

Canadian Algonquin: First Nations

The history of the Algonquin tribes, or “Algonkin,” of Canada is one filled with both national and international conflict. The Algonquin tribes in Quebec and Ontario, Canada, have faced political challenges from the French, the English, the Americans, and even members of rival tribes from as far back as the 1600s. The Algonquin still face political and cultural challenges today.

The Algonquin territories in Canada that remain today are organized into tribes and reservations known as First Nations. There are nine First Nations in Quebec, and one in Ontario. Of the approximate 8,000 plus Algonquins still living in Canada today, a mere 5,000 live on the First Nation Reservations. The ten reservations are: Barriere Lake, Dominion Abitibi, Eagle Village, Kitcisakik, Kitigan Zibi, Lac-Simon, Timiscamigue, Long Point, Wolf Lake, and Golden Lake.¹ These First Nations are still fighting for rights to operate as a tribe, separate from the Canadian government. It has been a struggle for the Algonquins to gain the ability to educate their own children and live on the land that they occupied for centuries prior to the arrival of the Europeans.² . Organizations such as the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) exist in the form of political groups, representing the nations and striving for these rights.

The Algonquin tribes were patriarchal and semi-nomadic prior to the formation of the Canadian Nation. As they relied heavily on hunting for sustenance, they moved around frequently within the territories of northeastern Canada, in the

¹ <http://www.algonquinnation.ca/timiskaming/history.html>

² <http://www.afn.ca/article.asp?id=3>

areas that are now Quebec and Ontario. Because of the quality of the soil as well as their tendency to not stay in one location, the Algonquin are not widely known for cultivation of corn or maize. Instead, the Algonquin were a tribe that relied heavily on trading. They hunted for food and then traded the skins and fur with the Europeans and other Native American tribes.³

In the 1600's, the Algonquin had a stable, yet fragmented, network of tribes in the Quebec region. Trade was stable through the early 1700s until conflict with the Iroquois developed. This was the beginning of a long chain of conflict the Algonquins would face.⁴ In order to protect their land, the Algonquins initially aligned themselves with the French—who were arriving to the region in droves. After a short time, the Algonquins learned that the true nature of their relationship with the French was not what it seemed. “They were not, after all, powerful and wealthy beings who had come to grant the Algonquins protection and aid. The French were greedy and often quite vulnerable men with an insatiable desire for old greasy beaver robes.”⁵ This turning point in their relationship with the French led the Algonquin to forge an alliance with the British.

From colonial times until the early twentieth century, the Europeans, French and British alike, were occupied with attempts to ‘civilize’ the Algonquins, as well as other tribes in the northeastern part of North America. When Puritans in Massachusetts captured Iroquois, they were sent north to what is now Canada. When the British tried to civilize the Algonquin tribes in Quebec, they too mixed

³ <http://www2.marianopolis.edu/quebechistory/encyclopedia/Algonquin>

⁴ <http://www.tolatsga.org/Compacts.html>, White, pg. IX -XVI

⁵ White, pg. 27

with the French and the Iroquois, and “French, Algonquian, and Iroquoian cultural influences were gradually, but unevenly blending.”⁶ This is partially the reason for the much-diminished population of the Algonquin First Nations in current day Quebec and Ontario.

Richard White writes in his book, *The Middle Ground*, of the relationship between the Europeans and the Native Americans in the areas of the Great Lakes, current Quebec and Ontario, as well as northern New York State. Those areas, which he refers to as the ‘Middle Ground’, or in French as ‘pays d’en haut’, were rich with trade and culture. He argues that though definite conflict existed among different groups, it was not those conflicts that lead to the present day situation for the Native Americans. “This world, pulled forward by the Europeans and Indians in tandem, vanished from most of what had been the ‘pays d’en haut’. The Middle Ground itself withered and died. The Americans arrived and dictated.”⁷

No matter who is blamed for the loss of Algonquin culture in the Quebec and Ontario region that was once dominated by the Algonquin tribe, the fact still remains that they are no longer a dominating faction of the regions population. For several reasons, Algonquin history and culture is not as prominent as that of other Native American tribes. The first is the struggle that the Algonquins faced in maintaining their separate identity when the Europeans were trying to assimilate them into mainstream society. The second reason is the general confusion over the difference between the Algonquin tribe, and the Algonquian language classification, which is the language base for a minimum of fifty Native American tribes.

⁶ Vaughn and Clark, pg. 17

⁷ White, pg. 523

Though this sharing of names creates a lot of confusion, there are several similarities between all of the Algonquian tribes. One such similarity is language. Though it is true that the language is not universal and each tribe has its own dialect, the relationship is similar to that of the European, Latin based, romance languages. One Algonquian tribe conversing with another would be similar to an Italian speaking with a Spaniard; it's not exactly the same language, but they can mostly understand one another.

There are several Algonquian tribes that were prominent in the Hudson Valley region; ranging from the Wampanoag and Narraganset, to the Munsee, Tappan, and Wappinger tribes. Several towns, in all parts of the Hudson River Valley, take their name from the tribes originally from the area; Wappinger's Falls, Catskill, and Peekskill are just a few examples. Additionally, the Tappan Bridge is named after the Tappan tribe who made their home in that area.⁸

However, the Algonquian tribes were not solely in the northeast. There were Algonquian tribes located throughout the country, Florida and Plains Region alike. The popularity of the Algonquian language classification has made the Algonquian name common standard in elementary social studies education, and easy to confuse with Algonquin. Despite all the confusion, both the Algonquin tribe and the tribes that speak the Algonquian language, have rich cultural and political histories that deserve more in depth and individualized attention.

⁸ Pritchard, pg. 215-273

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