



INDIGENOUS PEOPLES AND EUROPEAN CONTACT IN CANADA - A TIMELINE

PORTAL RESOURCES

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 IndigenousWorks

Before European arrival, Indigenous societies flourished across what is now Canada. From the Haida on the West Coast to the Mi'kmaq in the East, these nations had established complex cultures, trade networks, and governance structures. Estimates suggest that the pre-contact Indigenous population ranged from 500,000 to over 2 million. However, the exact numbers remain a subject of ongoing research and debate.

Arrival of Norse Vikings:

1000 AD: Norse Vikings, led by Leif Erikson, arrive at L'Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland, encountering the Beothuk people.

Atlantic Coast Encounters:

1497: Mi'kmaq and Beothuk peoples likely have first contacts with European explorer John Cabot.

1534: St. Lawrence Iroquoian and other First Nations meet Jacques Cartier as he enters the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

The Devastating Impact of Disease:

With the arrival of Europeans came diseases like smallpox, measles, and influenza, to which Indigenous populations had no immunity. It's estimated that, post-contact, disease wiped out up to 90% of certain Indigenous populations in the subsequent decades and centuries, resulting in a drastic decrease in their numbers.

Fur Trade and Alliances:

1604: Mi'kmaq nations establish relations with French settlers, led by Samuel de Champlain, on Saint Croix Island.

1639: Wendat (Huron) communities collaborate with Jesuit missionaries, resulting in the establishment of Sainte-Marie among the Hurons.

West Coast Interactions:

1774: Haida peoples encounter Spanish explorer Juan Pérez on Haida Gwaii.

1778: Nuu-chah-nulth nations interact with Captain James Cook upon his landing at Nootka Sound.

Arctic Encounters:

1576-1578: Inuit communities in the Arctic come into contact with Martin Frobisher's expeditions.

1610: Cree and other northern First Nations likely interact with Henry Hudson as he explores Hudson Bay.

Expansion and Territory Recognition:

1670: Swampy Cree and other First Nations engage with the newly established Hudson's Bay Company.

1755-1763: During the Acadian Expulsion, Mi'kmaq and Wolastoqiyik (Maliseet) peoples face disruptions due to British colonial actions.

Encounters in the Prairies:

1821: Plains First Nations like the Assiniboine and Cree witness the merger of fur trading giants: the Hudson's Bay Company and the North West Company.

From Trade to Treaties: The Shift in Indigenous-European Relations

In the 1600s, the fur trade emerged as a central economic enterprise in Canada, deeply involving Indigenous Peoples as indispensable guides, traders, and strategic allies in the burgeoning economy. This era was characterized by significant collaboration and interdependence between Indigenous communities and European settlers. The issuance of the Royal Proclamation in 1763 marked a critical juncture, recognizing Indigenous land rights and establishing a framework for treaty-making, which aimed to formalize relations and land agreements between Indigenous Peoples and the Crown. Throughout the late 18th to 19th centuries, a series of treaties

were negotiated and signed. These treaties often came with substantial misunderstandings and disparities in expectations, highlighting the complexities and challenges of these early agreements. The late 19th to early 20th centuries saw a shift towards policies aimed at the assimilation of Indigenous Peoples, notably through the establishment of residential schools. These schools were part of a broader policy framework under the Indian Act, introduced in 1876, which aimed to assimilate Indigenous Peoples into Canadian society while erasing Indigenous cultures and identities. The Indian Act has since been a cornerstone of Canada's Indigenous policy, affecting nearly every aspect of Indigenous life and rights, and remains a controversial part of Canada's legislative history.

Indigenous Resilience

The enduring presence, resilience, and cultures of First Nations peoples, Métis, and Inuit are integral to the fabric of the land now known as Canada. From pre-contact societies to interactions with European explorers and settlers, Indigenous communities have navigated challenges while upholding their traditions, values, and sovereignty. Recognizing the devastating impacts of European diseases on Indigenous populations, this timeline underscores the role of Indigenous communities in shaping Canada's history and emphasizes the importance of viewing this history from an Indigenous-centered perspective.

For Further Exploration:

- [Indigenous Peoples Atlas of Canada](#)
- [Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada](#)
- [The Canadian Encyclopedia: Indigenous Peoples](#)

Next Steps:

Consider reading further tipsheets in the Indigenous History series on [Indigenous Works' Resource Portal](#).