
ON THE RIM OF EMPIRE



O N A drizzly morning in September 1759, two small armies—one in British red, the other in French white—met in a cow pasture before the high walls of Quebec, Canada. This battle on the edge of the North American wilderness lasted only fifteen minutes, but it signaled the end of nearly three-quarters of a century of war and changed forever the future of our continent.

No one can say for sure when the struggle for North America began. Great Britain built its first lasting settlement in North America at Jamestown, Virginia, in 1607. A year later, the French founded the capital of New France at Quebec. Separated by the wilderness, the French and British colonies lived in peace for many years. France and Britain had very different ideas about the future of North America. The French were mainly interested in trading with the Native Americans for furs. French explorers and traders pushed into the vast interior of the continent,

claiming for their king the Great Lakes and all the lands drained by the huge St. Lawrence and Mississippi river systems. On paper, New France stretched from Hudson Bay to the Gulf of Mexico and from the Appalachian to the Rocky mountains. However, the French government allowed settlement in little of this vast area. Under the watchful eye of the royal governor, most of the colonists settled along the St. Lawrence from Quebec to Montreal. A few more lived in Acadia (today's Nova Scotia) and at small

French colonists and Indian guests celebrate at Port Royal, Acadia (Nova Scotia). While British colonists cleared farms and built towns along the Atlantic seaboard, French "inhabitants" founded a wilderness empire in Canada.



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outposts scattered across the wilderness. When the wars in North America began late in the 1600s, the French in North America numbered fewer than 15,000.

By then the British colonies along the Atlantic seaboard from Maine (then part of Massachusetts) to the Carolinas had a population of nearly 250,000. Britain viewed America as a place where its poor and dissatisfied subjects could produce agricultural and forest products for the parent country. The British government promoted settlement and allowed the colonies considerable self-government under governors appointed or approved by the king. Although most of the colonists lived within a few dozen miles of the coast, Britain claimed all the land westward to the Mississippi River.

The overlapping land claims of France and Britain made little difference to the Native Americans in the great wilderness beyond the French and British settlements. The Native American population is hard to guess, but perhaps 300,000 Indians lived in eastern North America in the late 1600s. Scattered in small tribes, they lived by hunting, fishing, gathering wild plants, and, in some places, farming small plots of land. Because the French did not crowd the Native Americans and usually traded fairly, most tribes were friendly to New France. Many French fur traders married Indian women and adopted Indian dress. French missionaries settled among the tribes, teaching them the Roman Catholic religion and learning Indian ways. The



Unlike their wandering kin on the plains,
the Iroquois lived in permanent villages
with cultivated orchards and fields.

British colonists had less sympathy for Native American customs and more hunger for Indian lands. They rarely married Indians and made little effort to convert the tribes to Protestant Christianity. Except for the mighty Iroquois Nation, most of the tribes were hostile to the British.

The five (later six) Iroquois tribes lived in northern New York. Masters of wilderness fighting, they dominated other Indian tribes from western Massachusetts to Indiana and from southern Canada to Virginia. The Iroquois had a

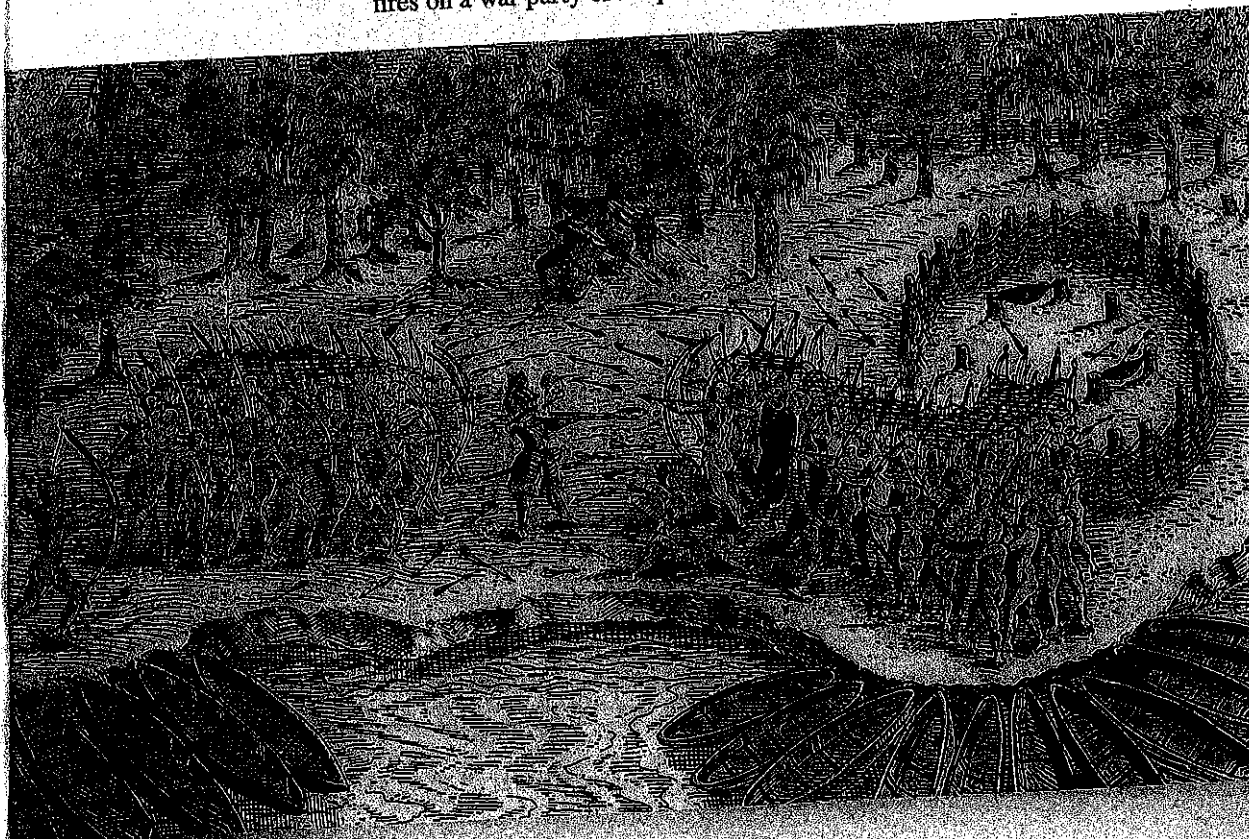
long-standing grudge against the French dating from a brush with the founder of New France, Samuel de Champlain (c.1567–1635), who had defeated them with a few shots from the first firearm they had ever seen. The Iroquois traded to acquire muskets of their own and became a constant threat to New France.

Trouble smoldered in North America long before events in Europe set off the first of the Colonial Wars (often called the French and Indian wars). Geography and furs lay at the center of the conflict between New France and the British colonies. Rivers were the natural highways for settlement

The French explorer Samuel de Champlain fires on a war party of Iroquois in 1609.



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Indians bring furs to trade at a European outpost. New France dominated the fur trade through its control of the waterways reaching into North America's vast interior.

and trade in the wilderness. Control of the St. Lawrence gave the French an easy route to the Great Lakes and the Mississippi, but the British colonists had no such convenient waterway to the rich interior with its wealth of furs. Instead, the steep, heavily wooded Appalachian Mountains crowded the colonies against the ocean.