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## The French Along the Northeast Coast—1604-1607

From 1604 to 1607, a French expedition explored the southeastern Canadian and New England coasts, ranging as far south as Cape Cod. During this time, the Frenchmen encountered many Native people throughout the region. Some of the interactions were peaceful, others were violent. The first winter base for this expedition is now within the boundary of [Saint Croix Island International Historic Site](#), a unit of the National Park system. One of the Native American settlements that was visited is located within the present boundaries of Cape Cod National Seashore. Archeological data, written accounts, drawings, and maps from the French reports of the exploration provide a wealth of information about the Native people, their ways of life, and their settlements. The nature of the interactions between Europeans and Native Americans at contact established patterns that were to continue throughout the colonial era in New England.



Aerial view of Saint Croix Island.

England's colonial venture at Jamestown, Virginia, stands as one of the most important milestones in the history of European exploration and colonization in North America. Yet, in the panorama of history, the 17th century Jamestown colony is a single point on a long continuum of European colonization and cross-cultural contact, interaction, and conflict. Archeological sites and historic drawings, maps, and texts enable scholars to explore initial European interactions with Native peoples on a number of early colonial frontiers. As a body of data, these historical situations provide a wide spectrum of human interactions under similar circumstances. Encounters ranged from cooperative and peaceful to confused and violent. These situations and outcomes provide a broad set of data for comparative studies.

From 1604 to 1607, French entrepreneurs and explorers scouted the Atlantic coast of what today is New England, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia. Led by a French nobleman, Pierre du Gua, the Sieur de Monts, they sought a good location to establish the headquarters for a French trading colony and were seeking attractive economic resources to extract from the New World. This short essay focuses on the records and maps created by Samuel de Champlain during this expedition. These documents are a productive source of information describing examples of a range of human interactions and much information about the natural environment and the Native American groups who lived along the New England and Eastern Canadian coast in the early 17th century.



Exploratory routes of Sieur de Monts and Champlain 1604-1607. [larger view +](#)

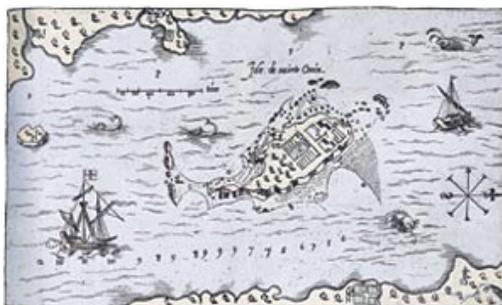
The 1604-1607 expedition was part of a rejuvenated French effort to establish a North American colony. It followed on a series of failures dating back to the early 16th century (Eccles 1998:1-33). Survival in the New World was a challenge. Nearly half of the French died at the settlement on St. Croix Island in the St. Croix River, the current boundary between Canada and the United States, during the winter of 1604-1605. In 1607, the settlement at Port Royal, across the Bay of Fundy from the mouth of the St. Croix River in present-day Nova Scotia, to which the French relocated in 1605 following the disastrous winter at St. Croix, also was abandoned. The French were required to return to France in the fall of 1607 because de Monts' fur trade monopoly was revoked. Ultimately Champlain and others succeeded in establishing a French colony. They made a successful economic enterprise based on vigorous trade, exchanging Native American furs for European metal tools and other manufactured items. But this required several more years of effort and a change of location. The successful colony was not along the Atlantic coast but in the less exposed St. Lawrence Valley at the location of present-day Quebec City.

This flurry of French activity along the Northeastern coast came just prior to the English settlement at Jamestown. The archeological remains from these efforts and others slightly later (1610-1615), when a few French outposts were established and quickly raided and destroyed by the English, provide opportunities for comparative investigations with the archeology of the Virginia settlements and with the later English settlements in New England.

### Champlain's Journals, Maps, and Illustrations

For archeologists, cultural anthropologists, and ethnohistorians studying early historic period Native American cultures along the Northeast coast and the interactions between these groups and Europeans, Champlain's text, maps, and illustrations are an information treasury. The six volumes of the Champlain Society edition of *The Works of Samuel de Champlain* (1922-1936) are the best source. Insightful and informative commentary by the general editor, H. P. Biggar, as well as by the individual volume editors and translators, provides context for evaluating the text and illustrations.

