

# Mi'kmaq Grand Chiefs

## Grand Chief Membertou



Grand Chief Membertou was born around 1510 and lived in the St. Mary's Bay area. He served as Mi'kmaq grand chief from 1550 until his death in 1611.

Grand Chief Membertou and his family were among the first to greet the Europeans. Father Biard, a Jesuit who was with the French in Acadia, described Membertou in the following way:

...the greatest most renowned and most formidable savage within the memory of man; of splendid physique, taller and larger limbed than is usual among them; . . . bearded like a Frenchman, although scarcely any of the others have hair upon their chin, grave and reserved feeling a proper sense of dignity for his position as commander.

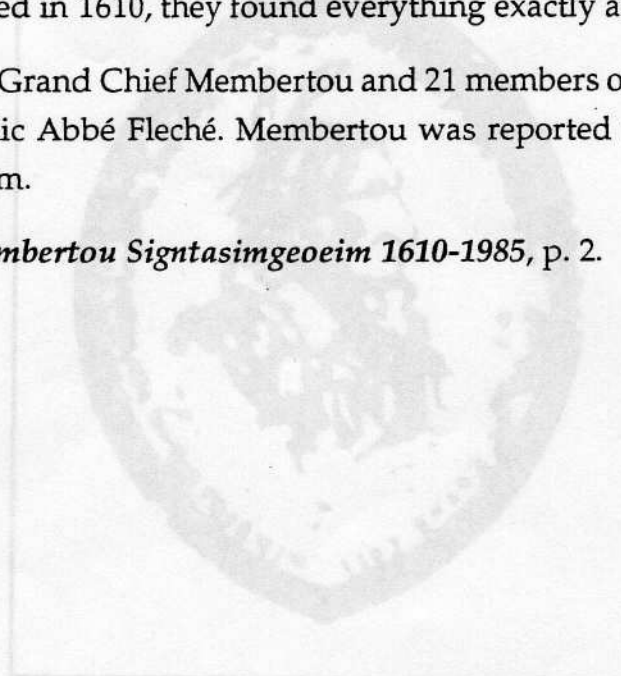
Historical references speak with reverence of the loyalty of Chief Membertou. Marc Escarbot, a Parisian lawyer and writer, described him as follows:

...having sufficient power to harangue, advise and lead his people to war, to render justice to one who has grievance, and like matters. He does not impose taxes upon the people but if there are profits from the chase, he has a share of them, without being obligated to take part in it.

Membertou was trusted and greatly respected as was indicated when the Port Royal Habitation was left in his care when the French lost the charter of Acadia in 1607. When the French returned in 1610, they found everything exactly as they had left it.

On June 24, 1610, Grand Chief Membertou and 21 members of his family were baptized by Roman Catholic Abbé Fleché. Membertou was reported to be 100 years old at the time of his baptism.

Source: *375th Membertou Signtasimgeoeim 1610-1985*, p. 2.



## PROFILES OF GRAND CHIEFS

	<b>Home Community</b>	<b>Dates of Tenure</b>	<b>Respected Personal Qualities</b>	<b>Key Accomplishments</b>
<b>Grand Chief Membertou</b>				
<b>Grand Chief John Denny, Jr.</b>				
<b>Grand Chief Gabriel Sylliboy</b>				
<b>Grand Chief Donald Marshall, Sr.</b>				



## Grand Chief John Denny, Jr.



John Denny, Jr. was the son of Mi'kmaq Grand Chief John Denny and Elizabeth Marshall Denny. He was the great-grandson of Grand Chief Toma Dennis. He was born on the Eskasoni Reserve in 1841. It is said that John Denny, Jr. was baptized by a priest from Red Island, Cape Breton.

John Denny, Jr. inherited the grand chieftaincy of the Dennis family on his father's death in 1881. When he became grand chief, John Denny, Jr. was already a renowned Mi'kmaq prayer and choir leader as well as a reader of Mi'kmaq hieroglyphics.

