

## **The First Metis Premier John Norquay, M.L.A., Premier of Manitoba (1878-1887).**

John Norquay was born on May 8, 1841 in the Parish of St. Andrews. His parents were John Norquay and Isabella Truthwaite. His paternal grandfather, Oman Norquay, came from the Orkneys to Hudson's Bay and married Jean Morwick, the Metis daughter of another Orkneyman. His maternal grandmother, Elizabeth Vincent, was the daughter of a Metis woman and an HBC officer.



John was the fifth of six children. At the age of two years, his mother died and his paternal grandmother, Mrs James Spence took care of him. His father died six years later in 1849. He attended school at the Parish of St. John's. He became a protégé of David Anderson, the Bishop of Rupert's Land, who provided him with odd jobs and who awarded him a scholarship for general proficiency in 1854, thus he was able to continue his studies at St. John's College. He studied Greek and Latin and became fluent in French. At that time the Church Missionary Society encouraged the learning of Indian languages thus, John learned Cree, Sauteaux and a little Sioux. John Norquay remained active in the Church of England and from 1875 on was an elected representative to the synod of the Rupert's Land diocese.

At seventeen, he obtained a position in the Parish School of St. James, and then taught at Park Creek School (now Parkdale). About this time, June 2, 1862, he married Elizabeth Setter, also a Half-Breed, and the daughter of George Setter who ran Manitoba House in 1849. In 1866, they moved to High Bluff near Portage la Prairie and John took up farming. He also traded furs on Lake Manitoba and even had a small store located at Kinosota. Elizabeth Norquay recalls:

*We worked hard, we did not have much but our needs were simple. I had never believed we could live on fish, as we had to do when the grasshoppers came and ate everything green. We moved from our farm at High Bluff before our flour supply was all used, to Lake Manitoba, so that we could get fish. We mixed our flour with fish and made fish rolls. There was a salt spring there and the people used to make salt and sell it. Salt was scarce so we preserved our meet by drying. Sugar was scarce too so we had no cakes or pies and we preserved our berries by drying. We would dry them in a cake and when we wanted some for the table we would break off a piece and add sugar to it. The women used to pound chokecherries and put them with the pemmican, just as we used currant jelly with mutton.<sup>1</sup>*

The couple had eight children between 1863 and 1881. Their last child, Theodora, died in infancy.

Norquay was not directly involved in the Resistance of 1869-70 although he did attend several of the public meetings concerning the Provisional Government. He also signed the election certificate of his cousin, also John Norquay, who was elected to Riel's Provisional Government.

On December 27, 1870 the constituent's of High Bluff elected Norquay by acclamation to serve in Manitoba's first Legislative Assembly. He made one attempt at federal election in 1872 in Marquette riding and was defeated by Robert Cunningham. Cunningham, who was born in Scotland, was a strong supporter of the Metis community. He supported Louis Riel and a general amnesty for those involved in the Red River Resistance as well as land reforms for the Metis.

From about 1874 to the early 1880s, the Norquay family lived on a small farm in St. Andrews just north of Winnipeg. Given his high standing in the Anglican Church and among the English Half-Breeds, he was elected from St. Andrews in 1874 and retained the seat until his death in 1899.

In the legislature, Norquay defended the rights of the Metis and Half-Breeds citing their contributions in the west. His moderate stance on most social issues led to promotion in the Assembly and he was appointed to succeed Robert Atkinson Davis as Premier in November 1878. He sought a new mandate on December 18, 1878 and was re-elected, but won his own riding by only eight votes. Although he was a Conservative in federal politics, he resisted the introduction of federal party lines into Manitoba, because he felt that a non-partisan approach would further his negotiations with Ottawa. Norquay was re-elected in the general election of December 9, 1886. In September of 1887 his government was accused of using the trust funds set aside for Metis children as general revenue. Norquay, against the wishes of Sir John A. Macdonald promoted a rail link with the United States, the Red River Valley Railroad. His government went ahead and paid \$256,000 compensation to the CPR, then the Prime Minister disallowed the land transfer. Norquay was then forced to resign on December 23, 1887. In the 1888 election the

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<sup>1</sup> W.J. Healy, *Women of Red River*, Winnipeg: The Canadian Women's Book Club, 1923.

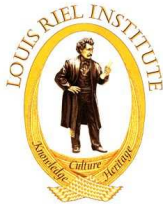
Liberals had a landslide victory, however Norquay retained his seat in the Kildonan riding.

One year before his death in 1899, John Norquay is credited with making the first ascent of the peak that carries his name. Mount Norquay is a 2,522-metre mountain located in the Canadian Rockies near the town of Banff, Alberta. In reality he did not actually reach the summit due to health problems.

#### *References*

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