

Connecting History Classrooms to Canada: Early Exploration and Aboriginal Connections

By Tina Storer with Rosemary Widenor
Center for Canadian-American Studies – W.W.U.

When teaching the history of Native American peoples, it is worth connecting to Canada not only because comparison offers a more complete view of the indigenous experience, but also because Aboriginal homelands crisscross the Canada-US border. Today, Canada's Aboriginal people (First Nations, Inuit, and Métis¹) are politically well-organized, have articulate leadership, and are making progress with both land claims and self-governance. They are recognized in Canada for their special status and celebrated annually on National Aboriginal Day, June 21. An excellent online gateway is the Aboriginal Canada Portal's *Resources for Teachers* section at <http://www.aboriginalcanada.gc.ca/acp/site.nsf/eng/ao31045.html>.

Let's start at the beginning then. Archeological records prove that First Nations have lived in Canada since 23,000 BCE. Exactly when and how Paleolithic peoples reached North America is still highly speculative. Some think a very gradual migration across *Beringia* (land that is now the Bering Sea) took place over thousands of years. An alternative theory is that a coastal route existed and people gradually moved south below the ice fields, where they were then able to move inland. It is also possible that there were different movements at different times by different people. The arrival of separate populations with different cultures would help explain the diversity of prehistoric and historic Aboriginal nations. This is especially true of the western coast of Canada, where seventeen languages from five different linguistic stocks were once spoken by Aboriginal Peoples. Among the last to arrive were the Inuit, approximately 4,000 years ago. Like the Métis, the Inuit are politically recognized in Canada as separate from the many tribes who form the First Nations.

Of course every Aboriginal nation also has its own creation story that tells of their land and peoples' origin (see the *Legend of Glooscap*²). To learn about other First Nations legends, visit: <http://www.aboriginalcanada.gc.ca/acp/site.nsf/eng/ao04580.html>, <http://www.native-languages.org/blackfoot-legends.htm>, and <http://www.indians.org/welker/legend.htm>

The First Nations of Canada are as diverse as the land itself. From the clans on the west coast who relied on Pacific salmon to the nomadic First Nations of the plains, every aspect of life varied greatly from tribe to tribe and place to place. A colorful array of languages and dialects existed, though many have now been lost. These languages helped make up the spiritual, social, and historical values of each community, passed down orally to each generation. While

many of these First Nation peoples interacted with one other, it wasn't until about a thousand years ago that the European exploration and settlement began to change the lives and cultures of Canada's original inhabitants forever.

As in the thirteen colonies, entrepreneurs and settlers were attracted by the possibility of riches to be made in Canada. From Vikings to Italian explorers to American colonials, everyone wanted to explore the uncharted lands of Canada and claim them as their own. For the First Nations and Inuit of Canada, first contact brought change and sorrow. When Europeans began to arrive in greater numbers, they inadvertently brought death with them in the form of smallpox, measles, influenza, diphtheria, typhus, tuberculosis, and mumps. It is estimated that between 90 and 93 percent of the North American Aboriginal population were killed by imported diseases. Because tribal elders were even more susceptible to sickness and death due to their age, many aspects of culture and tradition were lost with them. For Canada's First Nations, the process of colonization—and appropriation of land by both the French and English—had begun.

Conversely, in the case of the Métis people, European contact resulted in their very existence and special group status. The fur trade was a booming industry in Canada, and many of the French fur traders (*coureurs de bois*), as well as British or Scots who worked for the Hudson Bay Company, married First Nations women. Their children grew up influenced by the history and customs of both societies, resulting in a unique new culture and language of mixed-race people now known as the Métis. Today it is estimated that almost 400,000 Métis reside in Canada (and more in northern US states). To learn more, visit http://firstpeoplesofcanada.com/fp_metis/fp_metis_menu.html and http://www.canadiana.ca/citm/specifique/rielreb_e.html.