Each page is presented with the original French at the top and the English translation at bottom.



Champlain's map of Saint Croix Island. [larger view +](#)

Champlain's Maritime and New England voyages are described in his 1604-1607 *Journal* (in Volume 1 of the Champlain Society edition). This was edited and translated by W. F. Ganong. Champlain's detailed maps are accompanied by modern drawings of the same locations by Ganong. Many of the footnotes identify places in the text by their modern names. Ganong characterizes Champlain as the pre-eminent recorder of the early history of eastern Canada and the New England coast. The text "...narrates with all the authority of a leading participant and the matter-of-fact accuracy of an official report..." (1922:194). Champlain also was a great cartographer. In this respect, Ganong states, he has neither peer nor competitor.

Prior to Champlain the Atlantic coasts of Canada and New England were known to Europeans only through loosely written narratives and conventional maps of the earlier explorers, none of which bore any really definite relation to the region they professed to describe. In their place, Champlain presented accurate descriptions of the coast drawn up in the spirit of the modern *Coast Pilots*...with maps based upon genuine surveys and by methods correct in principle, even though necessarily crude in execution (Ganong 1922:193-194).

### Champlain's maps of New England and

Acadia consist of 3 larger maps showing the general area, 13 maps that chart important harbors, and 3 picture plans that show special locations, such as the settlements at St. Croix and Port Royal. Regarding the detailed maps, the 1604-1607 *Journal* includes Green Bay and the LaHave River mouth, Liverpool Bay, Port Mouton, and Annapolis Basin, the location of the Port Royal settlement, all in Nova Scotia; the St. John River mouth, in New Brunswick; St. Croix Island, mouth of the Kennebec River, Saco Bay and mouth of the Saco River, all in Maine; and Plymouth Harbor, Nauset Harbor, Gloucester Harbor, and Stage Harbor, all in Massachusetts.



Champlain's illustration of the Saint Croix settlement. [larger view +](#)

### The Context of Contact—Examples from Champlain's Journal

There is information from Champlain's journal entries and maps about local geography (especially waterways and sailing directions), natural environment resources, and most importantly for this essay, the Native American groups who resided in the area in the early seventeenth century. This information can be used to examine three specific locations and sets of events described by Champlain. The circumstances and outcomes of these events can deepen our understanding of the cultural and social context within which Native Americans and Europeans acted as they encountered one another during this early period of contact.

#### Meeting at the Fall Line of the Penobscot River, September 1604

On 2 September 1604, Champlain, with 12 sailors and 2 Indian guides, left the new French settlement at St. Croix Island in a small vessel, a pinnace, with orders from de Monts to explore the coast south of the settlement. The Indian guides were from the area around St. Croix Island, but Champlain remarks that they "were acquainted" with places to the south. Within a few days, the explorers sighted Mount Desert Island, which Champlain named for the stone mountain peaks, bare of trees. They encountered two local Indians in a canoe and,

after initial and tentative introductions, including the exchange of trade items for fish, led them further south to the mouth of the Penobscot River and up the river about 20 miles to the fall line (near present-day Bangor, Maine). Along the river bank, Champlain reported "...neither town nor village, nor any traces that there ever had been any, but only one or two empty Indian wigwams..."

From these Indians and others around St. Croix, he had learned quite a bit about their settlement system, which he also described:

They come there [to the river] and to the islands only for a few months in summer during the fishing and hunting season, when game is plentiful. They are a people of no fixed abode, from what I have discovered and learned from themselves; for they pass the winter sometime in one place and sometimes in another, wheresoever [sic] they perceive the hunting of wild animals is the best (Champlain 1922:292).

Near the fall line of the Penobscot River on 16 September, Champlain and his party met with the Indian leaders in the vicinity, Bessabez and Cabhis. Each was accompanied by at least 30 followers.

Champlain referred to these Indians as "Etechemins," distinguishing them from the "the Canadian Indians and Souriquois" who live farther north. He noted that the Indians of the Kennebec River (the next major river south of the Penobscot) also were Etechemins. Both the Etechemins and the Souriquois are grouped together by modern ethnographers as Eastern Wabanakis groups who followed a migratory foraging subsistence way of life (Prins and McBride 2007:1-3). Even farther south there was a language and ethnic shift that is described by Champlain. He writes that the more southern group is called the "Almouchiquois," a people who were horticulturalists.

