

# A CONDENSED HISTORY

Cartier and his companions made it upriver only as far as a large island that divided the St. Lawrence in two, at the confluence with the Ottawa River. This he named Montreal for the mountain which dominated the scene. That was in the 1530s. Early in the following century, New France was founded as a fur-trading settlement at the point where the great river narrowed.

The country 'above' Montreal, upriver to the southwest, past the mouth of the Ottawa, was Upper Canada.

Written accounts of French penetration into the continent's wild interior make their full beginning with the arrival of Samuel de Champlain in 1609. He brought the Jesuit missionaries to New France, men who were educated and literate, and who kept diaries.

The eastern coast of North America was to them the outer edge of the New World. The St. Lawrence River was an avenue of approach toward rich and fertile uplands having a more temperate climate. They had discovered the river that drained the big lakes with their surrounding northern woodlands, where hunting game was extremely abundant, rainfall more than adequate. The basin of the lower Great Lakes was beyond comparison to anything they had previously experienced. Freshwater seas this large were unknown to them, and dispatches to the King attempted to describe how the wave surface of Ontario rolled in swells like those of the ocean, the weather patterns of gales, flat calms, and steady westerly wind, and so on. Champlain and his priest companions started a systematic exploration of the interior lakes basin after 1610, accompanied by Mississaugue Indian guides who cleared paths toward the other Indian nations. The greatest of these in power and strategic location were the Five Nations of the Iroquois Confederacy, whose main village homelands (not including their much larger common hunting territory) stretched from the eastern door where the Mohawk River joined the Hudson west through the lowland corridor along the southern shore of Ontario and beyond. Their linguistic influence covered a portion of the Eastern Woodlands down to the Carolinas, the Cherokee homelands, a probable ancestral homeland for the Iroquois in the time before the melting of the last glaciers.

The French from Champlain in the first half of the 1600s to the siege and surrender of Quebec to the British in 1759, spread themselves thinly into the interior, establishing a long chain of outposts and forts up the Great Lakes basin to Detroit, then south to the headwaters of the Mississippi and the edges of the long-grass prairie. The English-speaking settlers of New England and Virginia were more agrarian, occupying portions of the coast in more temperate latitudes having longer growing seasons. Population pressures among the English colonists had not yet grown to their later dimensions to force exploration and settlement beyond the Appalachian Barrier.

For France to extend her trade and influence, winning over the Indians by religious conversion was the key. Her brand of Catholicism was bound up with her national spirit in a militant defense of the Christian faith, which she regarded as her highest purpose. As an imperial economic power in search of raw materials, she offered to the New World a doctrine of the one true Savior, in the belief that His word would bring eternal life to His children on earth. Those who refused to believe or resisted in offering up themselves and all their property to the ways of Coming Civilization were condemned to Eternal Suffering. The French made good on this last threat by being the first to import gunpowder weapons that with a thunderous noise could eliminate a dozen attacking warriors instantly. Because the control of the magnificent interior woodlands depended on control of the Indians, the Indians must then be taught the power of France. The shock troops in this effort were the Jesuits.

150 years after Champlain's arrival, the French were, in English eyes, threatening the most beautiful prize of North America, the Ohio Valley.

2.

The last glaciers covered the Canadian Shield and more on this continent, the northwest part of Europe, the Siberia of Asia. The top of the world was a solid sheet of ice capped on bedrock. The maximum southern ranges of the ice cap were thin at the edge, more subject to influences of terrain owing to upheavals in the earth's crust. The southerly edges were the glaciers. About 12,000 years ago—a precise date is meaningless, this was a process covering at least two thousand years—the glaciers began to melt with the warming of the earth's climate. The Adirondack Uplift was exposed for the greater part of this period, and had existed in prototypical form for hundreds of millions of years. The Adirondacks are very old and heavily weathered down, and were by the era of the glaciers. The gradually retreating ice surrounded the mountains on all sides. Alpine vegetation was present on the slopes. The southern line of terminus (the moraine) carved out the north-face of the Allegheny Plateau. Tree and grass life advanced from refuges in the higher altitude ridges of the untouched Appalachians. The Finger Lakes were gouged deep into the earth during the long northward retreat of the ice. At the foot of the glaciers, immense freshwater seas grew, with strong eddies and currents and outlets to the ocean. They received the meltwater.

