

A Saint Croix Island International Historic Site:
BRIEF HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Saint Croix Island International Historic Site: A Brief Historical Background

Saint Croix Island International Historic Site, located along the U.S.A.-Canada border in Maine, commemorates the founding of one of the earliest sites of European settlement in North America. In 1604, a group of 79 French colonists, led by the Sieur de Mons and cartographer, Samuel Champlain, built a tiny settlement and overwintered on the island. The results were disastrous, with nearly half the colonists dying of scurvy. However, the effort, together with the subsequent relocation of the settlement at Port Royal, marked the beginning of a continuous French presence in North America. The island itself was already known and used by the Wapaponiyik (or Waponahki) First Peoples of the region, who helped the French and taught them how to survive in the unfamiliar climate and territory.

A note on names

The French colonists of 1604 named the Island “Isle Sainte Croix”. The official name in English is Saint Croix Island (although you sometimes see it as Sainte Croix Island), which is abbreviated as St. Croix Island. The Island has had many different names over the centuries. The original Passamaquoddy name is thought to be “Muttoneguis”; earlier this century, the island was known locally as Dochet Island.

There are many different spellings of the name of Pierre Dugua, Sieur de Mons. In the journal translations, it is spelled Monts. However, the US National Park Services uses the spelling “Mons” as this is considered the closest form to the 17th century French.

When the cartographer Champlain came to Saint Croix Island, he had not yet achieved fame. He was simply known as Samuel Champlain. Only later, as the founder of New France, did he become known as Samuel de Champlain. We use Samuel Champlain for all references specifically related to Saint Croix Island.

In this teaching kit, we use the collective term “Wapaponiyik—People of the Early Dawn” to refer to the four First Peoples who lived near St. Croix Island: the Passamaquoddy, Penobscot, Mi’kmaq and Maliseet. Since the French had interactions with all four groups, we use the term Wapaponiyik to ensure that we acknowledge the contributions of all the First Peoples involved.

European Exploration and Settlement of the “New World”

The story of Saint Croix Island really begins well before 1604. The First Peoples had inhabited the surrounding area for millennia and had well established and long-lasting cultures which featured the interwoven elements of language, spiritual beliefs, mythology, music, and visual arts and were based on their close relationship to nature. Europeans had been crossing the Atlantic to fish or trade along the North American coast for generations.

Early voyages and contacts

The first known European contact with North America took place when Norse adventurers crossed the North Atlantic and established a settlement at what is now known as L'Anse aux Meadows, Newfoundland (c. 1,000 AD). Once the settlement failed, however, the explorations of the Norse fell into obscurity.

It was not until almost 500 years later that European explorers, backed by the courts of Europe, found their ways to North America's shores. Driven by the pressures of the spice trade and colonial expansionism, these adventurers hoped to find new routes to the Orient. In 1492, Christopher Columbus, reached what was subsequently described as the “new world” and brought back news to the Spanish court of the tremendous mineral wealth of that region. Five years after the voyages of Columbus, John Cabot landed in either Newfoundland or Cape Breton, claiming that territory for the English and opening up the rich North Atlantic fishery. In 1513, Juan Ponce de Leon explored Florida for the Spanish, and in 1524, Giovanni de Verrazanno sailed from North Carolina to Newfoundland for the French. Ten years later, in 1534, Jacques Cartier sailed up the mighty St. Lawrence River, searching for gold and a passage to Asia for the French. Finally, in 1576, Martin Frobisher, searched west of Greenland for the elusive northwest passage and gave his name to Frobisher Bay.

By the mid-16th century, French and Basque fishers were making annual forays to the waters off Newfoundland and Nova Scotia to satisfy the increasing European demand for fish and whale oil. As well, entrepreneurs were trading axes, knives, and glass beads with the First Peoples for furs, particularly around Tadoussac, where the Saguenay River meets the St. Lawrence. Still, these contacts were fleeting. It was not until later that any concerted attempt at European settlement was undertaken in these northern regions.