John Denny, Jr. took his role as grand chief very seriously and recognized that his territory was quite extensive. He visited many Mi'kmaq communities. In 1904 at Indianbrook Reserve, near the town of Shubenacadie, he attended a high mass celebrated by the bishop of St. John, assisted by Father R.P. Pacifique. During that mass 29 children were confirmed in the church. In June, 1910, Grand Chief John Denny, Jr. visited the Restigouche Reserve with a group of his chiefs to take part in the 300th anniversary of Grand Chief Membertou's baptism.

Each year Grand Chief Denny summoned his Grand Council and chiefs to the Chapel Island area. This was a time for the Grand Council to get together and take care of the different matters that involved all Mi'kmaq. Denny was careful to follow the traditions of the people, with great attention to detail.

The Grand Council met in a special tepee and, as they sat in a circle, each man took a turn in smoking the pipe of peace. They spent their time talking about the hunting and fishing of the previous year, about tribal laws concerning lands and local government, and about complaints, grievances and disputes.

It has been said that Grand Chief Denny conducted his meetings with great solemnity and dignity. After the official discussions were finished, he read the wampum belt (Inapsgog). To mark the closing of the formal business, a communal meal was served. This was followed with dancing and chanting by the whole camp.

Grand Chief John Denny, Jr. was praised for his religious contribution to the construction of the Holy Family Church on the Eskasoni Reserve. The church was completed and blessed by Father Pacifique on October 9, 1910.

Grand Chief Denny served the Mi'kmaq people faithfully for 37 years. He died on April 12, 1918 at the age of 77, the last of the Mi'kmaq hereditary grand chiefs.

Source: *Micmac Hymnal* p. 48

## Grand Chief Gabriel J. Sylliboy



Gabriel J. Sylliboy was born on the Whycomomagh Reserve on August 16, 1874. His parents were John and Mary Barrington Sylliboy. He was baptized by Father K.J. MacDonald in St. John the Baptist Church at Brook Village, Cape Breton.

Gabriel was to become the first Mi'kmaq to be elected to the position of grand chief. Prior to his election, Gabriel was a renowned Mi'kmaq religious leader, and held the position of grand captain in the Mi'kmaq Grand Council.

The Grand Council found itself in a very unusual position during its annual meeting at Chapel Island in August, 1918. They had just lost their grand chief, John Denny, Jr., who had advised his sons not to accept the hereditary chieftaincy. For the first time in its history, the Grand Council did not have an heir-apparent for the position of grand chief.

The demands of the position of grand chief were many, and so was the sanctity by which the grand chief had to live. The council had a responsibility to select a man who was worthy, as well as willing to abide by the guidelines.

A motion was put forward to elect a successor, and so six candidates were considered: Stephen Paul of Barra Head; Gabriel Sylliboy of Whycomomagh; Samuel Joe of Malagawatch; Isadore Pierro of Wagmatcook; Frank Gould of Eskasoni; Joe C. Marshall of Membertou.

Captain Gabriel J. Sylliboy was elected grand chief of the Mi'kmaq nation on August 1, 1919, at the age of 44. To mark the event, a high mass was celebrated that Sunday. Wearing a white cape and the grand chief's medallion, Gabriel was asked to kneel before the altar. Chief Joseph Julien of Millbrook and Chief Matthew Francis of Pictou Landing



