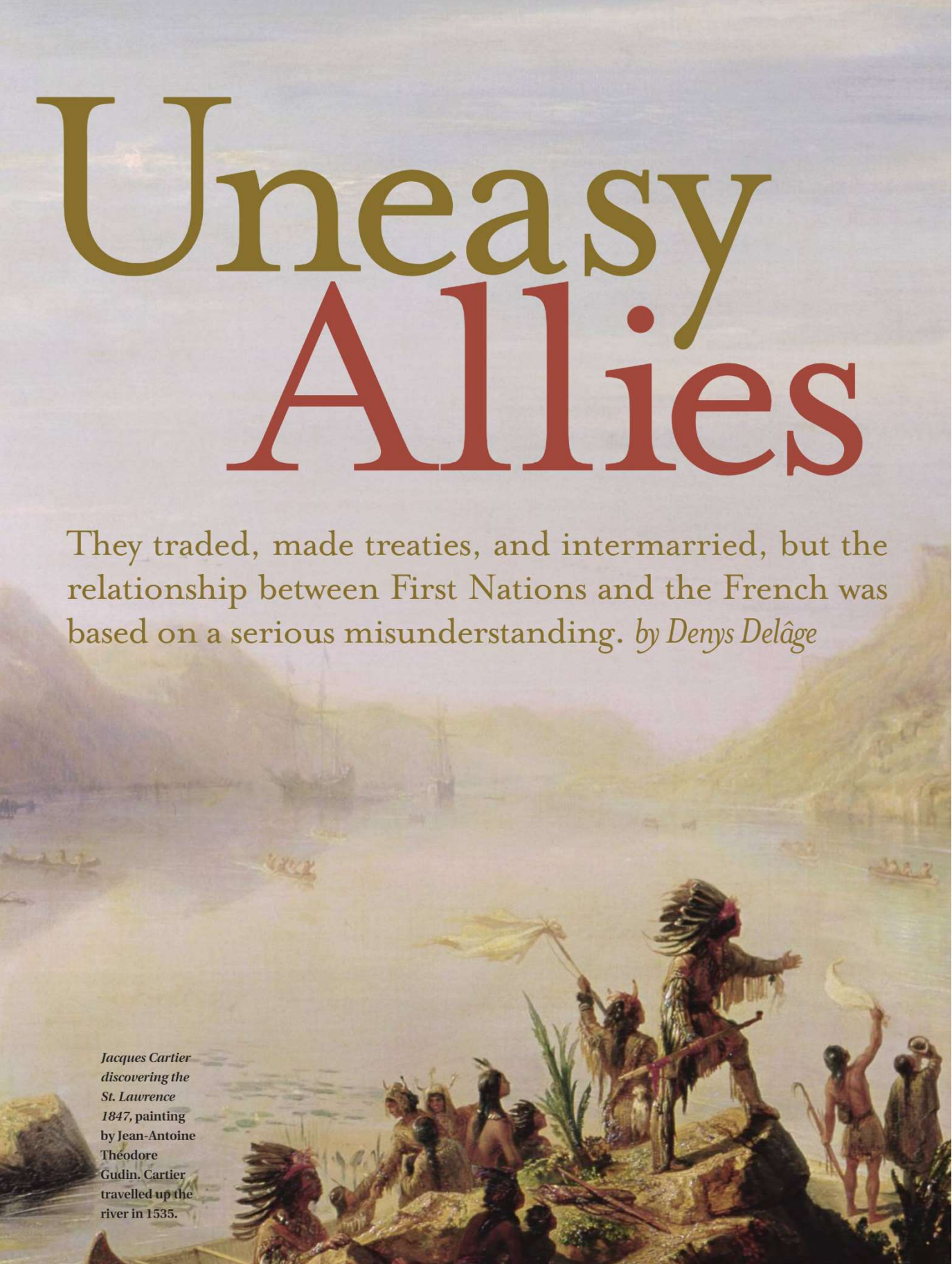


# Uneasy Allies

They traded, made treaties, and intermarried, but the relationship between First Nations and the French was based on a serious misunderstanding. *by Denys Delâge*



