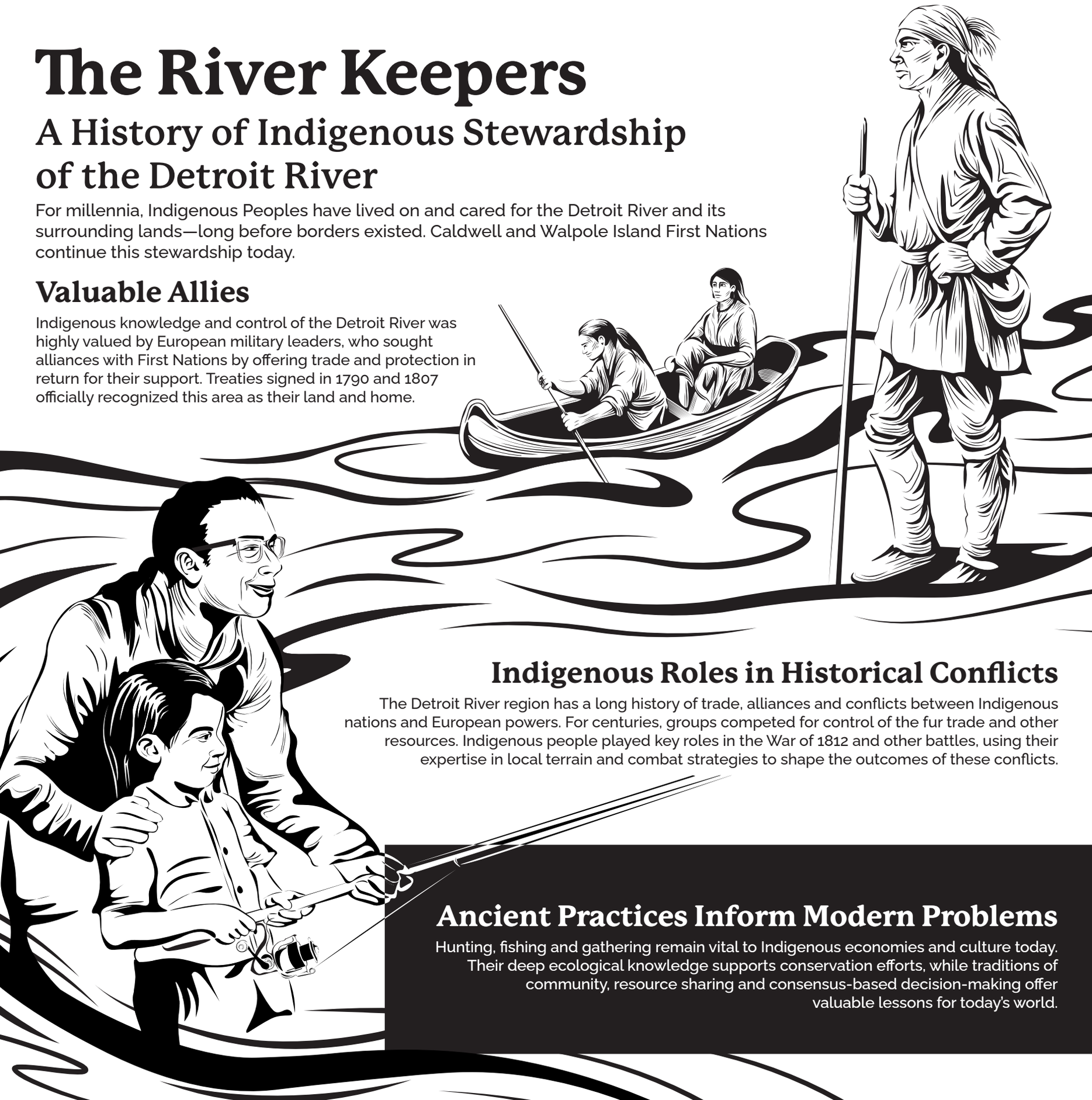
The River Keepers

A History of Indigenous Stewardship of the Detroit River

For millennia, Indigenous Peoples have lived on and cared for the Detroit River and its surrounding lands—long before borders existed. Caldwell and Walpole Island First Nations continue this stewardship today.

Valuable Allies

Indigenous knowledge and control of the Detroit River was highly valued by European military leaders, who sought alliances with First Nations by offering trade and protection in return for their support. Treaties signed in 1790 and 1807 officially recognized this area as their land and home.



Indigenous Roles in Historical Conflicts

The Detroit River region has a long history of trade, alliances and conflicts between Indigenous nations and European powers. For centuries, groups competed for control of the fur trade and other resources. Indigenous people played key roles in the War of 1812 and other battles, using their expertise in local terrain and combat strategies to shape the outcomes of these conflicts.

