

Traders and Missionaries

The Desire to Colonize

Before 1627, France saw the colony of New France primarily as a means to generate money through the fur trade. In the early 1620s, fewer than 60 non-Aboriginals lived in the colony. There was little incentive for Europeans to move there. Wars with Aboriginal groups made life dangerous and the climate was harsh. There were no markets for farm produce, no roads to transport people or goods, no community or family to support a European community and very few women. Even places of worship did not exist.

In 1627, Cardinal Richelieu, first minister to Louis XIII, worried that the colony of New France was not developing as it should. He feared that the British and Dutch colonies to the south would take over New France. Richelieu decided that a more permanent settlement in New France would protect France's position in the continent and help develop the trade and commerce that would bring more money and benefits to the mother country. Such a settlement would spread French legal and commercial institutions throughout the new land and, with them, French culture. For the devoutly religious Catholic majority of Europeans, North America provided an opportunity to spread the Christian word and, in so doing, save thousands of souls from eternal damnation.

Contributions of Fur Traders

In order to create more permanent settlements, Richelieu decided to encourage trade in the manner common at that time. He organized a trade monopoly—the Compagnie de la Nouvelle France. It had 100 associates—French noblemen—who provided the capital for the trade and who were given exclusive rights to all of the furs traded out of New France and all trade in the colony. They were given the rights to all lands in New France and the right to transfer land to noblemen (i.e., seigneurs) who wanted to take up land in the colony. In return for the profits from this trade, monopoly holders were required increase the colony's population and develop its society by bringing at least 200 Catholic colonists a year for 15 years to New France and fund Catholic missions to convert and assimilate Aboriginal peoples. Protestants were banned from the colony.

Profits from fur trading were difficult to find in these years. The fur trade, itself, was suffering serious difficulties. In 1627, France and England were at war and the French in New France had to battle to hold onto their lands. The English gained control of Quebec between 1629 and 1632, causing the suspension of the French fur trade. Wars between the English and their Iroquois allies and the French and their Algonquian allies ravaged the territories occupied by New France. Early in the 1640s, the Iroquois attacked Huron fur trade lines, disrupting

trade, killing allied Aboriginal groups and taking the lives of European traders. Even without the wars, it was difficult to attract settlers to New France. Clearing land and trying to establish farms on uncultivated lands was very hard work. The threat of attack by Aboriginals on both people and new farms made it almost impossible to attract and keep settlers.

As a result of these conflicts, the Compagnie de la Nouvelle France decided, in 1645, to sublet the fur trade to the Communauté des Habitants, an organization comprised of several leading men of the colony. The rule of the colony fell into the hands of the other key non-Aboriginal group in New France—the clergy.

Work of the Missionaries

When Samuel de Champlain established trading posts on the St. Lawrence, he imagined a new and permanent society emerging in New France. He thought that religion would provide the impetus for increased trade. He believed that the Algonquins would convert to Christianity and intermarry with the French settlers, creating large European-style settlements that would benefit the fur trade. This did not work out as he had hoped. The first missionaries assigned to the task of conversion were the Récollets, who established a small seminary at Quebec in 1615. Finding that the Aboriginal peoples were not interested in assimilating into French Catholic culture, they closed their doors soon after.

In the 1620s, the Récollets sought financial help from an order called the Society of Jesus or the Jesuits. This order was comprised of highly educated men who had worked throughout Europe trying to stem the tide of Protestantism. They were willing to take on the difficult task of Christianizing the New World. In 1632, in keeping with the mercantile model of doing business, Cardinal Richelieu gave the Jesuits a religious monopoly in New France.

Even with the financial and moral support of the French government, the Jesuits had little success in Christianizing the Aboriginal people. Parents refused to send their children to be educated in the Catholic missions unless bribed and the children who remained frequently ran away, grew ill or died. The Jesuit practice of corporal punishment (i.e., using physical means of punishing misbehaviour) was foreign to Aboriginal child raising practices. Marie de l'Incarnation started the Ursuline Order in France and was invited to New France by the Jesuits in the hope that the Ursuline Order would be more successful in converting Aboriginal people to Catholicism or to a European way of life. The hospitals they established were more successful than the schools. A number of Aboriginal people agreed to leave their sick and aged in what they called the "House of Death" (due to its high mortality rate) rather than leave them to die during summer migrations, as was their culture. These hospitals, which were originally created to meet the health needs of Aboriginal communities, began caring for the slowly growing French Canadian population. These religious hospitals became

the primary source of medical care for French Canadians until late 20th century in Quebec.

The Jesuits started the first schools in Quebec. In 1635, they established a school for Native boys, which became the first institution of higher learning north of Mexico. Their tradition of educational excellence continued. The church continued to be the primary educational institution in New France, Lower Canada, Canada East and Quebec. Catholic nuns and priests provided the vast majority of French Canadians with their education until the mid-20th century.

In addition to providing charitable medical care and education, the religious orders also brought nonreligious personnel to New France to help with the construction of buildings, farming and other tasks. As was common at that time, they paid the fare of young men to come to New France, with the agreement that these people would work for nothing more than room and board for a total of three years. These contract labourers or engagés brought important skills to the colony. They also created a market for local agricultural produce, stimulating production and trade. While many returned to France after their three years, some stayed to create their own farms and build the new communities of New France.

The colony grew slowly from 1627 onwards. In the early 1640s, the growing colony was the home of the Compagnie du Saint-Sacrement, a secret organization of religious zealots who saw New France as a new and holy land to be occupied by the faithful. This group arranged for the appointment of Francois de Laval-Montigny as New France's first Bishop. Laval began a moralistic crusade against "blasphemy, gambling, fornication" and drinking so common in New France. He wanted to excommunicate from the Church anyone who traded liquor with Aboriginal people. The government did not like the strong religious stance; it feared that the requirements of a sober, moralistic and religious colony would destroy both the fur trade and the colony that depended on it. This group also supported Paul de Chomedey de Maisonneuve, a soldier who took up the spiritual mission to establish a settlement in New France. In 1642, he brought 30 settlers with him to a site that they named Ville-Marie. While the tiny settlement grew very slowly in the first few years, due in part to constant attacks by the Iroquois, it later grew into Montreal, one of Canada's greatest cities.

The Effects of Early Efforts

In 1663, the population of New France was 3,035 non-Aboriginals. Most lived in the countryside, on land owned by seigneurs to whom they paid feudal dues. Two-thirds of the population were members of farm or labourer households. The rest were business people or members of the clergy. The bourgeoisie often had Aboriginal or black slaves; other servants were brought from France. Some seigneurs gave land grants to new colonists to encourage them to come. Historians estimate that about 10 percent of the population spent their lives

trading in the bush, in fur trade, and were “influenced by the Aboriginals’ free spirited behaviour”, often marrying Aboriginal women. Their uncivilized behaviour—drinking, rioting and gambling—caused much concern in the settled areas. New France became well known for both extremes: piety and rowdiness.

Louis XIV decided in 1663 that Compagnie de la Nouvelle France was not effective in overseeing colonization. The Compagnie’s monopoly was revoked and it was replaced by state officials responsible to the crown. From this date on, the colonization of New France began in earnest.

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