*Jacques Cartier  
discovering the  
St. Lawrence  
1847, painting  
by Jean-Antoine  
Théodore  
Gudin. Cartier  
travelled up the  
river in 1535.*







On July 3, 1608, a few heavy boats appeared in the middle of the river near what is now Quebec City; they came from Tadoussac, where their sailors had left their seagoing vessels for fear of going further upstream of the treacherous “Grande Rivière de Canada” (the St. Lawrence).

We can just imagine natives in fast-moving canoes appearing from every corner to greet François Gravé du Pont, leader of the expedition, and his second-in-command, Samuel de Champlain, who had come to build a settlement.

It was certainly a moment of immense celebration between the aboriginals and the strangers who had become “cousins” since their first meeting in 1603 near Tadoussac. This time, the two Frenchmen had come to set up a fur-trading post, as well as a small colony that they hoped would become the cradle of a “new” France.

Champlain and Gravé du Pont could not — and did not — dare mention this to their hosts, who welcomed the French to their territory. The natives saw the French as a new tribe with whom they could intermarry, as was the custom among allies. They also regarded the newcomers as potential trading partners and allies during war, as well as people with whom to exchange ideas on spirituality, ways of living, and the use of new tools and other innovations.

This, however, was not the intention of the French newcomers. Their aim was to capture a piece of America that was still eluding Spain.

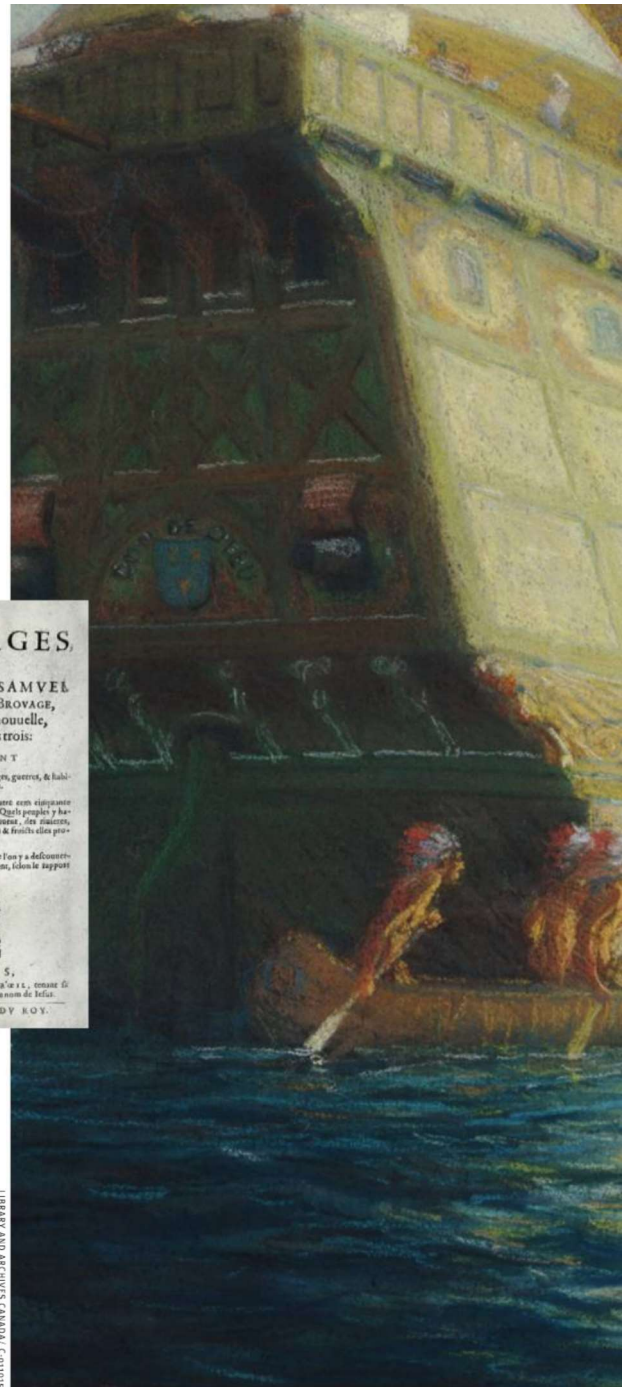
They wanted this land because it was rich in fur; plus, Quebec’s loca-