Key Motives for European Exploration of North America:

- expansion of imperial power
- search for route to the Orient (spice trade)
- fishing
- whaling
- fur trade
- settlement
- missionary work

Key Dates in Exploration

1000	Leif Ericsson (Norse)
1492	Christopher Columbus (Spain)
1497	John Cabot (England)
1500	Corte Real Brothers (Portugal)
1513	Ponce de Leon (Spanish)
1524	Giovanni de Verrazanno (France)
1534	Jacques Cartier (France)
1539	Hernando de Soto (Spain)
1576	Martin Frobisher (England)
1604	Pierre Dugua, Sieur de Mons (France)
1608-1635	Samuel de Champlain (France)
1678	René-Robert Cavelier de La Salle (France)
1768-1779	James Cook (England)
1792-1793	Alexander Mackenzie (Scotland)
1791-1795	George Vancouver (England)
1804-1806	William Clark & Meriwether Lewis (United States)

Early Settlements

Early European settlement attempts were largely unsuccessful and fraught with danger. As the St. Croix Island experience illustrates, settlers were unfamiliar with the demands of the North American climate and habitat. In their isolation, they easily fell prey to scurvy and starvation. In other cases, poor planning and hostile relations with neighboring First Peoples proved disastrous.

The St. Croix Island settlement is notable for its early date, preceding the arrival of the Pilgrims at Plymouth by more than fifteen years. At the time, the St. Croix settlers were the only Europeans living north of the Spanish colony of St. Augustine in Florida (founded in 1565).

Some Early Settlement Attempts

It took nearly five centuries from their first settlement attempts, before Europeans established successful and long-lasting colonies in North America. A partial list of settlement efforts follows.

Year	Place	Nationality	Outcome
1000	L' Anse aux Meadows, Newfoundland	Norse	Abandoned after skirmishes with First Peoples
1520s	Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia	Portuguese	Abandoned after skirmishes with First Peoples
1535	Stadacona, Quebec	French	Abandoned after first winter; many colonists died of scurvy
1541	Cap Rouge, Quebec	French	Abandoned after skirmishes with First Peoples
1550s	Red Bay, Labrador	Basque	Whaling stations abandoned as whale stocks declined
1564	Fort Caroline, Florida	French	Attacked by Spanish
1565	St. Augustine, Florida	Spanish	Successful
1585	Roanoke Island, North Carolina	English	Abandoned after skirmishes with First Peoples and supply shortages
1598	Sable Island, Nova Scotia	French	Abandoned after a few years
1604	St. Croix Island, Maine	French	After terrible winter, moved to Port Royal
1605	Port Royal, Nova Scotia	French	Attacked and destroyed by English in 1613
1607	Jamestown, Virginia	English	Successful
1608	Quebec City, Quebec	French	Successful
1610	Cupids, Newfoundland	English	Successful
1614	Manhattan (Nieuw Nederlandt), New York	Dutch	Successful
1620	Plymouth, Massachusetts	English	Successful

Meeting of Two Worlds

When the French newcomers arrived at St. Croix Island they encountered the Wapaponiyik First Peoples. This was very much a meeting of two worlds--with each group looking at the other through a unique, and very different, cultural lens. The friendly relations between the First Peoples and the St. Croix Island settlers proved key to the ultimate survival of the colony.

The Wapaponiyik (The People of the Early Dawn)

When the French settlers arrived at St. Croix Island, the area had been inhabited by the First Peoples for thousands of years. Four distinct groups of people lived—and still live—in the region: the Passamaquoddy, Mi'kmaq, Maliseet, and Penobscot. They spoke separate dialects of a common Algonquian language and shared many cultural similarities. They are known collectively as The Wapaponiyik (much the same way English, Irish and Scottish peoples are called British).

St. Croix Island itself, as well as its immediate surroundings, was home to the Passamaquoddy, or people of the Pollock. Sea mammal hunters and fishermen, they lived in small settlements during the winter and large villages in summer. Together they hunted for seals, porpoise, and fish, gathered roots and wild grapes, and made sugar from the maple trees along the shores of Passamaquoddy Bay. Passamaquoddy technology included birch bark homes, canoes, and containers, as well as the snowshoe and toboggan. Education was informal, with children learning the necessary skills by example. Girls and boys were often skilled at maneuvering a canoe by age ten. Passamaquoddy leaders, or *sachems*, were chosen for their hunting skills and relationship with the supernatural powers. A rich storytelling tradition included tales of the hero and transformer, Kuloskap, as well as other mythological characters representing different aspects of human existence. The Passamaquoddy, like other First Peoples, possessed a well-developed spiritual life based on the unity of all natural phenomena.

The French

The France that the St. Croix settlers left behind in the early 17th century was still largely an agrarian nation, although Paris, with a population of 300,000, was the largest city in Europe. The country as a whole had a population of 20 million. It was a feudal society, with stark contrasts between the rich and poor. The French state itself was almost bankrupt, after years of war with Italy, Spain, and England.