During the period of melting...

"It deposited its enormous load of debris, the clay, the sand, gravel, boulders, all the sediments of rock decay and fragmentation, of debris of every sort that had been caught up in the forward-flowing glacier."

Vegetation, beginning with the lichens, advanced before the northward retreat into all higher areas above water, and over time through many successional changes in composition with the eventual shrinking of the freshwater seas. The sediment and debris now unlocked from the ice was swirled and selectively moved according to weight and volume. Eskers and gravel deposits formed; drumlins were sculpted by ice movement and erosion. Glacial till, massive collections of rocks and boulders, blocked entire valleys and formed whole new systems of drainage and re-directed the meltwater rivers.

In each place that lay bare and newly exposed it took several thousand years for plant and animal life to reach development into a homeostatic biotic community. The forest in its climax stage of seral development is such a place. Its trees and its associated understory growth of herbacious plants and flowers have been selected according to natural laws of climate, soil type, drainage, terrain, angle of sunlight, and countless other factors, including the impact of fauna. The building of the soil evolved with the vegetation that decayed into it to mix with the rocks and minerals, to form it in layered horizons. It took 10,000 years to build the soil.



3.

Religious conversion of the Indians was the clear intention of Champlain by 1611. With some hardship, he made two or three trips up the dangerous St. Lawrence, meeting rapids and violent summertime weather, to make contact with the Iroquois hunting parties in a haphazard way. It is not clear whether this was the first encounter the Iroquois had with the French, but the white man's presence downriver was certainly known. The beginning of the Confederacy of the Five Nations, the lifetime of Hiawatha, has been put in European dates of some time in the 1300s. The Seneca Nation in the western end of the lowland longhouse country was the largest of the five in population. The population figure given in an early French document for the entire Confederacy was 25,000, but the reliability of this estimate is open to question. The Cayugas, whose main villages were east of the Senecas, had camps at Sodus Bay. The Oneida Nation migrated north with the summer seasons, planted corn in clearings in the woods of the eastern lakeshore that extended northeast along the river, and the corn was harvested by their hunters in the Fall. The environment of the eastern lakeshore, Henderson Bay in particular, but also a rich game-hunting area that lies between the two branches of Sandy Creek, caught the imagination of the Oneida people. The Onondaga Nation was itself very powerful in military terms. They are the keepers of the main fire, the scene of council for the Five Nations in the time of contact with the French, the Confederacy of Six Nations now with the addition of the Tuscaroras. Three Rivers, near the outlet of Oneida Lake, was an important place of gathering. Pompey Hill, at the northern end of the spectacular Cortland Valley, was for the Onondaga a strategic point of observation. Main Villages of the Mohawk Nation were strung out along the river valley of the Mohawk, which narrows to the east, has a complicated network of steep-sided ravines and gorges, and is easily defended. Each nation had extensive areas under cultivation. The corn fields of the Senecas were said to be considerably large. (It was not long before the French were threatening to burn them.) A particular companion-crop method used by the Iroquois is only now becoming known us.

The Confederacy had been formed for their common peace and protection. Besides their linguistic affiliation, the Five Nations shared the country that lay north of the Appalachian

Mountains but south of the barrier of the Lower Great Lakes—the country of the Iroquois is astride the best possible route of migration and travel from the coast to the interior. It is the natural land route from the great natural harbor at New York by way of the navigable Hudson River, or from New England by way of the Berkshires. Anyone wishing to move an army to capture Ohio, or wishing to control the English colonies on the coast, or check the expansion of a competing military power on the northeast corner of the continent, had to take into account the powerful Iroquois who were in control of the Longhouse country.

Mississaugaue, Huron, Algonquin, and Iroquois were present throughout all of Upper Canada. Champlain began a steady expansion of diplomacy and trade into the basin of the Lower Great Lakes.

