

History of the Blackfeet Nation, 1800-1895

The Blackfeet have lived in North America for over 10,000 years. A nomadic tribe that followed the seasonal grazing and migration of the buffalo, the Blackfeet spanned thousands of miles from the Rocky Mountains to modern-day Labrador. Contrary to modern perceptions, many historians consider the Blackfeet originally an Eastern Woodlands tribe that lived primarily in the Great Lakes region. However, due to the arrival of Europeans on the East Coast and tensions with their traditional enemies, the Cree, the Blackfeet were one of the first tribes to move West during the 17th century.

By 1700, most Blackfeet lived in the valley of the North Saskatchewan River in the modern-day province of Saskatchewan, still hunting buffalo with bows and arrows. Yet the new century brought about a technical and cultural revolution for the Blackfeet. The Blackfeet

began trading with Europeans and acquired a range of new items, namely horses and guns. Quickly becoming the best horsemen of all the Great Plains Indians, the Blackfeet were now able to control more land by pushing rival tribes west across the Continental Divide.

By 1780, the Blackfeet had close to 15,000 members and controlled land from Montana's plains to the North Saskatchewan River. The first half of the 19th century for the Blackfeet was defined in large part by interactions with colonialists. Encounters with fur traders and explorers like Lewis and Clark worsened relations between the tribe and white people, and instilled a view in non-Indians of the Blackfeet as hostile and violent toward white people. In 1837, nearly 6,000 Blackfeet, almost two-thirds of the tribe, were killed by a smallpox epidemic. Still recovering from this tragedy, the Blackfeet became

embroiled in a series of violent interactions with American traders as well as other tribes. However, a century later, by 1895, the Blackfeet were confined to comparatively tiny reservations and had lost nearly all of their previous lands.



