

WINTER IN NEW FRANCE: A CONSTANT BATTLE (1535-1763)

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ABSTRACT

On behalf of King of France, *François I*, explorer, sailor and geographer Jacques Cartier and about 60 men sailed to North America from St. Malo, France in April-May 1534. They reached and explored parts of the St. Lawrence River banks (until August 1534) which would become the cradle of New France (for more than 2 centuries from about 1534 to 1763). Winter was brutal and merciless for the first settlers used to a milder climate in France. At the very beginning of the colony and thereafter, several people died from cold, famine and diseases, including scurvy. This article looks at how people, notably from about 20 settlers in 1608 in Québec City to approximately 65,000 in the new world in 1763 fought, managed and over time adapted to the harsh environment in what later became known as Canada. (KEYWORDS: winter, New France, Canada, survival, adaptation)

INTRODUCTION

Shortly after the retreat of the last glacier (Inlandsis) some 12,000 years ago, the first explorers and settlers on the North American continent possibly came from Asia (renamed thereafter as "Paleo-Indians", Cole Harris et al, 1987); they would have settled along the Champlain Sea and later to what became The St. Lawrence shores around 8000-9000 B.C. (Chapdelaine, Bourget, 1992). Archeologists named these people after The Plano and Clovis cultures. Sites were excavated close to Rimouski, in what is called the Bic area located along the St. Lawrence River (Fortin, Lechasseur, 1993). Paleo-Indians hunted and fished in Eastern Canada as well as along the U.S. North-East Coast for several thousands of years.

To this date, it remains unclear as to who came next. James and Martin (1981) suggest that Greek geographer and sailor Pytheas about 350 B.C. sailed as far as Iceland. Carthaginians and Phoenicians possibly sailed west of the Mediterranean Sea. Irish Monks also sailed westbound. Mowat (2000) claims that the Farfarers (Albans) came to Canada even before the Vikings, possibly around 700-1000 A.D. and settled in the North. What is certain is that the Vikings stayed in Canada (Ingstad, 1970, 1977, 2001; Martin, 1995) around 1000 A.D. (*L'Anse aux Meadows* in Newfoundland, now a UNESCO World Heritage Site and still to this day, it is the only authenticated Norse site in North America) as they built at least one settlement on the most northern tip of the island of Newfoundland along the Gulf of St. Lawrence (Strait of Belle Isle) just south of Labrador (Red Bay). Explorer John Cabot reached Newfoundland in 1497. Several other explorers (English, French, Portuguese, Spanish, Italian, Dutch and Danish) sailed along the North American coasts. The Basques arrived next. They fished (Bélanger, 1971) and hunted whales (1530-1610 peak periods, Leblanc, 1984) possibly until about 1626 along the coast of Labrador, Newfoundland and along the St. Lawrence shores as far south as *île aux Basques* (near *Trois-Pistoles*, QC).

THE 16th CENTURY: DAWN OF NEW FRANCE AND WINTER

Jacques Cartier came to Canada/New France three times (1534, 1535 and 1541). In 1535-1536 Cartier spent the whole winter close to Québec City. This is possibly the first time Frenchmen faced a harsh Canadian winter. Of the 110 crew members, half became sick by mid-February 1535. Twenty-five people died from scurvy (Trudel, 1963). The 1541-1542 winter was just as disastrous for Cartier and his crew. Sieur de Roberval also failed to establish a settlement at Charlebourg-Royal (renamed France-Roy, near Québec City) from about 1541 to 1543. Several people died during the wintertime. Basques were also sometimes trapped at the end of their fishing seasons due to an early winter, possibly occurring as early as 1574-1575. The Notarial Act states that Basque Micheau de Hoyarsabal and crew members hibernated in 1586-1587 possibly at *île aux Basques* (Turgeon, 1997). French settlers under Marquis de la Roche also failed to establish a colony in Sable Island about 300 km southeast of Halifax (Nova Scotia) from 1598 to 1603. In 1600-1601, Pierre Chauvin de Tonnetuit living in *Tadoussac* had to move in with Native people when, of 30 people in 1600, 11 are left in the spring of 1601. The French government came to the conclusion that settling in Canada (New France) was an almost impossible task.