tion would give them control over the river, which they believed could provide a possible route to China. The French felt they were entitled to the land, since the first inhabitants did not farm it and were, as Champlain later wrote, “pagans” — that is, not Christians.

Champlain believed these so-called “savages,” if properly subdued and converted to Christianity, could one day become “civilized.”

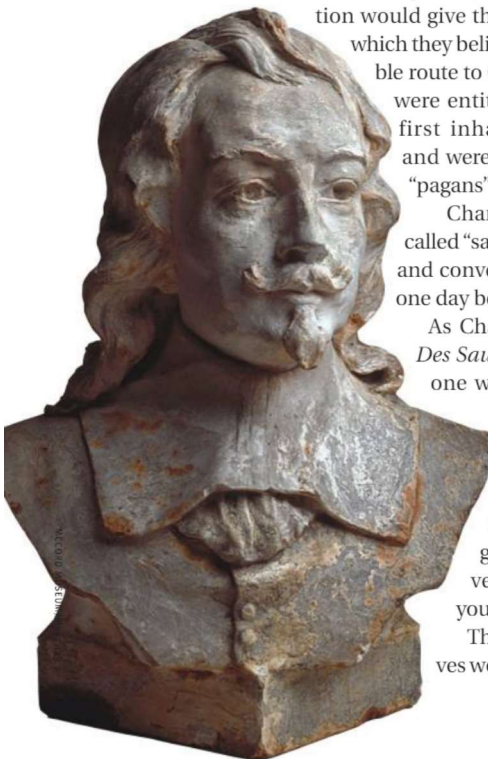
As Champlain wrote in 1603 in *Des Sauvages*: “I think that if anyone were to show them how to live, and teach them to till the ground, and other matters, they would learn very well; for I assure you that plenty of them have good judgment, and answer very properly any question you put to them.”

The French believed the natives would eventually become the



**Right:**  
Title page of Samuel de Champlain's 1603 book, *Des Sauvages*, a recounting of the explorer's early travels in New France.