Under the leadership of Henri IV, France had recently emerged from a prolonged period of religious warfare and civil strife, as Catholic and Protestant (Huguenot) forces had fought for control. In 1594, Henri had converted to Catholicism to keep the peace and assume the throne. In 1598, the Edict of Nantes had guaranteed religious tolerance for the Huguenots, a fact of some importance to the St. Croix expedition since a number of its participants, including its leader, Sieur de Mons, were Huguenots.

The St. Croix Island Settlement

Putting Together an Expedition

On November 8, 1603, Henry IV of France granted Pierre Dugua, Sieur de Mons, a monopoly for the conduct of the fur trade and the title of lieutenant-governor of the territory between the 40th and 46th parallels known as La Cadie. In return, De Mons was expected to colonize the country and convert the First Peoples to Christianity. The terms of the grant described the region's inhabitants as "men barbarous, atheists, without faith or religion". In reality, the Passamaquoddy and the other First Peoples had a rich and elaborate set of spiritual beliefs that infused every aspect of their lives and their relationships with their environment.

De Mons posted notices in all the ports of France forbidding any trade in the area to which he held his monopoly. He then recruited 120 noblemen, artisans and soldiers, and chartered five ships for the journey. Prominent members of the expedition included the explorer/geographer, Samuel Champlain; the Sieur de Poutrincourt, who had a special interest in farming; and François Pontgravé, who, like Champlain, had been involved with an expedition up the St. Lawrence the year before. De Mons also brought along a surgeon, a miner, a Roman Catholic priest and a Protestant (Huguenot) minister to look after the spiritual needs of the colonists. The group included a sizeable contingent of Huguenots.

Setting Forth

The expedition sailed from Havre de Grâce (now Le Havre), France in March 1604. Arriving at Sable Island on May 1st, they divided-up; three ships headed up the St. Lawrence to trade, Pontgravé sailed for Canso, and De Mons, Champlain, and Poutrincourt explored the coast of Nova Scotia and the Bay of Fundy. Throughout the summer De Mons searched for an appropriate site for a settlement while Champlain carefully mapped the inlets and harbours of the rugged coastline. Many places along the Nova Scotia coast, as well as the coasts of Maine and New Brunswick, still bear the names given to them by Champlain. The protected harbor and fertile lands of the Annapolis Basin caught Champlain's eye, but the expedition moved on in search of other possibilities. Recognizing the potential of the site, the Sieur de Poutrincourt asked De Mons for the rights to eventually create a colony of his own in the area which Champlain named Port Royal.

At the end of June, after exploring the mouth of the St. John River, the group arrived at Passamaquoddy Bay. Here they found an island situated inland near

the confluence of three rivers. Blessed with an abundance of resources, especially herring and bass, and easily defended against possible attack, it seemed a promising site for a settlement. De Mons named the island “Isle Ste. Croix”.

Settling In

The settlers’ first task was to fortify a small islet overlooking the harbor with a barricade and a canon. Champlain writes that *“Each worked so efficiently that in a very short time it was put in a state of defence, though the mosquitoes (which are little flies) gave us great annoyance while at work, and several of our men had their faces so swollen by their bites that they could scarcely see.”*

Following this, the men set to clearing the island and the adjacent mainland. Before long they had created a small hamlet with a storehouse, gardens, oven, hand mill for grinding wheat, and a cluster of dwellings.

With work progressing well, Sieur De Mons sent Champlain off for three weeks to explore southward towards the mouth of the Norumbega River, now known as the Penobscot River in Maine. After passing and naming Mount Desert Island, Champlain sailed up the Norumbega, establishing friendly relations with the area’s First Peoples.

A Devastating Winter

Champlain returned to St. Croix Island around the end of September. Soon the snow began to fall and the early start of an unusually severe winter cut short the settlers’ preparations. Before long the river filled with treacherous ice cakes, making it impossible to cross. Cut off from the mainland, they began to suffer from a shortage of drinking water, firewood, and other hardships. The cider froze and had to be given out by the pound. The settlers were forced to drink Spanish wine and melted snow.

Lacking fresh fruit and vegetables, the men fell prey to scurvy. Champlain’s descriptions of the horrors of this disease are vivid.

“There was engendered in the mouths of those who had it large pieces of superfluous fungus flesh (which caused a great putrifaction); and this increased to such a degree that they could scarcely take anything except in very liquid form. Their teeth barely held in their places, and could be

drawn out with the fingers without causing pain.”

Of the 79 men who had stayed at St. Croix for the winter, 35 died, and 20 more came close to the same fate. The surgeon performed a number of autopsies in order to determine the cause of death. Champlain’s journal describes these in gruesome detail.