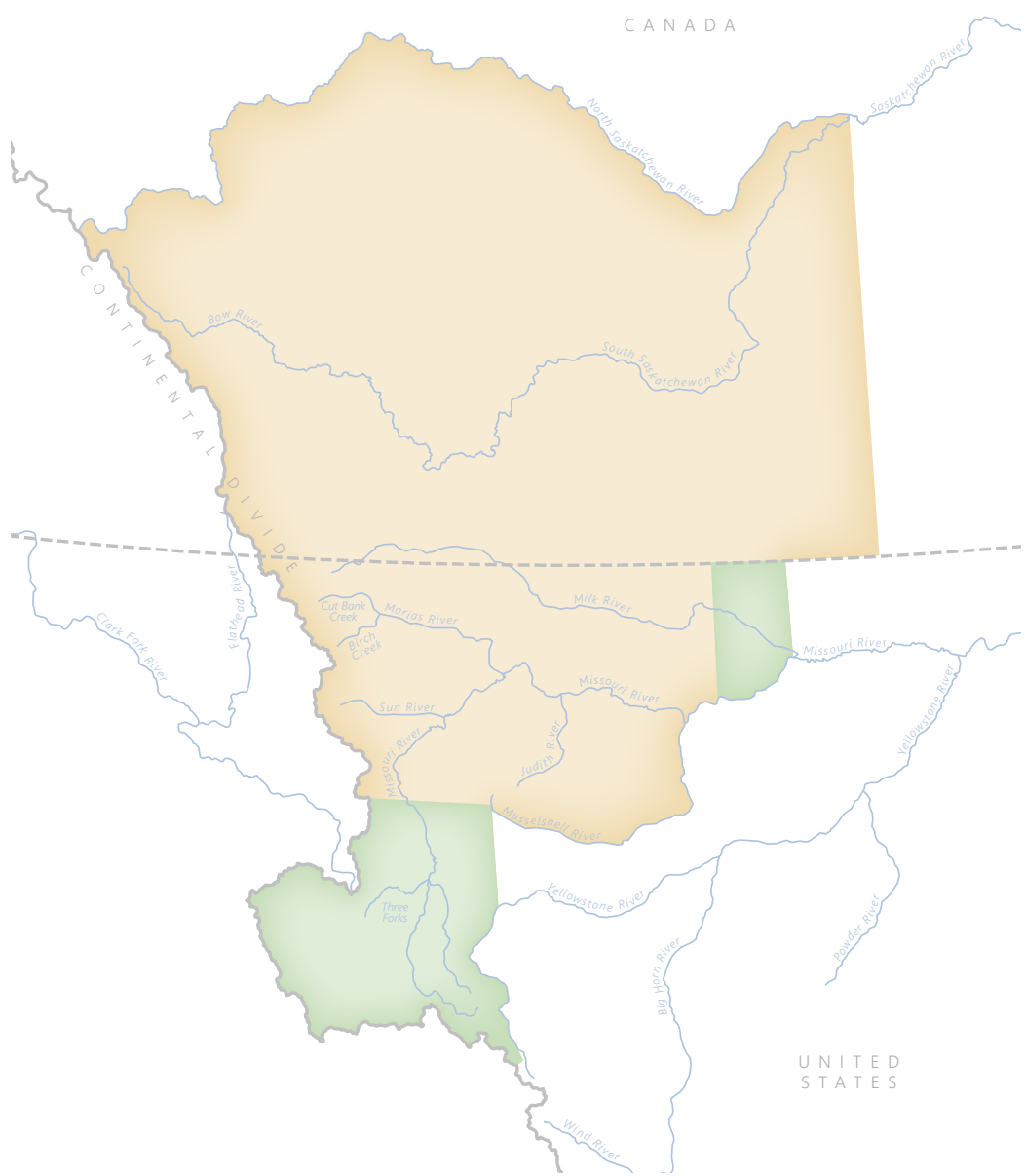
1800

During this period, the home regions of the three distinct tribes that make up the Blackfeet Nation became better defined. The Bloods and North Blackfeet settled north of the Canadian border, while the Piegan lived south of the border. Today, Piegan descendants live on the Blackfeet reservation in Montana and the Bloods and North Blackfeet live on the Canadian reservations in Alberta.