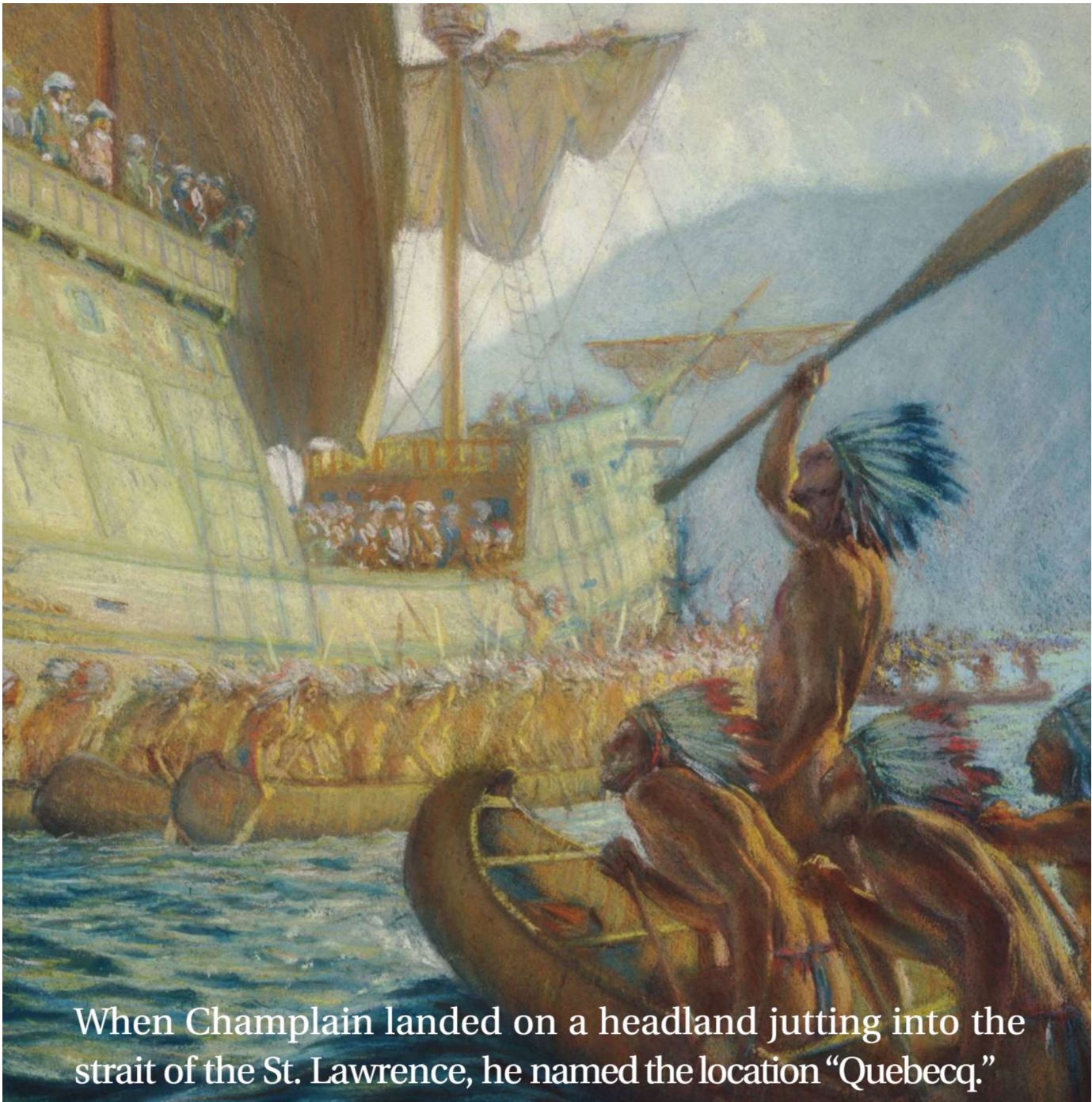
**Below:**  
Bust of Samuel de Champlain, by Alfred Laliberté.



subjects of their king and worshippers of Christ. Thus, the very foundation of the relationship between the French and the natives was based on a serious misunderstanding.

**W**hen Champlain landed on a headland jutting into the strait of the St. Lawrence, he named the location “Quebecq” — the name, he wrote, by which the “savages” referred to it. It was a variation of *gepèg*, a Mi'kmaq word meaning “strait” or the narrowing of a river.





## When Champlain landed on a headland jutting into the strait of the St. Lawrence, he named the location “Quebecq.”

There were no women among the thirty or so members of the French crew, who included loggers, carpenters, sawyers, locksmiths, stonemasons, labourers, and gardeners. They settled within a native summer community of approximately fifteen hundred inhabitants. The natives were primarily Innu (or Montagnais) who claimed the territory, as well as Algonquin, Mi'kmaq, and Maliseet. They gathered primarily to hunt migratory birds and to fish eel at the mouth of the Kabir-Kouba River (“river with a thousand meanders”) — today called the St. Charles River — as well as along the

grand coastal flats of Beauport and the Sillery headland, which the Montagnais called “Ka-iskouanouangashit” or more precisely, “the place we go fishing.”