Although Inuit contact with Europeans was less frequent, it had dramatic consequences on their culture and language. Early visitors and settlers introduced metal tools and other manufactured goods to the Inuit. Moravian missionaries converted many Inuit to Christianity, and North America's predominately English-speaking society forced the Inuktitut language into decline during the 20th century. To learn more about the Arctic exploration and contact with the Inuit, visit: www.inuitcontact.ca, http://www.heritage.nf.ca/aboriginal/inuit_history.html, and <http://www.nunavut.com/nunavut99/english/early.html>.

Both the French and British were quick to establish permanent settlements in North America. Explorer Samuel de Champlain established a French fur trading colony in New Brunswick and laid claim to land in what is now Nova Scotia. He then founded the oldest permanent settlement in North America near Quebec City, on July 3, 1608. And, although the thirteen colonies along the Atlantic coastline were the heart of English settlement, since 1670 the British-owned Hudson's Bay Company had laid claim to a vast northern territory known as Rupert's Land, where a network of forts was established. The English presence on Hudson Bay and to the south led to competition in the fur trade and eventually to conflict. Two sites

with excellent selections of primary and secondary sources about exploration, the fur trade, and Hudson's Bay Company are at http://www.canadiana.ca/hbc/sources/sources_e.html and <http://www.furtradestories.ca>.

The race between France and Britain to colonize and control North America intensified. With Québec City as the center of development, Nouvelle-France had much to overcome. Harsh winters and threats of Iroquois attack made growth slow and challenging, far below the level of English expansion. Without developed trade, a strong defense, or extensive funding, the French struggled to keep their heads above water. Eventually, Samuel de Champlain rounded up enough French investment to support the French colony. Alliances between the French and English with indigenous people did more to strengthen the fur trade than was done in the American colonies, where settlement was the first priority.

Population growth in the French colonies was given a jump-start, financed by King Louis XIV, by sending hundreds of young women to be wives and mothers of French children for Nouvelle-France. <http://www.angelfire.com/ma3/noelofbrockton/page36.html> offers more information about "*Filles du Roi*" ("king's daughters"). Many in Canada and the US can trace the roots of their lineage back to ship and Catholic Church records from these times.

The Roman Catholic Church also played a major role in the history of New France. The Church was not only responsible for many of the hospitals and schools, striving to better the lives of the citizens of New France, but also for conducting missionary work among the Aboriginal Peoples with the hopes of converting them to Catholicism. The first round of missionaries, the *Récollets*, arrived in the early 1600's but made little progress. Soon, however, the Jesuits arrived and by living among the tribes, they were able to connect with and convert them.

By the mid-1700s, the war between England and France in Europe spread to the colonies. The French-English Wars continued for years until 1759 when British forces, led by General Wolfe defeated General Montcalm's forces on the Plains of Abraham outside Québec's Citadel. "The Conquest", as the victory came to be known, gave Britain control of North America and what is now Canada.

Footnotes:

¹ See below for clarification on the three groups of Aboriginal peoples in Canada and note that the descriptors "Indian" and "Eskimo" are considered derogatory and are not used in Canada.

- 1) *First Nations* – This term refers to over 600 recognized indigenous governments (or bands) across Canada with distinctive cultures, languages, art, and music.
- 2) *Inuit* – This term refers to a group of culturally similar indigenous peoples inhabiting the Arctic and subarctic regions of Canada (Northwest Territory, Yukon Territory, Nunavut,

Québec, and Labrador) as well as in Alaska in the United States and in other countries who are part of the circumpolar world. Collectively these areas are known as Inuit Nunangat.

- 3) *Métis* – This term refers to those who trace mixed parentage to the era of the fur trade. First Nations mothers and either francophone *voyageur* fathers or anglophone Scottish fathers who were part of the Hudson's Bay Company. Today, these two cultures have essentially coalesced into one Métis tradition and language. The 400,000 people who self-identify as Métis are recognized in Canada as a distinct Aboriginal group and their homeland includes regions scattered across Canada as well as parts of the northern United States (specifically Montana, North Dakota, and northwest Minnesota).

² **Legend of Glooscap**

A long time ago, the Great Spirit who lived in the Happy Hunting Grounds created the universe and all life. The Wise One enjoyed his creation in the twinkling lights of thousands of stars, the sun and the many galaxies in the universe.

