



WELCOME TO NEW FRANCE

RELIGION IN NEW FRANCE

BY RACQUEL FORAN

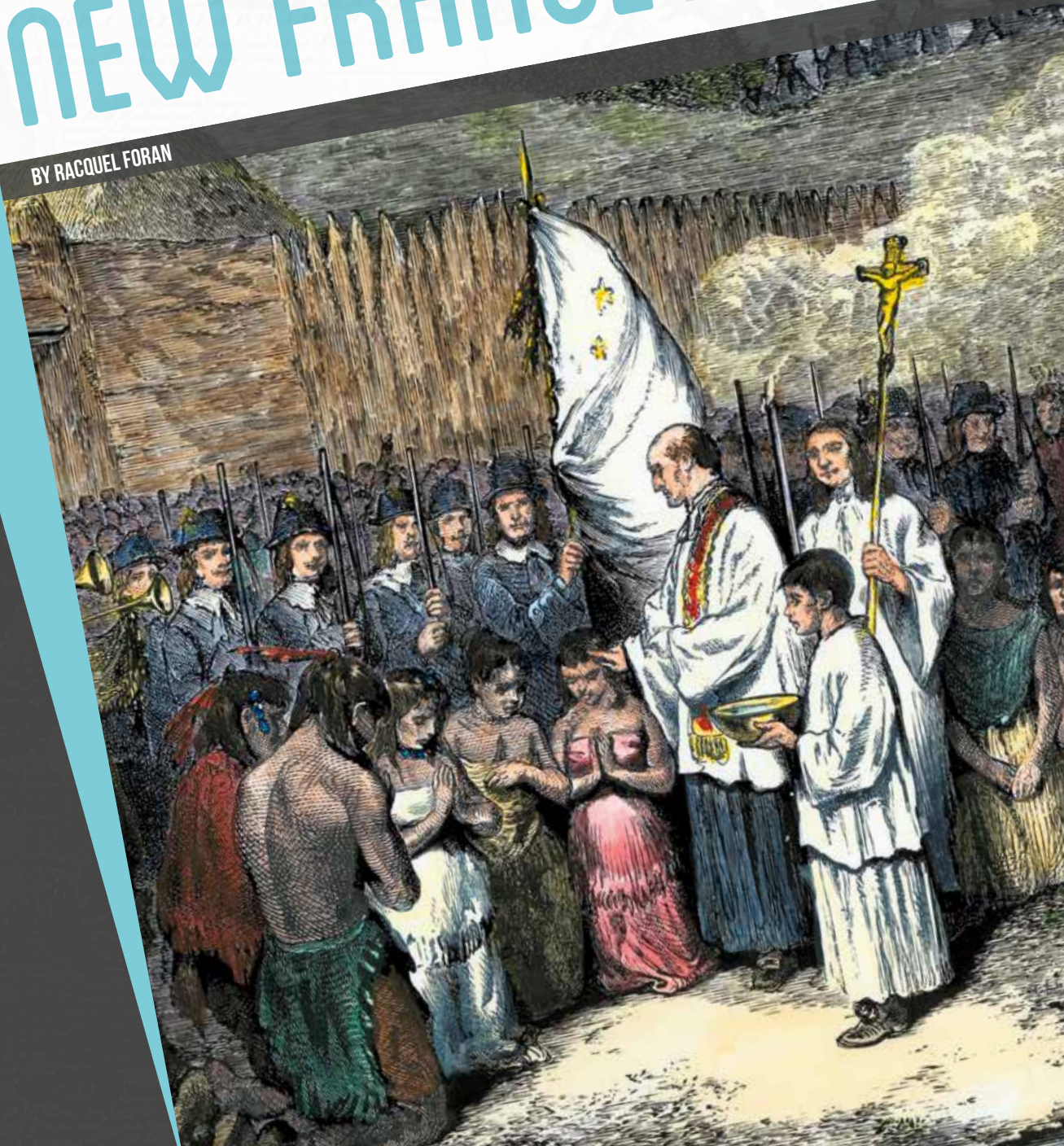


TABLE OF CONTENTS

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CHAPTER ONE

A New World

4

CHAPTER TWO

Aboriginal Spiritual Beliefs

10

CHAPTER THREE

Educating Colonists and First Nations

16

CHAPTER FOUR

Health Care and Hospitals

22

CHAPTER FIVE

Religion and Government

26

Glossary

30

To Learn More

31

Index

32

About the Author

32

A NEW WORLD

On April 20, 1534, French explorer Jacques Cartier set sail to North America. He and his crew landed in modern-day Newfoundland. They explored along the coast, coming to the Gaspé Peninsula on the south shore of the St. Lawrence River. There, Cartier planted a 9-metre-high cross. Symbolically, the cross claimed the land for King Francis I of France. The cross represented France's religion: Roman Catholicism. It would take approximately 80 years for **missionaries** to land in New France. But Cartier's large cross was a preview of the impact Catholicism would have on the new colony.

This granite cross was erected in 1934 to commemorate Cartier's 1534 landing.

Aboriginal Communities

Cartier was not the first person to explore North America.

Aboriginal Peoples had been living there for nearly 12,000 years. Approximately 500,000 people lived in the area of modern-day Canada when Cartier arrived. Each First Nations community had its own complex system of spiritual beliefs. Communities passed down stories that explained the creation of the world, their people, and their rituals. Each group had its own sacred medicines, such as tobacco, sage, and cedar. Each community held its own feasts, festivals, and ceremonies that included dancing, drumming, story-telling, and singing. These traditions were part of each community's way of life.

France's First Missionaries

French explorers soon found that it paid to cooperate with the Aboriginal communities they encountered. Trading beaver pelts with the Montagnais, Algonquin, and Huron-Wendat communities became a profitable business. But friendly contact with First Nations groups

did not result in Europeans respecting Aboriginal spiritual beliefs. The French thought Aboriginal people were "savages" who needed to be saved.

In 1615, French explorer Samuel de Champlain brought four Catholic Récollet **friars** to North America.