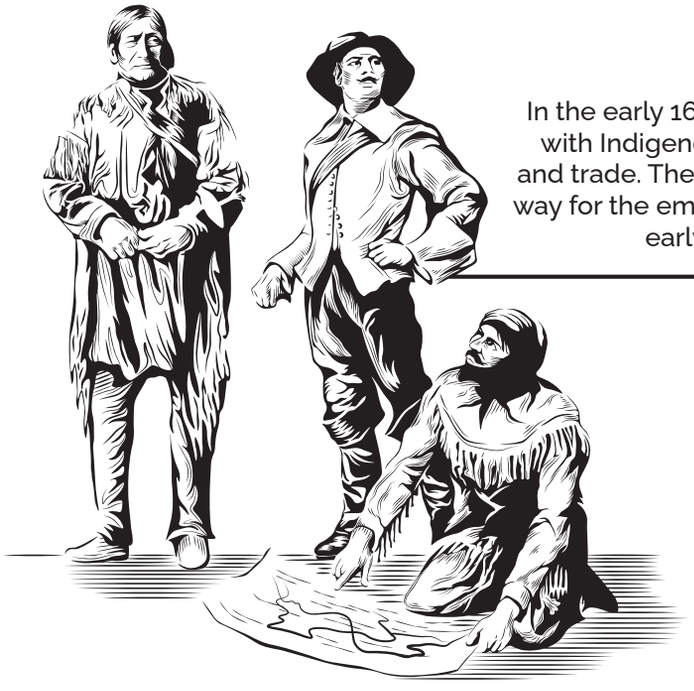
Ancient Practices Inform Modern Problems

Hunting, fishing and gathering remain vital to Indigenous economies and culture today. Their deep ecological knowledge supports conservation efforts, while traditions of community, resource sharing and consensus-based decision-making offer valuable lessons for today's world.

Coureurs des Bois
Runners of the Woods

Legendary Figures of the North American Fur Trade

The *coureurs des bois* were independent French-Canadian fur traders who travelled deep into the wilderness to trade with Indigenous Peoples in the 1600s. They contributed to exploration, the building of alliances with Indigenous Peoples and the founding of settlements in the Great Lakes region, including the Windsor area.

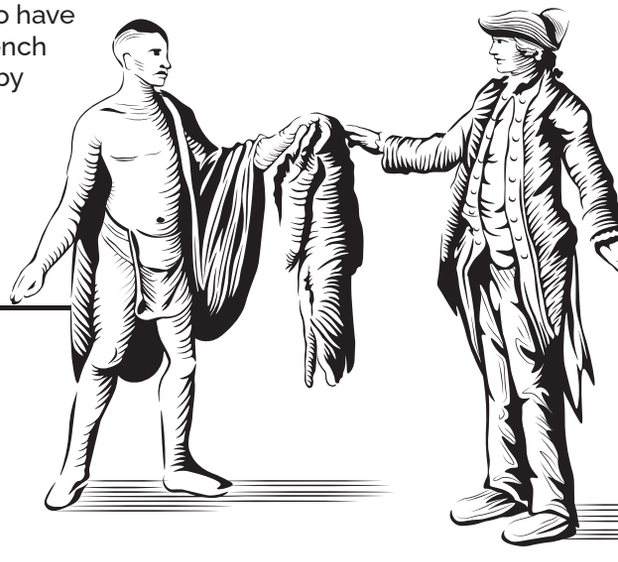


Marriage à la Façon du Pays

In the early 1600s, New France founder Samuel du Champlain encouraged French boys to live with Indigenous groups to learn their languages, customs and skills, which fostered alliances and trade. The practice was also taken up by grown men, and this cultural exchange paved the way for the emergence of the *coureurs des bois* and the *voyageurs* that followed. Many of these early French fur traders married Indigenous partners, giving rise to the Métis culture.