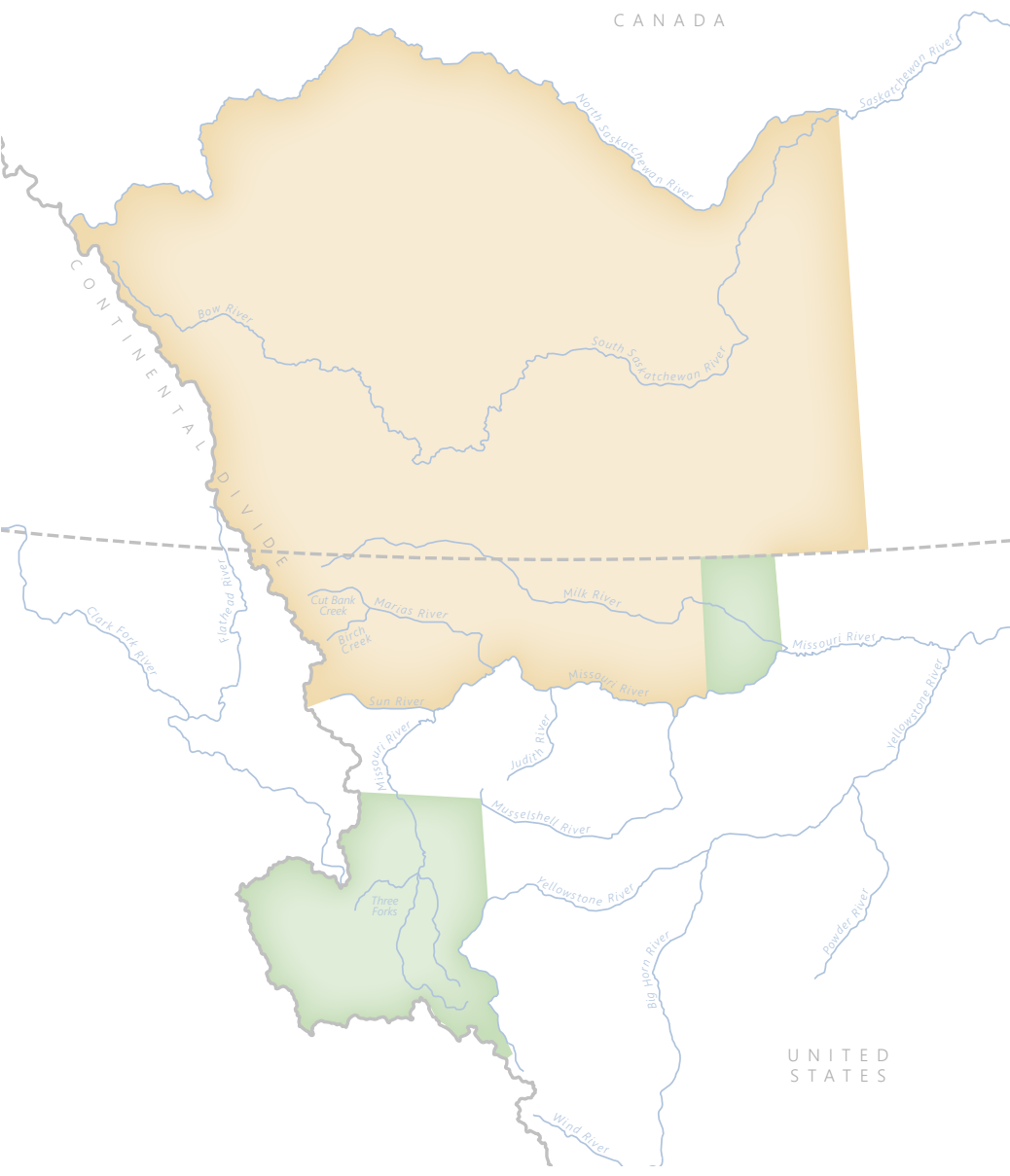
1851

The **Fort Laramie Treaty of 1851** was an agreement between the United States and representatives from eight Indian tribes, not including the Blackfeet. The treaty defined territorial claims for all the tribes and the United States agreed that these lands were solely Indian territory. Even though the Blackfeet were not contacted early enough to send a delegation to the meeting to ratify it, the treaty also included Blackfeet land. This was the beginning of a pattern of agreements, treaties, and laws that defined the Blackfeet homeland without approval by the tribe.