The Récollets were a branch of the Franciscan group of friars. The King of France ordered the missionaries to convert Aboriginal people to Catholicism. The four Récollet friars travelled across North America. They visited Tadoussac, an Aboriginal trading post at the junction of the Saguenay and St. Lawrence Rivers.

THE TRUCHEMENTS

Communication was one of the largest hurdles missionaries had to overcome. They did not speak the languages of Aboriginal communities. Most First Nations people did not speak French. Poor, young, adventurous men from France were the solution. Called *truchements*, or "helpers," the men lived in Aboriginal communities. They learned the community's language and customs. In return, the missionaries supported and educated the truchements.

They started missions in the Montagnais and Abenaki communities as they trekked west to the Great Lakes.

Jesuit and Ursuline Missionaries

The first Jesuit missionaries arrived in Quebec in 1625. One of them, Jean de Brébeuf, spent many years living among the Huron-Wendat. He learned about their culture and language. He also built many missions. But he had little success converting Aboriginal communities.

Jesuit missionaries sent reports back to the leader of the Catholic Church in France. The Church used the reports to raise money. The reports also encouraged more missionaries to go to Canada. Inspired by these reports, several Ursuline nuns left for New France in 1639. They had royal orders to “civilize” young Aboriginal women.

Life in New France was difficult. But the Ursuline nuns were determined. They built **convents** to operate as schools, hospitals, and their homes. Their first residents were Aboriginal girls. But these young women already had their own spiritual beliefs. Converting them



proved difficult. The nuns also took in colonists' daughters. Another group of nuns, the Hospitalières, arrived in New France in 1639. They opened a hospital in Quebec.



ABORIGINAL SPIRITUAL BELIEFS

Each Aboriginal community had its own spiritual beliefs. But many groups had a few core principles in common. They lived in harmony with the natural world. Their food, shelter, tools, and clothes all came from their natural environment. These things were gifts from the Creator. They respected and honoured water, rain, trees, and animals because they depended on them for survival. When an animal was killed for food, it was given thanks. The animal's remains were treated with respect.

A member of the Mohawk nation dances at a powwow in Quebec in 2015.

