

BACKGROUND**8. Indian Reserves**

A common practice in many colonized countries was to set aside certain lands specifically for its Indigenous peoples. This happened in British Columbia, beginning in colonial times around settled areas.

After BC joined Confederation in 1871, officials worked to allocate Indian Reserves for all First Nations throughout the province. There were two main periods of reserve creation.

Original Reserves were made in the late 1800s. Not surprisingly, First Nations protested being forced to live on Reserves, while at the same time their Indigenous Title was denied.

This led to what is called the McKenna-McBride Commission, between 1913 and 1916. New Reserves were added, but some original reserves were “cut-off” and given back to the province.

Disputes arose because, while the Federal government was responsible for managing “Indian” lands, Indian Reserves would have to come out of provincially controlled land. The province enforced a paltry allocation of acres per person compared with the rest of the country.

Today most First Nations have their main community on the principal reserve for their Band. In some cases this is an ancestral village site, while in others they settled in a new spot within their traditional territories.

Most Bands or First Nations also have additional reserve lands that were created at fishing or other harvesting sites.

In most of the rest of Canada, Indigenous title was recognized by treaties to surrender their

lands. However, the British Columbia government consistently refused to acknowledge Indigenous Rights and Title. Reserves were established with little consultation or compensation.

Being forced to live on reserves caused huge disruptions for First Nations communities. Most Nations had seasonal harvesting patterns that took them around large areas of their traditional territories. Under the Indian Act they had to set up permanent villages in one location, and build European styled homes.

There were many restrictions around who could live on a reserve – only registered Indians who were members of the Band – and even when people could leave the reserve.

The Pass System was originally instituted to control “rebel Indians,” but in many places it extended to all First Nations. People had to get a permit to leave the reserve from the Indian Agent. This system was policy, not a section of the Indian Act. It was not administered consistently, but was largely left to the Indian Agent to administer.

It is important to note that Reserves are not the same as traditional territories. Reserves are tiny parcels of land, sometimes called “postage stamp” sized plots of land.

Territories are all the land that a First Nations has used and cared for over many generations. Also note that reserves are not the same as reservations, which is the term used in the USA.