

Native Americans

The Indians were the main focus of the history of New France, and influenced the Europeans in the period before 1663. The Indians, being numerous compared with the Europeans, came into frequent contact with them.

The Indians and Europeans traded items with one another, which led to various events and actions that contributed greatly to the history of New France. The Europeans who arrived after the Indians had already settled were exposed to the native people's way of life, from which techniques for survival were acquired. Later, the Europeans depended on the Indians, some of whom acted as middlemen and who had items which were valuable to them.

Various Indian personalities were also observed and admired by Europeans particularly the Jesuits.

The Native Indians were among the first people to enter North America.

They entered America through the passage of the Bering Strait, a location

which is the midpoint of Alaska and Siberia. As time passed, they settled on various pieces of land and hunted, fished and grew crops. Alfred Bailey mentions that, "It had been suggested that Siouans, the Iroquoians and Algonquians were among the first to enter America."¹ Before the Europeans arrived, there were many native tribes that were already settled. By the time Europeans arrived in North America, they found natives occupying large amounts of land.² The Indians helped start the history of New France.

Since the natives arrived early in North America, their population started to increase quite rapidly. With the combination of migration as well as the birth rate, the Indians inflated their population to a large size. "In 1663, there were only still 3000 Europeans living in New France, no more people than constituted a small Iroquoian tribe."³ The Indians were in the majority before 1663.

Surrounding the area of New France there were two main native groups who spoke different languages. These groups were the Algonquian and the Iroquoian.

The Algonquians were primarily involved in trading and fishing. These people remained in groups called bands, which included relatives such as parents, children, grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. Algonquians primarily hunted, and so would develop groups to hunt in different areas.

They travelled around frequently and would take everything they needed while on their hunting journey. In the winter, they used snowshoes; in the Summer, they used the canoe. The Algonquians were always moving from one location to another; because of their hunting they never stayed in one location for a long period of time.

The Iroquoians were mainly occupied with agriculture. This group established themselves near land which could be farmed upon. They remained in this area until the land was exhausted and nothing more could be cultivated upon it. After the land was worthless it was abandoned and another piece of land was selected upon which to plant at another location. Their villages were known as Longhouses. These Longhouses were quite large and supported more than five families in them. The men were mainly the people who constructed the Longhouse. While the men were busy during the summer, hunting, trading, or engaging in war, the women would care for the crops. The Iroquoians helped contribute to agriculture by being one of the first to grow crops.

While trading with the Europeans, the Indians were faced with many instances that were devastating and other cases which helped them profit.

Trade in New France was so prominent that France decided to create a

monopoly to bring the trade under control. Two provisions had to be met:

Firstly, the private fur trading company had to

promote colonization. Secondly, it had to send

Roman Catholic missionaries to Christianize the

Indians.⁴

On the Gulf of St. Lawrence, Tadoussac, became the chief trading centre for

the Europeans. The trade route surrounding Tadoussac contained connections

from Hudson Bay to New England. Some negative aspects of the fur trade

were that:

The Fur Trade at first enriched traditional

Indian life, but later increasing competition

for pelts generated conflicts that led to the

dispersal of many Indian groups. Indian wars
grew out of long standing rivalries or
developed as a result of Indian disputes over
furs.⁵

An outcome of trading with the Europeans that devastated the Indians,
was the epidemics which the Europeans presented. These epidemics destroyed
a large percentage of the Indian population, which they did not deserve and
which were calamitous to the population.

Certain groups, such as the Hurons, abandoned agriculture and focused
on trading. This reveals that trading had an enormous impact on Indians
and their heritage. The Indians were still in control of exchanging furs,
since Indians controlled the supply of beaver pelt sought by the Dutch and

French traders, who waited at ports on Hudson Bay or St. Lawrence River for Indians to bring them in.⁶

Some Trading relationships continued for a long time and other affiliations did not last long at all. The trading relationships which took place included:

French and Hurons traded till 1649, trading between Dutch and Iroquois lasted till 1664, between the French and Ottawas after 1650, and trading between the English and Iroquois after 1664.⁷

This illustrates that trading relations involving Hurons were practically diminished soon after the Europeans had arrived. Regardless of the

misfortunes that occurred, trading benefitted both the Indians and the Europeans.