Aboriginal spiritual life included storytelling, rituals, and ceremonies. **Elders** told stories and legends to the younger generations. Through these stories, young people learned about their world and how they fit into it. Many of the rituals included ceremonies with drums, chanting, and dancing. Communities had war, rain, and harvest dances. They held ceremonies to celebrate births and rituals to mark the passing of life.

Many communities had faith traditions that included spirits. Some believed every object in nature had a spirit.

Some lived in the sky, while others lived in the water, the forest, or another natural feature. In many communities, adolescents went on vision quests. These retreats lasted one or more days. The young person would

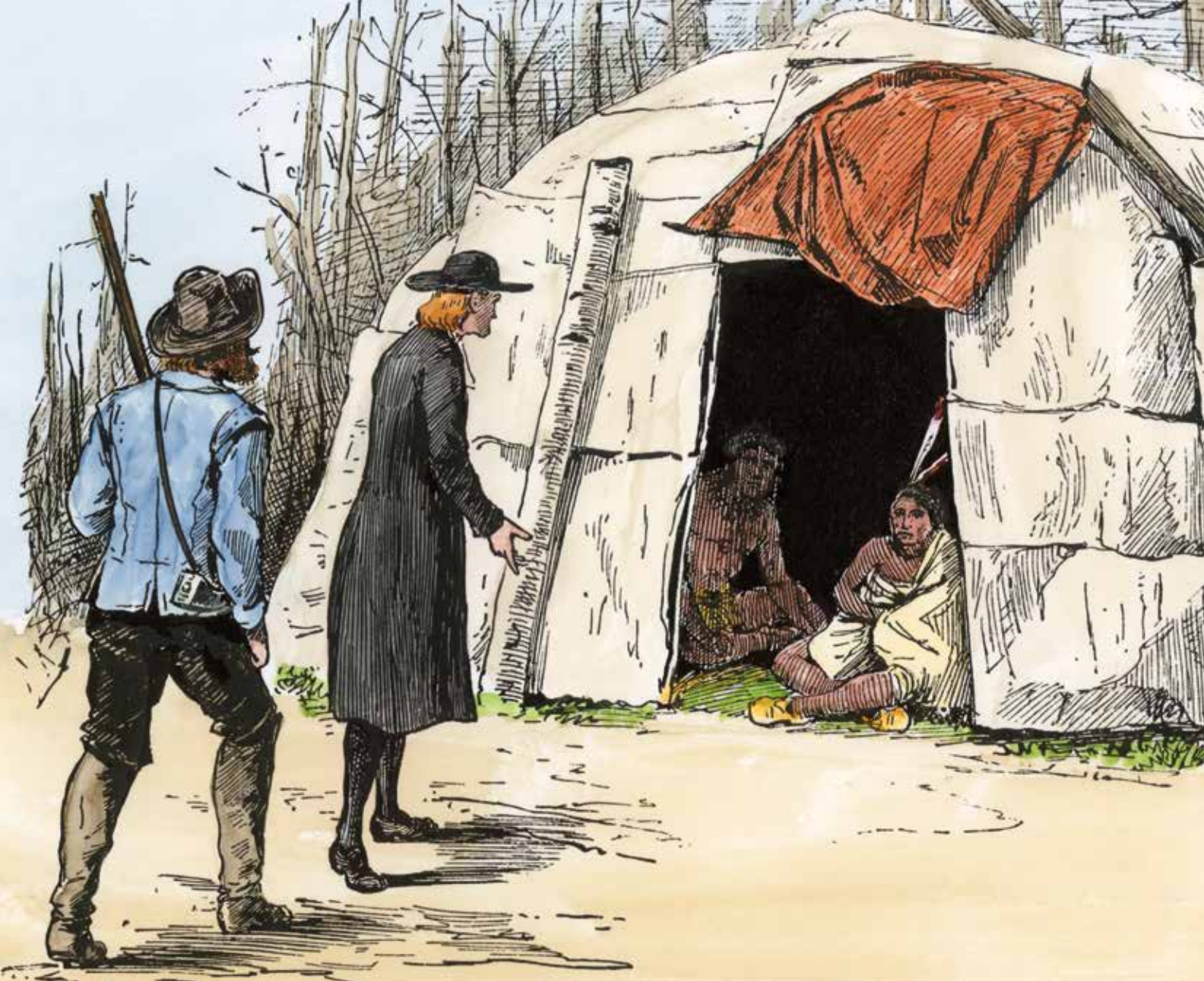
SHAMANS

Shamans were the spiritual leaders of Aboriginal communities. They were prophets, healers, and storytellers. They passed traditions down to younger generations. They also planned and led most of the community ceremonies.