The Indians traded furs, pelts and fresh food for iron tomahawk heads, blankets, manufactured cotton clothing, knives, pots and kettles, and jewelry as well. Trading posts and forts were built by the French between 1678 and 1749 at Niagara, Toronto, Frontenac (now Kingston, Ont.), La Famine at the mouth of the Salmon River on the eastern shore, and La Presentation at the mouth of the Oswegatchie River where it meets the St. Lawrence (now Ogdensburg, NY). Many smaller depots and caches were scattered around. Some were on islands in the St. Lawrence. Each of these places had an outlying Indian settlement for the converted, a fort with cannon and a full garrison of soldiers, mills and a boat-building yard that used nearby available timber, storage houses for the King's property. The Jesuits instituted programs for teaching the Indians the civilized methods of farming.

4.

White cedar has a definable range of maximum concentration in the eastern lakeshore and St. Lawrence Valley lowlands, where the bedrock is limestone. It grows in clumps either in marshes or on gravelly knolls, in search of low acid to slightly alkaline soil. It is a true northerner; you can find it in the mountains of North Carolina but there it is only a shrub when mature. Some people call it arbor vitae ("arbervyetee"). It is very straight with dull green flat-needle foliage packed thick to give the tree an overall conical shape. It is the main source of fence posts in this part of the country. But if it is growing in deep muck soil its heartwood may not be there and you will find the tree to be hollow inside. Only if there is clay subsoil within one foot of the top muck soil surface should you cut a cedar for posts.

The kind of cedar that is fashionable for house siding or often wasted for fake mansard shake roofs on shopping-center pizza stands is redcedar. It is prized for its beautiful smell, for cabinets, wardrobes and chests. It only grows out west beyond the Continental Divide, as a very large tree if left alone by the poachers in the national parks. It is not related to the white cedar of the northeast. It has berries, not cones.

It gets confusing when you try to sort out the cedars. White cedar is as good or better a material for siding or roof shingles as western redcedar, and was commonly used this way on farmsteads of this area. Eastern redcedar is the cedar of front yards. It is much greener, and has berries. Then there is the Atlantic redcedar found on the east coast...

One thing to keep in mind if you ever wonder about what kinds of trees grow where is their tendency to appear in associations with certain other types. There are tree associations that are typical to each physiographic region of the continent. In the Great Lakes - St. Lawrence River basin, the most commonly found association is a mixture of maple, beech, yellow birch, and hemlock spread across the landscape. Discounting the Adirondacks where the associations change with elevation into spruce and fir communities similar to those in Canada, the St. Lawrence Valley since its clearing by farmers in the last century is being invaded by hardwoods from the south. The original forests, except for the lake and river shoreline country, were predominantly of softwoods.

Three categories of forest cover occupy eastern North America. The deciduous hardwoods were originally vast and impenetrable except by way of the rivers. The northern fringe of their common range touches the southern shores of Erie and Ontario, across the Longhouse country. The change is evident between the Hudson Valley and the Champlain Valley, or the eastern Lake Ontario shore and the St. Lawrence Valley. In each case as you travel northward, hardwood stands become thinner unless you are near the edge of the milder microclimates of either the lake or the river. The prevalence of softwoods increases. And certain types of hardwoods able to withstand colder winters persist. These are the maple, beech and yellow birch, to mention the most common.

The St. Lawrence Valley and northern New England, together with southern Ontario Province and southwestern Quebec, is a region that contains a kind of vegetational unity. It is the most prominent range of sugar maple, hemlock and white pine.

The Boreal Forest region of Canada stretches from the Maritimes across the top of the prairies to the northern Pacific Coast. It is mostly composed of spruces, pines and firs—all conifers. Specific types change from the wetter eastern portion to the drier and more northerly western belt. It continues onward through the subarctic regions of Alaska, Siberia and Scandinavia, circumnavigating the upper latitudes of the earth.

Our region, lying between the northerly range of the deciduous forests and the southern range of the Boreal, contains within it trees originating from the Appalachian Highlands, others that came from the Canadian north. But the associations

are unique. This area is not a transition zone; rather, it is where the climate and soil of the Lake Ontario - St. Lawrence River basin has worked out its own lines of development in its trees and forests.

