



The newcomers

Although there is evidence that European seamen came into contact with North American Indians as early as A.D. 1000, European explorers and settlers did not settle permanently in Canada until the 16th century.

France was the first country to show a strong interest in the territory that is now Canada. The first French explorer, Jacques Cartier, encountered Micmac Indians almost immediately upon landing in the New World in 1534. Cartier's subsequent attempts to establish settlements failed, in part because he had alienated local Indian tribes by abducting some of their members and taking them back to Europe.

The fur trade

Nevertheless, Europeans continued to visit the east coast to fish its abundant waters and engage in trade for furs with the Woodland Indians. Over the next 50 years, the French developed a fondness for beaver hats that led to a growing and lucrative trade. Intertribal trade in furs for other commodities had existed long before the arrival of the Europeans. However, the desire of the Europeans for fur combined with their offerings of "magical" new products sharply raised the value of furs as articles of trade. In return for beaver pelts, the French adventurers provided Indians with European manufactured goods, including the musket (an early firearm) and food items such as biscuits and preserved goods.

The development of the fur trade is one of the most important events in the history of Canada. It also marked a turning point in the lifestyles of many Indian tribes. They began to trap more animals for pelts, and therefore had less time for traditional subsistence activities. As a result, their diets changed and they became more dependent on European foods. As well, the demand for furs led hunters farther afield, often into the territory of other tribes. Intertribal warfare intensified, and was given a new dimension by the muskets Indians acquired through trade and alliances with Europeans.

Permanent settlement

In 1608, French adventurer Samuel de Champlain founded the settlement of Quebec (today's Quebec City) as a fur trading centre. It was also around this time that England took a more vigorous interest in the northern regions of the New World, sending its own traders to North America in search of furs.