Present-day elders participate in Aboriginal community ceremonies.

receive a vision from a guiding spirit. At the end of the quest, the community's **shaman** interpreted the vision. The vision and its interpretation held meaning throughout the young person's life.



Most Aboriginal Peoples resisted converting to Catholicism.

Misunderstanding of the Missionaries

Before Europeans arrived in North America, Aboriginal people had never heard of a Christian god. And the

missionaries did not understand Aboriginal beliefs, rituals, and ceremonies. They thought Aboriginal shamans were witches or magicians who worshipped demons. They believed Aboriginal people needed to be converted to the Catholic religion. They thought First Nations groups were uncivilized. The missionaries hoped that after learning Catholic and French customs, First Nations would abandon their own beliefs and customs.

Aboriginal people did not trust missionaries. They called them “black robes.” The missionaries believed in discipline and obedience to the Church and its rules. Aboriginal communities preferred to listen to the wisdom of their chiefs, elders, and shamans. As much as the missionaries tried to convert Aboriginal people, they had little success.

FRAMING QUESTIONS

What were the goals of the Catholic Church in New France?
What negative impacts did residential schools have on the Aboriginal population?





EDUCATING COLONISTS AND FIRST NATIONS

The primary goal of missionaries in New France was to convert Aboriginal people to Catholicism. But over time, they provided many services to their fellow French colonists. Some religious groups ran hospitals. Others ran schools for colonists and Aboriginal children.

Educating Colonists

In 1635 the Jesuits opened the Collège des Jésuites in Quebec. At first, the Jesuits tried unsuccessfully to convert

A historical street leads past the Ursuline Monastery, *left*, in Quebec.

Huron-Wendat children to Catholicism. Over time, they focused instead on the education of French children. They taught the Catholic religion and arithmetic to elementary-school-age students. They also taught reading

and writing in French and Latin. Most students were boys planning to enter the priesthood.

Ursuline nuns educated young girls. Like the Jesuits, they first focused on converting Aboriginal children. In 1642 the Ursuline nuns opened their first convent. Their first students were all

Aboriginal girls. The nuns

found it easier to teach in the girls' native languages. In time the nuns could speak Huron-Wendat, Algonquin,

MARGUERITE BOURGEOYS

Nun Marguerite Bourgeoys arrived in Canada in 1653. She started her first convent in a stable in 1658. Later, she established the Ouvroir de la Providence. There, young women learned household and child-raising skills. She also established the Mission de la Montagne. The mission taught Aboriginal young women the Catholic religion, sewing, knitting, and embroidery.



Marguerite Bourgeoys established schools for colonial and Aboriginal young women.

and Iroquois. But their students often chose to forget what they learned about Catholicism or the French language soon after they left the convent.

Facing Resistance

Aboriginal communities were wary of missionary schools. The education was provided for free. But parents and elders did not trust the missionaries. Aboriginal children lived at the missionary schools. Their teachers gave them French names. They dressed them in European-style clothes. They used harsh discipline to convert their students. Some students became depressed and returned to their parents. Others got sick and died from European diseases they could not fight. Sometimes, missionaries succeeded in converting an Aboriginal student. But this often caused conflict within the student's family when he or she returned home.

Aboriginal communities resisted European efforts to convert them. But the Europeans never stopped trying. The practice of trying to convert Aboriginal Peoples lasted well past the end of New France in 1760. The last residential school closed in 1996. Missionaries, and later the Canadian government, forced their



Nuns, a priest, and their students pose for a photograph at the St. Anthony's Indian Residential School in Saskatchewan.

educational system on Aboriginal children. This was usually done against the wishes of the parents, and it was rarely successful.