Clearly the selection of St. Croix Island for a settlement was a mistake. The exposed site had intensified the impact of the winter weather and made survival in a strange land much more difficult. Looking back on the experience, Champlain wrote: *“It was difficult to know this country without having wintered there; for on arriving in summer everything is very pleasant on account of the woods, the beautiful landscapes, and the fine fishing for the many kinds of fish we found there.”* He then finished with his famous observation: *“There are six months of winter in that country.”*

Another Summer of Sailing: From St. Croix to Cape Cod

Spring came at last in May, and the health of the settlement was restored. On June 15, 1605, Pontgravé arrived with a ship loaded with supplies. His arrival was greeted with great joy and relief.

De Mons had already decided to move the settlement to a new site, and the summer was spent looking for a suitable location. De Mons and Champlain explored the coastline from St. Croix down to Cape Cod. Travelling with them was an Amerindian named Panounias and his wife. With their goodwill and assistance, the expedition enjoyed good relations with the First Peoples along the way. Only when the party arrived in Cape Cod, and they had exceeded the linguistic range of their Amerindian guides, did the expedition run into trouble. At Nauset Bay, they became embroiled in a confrontation, which left one crew member, a baker, dead. Although the incident was quickly smoothed over, De Mons decided that, with supplies running low and not having found a suitable location, it was time to turn towards home.

Moving On—The Shift To Port Royal

Upon their return to St. Croix in early August, De Mons gave the order to move the settlement to Port Royal. Although the task of moving the colony before winter was daunting, the settlers quickly dismantled their buildings, loaded their ships, and set sail for their new home. Once there, they set about clearing the ground and erecting their houses. Again they made a major effort to plant gardens and become agriculturally self-sufficient.

The move to Port Royal went well. The settlers were blessed with a much milder winter than the one before, and although scurvy again proved a

problem, this time the colony lost only five of its residents to the disease. Water and game were readily available, and the local Mi'kmaq came to the settlement to trade fresh meat for French bread.

To boost their spirits during the long winter, the gentlemen of the community instituted "*The Order of Good Cheer*". This became the first social club in North America. Each day a different person was expected to hunt and find food for the entire company. This ensured a steady supply of fresh meat for the group. The Mi'kmaq *sachem*, Membertou, was a frequent guest at the table.

De Mons returned to Europe to seek further support for the venture and in his stead left Pontgravé in charge of the colony. Champlain remained in Acadia to continue his explorations, hoping to sail as far as Florida the following year.

Who Was De Mons?

Pierre Dugua, Sieur De Mons, the leader of the St. Croix expedition, was a nobleman of considerable wealth from the region of Saintonge, France. A noted Huguenot, he fought alongside Henri IV during the Wars of Religion and had remained on good terms with the King even after the King's conversion to Catholicism. With this influence, as well as his reputation as a mariner, he was able to secure the fur trading monopoly for La Cadie (Acadia) that set the stage for the St. Croix settlement attempt. After enduring the terrible winter of 1604, De Mons returned to France in 1605. Eventually, his monopoly was revoked and his colonists were forced to abandon Port Royal in 1607. De Mons never returned to Acadia.

Who Was Champlain?

Samuel Champlain, from Brouage, France, played a major role in the establishment of both Acadia and New France. A talented mapmaker, Champlain explored the St. Lawrence with Pontgravé in 1603. While Champlain had no official role on the De Mons trip to Acadia in 1604, his detailed journals and maps of the coastline south to Cape Cod made a lasting contribution both to North American history and maritime navigation. After his experience in Acadia, Champlain led an expedition to establish a colony at Quebec in 1608. There, as Governor of New France, Champlain's leadership and diplomacy skills enabled him to form a network of alliances with the First Peoples of the St. Lawrence and Great Lakes which secured the safety of the colony and the future of New France. Champlain died at Quebec in 1635. By that time, his many contributions to the colony's development had earned him

the title of the “Father of New France.”

Champlain's Charts and Maps

In 1603, Champlain became the first to map in detail the coasts of Nova Scotia, the Bay of Fundy, and New England. Using a compass and astrolabe, he meticulously mapped out the details of the rivers, harbors, and sweeping bays which make up the area's coastline. In all, Champlain produced three general maps of Acadia and New England, thirteen special charts of important harbors and three associated picture plans. Champlain's skill as a cartographer has become increasingly clear with the passage of time. According to W.F. Ganong, Champlain presented accurate descriptions of the coasts "... based upon genuine surveys made by methods correct in principle, even though necessarily crude in application. His maps are thus the prototypes of our own which surpass his in technique, but not in conception".

