

INTRODUCTION

The object of this essay is to trace the birth and growth of trade and commerce down to the year 1632 in that portion of North America subsequently called New France. France was associated so long and so intimately with the valley of the St. Lawrence that the visits of Spanish, Portuguese and even English explorers before Cartier are sometimes forgotten. A brief account of attempts on the part of the other European powers to occupy this region will form a fitting prelude to the history of its first occupation by the French.

In considering the achievements and failures alike of these early voyagers we must remember that they had in mind nothing that corresponds to the modern map of North America. Between Europe and Asia they expected to find only a few scattered islands. Not only was America as a continent unknown, the very possibility of its existence had not been dreamed of. Columbus tried to reach China by a direct route across the Atlantic, and when on the twelfth of October, 1492, he landed on the island of Guanahani he entertained no suspicion of having stumbled upon the threshold of a new and vast continent. Presuming that he had arrived at the outskirts of China, his proposed goal, he referred the names learned from natives to places in Cathay mentioned by Marco Polo.

Yet Columbus did not reach the mainland either on his first voyage or on his second in the following year. The first Europeans to do so, since the adventurous voyages of the Northmen five centuries earlier, were the crew of an English vessel from Bristol. John Cabot, a Venetian, was sent out by Henry the Seventh in the summer of 1497 with orders to find and discover "any islands or countries whether of Gentiles or Infidels which before this time were unknown to all Christians." Cabot made a landfall probably on the shores of Labrador or