During the summer months at the encampments, they celebrated marriages, held feasts, and performed ceremonies for their warriors' departure to fight the Iroquois across the Richelieu or Upper St. Lawrence Rivers. They returned to their hunting grounds at the end of October.

At the time, there were no sedentary native farming communities in the region. There had been some when

*Arrival of Champlain at Quebec*, a 1909 painting by George Agnew Reid.



explorer Jacques Cartier visited the area in 1535, as well as when Cartier and Jean-François de la Rocque de Roberval visited between 1541 and 1543. The Stadaconas — farmers from the Iroquoian linguistic family who once had a village on the site of Quebec City — had been driven off the land around 1570. They likely disappeared due to a combination of factors, including wars for access to the fur trade in Tadoussac; epidemics of European origin; and, possibly, increasingly harsh winters that ruined the maize harvests upon which the native farmers relied.

Innu oral tradition refers to the Quebec City area by the same geographic feature used by the Mi'kmaq — Uepishtikueiau, which means “strait.” According to the still-vivid memories of the elders, Uepishtikueiau, which was in the westernmost region of their territory, was the main gathering place for the Innu people. Besides the fish and game, the region also provided the Innu with large trees from which to make their birchbark canoes.

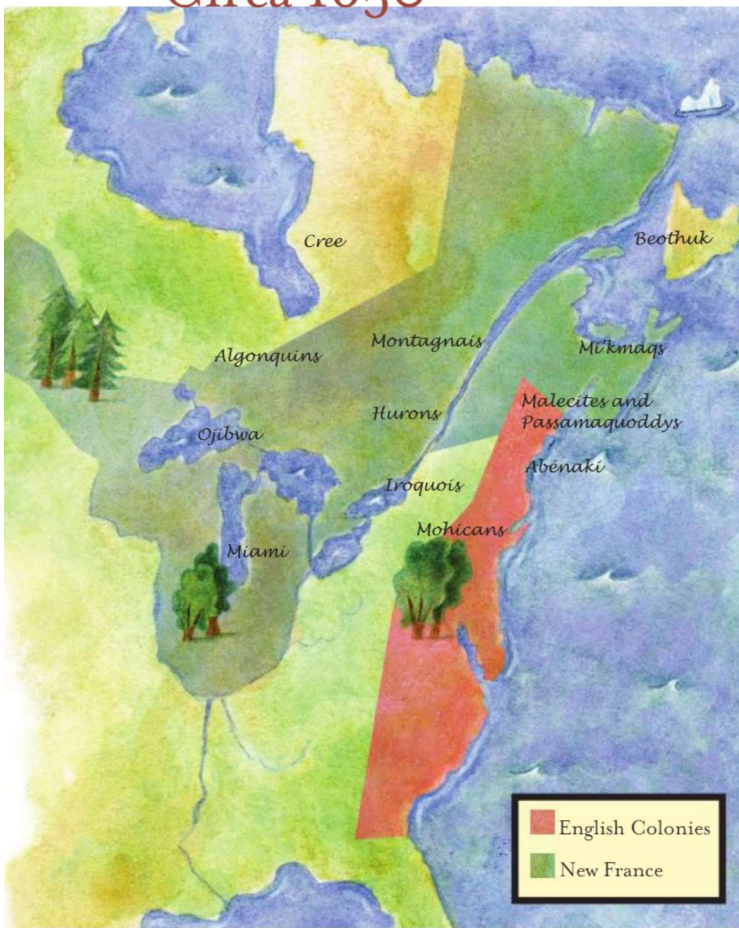
The Innu still recall the arrival of the “land seekers,” the Mishtikushuat — in other words, French builders of wooden boats, who wore hats and spoke a strange language. At that first meeting, the French would have been told to *kapak*, a word that meant to disembark and that other sources believe to be the origin of the name “Quebec.”

