French Explorers

Stories of the New World intrigued French rulers. Although they wanted a share of the American gold and silver, they were more interested in **finding a westward route to Asia**. In 1524, the French king commissioned Italian explorer **Giovanni da Verrazano** to search for a passageway through the New World. Verrazano spotted the coast of South Carolina and sailed north as far as Nova Scotia, but found no such water route or valuable treasure.

A decade later, French navigator **Jacque Cartier** led the first European expedition into the Gulf of St. Lawrence. During his second voyage in 1535, Cartier traveled as far as present-day Montreal, wintering at the site of Quebec. The Huron Indians were friendly, but when disease broke out among them, Cartier isolated his men who then developed scurvy. Later attempts in the 1540s by Cartier to establish a colony in North America failed, and France was soon engulfed in a religious civil war that pitted Catholics against **Huguenots, as French Protestants** were called.

To escape **severe religious persecution**, French Huguenots moved to the New World and established villages in South Carolina and Florida. In the 1560s, the French settlers built a fort and colony on the St. John’s River in Florida. The presence of the fort threatened Spain’s search for treasure, and the French Protestants were an offense to the Catholic nation. On August 28, 1565, the Feast Day of St. Augustine, a Spanish army overpowered the Huguenots and renamed the town St. Augustine.

In 1603, King Henry IV brought an end to the French wars of religion, and in **1608 Samuel de Champlain** **founded Quebec**, **France’s first *sustained* settlement in the New World**. The region became known as New France and the city was used as a base from which Champlain and other Frenchmen explored the area. Champlain used the **friendships he forged with the Indians** to start a **profitable fur trading business**. The French established a lucrative economic network with the Huron and Algonquin Indians, which soon developed into a **military alliance against the English** settlers to the south.

To take advantage of the popularity of fur, particularly beaver pelts which were prominently displayed on hats, clothing, and accessories, the French government turned its attention to fur trading in the New World. Trappers covered vast territory, from the Great Lakes and present-day Saskatchewan to trails along the Arkansas and Missouri rivers, and even into Texas. The French trappers shipped so many pelts back to France that they nearly extinguished the beaver population in North America.

**French missionaries also played a key role in the New World exploration.** By 1670 French missionary, Jacques Marquett had founded two missions along the Great Lakes in present day Michigan. Other missionaries, primarily Jesuits, ventured through remote areas of America to convert Indians to Christianity. Many tribes were wary of the Europeans and reluctantly allowed the missionaries, whom they called the “black robes,” into their villages. While some natives befriended the missionaries, many refused to convert to Christianity. Nevertheless, the first European contact many of the Indians experienced was with Catholic missionaries. The fur traders generally followed, and they frequently cemented their ties with the Indians by marrying into the tribe