

Madeline Nora Bernard

A Legacy of Resistance and Resilience



Introduction

Nora Bernard's life was marked by hardship, survival, and an unwavering commitment to justice. Born into a system designed to oppress and erase Indigenous culture and identity, she fought tirelessly to bring to light the truth about the atrocities of the Canadian Indian Residential School system. Her story is one of resilience in the face of systemic challenges. As Canadians work towards reconciliation with Indigenous people, her story has played an important part in bringing awareness of the past and acknowledgement of the harm that has been inflicted.



Early Life and the Impact of Residential Schools

Nora, Mi'kmaq from Millbrook First Nation in Nova Scotia, was born on September 22, 1935. Her life took an unfortunate turn in 1944, when, at the age of nine, she was forcibly taken by an Indian Agent to attend the Shubenacadie Indian Residential School. This was the only Residential school in the Maritimes. Like all Residential Schools across Canada, their mandate was to assimilate Indigenous children into Canadian society, stripping them of their language, culture, and heritage.

Indian Agents, who enforced the oppressive Indian Act, controlled many aspects of Indigenous peoples' lives, including access to education, and the ability to leave the reserve. Agents gave out day passes for anyone wanting to leave the reserve for the day. Nora was born into this system - taken from her community under false pretenses and placed in an institution meant to erase her identity.

Loss of Status and the Indian Act

Under the terms of the Indian Act at the time, Indigenous women who married non-Indigenous men lost their status. In 1955, Nora married a non-Indigenous man, this meant she was no longer recognized as having status by the Canadian government. The consequences of her losing status through marriage meant that her children were not recognized as Mi'kmaq either. In addition, only Status Indians can live in their registered community, this meant that Nora and her children were segregated from her community. She relocated a short distance away but was not allowed to formally live and raise her kids in her community.

In 1985, the *Indian Act* was amended by *Bill C-31*, which allowed Indigenous women who married non-Indigenous men to regain their status. However, this reform came with its own injustices—creating new categories of Indigenous identity, where children born from First Nation and Non-First Nation parents would be classified as 6(2) status or half-status and 6(1) would be considered full status. Despite regaining her status, Nora did not immediately regain acceptance in her community, and it would take decades before she was formally welcomed back.

A Fight for Justice

Nora's greatest contribution was her activism and advocacy for those who had survived the horrors of the Shubenacadie Residential School. In 1987, she began inviting other survivors to her home in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, where they shared their painful stories. These conversations led to the formation of an organization dedicated to representing survivors of the Shubenacadie Residential School. Nora became a tireless advocate, fighting to hold the Canadian government and the Catholic Church accountable for their roles in running these institutions.

Nora's determination and courage resulted in her filing the first class-action lawsuit against the Canadian government. Her efforts not only brought attention to the abuses at Shubenacadie, but also united survivors across Canada and gained national support from organizations like the Assembly of First Nations and Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami. Her advocacy played a key role in the eventual settlement of the Indian Residential Schools Class Action Lawsuit in 2006, which saw \$1.9 billion allocated for the compensation of Residential School Survivors. By 2012, nearly 80,000 survivors received financial compensation for the abuse and trauma they endured.

Legacy and Recognition

Unfortunately, Nora did not live to see the full impact of her hard work and dedication. She tragically passed away on December 26, 2007, just as the settlement was being finalized for disbursement. She did not live to witness the launch of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, nor the official apology from the Federal Government on June 11th, 2008.

Despite her passing, Nora's legacy continued to grow. In 2008, she was posthumously awarded the Order of Nova Scotia in recognition of her lifelong work Residential School Survivors. Her activism and leadership paved the way for other survivors to share their stories and demand justice.

On October 30, 2023, a powerful tribute to Nora's legacy took place. A street in Halifax was renamed from Cornwallis Street to Nora Bernard Street, honoring her life's work and her enduring impact Mi'kmaq people and Survivors. Nora's story serves as a reminder that the struggle for justice is ongoing, and through determination, resilience, and solidarity, change is possible.



Residential School Legacy and Timeline in Mi'kma'ki

1726 –

Peace and Friendship Treaty is Signed.

1752 –

Peace and Friendship Treaty amended and signed by Chief Jean-Baptiste Cope.

1763 –

Royal Proclamation; established legal framework for dealing with First Nations.

1779 –

Final ratification of *Peace and Friendship Treaty*.

1867 –

British North America Act, Canada is formed.

1857 –

Gradual Civilization Act was created with the goal to encourage Indigenous people to adopt a “civilized” life and abandon their traditional lifestyle

1831 –

First Residential School is opened - Mohawk Indian Residential School opens in Brantford, Ontario.

1869 –

Gradual Enfranchisement Act: established a legal definition of “Indian” and introduced policies to assimilate Indigenous peoples into Canadian society to encourage Indigenous people to adopt a “civilized” life and abandon their traditional lifestyle.

1876 –

Indian Act is created and enforced.

1885 –

Indian Act is amended to prohibit ceremonial practices.

1920 –

Mandatory for kids ages 7-15 to attend Residential Schools.

1930 –

February 5th, Shubenacadie Indian Residential School is founded.

1951 –

Ceremonial practices are allowed; First Nation women are allowed to part of Band council.

1961 –

First Nations can vote without giving up their Status.

1967 –

Shubenacadie Indian Residential School is closed.

1981 –

Constitution Act amended to affirm Indigenous rights in Canada.

2009 –

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) is launched.

1985 –

Bill C-31: Amendment to the Indian Act, women who married out regain their Status (creates a new system of who is and isn't status).

2008 –

Nora Bernard posthumously receives Order of Nova Scotia.

2008 –

June 11th, Federal Government apologies for the Residential School system.

1996 –

RCAP (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples) final report is released and called for public inquiry on the impacts of Residential Schools.

2005 –

AFN announced class action against Government of Canada over the legacy of Residential Schools practices.

1996 -

Nora Bernard files class action suit.

1998 –

Aboriginal Healing Foundation is founded.

2015 -

June, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) released the *94 Calls to Action*.

2022 -

July 25th, Pope Francis visits Maskwacîs, Alberta recognises the abuses experienced at Residential Schools the Residential School system.

2023 -

On October 30th, Halifax Street renamed to Nora Bernard Street. Canada over the legacy of Residential Schools practices.

References

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