After creating the universe, the Great Spirit sat down to rest. Then he created Glooscap and gave him special spiritual and physical powers. He called Glooscap to share the sacred pipe and said, "Glooscap, I am going to create people in my own image. I will call them Micmac."

The Great Spirit was pleased with this creation. He took out his sacred pipe and again called Glooscap. As the Great Spirit was smoking he noticed a large amount of dark red clay left over. "Glooscap, look at this large piece of clay, the same color as my Micmac people. I will shape this clay into a crescent form and it will be the most beautiful of all places on Mother Earth. It will become the home of my Micmac people."

The Great Spirit fashioned an enchanting island and called it Minegoo. He dressed her dark red skin with green grass and lush forests of many different kinds of trees, and sprinkled her with many brightly coloured flowers. Her forest floors were like deep soft carpets which would cushion the moccasined feet of the Micmac people.

Minegoo was so beautiful that it made the Great Spirit extremely happy - so happy that he thought about placing Minegoo among the stars. After considering this for a short time, the Wise One decided that Minegoo should be placed in the middle of the singing waters, now known as the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

Sources:

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- “Legend of Glooscap” *History of Canada Online*. [http://canadachannel.ca/HCO/index.php/Glooscap %26 PEI](http://canadachannel.ca/HCO/index.php/Glooscap_%26_PEI)
- Chapter 1A, The Founders: Aboriginal Canada, *History of Canada Online*. <http://canadachannel.ca/HCO/index.php/A. Aboriginal Canada>.



Champlain & First Nations guides

http://www.google.com/imgres?hl=en&client=firefox-a&hs=rd8&sa=X&rls=org.mozilla:en-US:official&biw=1280&bih=831&tbn=isch&prmd=imvns&tbnid=3S08eUiBrr8GaM:&imgrefurl=http://heritagecrowd.org/stories/exhibits/show/the-ottawa-valley--a-natural-a/the-ottawa-river--flowing-with/item/27&docid=Z47q_t_nWQUkkM&imgurl=http://heritagecrowd.org/stories/archive/files/720a1e5ae91f7ce4ce1a953fc48f2a8a.jpg&w=640&h=477&ei=DhMfT-n6J-eW2AW91Jz7Dg&zoom=1&iact=rc&dur=508&sig=114312363673653952200&page=1&tbnh=157&tbnw=202&start=0&ndsp=21&ved=1t:429,r:10,s:0&tx=170&ty=39



The Fur Trade in Canada thrived

URL:http://www.google.com/imgres?hl=en&client=firefox-a&rls=org.mozilla:en-US:official&biw=1280&bih=831&tbn=isch&tbnid=c9TKWkZhxRF6M:&imgrefurl=http://www.familyhistoryalive.com/Manitoba-Vital-Records--Births-Marriages-and-Deaths.html&docid=ycO_nG1bb1F1VM&imgurl=http://www.familyhistoryalive.com/images/Fur_traders_in_canada_1777.jpg&w=600&h=423&ei=1BQfT9a3G8rY2QXln6CvDw&zoom=1&iact=rc&dur=312&sig=114312363673653952200&page=1&tbnh=151&tbnw=203&start=0&ndsp=21&ved=1t:429,r:2,s:0&tx=66&ty=98



Arrival of the “King’s Daughters”

http://www.google.com/imgres?hl=en&client=firefox-a&hs=Uj8&sa=X&rls=org.mozilla:en-US:official&biw=1280&bih=831&tbn=isch&prmd=imvns&tbnid=caZ3RtRheU-qzM:&imgrefurl=http://www.dailykos.com/story/2006/09/01/242098/-CAN-HIST-101--Age-of-New-France-%28Canadian-History-for-Americans-Part-2%29&docid=D4-zRba1e4Fw_M&imgurl=http://static.flickr.com/78/231189476_0d6ac206c7.jpg&w=450&h=291&ei=axOfT62BC6rK2AXyn6yxDw&zoom=1&iact=hc&vpx=517&vpy=160&dur=965&hovh=180&hovw=279&tx=109&ty=56&sig=114312363673653952200&page=1&tbnh=141&tbnw=188&start=0&ndsp=25&ved=1t:429,r:2,s:0