**FRENCH CLAIMS IN NORTH AMERICA**

As the seventeenth century neared its sunset, a titanic struggle was shaping up for mastery of the North American continent. The contest involved three Old World Nations—Britain, France, and Spain—and it unavoidably swept up Native American peoples as well.

From 1688 to 1763, four bitter wars convulsed Europe. All four of those conflicts were world wars. They amounted to a death struggle for domination in Europe as well as in the New World, and they were fought on the waters and soil of two hemispheres. Counting these first four clashes, nine world wars have been waged since 1688.

The American people, whether as British subjects or as American citizens, proved unable to stay out of a single one of them. And one of those wars— known as the Seven Years’ War in Europe and the French and Indian War in America—set the stage for America’s independence.

**France Finds a Foothold in Canada**

Like England and Holland, France was a latecomer in the scramble for New World real estate, and for basically the same reasons. It was convulsed during the 1500s by foreign wars and domestic strife, including the frightful clashes between the Roman Catholics and the Protestant Huguenots. On St. Bartholomew’s Day, 1572, over ten thousand Huguenots—men, women, and children—were butchered in cold blood.

A new era dawned in 1598 when the Edict of Nantes, issued by the crown, granted limited toleration to French Protestants. Religious wars ceased, and in the new century France blossomed into the most feared nation in Europe, led by a series of brilliant ministers and by the vain King Louis XIV. Enthroned as a five-year-old boy, he reigned for seventy-two years (1643–1715), surrounded by a glittering court and mistresses.

Fatefully for North America, Louis XIV also took a deep interest in overseas colonies. Success finally rewarded the exertions of France in the New World, after rocky beginnings. In 1608, the year after Jamestown, the permanent beginnings of a vast empire were established at Quebec, a settlement commanding the St. Lawrence River. The leading figure was Samuel de Champlain, a soldier and explorer whose energy and leadership earned him the title “Father of New France.’’

Champlain entered into friendly relations with the nearby Huron Indian tribes. He joined them in battle against their foes, the federated Iroquois tribes of the upper New York area. Two volleys from the “lightning sticks’’ of the whites routed the terrified Iroquois, who left behind three dead and one wounded. France, to its sorrow, thus earned the lasting hatred of the Iroquois tribes. They thereafter hampered French penetration of the Ohio Valley, sometimes ravaging French settlements and frequently serving as allies of the British in the struggle for supremacy on the continent.

The government of New France (Canada) finally fell under the direct control of the king after various commercial companies had faltered or failed. In this royal regime, the people elected no representative assemblies, nor did they enjoy the right to trial by jury, as in the English colonies.

Population in Catholic New France grew at a slow pace. As late as 1750, only sixty thousand or so inhabited New France.

* Landowning French peasants, unlike the dispossessed English tenant farmers who embarked for the British colonies, had little economic motive to move.
* Protestant Huguenots, who might have had a religious motive to migrate, were denied a refuge in this raw colony.
* The French government, in any case, favored its Caribbean island colonies, rich in sugar and rum, over the snow-cloaked wilderness of Canada.

**New France Fans Out**

New France did contain one valuable resource: the beaver. European fashion-setters valued beaver-pelt hats for their warmth and opulent appearance. To adorn the heads of Europeans, French fur-trappers ranged over the woods and waterways of North America in pursuit of beaver.

These colorful *coureurs de bois* (“runners of the woods”) were also runners of risks—two-fisted drinkers, free spenders, free livers and lovers. They littered the land with scores of place names, including Baton Rouge (red stick), Terre Haute (high land), Des Moines (some monks), and Grand Teton (big breast). Singing, paddle-swinging French voyageurs also recruited Indians into the fur business. A large number of Indian ships arrived in Montreal in 1693 (numbered four hundred canoes.)

But the fur trade had some disastrous drawbacks. Indians recruited into the fur business were decimated by the white man’s diseases and debauched by his alcohol. Slaughtering beaver by the boatload also violated many Indians’ religious beliefs and sadly demonstrated the shattering effect that contact with Europeans wreaked on traditional Indian ways of life. Pursuing the sharp-toothed beaver ever deeper into the heart of the continent, the French trappers and their Indian partners hiked, rode, snowshoed, sailed, and paddled across amazing distances. They trekked in a huge arc across the Great Lakes, into present-day Saskatchewan and Manitoba; along the valleys of the Platte, the Arkansas, and the Missouri; west to the Rockies; and south to the border of Spanish Texas (see map at left). In the process they all but extinguished the beaver population in many areas, inflicting incalculable ecological damage.

French Catholic missionaries, notably the Jesuits, labored zealously to save the Indians for Christ and from the fur-trappers. Some of the Jesuit missionaries, their efforts scorned, suffered unspeakable tortures at the hands of the Indians. But though they made few permanent converts, the Jesuits played a vital role as explorers and geographers.

Other explorers sought neither souls nor fur, but empire.

* To thwart English settlers pushing into the Ohio Valley, Antoine Cadillac founded Detroit, “the City of Straits,” in 1701.
* To check Spanish penetration into the region of the Gulf of Mexico, ambitious Robert de La Salle floated down the Mississippi in 1682 to the point where it mingles with the Gulf. He named the great interior basin “Louisiana,” in honor of his sovereign, Louis XIV. Dreaming of empire, he returned to the Gulf three years later with a colonizing expedition of four ships. But he failed to find the Mississippi delta, landed in Spanish Texas, and in 1687 was murdered by his mutinous men.

French officials persisted in their efforts to block Spain on the Gulf of Mexico. They planted several fortified posts in what is now Mississippi and Louisiana, the most important of which was New Orleans (1718). Commanding the mouth of the Mississippi River, this strategic outpost also tapped the fur trade of the huge interior valley. The fertile Illinois country—where the French established forts and trading posts became the Trappers, Explorers, and Indians in New France garden of France’s North American empire. Surprising amounts of grain were floated down the Mississippi for transshipment to the West Indies and to Europe.