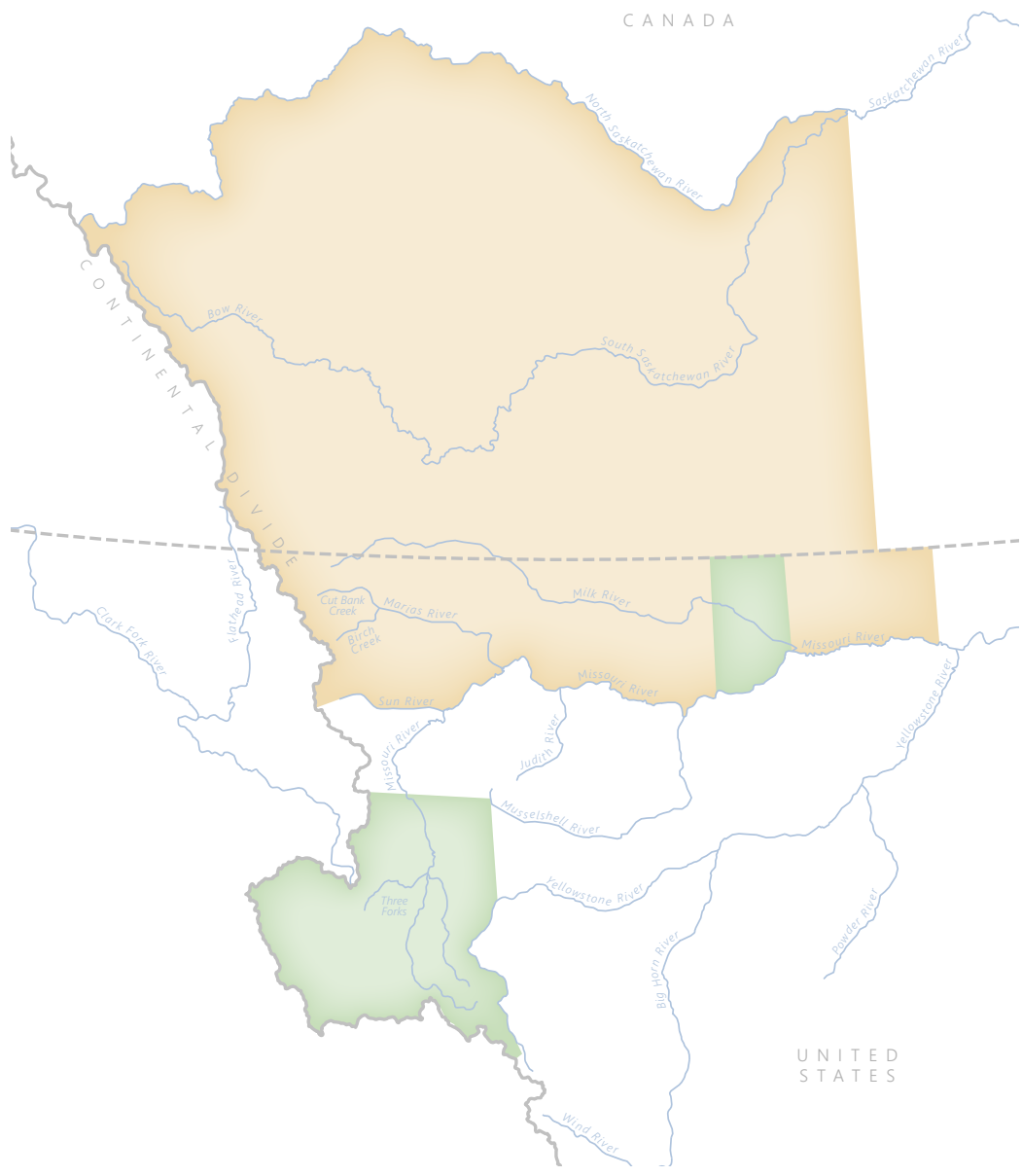
1855

The **Lame Bull Treaty of 1855** was signed by the tribes of the Blackfoot Confederacy, in addition to delegations from other tribes. The U.S. government's goal was to make way for the railroad by negotiating a peace between the tribes. The treaty defined two common hunting grounds. The United States agreed to provide "useful goods and provisions" as a return for these concessions by the Blackfeet. However, by 1865, there were no more bison on the common hunting ground and new gold mining camps brought more than 15,000 miners into Blackfeet country.



