New France 1627-1663

Champlain’s Dream for Canada

In 1618 Champlain proposed a colonization scheme centred on a showpiece city to be called *Ludovica*, at the site of Québec. It was to be a free port and major commercial *entrepôt* for the France-China trade. At this time he was still convinced he would find a water route through the American continent to the Orient, and he asserted that from Ludovica one could “easily reach the Kingdom of China and the East Indies from which we would derive great riches.” Nothing came of Champlain’s grandiose scheme. With no obvious route to the Orient, no evidence of gold or riches, and no willing French investors, the incentive in France for building a Laurentian duty-free port evaporated.

The more practical elements of Champlain’s vision were retained. The maintenance of a commercial centre with a small agricultural support base, which did not neglect either the pursuit of the fur trade or the evangelization of the native peoples, appeared to be in line with the views of the French court and the Roman Catholic Church. However the financial backers were merchants especially interested in the fur trade. They were not interested in active colonization, which might detract from an activity that did not require a large European labour force.

Richelieu’s Commercial Outpost

Cardinal Richelieu, who had become the king’s chief minister in 1624, organized the Company of One Hundred Associates in 1627 to administer, settle and develop New France. Under the charter, the company had an obligation to bring out 4000 settlers over a 15 year period, providing them with employment and their basic needs for the first three years. Three priests were to be maintained in each settlement at company expense as well. Settlers had to be “natural-born French Catholics” which meant that naturalized foreigners and Protestants could not become permanent residents. Settlers were allowed to hunt and trade for furs, but only the company could export furs from the colony.

In exchange for a monopoly on trade in all lands between Florida and the Arctic Circle, Cardinal Richelieu had managed to extract a commitment from the French investors to undertake colonization and support missionary work. This was essential because France was already behind both England and the Netherlands in developing the lands it claimed in America. By this time Virginia had a representative assembly and over 2000 colonists, New England’s population was three times as great and even New Netherlands claimed more people than New France.

The prospects of commercial gain and vigorous colonization were soon dashed. First, supply ships of 1628, with hundreds of settlers, livestock, tools, implements, and supplies were captured at sea. Then Québec itself was captured by the English Kirke brothers and occupied from 1629 to 1632. Thus, by the time of Champlain’s death in 1635, the Canadian colonies still had only a few hundred people, and the prospects of deriving great wealth from resources were considerably dampened. By 1645, it still had only about 600 settlers and the company was heavily indebted, having never made any profits. The Company of One Hundred Associates then transferred its trade monopoly to the Community of *Habitants*, a group of about a dozen colonial merchants who had no interest in colonization.
The early seventeenth century was a period of religious revival in France, which gave an impetus to foreign and domestic missions, the creation of new religious orders and lay associations, the establishment of houses of charity, hospitals, and schools, and a reformation of religious practices. In North America the militant, aggressive, highly-organized, and well supported Society of Jesus spearheaded French missionary work. The Jesuits became the chief agents for the establishment of a “New Jerusalem, blessed by God and made up of citizens destined for heaven.” To achieve that result, four “holy experiments” were attempted in New France.

**Christian huronia**

The Jesuits had visions of turning Huronia, the confederacy of the Huron nations, into a model Christian community in New France, with themselves as the intermediaries between the crown and the converts. Father Le Jeune could write in 1635 that “it seems as if God shed the dew of his grace much more abundantly upon this New France than upon the old, and that the internal consolations and the Divine infusions are much stronger here, and hearts more on fire.” Some religious enthusiasts even speculated that the Native peoples were of Jewish origin, perhaps descendants of the fabled Ten Lost Tribes of Israel, and so likely candidates for immediate mass conversion to Roman Catholicism.

From their missionary headquarters at Ste. Marie (now near Midland, Ontario), established in 1639, the Jesuits visited the Huron and Neutral villages, preached the Gospel, and cared as best they could for the sick and dying as epidemics ravaged the region. Some notable gains were made—an estimated quarter of the population accepted baptism—but this broke the unity of Huron society and introduced a religious factionalism that even entered the Huron Confederacy Council. Although the Huron villages were concentrated in a compact area and were economically reasonably secure, the concentrated Iroquois raids of 1648-49 succeeded in terrorizing them. They abandoned their territory; as one village after another fell before the Iroquois attacks, panic set in. The Jesuits, seeing this collapse of the confederacy, set their fortified compound of Ste. Marie ablaze. Their dream of a Huron Christian community went up in smoke in 1649.

**The sillery Réduction**

A second experient was the Sillery réduction (or reserve, as it was later called), a Native settlement near French farmers and the town of Québec. The missionary Paul Le Jeune had become convinced during a journey among nomadic northern Algonkian bands that they could be successfully converted only if they were re-settled on agricultural lands within the European community, where families would be raised in a French and Catholic milieu. It seemed essential to him that nomadic bands give up their traditional way of life and adopt a sedentary agricultural life-style as an aid to their “civilization” and Christianization. The reduction was a model community that the Jesuits had first established in South America. Unlike the reserves established in the English colonies, it was not designed to restrict Native habitation and make room for European settlement.

A wealthy donor, Noël Brûlart de Sillery, provided them with land near Québec and the means to build a chapel, houses and other buildings, as well as to hire labourers to clear the land on which Algonkian converts were settled. By 1651, Huron refugees from the Iroquois war took up residence at Sillery.
They subsequently moved farther from the town of Québec, and their descendants today are located at Wendake (Nouvelle Lorette).

**Ville-Marie**

Another “holy experiment” was Ville-Marie, a Utopian venture on the strategic island of Montréal conceived and supported by French dévots. These lay zealots were members of the Company of the Holy Sacrament, who organized the Society of Notre-Dame de Montréal, which began clearing land and erecting a town on the island in 1642. Ville-Marie was dedicated to the Virgin Mary and had its avowed purpose, the conversion of Native peoples to Roman Catholicism.

Since there were no permanent Native encampments in the immediate area, the small Ville-Marie school and hospital served primarily the French settlers. By 1663 the religious enthusiasts who had invested in this model Christian community were both indebted and discouraged. Their association was dissolved, the island became the property of a community of secular priests, the Sulpicans of Paris, and thereafter the utopian Ville-Marie gave way to a more secular Montréal.

**Questions:**

1. What terms did Cardinal Richelieu impose on the Company of One Hundred Associates? Why was this done?
2. What problems seriously harmed Richelieu’s efforts to colonize New France?
3. What was the goal of the Jesuits in New France?
4. Outline the Jesuit work in Huronia. What was the fate of the missions in Huronia?
5. What objectives motivated the establishment of the Sillery réduction?
6. Explain the people and motivations behind the founding of Ville-Marie. What became of the original plan and the community?