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COLONIAL AMERICA

A Very Short Introduction

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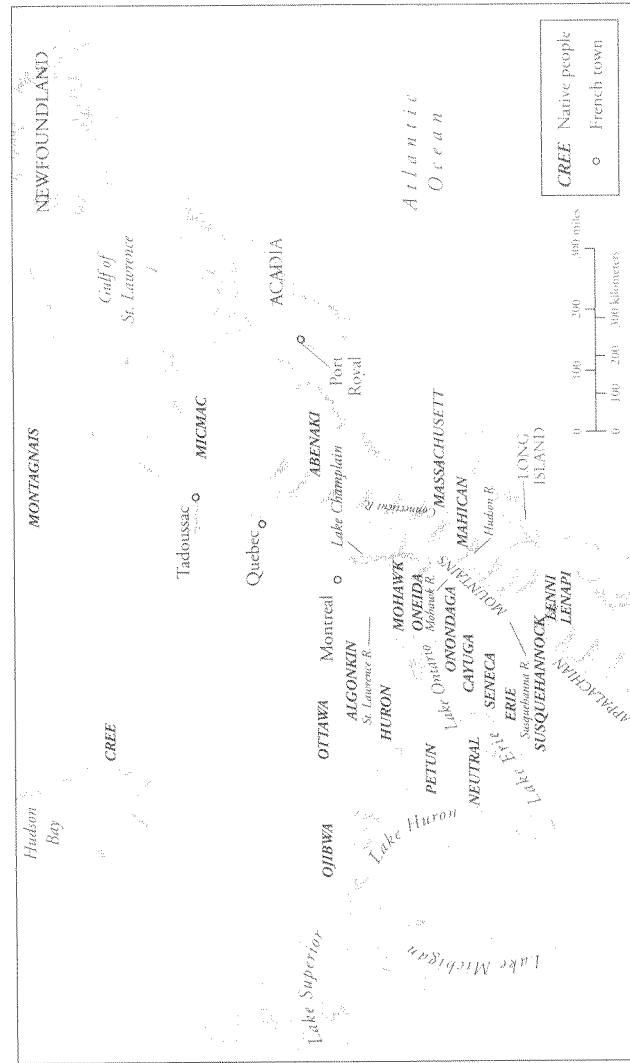
Jesuit priests hurriedly baptized hundreds before they too were hacked or burned to death.

During the 1650s, the Haudenosaunee next turned against the Iroquoian-speaking Erie, Petun, and Neutral nations who lived to the west around Lake Erie. Once again, the victors killed most of the defeated warriors, captured their women and children for adoption, and destroyed the villages. In 1657, a visiting French priest concluded that adopted captives had become a majority among the Haudenosaunee, whose raids also ravaged the French settlements along the St. Lawrence.

At home, French imperial officials worried that they were losing the demographic race to colonize North America. By 1663 New France had grown to just 3,000 colonists, smaller even than the 5,000 colonists planted by the tiny Netherlands along the Hudson. Worse still, by 1660 the English had 58,000 colonists in New England and the Chesapeake colonies. Impatient with Canada's slow growth, in 1663 the French Crown took over the colony from the fur-trading company.

To stimulate population growth, the Crown subsidized emigration to the struggling colony. Primarily poor, single, young men in search of work and food, most of the emigrants arrived as *engagés* obliged to serve a three-year term before they recovered their freedom. The female emigrants primarily came from an orphanage in Paris and were known as *filles du roi* (daughters of the king). In addition to paying for their passage, the Crown provided a cash marriage dowry, an alluring incentive for orphan girls, who lacked the family money expected for a marriage. The *filles du roi* promoted the formation of families, who helped to consolidate the colony. Where the *engagés* who remained single usually hastened back to France at the end of their indentures, those who married tended to stay in the colony, where most became farmers known as *habitants*.

Colonial America



6. New France, ca. 1650.

After 1673, when the government retrenched to save money, the subsidized emigration ground to a halt. Although the Canadian population continued to grow through natural increase, it could never catch up to the swelling numbers of English colonists. From about 3,000 in 1663, the population of New France reached 15,000 in 1700—far less than the 250,000 then in English America. Despite a population of 20 million, the largest in western Europe and four times larger than England's 5 million, France sent far fewer colonists to America. Push was weak because most of the French peasants preferred to endure their known hardships rather than risk life in a strange and distant land.