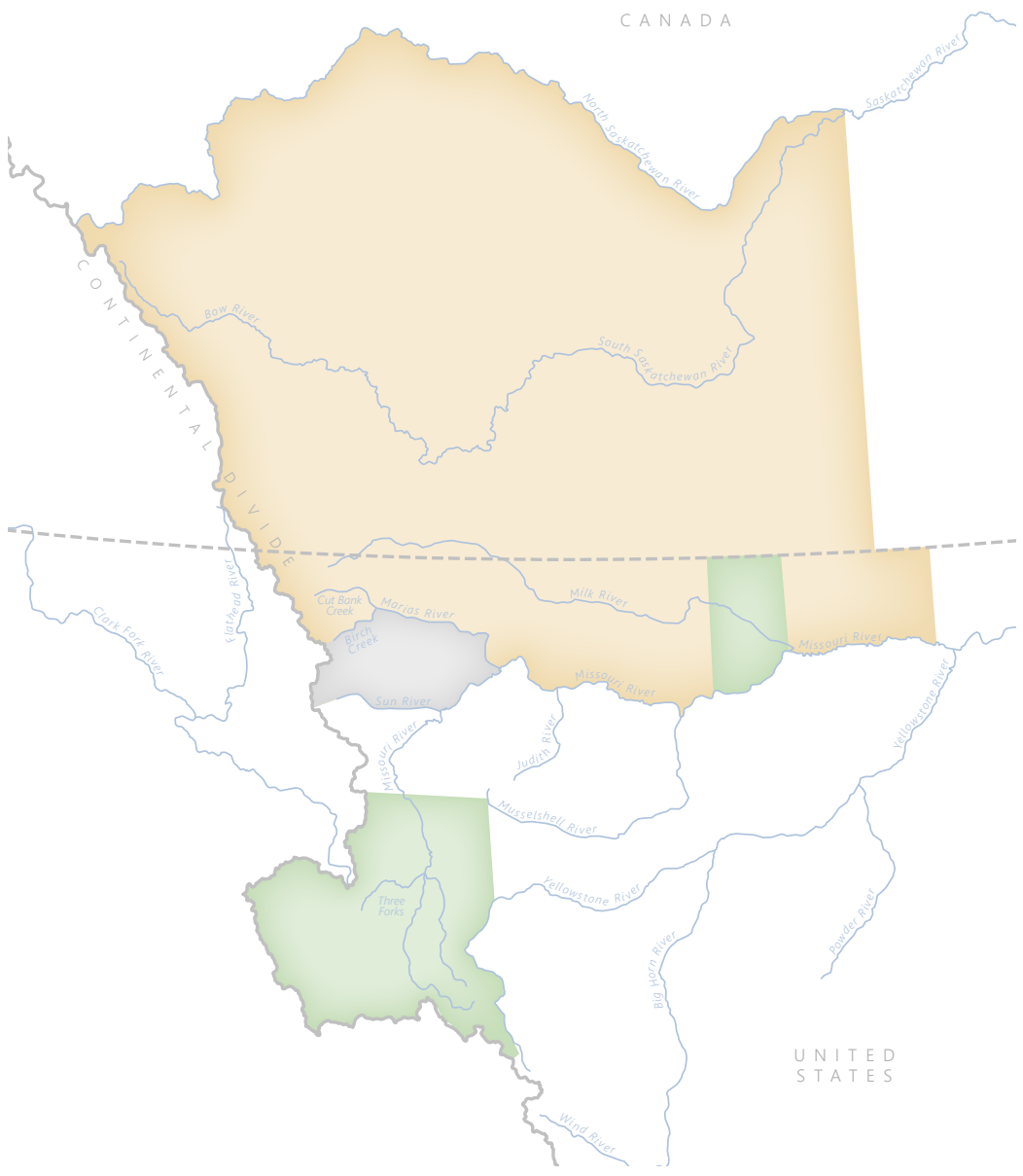
1865

In 1865, a group of Blackfeet tribal leaders agreed to an **unratified treaty** with the Montana Governor Meagher and Blackfeet Indian Agent Gad Upson to sell their lands south of the Missouri River and north of the common hunting grounds. For over 2,000 square miles of land, the Blackfeet received \$1 million from the U.S. government. Although it was never ratified, white settlers began moving into these new lands as if the treaty had been ratified.



