

The Origin of the Name Manitoba

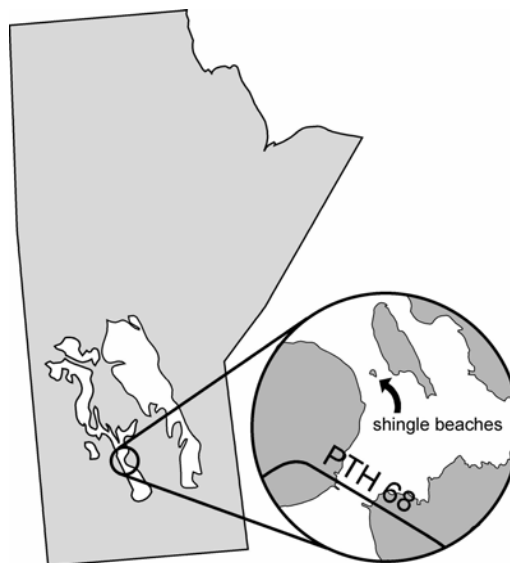
*The Narrows of Lake Manitoba
(on PTH 68, 60 km west of the junction of
PTHs 6 and 68)*

The name *Manitoba* originated in the languages of the Aboriginal people who lived on the Prairies and travelled the waters of Lake Manitoba.

These people, the Cree and Assiniboin First Nations, introduced European explorers, traders and settlers to the region and its waterways. They also passed on to the newcomers the ancient names and poetic legends associated with the places they inhabited. More than two centuries of contact and trade between the Europeans and First Nations produced a blending of their languages. From Aboriginal name and legend to official title of the province, the evolution of the name *Manitoba* mirrors the history of the region.

At the Lake Manitoba Narrows a strong wind can send waves washing against the limestone rocks of an offshore island. The unique sound from the waves is said to be the Manitou, or Great Spirit (in Ojibway, “Manito-bau”). The legend survives in the Province’s name – Manitoba.

Thomas Spence, leader of the Canadian settlement near Portage la Prairie, was the first person to use the word *Manitoba* in reference to both the lake and surrounding territory. By 1858 the population of the Portage community had grown to the point where it needed a municipal organization of its own. In 1868, Spence and others at the settlement formed a provisional government and announced to the British Colonial Office that the district was to be known as the *Republic of Manitobah*. The government was not recognized, but the name endured.



During the Red River Resistance of 1869-70, Spence joined Louis Riel’s Métis Council. In the spring of 1870, delegates from this council were sent to Ottawa to negotiate the transfer of Red River to the Government of Canada. The List of Rights they carried to the meeting stated that the new province would be called Assiniboia, a name given to the area by Lord Selkirk. But Riel had misgivings about the name. On April 19, 1870 he sent the following letter of instructions to his delegate, Father Noël-Joseph Ritchot:

The name of the country is already written in all hearts, that of Red River. Fancy delights in that of ‘Manitoba’, but the situation seems to demand that of ‘North-West.’ Friends of the old government are pleased with that of Assiniboia (but) it is not generally enough liked to be kept. Choose one of the two names ‘Manitoba’ or ‘North-West.’

On May 2, 1870, Sir John A. Macdonald announced that a new province was to enter Confederation under *The Manitoba Act*. He said the province’s name had been chosen for its pleasant sound and its associations with the original inhabitants of the area.

Both the Cree and Assiniboin terms, and the legends and events associated with their use, are preserved forever in the name *Manitoba*. A plaque commemorating its origin is located on the east side of the Lake Manitoba Narrows.