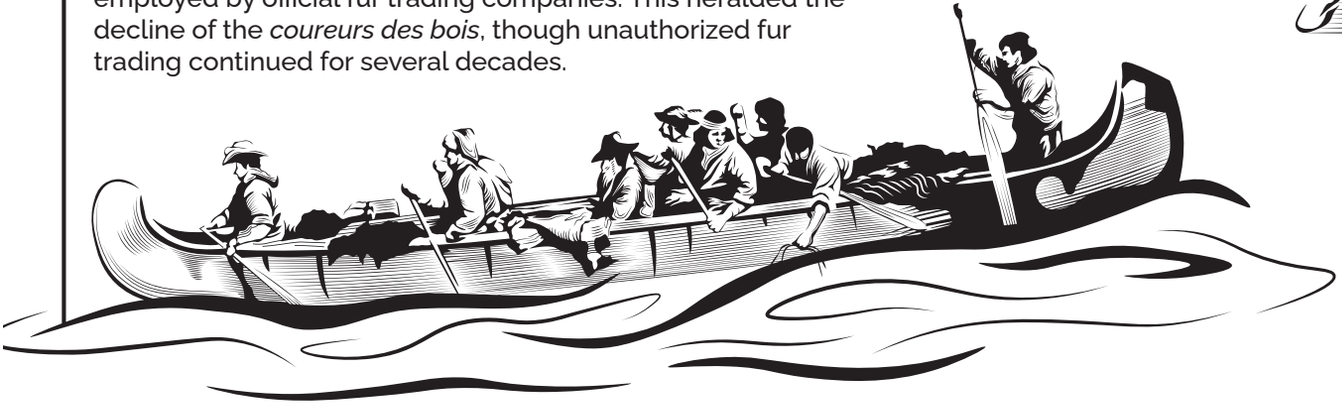
Rise of the Independent Fur Traders

In the mid-1600s, many officials preferred to have Indigenous people bring furs directly to French merchants, so individual entrepreneurship by the *coureurs des bois* was discouraged. Nonetheless, this life of freedom and exploration continued to attract hundreds of men. The number of *coureurs des bois* peaked in the late 1600s as settlers flocked to the "New World."



Replacement with Company *Voyageurs*

In 1681, officials began issuing licences known as *congés* to *voyageurs* employed by official fur trading companies. This heralded the decline of the *coureurs des bois*, though unauthorized fur trading continued for several decades.



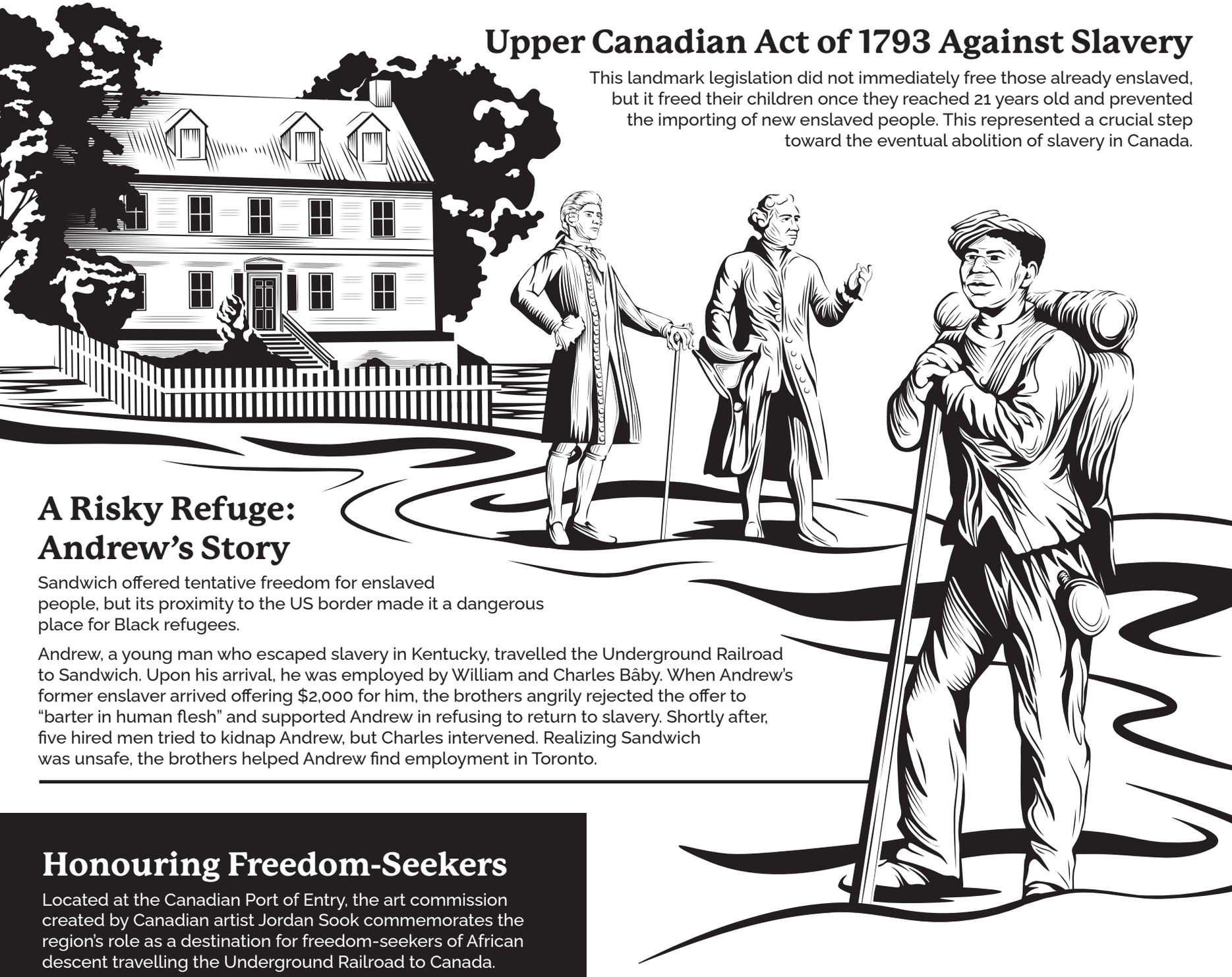
French Roots

Many *coureurs des bois* settled in the Windsor area, directly influencing the use of French language through the area.