According to the oral tradition, there was a tense moment at the newcomers’ arrival, after which the two sides shook hands with one another and the natives welcomed the strangers. Unfortunately, the traditional stories say, the relationship soon degenerated into a series of battles in which many Innu men were killed. The French demanded Uepishtikueiau be turned over to them, but the demand was rejected. They tried again after the wheat harvest, offering to supply the Innu chief with enough flour to ensure that neither his people nor their descendants would ever have to endure a famine again. This time the Innu accepted the offer. They were also given firearms. The Innu grew to like the French, who, in the meantime, began to increase in number and sought to own all the land around them. The newcomers increased the size of their gardens, put fences around them, and started selling rather than giving.

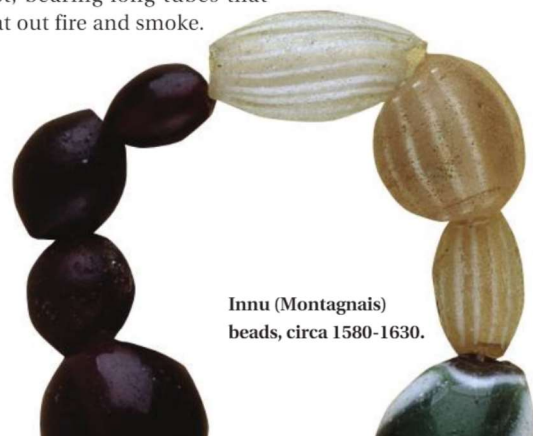
According to the Innu, as the French became less dependent on their hosts, the newcomers began to look down on the aboriginals, killing their men so they could have the women. The Innu were therefore forced to retreat further down the river.

News of the arrival of the French soon spread to the Great Lakes. A shaman from the Ojibwa tribe in the Sault Ste. Marie region is said to have dreamed of bearded men stepping off the large wooden canoes that had transported them across the sea from the east, bearing long tubes that spat out fire and smoke.

## Eastern North America Circa 1650



Champlain’s accounts mention more than twenty nations or tribes that belonged to two main linguistic groups — Iroquoian and Algonquian. Champlain forged alliances with the Huron and other nations living along the St. Lawrence River, which led to the French assisting those nations in their wars against the Iroquois Confederacy. Their aboriginal allies, in turn, helped the French in their battles against the British.



Innu (Montagnais) beads, circa 1580-1630.

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## The French joined a large alliance in which chiefs and kings were “brothers” and natives and French were “cousins.”

Left: Image from the *Codex Canadiensis*, a record of aboriginal life and culture made by Jesuit missionary Louis Nicolas, Circa 1664–1675.

Below: *Sauvagesse Iroquoise*, hand-coloured etching by Jacques Grasset de Saint-Sauveur Circa 1757–1810.

difficult, thanks to the exchange of food with the Montagnais.

Twenty years after its founding, the French outpost remained small, consisting only of a trading post, two small convents, and a farm. There were a total of about seventy French people, including forty-five unmarried men and just three families.

It was not always peaceful between the two peoples. Soon after the founding of the colony, tensions began to rise between the French and the natives. According to Champlain, he did not dare take any serious action when two of his men were assassinated.

“First, we were weak, considering the numbers of the savages outside and inside our factory, who, vindictive and revengeful as they are, might have fired it everywhere and put us to rout. The second reason was that there would be no more security in intercourse with them, and we should live in perpetual mistrust,” Champlain wrote in *Voyages du Sieur de Champlain, Vol. III*, in 1618.