HEALTH CARE AND HOSPITALS

Nuns and priests ministered to the sick, wounded, suffering, and poor. Groups of missionaries founded and ran hospitals in New France. The Hôtel-Dieu de Québec was the first to open in 1639. In 1645 the Hôtel-Dieu de Montréal opened its doors. It tended to poor colonists, wounded soldiers and sailors, and Aboriginal patients. In 1697 Ursuline nuns formed a convent in Trois-Rivières. It was a hospital and boarding school.

New France apothecaries distributed medicines similar to these modern examples.

Health and the Catholic Church

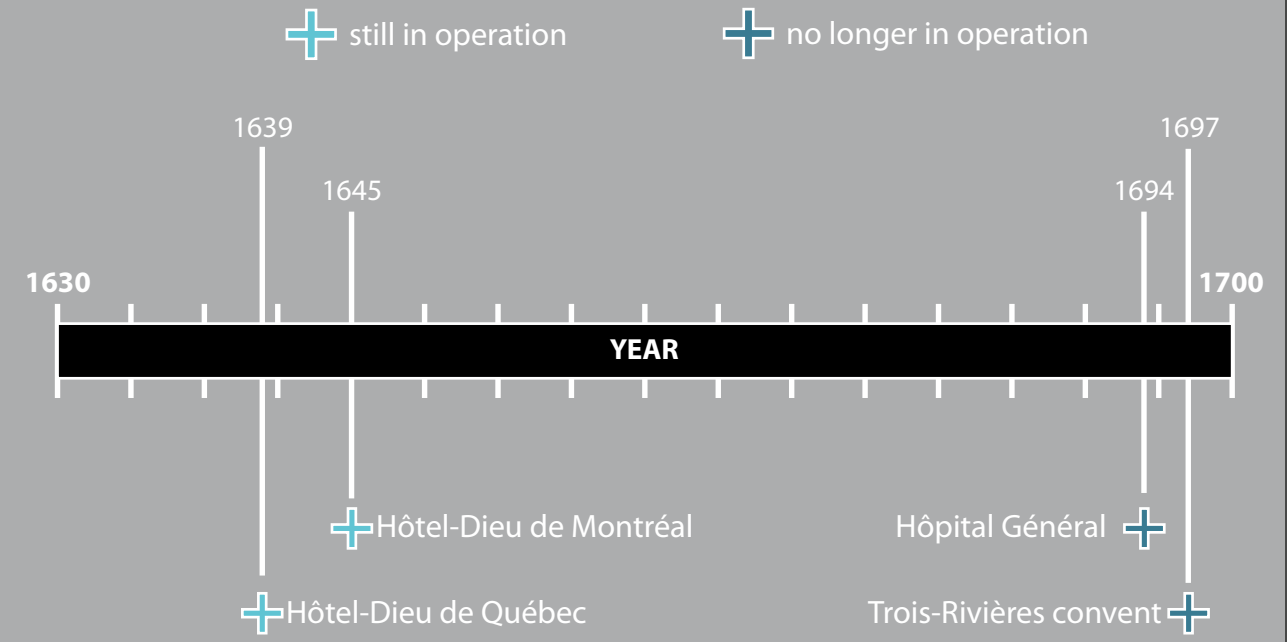
In the 1600s, Catholicism taught that sickness was a warning from God. It was a punishment for sins. Priests

and nuns preached patience. They encouraged prayer and penitence as a way to healing.

The nuns who ran the hospitals believed God had a role in illness and healing. But the hospitals still had medical staff to work with patients. Doctors, surgeons, and **apothecaries** tended the sick. Doctors diagnosed the illness and determined the course of treatment. Surgeons took care of

HÔPITAL GÉNÉRAL

The Hôpital Général opened in Montreal in 1694. A charitable group called the Frères Charron founded and ran it. But the Frères Charron did a poor job of managing the hospital. In 1747 a group of nuns took over the Hôpital Général. Called the Grey Nuns, they cared for more than just the sick. They also took in orphans, elderly and poor colonists, and those with disabilities and mental health problems. The hospital was the first to offer specialized treatment for groups such as these.



wounds and other injuries. Apothecaries mixed and distributed medicines. Nuns served as nurses and often as apothecaries.

RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL EFFECTS

Disease—Mental Trauma—Cultural Assimilation



RELIGION AND GOVERNMENT

In France in the 1600s, the government and the Catholic Church were closely connected. The French believed the king of France was given his authority by God. This meant the king's orders also came from God. The king of France held power over all of New France. King Louis XIII wanted the colony to be Catholic. In 1627 his chief advisor, Cardinal de Richelieu, banned non-Catholics from moving to New France.

Keeping Order

It was difficult for the king to rule New France from across the Atlantic Ocean. So Richelieu formed the

The Catholic Church was a powerful and prominent force in New France.

CHURCH AND TAX

The Church had limited funds to operate their schools, hospitals, and missions. It collected money through **tithes**. A tithe is money **parishioners** pay to the Church. Parishioners were expected to give 1/13 of their land's earnings. Many parishioners could not afford such a high tithe. They negotiated a new one. They would only pay 1/26 of their grain earnings. This was the first form of taxing the public for social services, such as education and health care.

Compagnie des

Cent-Associés in 1627.

Under the colonial governor's supervision, the Compagnie controlled the land and fur trade. In exchange, the Compagnie settled Catholics in New France and attempted to convert Aboriginal people.

The Church helped run New France society. Priests read royal orders and performed legal and government services. They

registered births and deaths and drew up marriage and business contracts. They relayed government messages and acted as government officials.

Changing Colony

The Compagnie des Cent-Associés was not able to grow the colony quickly. In 1663 the king revoked the rights of the Compagnie. He declared New France a royal colony. This meant the king was now directly responsible for governing New France.

The same year, the Sovereign Council of New France was founded. It acted on behalf of the king. The council oversaw public security and order. It managed colony supplies, services, and finances. The council had up to 12 people on it. The governor, **intendant**, and Church bishop filled three of the most important positions. The Church was very influential. Through the bishop's seat on the council, the Church's opinion was considered when making any decisions about the colony. Its chair on the council reflected the influence the Catholic Church had cultivated in New France.

GLOSSARY

ABORIGINAL

relating to the first people to live in an area

APOTHECARIES

people who prepared medicines

CONVENTS

buildings occupied by a community of religious people, often nuns

ELDERS

people whose age and experience are worthy of respect and honour

FRIARS

members of a Roman Catholic order

INTENDENT

A high-ranking official in a French colony

MISSIONARIES

people sent to a foreign country to promote Christianity

PARISHIONERS

members of a church

SHAMAN

someone believed to be able to use magic to cure the sick, see into the future, or control events

TITHES

payments that support the Church or priesthood

TO LEARN MORE

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- Aboriginal spiritual beliefs, 6, 7, 8, 11–15
- Bourgeois, Marguerite, 18, 19
- Brébeuf, Jean de, 8
- Cardinal de Richelieu, 27
- Cartier, Jacques, 5, 6
- Catholicism, 5, 7, 8, 14, 15, 17, 18, 19, 24, 27, 28, 29
- Champlain, Samuel de, 7
- Compagnie des Cent-Associés, 27–28, 29
- government, 20, 27–29
- health care, 9, 23–25, 28
- Hospitalières, 9
- Huron-Wendat, 7, 8, 18
- missionaries, 5, 6, 7, 8–9, 14–15, 17, 18, 20, 23
- Montagnais, 6, 8
- Récollet friars, 7
- residential schools, 20–21, 25
- schools, 8, 17, 18, 19, 20–21, 23, 25, 28
- shamans, 12, 13
- St. Lawrence River, 5, 7
- Ursuline nuns, 8, 17, 18, 23

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Racquel Foran is a freelance writer who lives in British Columbia. She has written a number of juvenile reference books on topics as varied as developing nations' debt, North Korea, and organ transplants. Foran publishes a dance magazine for young readers. She is dedicated to fostering a love of reading and learning in children.