

History of the Algonquins

Archaeological information suggests that Algonquin people have lived in the Ottawa Valley for at least 8,000 years before the Europeans arrived in North America.

Algonquian is the name of the cultural linguistic group that includes many "tribes", of which the Algonquin are one. In fact, the Algonquian linguistic group is spread over an extensive territory beyond the Ottawa River, perhaps stretching across a significant part of North America and comprising scores of Nations related by language and customs. Other members of the Algonquian cultural/linguistic group are Mississauga, Ojibwe, Cree, Abenaki, Micmac, Malecite, Montagnais, and the Blackfoot, among others.

The source of the word Algonquin is unclear. Some say it came from the Malecite word meaning "they are our relatives," which would suggest Algonquins were part of a broad group of native peoples. Others say Algonquin means "at the place of spearing fishes and eels from the bow of a canoe".

The website of the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Hull, Quebec, states:

"The arrival of Europeans severely disrupted the life of the Algonquins, the Native people who lived in the Ottawa Valley at the time. By the mid-seventeenth century, several deadly diseases had been introduced, and great numbers of Algonquins perished. Struggles with the neighbouring Five Nations Iroquois Confederacy for control of water routes to the rich fur resources of the hinterland resulted in political intrigue and armed conflict. Together, these factors changed the way of life of the Ottawa Valley Algonquins forever."

The Algonquins were on the Ottawa River and its tributary valleys when the French moved into the area. Samuel de Champlain made contact with the Algonquins in 1603 shortly after he established the first permanent French settlement on the St. Lawrence at Tadoussac. In 1610, Algonquin guides accompanied Étienne Brûlé on his voyages to the interior of Canada.

It was the start of deep involvement by the Algonquins with the French in the fur trade. Every fur trader, who hoped to be successful in exploring the interior of Canada, prepared for the journey by familiarizing himself with the Algonquin

language, since it was recognized as the root language for many other Aboriginal languages.

Today, the political boundary between Quebec and Ontario exists, but in those days, as today, Algonquins lived on both sides of the Ottawa River. In these early days, they were semi-nomadic, moving from one place to the next in search of food from hunting, trapping, fishing and gathering.

Travel was by foot and by birchbark canoe in the summer months and toboggans and snowshoes in the winter. Clothing and tents were made from animal skins, though tents, also known as wigwams, were sometimes made of birchbark. During the summer months, groups gathered along the river to fish, hunt and socialize. When winter arrived, smaller groups spread out into small hunting camps made up of large related families. The climate was harsh and starvation was not uncommon.

When he first met the Algonquins at Quebec, Samuel de Champlain was so impressed with the Algonquin's furs that he explored the St. Lawrence as far west as the Lachine Rapids. Champlain left for France shortly afterwards, but upon his return in 1608, he immediately moved his fur trade upstream to a new post to shorten the distance that the Algonquin were required to travel for trade.

Champlain was anxious to conclude treaties with both the Algonquin and their Montagnais allies, both of whom were allied against the feared Iroquois Confederacy. The Five Nations of the Iroquois Confederacy included Mohawks, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga and Seneca; they were later joined by the Tuscarora to become the Six Nations.

Champlain felt a treaty with the Algonquins would preclude competition from his European rivals, who were mainly the Dutch but also the English. The Algonquin, Montagnais, and their Huron allies, were reluctant to commit themselves to the long, dangerous journey to trading posts north of the Ottawa River unless the French were willing to help them in their war against other members of the Iroquois confederacy. In this, the French provided support and gained great commercial opportunities.

Fur from the Great Lakes flowed down the Ottawa and St. Lawrence Rivers to the French during the years that followed, and the Algonquin and their allies dominated the Ottawa and St. Lawrence valleys. However, the Iroquois remained a constant threat, and in winning the trade and friendship of the Algonquin, the French had made a dangerous enemy for themselves.

It did not take long for the focus of the fur trade to move farther west, because the French had already learned about the trapping areas to the west controlled by the Huron, who were Algonquin allies against the Iroquois. The quantity and

quality of the fur available from the Huron could not be ignored, and in 1614 the French and Huron signed a formal treaty of trade and alliance at Quebec.

The following year, Champlain made his second journey up the Ottawa River to the Huron villages south of Georgian Bay. While there, he participated in a Huron-Algonquin attack on the Oneida and Onondaga villages (these tribes were part of the Iroquois Nation Confederacy), confirming in the minds of the Iroquois (in case they still had doubts) that the French were their enemies.

The Iroquois, who had been displaced from the St. Lawrence Valley by the Algonquins, Montagnais and Hurons before the French had come to North America, had never accepted their loss of this territory as permanent. The Iroquois by this time had exhausted the beaver in their traditional homeland and needed additional hunting territory to maintain their position with the Dutch, who at that time were transporting their purchases through modern day New York. Their inability to satisfy the demand for beaver was the very reason the Dutch had tried in 1624 to open trade with the Algonquin and Montagnais.

