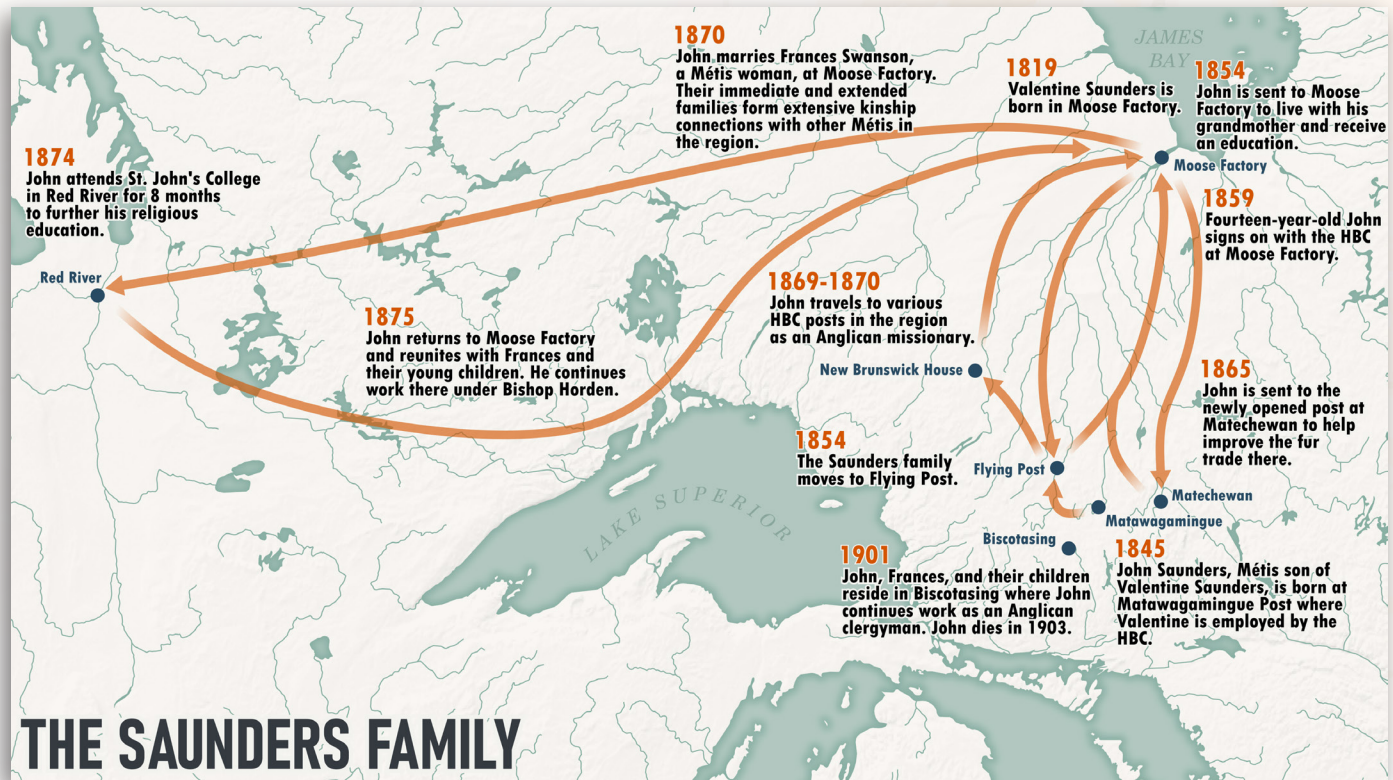


FL3034 The Saunders-Leblanc Family



John Saunders grew up in a lively and mobile Métis household. His father Valentine was born in Moose Factory and joined the Hudson's Bay Company as an apprentice at 15 years old. John and his 17 siblings spent their early years gaining a deep understanding of the Métis world of the fur trade. John was born at Matabagamingue in 1845, an inland post located at Mattagami Lake established to improve the fur trade north of Lake Superior. At Matabagamingue, his father worked as a Middleman for the HBC.

