

The Great Lakes-St. Lawrence Lowlands comprise the rest of southern Ontario and contain most of the population, industry, commerce and agricultural land.

Ontario's climate ranges from humid continental in the south to subarctic in the north. The Great Lakes and the St. Lawrence River form the province's southern boundary; Hudson Bay and James Bay the northern boundary. These bodies of water cool the summer, lessen the severity of winter, delay autumn frosts and reduce the difference between day and night time temperatures. The cold polar air sweeping down from the north and the warm moist air flowing north from the Mississippi River give Ontario adequate precipitation throughout the year.

History

In the early seventeenth century, the region between Georgian Bay and Lake Simcoe was inhabited by the Huron Indians and their neighbours, the Petuns. These tribes lived in large bark-covered longhouses within fortified villages. Their loose grouping of family-linked bands subsisted by cultivating fields of Indian corn. To the east, the nomadic Algonquian-speaking tribes relied on hunting and fishing for their livelihood. The Hurons and Petuns numbered about 25 000 – a match for their arch rivals, the Iroquois, south of Lake Ontario.

Following the founding of Quebec City in 1608 by the French explorer Samuel de Champlain, the Hurons travelled to the colony by river to trade beaver pelts. Over the next century Ontario's waterways were used extensively by explorers, fur traders, missionaries and soldiers, but there was little permanent settlement. Intense rivalry developed between British and French fur traders however, and in 1749, the French built Fort Toronto at the mouth of the Humber River in an effort to prevent Indians from trading with the British at Oswego on Lake Ontario's southern shore.

During the American Revolution, the United Empire Loyalists in the American colonies who preferred British rule to independence, began to move into the Niagara Peninsula. After the war, Loyalist immigration increased and surveyors found it difficult to keep ahead of them as they took up British land grants. Settlement spread eastward along Lake Ontario's northern border and the St. Lawrence shore and westward as part of the general movement to the West.

The new English-speaking settlers were accustomed to representative institutions and demanded them in their new province. In 1791, the British Parliament passed the Constitutional Act, which divided Quebec along the Ottawa River into Upper (Ontario) and Lower (Quebec)