Seventeenth-century New France also offered scant pull for potential emigrants. Many balked at the hard work of clearing dense forests to make new farms in a land of long and bitter winters. When winter at last receded, warm weather unleashed tormenting clouds of mosquitoes and blackflies—denser and fiercer than any in Europe. The summer also brought deadly, burning raids from the Haudenosaunee, a grim deterrent to settlers. And few farmers could prosper given the short growing season and the lack of an export market. Their bulky hides and grains could not bear the high transportation costs dictated by Canada's northern isolation far up the St. Lawrence, which froze solid for at least half the year. The *habitants* had to rely on the limited local market, feeding fur traders and soldiers.

To govern New France, the Crown appointed a military governor-general; a civil administrator known as the *intendant*; and a Catholic bishop. The three were supposed to cooperate to enforce Crown orders while competing for Crown favor by jealously watching one another for corruption, heresy, and disloyalty. As in New Spain, official contention served the Crown's interest in keeping ultimate control. And, as in New Spain, the French Crown established no elective assembly to represent the colonists. Instead, as the colonial legislature, the Crown appointed a sovereign council, consisting of five to seven leading colonists

as well as the governor-general, bishop, *intendant*, and attorney general.

Most of the colonists were *habitants* who dwelled on farms along the St. Lawrence River between the two major towns, Québec and Montreal. They leased their lands from aristocratic landlords known as *seigneurs*. The roads were few and bad, so people and their goods primarily moved by horse-drawn sleighs in winter and by canoe or boat along the river in summer. Every parish featured a Catholic church, the lone faith tolerated in the colony. In the valley, some Montagnais, Huron, Abenaki, Algonkin, and Mohawk persisted in mission reserves. Their priests had learned tacitly to accept traditional customs and rituals that did not directly contradict Catholic worship. In the mission village, the Indians practiced a mix of Indian and European horticulture, but they annually dispersed for many weeks to hunt in the vast northern forest.

Farther west, beyond Montreal, and across the Great Lakes to the Mississippi, the immense hinterland hosted only a few colonists who depended upon the fur trade with the Indians. The upper-country French clustered in a few scattered settlements near forts, principally at Cahokia, Kaskaskia, and Vincennes in the Illinois country and at Detroit between Lakes Huron and Erie. In the vast Great Lakes watershed, about 2,000 French lived as a small minority on reserves among about 80,000 natives divided among many nations, mostly Algonkian-speakers.

In the upper country, the Indians and the French developed an alliance based upon mutual accommodations on what the historian Richard White has called "the middle ground." A middle ground could develop only where neither natives nor colonizers could dominate the other, where, instead, they had to deal with one another as near equals. To build an Indian alliance, the French had to arbitrate the feuds, primarily over murders. By ceremonially delivering French goods to "cover the graves" of murdered Indians, the French could unite their villages against the Haudenosaunee and the English.

The middle ground rested on creative misunderstandings. The French insisted that their king was the "father" to Indian "children." The French thus sought to command the Indians as if they were the dutiful children of a European patriarch. But the Indians did not have patriarchal families. Indeed, mothers and uncles had far more authority than did fathers. So the natives happily called the French their "fathers" in the expectation that they would behave like Indian fathers: indulgent, generous, and weak. Among Indians, a father gave much more than he received.

To expand their native alliances and contain the English colonists along the Atlantic seaboard, at the end of the seventeenth century the French established another colony to the southwest, along the Mississippi River. They named their new colony Louisiana, in honor of King Louis XIV. The capital was the port city of New Orleans near the mouth of the river. Distant from France and prone to subtropical diseases, the colony languished, attracting even fewer colonists than did Canada. In 1746 Louisiana had only 4,100 slaves, 3,300 settlers, and 600 soldiers. Nearly three-quarters of them lived on the lower Mississippi near New Orleans. Dependent on the limited trade in deerskins and plantation tobacco, the colony cost much more to administer than it yielded in revenue. The embezzling corruption of the colonial officials also drove up those administrative costs.

Lacking enough soldiers to dominate the immense hinterland, the French had to cultivate native allies, particularly the 12,000 Choctaw who lived east of the Mississippi and north of New Orleans. But the natives of the interior could be enticed by English traders, based in South Carolina, who offered better quality manufactured goods at lower prices. Put on the defensive commercially, the French compensated with gifts. During the 1730s, the Choctaw received presents worth nearly 50,000 *livres*—about twice the value of the deerskins they traded to the French. The newcomers ran their relationship with the Choctaw at a financial loss because strategic considerations took primacy over the economic in Louisiana. The French paid dearly to retain the Choctaw as their allies, to keep runaway Africans and deserting soldiers within Louisiana, and to keep the rival English traders from South Carolina out.