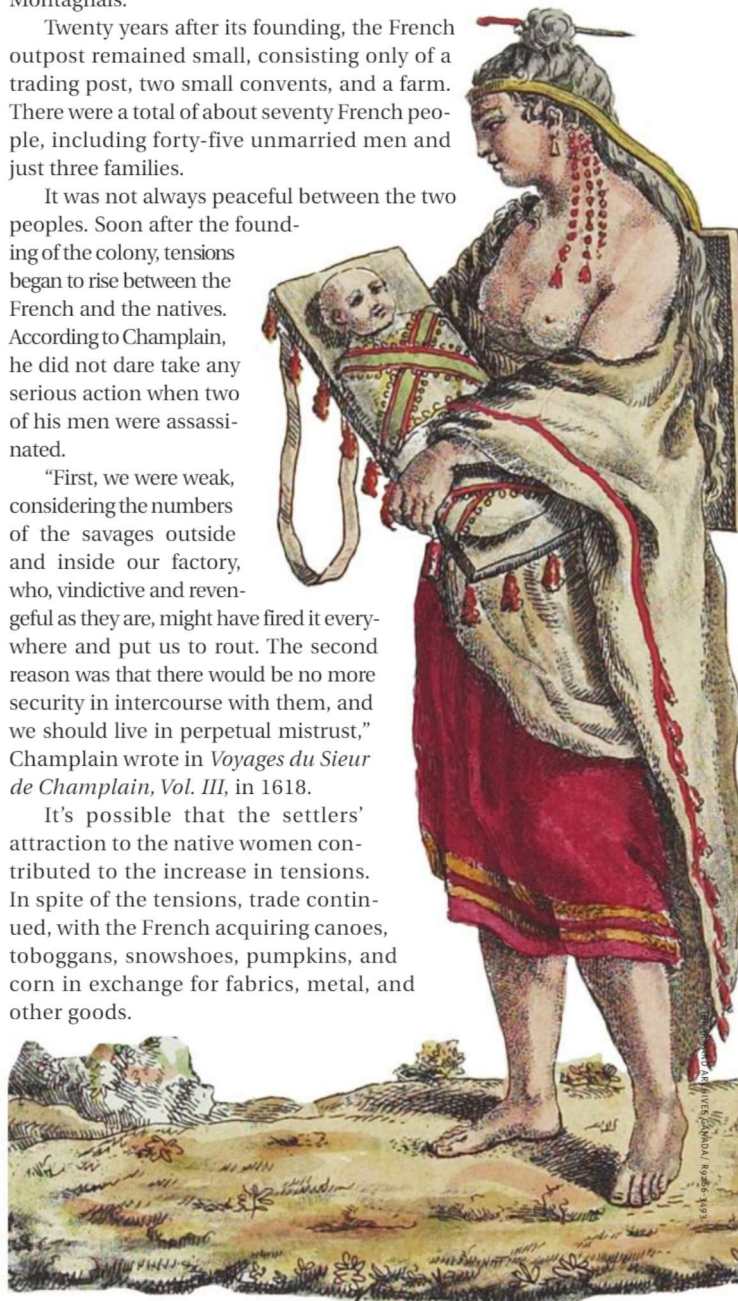
It’s possible that the settlers’ attraction to the native women contributed to the increase in tensions. In spite of the tensions, trade continued, with the French acquiring canoes, toboggans, snowshoes, pumpkins, and corn in exchange for fabrics, metal, and other goods.

Although many cite the 1608 founding of the “Habitation” of Quebec as the date of the founding of Quebec City, and ultimately Canada, others might argue the true founding moment occurred five years earlier.

On May 27, 1603, Champlain and his superior, Gravé du Pont — mandated by their king and accompanied by two Montagnais brought back from France to serve as interpreters — signed a historic alliance with Montagnais Chief Anadabijou amid great celebrations at Pointe Saint-Mathieu, near Tadoussac.

According to historians, other native nations — the Algonquin, Etchemin (Maliseet), and Mi’kmaq — joined in the alliance during the ceremony, or soon afterwards. With this, the French joined a large alliance in which chiefs and kings were “brothers” and natives and French were “cousins.” They were linked diplomatically by the obligations of the extended family — the privilege of intermarriage, the obligation to help one another, trade with each other, and mutual protection. The French were thus authorized to settle on the land of their native “cousins” — but in return, had to fight their enemies, who, at the time, were the Iroquois.

