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The Wendat Confederacy, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, and the European Colonizers

Chapter Outline

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the development of the Wendat and Haudenosaunee confederacies and to demonstrate the lasting influences of Europeans—in particular the French and English—on these confederacies. Montreal had been established as the centre of St Lawrence trade, and the Wendat and French entered into an alliance that would have lasting impacts in the region. Prior to the arrival of the French, the Wendat had been allied with the Innu, Omamiwinini, and Mi'kmaq against the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. Due to their alliance with the Wendat the French became immediate enemies with the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. In addition to a trading relationship, Champlain insisted that the relationship also include one of conversion. He asserted that without missionary involvement, there would be no trade. The influence of the missionaries went far beyond attempts at conversion and, in fact, resulted in the deaths of many Wendat; it is believed the missionaries spread European diseases such as smallpox among the Wendat. This indirect spreading of disease had long-term impacts in that it caused the Wendat to question their own spirituality and spiritual leaders as the Wendat had no explanation why diseases were decimating them but not impacting the Jesuit missionaries among them.

Realizing the importance of access to European trade goods, the Haudenosaunee established trading relationships with both the Dutch and English and for a time played the two European nations off against each other. In the 1640s, the Haudenosaunee—especially the Kaniienkehaka and Onondowaga—began blockades of the St Lawrence, stopping the Wendat and French from moving furs. As the situation intensified, the Haudenosaunee moved from attacking trade convoys to attacking settlements. As a result of these intensified attacks and the devastation from disease, the Wendat dispersed from their territory and joined other nations that accepted them. In 34 short years, the Wendat Confederacy went from the most powerful confederacy in the region to a defeated nation. The inhabitants left its territory and attempted to survive among other nations.

The impact of the dispersal of the Wendat included a change in geographic concentration of the fur trade and a greater influence of the British. This shift in geography was to more northern and westerly areas, and this paved the way for the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) to rise to prominence. The HBC realized that an alliance with the Cree was essential to success of the trade, so they made efforts to cultivate a relationship. The French also saw opportunities in the fur trade in the West, so they made efforts to establish good relationships with the Cree and other groups in the West. As a result, the various Indigenous nations became very good at taking advantage of European interest in alliance and friendship.

Learning Objectives

- To understand how the Wendat Confederacy went from the most powerful confederacy on the St Lawrence to a defeated nation in the span of a single generation
- To determine the results of the fall of the Wendat Confederacy on the St Lawrence and the inland fur trades
- To gain an overview of how the Haudenosaunee and Onondowaga succeeded in scattering the Wendat
- To recognize the implications of the French pushing beyond the *pays d'en haut*
- To understand the different perspectives on sovereignty between the French and the First Peoples

Key Terms, Figures or Sites

Brébeuf, Jean de (1593–1649) Jesuit missionary to the Wendat who was captured and killed by Haudenosaunee warriors during the Haudenosaunee attack on the Wendat villages in 1649 (p. 88).

Council of Three Fires (Niswi-mishkodewin) Confederacy for joint defence against the Haudenosaunee. It was made up of the Boodwaadmii (Fire Keepers), the Odaawa (Trader Nation), and the Ojibwa (Faith Keepers) (p. 90).

coureurs de bois Europeans who assimilated to First Nations culture and who were particularly active in the fur trade (p. 93).

Haudenosaunee Confederacy (formerly the Five Nations League) Founded in the sixteenth century, or before, in the present-day Finger Lakes region of northern New York. They were, from east to west, the Kanienkehaka, Ony'ota, Onondaga, Guyohkohnyo, and Onondowaga. The league later became known as the Six Nations around 1720 when the Tuscaroras migrated north to join (p. 86).

Hearne, Samuel (1745–92) HBC fur trader and explorer who, with his Indigenous guide Matonabee, reached the Coppermine River (present-day NWT) in 1772 and later rebuilt Fort Churchill. Hearne's adoption of Indigenous methods of travel allowed him to become the first European man to reach the Arctic Ocean overland (p. 97).

homeguards Bands of Indigenous people who settled near French or English trading posts (p. 95).

Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) Company that received its charter from Great Britain in 1670 to trade for furs, explore, and settle Rupert's Land, which consisted of the Hudson Bay drainage basin, all of Manitoba, most of Saskatchewan, southern Alberta, and extended north to the Arctic (p. 94).

Jesuits Members of the Society of Jesus, a Roman Catholic order of priests. They were principal actors in the missionary activity in New France (p. 82).

Kondiaronk (c. 1649-1701) Chief of the Tionnontate Nation. Most famous for using all of his skills in warfare to prevent any peace between the French colonizers and the Haudenosaunee Confedera-

cy. Was one of the first practitioners of the diplomatic ploy of playing the French against the British (p. 82).

Matonabee (c. 1737–92) Denésoliné leader who worked for HBC and guided Samuel Hearne on his third excursion in search of the Coppermine River (1772). Matonabee ensured the success of this expedition by using the Indigenous manner of travel, which involved trekking in a family group and provisioning along the way (p. 97).

pays d'en haut (“Upper Country”) The region of the three Upper Great Lakes (p. 98).

Tessouat Kitchespirini of Allumette Island, initially resisted the missionary efforts of the Jesuits but was later baptized; one of at least three ogimaak named Tessouat, he controlled travel along the Ottawa River. An earlier Tessouat (Besouat; fl. 1603–13) met Champlain. A third Tessouat, also known as Le Borgne de l’Isle because he was blind in one eye, died in 1636 (p. 83).