Seeking Sanctuary

A History of Slavery and Freedom in Sandwich

Sandwich was a site of enslavement in the 18th century, but after a change in Canadian legislation surrounding slavery, it became a haven for African-descent freedom-seekers in the 19th century.



Upper Canadian Act of 1793 Against Slavery

This landmark legislation did not immediately free those already enslaved, but it freed their children once they reached 21 years old and prevented the importing of new enslaved people. This represented a crucial step toward the eventual abolition of slavery in Canada.

A Risky Refuge: Andrew's Story

Sandwich offered tentative freedom for enslaved people, but its proximity to the US border made it a dangerous place for Black refugees.

Andrew, a young man who escaped slavery in Kentucky, travelled the Underground Railroad to Sandwich. Upon his arrival, he was employed by William and Charles Bâby. When Andrew's former enslaver arrived offering $2,000 for him, the brothers angrily rejected the offer to "barter in human flesh" and supported Andrew in refusing to return to slavery. Shortly after, five hired men tried to kidnap Andrew, but Charles intervened. Realizing Sandwich was unsafe, the brothers helped Andrew find employment in Toronto.

Honouring Freedom-Seekers

Located at the Canadian Port of Entry, the art commission created by Canadian artist Jordan Sook commemorates the region's role as a destination for freedom-seekers of African descent travelling the Underground Railroad to Canada.