For the Iroquois, the obvious direction for expansion was north, but the alliance of the Huron and Algonquin with the French made this impossible. The Iroquois at first attempted diplomacy to gain permission, but the Huron and Algonquin refused, and with no other solution available, the Iroquois resorted to force. In what is generally considered the opening battle of the Beaver Wars (1630-1700), the Mohawk attacked the Algonquin-Montagnais trading village at Sillery (just outside Quebec) in 1629.

By 1630 both the Algonquin and Montagnais needed French help to fight the invader, but this was not available. Taking advantage of a European war between Britain and France, Sir David Kirke captured Quebec in 1629, and the British held Canada until 1632 when it was returned to France by the Treaty of St. Germain en Laye.

These three years were a disaster for the French allies. Since their own trade with the Dutch was not affected, the Iroquois were able to reverse their losses of territory in the St. Lawrence Valley. They drove the Algonquin and Montagnais from the upper St. Lawrence.

When they returned to Quebec in 1632, the French attempted to restore the previous balance of power along the St. Lawrence by providing firearms to their Algonquin and Montagnais allies. However, the initial sales were restricted to Christian converts which did not confer any real advantage to the Algonquin. The roving Algonquin bands had proven resistant to the initial missionary efforts of the "Black Robes," and the Jesuits had concentrated instead on the Montagnais and Huron.

But trouble continued as the Algonquins developed divisions among themselves over religion. The Jesuits were not above using the lure of firearms to help with conversions. Many Algonquin converts to the new religion left the Ottawa Valley and settled first at Trois Rivieres and then Sillery. This weakened the main body of traditional Algonquin defending the trade route through the Ottawa Valley. The consequences quickly became apparent.

The Dutch had reacted to the French arming their native allies with large sales of firearms to the Mohawk, who passed these weapons along to the other Iroquois, and the fur trade degenerated into an arms race. After seven years of increasing violence, a peace was arranged in 1634. The Algonquin used this period to start trading with the Dutch in New York, a definite "no-no" so far as the Iroquois were concerned, and the war resumed.

Weakened by the departure of Christian converts to Trois Rivieres and Sillery, the Algonquin could not stop the onslaught that followed. Iroquois offensives during 1636 and 1637 drove the Algonquin farther north into the upper Ottawa Valley and forced the Montagnais east towards Quebec. Only a smallpox epidemic, which began in New England during 1634 and then spread to New York and the St. Lawrence Valley, slowed the fighting.

A real escalation in hostilities occurred in 1640 when British traders on the Connecticut River in western Massachusetts attempted to lure the Mohawk from the Dutch with offers of guns. The Dutch responded to this by providing the Mohawk (and thus the Iroquois) with as many of the latest, high-quality firearms as they wanted. The effect of this new firepower in the hands of Iroquois warriors was immediate.

Some Algonquin tribesmen such as the Weskarini along the lower Ottawa River were forced to abandon their villages and moved north and east. By the spring of 1642, the Mohawk and their allies had succeeded in completely driving many groups of Algonquin and Montagnais from the upper St. Lawrence and lower Ottawa Rivers, while in the west, other allies (Seneca, Oneida and Onondaga) fought the Huron.

To shorten the travel distance for Huron and Algonquin traders, the French in 1642 established a new post at Montreal (Ville Marie). However, this only seemed to make matters worse. The Iroquois soon sent war parties north into the Ottawa Valley to attack the Huron and Algonquin canoe fleets transporting fur to Montreal and Quebec. Other setbacks to the Algonquins and Hurons brought the French fur trade to a complete standstill, and Champlain's successor Charles Huault de Montmagmy had little choice but to seek peace.

Montmagmy eventually agreed to a treaty permitting the French to resume their fur trade but it contained a secret agreement requiring French neutrality in future wars between their Algonquin and Huron allies and the Iroquois. This agreement

was in exchange for a Mohawk promise to refrain from attacks on the Algonquin and Montagnais villages where the Jesuits had missions.

There was a pause in the fighting during which Huron and Algonquin furs flowed east to Quebec in unprecedented amounts, while the Iroquois renewed efforts to gain the permission of the Huron to hunt north of the St. Lawrence. Refused after two years of failed diplomacy, the Iroquois resorted to total war, but this time with the assurance that the French would remain neutral. The Mohawk chose to ignore the distinction between Christian and non-Christian Algonquins and almost exterminated a group near Trois Rivieres in 1647.