Thanadelthur (d. 1717) A Denésoliné woman, referred to as the Slave Woman in the HBC records, who was enslaved by Cree in 1713 but escaped and travelled overland to Fort York. She was instrumental in negotiating peace between the Denésoliné and the Cree (p. 97).

Wendake Territory in present-day south-central Ontario extending eastward from Georgian Bay that was controlled (at the time of early European contact) by a confederacy of Iroquoian-speaking communities whom the French called Huron, but who called themselves Wendat. Known as Huronia in Euro-Canadian historiography (p. 79).

Study Questions

1. Name three possible reasons behind the Wendat and Omamiwinini interest in meeting the French.
2. Who were “the People of the Rock”?
3. Who were “the People of the Bear”?
4. What were the main elements that resulted in the downfall of the Wendat Confederacy?
5. Why did the Council of Three Fires refuse to join the Wendat against the Five Nations League?
6. When the Haudenosaunee temporarily made peace with the Wendat Confederacy in 1624, what was their motive and what was the outcome?
7. How was the fur trade affected by the fall of Wendake?
8. What were the immediate impacts of the Hudson’s Bay Company on the Cree?
9. What roles did the coureurs de bois and the homeguards play in the fur trade?

10. What roles did women play in the fur trade?
11. What strategies did Indigenous Peoples use to play off the English and the French in the fur trade?
12. What was the *pays d'en haut*?

Essay Questions

1. Discuss the attempts to convert Indigenous Peoples to Christianity. How successful were these attempts and what were some of the complicating factors in this process (for both the Jesuits, or missionaries and the Indigenous Peoples involved)?

There was significant resistance to conversion as some Indigenous Peoples did not trust in the motives of the missionaries and were not convinced of the existence of hell (p. 82). In 1648, only 15% of Wendat Confederacy were Christian. The sincerity of converts was questionable with motives possibly being connected to preferential treatment in fur trade; commercial incentives were especially beneficial (p. 83). Of particular importance to consider, is the role of regional security concerns for the Wendat. The French were willing to trade firearms with converts only, and the Wendat were concerned about the number of muskets ending up in hands of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy from the Dutch and English (p. 83).

In spite of high hopes of evangelizing the Indigenous Peoples quickly, it took nine years for Jesuit Jean de Brébeuf to learn the Wendat language; also, trade interests did not always match missionary goals (p. 88). Ultimately, missionaries never completed the evangelization of the Wendat; a few nuns were produced but not a single priest among the men (p. 89).

A source of difficulty arose with conflicting values between Indigenous worldview and Christian principles; Indigenous Peoples did not believe in a dominant position for human beings (p. 89). Further, Indigenous Peoples recognized contradictions between spiritual teachings and actions of French traders (p. 90).

When disease struck, the missionaries also became suspect as they seemed unaffected, thereby creating tensions (p. 90). Later, at Hudson's Bay Company post, when formal education was implemented, the inclusion of Christian religion in the curriculum can be seen as an ominous predecessor of the residential school system (p. 98).

2. Briefly explain how the French and the Indigenous Peoples viewed the question of sovereignty and their position with regards to French Law.

The French were not clearly decided as to whether the Indigenous Peoples should be seen as allies or subjects of the French monarchy. Eventually, the French determined that the Indigenous Peoples should be seen as subjects and abide by French laws that were imposed. The Indigenous Peoples, who saw themselves as free and sovereign, did not accept this easily. They particularly did not appreciate being imprisoned for breaking laws they did not even know existed. If they

had been approached with the proposition of abiding by French laws, they would not have accepted them (p. 84).

3. Briefly explain what role the Haudenosaunee and Onondowaga played in dispersing the Wendat.

In 1642, two members of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, the Kanienkehaka (who the French and English called Mohawk) and the Onondowaga, (who were referred to as Seneca), began river blockades to prevent the trade brigades that used the St Lawrence, Ottawa, and Richelieu rivers. A peace agreement between the French and the Kanienkehaka was short-lived, with the benefit of a few brigades getting through. In 1648, when the Wendat rallied again and sent down 60 canoes, they returned to find three of their villages burned. In conjunction with the attacks by the Haudenosaunee, the French were also fortifying their position. These challenges eventually led the Wendat to give up and in 1649 they burned their 15 remaining villages and dispersed (pp. 91-93).

4. Explain the difference in understanding of early treaties and trade alliances between the English and the Cree.

The Cree presumed that the English were paying them “rent” as symbolized by ceremonial gift giving. The concept of owning land was foreign and the First Nations believed they still had access to the forts. The English believed they were acquiring property and had complete control. The Cree homeguard also hunted on behalf of the English; this relationship was also upheld via feasts and gifts. However, relations were uneasy. As resources became depleted, agreements sometimes turned to violence (p. 95).

Additional Resources

Further Readings

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Websites

John Douglas Belshaw – Canadian History: Pre-Confederation, “4.4 Wendake/Huronian and the Fur Trade”

- <https://opentextbc.ca/preconfederation/chapter/4-4-wendakehuronian-and-the-fur-trade/>

John Douglas Belshaw – Canadian History: Pre-Confederation, “5.7 The Five Nations: War, Population and Diplomacy”

- <https://opentextbc.ca/preconfederation/chapter/5-7-the-five-nations-war-population-and-diplomacy/>

Virtual Museum of Canada - Time Periods: The Native Peoples and Champlain: Fur Trade

- <https://www.historymuseum.ca/virtual-museum-of-new-france/economic-activities/fur-trade/>