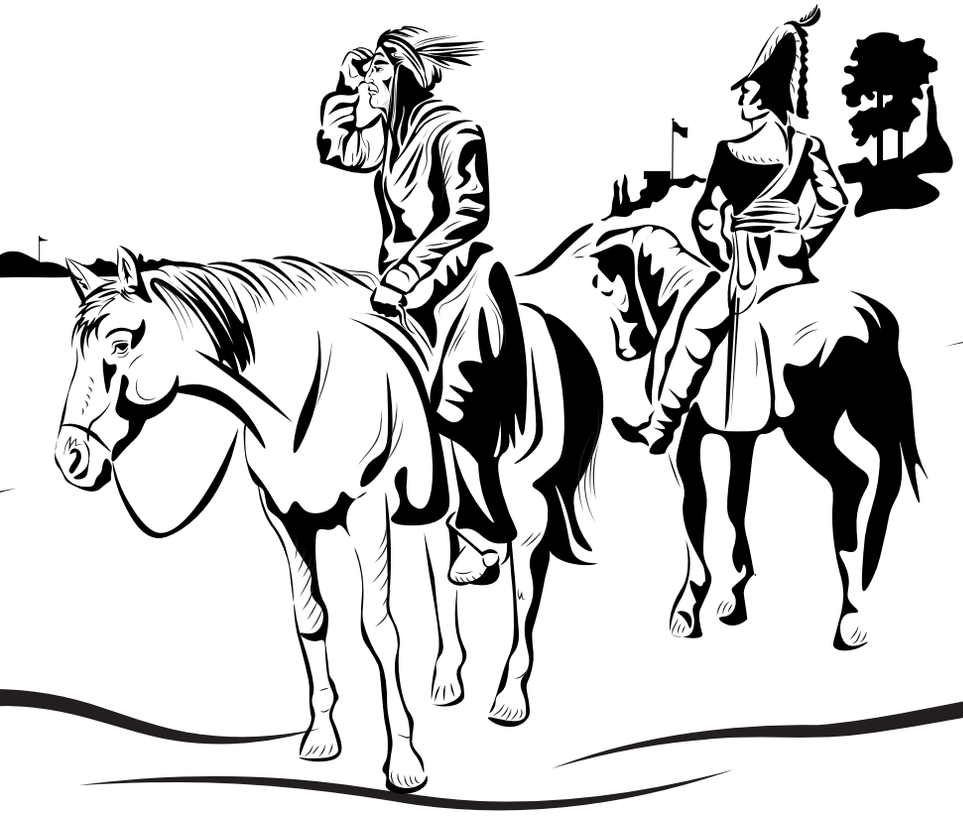
The War of 1812

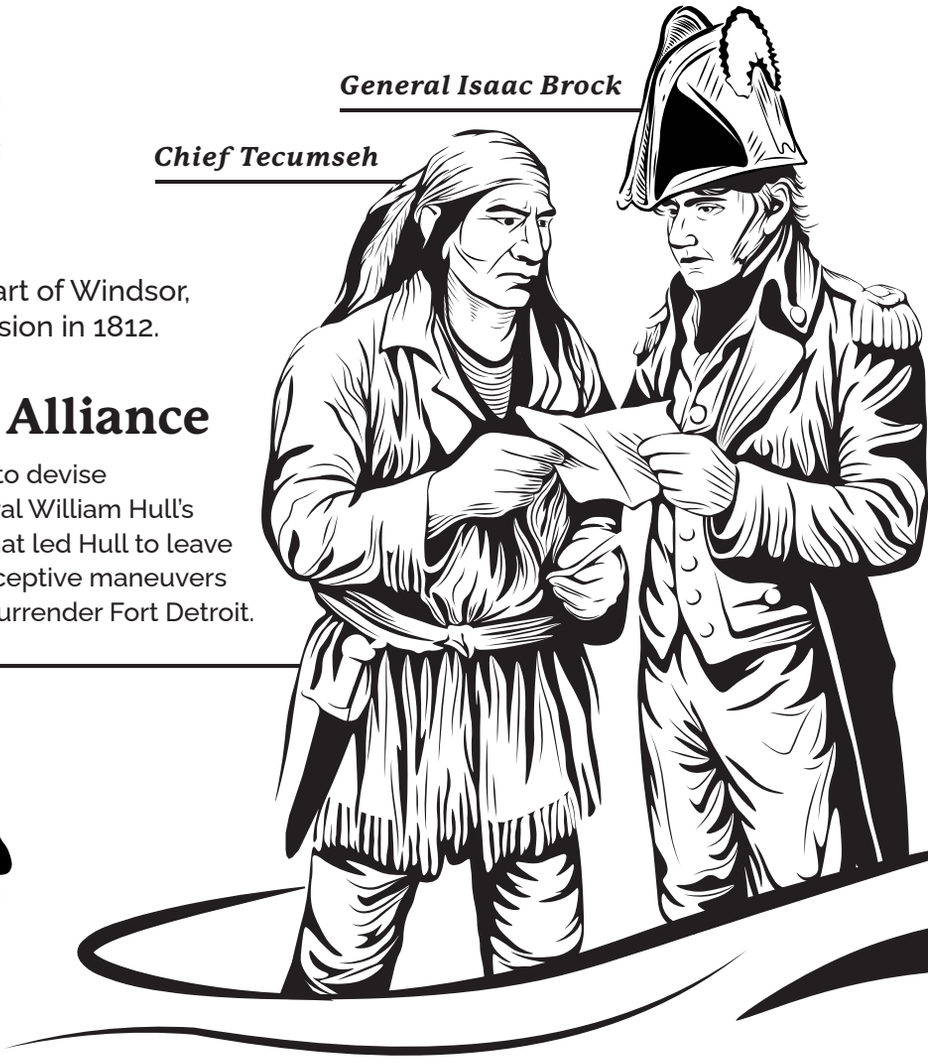
The Defence of Sandwich

The village of Sandwich in Southwestern Upper Canada (now part of Windsor, Ontario) was a key defensive location against the American invasion in 1812.

An Effective Indigenous and British Alliance

Chief Tecumseh and his warriors allied with British General Isaac Brock to devise clever strategies for American surrender. Following the American General William Hull's invasion of Sandwich, they allowed false messages to be intercepted that led Hull to leave Sandwich and retreat to Fort Detroit. Tecumseh's warriors then used deceptive maneuvers in the forests to create the illusion of a larger force, convincing Hull to surrender Fort Detroit.





The Treaty of Ghent

The War of 1812 officially ended with the signing of the Treaty of Ghent in 1814. Upper and Lower Canada remained part of British North America. The brave defence of the region by Métis, First Nations and local militias inspired a sense of national identity.

The Aftermath of War

Much of Sandwich was devastated during the war, as opposing forces destroyed buildings and crops to prevent valuable resources from falling into enemy hands. Many supply chains were also cut off, and the settlers in the region suffered greatly from poverty and famine.

