

The French in North America Before 1763

1. French fur traders often married or had relationships with Native American women. This benefited both: the fur traders gained access to important kin trade networks, and the Native Americans gained access to a steady supply of trade goods. Very few French wives or families accompanied fur traders or soldiers into the fur trade area. Their children, called *métis*, played an important role as intermediaries between the two cultures, and as translators.
2. From Montreal, large canoes took the Ottawa River to Lake Nipissing and into Georgian Bay and Lake Huron. They then headed further west or south, through Lake Huron, Lake Michigan, or Lake Superior, to reach the grounds where the voyageurs would trade with the Native Americans.
3. Robert René Cavelier de La Salle (1643-1687) took the St. Joseph River from Lake Michigan, portaging to the Kankakee River, continuing to the Illinois and the Mississippi Rivers.
4. The Moingona Indians lived in what is now Iowa; the French called the Des Moines River "la Rivière des Moines" after this tribe. The city took its name from the river. Take a look at a French-language map from the 1700s to see place names--rivers, lakes, and some towns.
5. The rapids at this juncture of Lakes Superior and Huron were named after the Virgin Mary (Sainte Marie).
6. Father Jacques Marquette (1637-1675) and his traveling partner, Louis Jolliet (1645-1700), and their party had hoped that the Mississippi River--never seen before them by Europeans--would take them to the Pacific Ocean. When they reached the mouth of the Arkansas River, it was clear that the river was not heading west. Faced with hostile groups of Native Americans, they decided to turn back.
7. The southern part of the French territory of North America was called Louisiana, and had a different administration from the northern part, called Canada. The entire territory was called "New France," and was much larger than the territory claimed by the British at that time.
8. Small trading posts were established in the wilderness, often on rivers, very often near Native American villages, gathering places, or hunting grounds. Larger trading posts, from which voyageurs would depart for more remote posts, included Michilimackinac at the juncture of Lakes Michigan and Huron, and Grand Portage on Lake Superior.
9. Antoine Laumet called de Lamothe Cadillac (1658-1730) founded Fort Pontchartrain--later the city of Detroit--in 1701.
10. French forts in the Great Lakes area--now part of the United States--were for the most part not large. They would house a few dozen soldiers and a few specialists like a blacksmith or baker, and would be a base for fur traders. They were nearly always located on rivers, and usually were near a Native American village. Their function was to establish a French presence in order to convince the Native Americans that they should continue to trade with the French instead of one of their rival groups, and to maintain peace as much as possible in the surrounding countryside.
11. Leggings and breechcloths were much more practical than trousers for men who often got wet as did the voyageurs, and who needed sturdy leather to protect them from the forest vegetation. A favorite color was scarlet.

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12. The French Navy ("la Marine") provided the military presence in French North America. There were never a tremendous number of civilian immigrants from France, and the population density of the lands claimed by France remained quite a bit lower than that of the British colonies. In 1760, there were only about 90,000 people of European origin in the French colonies of North America. The French were most certainly dependent on the Native Americans who already inhabited this region.

13. Pierre-Esprit Radisson (1632-1710) and his brother-in-law, Médard Chouart sieur des Groseillers (1618?-1690), had remarkable adventures in the Minnesota area in the mid-1600s.

14. The Dutch had first settled New Amsterdam and were active in the fur trade, rivals for the loyalty and furs brought to them by the Native Americans.

15. The Battle of the Plains of Abraham, at Quebec City on September 12, 1759, was a decisive event of this war between the French and the British. The French General Montcalm and the victorious English General Wolfe were both mortally wounded. The Treaty of Paris, which put an end to the "French and Indian War," also known as the Seven Years' War, turned over all of France's North-American colonies to the British; they retained some of their Caribbean colonies (such as Guadeloupe and Martinique), however, which they saw as more profitable.

16. Ribbon was used to decorate clothing. Native Americans also traded their furs for cloth, blankets, and decorative items like beads, earrings, and bracelets.

17. Metal items were extremely useful to the Native Americans. Kettles, axes and "tomahawk" heads were traded for furs. The kinds of items to be traded, as well as their prices, were strictly regulated by the French colonial government. Often, the quality of French goods was lower and the prices higher than that of the English goods, which made it more difficult to keep the Native Americans from trading with the British.

18. Marquette and Joliet came down the Wisconsin and Fox Rivers to the Mississippi River.

19. The Great Lakes were important routes from Montreal and Canada into what the French called "le pays d'en haut"--the Upper Country--and "le petit nord"--the Little North. The former was farther north, more in what is now Canada. The latter included the area around the Great Lakes: current Michigan, northern Indiana and northern Illinois, Wisconsin, and Minnesota.

20. The English were stiff competition for the French; they became allies of the powerful Iroquois nation, who served as intermediaries with many other Native American peoples. The English also had better, cheaper goods for trade. Their way of interacting with the Native Americans and of colonizing North America was very different from that of the French. English and Native Americans rarely intermarried, and the English were intent on establishing towns and farms, whereas the French simply wanted to continue the fur trade for the most part.

21. The word "voyageurs" simply means "travelers," but it has come to mean the Quebec men who paddled the canoes, large and small. They signed contracts that specified what they were to receive in return for a given expedition: besides their wage, they received a blanket, a given number of shirts and handkerchiefs, and tobacco, among other items. Even when the fur trade business was managed primarily by North Americans of English or Scottish origin, the canoes continued to be manned--into the 19th century--by Canadians of French ancestry.

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22. Some portages were miles long. The voyageurs carried not just the canoes but also the goods and furs, loaded into "packs" of around 80 pounds each, wrapped with canvas and marked with the symbol of the trader whose property the packs were. Often the voyageurs would "double-pack" in a portage, and one man boasted of being able to carry 4 packs: 320 pounds!
23. The fur trade was more important than Canadian agriculture or Canadian fishing to the French economy, during the time it held its North American colony. A variety of furs were traded.
24. The French called the Ohio River "la belle Riviere." It was an important route to the Mississippi, but the area that is now Ohio was held, quite firmly, by the English, and the Native Americans living there tended to trade with the English. An important route to the Mississippi for the French fur traders, however, was to come from Michilimackinac or Detroit to the Wabash River, which flows into the Ohio and then the Mississippi.
25. The beaver fur was valuable and was traded in varying kinds and qualities. Other furs and skins traded included bear, otter, mink, lynx, deer, and others.
26. Canoes were of different sizes for travel on various sizes of lakes and rivers. The biggest, called "canot de maître" or Master Canoe, were up to 40 feet long. They were used in large rivers and lakes.

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