

10. EXPLORATION & COLONIZATION OF NORTH AMERICA, THE FUR TRADE, NEW FRANCE (3/09/04)

First exploration and contact

First crossing of Atlantic and contact much more unofficial for North America than with Spanish.

Often alleged that Viking, Welsh, Irish, Phoenician, Egyptians etc. early-on crossed to Americas

Evidence for this claim mostly very weak, highly biased interpretations.

Except now clear that the Vikings did do it.

Remarkable accomplishment but not nearly as big as with Columbus: they went from island to island in short bursts rather than one long crossing.

In 985 AD, an Icelander named Bjarni living on Greenland blown off course, sees new land. Ten years later Leif Erikson hits Labrador, winters on Newfoundland.

Colony there for few years. Norse artifacts recently found, in archaeological dig on Labrador. They may have gone there for timber, none available on Greenland. Went as far as "Vinland", much speculation about whether Vinland was Cape Cod or points even further west or south, but probably just top of New Brunswick.

Vikings had contacts, often hostile, with "Skraelings," probably both Inuit (Eskimos) and Indians.

Then, with climate change, depletion of resources, Vikings had to retreat eastward.

1497, five years after Columbus, Sebastian Cabot rediscovers Newfoundland.

Was probably rediscovered already a few years before by ships from Bristol, but they didn't keep good records.

Soon official exploration, assertion of national rights, by Cartier.

Looking for fish, for cod. Multinational fleet of fishermen.

Many began salting cod for shipping while on shore on Newfoundland.

Temporary settlements, large multinational camps.

Fishermen begin trading with Indians who came to camps, small beginnings of huge trade.

The fur trade

See reading by Eric Wolf, chapter by Taylor.

Already great fur trade across northern Europe, animals depleted

So Americas hooked into this pre-existing trade.

Indians traded pelts, especially beaver, for European goods.

Taylor takes one position, that in beginning Indians mostly wanted goods that brought prestige in their own society, e.g. they cut up metal pots to make ornaments.

Others disagree, say that Indians early-on recognized technological superiority of metal tools etc., had utilitarian motives for trade.

Certainly the trade did not mean Indians gave up own culture immediately; often used exchange for own ends.

Whatever the motive, Indians very readily joined in. In southern North America, trade in skin. Later, on Pacific coast, sea otter pelts. But beaver was king. Used to make felt for hats.

Different European strategy than settling or conquering. Taylor points out that fur trade involved less work than other colonial strategies.

Indians soon killed off beaver in their territories. To continue in the trade, they had to find a way to control trade routes, act as middlemen, or steal from others.

Two sides brought different ideas, values, practices to trade:

Europeans very market and profit-oriented.

Indians system of non-market, "gift" exchange.

Europeans had to adjust selves to Indian expectations: much ceremony. First gifts to chief, often then hard bargaining afterwards. Gifts received by chief, then redistributed to others, became important part of economic and political systems.

French did not control the greater part of the territory in which they worked. It was more a sphere extending far to west in which had great influence.

Took role of older brother, generous father. Exerted influence through gifts and mediation in tribal disputes. Not because nobler than Spanish, forced on them by location and circumstances. Examples of Frenchmen who wanted more military domination, learned the hard way that impossible.

By same taken, Indians learned to be more market-oriented, bargain harder.

Historical question of how much and how fast Indians grew dependent on European goods. Apparently during breaks in trade they would return to old ways. But in long run they were increasingly caught. Increasingly alcohol in trade, terrible effects.

But Europeans dependent on trade too.

As Wolf emphasizes, trade ended up stretching far across continent.

Later stages, white trappers as well as traders. But in first centuries depended entirely on Indian participation.

French colonization

Taylor is good on the French colony.

New France (Canada) not as desirable as lands further south, but the French were stuck with it.

They briefly had colony in Brazil, also some successes in Caribbean, though ceaseless conflict there.

New France had a short growing season, not great for agriculture. At first few French settlers who willing to go there.

So was more base for fur trade, and for international struggle with English, less real colony, except some in St. Lawrence valley.

Also was far from Spanish to South, so safer. St. Lawrence River was an avenue into interior, but it could be controlled at its mouth, at Quebec.

So French worked through Indians. Through local hunters, members of Algonkian language family, then on Hurons, agriculturalists living well to west. 1500 mile trip to Huron country, as in movie "Black Robe".

Hurons exploited their location, were corn farmers. Traded corn for furs with Indians to north.

Advantageous position in fur trade.

The problem was with a related people to south, so-called Iroquois.

Iroquois comprised five (later six) related peoples, united in one confederacy. Less a unified tribal structure than a peace group: maintained peace among them, so could war against non-members.

Iroquois jealous of trade with French.

Also, the Frenchman Champlain was drawn into a war against Iroquois on side of his Indian allies. First use of a gun in Indian wars in north America.

The Iroquois were also in strategic position. They lived on rivers and lakes oriented North/South. Also between French on one side and Dutch and English on other.

They started to raid and ambush along St. Lawrence River, attacking Huron convoys coming downriver. Steal furs instead of trapping or trading for them.

Start of what later called the beaver wars. Colonial conflicts among Indians and colonists, fur trade one issue.

Traditional explanation makes Iroquois seem very aggressive. Claimed that if had not been stopped, they would have conquered half the continent.

But more likely that, like every other group, caught up in cycle, had little choice.

Cycle of revenge, raise back and forth.

Also needed captives to make up for population losses from epidemic disease and war.

Also crucial to get guns. If enemies had guns and you didn't, could be very bad.

So there was a long series of colonial wars.

As we will see, the conflict between Iroquois and Huron ended with destruction of Huron, many killed, others dispersed (know later as Wyandot), others adopted by Iroquois