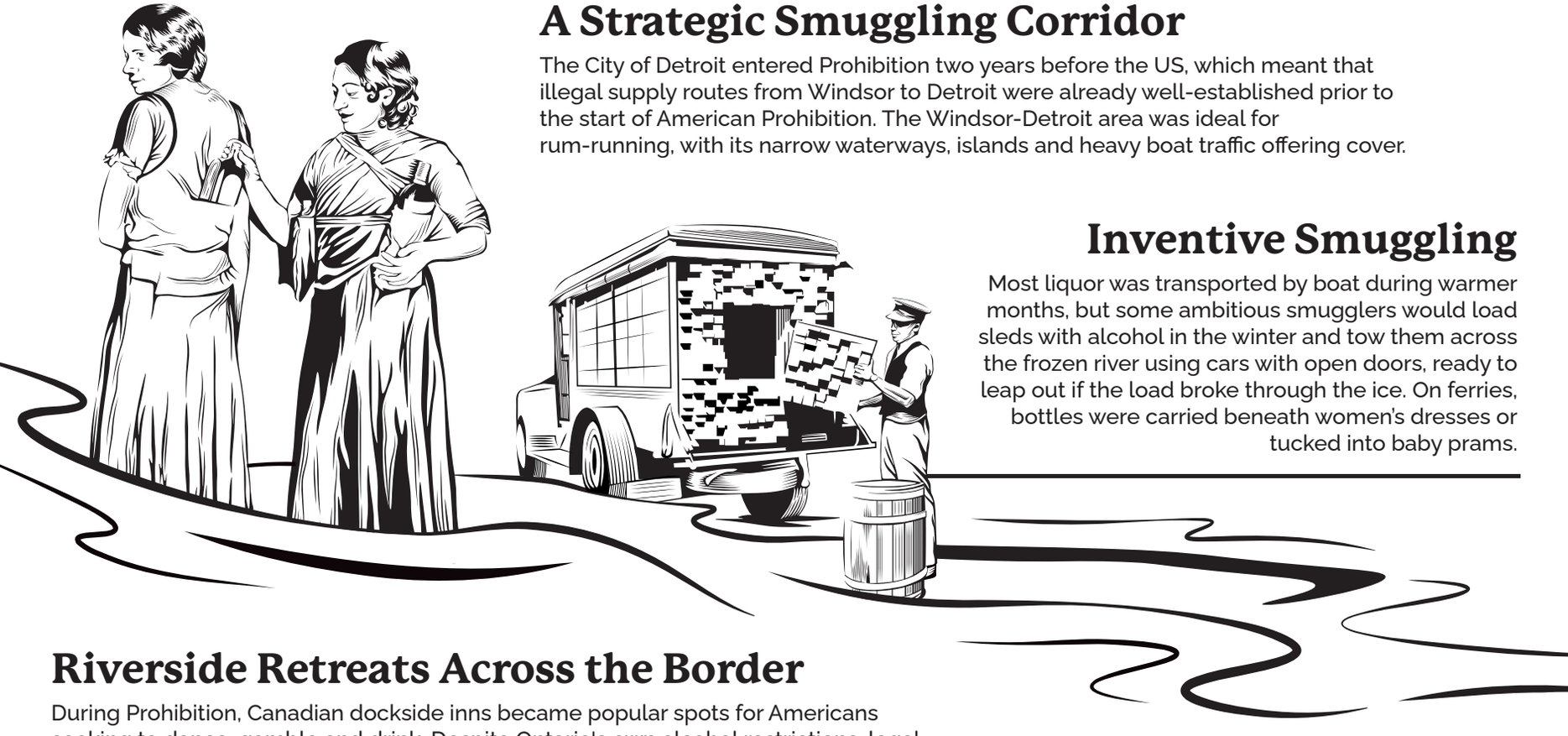
The Duff-Bâby Mansion

Although the war destroyed most of the original town site, the Duff-Bâby Mansion, used as a headquarters for both sides, still stands. During the house's 1995 restoration, archaeologists discovered over 75,000 historic artifacts.

Prohibition Paradise

Rum-Running Over the Windsor-Detroit Border

During American Prohibition (1920 to 1933), an astonishing 75% of all alcohol entering the US crossed illegally through the Windsor-Detroit border.



A Strategic Smuggling Corridor

The City of Detroit entered Prohibition two years before the US, which meant that illegal supply routes from Windsor to Detroit were already well-established prior to the start of American Prohibition. The Windsor-Detroit area was ideal for rum-running, with its narrow waterways, islands and heavy boat traffic offering cover.

Inventive Smuggling

Most liquor was transported by boat during warmer months, but some ambitious smugglers would load sleds with alcohol in the winter and tow them across the frozen river using cars with open doors, ready to leap out if the load broke through the ice. On ferries, bottles were carried beneath women's dresses or tucked into baby prams.

Riverside Retreats Across the Border

During Prohibition, Canadian dockside inns became popular spots for Americans seeking to dance, gamble and drink. Despite Ontario's own alcohol restrictions, legal loopholes allowed these establishments to thrive. Many law enforcement officers turned a blind eye, accepting bribes and free drinks instead of shutting them down.



Vigilante Justice in Sandwich

Outraged by police inaction, Reverend Leslie Spracklin took matters into his own hands in 1920. Leading a goon squad backed by Ontario's Attorney General William Raney, the "Trigger-Happy Pastor" stirred up trouble along the river. His crusade ended in a deadly showdown with Babe Trumble, owner of a local tavern, whom he shot and killed. Though he was acquitted, the incident ended his vigilante campaign.

A Haven for Migratory Birds

Overwintering on the Detroit River

Huge numbers of waterfowl, most notably Canvasbacks, Redheads, Greater Scaups, Common Goldeneyes and Common Mergansers, rely on open waters in the Detroit River to survive the winter.

An Open Water Santuary

The Detroit River's strong current and warm water discharge from Windsor and Detroit keep it from completely freezing, making it a vital winter habitat for hundreds of thousands of waterfowl. When the cold is so extreme that nearby Lake St. Clair and portions of the St. Clair River and Detroit River freeze over, even greater numbers of waterfowl flock to remaining stretches of open water downstream of Windsor.



