniku. The land was officially recognized as Barra Head St-Regis Reserve in 1834. In 1958 Barra Head was changed to Chapel Island. On May 4, 2010, the name of the band was once again changed to Potlotek First Nation. Today Potlotek First Nation has a total population of 753 registered band members, of which 575 reside on-reserve.

Since Father Maillard began the St. Anne Mission in the 1750s, thousands of Mi'kmaq from across Mi'kma'kik continue to make the annual pilgrimage to Miniku in Potlotek First Nation. Each year they come in July to celebrate the Feast of St. Anne, renew their faith and reinforce family ties. The St. Anne Mission takes place for five days, but many will come and stay the entire month leading up to the Mission. The island is not only a place of worship, the Grand Council of the Mi'kmaq still meet twice a year on Miniku. In 2003, Miniku (Chapel Island) became designated as a National Historic Site of Canada.



Much like other Mi'kmaq communities, the commercial fishery has been the main driver of economic growth and development for Potlotek First Nations. In 1995 Potlotek First Nation created Apaqtukewaq Fisheries. The co-op was formed to enable the community to open doors



for job creation. After the Marshall decision the band was able to acquire a number of fishing licenses in the lobster and crab fisheries, as well as, tuna and groundfish. The money generated from the fisheries has allowed Potlotek First Nation to prosper. Moreover, a large number of community

members are employed in the fisheries. After the creation of their Commercial Fisheries, Potlotek First Nation has followed one key goal and that was to maintain sustainable employment for the members of the community, as well as, contribute to the social and economic wellbeing of the community. Presently Potlotek First Nation Band is recognized as having one of the highest employment rates of all First Nation Bands in the Province. Approximately 65-75% of Potlotek First Nation community members are employed on an annual (seasonal) basis.

Like many First Nation communities, the community has also invested in a service fuel station. The Potlotek Expedition Gas & Convenience is owned and operated by the band. 100% of the employees working at Potlotek Expedition Gas & Convenience are band members.

In 2013 Potlotek First Nation formed the Potlotek Tourist Information Centre Society and was officially incorporated on February 27, 2013. The inspiration to form the Potlotek Tourist Information Centre Society came from a group of band members in the Adult learning program. It was formed to help create jobs within the community and build partnerships with the Tourism Industry. Since then Potlotek First Nations Tourism has increased substantially which has in turn created more employment opportunities for Band members.



Two of the biggest events held each year in Potlotek First Nation are the powwow and the Saint Anne's Mission celebration. The first powwow in Potlotek First Nation was held in 1993. It was organized by George Marshall. It has been held annually ever since. It starts on the third Friday of July and ends the following Monday. Each year the community plays a big role in the



organization of their annual powwow. A sacred fire is lit at the beginning of the pow wow and is not permitted to go out until the powwow is over. Community members will volunteer as firekeepers where they will take turns watching the fire to make sure it doesn't go out. The community of Potlotek First Nations provides daily breakfast and an evening feast every evening of the powwow. Potlotek annual powwow attracts thousands of people each year.

The community is currently planning on building a RV park and campground on the hill near the shore of Pitu'pok offering visitors with a clear view of Miniku. The RV park and campground will offer electrical and water connections as well as a shower and bathroom facility. There are also plans for opening a canoe and kayak rental business next to the RV park and campground that will be entirely band owned and operated.

Before the signing of the Mi'kmaq Education Act in 1998, the Potlotek First Nation has had full responsibility and jurisdiction over their education. Jurisdiction over all educational matters has now been vested in the Potlotek Board of Education.

Potlotek Adult Learning Program offers band members with a diverse learning, such as, revitalizing the skill of harvesting L'nuinpisun (native medicines), an achieved skill from parents through hands on training and oral traditions; Mi'kmaq language (written and oral) Computer skills, Emailing, Power- Point, Excel and Word-Perfect, Budgeting, life skills etc.

The Mi'kmawey School is situated overlooking the Bras D'Or Lake and was officially opened on October 1st, 1998. The school is home to the Potlotek Headstart program as well as grades primary to six. With a school population of 73 students (projected), the Mi'kmawey School boasts itself as one of Nova Scotia's leading First Nation schools in technology. Students at the school have opportunity to receive a quality education from a qualified and enthusiastic staff.



Following Nova Scotia, Department of Education guidelines, students take part in daily Mi'kmaq language courses and have access to the latest in technology.