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Fur Trade 08: New France and the Place of the Fur Trade

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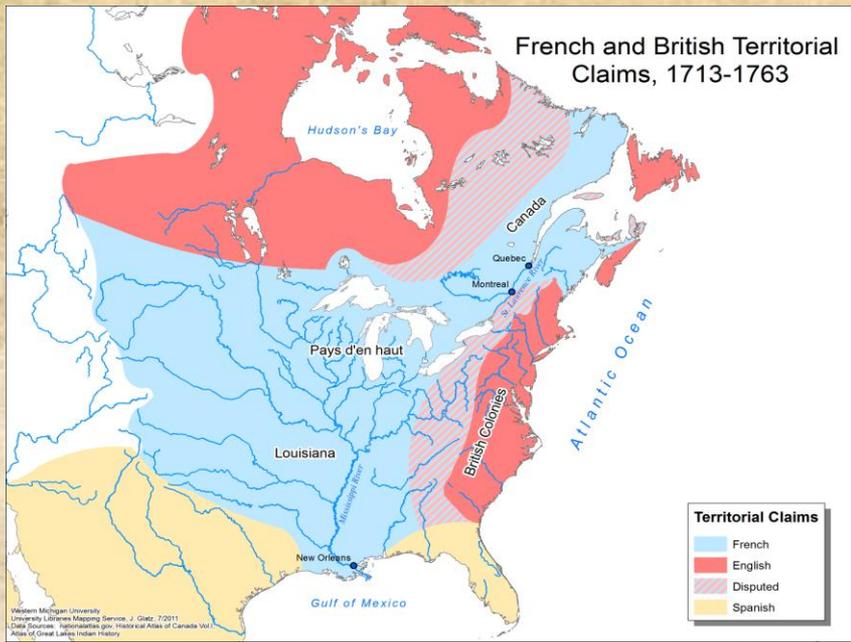


New France and the Place of the Fur Trade

What Was New France?

New France was a widespread network of French settlements, trading posts, forts, and missions within Native-controlled territory in North America.

As the French explored North America, they encountered many different Native peoples and a landscape rich in fur-bearing animals. The first French settlements were fishing villages along the coast, but soon fur displaced fish as the center of New France's economy. The core of French settlement grew along the banks of the St. Lawrence River, concentrated in the cities of Montreal and Quebec. Further west, New France encompassed the Great Lakes region (known as the *pays d'en haut* or "upper country") and the area of the Mississippi River valley stretching down to the Gulf Coast and Louisiana. In these territories the French established a network of trading posts, forts and missions. These "islands" of French settlement in Native-controlled lands became the principal places of Native and French interaction and exchange in the fur trade.



Imperial Rivals

The French and British often competed in the fur trade.

Although New France often lost money, the French did not want to lose the fur trade to their imperial rivals, the English. The French, who had far fewer colonists than the English, created and maintained an amicable relationship with the Native Americans. These alliances gave them an important advantage over the English and touched many aspects of life in New France, from personal matters, to trade and politics.

Sa Ga Yeath Qua Pieth Tow, a Mohawk leader, during a diplomatic visit to Europe. He stands proudly with this fusil fin held closely by his side. Painting by Jan Verelst, 1710. Courtesy of Library and Archives Canada, C-092419.



More than Profits at Stake

The fur trade helped create and maintain alliances and social relations between Europeans and Native groups.

The fur trade at first earned large profits. Furs were lightweight and easy to transport in birchbark canoes. Beaver pelts, the trade's mainstay, fetched high prices in Europe where beaver felt hats were in high demand. However, by the late 1690s the supply of beaver began to outweigh demand. Because the French Crown guaranteed the price of furs, the oversupply meant that the fur trade sometimes actually lost money. If the trade lost money why did the French keep it up? The trade was about more than the value of furs.

Native groups linked buying and selling with other social relations. They viewed exchanges as gifts rather than trade. Gifts created special bonds between societies and reinforced social-alliances. Those who gave gifts gained prestige, honor, and influence and those who received them had an obligation to the giver.

The French went to great lengths to continue the fur trade in order to maintain their relationships with Native allies. The British, however, discontinued the policy of gift-giving, leading to resentment and hostilities that precipitated Pontiac's Rebellion.



Engraving depicting the fur trade in North America. Detail from William Fadden's "Map of the Inhabited Part of Canada, From the French Surveys," 1777. Courtesy of Library and Archives Canada, C-35062.