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FOUNDATION OF NEW FRANCE AND WINTER

Nevertheless New France was officially founded around 1604 to 1608 by Intendant Samuel de Champlain and Pierre Dugua de Mons. Winter was hard on everybody, and sometimes deadly. In 1604 Pierre Dugua de Mons, along with 79 people, settled along St. Croix River (New Brunswick). The winter of 1604-1605 was so harsh (about 30 people died from scurvy) that they moved to *Port-Royal* (Nova Scotia, Couturier, 1994, p.35). Several people also died during the winter of 1605-1606 in *Port-Royal*.

During the summer of 1608, Champlain believed that it would be better for everybody to leave this area (*Port-Royal*) for Québec City (they built *habitation*: a house) along the St. Lawrence shores. Twenty people out of 27 died during the winter of 1608-1609. The 17th Century was difficult on the settlers as about 60 people died in three winters. Not much is known till 1617 when the first families from France migrated to New France. Louis Hébert and his family (Lapointe et al, 1995) settled in Québec City in 1617. Louis died while shoveling snow and ice off his roof in January 1627.

The major mistake the first settlers made was building according to Western France standards, not such a good idea in a much colder climate. Stone houses didn't retain heat very well in that area. It stays cold and humid in winter, and using a single fireplace to keep their homes warm during very cold winter months was inefficient. People struggled with cold and suffered from malnutrition. In 1629 New France had a population of about 117 (Lahaise and Vallerand, 1977).

After Québec City, *Trois-Rivières* was founded in 1634 and *Montréal* in 1642. In 1663, the population of New France grew to 3007 and to 8084 in 1674 (Trudel, 1997) mainly guided by the *Compagnie des Cent Associés* (a system devoted to attract more people from France to New France, also known as *Compagnie de la Nouvelle-France* or *Compagnie du Canada* from 1627 to 1663). Fur trading was still the main economic source of income in the 17th Century in New France. Forming alliances with Native people (Creighton, 1970), the new *Coueurs des Bois* (trappers) were introduced to trapping with the help of snowshoeing and toboggans in the wintertime when the quality of animal fur was most valuable. The colony with its first Canadian -born generation slowly switched to agriculture and cattle. Houses began to be constructed from lumber rather than stones improving comfort and retaining more heat.

18th CENTURY

In 1700, New France had a population of about 13,000 people (twice as much as in 1674 with 8084). Benefiting from a high birth rate, the population reaches about 65,000 by 1765 (Blanchard, 1960), when British rules came into effect since about 1763 (Peace of Paris). Winter, snow and cold were still felt by the newcomers. The heating system of homes began to improve substantially around 1730. Indeed, a new type of cast iron, wood burning stove was developed in *Les Forges du Saint-Maurice*. St. Maurice Ironworks (a smelter located about 10 km north of *Trois-Rivières*) was the birthplace of the country's iron industry where high-quality iron ore was discovered. It operated more or less from 1730 to the mid-1830s and has been a National Historical Site of Canada since 1973. This new stove equipped with a long pipe connected far away from the chimney allowed the heat to be distributed more equally inside every wood house, providing a more comfortable environment in the wintertime.

But winter in New France meant that the settlers had to search, cut and pile large amounts of firewood. Preparing vast quantities of winter food stock was also a necessity. Designing warmer clothes (boots, mitts, tuques, and scarfs were often made from fur) offered better protection against the long and bitter cold, and travelling long distances was still virtually impossible during that season, making people more isolated. No health care or school system made them more vulnerable in New France.

Hence winter, snow and cold were always a constant hard-fought battle for the inhabitants of New France. The white season, however, helped build a new breed of people. Coming to terms with the new continent definitely took time and required the settlers to learn new skills. A fact that will eventually happen in the long run.

CONCLUSION

Native people were experienced and quite successful in surviving winter in North America. They were also a valuable resource to the first French Explorers and settlers throughout New France. The Native people helped save lives. The settlers slowly making progress throughout the tough winters would become Canadians, French Canadians and later known as Québécois with the help of democracy, good government, ingenuity and a strong desire to succeed. Winter would eventually define them and become a great part of their own culture as would several other people settling in cold North America.

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