Fort St. Joseph Archaeological Project

Intercultural and Anthropological Studies

2011

Fur Trade 05: Getting Around in 17th and 18th Century New France

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Getting Around
in 17th and 18th Century New France

Routes and Transportation

Fur traders utilized water routes and birchbark canoes to transport goods and furs over large distances.

Fur traders preferred water transportation to land routes. Lakes and rivers were the fur trade's highways. Canoes hauled far more weight faster and easier than a man or horse could carry. The most commonly used vessel in the fur trade was the birchbark canoe.

Fur Trade Routes, 1755
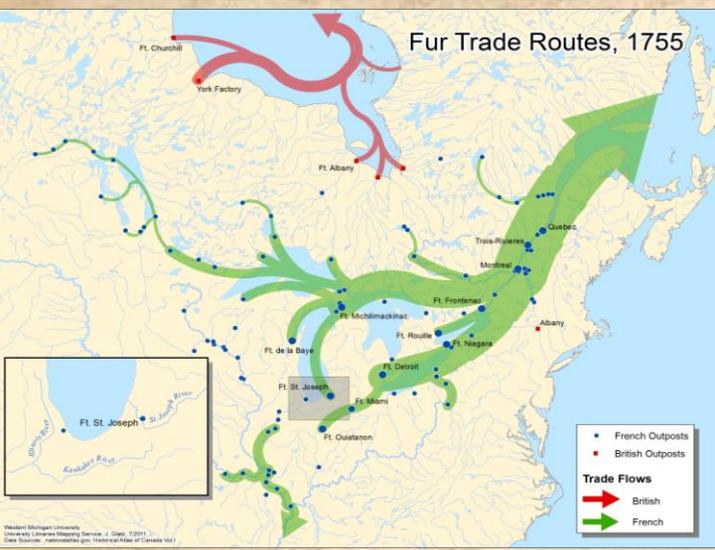
Two main routes connected Montreal with the *pays d'en haut*. The first ascended the St. Lawrence River through Lake Ontario and Lake Erie, passing by York (Toronto), Niagara, Detroit, and up to Michilimackinac. The second ran up the Ottawa River, west along the Mattawa River, across Lake Nipissing and along the French River to Georgian Bay and Lake Huron and also through Michilimackinac. Algonquin nations controlled the Ottawa River and sometimes charged tolls for the use of the river.

Experienced travelers or guides passed along knowledge of routes. In time, routes, portages, and camp sites became common knowledge. Cartographers never intended their maps of New France to guide travelers in the way modern road maps do today. Instead, the maps helped claim lands for France by showing the limits of what the French claimed to have discovered and occupied.

Fort St. Joseph stood near the intersection of both land and water routes. It was near the Sauk Trail, and only a short canoe trip from Lake Michigan and its water routes to northern posts. The Kankakee-Illinois-Mississippi water route to Illinois and Louisiana posts lay only a few miles away.
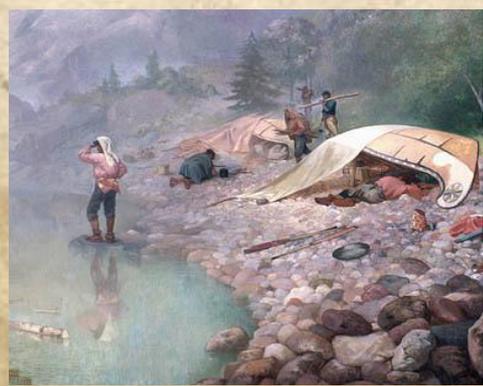

This famous 19th century painting, *Running the Rapids* by Frances Anne Hopkins, depicts fur traders running rapids in a Montreal canoe. Courtesy of Library and Archives Canada C-2774.

Travels of a *Voyageur*

Voyageurs' *travels were physically challenging and often dangerous.*

Voyageurs were hardy men who paddled heavily-laden canoes for many miles a day. In the summer they had to travel long distances quickly. Often they sang to set the pace of paddling. When they came to obstructions such as rapids or stretches of land between bodies of water, they had to portage: picking up and carrying their canoes over land along with heavy packs of supplies and goods. Not only did the job require physical prowess, but it was dangerous. Many *voyageurs* lost their lives to the forces of nature or attacks from hostile Natives.

It is the Paddle That Brings Us

Riding along the road from Rochelle city,
I met three girls and all of them were pretty.
It is the paddle that brings us, that brings us,
It is the paddle that brings us there.

– Translation of a *voyageur* song. From Carolyn Podruchny's *Making the Voyageur World*, 2006.

Early 19th century *voyageurs* breaking camp. Detail of Francis Anne Hopkins, *Voyageurs at Dawn*, 1874. Courtesy of Library and Archives Canada, C-2773.