Raptors' Winter Feast

Peregrine Falcons and Bald Eagles are often attracted to these large flocks of overwintering waterfowl, which can provide a valuable wintertime food supply for these aerial predators.

The Detroit River Christmas Bird Count

Established in 1978, the Detroit River Christmas Bird Count is a binational initiative to track overwintering bird populations. In addition to monitoring species fluctuations, the data helps assess the effects of habitat changes and environmental threats, serving as an indicator of ecosystem health. A total of 35 bird species have been consistently counted during the annual events.

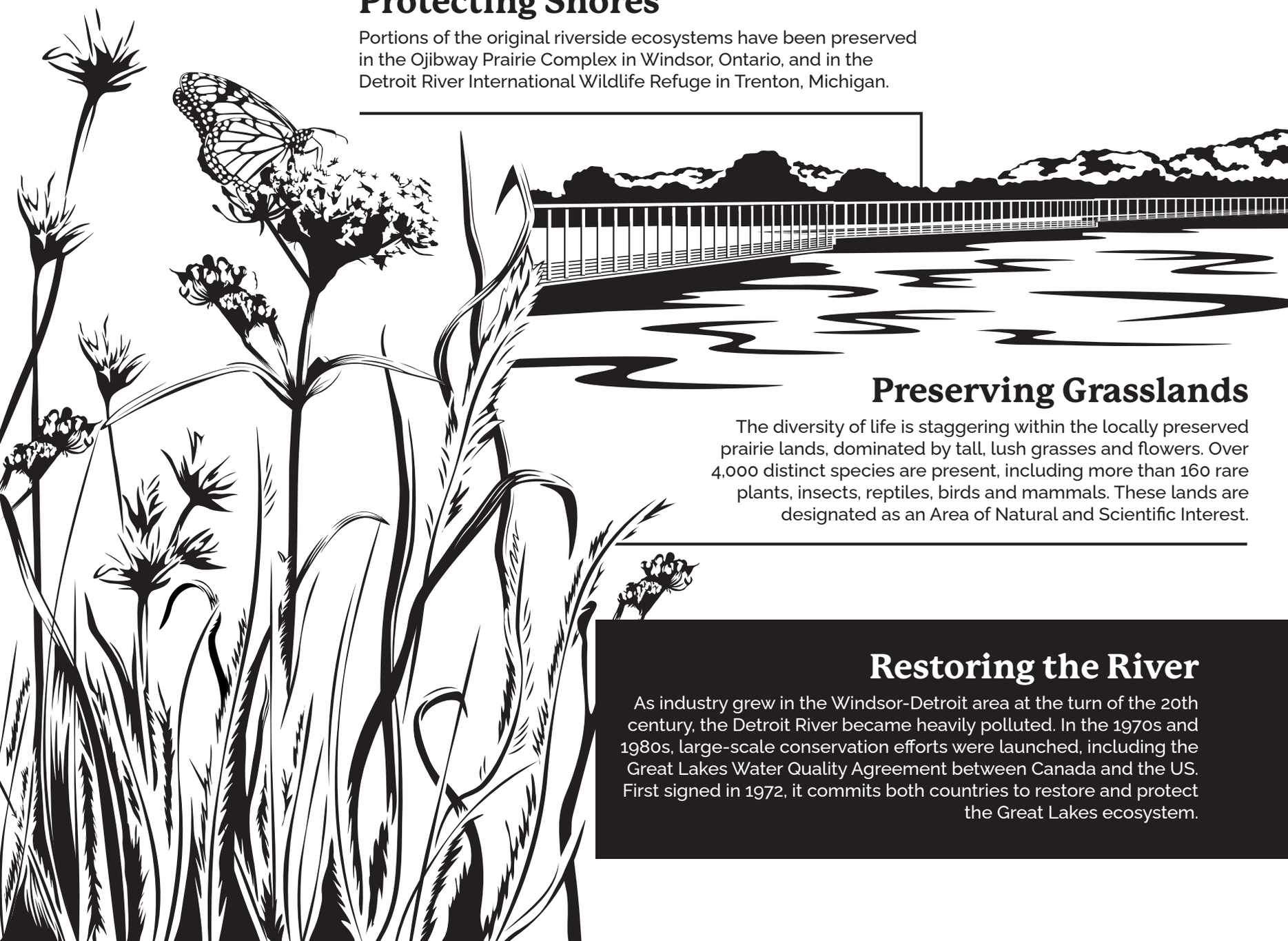
From Polluted Past to Protected Future

Preserving the Detroit River's Diverse Ecosystems

Since European settlers arrived, human-made changes to the Detroit River's shoreline and channels have affected water quality and removed much of the once-thriving prairies and wetlands. Today, numerous organizations are working to protect the remaining pieces of these valuable ecosystems.