The Iroquois overran and completely destroyed the Huron. During 1650, the remaining Algonquin in the upper Ottawa Valley were attacked and overrun. There is evidence that some Algonquins remained in the headwaters of the tributary rivers. During the following years, the French tried to continue their fur trade by asking native traders to bring their furs to Montreal. Iroquois war parties roamed the length of the Ottawa River during the 1650s and 60s, making travel extremely dangerous for anyone not part of large, heavily-armed convoys.

By 1664, the French had decided they had endured enough of living in constant fear of the Iroquois. The arrival of regular French troops in Quebec that year and their subsequent attacks on villages in the Iroquois homeland brought a lasting peace in 1667.

This not only allowed French traders and missionaries to travel to the western Great Lakes, but permitted many of the other Algonquins to begin a gradual return to the Ottawa Valley. During the next fifty years the French established trading posts for the Algonquin at Abitibi and Temiscamingue at the north end of the Ottawa Valley. Missions were also built at Ile aux Tourtes and St. Anne de Boit de Ile, and in 1721 French missionaries convinced approximately 250 Nipissing and 100 Algonquin to join the 300 Christian Mohawk at the Sulpician mission village of Lake of Two Mountains (Lac des Deux Montagnes) just west of Montreal.

This strange mix of former enemies, both of whom had converted to Christianity and allied with the French, became known by both its Algonquin name Oka (pickerel), and the Iroquois form, Kanesatake (sandy place). For the most part, the Algonquin converts remained at Oka only during the summer and spent their winters at their traditional hunting territories in the upper Ottawa Valley. This arrangement served the French well, since the Algonquin converts at Oka maintained close ties with the northern bands and could call upon the inland warriors to join them in case of war with the British and Iroquois League.

All of the Algonquin converts were committed to the French cause through a formal alliance known as the Seven Nations of Canada, or the Seven Fires of Caughnawaga. Members included: Caughnawaga (Mohawk), Lake of the Two

Mountains (Mohawk, Algonquin, and Nipissing), St. Francois (Sokoki, Pennacook, and New England Algonquian), Becancour (Eastern Abenaki), Oswegatchie (Onondaga and Oneida), Lorette (Huron), and St. Regis (Mohawk).

The Algonquin remained important French allies until the French and Indian War as the Seven Years' War was known in North America (1755-63). By the summer of 1760, the British had captured Quebec and were close to taking the last French stronghold at Montreal. The war was over in North America, and the British had won the race for control of North America. In mid-August, the Algonquin and eight other former French allies met with the British representative, Sir William Johnson, and signed a treaty in which they agreed to remain neutral in future wars between the British and French.

This sealed the fate of the French at Montreal and North America. After the war, Johnson used his influence with the Iroquois to merge the Iroquois League and the Seven Nations of Canada into a single alliance in the British interest. The sheer size of this group was an important reason the British were able to crush the Pontiac Rebellion around the Upper Great Lakes in 1763 and quell the unrest created by the encroachment of white settlers in the Ohio Country during the years which followed. This sheer size was also a factor in King George's decision to proclaim that Indian territory should be reserved for their use in perpetuity.

Johnson died suddenly in 1774, but his legacy lived on, and the Algonquin fought alongside the British during the American Revolution (1775-83) participating in St. Leger's campaign in the Mohawk Valley in 1778. The Algonquin homeland was supposed to be protected from settlement by the Proclamation of 1763, but after the revolution ended in a rebel victory, thousands of British Loyalists (Tories) left the new United States and settled in Upper Canada.

To provide land for these newcomers, the British government in 1783 chose to ignore the Algonquin in the lower Ottawa Valley and purchased parts of eastern Ontario from Mynass, a Mississauga (Ojibwe) chief. Despite this, Algonquin warriors fought beside the British during the War of 1812 (1812-14) and helped defeat the Americans at the Battle of Chateaugay. Their reward for this service was the continued loss of their land to individual land sales and encroachment by American Loyalists and British immigrants moving into the valley.

The worse blow occurred when the British in 1822 were able to induce the Mississauga near Kingston on Lake Ontario to sell most of what remained of the traditional Algonquin land in the Ottawa Valley. And for a second time, no one bothered to consult the Algonquin who had never surrendered their claim to the area but still received nothing from its sale.

Further losses occurred during the 1840s as lumber interests moved into the Upper Ottawa Valley. Legislation in 1850 and purchases by the Canadian government eventually established ten reserves – one in Ontario and nine in

Quebec -- for Algonquin use and occupation. These reserves only secured a tiny portion of what once had been their original homeland.

Today, Algonquins continue to live on the Ottawa River and its tributaries. There is one reserve community in Ontario at Golden Lake, and numerous families living in communities with non Algonquins in Bancroft, Ardoch, Bonnechere, Sharbot Lake, Antoine, Mattawa/North Bay, Ottawa and Whitney.