"The entire area is profoundly modified by glaciation. The western part of the Adirondacks and the Tug Hill are dissected plateaus about 2,000 feet in elevation. The valleys of the Western Adirondack Plateau are often wide and deeply filled with glacial material; much of the intervening surface is rolling, and slopes are only moderately steep. The Adirondacks are remarkable for the large number of lakes and ponds which are most abundant in or near the mountains. Extensive proglacial lake deposits—deposits that resulted from the dynamics of north-flowing mountain streams meeting the foot of the glaciers—are correlated with the retreat of the last ice sheet which disappeared from most of the upland while it still encircled it in the surrounding valleys. These are covered with gravel, sand and silt. The elevated



benches so generally occupied by deciduous or mixed deciduous-coniferous forests and the spruce flats bordering on lakes and streams owe their origin to the proglacial lake deposits."

In the river valley lowlands west and north of the Adirondack Plateau, the dominant trees owe their origins more to migration from the Alleghany Plateau (the 'Southern Tier'). Beech, white ash, black cherry, and elm originally came in from the deep southern parts of North America during the post-glacial period. The softwoods came from highland refuges. Sugar maple, basswood, and northern red oak invaded from the Alleghany Plateau.

From the north eventually came white and black spruce, fir tamarack, balsam, poplar (aspen), and paper birch. Species whose maximum concentrations are co-extensive with this forest region are hemlock, white pine, yellow birch, Norway pine, in the mountains red spruce, and along the eastern lakeshore and St. Lawrence lowlands the white cedar.