The natives — particularly the Montagnais — played an indispensable role in the early survival of the colony. Indeed, after most of the twenty-eight Frenchmen died of scurvy during the extreme cold of the 1608–1609 winter, subsequent winters were less







*Madame Champlain teaching to young Indians,*  
by Adam Sherriff Scott, 1931.

## Utopia in New France

Champlain dreamed of creating a united colony of French settlers and “civilized” Christian natives.

In 1633, Samuel de Champlain — accompanied by fifty men — returned from France to his Quebec habitation with plans to set up a French province exclusively for Catholics. But how was he to achieve that goal with no female immigrants? The answer: Establish a few devout Catholic families among the natives, to set the example for faith and work.

“Our young men will marry your daughters, and we shall be one people,” Champlain explained to the chiefs. But this was no easy feat.

The Jesuits took the initiative with this utopian project. They built a house in Sillery, just west of Quebec City, and cleared the fields. They constructed houses for two Christian Montagnais chiefs renowned for their loyalty, Noël Negabamat and François-Xavier Negaskoumat, and their families. They were to settle down and learn how to live a sedentary life.

In 1639, Ursuline nuns arrived in Quebec City. Together with the Jesuits, they soon set up boarding schools for native boys and girls — mostly children of the chiefs. The nuns taught lessons in three languages: French, Montagnais, and Huron.

In 1651, the Jesuits conceded Sillery — a five-kilometre-by-twenty-kilometre stretch along the river that was under their patronage — to the “novice Christians.” The few French inhabitants who came to settle there thus had “savage chiefs” as their lords. As the Crown deemed it “very reasonable” for the “savages” to keep land “in their own country” that they would need in order to live near the French, it also provided for such concessions to be made close to all French forts. Some forty First Nations families came to settle in Sillery, but the experiment ultimately failed.

The natives resisted the sedentary life, and also suffered from epidemics, not to mention raids from Iroquois warriors. The mission soon became almost deserted, and then burned down.

As French families began to settle in the seigneurie of Sillery, colonial authorities felt it was ridiculous for the “savages” to be lords. The king reclaimed control over the colony in 1663. The Huron lost possession of the land, first to their Jesuit teachers and then to the British Crown. The Huron today continue to make petitions for its return, or for compensation.

— Denys Delâge

Right from its beginning, Quebec City was geographically polarized by two worlds: on the one hand, a small garrison lived the French lifestyle within the walls of the Habitation; on the other hand, missionaries and interpreters were living among the aboriginal communities up the river to the Great Lakes.

The colony itself was born during war, and the French were expected to join their native allies in their offensives against the Iroquois — which they did in 1609, 1610, and again in 1615.

Militarily, however, Quebec City was quite weak compared to Jamestown in Virginia, which was founded in 1607 and had more than two thousand settlers. It was therefore no surprise that the Kirke brothers — French Huguenots who managed, for a short period, to conquer much of New France for the English — were able to take possession of the colony in 1629. However, thanks to a recently signed peace treaty between England and France, Quebec City was handed back to the French in 1632.

All through its early history, the colony of Quebec depended on its alliances with the natives for protection and survival. The natives successfully helped the French fend off an attack by New England’s William Phips in 1690. In 1759, eighteen hundred native warriors fought side-by-side with the French in their battle against the British.

After the fall of Quebec City, the British concluded treaties with natives living close to the French settlers — including the Huron — recognizing their right to keep their religion, their possessions, and their customs. The native nations joined the “covenant chain” with the British, and most of their warriors fought alongside the British against the Americans during the War of Independence and the War of 1812.

The history of Quebec City is one of interaction among peoples; it is important to know the contributions and exchanges borne out of the alliances as well as the tensions and conflicts that stemmed from the conquests. This is all part of our common heritage. 🐾

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### Et Cetera

“Les premiers contacts selon un choix de récits amérindiennes publiés aux XIX<sup>e</sup> et XX<sup>e</sup> siècles,” by Denys Delâge, *Recherches Amérindiennes au Québec*, vol. XXII, Nos. 2–3, Fall 1992.

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