The Indians and the French kept a respectful distance between them, the French remaining offshore aboard their boat. Champlain, accompanied by two other Frenchmen and his two Indian guides, went ashore to meet with the Indian leaders. He described the setting for the encounter:

I ordered the crew of our pinnace to draw near the Indians, and to hold their weapons in readiness to do their duty in case they perceived any movement of these people against us. Bessabez, seeing us on shore, bade us to sit down, and began with his companions to smoke, as they usually do before beginning their speeches. They made a present of venison and waterfowl (Champlain 1922:295).

The meeting proceeded smoothly and ended peacefully with both sides apparently satisfied. Each side expressed strong interests in cooperation and alliance. Champlain reported that he conveyed the greeting of Sieur de Monts, the wish of the French to be friends with the Indians, to settle in their country and improve life for them. Champlain recorded Bessabez's reply that he and his people also wished for friendship and welcomed them to settle in their country so that his people could benefit from more trade between them. Gifts were exchanged, "beaver-skins" furs for French "...hatchets, rosaries, caps, knives, and other little knick-knacks." The meeting concluded; Champlain and his men sailed down the river the next day. They explored Penobscot Bay and environs a bit more, and then returned to the St. Croix settlement, arriving there on 2 October.

The context of this incident involves representatives of two quite different cultures meeting to seek an accommodation that would reward both groups. Each side had limited experience with representatives of the other. Champlain had spent part of 1603 at Taddousac on the northern shore of the St. Lawrence River where the Saguenay River joins the larger flow and briefly explored the lower St. Lawrence region farther west. At Taddousac, Champlain was involved in a large greeting ceremony with Indian groups also camped there (Fischer 2008:124-145).

The Indians clearly had some experience trading with Europeans along the coast. The French were wary, outnumbered as they were by the Indians at least five to one. The Indians also were cautious. They didn't bring the French to their settlement, but met on what might be neutral ground, especially since two Indian groups - whether bands or tribes is unclear - are involved. Apparently the Indian groups did not "possess" this land with permanent residence, but used it annually. This might color the attitude they seem to express regarding the French "settling" in the area, at least as summarized by Champlain.

In this instance, the communication seemed to be clear. Each side was able to be understood by the other, presumably through the Indians from the St. Croix River area who accompanied Champlain. Champlain's Indian guides were not too far from home. There is nothing in Champlain's description to suggest that he does not understand Bessabez's statements or that his own were not likewise understood. This is not the case as the French ventured further south, in the episodes described below.

#### **Meeting at Saco Bay and mouth of the Saco River, June 1605**

Following the terrible winter of 1604-1605 at the St. Croix settlement, French efforts to discover a more hospitable location for settlement began. On 18 June 1605, de Monts, Champlain, "some gentlemen," and twenty sailors once again sailed south along the coast. Their Indian guide this time was named Panounias. His wife also accompanied the French expedition as she was a native of the southern country they planned to explore.

Going beyond Penobscot Bay, Champlain described the mouth and lower portion of the Kennebec River where the French met with a local Indian leader. This pattern recurred as the

French sailed west and south along the coast. At Saco Bay, the next major bay beyond the Kennebec River, Champlain noted that the Indians spoke another language, different from that of the Souriquois or the Etechemins. This new Indian group is referred to as the Almouchiquois. Along Saco Bay, Champlain records the first instance of cultivation by Indians. He noted:

They till and cultivate the land; a practice we had not seen previously. In place of ploughs they use an instrument of very hard wood made in the shape of a spade...We saw their grain, which is Indian corn. This they grow in gardens, sowing three or four grains in one spot...they heap about it a quantity of earth. Then three feet away they sow as much again; and so on in order. Amongst this corn they plant in each hillock three or four Brazilian beans, which come up in different colors...they keep the ground very free from weeds. We saw there many squashes, pumpkins, and tobacco, which they likewise cultivate (Champlain 1922:327-328).