Although it served as the Kenogamissi River District's administrative headquarters between 1822 and 1892, Matabagamingue was a relatively small post with no more than five or six HBC servants and a couple of families at any given time. The two other posts under the Kenogamissi River District were Flying Post and Matabagamingue. Servants at these posts were required to make annual trips to Moose Factory to receive European provisions. Like other posts, Matabagamingue relied on the hunting, fishing, and gathering skills of Métis families to survive.

The Saunders family's movements followed Valentine's work with the HBC. In 1854, the family made the trip about 50 miles north-west to Flying Post, where Valentine worked for the next three decades. The postmaster frequently wrote about Valentine, applauding his generosity, and once commending his ability to snare and then carry 30 frozen hares from his camp to the post. Young John did not remain at Flying Post with his family for long, though. At nine years old, John made the long and challenging canoe journey 500 miles north to Moose Factory, to live with his grandmother. He remained there for two years, and attended the Anglican school run by Reverend John Horden. His attendance at school was often interrupted by the realities of life at the post, when John helped his grandmother hunt and harvest firewood.

At 14 years old, John joined the family business by becoming an apprentice cooper with the HBC at Moose Factory. Over the next seven years, John proved himself a willing and hard worker while also attending the adult school in the evenings to further his education. No stranger to moving around, John was later sent to the newly opened post at Matechewan to help improve the fur trade there. He spent the winter travelling on snowshoes to fur traders' camps in the area to buy furs. But by 1870, John was yearning for change. He left the HBC and joined the Church Mission Society under his old teacher Reverend Horden.

In his new line of work with the Anglican Church, John's Métis heritage meant that he bridged a gap between settler and Indigenous communities. Able to converse in Ojibway, English and Cree, John was sent to Flying Post, where his family still lived, to act as a missionary. Reunited with his family for a short time, John not only spread his faith, but also taught his siblings how to read. John returned to Moose Factory in 1870 where he married Frances Swanson, a member of another prominent Métis fur trading family. In 1872, John's mentor Reverend Horden left for London to be consecrated the first bishop of Moosonee. He left John in charge of conducting religious services at Moose Factory.

Like many Métis, John Saunders travelled throughout the Métis Homeland. In 1874, he left Moose Factory to attend St. Johns College in Red River, Manitoba in order to further his religious education. He remained in Red River for eight months before returning to his wife and young children in Moose Factory. The journey home was not straightforward. The first stage involved a four horse-drawn carriage, followed by a stint on the railway and then a steamer ship on Lake Superior, which took him through Sault Ste. Marie. When John was on the steamer, near Michipicoten, the boat crashed into and sank another steamer, which took the lives of 11 people. Although this particular trip was more harrowing than most, John was certainly no stranger to long journeys.

In 1876, John was ordained as a deacon and left Moose Factory to return to his roots in Matawagamingue, where he was appointed to the newly formed missionary station. He worked for a decade to establish an Anglican presence in the area.

By the late 1800s, the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway created a small economic boom in northern Ontario around communities such as Sudbury and Timmins. Many Métis families who had worked for the Hudson's Bay Company in the Abitibi/Timiskaming region relocated south. John and his family eventually settled in the small lumbering town of Biscotasing, where John continued his work, now as an ordained priest. While here, John translated multiple religious texts into Ojibway to make them more accessible to the Indigenous community.



I. Rev John and Mrs. Sanders, 1890s Credit: Vince Crichton, Chapeau Public Library

II. Reverend John Sanders, 1889. Possibly taken at Biscotasing or Missinabie. Credit: Vince Crichton, Chapeau Public Library

III. John Sanders by Dayna Rainville Credit: provided by Lori Rainville. Timmins Today, Village media

IV. Reverend John Horden. Credit: Warlordjohncarter, Wikimedia Commons