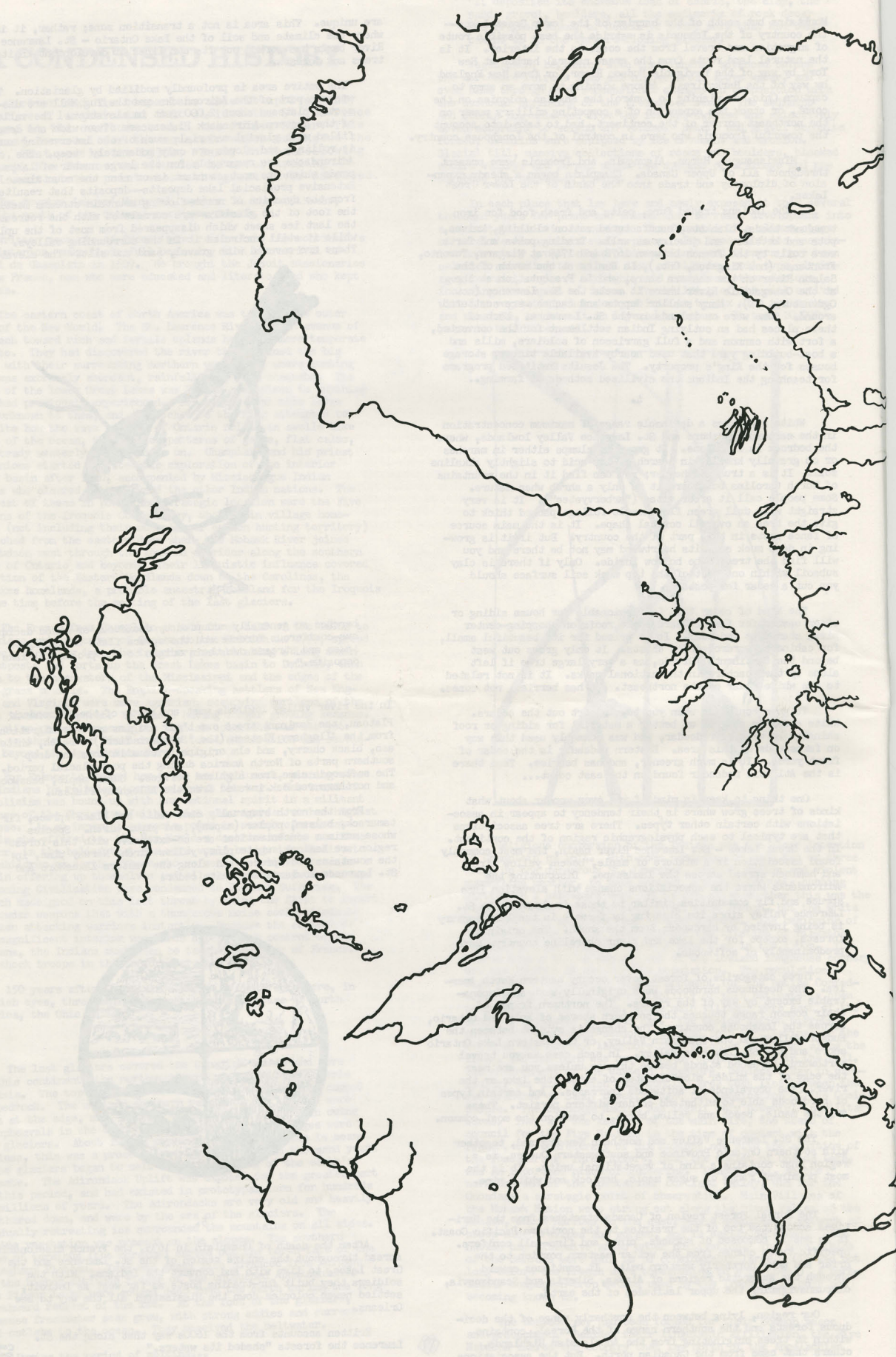
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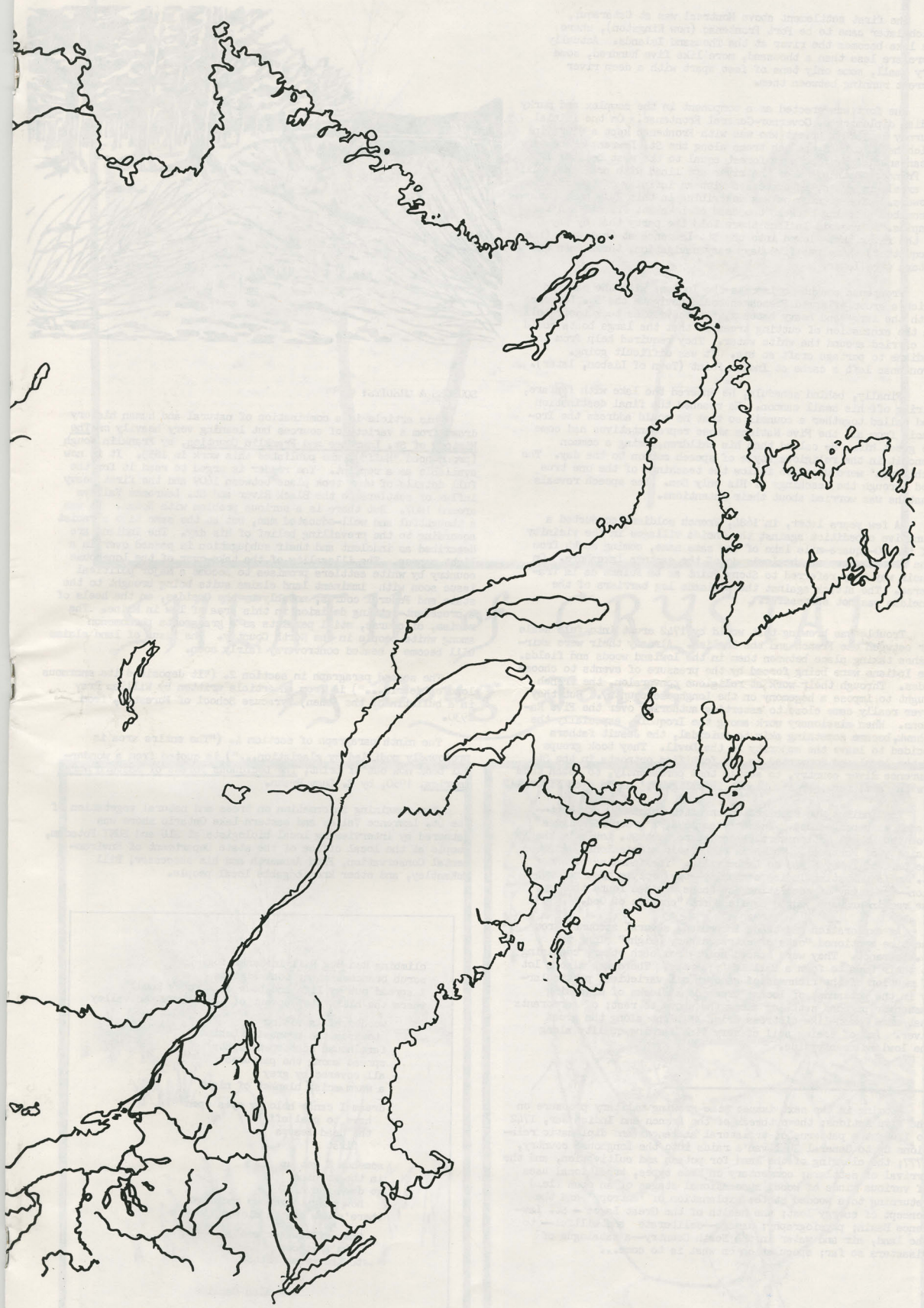
After the death of Champlain in 1635, the French missionaries spread throughout the entire region of the St. Lawrence and the Great Lakes, to live with and convert the Indians. With the soldiers they built fur-trading posts as far west as Detroit, settled newer colonies down the Mississippi all the way to New Orleans.

