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CHAMPLAIN QUADRICENTENNIAL

Samuel de Champlain, A Life

Discovering Lake Champlain

Samuel de Champlain's personal goals were to explore and map New France, find a water route to the Pacific and convert the Indians to Christianity. He believed that his success depended on a commercial treaty with the northern Indians—the Montagnais, Algonquins, Hurons, Nipissings and Ojibways.

These nations demanded French support in their perennial wars with the Iroquois Confederacy tribes to the south who annually raided north from their bases in present-day New York State. As soon as he received reinforcements from France that spring of 1609, Champlain summoned a powwow with the Hurons and Algonquins.

He decided to join an incursion against the Iroquois. With twenty Frenchmen, four of them armed with arquebuses, he traveled south in two shallops. At first, three thousand allied Indians greeted him, but after the customary prewar five day festival, only sixty were fit to join him as he hurried south. At the Chambly rapids, he had to abandon his sailboats and proceed with 24 war canoes.

His guides assured him that they would soon encounter Iroquois, but the shoreline was empty for more than 100 miles as his canoes glided up the lake. He observed that the Adirondacks were still snow-capped in mid-July. Champlain described the lake he would name for himself in his book, *Voyages in New France* (1613), how he had marveled at the lake's "great extent... I have seen four beautiful islands." He also noted "several rivers which come falling into the lake surrounded by numerous beautiful trees of the same species that we have in France." The lake shores were not yet denuded of oak, walnut, cherry and hemlock.

On July 29, 1609, Champlain's scouts found an Iroquois war party entrenched behind a barricade in a meadow at a spot overlooked today by Fort Ticonderoga. Staying in their canoes all night, the Hurons hurled the customary insults at the Mohawks. At daybreak, Champlain and his party landed. Some 200 Mohawks sortied from their fort toward him. They were, Champlain reported, "strong, robust men" who "came slowly to meet us with a gravity and calm which I admired....At their head were three chiefs," wearing eagle feathers.

Champlain's allies ran 200 yards toward the Mohawks, then called for Champlain. He wore an armor jacket and steel helmet with a white plume. He had loaded his arquebus with four bullets. He aimed at the three chiefs and fired. All three dropped, two dead, the other mortally wounded. As arrows whirred from both sides, one of Champlain's gunners, hidden in the trees, fired again. The Mohawks panicked and fled.

Champlain was the first European to see Lake Champlain. His expedition clinched the French alliance with the northern tribes, but he had only

exacerbated a bloody rivalry that would end 150 years later with the French driven from North America.

On the same day Champlain killed three Iroquois chiefs, Henry Hudson, exploring the river he named for himself, was ushering aboard his Half Moon a band of Iroquois and plying them with brandy. They left tipsy but a new alliance was born. The Dutch, and then their English successors would trade guns for furs, arming the Iroquois against their ancient enemies to the north.

Returning to France that autumn, Champlain reported to King Henry at Fontainebleau palace. With the King's backing Champlain made a fourth voyage the next year with skilled craftsmen. While he was away, Henry, his royal sponsor, was assassinated. Young Louis XIII succeeded him under his mother, Marie de Medici's regency.

Meanwhile, Champlain led a second attack, this time on the Onondaga in present-day New York State. This time, he was wounded by an arrow in the leg. He returned to France to convalesce and to shore up his support at the court of the new ruler.

» [Marriage Troubles](#)

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