The Legacy of St. Croix Island

The establishment of the St. Croix Island settlement marked the beginning of a continuous French presence in North America. Not only is its story the introductory chapter in the history of the Acadian people, it is also of international significance, forming an integral part of the histories of three countries: Canada, France, and the United States. The start of continuous contact with Europeans also marks a turning point in the saga of the First Peoples of the region.

Port Royal

The experience gained at St. Croix Island led to the creation of a much more successful settlement at Port Royal. Nestled in the Annapolis Valley, the settlers were better protected from the elements. Their mainland location made it easy to farm, fish, hunt and gather firewood without having to cross icy waters.

In 1607, the first colonists at Port Royal were forced to leave the colony when De Mons lost his trading monopoly. The venture was revived in 1610, when the Sieur de Poutrincourt returned to the site to establish a fur trading post and farming community. In 1613, the settlement was destroyed by an English raid from Jamestown, however a handful of colonists remained in Acadia. They were still pursuing their new life in the “New World” in 1621, when the British Crown first laid claim to the region.

The Acadian Legacy

The history of Port Royal and Acadia is fraught with conflict, as competing factions struggled for control of the colony and the lucrative fur trade with the First Peoples. Many of the English settlers of New England also viewed the French colony as a threat, and over the years, led repeated raids and attacks on the settlement. Control of the colony changed hands between the British and the French repeatedly.

Despite these repeated disruptions, the people of Acadia thrived. Over the years, they created a prosperous community built around the tremendous agricultural potential of the Annapolis Valley, as well as the wealth of the sea and nearby forests. A unique system of dikes enabled them to reclaim the rich soil from beneath the tidal waters of the Annapolis Basin and Bay of Fundy, By the 1750s, Acadian homes and villages could be found along the shores of the Bay of Fundy and the north shore of New Brunswick. Some Acadians had also settled on Prince Edward Island and Cape Breton.

The Deportation of the Acadian People

In 1755, the British, who had controlled Acadia since 1713, decided to forcibly remove all the French inhabitants of the region to the British colonies to the south because the Acadians refused to swear an unqualified oath of allegiance to the British. Hundreds of families were loaded onto overcrowded vessels and sent far from their homes. Many were deported to New England and subsequently some made way to Louisiana which was still under French control. Others escaped, making their way to Prince Edward Island, Quebec, or France. The deportations continued throughout the Seven Years War (or French and Indian War). Between 1755 and 1763, around 10,000 people were displaced from their homes throughout Atlantic Canada.

The deportation of the Acadians, known as “*Le Grand Dérangement*” remains tremendously controversial even today as historians weigh the real security concerns of the British versus the suffering of the Acadians.

New France

The settlements at St. Croix and Port Royal were key steps in building the colony of New France. In 1608, Champlain established a permanent settlement at Quebec. Over the years, settlers gradually took up the lands of the St. Lawrence Valley. Many were farmers, but others preferred to explore the interior and trade for furs. These men became the famous French “*coureurs des bois*” and “*voyageurs*” who travelled thousands of miles by canoe along the waterways of the vast continent.

French explorers such as Louis Jolliet, Jacques Marquette and the Cavalier de La Salle became the first Europeans to see the Great Lakes and journey down the Mississippi. By 1642, the French had established a fur trading and missionary outpost at Montreal. By 1701, they were at Detroit and Michilimackinac. At its peak, New France extended from the St. Lawrence to the Rocky Mountains in the west, and Louisiana and the Mississippi in the south. In 1763 the French ceded New France to England under the terms of the Treaty of Paris.

The French Presence in North America Today

The French presence in North America continues to this day. Over 16 million people of French-speaking origin live in Canada and the United States. In Canada, the province of Quebec remains predominantly French-speaking. French-speaking communities can also be found in New Brunswick, Ontario, and most other Canadian provinces. In the United States, people of French-speaking origin are concentrated largely in Louisiana, Maine, and the other New England states.

St. Croix Island International Historic Site

St. Croix International Historic Site is located in Calais, Maine, along the international border with New Brunswick. Because of its significance to both the United States and Canada, the site was designated an International Historic Site in 1984. The first site of its kind, it is owned and managed by the United States National Park Service, under a cooperative agreement with Parks Canada.

No access is provided to the island itself because of the dangers of erosion and the fragility of the island's archaeological resources and ecosystem. Visitors are able to enjoy the mainland site, where the colonists built their gardens and a hand mill. They can also visit the Parks Canada exhibit about the St. Croix settlement in nearby St. Andrews, Canada.

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