Written accounts from the 1600s say that along the St. Lawrence the forests "shaded its waters."

cont. →  
page 12

A CONDENSED HISTORY





The first settlement above Montreal was at Cataragui, which later came to be Fort Frontenac (now Kingston), where the lake becomes the river at the Thousand Islands. Actually there are less than a thousand, more like five hundred, some very small, some only tens of feet apart with a deep river current running between them.

The fort was erected as a component in the complex and murky Indian diplomacy of Governor-General Frontenac. On the initial journey in 1678 a priest who was with Frontenac kept a diary in which he said that the oak trees along the St. Lawrence "are very clean and lofty, forming a forest equal to the most beautiful in France. Both banks of the river are lined with prairies, full of excellent grass, interspersed with an infinity of beautiful flowers." The country he was describing in this July entry he described as being between the head of Lake St. Francis and the "rapids." Iroquois Indians there told the party that by way of the river that flowed into the St. Lawrence at that spot (the Lacquette?) there was five days easy navigation, three when the waters were lower.

Frontenac sought to impress the Indians with the ease in which a group of armed Frenchmen could navigate the St. Lawrence with the large and heavy bateaux, but the rapids took their toll in the exhaustion of cutting trees so that the large boats could be carried around the white water. They required help from the Indians to portage craft so big. It was difficult going. Frontenac left a cache at Indian Point (Town of Lisbon, later).

Finally, behind schedule, he entered the lake with fanfare, firing off his small cannon. He reached the final destination and called together a council so that he could address the Iroquois from all the Five Nations whose representatives had come to greet him. He called them his children, using a common conceit in the religious style of speech common to the day. The 'children' were urged to follow the teachings of the one true God through the teachings of His only Son. The speech reveals that he was worried about their intentions.

A few years later, in 1684, French soldiers conducted a punitive expedition against the Oneida villages in the vicinity of the 80-square-mile lake of the same name, coming south from the river by way of the lowlands of the eastern lakeshore. On their way they referred to Stony Point as La Pointe de la Traverse. The attack against the palisade log barriers of the Oneidas was not successful.