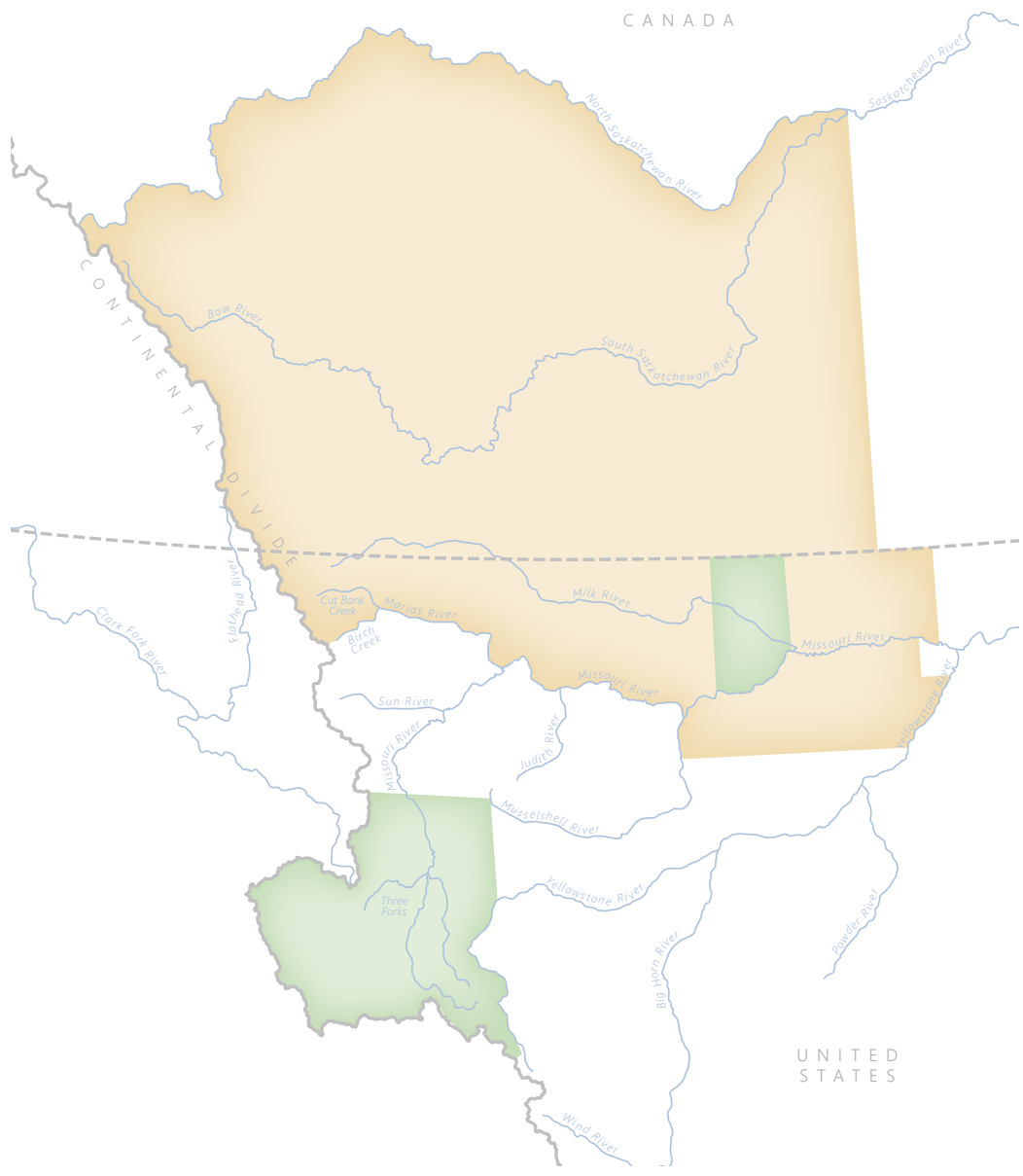
1873

President Grant's **1873 Executive Order** reduced 1851 and 1855 treaty lands and established combined reservation lands for the Blackfeet, Gros Ventre, Assiniboine, and Sioux. While the area of the Blackfoot Nation technically expanded to the East, this Order was an early indicator of the federal government's desire to establish defined reservations for Indian tribes.



