

French/Native Relations in Quebec: 17th-18th Centuries

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France had a markedly different approach to colonization in North America than did Great Britain. Colonists sent by France came to the New World in only relatively small numbers and limited themselves to a narrow expanse of territory in the St. Lawrence Valley that centered on the forts that were to form the nuclei for the subsequent urban centres at Quebec (founded in 1608), Three Rivers (founded in 1734), and Montreal (founded in 1642). The French, unlike the British, were interested in neither settlement nor agriculture but, on the contrary, were primarily motivated in setting up a commercial infrastructure to carry out fur trading with First Nations' hunters and trappers. It was in aid of such a goal that they entered into extensive amicable interactions with First Nations people, negotiating military, diplomatic and commercial alliances that helped extend French influence over vast regions of the New World. By the latter half of the 17th century, France had established an extensive commercial empire in North America. The establishment of British hegemony in their own North American colonies had taken the route of domination, subjugation, and violence against First Nations in a process that we would today call ethnic cleansing. The French built their empire via diplomacy and negotiation as well as by commercial and military alliances with Indian nations occupying a vast territory in Canada and the greater Mississippi valley.

This stark contrast can be better appreciated by viewing what was going on further to the south where the British settled their own nationals in large numbers and allowed these immigrant colonists to come to depend heavily upon agriculture for their food supply and commodities for export. These settlers developed a voracious appetite for First Nations' land, which they came to satisfy eventually via a process of war, extermination, displacement, and expropriation. Brutal antagonism between the settlers and the native peoples began to be a commonplace of British North American colonization, in stark counterpoint to the collaborative relationship seen between Europeans and natives in New France.

French dominion over vast tracts of North America that was not built by subjugating First Nations' people through military conquest had important ramifications. While conflict and violence were not entirely banished, the French neither desired nor achieved the power to impose their will by force of arms. Their relationship with First Nations, indeed, often took the form of a military alliance where native warriors joined with French soldiers to combat their common enemies, the British. The First Nations of New France, as a result, retained a tremendous degree of autonomy, although many ultimately came to accept a certain degree of French hegemony.

The greatest source of pressure for the French to interfere with the lives of First Nations' people came from their religious orders that were highly motivated to convert the native people to Catholicism. Jesuits first came to North America in the early part of the 17th century. They lived in native villages, learned local languages, and came to intimately know the native people and their culture by actually living amongst them. The Jesuits made Quebec the headquarters of

their operations in 1625. Missionaries followed the fur trade routes westward and, although viewed by First Nations people as part of the broader French presence, were often the main source of friction between French and native peoples. Missionary work and colonization were inextricably intertwined, however, and together determined the nature of the relations between natives and French.

Although First Nations people of the eastern woodlands were neither displaced nor conquered, they did experience profound and difficult changes during the 17th century as a result of the French presence. They suffered from terrible epidemics as unfamiliar infections were introduced against which the native people had little or no immunity. The economic foundations of the New World were transformed by the demands of the fur trade and metal implements and weapons brought from Europe gradually replaced traditional technologies. Political instability and wars of much greater extent and ferocity than ever before experienced came to be among the many indirect and injurious consequences of the broader European incursion of into North America.

Source:

Allan Greer. *The Jesuit Relations - Natives and Missionaries in Seventeenth-Century North America*. Boston, New York: Bedford/St. Martins, 2000.