

INTRODUCTION

The 2000 United States census counted more than 8 million Americans who claim French ancestry. Franco-Americans, the fifth largest ethnic group in the United States, trace their history in North America back more than 400 years. They came as explorers, missionaries, settlers, soldiers, religious refugees, exiles, and immigrants.

Discovery, Exploration and Settlement

In 1524 François I of France, seeking to increase his revenues, began the search for a route to the Orient. Following the example of Queen Isabella of Spain, he commissioned an Italian navigator, Giovanni da Verrazano, to sail the coast of North America from the Carolinas to the Canadian Maritimes on behalf of the French crown. In his explorations, Verrazano is believed to have sailed up the Hudson River, a feat which preceded Henry Hudson's exploration by 85 years. Although Verrazano found no riches, similar efforts by the French continued, and Jacques Cartier was sent to explore the northern portion of North America; he discovered the St. Lawrence River in 1534.

Samuel de Champlain arrived in North America in 1604 and started a settlement in Acadia. His explorations took him as far as Lake Champlain and into New York State. He is thought to have been the first European to describe Niagara Falls. In 1608 Champlain founded the city of Québec. While France was still looking for a route to the Indies, it discovered another source of riches—beaver pelts, for which there was a great demand in Europe. To support the hunters and trappers, some 10,000 French settlers arrived in New France.

Religion and Emigration

The 16th and 17th centuries in France were a time of great religious turmoil. During the Reformation, John Calvin converted many fellow Frenchmen to Protestantism. These Huguenots, as they were called, were feared by the Catholic majority in France; this fear led to conflict and war. Many Huguenots fled to England, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and Germany. They belonged to the new middle class: many were skilled craftsmen, especially in the growing textile trade. Although they were welcomed wherever they went, some Huguenots sought greater religious freedom and left for America. The Dutch settlers of Fort Orange (now Albany) in 1624 were mostly French-speaking Walloons from Hainaut who had fled persecution. They were also among the first to settle the Hudson River Valley and Manhattan Island between 1620 and 1626. The passing of the Edict of Nantes in 1598 granted the Huguenots religious and political freedom, but it was repealed in 1685 by Louis XIV; once again the Huguenots were persecuted and fled France. Many came directly to America while others fled to England and other European nations.

France's religious fervor had other effects in North America. The ardor of those seeking a route to the Indies and the pelts of beavers was often exceeded by the zeal of priests, nuns, and laymen. They came not only to support the faith of the settlers, but to convert American Indians to Roman Catholicism. Fathers Jogues, Hennepin, and Marquette are the best known of the countless priest-explorers who came to North America from France. Father Jogues was the first European to see Lake George, which he named Lac du Saint Sacrement. He was tortured to death by the Indians in 1644 and was canonized by the Roman Catholic Church in 1930.

The End of France's North American Empire

The period from 1689 to 1763 is marked by a series of wars. King William's War, Queen Anne's War, and King George's War originated in Europe and spread to North America where they caused conflict between the British and the French. The final war of the period, the French and Indian War (a name often given to all four wars) ended French rule in Canada with the taking of Québec City in 1759 and Montréal in 1760 by the British.

Maintaining control of North America was a difficult task for the British, and the presence of so many British troops caused unrest in the American colonies leading to the American Revolution in 1775. Large

numbers of people from Canada and France were sympathetic to the colonists' cause. While Québec could not enter the war, many of her young men joined fighting forces such as the Green Mountain Boys. An entire battalion of French Canadians fought alongside the colonists in the Continental Army. In recognition of their contributions they were given land grants, enabling them to settle in the United States after the war. From France came the Count de Rochambeau, Count de Grasse, and the Marquis de Lafayette, a young and wealthy nobleman who used his personal fortune help the Americans in their struggle. This aid was an important factor in the success of the Revolution.

By the end of the 18th century, the circumstances in France which brought about the French Revolution produced a new wave of French immigrants to the United States, many of whom settled in New York State.

French Canadians Emigrate

French Canadians were growing restive under the oppression of their British conquerors. In 1837, under the leadership of Louis-Joseph Papineau, they revolted. A band of 2,000, armed only with clubs, pitchforks, and wooden guns, was quickly subdued by 8,000 well-armed British soldiers. Many of those who escaped resettled in upper New York State and northern New England. The dissatisfaction and unrest which provoked the revolt continued and was ultimately one of the causes of the mass migration from Québec to the United States in the latter half of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century.

Large textile mills, developed in England during the Industrial Revolution, were now being reproduced in America. Needing industrious workers, mill owners recruited in Québec. Between 1840 and 1850, 30,000 French Canadians moved south. This migration increased to the point that, each year between 1866 and 1875 50,000 people left Québec. Although the rate of emigration from French Canada decreased, it continued strong well into the middle of the 20th century.

Today there are nearly 630,000 people of French ancestry in New York; they are the state's eighth largest non-English-speaking ethnic group. With such a large population in New York, it is the aim of this guide to examine the contribution made by the French to the shaping of the state.

In this guide, New York is divided into seven geographic regions as follows: Capital District, Lower Hudson Valley, Metropolitan, North Country, Thousand Islands, Central, and Western.