Based on his observations of the "fixed abodes" of the Indians and the cultivated fields, along with nut-bearing trees, Champlain inferred that the climate in this area was milder than that of the St. Croix River. He reported that "the Indians remain permanently in this place, and have a large wigwam surrounded by palisades formed by rather large trees placed one against the other; and into which they retire when their enemies come to make war against them" (Champlain 1922:329-330).

Continuing southwest, then more south, following the coast, Champlain recorded Cape Ann, then Massachusetts Bay and Plymouth harbor, then Cape Cod, which he named Cap Blanc for the large white sand dunes, even then prominent, at its far end. Rounding Cap Blanc, they sailed along the ocean side of Cape Cod until they reached the first inlet at that side, the wide, sheltered embayment now known as Nauset Harbor.

#### **Mallebarre Harbor (Nauset Marsh, Eastham, Massachusetts), July 1605**

On 20 July, de Monts and his party managed to ride over the shoals and sandbanks at the entrance to Nauset Harbor, which Champlain named Mallebarre ("bad bar") for these obstacles, and into the large embayment. The land around the embayment was densely occupied. Champlain noted: "...all around it little houses about which each owner had as much land as was necessary for his support...There came to us from all sides, dancing, a number of Indians, both men and women" (Champlain 1922:350).

On 21 July, de Monts, Champlain, and nine or ten companions, all armed, set off to visit the Indian settlement. The remainder of the French party stayed with their ship, guarding it and its contents. In his journals, Champlain describes a landscape with many cultivated fields, filled with the same crops he noted along Saco Bay. He noted several fields that were not cultivated, being left fallow and suggesting a multi-year strategy for cultivation by the natives.

The French determined that the Indians were permanent residents of the site and that the climate was more moderate than what they had experienced at St. Croix. However, they were not able to communicate in detail, or with great clarity, because the native language spoken at Nauset was substantially different from that of the Indians around St. Croix. There is no description of any formal meeting between de Monts and Indian leaders.

Two days later, as French sailors were filling some large metal kettles with fresh water, Indians near the spring set upon one of the sailors and stole the kettle from him. A fight ensued in which the French fired their weapons and Indians loosed arrows. One sailor was killed and one Indian, who had been visiting the French pinnace, was captured. Marc Lescarbot, another participant in the French expedition who was at Mallebarre, reported in his published journal that during this fight de Monts ordered the French with him not to shoot at some of the Indians, because they were by-standers and not among the murderers of the French sailor. De Monts also showed restraint in releasing the captive Indian for the same reason.

Some hours later, a group of Indians approached the French to make amends. Champlain describes the Indians coming "...making excuses by signs and outward show that it was not they who had done this evil deed but others farther off in the interior. We were unwilling to do them harm, although it was in our power to avenge ourselves" (Champlain 1922:355). This seems to have been the end of the incident. Although Champlain recorded additional information about the Indians at Mallebarre, e.g., how they prepared food, their clothing (in particular, the lack of furs and use of grasses and hemp in dress), their physical appearance, and other topics, he does not describe any further social interactions between the French and the Indians before the French departed on their return journey on 25 July.

The context of the Mallebarre incident has some of the same general characteristics as the earlier contact near the fall line of the Penobscot River. It was, after all, a meeting of representatives of two quite different cultures with limited experience dealing with each other. However, it also differed in important ways.

The context for the Mallebarre contact involved the French seeking a settlement location in an area that was quite densely occupied. All of the good harbors from the Saco River, in southern Maine, southwards that Champlain described and mapped along the route of the 1605 exploration had Indian settlements in the choice locations around them. These southern Indians were permanent residents of these locations and horticulturalists. Vacant land in these locations might have been scarce, mainly fallow land set aside for subsequent use when their fertility was replenished. Such land would not have been available for new settlers to set up a trading colony or residences.

There is no trading activity described by Champlain in his Mallebarre narrative, although at one point he mentions that the Indians gave the French "a quantity of tobacco." Did he neglect to write about trade there because it had become so common not to merit mention? Or, was there nothing to trade for? Champlain noted the lack of furs among the clothing of the Indians at Mallebarre. It seems that they did not have pelts to trade for European hatchets, knives, and other goods. This might explain a characteristic of the Indians that Champlain described here. He wrote:

The slightest intercourse with them at once discloses their character. They are great thieves, and if they cannot lay hold of a thing with their hands, try to do so with their feet, as we have repeatedly learned by experience. I fancy that, had they anything to barter; they would not resort to thievery. They bartered their bows, arrows, and quivers for pins and buttons; and had they possessed anything better, would have done the same with it. One must be on one's guard against these people and mistrust them, yet without allowing them to perceive it (Champlain 1922:357).