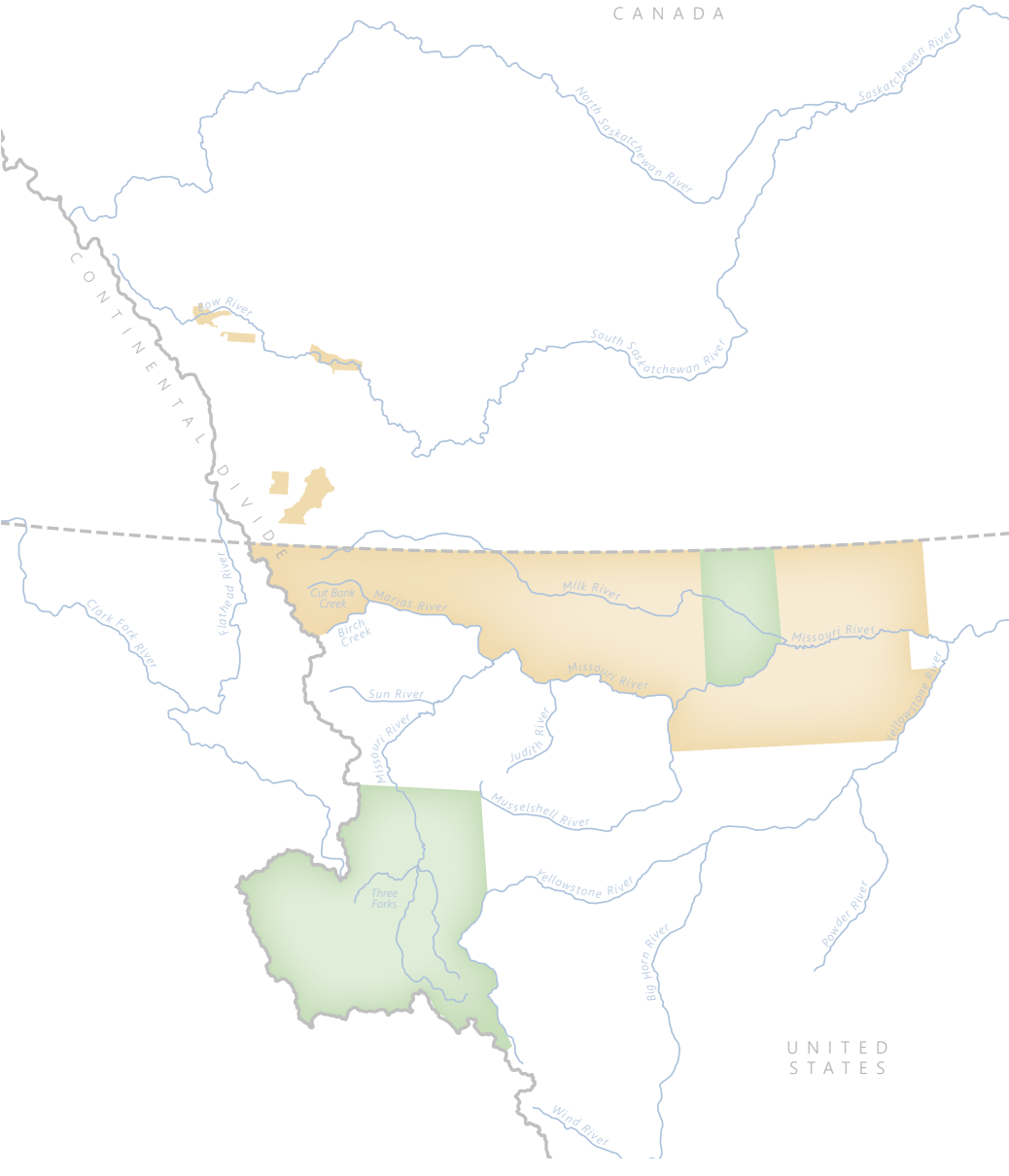
1874

By **Act of Congress in 1874**, the federal government further diminished the joint reservation by moving the southern border 200 miles northward from the Sun River to the Marias River. This piece of land, known as Sun River Country, was taken from the tribes without compensation and returned to the public domain by the government. It was soon opened for settlement.



