The French in North America: Another Frontier of Inclusion

The Protestant Reformation transformed Europe beginning with the German priest Martin Luther's 1517 nailing of his 95 theses or statements to the door of the Wittenberg Church. Luther sought at first to reform the Catholic Church, but soon his followers protested the Catholic Church's rule. Eventually the term "Protestant" applied to all Western Christians who did not maintain allegiance to the Pope. Take a "Western Civilization" course to learn about the Protestant Reformation.

For this class, we need to understand the Reformation as it influenced settlement in North America. Protestants organized the first French attempts to colonize in North America, but these Huguenots colonies failed largely because they were founded in the Southeast where the Spanish dominated and moved to crush the French settlements.

Fishermen from northern Europe knew of the rich fishing grounds off of Nova Scotia and soon Europeans discovered the fur resources of North America. The French traded textiles, glass, copper, and ironware (including weapons) with American Indians and in turn received furs. Because the wild game of Europe had been so depleted by Europe's growing population, the North American furs filled an important need for winter clothing. Thus the North American fur trade began. By end of 16th century over a thousand ships per year (mostly French) traded for furs along northern coast. The Indians grew skilled at pitting Europeans against each other to get best exchange rate.

The fur trade benefited both the Indians and Europeans, but the trade also encouraged the spread of epidemic diseases and resulted in Indians' becoming dependent on European manufactured goods such as metal knives, kettles, and firearms. As time passed, the trade turned more and more in European favor.

By the early 17th century, the French attempted to control fur trade. Samuel de Champlain (agent of Royal Canadian Company) led this effort.

You can learn about Champlain and New France in the 1600s in this virtual exhibit called "Living in Canada in the Time of Champlain, 1600-1635." It is sponsored by the Canadian Museum of Civilization through its Virtual Museum of New France:

http://www.civilization.ca/cmc/vmnf/champlain/indexeng.shtml

Unlike the Spanish (and the English), the French colony (New France) relied on a system based on commerce not conquest. In the fur trade, Frenchmen dispersed among the Indians where they learned Indian languages and customs. Like the Spanish, the French colonization effort included religious conversion. The Jesuits (a Roman Catholic religious order founded in 1534)
first arrived in New France in 1625, and although few in number they had some success in converting the Indians largely because they were more accepting of Indian cultural norms.

A Frontier of Inclusion

Like the Spanish in New Mexico, the French sent small numbers of French colonists and most were men. These men had children with Indian women called "métis." Another similarity to the Spanish colony of New Mexico was the small size of New France: only 15,000 by 1700 with Quebec City as the administrative center and Montreal (founded in 1642) just a frontier outpost.

Read French and Indian accounts from the time in the folder: New France: In Their Own Words.