Trouble was brewing that would by 1742 erupt into full scale war between the French and the English. Already there were skirmishes taking place between them in the lowland woods and fields. The Indians were being forced by the pressure of events to choose sides. Through their work at religious conversion, the French sought to impose a hegemony on the Longhouse country. But they never really came close to asserting authority over the Five Nations. When missionary work among the Iroquois, especially the Mohawk, became something akin to suicidal, the Jesuit fathers decided to leave the majority to the Devil. They took groups of the loyal and converted to the fortified outposts in the St. Lawrence River country, to settle them permanently, to teach them how to farm, for them 'to become intelligent,' maybe even literate.

The Indians who remained unconverted—about 90 per cent—traded with both sides. As early as 1675, a group of emigres from the Mohawk Nation were relocated to Saut St. Louis in the vicinity of Montreal. This was the result of missionary work on the part of LeMoynes and de Lamberville. The founding of the St. Louis Christian Indian community—the prototype of a reservation—was a way of separating out those who had found the Way. The remainder were judged hopeless and "enemies of God."

As exploration and trade increased, several accounts from the time mentioned "oaks of extraordinary height" along the St. Lawrence. They were spaced apart from each other, combining at their tops to form a tall leafy canopy. There was also a lot of mention of the richness of game in all varieties, particularly in the wetlands; of loons; tremendous flocks of migrating passenger pigeons settling along the shore to rest; of cormorants that made human-like distress cries at night along the great river. And of seeing soil of very fine farming quality along the lowland countryside.

Coming in the next issue: the growing military pressure on the Five Nations; the outbreak of the French and Indian War, 1742 to 1760; the patterns of trilateral alliances and diplomatic relations up to General Sullivan's raids into the Longhouse country, 1777; the clearing of the land for potash and cultivation, and the arrival of settlers; commentary on tree types, traditional uses of various kinds of wood; successional stages of an open field returning to a wooded state; explanation of 'entropy' and the concept of energy lost; the health of the Great Lakes - St. Lawrence Basin; physiography; damage—deliberate and willful—to the land, air and water in the North Country—a catalogue of disasters so far; speculation on what is to come....



#### SOURCES & CREDITS:

This article is a combination of natural and human history drawn from a variety of sources but leaning very heavily on *The History of St. Lawrence and Franklin Counties*, by Franklin Hough (pronounced "Huff"), who published this work in 1853. It is now available as a reprint. The reader is urged to read it for the full details of what took place between 1609 and the first heavy influx of settlers to the Black River and St. Lawrence Valleys around 1807. But there is a serious problem with Hough. He was a thoughtful and well-educated man, but at the same time a racist according to the prevailing belief of his day. The Indians are described as indolent and their subjugation is passed over in a light manner. The illegality of the take-over of the Longhouse country by white settlers promises to become a major political issue soon with imminent land claims suits being brought to the state and Federal courts, notably by the Oneidas, on the heels of a precedent-setting decision in this area of law in Maine. The racism, of course, still persists as a grassroots phenomenon among white people in the North Country. The issue of land claims will become a heated controversy fairly soon.

The second paragraph in section 2. ("It deposited its enormous load of debris...") is from an article written by William Bray in a bulletin of the (then) Syracuse School of Forestry, from 1930.

The ninth paragraph of section 4. ("The entire area is profoundly modified by glaciation...") is quoted from a wonderful book now out of print, *The Deciduous Forest of Eastern North America*, 1950, by E. Lucy Braun.

The remaining information on trees and natural vegetation of the St. Lawrence Valley and eastern Lake Ontario shore was gathered by interviewing local biologists at SIU and SUNY Potsdam, people at the local office of the state Department of Environmental Conservation, Fred Ashworth and his successor, Bill McKentley, and other knowledgeable local people.

climbing Red Bug Hill in dense fog  
scrub branches at my coat sleeves  
I spread out my life and body on a rocky knoll  
where the hills step up out of the cultivated valley

wooded hills rising  
towards the mountains behind  
farm house scattered lights  
spread among the pastures  
all covered by grey  
a warm moist blanket of night

dream I can't hold my eyes open  
have to peel off  
the dead leaves  
first

somehow I get up  
in the morning  
go down the hill  
how easy to get up and move  
there's dew on the clover flowers

the still water pool  
is a window  
to the creek bottom

— Alan Casline