**Early French Exploration and Colonization Timeline**

The French were somewhat slow to develop an interest in the New World. It was only after a French [privateer](http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h629.html) captured a Spanish ship laden with Mexican gold and silver that attentions were directed westward. Spurred by dreams of great wealth, Francis I (r. 1515-47), dispatched three navigators to the New World, the first two of whom were instructed to discover a [Northwest Passage](http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h515.html) to India:

* [Giovanni da Verrazzano](http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h534.html), a hired Italian pilot, failed to find the passage during his voyage of 1525, but he did establish a French claim to portions of North America.
* [Jacques Cartier](http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h1143.html) crossed the Atlantic in 1534 and 1535; on his second trip he ventured up the St. Lawrence River as far as the eventual site of Montréal.
* Sieur de Robervall in 1542 captained the first meaningful attempt by the French to establish a permanent settlement in North America; he took over a camp left earlier by Cartier at the site of present-day Québec; the settlers remained one brutal winter before returning to France.

Later French expeditions included the following:

* [Jean Ribault](http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h1147.html) explored coastal Florida and the St. Johns River in 1562, but sparked almost immediate tension with Spanish forces in the area.
* [Samuel de Champlain](http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h1142.html), the greatest of the French explorers, founded Port Royal (1605) and Québec (1608).
* Jean Nicolet (Nicollet), a companion of Champlain, explored [Lake Michigan](http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h2317.html) and surrounding areas in the 1630s.
* Louis Joliet and [Jacques Marquette](http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h1149.html) conducted explorations of the Mississippi Basin in 1673.
* Sieur de La Salle explored the upper Mississippi River and Lake Michigan areas in 1679.
* Sieur de Bienville was the founder of New Orleans and explored the Mississippi Valley in 1698.
* Sieur d'Iberville in 1699 cruised the coast of the Gulf of Mexico and was the first to enter the Mississippi from the south.

French efforts in the New World differed sharply from those of the English. The French excelled at exploring new areas — even deep into the interior regions — while the English usually stayed close to the coastlines. The French contented themselves with developing thriving commercial interests, especially fur trading and fishing, rather than planting large permanent settlements populated by French citizens. These radically different colonial strategies did nothing to dim the growing rivalry between the two nations.