During the fur trade some Indians played the role of the middlemen, helping out with the flow of the trade. These middlemen had located themselves so they could cover the areas where tremendous amounts of the trading done. The Hurons, who were middlemen, mainly traded with the Algonquians and the French. The Hurons traded furs and in their canoes transported native as well as European goods. The middlemen had some influence on the Europeans, for the reason that after the fall of Huronia, the Coureurs de Bois took over the role of the middlemen. These Coureurs de Bois stayed and lived with the Algonquians who helped them carry out their role effectively. Algonquians at some point also played the role of middlemen while they were exchanging goods with the Dutch. The middlemen were helpful in controlling the trading that developed in New France, and

the Indians effectively carried out their roles competently.

During the fur trade many items were traded between the Indians and the Europeans. The main item of trade that the Europeans desired from the Indians was fur. Conversely, the main article sought by the Indians from the Europeans were metal goods. In 1534, the fur trade industry became the most popular and dominant industry in New France. For the Europeans, the most popular method to accumulate furs was to trade with the Indians. In return for furs, Indians acquired European tools which made their work easier and more productive. These tools also lasted longer and could be transported easily because of their light weight. The particular items traded that were of use to the Indians were as follows: iron axes, hatchets, which were useful outdoors and for construction; cooking pots, steel knives, and needles helped the Indian women who cooked and sew.

Another item which had a large impact was the kettle: "The Kettle was the

most revolutionary article which came within the sphere of the women."⁸

Foodstuffs and clothing were also acquired from the Europeans. Among the

clothing were summer capes which the Europeans wore, and for the winter,

blankets for beds were traded for furs.⁹ Other articles which were traded

but did not have a positive impact on the Indians were liquor and tobacco.

In 1640 Dutch traders sold guns to Mohawks, and private traders sold guns

to the Iroquois for furs.¹⁰ These items were particularly useful when in

combat against the enemy, and they were more powerful than any other

weapons the Indians were accustomed to. Items that were traded, especially

metal goods, helped the Indians with their way of life and made their tasks

more easy.

Christianization of the Indians was a laborious task, but the effort

of the Jesuits led to some successful outcomes. Champlain had considered

that the task of converting Indians was of equal importance as gathering

wealth in the Fur Trade or extending French influence in North America.¹¹

The first missionaries who attempted to convert the Indians were the

Recollets. They tried to make the Indians adapt to the European lifestyles

with great effort, but were quite unsuccessful. A reason for their

difficulty in converting the Indians was that there was a language barrier

which separated the two. To overcome this barrier, the Jesuits who

followed, had to learn the native tongue. Similarities in religious

beliefs between both the Indians and the Jesuits were helpful in converting

the Indians, since these beliefs helped the Indians relate to the

missionaries' sermons, and the Indians were influenced by the lectures that

they addressed. The Jesuits, while staying with the Indians during the

process of conversion to Christianity, were required to adapt to the

Indians' ways of life and saw many qualities of Indians, some of which the

priests admired and found virtuous. In conflict with the missionaries,

some native groups were very fearful of the Jesuits. The reason was that people who were baptized, fell ill and soon died. This view led them to believe that the Jesuits were associated with all the misfortunes and evil which they feared. The Jesuit's endless attempts to Christianize the Indians were nevertheless a significant gesture which clearly influenced the Indians and their ways of life.

Indians possessed qualities which were superior in helping them survive and that Europeans found very appealing. The Indians had good experience in the resources available which helped in adapting to the country. One articulate characteristic was that they "Highly valued politeness and good manners in dealing with one another."¹² Indians tried not to force a person into actions because "It was immoral to make someone do something against his will."¹³ If there was plenty of food, sharing was encouraged: "Indians considered it wrong to let someone starve while others

had more than they needed."¹⁴ Therefore the Indians maintained equality among all individuals and tried to conform with other fellow human beings.

On the topic of diseases, A.G. Bailey states, "The early travellers found that certain ailments which were current among Europeans at the time were absent from the native society. The diseases suffered by the Indians were quite few in number."¹⁵ This demonstrates that the Indians were healthy and adapted well to their environment. The Indians could survive the ruthless climate surrounding them, and even developed snowshoes to help them endure the terrain when it was covered with snow. R.J. Surtees claims that, "In virtually all instances, the Indians greeted newcomers with friendship, guidance and assistance."¹⁶ That is a good example of their unselfish and invitingly friendly attitude to other humans, even if they were of a different creed. In agriculture, "These natives, even though they seemed so primitive, had mastered agriculture in corn, melon, squash, and beans. They had achieved hunting skills with crude weapons and appeared robust

enough."¹⁷ Even though they did not have very good tools, they still made the most of whatever they had and used it to their full advantage. The natives possessed qualities and traits which are essential for survival in demanding conditions and for developing strong relationships.