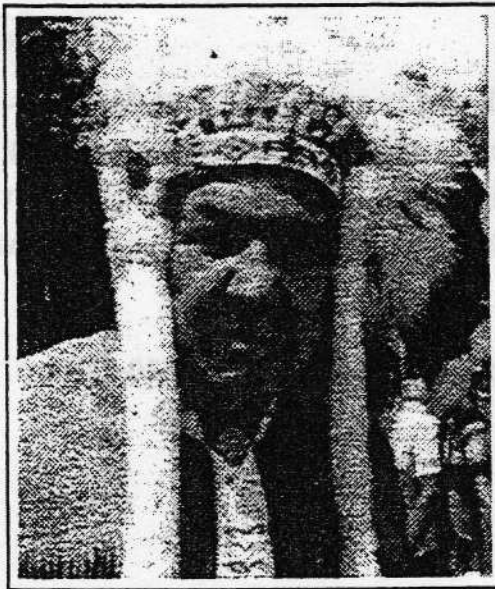
served as witnesses to the grand chief's induction to the lifetime position. Gabriel promised Father Pacifique that he would serve the Mi'kmaq people and his church faithfully. Following the mass, Gabriel gave his maiden speech in a style that earned him acclaim as a master of Mi'kmaq oratory.

In 1957 on Chapel Island, Grand Chief Sylliboy dedicated a monument, a rock which had been carried to the island from the surrounding waters. The rock was hollowed out and a crucifix fixed on top. It was dedicated as a shrine to Saint Anne, the Mi'kmaq patron saint and beloved grandmother since 1630.

Grand Chief Gabriel J. Sylliboy died in 1963.

Source: *Micmac Hymnal*, p. 49

## *Grand Chief Donald Marshall, Sr.*



Donald Marshall, Sr. was born at the Old King's Road Reserve in Sydney, Nova Scotia, on May 28, 1925. His parents were Joseph Charles and Margaret Stevens Marshall.

In 1926, the federal government relocated Mi'kmaq people living on the King's Road Reserve to the Membertou Reserve in Sydney. The Marshall family, which included twelve children, moved to Membertou at that time.

Donald was a member of the Mi'kmaq Grand Council at the time that Gabriel J. Sylliboy was grand chief. The two men worked closely together and became very close friends. Donald took his responsibilities as captain seriously, and worked hard to represent Membertou.

When Grand Chief Gabriel J. Sylliboy became ill, he asked to see Donald. It was then that the dying grand chief predicted that Donald would be his successor. After his death, the Sylliboy family asked Donald to keep the grand chief's medal until the Grand Council met to elect a new chief.

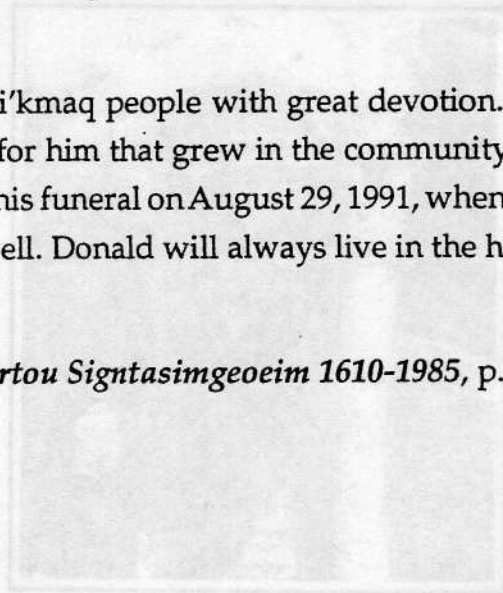
When Donald joined the Grand Council meeting on July 26, 1964, he found that he was among the men being considered to succeed Grand Chief Sylliboy. The Grand Council put forward five candidates, and it was then that Captain Donald Marshall, became grand chief of the Mi'kmaq nation.



Membertou Reserve hosted a celebration to mark the occasion. Donald received many gifts from his people. Among them was a traditional Mi'kmaq outfit presented by Afton Reserve Ladies' Club.

Donald served the Mi'kmaq people with great devotion. He died on August 25, 1991. The respect and love for him that grew in the community during his 27 years as grand chief were evident at his funeral on August 29, 1991, when hundreds of Mi'kmaq people gathered to say farewell. Donald will always live in the hearts of the people who knew him as grand chief.

Source: *375th Membertou Signtasimgeoeim 1610-1985*, p. 13.



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