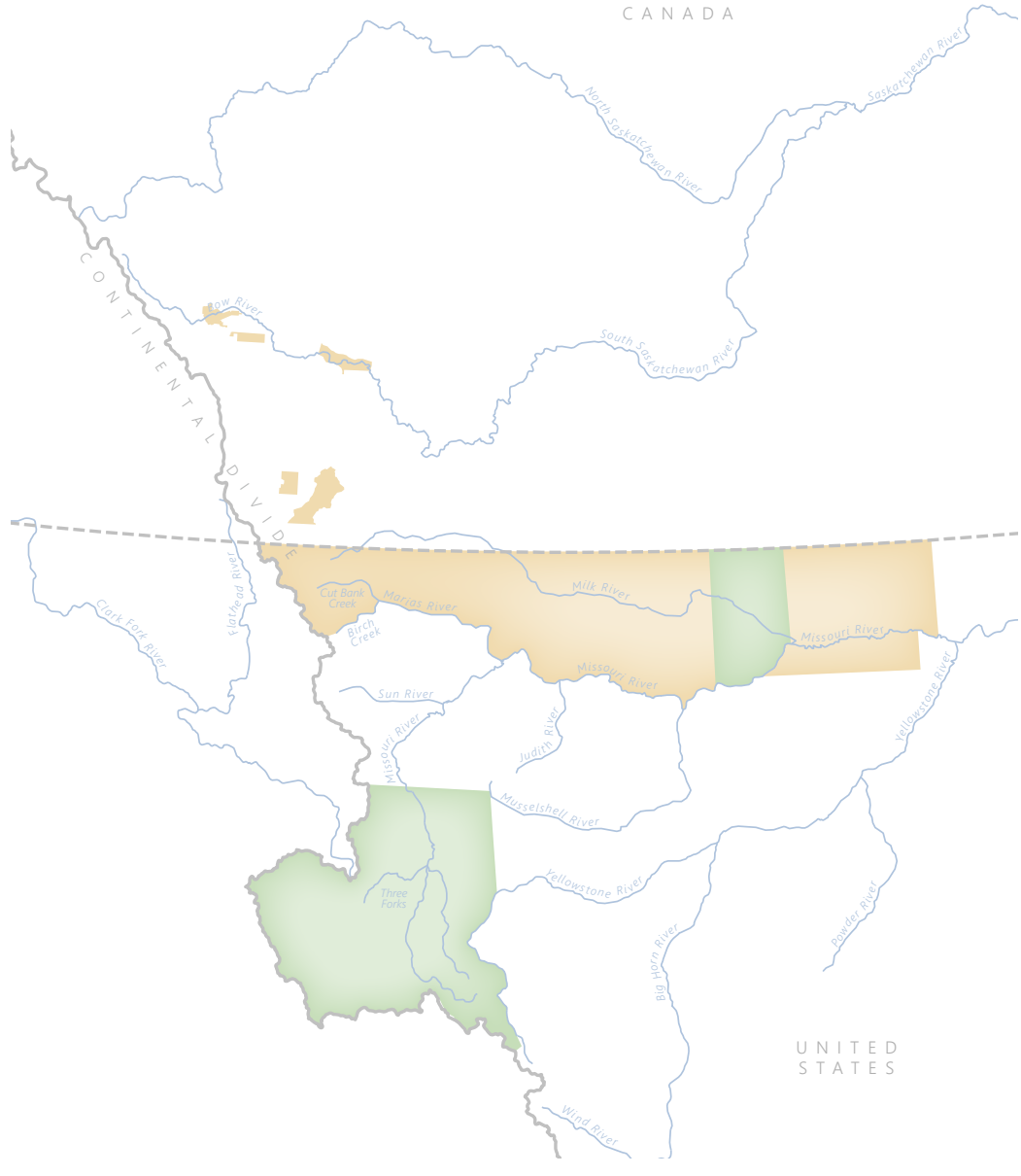
1875

Due to public pressure, **President Grant returned lands to the tribes that had been taken in 1873 and 1874 by Executive Order and Act of Congress**. This land, situated south and west of the Missouri and Yellowstone Rivers, was in Indian control for only half a decade.



1877

Treaty 7, one of the 11 Numbered Treaties signed between First Nations and the British Crown, established reservations for the Blackfeet tribes in Canada and included promises of annual payments to the tribes and hunting rights on surrendered land. By sheer amount of land lost, this treaty proved to be one of the most consequential agreements signed during this century.



1880

President Hayes' **1880 Executive Order** took back the land south and east of the Missouri and Yellowstone Rivers that was restored to the tribes by President Grant in 1875.



1887

Responding to pressure from white settlers and ranchers desiring to move into the lands of the already shrinking reservation, Congress held land cession hearings in the winter of 1887 to negotiate another **land treaty**. The few Blackfeet leaders that attended signed an agreement that would relinquish all but 45 square miles of their land to the government. In total, the Blackfeet ceded 17 million acres of their land in exchange for \$125,000 per year for 10 years.



1895

The "ceded strip" of 800,000 acres, taken by an **Act of Congress** in return for \$1.5 million, was home to some of the Blackfeet's most sacred lands, including Chief Mountain. In 1910, this land would become part of Glacier National Park, which is now visited by over 3 million people each year.

The "ceded strip" is important in the story of the Badger-Two Medicine. Following the loss of this land, Blackfeet leaders say that the power and medicine present in the strip was transferred to the Badger, the Blackfeet's last refuge.