



New France

By the 16th century, thousands of European fishermen were sailing the North Atlantic to fish for cod and hunt whales in the “New World” and the Gulf of St. Lawrence. It was also a time of discovery and exploration, as empires sought a route to the Indies and China, and the riches found there. In 1534, King François I of France commissioned Jacques Cartier, a navigator from St. Malo, to set out on a voyage across the Atlantic Ocean. Cartier explored the coast of North America and the St. Lawrence River, and was the first European to reach the village of Hochelaga (Montréal). But the Europeans were not quick to settle in the region. Some 70 years later, Pierre Du Gua de Monts and Samuel de Champlain founded Port-Royal and established the colony of Acadia. In 1608, Champlain founded the city of Québec; he continued to explore the St. Lawrence River, travelling as far as the Great Lakes. In the 18th century, the La Vérendrye family reached the Great Plains of the West.

The population of New France increased as labourers, soldiers and the “filles du Roi” (women of marriageable age sent by the king to marry the large numbers of single men in the colony) came from France. The arrival of settlers led to the founding of Trois-Rivières (1634), Montréal (1642) and Louisbourg (1714). These settlements expanded thanks to financial assistance from France, but also as a result of the fur trade. Beaver pelts were in great demand in Europe, and many Canadian merchants traded with the Aboriginal peoples, exchanging various goods for furs. Throughout this period, fishing remained a major economic resource, benefiting French fishermen and merchants in particular.

When the Europeans arrived, the inhabitants of Eastern Canada belonged to three different language families. The Inuit were nomadic hunters. The Iroquoian group, including the Huron-Wendat (Hurons) and the Iroquois, were farmers, fishermen and hunters. The Algonquian group, including the Innu (Montagnais), Mi'kmaq, Abenaki and Algonquin, were nomadic peoples who lived by hunting, fishing and gathering. Relations between the French and the Iroquois were particularly strained. The Great Peace, a treaty signed in Montréal in the fall of 1701, brought some respite and enabled the colony to develop. During this time of relative peace, the French gained new territory and eventually controlled up to three-quarters of the American continent.

The colonial government of New France was headed by a governor, responsible for military matters and external relations; an intendant, responsible for finance, justice and trade; and a superior council that acted as a court of appeal. The bishop and clergy controlled religious life in the colony. Religious communities, such as the Jesuits and the Ursulines, provided health, education and charitable services, and worked to convert the Aboriginal peoples.



The land in New France was divided into “seigneuries” (tracts of land granted to an individual by the king), as in France. The individuals or communities that were granted a seignery had to meet certain obligations, such as pledging loyalty and homage, and granting land to persons who requested it (“censitaires”, or tenants). The censitaires had to pay annual dues, known as “cens” and “rentes”. Three-quarters of the colony’s population made their living from agriculture.

Colonial society mirrored France’s “ancien régime” to some extent. Nobles (military officers and administrators) and merchants made up the elite; the rest of the population was composed of craftsmen and “habitants”. Colonial society was less rigid than French society, and it became clear early on that people did not achieve their position based on social rank but on merit, talent and their contribution to society. Various prohibitions regarding daily life were enforced through regulations. Over time, the land, climate and contact with the First Nations left their imprint on the colonists’ characteristics. By the 18th century, the habitants were calling themselves Acadians or Canadians.

New France continued to grow for nearly 200 years, but could not repulse the frequent attacks by English troops seeking to make the territory part of the British colonial empire. The Acadians, who had become British colonists in 1713, suffered the first effects of the Seven Years’ War, when the English decided to begin deporting them in 1755. The defeat at the Plains of Abraham in September 1759 led to the fall of New France. With the Treaty of Paris in 1763, the conquered colony was officially handed over to England.