

ST. LAWRENCE RIVER AND THE THOUSAND ISLANDS: HISTORY AND LEGENDS

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HISTORY OF THE THOUSAND ISLANDS

The great highway of the north and west during the decades when the early French explorers, missionaries, colonizers and traders were searching out an unknown continent, the St. Lawrence River, trade artery and summer playground, is rich in historic incidents and legends. Across it has swept the tide of contending empires in the long struggle between white races for dominance in the new world, just as the Indian tribes and nations had made it debatable territory for centuries before the coming of the palefaces.

Indians of the Algonquin tribes of the north and Iroquois of the Five Nations to the south of Lake Ontario first used the river for hunting and fishing excursions and frequent war expeditions. When Cartier, de la Roque, Champlain and their hardy soldiers, sailors and traders established the first trading settlements on the lower St. Lawrence they were told of the mighty stream whose length was measured in terms of days, and beyond that river were vast expanses of fresh water leading to regions of which the Indians knew little more than campfire legends.

Jacques Cartier

It was Jacques Cartier whose explorations of the lower St. Lawrence with two vessels in 1534 are first recorded, though Cartier believed that he found evidence and talk

among Indians of previous explorations by Spaniards who were disappointed in their search for mines or other riches. For years previous the waters about Newfoundland and the islands at the mouth of the St. Lawrence had been frequented by Breton, Norman and Basque cod-fishermen—according to tradition even before Columbus discovered the islands of the West Indies in 1492. In the next year Cartier returned and on the 10th day of August landed on the shores of a bay in the lower river, which bay he named St. Lawrence in honor of that saint's day. The river has taken its name from the bay named for the Spanish saint.

Cartier sailed up the St. Lawrence as far as Quebec, and later visited the present site of Montreal, where a great Iroquois Indian camp was found. The winter was passed at a camp constructed near Quebec, a winter of great privations and disease which took heavy toll of the adventurous band. In 1536 the explorers returned to France without finding that passage to the Indies so much desired, or the illusory land of gold and rubies and wealth described by the crafty Indians.

Francis de la Roque

In 1542 Francis de la Roque, with a commission from King Francis First of France, sailed up the St. Lawrence and founded a station between Quebec and Montreal, or Hochelaga, as the Indians called their ancient meeting place, and site of a fortified village of an Iroquois tribe.

It was at the river of Cap Rouge, the same place where Cartier and the men of his third expedition had spent the previous winter, under direction of de la Roque, who intended to follow the same year. Cartier held the title of Captain-General of the expedition of 1541, but would not remain with de la Roque when the latter arrived with more colonists the next year. Cartier returned to France. The first settlers experienced many hardships from unfriendly Indians, wild animals and sickness incident to poor provisions and a winter climate to which they were unaccustomed, with the result that these trading posts were abandoned and those who remained alive returned to France, or in a few cases men abandoned the life of the whites, and were adopted into Indian tribes.

Not until the seventeenth century did any white man record the complete journey from Montreal to Lake Ontario, "beautiful lake" as it was interpreted in the Indian tongue. These dusky natives told many stories of the countless islands and broad waters "ten days above the rapids that are near Montreal," as a grand-nephew of Cartier wrote in 1587. The lower reaches of the river from Montreal to the sea early bore the name St. Lawrence, but for decades the mighty stream of blue water flowing from Ontario to Montreal was called the "Great River."

Samuel de Champlain

Champlain, the able governor-explorer of New France,

himself recounted in detail the wonders of scenery, the Indian customs and laws and the possibilities of developing the region to the spiritual and material benefit of the aborigines as well as to the greater honor and glory of his native France and her children. Champlain was the first great explorer and exploiter of the region beyond Montreal, though historians disagree as to whether he ever made the complete journey through the St. Lawrence. For years he continued in personal contact with the chiefs and visited the tribes from Lake Huron to Lake Champlain, which latter he discovered in 1609, and the former in 1615. He became a great father to the northern Indians, counseling them in their troubles and disputes, and bringing them greater comforts and wiser provision for the future through the influence of trade and commerce early established on a large scale at Montreal.

In 1608 Champlain renewed the effort to found a permanent colony in New France, sailing up the St. Lawrence to the site of Quebec and building a fortified station on the land between the river's edge and the high rock which in later years became the stronghold of the lower river. Champlain also visited Hochelaga, the present site of Montreal which Cartier had visited seventy years before, but Champlain found no trace of that heavily-stocked Iroquois town—only a few families of the Algonquin Indians living in rude shelters. This was one year after Jamestown in Virginia was settled by that English company which endured so many hardships before relief

came, and they were able to win a living from the soil and woods.

Discovery of Ontario

In 1615 Champlain crossed the upper entrance to the St. Lawrence, at the mouth of Lake Ontario, with a war party of Hurons who had come down the Trent river and through the Bay of Quinte, bent on vengeance for past depredations of their ancient enemies, but kindred people, the Iroquois of central New York. In October of that year he landed on the south shore of Lake Ontario, near Henderson Bay, five years before the first white settlers landed on the Massachusetts coast and six years after the Dutch landed on Manhattan and sailed up the Hudson river. The expedition was not successful, and returned to spend many weeks in hunting game for the winter near the site of the present city of Kingston. It was not until the following year that Champlain was able to return to his settlements at Montreal and Quebec, as the Indians used various pretexts to keep their wise counselor with them throughout the cold months until spring loosened the ice in the northern rivers. Champlain passed the winter in the Huron country and returned by way of the Ottawa river.

In following decades the St. Lawrence river saw an increasing flotilla of canoes, batteaux and galleys of the traders, explorers and zealous French missionaries pushing westward. Among the Thousand Islands the traders

stopped to barter for pelts, the explorers gained information of the lakes and rivers of the west, and the missionaries learned of the tribes and tongues of the new wards of old France. The Island region was a great storehouse of food for the red men, who came in large numbers during the fall months to catch and dry or smoke the pike, muscullonge, eel and sturgeon of these waters, returning to their winter encampments with heavily laden canoes. The early missionaries and voyageurs remarked upon the varied beauty of Island scenery, the broad and narrow reaches of blue waters, and the great abundance of game and fish. "Les Mille Isles" or "Lake of the Thousand Islands" it was called by the French, and the English later used the same titles.

The Indian Barrier

Though Indians of the Algonquin and Huron tribes frequented the Thousand Island regions for hunting and fishing purposes, yet it was the northern rampart of that remarkable federation, the five nations of the Iroquois—later called the "Six Nations," when a kindred people, the Tuscaroras of the Carolinas, were admitted to membership. Here the Mohawks, Oneidas, Onondagas, Cayugas and Senecas gathered for fishing, and expeditions to the smaller beaver lakes lying inland a short distance on the south of the St. Lawrence. These hardy warriors, especially the Mohawks, made frequent raids to the headwaters of the Ottawa river as well as to the foot of the