Also, at Mallebarre, the communication was far from clear. There was no translator available; each side may not have understood the other clearly. Champlain notes this lack of clarity in his text.

After five days at Mallebarre, de Monts headed back to St. Croix to seek a new location for settlement in a different direction. Champlain records that despite nearly six weeks of seeking, the French had "...been unable to find [a more suitable] place on any of the coast we had explored on this voyage" (Champlain 1922:362). It may have been that the coast south of the Penobscot was too densely populated by permanent Indian settlements and did not provide a sufficient supply of the furs, pelts, and other resources that the French hoped to obtain through trade.

### Conclusion

After wintering at the new settlement of Port Royal in present-day Nova Scotia, the French again scouted the New England coast in September and October of 1606. They moved more quickly this time with fewer stops. Champlain's journals again record the voyage and provide maps and illustrations of some of the places and events (Champlain 1922: 392-438).

They touched at the former location of the St. Croix settlement, the Saco River, Cape Ann, and Gloucester Harbor in present-day Massachusetts. From the harbor at Gloucester, they crossed directly to the tip of Cape Cod and sailed down the ocean side of that peninsula again. The most significant event during this voyage was a deadly encounter at a large Indian settlement in Stage Harbor, the site of present-day Chatham, Massachusetts, a large embayment south of Nauset at the end of their southern voyage.

The French did not succeed in finding a suitable settlement location on the New England coast. At both Nauset in 1605 and Chatham in 1606, their efforts resulted in hostility and bloodshed by both Natives and Frenchmen. As in 1605, the 1606 voyagers turned north and returned to Port Royal for another winter.



Champlain's illustration of the battle at Stage Harbor. [larger view +](#)

The 1604-1607 French attempt at colonization in the Maritimes and New England ultimately failed, because of domestic political maneuvering in France, but also because the economic wealth of the Northeastern coast wasn't in precious metals or abundant furs, but in its potential for settlement.

Less than a generation later, English colonists intent on a different model of colonization that focused on settling the "new land" were successful. The English also were preceded by a series of deadly epidemics that decimated portions of the coastal Native populations, opening land for new settlers, without which they also might have failed.

Archeological sites and historic drawings, maps, and texts enable scholars and scientists to explore a range of early colonial frontiers and initial European interactions with native peoples. These examples provide a wide view of human interactions under various circumstances and provide a potentially broad set of data for comparative studies. At least two substantial archeological sites have been discovered and explored at locations described by Champlain. One is Saint Croix Island International Historic Site; the other is the extensive archeological district around Nauset Harbor in Eastham, Massachusetts, now part of Cape Cod National Seashore and a National Historical Landmark district.

Contemporary interpretations of the French exploration of the Northeastern coast and other situations of exploration, culture contact, and colonization will vary. From some perspectives de Monts, Champlain, and their compatriots will be characterized as the advance men for Western hegemony whose explorations led to terrible consequences for America's native inhabitants. At the other extreme the perception of them is as intrepid explorers and brave colonists opening a new world for European settlement and human advancement. This short essay doesn't try to resolve, or even evaluate, these interpretations. However, it does point out the rich record that the journals, other texts, illustrations, and maps of Champlain and

others provide. Scholars can continue to plumb these sources for information to better understand our common past and better serve our present.

*By Francis P. McManamon*

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More information about Champlain's travels in the New World, can be found at "[Visit Archeology: Samuel de Champlain's Expeditions](#)"

The same landscapes that Champlain saw are still available at [Cape Cod National Seashore](#) and [Saint Croix Island International Historic Site](#).

A version of this paper was presented in ***The Context of Contact: Archeology, Culture, History***, organized by Andrew Veech and F. P. McManamon, a symposium held at the 2007 Society for Historical Archaeology Annual Meeting, Williamsburg, VA.

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