Protecting Shores

Portions of the original riverside ecosystems have been preserved in the Ojibway Prairie Complex in Windsor, Ontario, and in the Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge in Trenton, Michigan.



Preserving Grasslands

The diversity of life is staggering within the locally preserved prairie lands, dominated by tall, lush grasses and flowers. Over 4,000 distinct species are present, including more than 160 rare plants, insects, reptiles, birds and mammals. These lands are designated as an Area of Natural and Scientific Interest.

Restoring the River

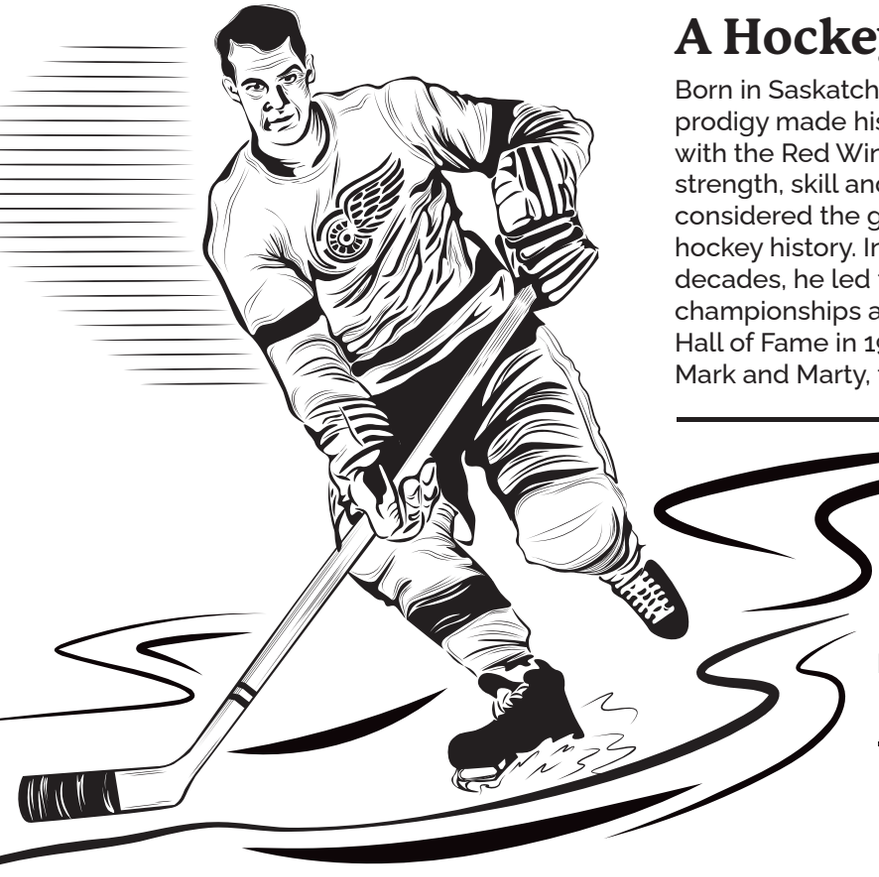
As industry grew in the Windsor-Detroit area at the turn of the 20th century, the Detroit River became heavily polluted. In the 1970s and 1980s, large-scale conservation efforts were launched, including the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement between Canada and the US. First signed in 1972, it commits both countries to restore and protect the Great Lakes ecosystem.

Gordie Howe #9

A Tribute to Mr. Hockey

Gordie Howe is revered internationally for his incomparable hockey achievements and uncommon humanity. As a Canadian who played for the Detroit Red Wings for 25 seasons, he is beloved across Canada and the US, but especially in Windsor and Detroit.





A Hockey Legend

Born in Saskatchewan in 1928, the teenage prodigy made his National Hockey League debut with the Red Wings in 1946. Known for his speed, strength, skill and toughness, Howe is considered the greatest all-around player in hockey history. In a career spanning five decades, he led the Wings to four Stanley Cup championships and was inducted into the Hockey Hall of Fame in 1972. He came out of retirement to play alongside two of his sons, Mark and Marty, for a total of seven more seasons, retiring at the remarkable age of 52.

A Legend in the Community

Howe's legacy of kindness, humility and generosity are as iconic as his remarkable athletic achievements. With the help of his wife Colleen, he championed charitable causes that supported youth, education and healthcare, and was a devoted mentor for young players both on and off the ice. For his selfless example, he was endeared by fans across the globe.

The Gordie Howe Hat Trick

Howe was known for his rare combination of skill and fierceness on the ice resulting in the hockey term, the "Gordie Howe Hat Trick" being named after him. It consists of a goal, an assist and a fight.



The Namesake

It is fitting that the new, publicly owned bridge be named after such an inspirational Canadian humanitarian who played most of his unparalleled hockey career in Detroit. A formal announcement of the name occurred in May 2015, an honour to which Mr. Hockey humbly replied, "Well that sounds pretty good to me."