

Samuel de Champlain Biography/Overview

Sailing in search of a quicker route to the East, Christopher Columbus accidentally stumbled on what was to be called the New World. Like Columbus, the explorers that followed were also seeking a passage to the rich lands of China and the East Indies. Samuel de Champlain was no exception. He believed that there was a passage through the body of land discovered by Columbus in 1492. Although Champlain never succeeded in finding this fabled passage, his changing set of goals and accomplishments brought much wealth and fame to his beloved France.

Although there is much controversy around the date of his birth, it is accepted by most historians that Samuel de Champlain was born in 1567 to Antoine de Champlain and Marguerite Le Roy, in the coastal town of Brouage, France. Living in a coastal town allowed for sea-faring stories and experiences to not only reach Champlain but also greatly influence him. During this time period a formal education, though highly desired, was considerably impractical. His father, a fishing boat captain, could not afford a formal education for his son. Instead, Champlain received his education from his time spent on ships and the hands-on experiences his father's lifestyle provided around ships. Little more is known about Champlain's youth, but it is presumed that he spent his younger years learning the sailor's trade first-hand.

After serving five honorable years in the French army, Champlain found himself turning back to his passion for discovery, which sailing explorations provided. So in 1598 Champlain boarded a ship bound for Spain and remained on it for its trans-Atlantic voyage. This was the perfect spot for Champlain, since at the age of thirty-one

Champlain was eager to see the New World. The next three years were the first of many spent abroad for Champlain, but the only ones to be spent in and around the Caribbean. On this first voyage Champlain made stops on the Yucatan Peninsula, Guadeloupe, and Puerto Rico. It was the first and only time he viewed the mighty Pacific. His detailed accounts of the Indians, vegetation, and animal life are the first evidence of Champlain's ever observant eye and keen interest in exploration.

Upon Champlain's return to France he was eager to tell King Henry IV of his journeys. For which he was given a pension and brought to the service of the King. He continued his explorations and served as a geographer and cartographer on his second and third voyages. Champlain made many detailed drawings and notes of the land and rivers traveled as well as the Indians and vegetation he saw. But travel was not always easy. One harsh winter, on the island of Saint Croix, he lost many of his men. After the tragedy Champlain had the option of returning to France, but the voyager inside of him wouldn't let him return; he decided to stay. He planned to explore as far south as Florida, but problems with the ships and weather prevented him from making this journey. Champlain returned to France in 1607, during which time he expressed interest in creating a settlement further up the St. Lawrence River, in order to be closer to center of the fur trade.

On July 3, 1608 Champlain founded the settlement of Quebec which he would later call his "Habitation". The settlement brought the French fur trade closer to the source and increased the importance of the French-Indian relationship. In order to preserve this relationship Champlain traveled with a Huron-Algonquin war party into what is now present day New York State to attack an Iroquois tribe. Traveling down

what Champlain would modestly name Lake Champlain, the war party approached the enemy tribe. Near what was to become the site of Fort Ticonderoga, Champlain and the Hurons defeated the Iroquois. This battle solidified the French position in Canada as aligned with the Indian tribes of the north against the Iroquois.

After returning to France from a fifth voyage in the spring of 1610, Champlain signed a marriage contract with Helene Boule. Champlain remained in France only a short time before his next voyage in 1611. It was on this sixth voyage where he started his second settlement at what he called Place Royale, which is now present day Montreal. Within the same year he was back in France spending time with his new bride. After Champlain's seventh voyage to Canada, he became interested in bringing missionary work to Canada along with his commercial and exploration efforts. Although a desire to spread Christianity spurred him on his eighth voyage in 1615, Champlain found himself preparing for another battle against the Iroquois. The Iroquois tribe was better prepared this time. They positioned themselves inside a fort on Onondaga Lake near the present day city of Syracuse. The attack on the Iroquois fort failed and Champlain was wounded. Without reinforcements to prolong the battle, Champlain and the Huron tribe retreated. Champlain was carried by the Hurons back to their lands before returning to France in September of 1616.

Back from a short ninth voyage in 1618, Champlain was appointed the Governor of New France. After spending a little more than a year in France, Champlain returned, in 1620, to Quebec with his wife Helen. He found the settlement in poor condition, but used the many comfortable seasons following his tenth voyage for minor repairs. Champlain and his wife returned to France in 1624, whereupon he became lieutenant of

New France. His new title further empowered Champlain to wage war and set out for further exploration. With Champlain again away from Quebec little was done to maintain it. It was not until Champlain's eleventh voyage, in 1626, that important repair to the settlement and reconstruction of the fort at Quebec was made.

Champlain's bigger and stronger fort would never see battle in his lifetime. It was turned over peacefully to the English on July 20, 1629. Champlain and his French settlers were treated with respect and taken to England. Before returning to France, Champlain stayed in London to protest the illegal acquisition of Canada by England. Three years later, on March 29, 1632, Canada was returned to France. The twelfth and final voyage of Champlain, in 1633, brought him back to Quebec, yet again, in need of repair. He focused not only on restoring Quebec, but also on the fur trade for France, before he suffered a stroke in October of 1635. Champlain died two months later on Christmas day.

Samuel de Champlain was a man of adventure, service and vision. Always eager to make the voyage across the Atlantic, Champlain died still dreaming of the Northwest Passage he never found. In his service to his King and his country, Champlain always kept the best interests of his people at hand. A wise and charitable man, he won the affection and trust of many Indian tribes and the men that followed him. His vision of a settled New France was slow to take root during his lifetime, but ultimately his idea prevailed. Although the fruits of his labor weren't understood and valued by many then, today we recognize Champlain as the "Father of Canada".

- David Sabatino, Marist, '07

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