While trading with the Europeans, the Indians became almost possessed by the European goods they desired. "With the decline in food resources in the country, the Eastern Algonquians lost a measure of self-reliance and became increasingly dependent upon Europeans for their supplies."¹⁸ Since the Europeans had superior metal items, the craving of the Indians would force them to go to the Europeans to acquire them: "Indians didn't have copper, iron, hemp, wood or manufactured articles and resorted to the French for them."¹⁹ The European goods helped the Indians out by making their tasks easier to cope with so that "They grew dependent on goods and

allied with whites, who could provide for them."²⁰ This explains how the Indians lost some of their heritage by relying too heavily on the European goods.

The Europeans greatly depended on the Indians as the Indians

contributed to the Europeans survival in a land which was new to them.

R.J. Surtees claims that "Iroquois people probably saved Cartier's party

from complete extinction during the winter of 1535 and 1536, by teaching

the Frenchmen a cure for scurvy."²¹ The Indians, being the only other

human beings and the most welcoming in New France, were the only ones who

could help the perplexed Frenchmen: "Indians were the only available

teacher who could show the newcomer how to live in a harsh climate, to

forage for food, paddle and build a canoe, to travel on snowshoes and to

build shelters."²² In agriculture, the Indians introduced Europeans to

plants such as potatoes, corn, peanuts, pumpkins, peppers, tomatoes, and

beans.²³ Because the Indians had furs that the Europeans desired so critically, "Both French and Dutch traders tried to conduct themselves in a manner that would please the Indians and encourage the Indians to trade"²⁴ This statement clearly displays that the Indians were the main motive for trading, and without them there would not have been any trade taking place at all in New France. As the Indians were superior in hunting, the French needed assistance from the Indians, who did help them. "The French were dependent on native food supply, especially game, in pursuit of which they were novices."²⁵ According to some historians,

As late as 1643, Quebec was almost entirely dependent on Indians hunting for its meat supply. Algonquians taught the French how to grow corn, beans, pumpkins, and squash. From the Indians, they learned how to make maple

sugar and gather wild berries. Algonquians

also trained the first Frenchmen how to

survive the interior.²⁶

The native people were independent in agriculture as well as survival, but

still helped the disoriented Europeans with some of their skills."The

Indians taught Europeans how to hunt, travel, farm and subsist in their new

environment."²⁷

Prior to 1663, the Indians clearly influenced the Europeans and the

history of New France. With fur as their main trading item, they obtained

European goods which they desired that helped make their everyday lives

easier. Using techniques of survival in the outdoors, they clearly set a

trend for the Europeans to follow, so that they could reside in this

unpredictable country. The Europeans, soon after discovering the natives,

depended on them as their source of various techniques which were mandatory for survival, such as hunting for food. The Indians were the primary, contributing factor to the history of New France and without their influence, Europeans could not have progressed to where they are at this point in Canada.

Endnotes

1. Alfred G. Bailey, *The Conflict of European and Eastern Algonkian Cultures* (University of Toronto Press, 1969), p.2.

2. Bruce G. Trigger. *The Indians and the Heroic Age of*

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p.4.

3. Bruce G. Trigger. Natives and Newcomers (McGill-Queens

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4. R.D. Francis, Richard Jones, Donald B. Smith, Origins:

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Winston of Canada, Limited, 1988),p.41.

5. R.J. Surtees, The Original People (Holt, Rinehart and

Winston of Canada, Limited,1971),p.22.

6. Ibid., p.19.

7. Ibid., p.20.

8. Bailey, The Conflict of European and Eastern Algonkian
Cultures, p.24.

9. Ibid., p.12.

10. Trigger, The Indians and the Heroic Age Of New
France, p.18.

11. Surtees, The Original People, p.34.

12. Trigger, The Indians and the Heroic Age of New
France, p.6.

13. Ibid., p.6.

14. Ibid., p.6.

15. Bailey, Conflict of European and Eastern Algonkian
Cultures, p.27.

16. Surtees, The Original People, ix.

17. Ibid., p.1.

18. Bailey, Conflict of European and Eastern Algonkian
Cultures, p.56.

19. Ibid., p.11.

20. Surtees, *The Original People*, p.21.

21. *Ibid.*, ix.

22. *Ibid.*, p.19.

23. *Ibid.*, p.19.

24. Trigger, *Indians and the Heroic Age of New France*,

p.22.

25. Bailey, *Conflict of Europeans and Eastern Algonkian*

Cultures, p.117.

26. Francis, Jones, Smith, Origins : Canadian History To

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27. Surtees, The Original People, p.ix.

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